

## **Table of Contents**

Cover

**Color Illustrations** 

**Prologue** 

**Chapter One** 

**Chapter Two** 

**Chapter Three** 

**Chapter Four** 

**Epilogue** 

**Afterword** 

**Bonus Short Story** 

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

## **Prologue**

In her past life, Eluria spent very little time with her mother. They hadn't necessarily been on bad terms; the woman had just been completely and utterly apathetic toward her daughter. Even the handful of conversations they'd exchanged were hardly those of a parent and child.

It was for this reason that Eluria would throw herself into researching magic. The child had believed that doing so would surely draw her mother's attention and praise. It had been such a pure and innocent wish, but alas, it had only served to widen the gaping canyon between them. Such a small child studying magecraft at an adult level and even building the foundations of a new art she referred to as "magic" must have reflected bizarrely in her mother's eyes.

The casual conversations between Eluria and her mother had dwindled with each passing day. Because of this, the time she had spent with her father felt much more substantial in the girl's memories.

"Dad, I want to read that," said the girl, pointing at the magecraft textbook her father held in his hands.

Eluria's father was hardly ever at home, and any time he had been was spent holed up in his room. She saw him far less often than her mother, but that only made the young girl want to learn more about this man.

Her father scratched his head with a sheepish smile. "Hmmm... You might not understand what it says, El."

```
"Yeah. I don't."

"I thought so..."

"But that's no reason not to read it."
```

"Ah, such wise words..." Her father smiled wryly before placing her on his lap and reading the book out loud for her. Each time she asked about a word she couldn't understand, he would patiently explain in simpler terms.

From there, Eluria would spend her days sneaking into her father's study and digging through his trove of textbooks. Whenever he returned, she would make a point to demonstrate all she had learned in his absence, and her father would smile so happily at her every single time.

"You're such a hard worker, El," he praised with a gentle pat on her head.

"Mm-hm. I did my best."

"You sure did. I never thought," he mumbled as he craned his neck to look up, "that you'd learn magecraft so soon."

Reaching out to the sky above them was a gigantic tree that Eluria had made with magecraft. She had prepared all the catalysts, set them in a precise and synergistic arrangement, and crafted a circle to circulate mana in the correct order. Her efforts culminated in a product she could truly be proud of.

"With this, I have finally surpassed you, father."

The man looked down at her. "And where did you learn to speak like that?"

"From your books."

"Oh, right... You said you finished all my textbooks, so you started reading the others..."

"I memorized it all too," said little Eluria, smugly puffing out her chest.

Her father scratched his head with a crooked smile. "Well, I can't let my daughter surpass me so easily, now can I? Guess I gotta put my back into it..."

"Give me your best, brave warrior."

"Your vocabulary gets more colorful each time I see you." Her father chuckled as he placed a hand on her head.

Then, the very next second, another gigantic tree burst forth from the ground beside Eluria's, reaching out to the heavens while toppling the surrounding forest. Eluria looked up at her father's creation as the man himself wore his own smug smirk.

"Mine's taller. Guess I win."

"Wow..." Eluria murmured. "You're so childish, dad."

"Ugh, I can't deny it...!"

"But how'd you do that?" Despite her tender age, Eluria had already studied all the basics and laws of magecraft. What her father had just done was completely outside of any magecraft theory she had learned. "Can you teach me?"

"Hmmm... Nope. No can do." As always, her father put on a wry smile. This would be the first time he ever refused to teach her something.

The young girl indignantly puffed up her cheeks. "So you're childish *and* petty," she said, sulking.

"Ah, my standing as a father is dropping at record speed..." He sighed and shook his head. "But you see, I think it's better for you to find out for yourself, El."

The girl blinked. "Me...?"

"Yeah. It'd be a cinch for me to teach you, but then you wouldn't be able to experience the joy of discovering it yourself, right? So from now on, I think you should direct your efforts into making something new, something different from magecraft..."

Eluria's father placed a warm and familiar weight on her head as he smiled gently at the young girl.

"Something known as 'magic'...that will grant your greatest wish."

## **Chapter One**

"I was the human known as the Hero."

"And I was the elf known as the Sage."

Raid and Eluria stood side by side as they revealed the whole and unfettered truth to their two friends.

"We reincarnated a thousand years into the future, and now, we're engaged."

It sounded so absurd and ridiculous that it could be easily laughed off as a joke. However, Wisel and Millis simply nodded and said in perfect unison, "Okay. That explains a lot."

They had accepted it so easily that Raid and Eluria found themselves blinking at one another. "You really believe us just like that...?" Raid asked.

"I'll answer that with a question of my own," said Wisel. "Why did you think we wouldn't believe you?"

"Uh-huh..." Millis nodded blandly. "You two are clearly too extraordinary. In fact, I'm *relieved* there's an explanation for it."

"Exactly. Although I don't know how you got so strong, it's just a relief to know that you two gained such insurmountable strength from your own pasts, and not from—I don't know—some wild mutation or something."

Raid and Eluria honestly didn't even know if they should be flattered or offended.

"So, Raid," Millis continued. "You said you were called 'the Hero'? What's that mean?"

Wisel hummed. "From the sound of it, I'm guessing it's a title similar to the Sage..."

"A thousand years back, there was a nation called Altane," Raid explained.

"They were always at war with Vegalta over land and resources and whatnot.

The only one who could fight on even terms with the Sage—"

"—was the Hero, Raid Freeden," Eluria finished with a smug puff of her chest. From how eagerly she piped up, it seemed like she'd been wanting to say that for a while now.

But as expected, Wisel's and Millis's reactions weren't very promising.

"Altane...? The Hero...? I can't say I've heard of either."

"I mean, I know what a hero is," Millis said with a thoughtful hum. "But if you were strong enough to contend with the Sage, then shouldn't you be in the history books too?"

"I agree with Ms. Millis. Wars involving the Sage have been recorded in our history. Even if that country Altane eventually fell into ruin, wouldn't its name or stories at least come up here and there?"

"About that..." Raid nodded. "We've done a bit of digging, and Altane definitely isn't mentioned anywhere. The battles we remember have either been altered or erased entirely."

Raid and Eluria could recognize several of the battles that were recorded in the history books, but there were incongruities whenever Altane was involved. The inciting incident and the general flow of events remained the same, but Altane would often be replaced with another nation entirely; in some cases, the war itself was completely left out. They had tried to find discrepancies between the personal collection of the Caldwin estate, the instructor-only documents at the Institute, and even the history textbooks in public circulation, but it was all the same.

"For what it's worth, there is one story I learned about from Eluria and the headmaster. Turns out the elves know about the Hero."

"Ohhh. What kind of story is—mngh?!"

"That part doesn't matter." Eluria pinched and pulled Millis's cheeks with a dark look on her face. It seemed the girl was still pretty embarrassed about that love story.

"O-Ohay...?"

In any case, the fact of the matter was that the story was simply known to the

elves. Even then, they only seem to see it as an old fable or folktale at most, with zero historical or factual value.

"So now," Raid continued, "we're trying a different approach: looking into specific fields. Things like the technical advancements of magic gear or changes in manabeast ecology... There might be discrepancies in each field's history or how the information's been passed down."

Wisel hummed. "I see. That would be right up my alley then." The Blanche family had been magic artificers for generations and had even crafted magic gear for the royal family in the past. There was a possibility that somewhere along the line, they had gotten their hands on confidential information and somehow managed to pass it down.

"Um..." Millis meekly raised her hand. "Is there something I can help with...? Although it feels like I'm just The Ordinary Civilian of our group..."

"Well, there *will* be times we'll need an ordinary civilian's point of view." Raid shrugged. "Also, your hometown of Norberg, where you frolic with your sheep besties, was part of Altane back in our era."

"Wow! Could it have been a bustling city back in the day?"

"Nah. Even back then, it was all just mountains. It was also something of a secluded land that only a very few nomads stopped by from time to time."

"Ah... So I was always fated to be born a country girl..." Millis gazed wistfully into the distance, likely envisioning her ancestors frolicking with the sheep long ago.

"A secluded land isn't too bad," said Eluria.

"As if my current hometown wasn't secluded enough...!"

Eluria patted the girl's shoulder in consolation. "That's not what I meant. It's in those sorts of places that we might find some cultural knowledge like we did with the elves. You know, stuff like poems and dances that were passed down through tradition."

Since the elves had successfully passed the information down by oral tradition, it was very possible that something similar had happened in other

secluded tribes and groups. At the very least, they might be able to find some clues from artifacts like the journal that Raid's standard-bearer had left for his descendants. Of course, their chances were slim at best, but they couldn't let even the faintest of clues slip by if they wanted to find a flaw in the information cover-up this hypothetical third party had orchestrated.

"We're really shorthanded for all the information gathering and analysis we'll be doing," Raid said. "That's why, once we knew we could trust you, we told you the truth. We wanted to ask for your help."

"I'm flattered that you decided you could trust us..." Wisel's expression turned grim. "Still, this is definitely something you should tell *only* those you trust."

Millis nodded. "Well, reincarnating from a thousand years ago certainly isn't the sort of thing just anyone would believe..."

"It's not just that. I'm talking about how harm might come to those who learn the truth, especially since it's looking like this was an intentional scheme."

There was already one suspicious sign that hit close to home: the armored dragons that had appeared in the middle of the Institute's exam. The incident itself remained shrouded in questions, and the culprit was still at large. Not to mention that armored dragons should have been extinct—but now, they'd crossed through time and appeared in this era, just as Raid and Eluria had.

"Yeah... Eluria and I did hesitate 'cause of that. We were worried we might be dragging you two into our mess." Wisel and Millis were their friends, but they also had nothing to do with their past. They didn't want to drag them into trouble. Despite that, they'd ultimately chosen to reveal the truth. The reason was simple.

"But we figured we'd be able to keep you both safe," the pair finished in perfect sync.

"Such reassuring words...!" Millis grunted.

"Right... I guess our safety's good as guaranteed just by having the two of you around."

Even by modern standards, Raid and Eluria were monstrously strong.

Together, they would be able to face whatever threat came their way. It wasn't hubris; this decision had been made based on their own past experiences and abilities.

"We even have Alma on board," Raid added. "I'll explain things to her, so you two can rest assured you'll be okay."

"Oh! Is this why you and Ms. Alma have been kind of close lately?" asked Millis.

"Yep. Alma's ancestor was my subordinate standard-bearer."

"Oho! What a relief!" Millis grinned from ear to ear while, for some reason, patting Eluria on the shoulder. Eluria's only response was a curious tilt of her head, so Raid figured he didn't need to pay her outburst any mind.

"In any case," he continued. "Sorry for pulling you into this, but we could really use your help."

"Don't worry about it," Wisel assured. "I've been curious about your powers since we met. Besides, this might help me come up with some new magic gear."

"Leave the moral support to me! I won't be letting my few precious friends down so soon!" Millis cheered.

Eluria smiled fondly at them both. "Thanks, you two."

Just as they wrapped up their discussion with Wisel and Millis, the classroom door slid open and Alma wandered in while letting out a huge yawn. "Class is starting," she drawled.

Trailing behind her was a woman with striking brown hair tied neatly into a ponytail. She looked oddly familiar.

Raid raised a brow. "Wasn't she in charge of our entrance exam...?"

"Yeah." Eluria nodded. "I remember she explained all sorts of stuff to us. She was nice."

Alma walked up to the lectern, the brunette in tow, and clapped her hands together. "Hey, pay attention now! You don't wanna miss your new teacher's very fun introduction, do you?"

"H-Huh? It has to be fun...? Should I pull a dove from my sleeve or something?!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Alma scolded, landing a chop on the woman's head.

"Owww!"

The students watched the oddly comical scene with perplexed gazes.

"Anyway..." Alma cleared her throat. "As you all know, a few days ago, an unknown party unleashed manabeasts into the exam grounds, attacking the students. Because of that, it's been decided that additional instructors will be assigned to each class."

"I'm Philia Theresia, a first-class magician. It's nice to meet you all." The woman, Philia, bowed her head in greeting.

"I'm still gonna be your instructor, but in case of emergency, I'll need to go out to assess the situation and give orders as a special-class magician. So, Philia will work as my assistant and take care of the class whenever I'm away."

"I'm nowhere near as good as Al, but I hope—ow!"

"Keep your chin up. Aren't you a first-class magician? And don't call me that here."

"Oh, right... I guess we aren't students anymore, huh? Sorry about that, Al... Yowch!"

Alma kept landing chops on Philia's head each time she opened her mouth. They seemed to be good friends.

"All right, Philia. The headmaster's a-callin', so I'll leave the rest to you."

"O-Okay... I'll do exactly as you taught me yesterday, Al!"

"Sure, sure. And I told you to quit it with the nickname." After leaving Philia with one last chop, Alma beckoned Raid and Eluria over. "Raid, Eluria, you two have also been summoned. Come with me."

"All right. Off we go, I guess."

"Raid, what do you want for dinner tonight?"

"Me? Hm... My stomach's calling for some meat."

"Mm. Okay. I'll have fish, then. So we can go halfsies."

"You two are way too used to this already..." Alma shook her head in exasperation as she led them out the classroom.



Raid and Eluria had been to the headmaster's office a few times already, but this was the first time they had been welcomed by such a bizarre sight. The moment Alma opened the door, the young girl was already prostrating herself before them.

"I AM SO VERY TERRIBLY SORRY!!!"

"Uh..." Raid stared down at her. "Headmaster, where is this coming from?"

"I don't want to be scolded anymore, so I'm starting with an apology!"

"Right... But could you explain why you're apologizing?"

"Promise me first that you won't get mad, Raid! I swear I did my best! I really, really, really tried to convince them that you weren't at fault, even while everyone was glaring daggers at me!!!" With tears in her eyes, Elise slammed her hands on the floor like a child throwing a tantrum, effectively destroying whatever dignity was left in her image as the headmaster.



Looking down at the poor girl, Alma scratched her head and sighed. "Well, the higher-ups *have* been giving her a tough time after that last incident."

"Ah... I guess I did finish the exam with a pretty big bang," Raid said.

The instructors had struggled against the armored dragon because of its ability to nullify magic, and even a special-class magician like Alma had suffered a significant drop in her magic's effectiveness. The manabeasts had undeniably been a huge threat. However, that didn't change the fact that Raid had essentially flattened the surrounding topography along with them. It wasn't at all strange for that sort of display to garner some sort of backlash; Elise had likely negotiated on his behalf over that issue.

"You two did go a bit overboard, but Raid, you protected both the students and the teachers, while Eluria, you worked with Alma to evacuate everyone to safety. Taking all that into account, I proposed that the royal family reward you two in some way..." Elise rubbed her eyes and bowed her head once more. "But both the royal family and the Magicians' Association rejected the motion..."

Raid shrugged. "Well, I would never have expected them to agree."

In this world of magic elitism, the Magic Kingdom of Vegalta stood as a prominent force, while the Magicians' Association served as the representative organization that managed all magicians. There was no way they would acknowledge Raid.

"If it comes out that someone who can't use magic wielded some unknown power to fell those manabeasts—that not only the instructors but even a special-class magician struggled with—then the very foundation of this world could be shaken to the core." Raid could understand why he had been denied a reward. For the royal family and the Association, the best and safest choice was to grant it to Eluria, who had already been acclaimed as the Sage's Reincarnation from a young age. "A commoner with an unknown power...and unidentified manabeasts that appeared out of nowhere. There must have been a few who insisted I was the culprit and just orchestrated the whole incident for my own benefit."

"R-Right! There were! But I denied it with all my—"

"But there's no clear proof of that. The only things they can be certain of are that I protected the students and instructors, and that I decimated the surroundings, so they probably decided to call it even with the positives canceling out the negatives. I'm sure they didn't want to waste any more time on such a discussion with the culprit still at large anyway."

"Ummm... That is how the whole discussion wrapped up..."

"Personally, I have no objections. If I did, people would demand an explanation concerning my powers, which I unfortunately cannot do at the moment. Not to mention that raising an objection in this situation would only worsen their impression of me."

"You're taking all the words right out of my mouth!!!" Frustrated at the conversation getting away from her, Elise slammed her hands on the floor once more. Such a young girl, yet she already carried so much discontentment in her life. "But... Are you really okay with that, Raid?"

"Of course. I'm already plenty grateful that you defended me throughout it all, Headmaster."

"But Eluria..." The headmaster hazarded a sideward glance. "She looks incredibly *not* okay with this!!!"

As Elise said, the girl's cheeks were puffed out in clear dissatisfaction. "Then I don't need the reward either," Eluria grumbled.

"Huh...? Um, I think that'll cause trouble for a lot of—"

"They can give me credit. But I don't need to be rewarded or commended. I'd feel like I stole Raid's achievement if I accepted."

"Why not?" Raid shrugged. "You should take what you can get."

"Nuh-uh." Eluria turned her face away with an indignant harrumph.

Sensing that the girl wasn't going to compromise on this matter, Elise cleared her throat and nodded. "All right. I'll tell them exactly that, then. Also, there's one more thing that's been decided with regard to you, Raid."

Elise smoothed her expression as she moved to the next topic. "The royal family and the Association cannot deny your strength, but it is too

unprecedented to officially acknowledge at present." No matter how evident his strength was for all to see, it was hard to accept him as a magician while the nature of his powers was shrouded in mystery. "So, they'll be launching a detailed investigation in order to decide whether to treat you as a magician or to create a new classification for your abilities."

Raid narrowed his eyes. "Could I ask you to elaborate?"

Elise nodded. "Your instructor, Special-class Magician Alma Kanos, will be in charge of assessing and studying your power. Additionally, since the Institute exams are currently magic-centric, the Association will prepare separate exams for you."

That could only mean one thing: since they couldn't afford to acknowledge Raid's power if it wasn't magic, all they had to do to return him to obscurity was give him an *unpassable* exam.

"All your exams hereafter," Elise declared, "are to be administered by specialclass magicians."

Special-class magicians were the pinnacle of all present-day magicians. They could wield tenth-stratum magic and had used their overwhelming strength to subjugate ultra-sized manabeasts.

As a magician herself, Elise understood just how difficult it would be to face such powerful opponents. Her face twisted in frustration. "I objected till the very end. It was clear as day they had no intention of ever acknowledging—"

"Understood. Those conditions are acceptable."

"I'm still talking!!!"

"I never expected an easy ride. My backer, the head of House Caldwin, ordered me to prove myself in a way that would silence those who underestimate me. And..." Raid flashed the headmaster a daring grin. "She also told me to show them all who's boss." In his past life, Raid had always welcomed powerful foes. He was the Hero, a monster of unparalleled strength, but the top was a terribly lonely place. That was why he was so strongly drawn to the Sage—because she could rival his strength. This was a core value of the human known as Raid Freeden—something that had never changed, not even a

thousand years later. "So, a special-class magician should suffice as my opponent."

Elise gulped, overwhelmed by Raid's brazen gaze. She turned to Eluria, who'd remained silent all the while. "A-Are you okay with this, Eluria?"

"Mm... I have something to say."

"Yes, of course you do! After all, if Raid fails, House Caldwin's honor will be—"

"I want to fight special-class magicians too."

"Eluriaaa! I don't need any more headaches right now, I beg you!!!"

"I really enjoyed sparring with Ms. Alma... If the others are just as strong, then I'll be able to see all sorts of magic. It sounds fun." Eluria huffed, eyes sparkling as if a switch had been flipped within her. As they said, birds of a feather flock together. "Raid, let's share."

Raid considered it a moment. "Oh... Wait, that's perfect. There are nine special-class magicians, and one of them's already monitoring me, so that leaves four of them for each of us for our quarterly integrated exams. Wow, it all works out."

"A genius idea, if I do say so myself."

"Wait... Your headmaster is right here in front of you... Don't just make your own plans...!" Elise wailed, still kneeling on the ground. Such a young girl, yet her suffering truly never seemed to end.

Alma hummed. "Well, it's true that a bunch of restrictions aren't enough for Eluria. Besides, since she'll certainly become a special-class magician in the future, it might be better to have her gain some experience now..." She trailed off, glanced at the girl on the floor in pity, and sighed. "Any more and Elise's stomach might just burst. How 'bout we excuse ourselves for now?"

Elise whimpered. "Thanks... You know, I got some nice meds from my doctor recently..."

"Take care of yourself. We don't want a stoned little lady for our headmaster." Alma gave Elise's head a few pats before leading Raid and Eluria out of the office.

The three walked down the hallway in silence for a while.

Then, Alma suddenly spun around with a grin. "Well? I did pretty good, didn't I?"

Raid smiled and nodded. "Yeah. Great job."

Alma let out a smug huff. "What can I say? Just doin' my job as the descendant of the Hero's subordinate."

"How are you related to our new instructor?"

"Philia was my classmate here at the Institute. I can guarantee her skill and trustworthiness. At the very least, we can count on her if something happens."

"All right. Looks like you found us someone good."

Raid had given Alma two tasks for the meeting: to volunteer as his observer and to find someone trustworthy to be her assistant.

The first task was simple. After all, Alma was already the obvious choice for the role. She could easily observe him up close in class, and as a special-class magician, she could also be trusted to handle any unforeseen accidents that might occur due to his unknown abilities. And since Raid wasn't the Institute's only problem—what with the culprits behind the manabeast incident still at large and their goal and numbers still unknown—their choices were essentially limited to special-class magicians or other such capable and trustworthy personnel who could flexibly handle any situation. This gave Alma the chance to push for her own recommendation for the second task.

"With you as my observer, it won't look suspicious for us to start interacting more," Raid said. "A special-class magician should have much more access and be able to move around more freely."

Alma nodded in agreement. "Even members of the venerable House Caldwin can't easily access confidential information and investigation details, after all. Just leave the digging on this side to me."

Raid smirked. "Sure. I'm leaving it all to you."

"Yes, yes. As you wish, Your Excellency," Alma said, grinning.

Eluria watched the two and nodded to herself. "Now that I think about it, you

were always good at commanding people, Raid."

"I was the general, after all. Besides, a certain Sage was working real hard to raise up an army of magicians. I needed to efficiently move everyone around to keep up."

Eluria clapped. "Yep. That's why you're amazing."

Alma cleared her throat. "May I continue?"

"Why'd you even stop?" Raid asked.

"Cause you two went off to your own little world."

"The heck?"

"Raid, she must be talking about a new magical theory on special multidimensional spaces."

Alma's eyes narrowed. "Yeah... Okay. I think I'd better keep talking." She sighed. "For now, it looks like the Institute's decided how to handle you, Your Excellency. I'll need to report any progress on my investigation of your power, so I'd appreciate it if you could tell me what you know..."

"I just ate my meals and trained my body, and here I am."

Alma stared blankly at him. "Uh-huh... Yeah. I think I understand how Elise feels now."

Eluria had said something about his mana not fitting within the standards, but they had no idea why, so Raid was honestly unsure what to tell her.

"Eluria, what's your take on His Excellency's power?"

"Hm... If I had to say, it almost seems as if Raid's body became abnormally strong in order to withstand the peculiar mana that manifested within him."

Alma narrowed her eyes. "In other words, his robust body is a byproduct of his mana?"

"Yeah. That's why Raid is purely a strong human."

"I don't think just any 'strong human' changes the map..."

"Well, that wasn't pure physical strength... Still, from what I could tell, Raid

just drew his mana out, coated the sword in it, and swung with all his might. It was neither magic nor even magecraft—just mana." Eluria nodded as she slowly shared her thoughts. "But looking at it another way, that means his mana alone was just that dense and complex. Mine was inferior in density, which is why it was being drowned out."

"Inferior...? Even the Sage's mana lost against his?"

"Yeah. At the very least, his mana must be mostly composed of an unknown type, one that is far denser than any of the six mana branches presently known, and has also never been discovered by me or any magician throughout the past millennia."

Mana quality could be classified into six branches: red, blue, green, yellow, black, and white. A human's mana took on these qualities—a minimum of one and maximum of six—and only by assembling a color-compatible formula could a spell be cast. These were the basics of basics in magic theory. No new branch had ever been discovered in the millennia since magic was invented.

Raid scratched his cheek. "It sounds pretty grand when you put it that way...but it's been nothing but a nuisance to me."

"Yeah. I'd feel the same way in your shoes," said Eluria.

"Really?" Raid replied. "I think you'd manage something. I mean, you can even use Polyaggregate Expansion."

"I don't think so. It'd be a huge task just to extract the mana needed for a specific spell, and it wouldn't even activate if any unnecessary mana got into the mix." It would be like filling a small palette with a huge mess of paint, then trying to load your brush with only one color.

"Seriously? If you can't do it, then there's no hope for me."

"Also," she added, "I think your mana isn't natural to your constitution."

"You mean...I wasn't born with it?"

"Yeah. Didn't you say you were sick a lot as a child in your past life?"

Raid had mentioned that he was often bedridden from fevers. Frustrated, he kept training his body and falling sick over and over... After repeating that cycle

again and again, his body had become incredibly tough.

Alma turned to her, eyes wide. "Could the fevers have been conformity responses to foreign mana...?"

"That's my working theory," affirmed Eluria.

"If I recall correctly," Raid mumbled, "that's the thing where you suffer temporary adverse reactions when incompatible mana is introduced into your body, right?"

"Wow, what a surprise! You're such a diligent student." Grinning, Alma patted Raid on the head.

Mana was said to be power generated by the circulation of blood in the body. Although all humans had the same major blood vessels, the precise position, shape, and pathing of the finer veins differed from person to person. The unique combination of those specifics were what determined each individual's mana quality.

When mana of differing quality were introduced into one's blood through things like transfusions, the human body would show a mild adverse reaction to the unfamiliar mana. This reaction would only be temporary, and in time, blood circulation would color the foreign mana with the body's natural mana, gradually conforming to the body's constitution.

"Fevers are a main symptom of those adverse reactions. The chances are high," Eluria noted.

"I get the logic..." Raid shook his head. "But it just doesn't make sense."

"Yeah. It's weird."

Everything happened to Raid when he was a young child. Back then, Eluria had already completed her magic theory, but it hadn't been shared with the world just yet. Magic itself had yet to become known to the common public.

Not to mention...

"That would mean someone fed your body foreign mana."

His body had shown an adverse reaction to mana that didn't belong to his body—this was undoubtedly the work of a third party.

Eluria hummed. "I've seen reports that say being fed foreign mana in your childhood, when your blood vessels are still growing and forming, triggers a *change* in mana quality rather than conformity."

"I've read similar stuff too." Alma nodded. "Apparently, transfusing a substantial amount of blood into an injured child has resulted in changes in mana quality."

"But that," said Eluria, casting her eyes down grimly, "is something we know now. It's a different matter entirely if we're talking about the past."

"Right..." Alma's expression sank as well. "Besides, we're talking about multiple instances of adverse reactions here. Wouldn't that mean a ton of His Excellency's blood was replaced each time?"

Raid frowned. "No... I may have been sickly, but I was never injured."

"Yeah. So that means *only* the foreign mana was poured into your body...but that's impossible even with modern techniques. Moreover, whoever did it seemed to know that your body would adjust to it—to a type of mana that hasn't even been discovered today." Eluria's eyes narrowed, glinting sharply as she uttered, "It's almost as if someone from the distant future bestowed this power upon Raid."

Such a thing would have normally been deemed impossible, but the impossibilities were already accumulating. It wouldn't be strange if something had been brewing as far back as a thousand years ago without them knowing.

Regardless, there was one thing Raid knew for sure:

"But thanks to all that, I'm who I am today. So I'm not bothered."

Eluria stared at him long and hard. "Really?"

"Yeah. Without this power, I would've died in a ditch somewhere. Then, I wouldn't have been able to meet you and enjoy my life back then. I'm almost grateful, really." He might have lived a lonely life, but he had never once cursed his fate. If the path he walked because of his monstrous strength formed the human known as "Raid Freeden," then it felt wrong to hate or reject this power.

Seeing Raid's smile, Eluria found her own lips tugging upward. "Okay."

"In any case," he continued. "The fact of the matter is that I can control this power of my own free will, and there are no huge issues at the moment. So we should focus our attention on other matters instead."

"Right. I should be able to buy some time if I report all this bit by bit. It won't be too late to investigate more thoroughly from..." Alma trailed off, her face turning paler by the second. "W-Wait... There's something I forgot to give you, Your Excellency!"

"To me...?"

Alma took a letter from her inner jacket pocket. It was made of high-quality paper...and sealed with a crest that anybody would recognize.

"You have received a letter," she said with a sheepish smile, "from none other than the royal family, I guess?"



The next day, Raid and Eluria took a day off from classes. They rode to the royal palace in a magic automobile, bathed in the orange light of the setting sun.

Inside the vehicle, Raid sighed heavily. "Seriously, that woman... She actually forgot she was entrusted with a letter of invitation for us."

Eluria nodded. "I guess Ms. Alma can be pretty scatterbrained."

Alma had been entrusted with the invitation in the same meeting where Raid and Eluria's near future had been decided. She'd thought that she could hand it to them anytime in the Institute, but it ended up completely slipping her mind until the day before they were due to appear. Thus, Raid and Eluria had hurried over to the Caldwin estate, gotten scolded by Alicia for the late notice, and prepared for the trip in a flurry.

"Our only saving grace was that it's the princess's personal summons rather than a royal event, and she asked us to come in the evening, so we still had enough time to prepare..."

Eluria puffed her cheeks up. "But I don't like formalwear," she grumbled. "Since she summoned us personally, we could've just come in our uniforms."

"No can do. We're talking about a member of the royal family here."

Today, Eluria had been thoroughly dolled up by her family's servants. She wore a shawl as white as snow atop a navy blue party dress, and her long silver hair was neatly styled. She looked just a little more mature than usual.

Unaccustomed to such outfits, the girl was restless in her seat. "It's hard to move in this dress. And my hair might come undone..."

"What the heck are you planning to do in the palace?"

"Nothing. I'm just always prepared for battle."

"Well, how 'bout you take it easy today? Your hair looks really cute now, so it'd be a waste if it gets ruffled."

The compliment seemed to brighten her mood quite a bit. Eluria stopped fidgeting, her cheeks a little red as she nodded quietly. "Fine then."

As Raid chuckled at her reaction, the automobile stopped in front of the castle gates. When the driver opened the door, Raid stepped out and looked up. "Wow. Never thought I'd come here."

The royal palace, the very symbol of Vegalta, sat atop the center of the capital and towered over the city just as it had a thousand years ago. It was a large castle that had been built upon a foundation carved into a small mountain. The castle was visible from anywhere in the capital, representing both the citizens' respect for their homeland and the royal family's promise to watch over their people. As one who had once been affiliated with their enemy nation, Raid had never thought he'd ever get the chance to step onto such consecrated ground.

Raid stared up at the looming palace, barely noticing as an elderly butler who stood in front of the gate lowered his head. "We have been waiting for you, Lady Eluria Caldwin," he greeted. "And...if I am not mistaken, you must be Lord Raid Freeden, correct?"

"Yes. We have come at the summons of Her Highness the Princess."

"Thank you kindly. I am Serbas, Her Highness's attendant and the head butler of the palace. It is an honor to make your acquaintance." The butler, Serbas, bowed once more.

Raid lightly reciprocated the gesture. Eluria did the same, albeit while hiding meekly behind him and peeking only her head out.

"I am relieved to see you haven't changed, Lady Eluria," said Serbas.

The girl stared at him for a while before simply nodding.

Raid sighed helplessly. "My apologies. She's quite shy."

"Yes, I am well aware. Lady Eluria and Her Highness have known one another since they were very young. She would always hide behind Lady Alicia whenever they would visit." Serbas smiled gently, but Raid could easily imagine how much cold sweat must have run down Alicia's back at the sight of her daughter being so indiscriminately shy, especially in front of the royal family.

But Eluria seemed to be more than just shy now. It was normal for her to hide behind him and grip tightly to his sleeve, but now she was also warily looking around, for some reason. "Serbas..." she called, hesitant. "Where is she?"

"Please rest assured. Her Highness is currently waiting inside the palace."

The girl narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. I made sure to tie her down with my magic," he said, humbly bowing as if he hadn't just said something completely outlandish.

However, Eluria was not alarmed by his strange attempt at consolation; in fact, she finally stood next to Raid with a breath of relief. "Okay. I can trust your magic."

"To receive such praise from the Sage's Reincarnation is truly a great honor I am undeserving of." Serbas smiled and turned back toward the gate. "Allow me to escort you to the palace. Everything has been prepared to welcome you—"

The palace gates opened with a heavy sound—and something gold *zoomed* right past Raid. The next second, he heard a loud, rattling crash behind him.

Raid blinked. "Huh...?" He hurriedly spun around and found Eluria hiding behind him once more, trembling all over and face pale as a sheet. "Eluria? What's wrong?"

"Raid... We need to run!" she desperately begged.

He frowned and cocked his head in confusion. "Run? From what?"

Meanwhile, Serbas frowned, his eyes narrowed as he stroked his chin. "Hm... She escaped in five minutes and thirty-five seconds today. That's a new record."

"Uh...'escaped'? Who did?"

"Her Highness, of course," the butler answered with a light smile.

At that moment, a figure emerged from the evening shadows behind them. Her pale golden hair sparkled under the setting sun and softly framed a pair of sky blue eyes filled with vigor and life. "Hmph! I see you've finally arrived, Eluria!" the girl exclaimed, her hand propped on her hip.

There wasn't a soul in Vegalta who wouldn't recognize her, for it was none other than her lineage that had transformed this natural paradise into the country that shared her family name. They had grown into a large nation by trading their land's abundant resources, and later on, they had clashed fiercely with the Altanian empire that had conquered more than half the continent. Generation after generation, the one and only royal family continued to govern this kingdom and laid claim to the nation's name.

Among that precious lineage was the current king's beloved daughter: First Princess of the Magic Kingdom of Vegalta, Kristia von Vegalta.

"Even though I'd graduated and was finally free from the Institute, you never responded to any of my summons!" Princess Kristia huffed as she stomped on the pavement. Then, in a sudden burst of speed, she *threw* herself on Eluria. "I really, truly, verily missed you so!!!" she crowed, rubbing her cheeks against Eluria's with a dreamy expression on her face. "Ahhh, these soft and squishy cheeks! This silky smooth hair! Finally, I can replenish all the Eluria-ness I was deprived of for the three long years I spent trapped at the Institute!!!"

In complete contrast to the ecstatic princess, Eluria's face had dropped all emotion as she resigned herself to getting her cheeks nuzzled. "Kris... Stop treating me like a refill station..."

Serbas bowed to Raid. "I sincerely apologize for Her Highness's shameful display. She tends to forget herself when it comes to Lady Eluria."

Raid had been staring at the scene in disbelief so it took him a while to face

the butler. "Well...I'd heard they hadn't seen each other in a while."

"Indeed. Her Highness has adored Lady Eluria like her own little sister since their childhood days. Her affection had gotten to the point where His Majesty strictly forbade Her Highness from returning home until she graduated from the Institute."

Watching the princess fawn over Eluria before his eyes now, Raid found it easy to imagine what kind of relationship they had as kids.

Sensing his gaze, the princess whipped her head around and directed a sharp glare at him. "You are Raid Freeden, yes?!"

"It is a great honor to make your acquaintance, Your Highness. I have come to the palace upon your sum—"

"Too stuffy! Cease your pleasantries!"

Raid froze, mouth hanging open for a stunned moment. "Ahem... Pardon me. Yes, I am Raid Freeden."

"Since you are Eluria's fiancé, I will permit you to call me Kris! Likewise, I shall call you Raid!"

"Thank you for your kind consideration, Princess Kris."

"Splendid! With this, we have forgone the more tedious portions of the greeting!" Princess Kris nodded, the corner of her lips curled up in satisfaction. Raid had assumed the princess would be more demure, but she turned out to be quite the intrepid lady, much like Alicia. Staying true to this new impression, Princess Kris boldly pointed at him and declared, "Raid Freeden! Know that I have only half accepted you!"

Raid blinked. "May I ask what you mean by 'half'?"

"Because Eluria will hate me if I completely reject you!!!"

"I see. Then the remaining half, I presume, stems from your doubts about my capabilities?"

Princess Kris's eyes widened imperceptibly at his quick-wittedness but swiftly regained their bold glint. "Indeed. I shan't believe that one who cannot wield magic stands on equal footing with Eluria." Her opinion was formed not merely

as a royal of Vegalta but as one who'd known Eluria since childhood. "You have earned the trust of Alicia Caldwin, as well as her husband, Galleon, with whom you personally sparred. In the Institute, you halted a special-class magician's magic with your bare hands. A mere few days ago, you erased an entire Designated Danger Zone from the map... Do you expect me to believe all this was achieved without the use of magic?"

"If I were to speak bluntly, I believe anybody would think, 'What kind of nonsense is this?'"

"Oh my. I see you have some self-awareness."

"Then did you perhaps summon us here to have me prove my strength?"

The princess narrowed her eyes. "Why do I get the odd feeling I'm dancing to the tune of a song you've composed in your head?"

"Not at all. I have simply braced myself to face such scenarios. My power, after all, is too mysterious for those well-versed in the magical arts to welcome so openly."

Anybody would have a hard time believing rumors or reports until they saw it for themselves. Until now, chatter about Raid's power had been contained within the Institute, but the incident during the exam had brought it to the attention of the nation's top brass—the royal family and the Magicians' Association. He wouldn't be surprised if there were people who wanted to see his power—not just to confirm their doubts, but also out of intellectual curiosity at the possibility that his power was a type of magic that had yet to be discovered.

"Unlike one as unlearned as myself," he continued, "those with outstanding talent such as Eluria and the magicians who are the pride of Vegalta may actually be capable of comprehending my power. In which case, I wish to cooperate by displaying my power whenever asked, as it may further the development of magic."

"Ugh... You are a far more decent human being than I expected."

"Mm-hm. Isn't he amazing?" Eluria bobbed her head, pleased at the praise Raid had received. Meanwhile, Raid was just relieved to see the life return to

Eluria's eyes.

"However..." Princess Kris sneered as she remained glomped on Eluria. "Your ability is not what I refuse to accept."

"In that case..." Raid hummed in consideration. "Are you concerned with my pedigree?"

"Not at all. It is certainly unprecedented for House Caldwin, a collateral line of the royal family, to welcome a commoner as their son-in-law. However, such an issue will easily be insignificant should you prove yourself worthy—something I do not doubt is merely a matter of time, given all the eyes that seem to be watching you expectantly."

There, Princess Kris paused and took a deep breath. "What I wish to test," she declared with all the majesty of a royal and absolutely no sense of shame, "is your *LOVE* for Eluria!!!"



Raid and Eluria were escorted by Serbas through the palace corridors and into a grand reception hall filled with resplendent ornaments and decor. It looked like the sort of place that was used for parties where aristocrats, wealthy merchants, and other members of the upper class of society socialized. Or perhaps, the royal family used it for smaller celebrations among themselves.

Thus, they had entered the grand space with hushed steps...but it was all for naught.

"Welcome, one and all, to the first ever Who Loves Eluria More Contest!!!"

Following the princess's boisterous opening statement was a wave of applause and cheers from all around the venue, heating the air with lively vigor. The people in the hall wore not dresses and suits, but casualwear and work clothes, likely employees of the palace, many with snacks and alcohol in their hands. With how many were cheering, it seemed as if more than half of the palace's staff and soldiers were in attendance. To top things off, a huge stage had been set up in front, clearly indicating this event was no last-minute plan.

Raid stood atop the grand stage and turned his head to the princess beside him. "Princess Kris, what is all this?"

"The Who Loves Eluria More Contest. Did you not hear what I just said?"

"No, not that. What are all these people doing here?"

"We just so happened to be planning a party for the palace staff. I simply made additional preparations to call you here as a little entertainment on the side."

Raid raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Is it okay for outsiders like us to serve as entertainment...?"

"But of course. Eluria has visited the palace regularly since she was young, so the older staff members already know her very well. As for you, well, everyone is curious about Eluria's mysterious new fiancé." Princess Kris swept her gaze over the audience. Many of their eyes were, as she said, focused on Raid. "You are now affiliated with House Caldwin, and these are the people whom you are to stand above. This is a good opportunity to show them what kind of person you are."

Raid, a commoner from the boonies who wielded an unknown power, was now to marry into a great household that had served the nation for generations. It was only natural for people to have some misgivings about him. Princess Kris must have thought that it wasn't only those in the Institute, the magicians, and the upper class who needed to know what kind of person Raid was. Ordinary citizens like the palace staff also deserved to know.

"I have conducted my own investigation into you," she continued. "From your background to your conduct and reputation in the Institute... I even know of your efforts to contribute to your village in your own way despite your inability to use magic. I am not so foolish as to cry and wail that you are unworthy of Eluria with all of that in mind." Princess Kris spoke in a subdued tone and solemnly nodded...until her head simply fell and drooped like a sunken ship. "Of course, I cannot deny that I feel as if Eluria has been taken from me...!"

"Oh, um... My apologies."

"None needed. It is true that Eluria chose you... Of course, I did not bring you here to place you on a pedestal, nor was I lying when I said I wished to test your love for her," said the princess, smiling.

Soon, Serbas stood on the stage with a magic microphone in hand and commenced the event. "Greetings. I am Serbas, your host for today's proceedings. Our contestants for this event are Her Highness, Princess Kristia, renowned far and wide for her many eccentricities born of her excessive love for Lady Eluria, and Lord Raid Freeden, Lady Eluria's fiancé."

"Wait a second! I sense some spite in my introduction!" Princess Kris yelled.

"Everyone in the palace is already aware, Your Highness. That is why we are all looking forward to Lord Raid's valiant efforts today," Serbas said, brushing the princess's protests aside. He seemed oddly experienced with hosting these sorts of events. "Whoever knows Lady Eluria the best," declared the butlerhost, "shall be declared the winner."

As the audience's gazes were gathered onto Raid, the magic spotlight swept to the highest platform on the stage. Right there, seated on an extravagant chair, was Eluria. Her cheeks were flushed all the way to the tips of her ears, and she hung her head, shoulders hunched and shaking. "I want to hide under a rock..."

"You're so cute when you're embarrassed, Eluriaaa!" Princess Kris squealed, bolting out of her seat to glomp Eluria once more.

"Your Highness, please refrain from interrupting the proceedings with your fangirling," Serbas rebuked, immediately chaining her down with magic. Raid was beginning to doubt he was actually the princess's attendant. "Well then, Lord Raid, would you like to say a few words to the audience?"

"Ah... Yes." Raid cleared his throat. "It hasn't been long since our engagement, but I hope to live up to my position as Eluria's fiancé, not just for her but for everyone who has come here to cheer us on today. Thank you."

"Thank you very much for that wonderful introduction. Now then, Your Highness, please go ahead."

Princess Kris harrumphed. "I have been with Eluria since we were children! I will show you that I know all there is to know about her—her likes, her dislikes, and the number of times she's spilled tea during her afternoon naps! I can even tell you the brands of tea!"

"I would be eternally grateful if you could direct your efforts to our nation's prosperity instead." Serbas nodded solemnly. "To answer, the contestants must press the button in front of their seat and complete the sentence describing Lady Eluria. The right to answer will be given to whoever presses it first. Lady Eluria will verify the answers herself."

Eluria flinched. "M-Me...?"

"My apologies for the trouble. I have received demands to make you speak as much as possible, so I would like you to read out the questions as well."

"O-Okay..."

"Thank you. Please use the two buttons in front of you to declare whether the answer is right or wrong." Serbas bowed deeply and handed the question sheet to Eluria.

Nervous, the girl read through them, her eyes swimming. She took a deep breath and slowly opened her mouth. "The firth—" And, as expected, she bit her tongue. She bit it so delightfully, far before reaching the question itself.

Princess Kris threw herself forward and punched her button. "Eluria is so cute!!!"

"Your Highness, the question has not yet been read," said Serbas.

"I know! Every cell in my body just told me to yell that out!!!"

Serbas was unmoved. "I see. However, I will revoke your right to answer should you do that again."

Eluria hid her flushed face behind the question sheet she held with trembling hands. She looked seconds away from dying of embarrassment. "Sorry... Could you do it, Serbas?"

"Hm... I see you still struggle with public speaking. In that case, allow me to read the questions, and Lady Eluria, you may verify the answers." Serbas adjusted the plan and took the sheet back from Eluria. "Now, the first question: Lady Eluria's ho—"

Before he even finished reading the sentence, Princess Kris hit her button. "Reading," she answered boldly. "Not just books but also magic research

theses."

Eluria nodded. A pleasant chime rang through the hall, announcing that the answer was correct.

Showered by the crowd's cheers, Princess Kris smugly puffed her chest out. "Hmph! Such a simple question. There was no need to listen until the end."

"It...seems so," Raid replied, flustered on the inside.

What the princess had just done wasn't simply a matter of *knowing* the correct answer. Since Eluria hadn't formulated the questions herself, they couldn't be entirely private in nature. Under that assumption, Princess Kris had determined, based on the movement of Serbas's mouth, that "ho" was to form the word "hobby." Raid could also perceive such minute movements, but he suspected she had relied not only on that visual information but also the habitual modulation and inflection in Serbas's voice.

And most likely...she had also used magic. When they first met, Princess Kris had run to Eluria at an unnatural speed. In the past, Raid had seen a similar sort of magic—and if the princess was using that kind of magic, then it was plenty possible for her to gain the time she needed to deduce the complete sentence from all the elements of Serbas's speech.

Long story short: Princess Kris came here to win.

"What's this? Are you going to lose without so much as putting up a fight? And you pride yourself on being Eluria's fiancé, hm?" Princess Kris taunted Raid with a daring smirk, challenging him to a serious battle amid these festivities.

His internal calculations of his enemy's strength and analysis of the battlefield's status attested to how flustered Raid's mind had become. Although he found his trail of thoughts quite ridiculous, he also felt the weight this battle held and the pressure not to lose—specifically from Eluria, who was presently staring hard at him from atop her seat of honor. Her eyes, sparkling in anticipation, were practically screaming at him to get the right answer. To make matters worse, when he met her gaze, she began nodding vigorously as if to say, "I know you can do it!"

Unfortunately, the tides of war were not in his favor. He could never win

against Princess Kris in terms of speed, and if he pressed the button before hearing the question, he would certainly get it wrong and let Eluria down.

Despite his whirlwind of thoughts, the contest continued.

"The second question: Lady Eluria slee—"

"A stuffed toy. Her favorite is a big black dog named Varry."

With another chime from Eluria, Princess Kris racked up her second point. Raid had overcome many hopeless battles before now, but never had the path to victory been so far beyond his grasp.

He hazarded another glance at Eluria—her lip was stuck out in a pout, clearly displeased. However, the target of her glare was not Raid but the princess. Eluria had probably noticed that she was using magic, and with how long they had known one another, Eluria could probably tell that Princess Kris was serious about winning.

"Serbas," she called out quietly. "Can I make my own questions?"

"Why, of course. However, Lady Eluria, I fear you might make yet another adorable display of biting your—"

"Th-That happened because I was reading from a script! I'll be fine if I come up with the questions myself...!"

"Is that so? Then, by all means."

Eluria's desperate appeal landed the microphone back in her hands. "Um...
The third...question," she said, voice trembling but tongue brilliantly unbitten.
"When I'm tired, I like to season my food with...?"

Princess Kris narrowed her eyes. "What an oddly specific piece of trivia."

"Not really," Eluria insisted with a shake of her head. "It's just what came to mind."

Of course, Raid noticed what she was up to, as could anyone else in the venue. Eluria had asked a question that would be to Raid's advantage. As if to prove their suspicions, Eluria was sending Raid a gaze full of confidence, her eyes now screaming, "Now's your chance!" It was blatant enough that any of the spectators could see it.

Raid's hand felt unusually heavy as he brought it to his button. "A heaping ton of salt," he answered.

Ding ding ding ding! Eluria repeatedly tapped the button, beaming as she announced he was correct. She looked *really* happy.

Of course, Eluria continued her assault. "Fourth question: When ordering from the Institute's cafeteria, I choose my meal depending on...?"

"What I get. Specifically, you pick something different so we can have half of each."

"Fifth question: After going to the bath with Millis, I always...?"

"Drop by the cafeteria to pick up some ice cream or sweets. We eat them together when you get back to our dorm."

"Sixth question: Before going to sleep...?"

"You roll around the bed to make sure you're far enough not to bump me in your sleep."

Princess Kris clutched her chest. "Urgh...! They're using the game to show off their relationship!"

"And Lord Raid is answering everything perfectly," Serbas added. "Why, I can easily picture their peaceful and harmonious life together at the Institute."

"I daresay they even spoon-feed one another when they are alone!"

Serbas nodded. "According to our investigation, they already do so in their dorm cafeteria with other students watching."

"That cannot be! The sight of Eluria defenselessly opening her mouth and munching on her food with her cute little cheeks puffed up like a squirrel will surely bring all of humanity to their knees!"

"Your Highness, I believe that only applies to you. Their schoolmates simply watch on with warm and fond gazes."

The audience began chuckling fondly at the duo's familiar exchange. Raid wasn't usually one to feel embarrassed, but in front of such a huge crowd, even he couldn't help the budding awkwardness.

Sensing Raid's discomfort, Serbas offered a nod and resumed his hosting duties. "The next question will be the last," he declared. "In terms of points, Lord Raid has already won, but the contestants stand here today to prove their love for Lady Eluria. Please do your best to earn as many points as possible." The butler then turned to Eluria, quietly urging her on.

However, the girl remained silent, her head hung in thought.

"Lady Eluria? Is everything okay?"

Eluria hummed. "I was just coming up with the question," she said, nodding as if she'd come to a decision. Then, she slowly parted her lips and asked her final question:

"I like...?"

It was so short that even Princess Kris stared blankly for a moment, her response delayed as she was expecting Eluria to dish out yet another question catered to her fiancé.

In that time, Raid had snapped back to attention and pressed his button. "Warm milk tea," he answered.

A harsh buzzer rattled the venue—he was wrong.

"Oh dear. It appears Lord Raid's answer is incorrect," said Serbas. "Lady Eluria, could you grace us with the correct answer?"

Eluria softly shook her head. "I won't say."

"Oh ho. Are you certain?"

"Yeah. It's a secret." Eluria raised the question sheet to cover the slight blush over her cheeks. Her eyes, however, were clearly on Raid. When their gazes interlocked, her eyes gleefully curled up. "A secret," she repeated, giggling playfully behind the paper.





After successfully overcoming the contest orchestrated by Princess Kris, Raid and Eluria stepped off the stage and were greeted by the partygoers who made up the audience.

"Congratulations on your engagement, Lady Eluria."

"Mm... Thanks," Eluria replied from behind the safety of Raid's back like normal. However, her body was peeking out about thirty percent more than usual, and she didn't even look tense—a testament to the familiarity she'd built up with the palace staff over the years.

This familiarity went both ways; the palace staff were considerate enough to keep their greetings as short as possible for the shy girl. Even then, they all seemed to say the same thing: "Lady Eluria, you seem much brighter than before."

Eluria blinked. "Do I?"

"Yes. You often face our princess's absurdities with a rather...impassive countenance, but today, I witnessed a colorful variety of expressions on your face," said a middle-aged woman, smiling gently. "Moreover, I recall you mentioned another name earlier. Could she be your friend from the Institute?"

"Mhm. A really funny girl named Millis. I also became friends with a magic artificer named Wisel."

"Oh my. I'm pleased to hear you've made such good friends."

Eluria meekly nodded. "Yeah. They're both great."

"It seems we have Lord Raid to thank for that."

Raid blinked. "Me?"

"Yes. When she was younger, Lady Eluria never interacted with anyone aside from Her Highness. I'm certain her newfound expressiveness is all thanks to your influence."

"Not at all," Raid replied. "Eluria has always been adored by many people. She's simply begun to respond in kind. My influence is inconsequential."

"Goodness, you need not humble yourself before us. Lady Eluria's questions earlier made it clear as day how well you two get along. Anybody can see that her recent cheery behavior was thanks to you, Lord Raid," the woman insisted, chuckling fondly despite the strained smile on Raid's face. "Well then, I pray that you be blessed with bright and happy days ahead." The woman bowed and quietly excused herself.

Once the wave of greetings finally ceased, Raid let out a small sigh. "I got dragged into some weird event by the princess, then showered with praise from people I've just met... Today's just full of surprises."

Eluria nodded. "Mhm. They praised you lots. I'm very pleased."

"I also learned that there are a lot of people worried about you."

"That...was also a surprise," she insisted weakly.

Their conversations with the staff typically followed a certain pattern: the staff congratulated them on their engagement, shared stories of how shy Eluria had been as a child, then insisted she had changed recently all thanks to Raid. It truly said something about Eluria that nearly *all* the greetings followed this flow —not that the staff's anecdotes weren't enough to glean the extent of the girl's shyness.

Apparently, Eluria always hid behind Alicia in social events, never went out unless dragged along by Princess Kris, startled and tripped when spoken to by others her age, fled when approached by the guards, and hid under the bed whenever the maids entered her room to help her get dressed. Truly, no amount of innate magical talent could abate the concerns of anyone watching Eluria as she went about her daily life.

"Yeah... I guess you've improved a lot, huh?"

"Yep. Now I can even walk around the Institute on my own," she said smugly.

Her pride was undercut by the fact that she was currently holding on to his sleeve, but Raid offered her a crooked smile anyway. "You sure can. Good on you."

Soon, Princess Kris approached them. "Splendid work today, you two."

"Thank you very much." Raid bowed. "I've also gained a meaningful experience today thanks to your kind consideration."

The princess's eyes narrowed. "You say that even though I had essentially coerced you into participating... You are truly too soft for your own good." She sighed and smoothed her expression. "In any case, I have seen for myself that you are sincere in your relationship with Eluria. She also seems to trust you greatly." Princess Kris smiled, looking as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I now know that I can entrust her to you."

Finally, she had given her judgment as Eluria's childhood friend who'd stood by her side for the longest time.

"As a member of the royal family and the future leader of this nation, my days ahead will be quite busy. I cannot spend my time chasing Eluria as I have until now." The princess firmly set her hand on Raid's shoulder, solemnly looked him in the eye, and placed something in his hands.

Raid looked down at the object and blinked; it was a magic device with a large round lens. "Um... What's this?"

"A magic camera."

"I can see that."

"I implore you to photograph Eluria's daily life at the Institute and deliver the images to me here in the palace."

"My apologies, but I cannot do that. My mana would break the device."

"Oh my. So you cannot use either magic gear or magic devices?"

"I normally use magic devices by asking Eluria to charge it with her mana beforehand. I would have to do the same for this camera to—"

"I'm not touching that thing," Eluria grumbled, vigorously shaking her head.

Princess Kris groaned. "I was hoping to get my fill of Eluria through this..." Sighing in disappointment, she tossed the device to Serbas. "In that case, I suppose I shall have you deliver your personal anecdotes instead. With all the Eluria Love I have accumulated over the years, I am plenty capable of filling in the gaps with my imagination."

Her words were very questionable, coming from a princess's mouth, but Raid picked up on the intentions that lay behind them. "In other words," he said, "you are giving me a reason to visit the palace when needed?"

"Sharp as ever, I see. Some might voice their disapproval if a commoner were to visit the palace alone, and you cannot possibly have a member of House Caldwin accompany you each time, no?"

Although he'd only recently become affiliated with House Caldwin through his engagement with Eluria, Raid's own status was still rather weak. Not to mention that House Caldwin was matriarchal; even the family head's spouse was not seen as equal to the family head.

However, his standing would change if Raid regularly visited the palace. He would come to be seen as the princess's close friend in the same way Eluria had, significantly lessening the chances of facing scorn and disdain in upper-class social gatherings.

"Moreover," the princess continued, "my great love for Eluria is known far and wide. Nobody would so much as bat an eyelash if I were to personally invite you for this purpose."

"Even the aristocrats know about it? That's...quite impressive."

"Indeed! My overflowing love for Eluria truly *is* impressive, is it not?!" Princess Kris preened, squeezing Eluria into a hug. The girl looked blank and resigned yet again...but she didn't seem entirely uncomfortable, at least. "Frankly speaking, I was not planning to help you to this extent. However, I was told to lend you both my aid."

Raid raised a brow. "You were told to?"

"Certainly. By someone who wishes to meet you both. That," said the princess as she spun on her heel, "was the *other* reason I summoned you here today."

Princess Kris guided them to the balcony, beneath the sky that was now painted in the deep blue of dusk. The stars were twinkling and the moon had surfaced in the sky, but not a single soul could be seen on the terrace. All they could see from here were the lights of the capital's bustling citizens far below.

But Raid already had an inkling as to who this mystery person might be.

In her childhood, Eluria had been so wary of others that she had looked at even her own birth mother, Alicia, in fear. However, Raid now knew that she and Princess Kris had been close friends from a very young age. The reason for this swiftly earned trust was easy to imagine: most likely, the princess had felt familiar to her, be it her appearance or her mana.

Moreover, when they entered the palace, Princess Kris had pounced on Eluria using a specific kind of magic—one Raid had seen on the battlefield before. That magic could interfere with the laws of the world, step into what was normally an untouchable conceptual realm, and manipulate it at will—a skill truly worthy of being called magic.

As far as Raid knew, there was only one person who could wield such magic. That person had studied magic by the Sage's side as her disciple, inherited her will after her passing, and created the foundation for the world of magic elitism and modern magical techniques they lived in now, a thousand years later.

"It appears you've had quite a bit of fun, Hero of Altane," said the princess, the tone of her voice now different yet also familiar.



Raid found himself responding just as he would have a millennia ago. "Hah... No need to look so tense now...Tiana."

This was the woman who had followed the Sage into the battlefield despite her royal blood, wielding both her master's teachings and the unique magic she had inherited from her bloodline. In the end, she had even abandoned her right to the throne to instead take on the Sage's surname and ultimately established the foundation of the world as they knew it today.

The name of that grand figure was Tiana von Vegalta.

"I see you were rather handsome in your youth," said Tiana. "You looked no more than a withered old tree back when I fought you, so I can't quite believe my eyes."

"Oh yeah? Well, I for one didn't expect to run into the little girl who'd bawl her eyes out every time she lost to this withered old tree, so I'd say we're even, no?"

Tiana, in Princess Kris's body, narrowed her eyes to a glare. "An annoying man, as always." She sighed. "In any case, I did not ask Kris to call you out for mere small talk."

"So you aren't reincarnated?"

"No. I've merely used my magic to send my consciousness a thousand years forward and borrowed Kris's body to converse with you like so."

Tiana's magic... Raid called it "time travel." It was magic that allowed only Tiana to move her mind and body through the dimension known as "Time," free of anyone's interference. In the dimension that embodied the concept of time itself, even the normally irreversible *flow* of time did not exist. Thus, transferring only her consciousness into that plane could grant her nearly infinite thinking time.

Of course, that last bit was just conjecture on Raid's part. He recalled occasionally struggling to fight against Tiana as she would sometimes read his moves, almost as if she could see the future, so he was practically certain of his hypothesis.

Raid hummed. "I see now. To enter Time, you'd need to use mana to convert your physical body and also continue consuming it depending on how you move within, so transporting just your consciousness wouldn't use up as much."

Tiana frowned. "I'm not sure how to feel hearing you speak so eloquently about magic."

"Thanks to your efforts, I've been able to learn a whole lot in this new life. Now I know why you were a chronic mana-guzzler with a bad habit of passing out."

"Stop calling me that!!!" Tiana snapped, eyes nearly bloodshot.

Tiana's time travel skill was tricky to deal with—even Raid would admit to that. However, it seemed transporting her body through Time consumed an excessive amount of mana. Tiana could only jump ten seconds at most, and her physical movements would dull each time due to excessive mana loss. Five jumps was the limit, and after that, she would simply flop over. There were a few times she'd charged at Raid only to collapse from mana deficiency. Raid would then watch as Eluria swooped in to save her and forced a mana recovery drink down her throat. After this happened a couple of times, he'd taken to calling her "the mana-guzzling gal," but she didn't seem very fond of the nickname, for some reason.

Raid frowned. "But still, it's gotta be hard to transport even just your consciousness through a thousand years, right?"

"Normally, it would consume a lot of mana, yes. Under usual circumstances, I'd have certainly collapsed partway through, but I didn't." Tiana's expression set coldly. "Because there was a *hole* leading to this era."

"A hole...?"

"Yes. That hole serves as a shortcut of sorts. For a short time, I can send my consciousness here and even borrow Kris's body, as her mana is of similar wavelength to mine."

Raid furrowed his brow. "Could that hole be there because of us?"

"That is possible. The details of reincarnation magic are unclear... Conversely, seeing as both you and Lady Eluria reincarnated in the same era, that hole could

have played some part in bringing you here. Perhaps the destination of your reincarnation had even been specified to this era."

Raid and Eluria had reunited a thousand years after their deaths. Whether that was a coincidence or not, there was one thing they now knew for sure.

"In other words," Raid concluded, "someone besides you has traveled through Time."

If that hole had anything to do with their simultaneous reincarnation, then it likely existed even before the magic was activated and Raid and Eluria were reincarnated. The hole might have even been formed for that very purpose in the first place. Either way, it would mean that their reincarnation was planned by someone.

"At the very least, the fact that the hole in Time is passable," Tiana surmised, "means that, a thousand years ago, someone else either reincarnated or time traveled as well."

"Could you open up a hole in Time?" Raid asked.

"No. The realm of Time is incredibly complex. Although my magic allows me to enter, I am incapable of interfering with the space itself or leaping to a specific time." So what was impossible for Tiana was possible to this third party, who then went on to facilitate their reincarnation—but why? If they were capable of such a feat, then why bother with reincarnating the Hero and the Sage?

Having hit a wall, Raid sought help from the girl beside him. "Eluria, do you have any—"

"Kris..." Eluria muttered, head wobbling and eyes spinning. "Kris was...Tiana...?" Raid could've sworn he saw several question marks floating above her head.

He narrowed his eyes and turned back to Tiana. "Hang on... You didn't tell her?"

"Uh, no... I can only be here for ten minutes at a time, and besides, even Kris only knows the bare minimum, since I didn't know who could be involved, and also, Lady Eluria mentioned that you might have reincarnated as well, so I was

investigating that, a-and..." Tiana's eyes nervously swam around as excuses spilled from her lips.

Eluria, now certain the girl was Tiana, quietly sharpened her eyes into a glare. "Don't tell me... All those times Kris hugged me..."

"W-Wait! Those were mostly Kris! I only swapped with her sometimes to check for myself how soft and cute and adorable you were when you were young!"

"I remember she made me play dress-up at our sleepovers..."

"You're mistaken! I simply told her what kinds of clothes I thought would suit you, then later looked through the pictures she took!"

"And even her widespread reputation as the eccentric princess..."

"Okay, that really has nothing to do with me!!!"

Tiana grew more frazzled by the second, confessing her crimes under Eluria's interrogation. Raid had been their enemy a thousand years ago, so he had no insight into their dynamic, but now he could say this for certain: blood and mana wavelengths weren't the only things Kris and Tiana shared—they also had the same grand and everlasting love for Eluria.

"Tiana. Time for a scolding."

"Yes, please!"

Eluria frowned. "I don't think that's the right response."

"But I'm just so happy..." Tiana's lips quivered into a smile. "I mean, I finally...get to talk to you again..." Tears pooled in her eyes and trailed down her white cheeks. Tiana was living a thousand years ago, in a time when Eluria had already passed. There should have been no way for them to speak like this ever again.

"In my grief after your passing... I wanted to see you just one more time. So I looked for a way to travel to the past with my magic." As she grasped at straws, seeking Eluria out, Tiana had discovered the hole in Time—and on the other side of that hole was a certain young girl. "When I saw a girl who looked so much like you, I decided I needed to make that future a reality and took up the

Sage's legacy... After the Hero's death, the Altanian army fell into shambles. We cooperated with the remnants to take the Altanian empire down. Right now, we are working hard to propagate the magical techniques you left behind."

Her efforts were founded on her immense trust in her teacher. She believed that the Sage would be alive again in the future, even through means far beyond human comprehension such as reincarnation. Tiana believed in that possibility and worked hard to turn that future, where Eluria was alive, into reality.

"I really wanted to speak to you right away...! I wanted to hear you call my name again, like you always did ten years ago!"

Tiana must have been itching to speak with Eluria as soon as she made contact with Kris. But she knew that someone else possessing techniques far beyond her grasp had traveled through Time ahead of her. She'd had to consider the possibility that Eluria's death and reincarnation had been orchestrated. So she moved secretly, hiding her identity until she'd confirmed that Raid had also been reincarnated. Meanwhile, she continued watching her beloved teacher through Kris. That was all she could do.

"So... So I...!"

"Mhm." With a short hum, Eluria embraced her precious disciple. "Thank you for working so hard for me, Tiana," she whispered, gently caressing her head. "You did your best. You did really well."

"Yes... I did...!"

"If it's been ten years since I've died, then you must be an adult already."

"I've already grown taller than you too..."

"Really? You must be a really pretty lady, then."

"Yes... I'm so sad that I cannot show you..."

In each other's arms, the master and disciple filled the space between them with mundane conversation, almost as if to make up for all the time they had spent apart.

After a few moments, Tiana parted from her teacher, eyes red and puffy. "I'm

sorry... I have to return soon."

"Okay. When can we meet again?"

"If I chug some mana recovery drinks, then perhaps tomorrow..."

"Huh. Sooner than I thought."

"However, I need to borrow Kris's body to speak with you... I will discuss with her when would be the best time, given her busy schedule..."

"You two can hold discussions...?"

"Yes... Perhaps because our wavelengths are similar, just talking with her doesn't cost me much mana." Tiana sniffled, slowly calming under Eluria's gentle headpats.

Raid would have loved to let the master-disciple duo have their moment till the very end...but there was something he needed to ask. "Tiana," he called. "Let me ask you something before you go back." This was something he'd given up on finding out as it had been lost to time, but now Tiana should be able to give him an answer: "How did Eluria die?"

Tiana rubbed her eyes and raised her face. Contrary to his hopes, however, her expression was strained. "I...cannot provide a clear answer."

Raid frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I can tell you the cause of death, but I am uncertain as to what led up to it or even if a third party had a hand in it." Tiana paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts. "Lady Eluria was found dead in her private quarters, which she had also been using as her workshop. It was heavily guarded by soldiers and magic devices, as it housed various research documents and confidential information. However..." She cast her eyes down. "We found no traces of struggle, nor had anything inside gone missing. Lady Eluria was just lying in the center of the room, almost as if she were asleep. And..."

Tiana's lips quivered as she recounted the scene, but she looked Raid in the eye as she finally gave him the answer to his question.

"Not a single ounce of mana could be found in her body."

Her answer was the truth—as well as the mystery—of Eluria's death.

•

After Tiana left, Kris regained consciousness as if nothing had happened. Apparently, she couldn't hear their conversation, but she *had* heard from Tiana that they would be having a talk, so she simply tilted her head and said, "Oh, are you done talking?"

Now, the princess was gleefully swinging a fluffy pillow around. "A sleepover with just me and Eluria!!!" she cheered. "Goodness, it's been far too long! Over a thousand days, in fact! Such a joyous occasion must be shared with the populace! Henceforth, today shall officially be declared Sleepover With Eluria Day!"

"Kris, you shouldn't add weird national holidays to our calendar." In stark contrast to the giddy princess, Eluria hugged her pillow while shaking her head.

Kris always talked about commemorating her activities with Eluria with national holidays. For now, they could still be shrugged off as just another one of the princess's eccentric ramblings, but Eluria feared that the day Kris took the throne would signal the beginning of Vegalta's new wave of useless holidays.

"I'm still surprised you and Tiana were acquaintances."

"'Acquaintances' is such a strange way to put it... Since my childhood, I've always thought of her as a second personality. I never could have imagined she was such an esteemed ancestor of mine." Kris chuckled wryly. "She understood and affirmed my strong love for you, so she always felt like just another me I could converse with."

"Yeah... You two are really alike." Not just their mana but even their dynamics with Eluria were very similar; they both took care of her like she was their little sister. Eluria had been able to open up to Kris so quickly because she felt like she'd known her for ages. "The only difference between you two is that you have that whole 'eccentric princess' thing going on."

Kris shrugged. "Oh, that's just me speaking in character."

"I...don't know what I was expecting, but that definitely wasn't it."

"You see, if I am widely known as a weird and eccentric princess, then nobody would bat an eye if they caught me speaking with Lady Tiana, right?" Kris sighed

deeply. "When it started, not even my father and mother would believe me when I tried to tell them I was simply speaking with my other self. I got quite tired of receiving doctors in my room every day."

Eluria could sympathize with that. When she first talked about finding Raid, the first thing her parents had done was find her a doctor. At this point, she understood that it was a very valid reaction, but that had nonetheless prompted her to keep her mouth shut and go looking for Raid on her own. Kris's means of coping must have been fostering this reputation of eccentricity.

"Now, everybody simply shrugs it off whenever they find me doing something odd. Moreover, those in the palace and even the capital all adore me as the jovial and boisterous princess. With this, my popularity among the people will remain strong even after I take the throne, further solidifying my authority as a monarch."

"I'm surprised you thought it through so extensively."

"The nation could suffer consequences should I rest on my laurels. As one with royal blood who stands at the head of Vegalta, it is my duty to protect the country that our ancestors have passed down to us." Kris held her head up high, speaking with great pride. She had garnered the people's respect despite her many oddities, surely because this earnest side of hers was evident in her workings as a royal.

Eluria stared at the princess in a daze—until her cheeks were suddenly pinched and stretched. "Wh-Whaaa?"

Kris pouted. "You are looking rather glum."

"Mm... Am I?"

"I am certain of my observation, as one who has been watching you for the past eighteen years."

Eluria raised an eyebrow in confusion. "So you've been watching me since before I was born..."

"Jokes aside." Kris sighed. "Did something happen during your talk with Lady Tiana?"

Eluria meekly nodded. "It's just... Something's bothering me."

Of course, she was talking about the circumstances surrounding her death. She could recall that she had been conducting some magic research, then had some of her favorite warm milk tea as a quick break, then standing back up once she'd regained her energy—and that was all. But she'd never thought too deeply about it. She *had* been wringing herself quite dry to progress her research, so she figured she'd just accumulated too much fatigue along the way without noticing it herself.

However, it seemed she was mistaken. It should have been impossible for her to die from total mana depletion. Whenever mana levels dropped low enough to affect bodily functions, one naturally lost consciousness in order for the body to prioritize recovering mana, entering a state of dormancy until enough mana was replenished. In other words, if you ever cast a spell using more mana than you had, you'd lose consciousness before your magic could activate.

It was also hard to believe that someone had *taken* her mana. Eluria could still recall the state of security around her room. She found it hard to believe that anyone could have sneaked past all of those measures and reached her, and even if they had, the Sage wasn't so weak as to succumb to a surprise attack even when exhausted.

In the end, she and Raid had learned how she died, but not why.

The girl was snapped out of her thoughts when Kris tugged on her cheeks once more. "Now, now, do not look so pressed. You are far cuter when you smile."

"Mngh..."

Kris finished loosening the girl's strained expression before she softened hers as well. "I shan't ask any more than what Lady Tiana has already told me, as I am still the princess, and things may change between us should I learn too much."

Tiana said that she'd only told Kris the bare minimum, but that must have been enough for her to figure out Eluria's true identity. The moment she confirmed the truth from Eluria herself, however, they would no longer be able to remain as friends as they were now.

So Kris said no more and simply wrapped her arms around Eluria. "Come what may, I will always be your friend," she whispered, "so that I can stand by you and support you when times get tough."

Kris always hugged Eluria like this, ever since they were kids. Back when Eluria had just reincarnated into this world a thousand years in the future, when she found herself all alone in an unfamiliar world, this hug always told her that she had at least one person who would stay by her side no matter what.

"Really... You two are just so very...alike," Eluria whispered back. The princess before her now reminded her so much of her beloved disciple, who never once left her side till the very end.

## **Chapter Two**

The day after they had been summoned to the palace, Raid and Eluria took another day off from classes to assess their new information. First, they considered the possibility that Eluria's mana depletion and their reincarnation were related, but the theory was strongly shut down by Eluria herself.

"I'm not saying they can't be related, but I doubt my mana could support two reincarnations."

Even taking into account the hole that Tiana had mentioned, Eluria just didn't have enough mana to reincarnate both her and Raid. Reincarnation magic, as Eluria saw it, was similar to time travel in the sense that it dealt with a concept no human should be able to lay hands on: the human soul. Just a single reincarnation should cost an unimaginable amount of mana.

Additionally, Eluria had reincarnated as an entirely different race, and the two of them had even reincarnated with a three-year gap in between. These aspects diverged from reincarnation magic theory as she knew it, leading her to the possibility that theirs was some form of *incomplete* reincarnation.

As for the circumstances of Eluria's death, there wasn't much they could say for certain at this point. If the person who made the hole in Time had come to their era a thousand years ago, then magic would've been antiquated in their eyes, and even the heavy security around Eluria's room must've been no more than a pebble on their path. In any case, while that person certainly could have directly laid a hand on Eluria, they could have also simply taken the last of her mana after she'd collapsed from fatigue or illness.

Regardless, there was just one thing that was now clear to them: at the very least, this mysterious figure could wield hitherto unknown magical techniques, be it back then in the Hero and Sage's era or even now in the modern day.

They had to take into account the possibility that this person was *from the future*.

They didn't know how this mysterious figure was interfering with their lives or why they'd made Raid and Eluria reincarnate. To figure that out, they had to settle back into gathering information as usual.

And the ultimate result of their thorough and deliberate discussion...

"Hnnn..."

...was a wonderfully floaty Eluria the very next morning. The girl persistently kneaded her pillow with both her hands, her face set into a very stern expression.

Raid watched pensively. "What're you up to, Eluria?"

"Smooshing the pillow..." murmured the girl, eyes only half open. "I'm charging it up with fluff power..."

Floaty Eluria was a truly mystifying and unfathomable creature. However, Raid had already learned much about her in the time they'd spent living together.

For example, Eluria's floatiness had levels. On the extreme end of the scale was "severe floatiness," where she detested the mere notion of leaving her bed, struggled to form proper sentences, and refused to move unless prodded. One step below that on the middle of the scale was "moderate floatiness," wherein her responses remained ambiguous at best, but she was at least capable of performing instinctive and routine actions.

Currently, Eluria was in the weakest state which Raid called "mild floatiness." Her response indicated that she'd given Raid's question proper thought, and she was even kneading the pillow of her own volition. From this, Raid surmised she would regain her senses very soon.

Of course, whatever Floaty Eluria said or did held no meaning whatsoever—the important thing was that her floatiness followed certain patterns. It was Raid's job to discern those patterns in order to spur on her awakening.

"Raid... The fluff... It's charging up..."

"It sure is. That's one fluffy pillow right there," Raid breezily agreed while guiding her to the living room. He then sat the girl—still fluffing up her pillow—

down on the couch before proceeding to the kitchen and activating the magic heater.

The most effective means of awakening Floaty Eluria was a bath. However, getting her to take one was easily Raid's most difficult task. Whether she would undress herself depended on her mood. Sometimes, she would give up partway and enter the tub still partly clothed. Therefore, Raid had to make sure she'd taken her clothes off before entering the bath—which didn't needlessly fluster him as he was already much older than he looked, but he'd still feel terribly guilty if he ended up seeing Eluria naked while the girl wasn't even fully conscious. Raid could confirm even while blindfolded whether she'd undressed herself, but he'd rather not run the risk at all. Therefore, the bath was set as his last resort during cases of severe floatiness.

As such, he was currently attempting another method that he had discovered as the leading researcher of Eluria's floatyism.

"Here. Have some." Raid handed the girl a cup of milk tea.

A creamy scent wafted along with the steam rising from the drink, piquing the girl's interest. She sniffed at the air, never failing to recognize her favorite drink even in a state of floatiness. This was Raid's groundbreaking method: warming her body with a drink.

Eluria stared at the cup and cocked her head. "It's hot?"

"I already cooled it down a bit. It won't scald your tongue."

The girl took the cup in her hands, but her brows only furrowed deeper. "It's still hot," she whined.

"Then wait a bit before drinking it."

"Blow on it."

Raid wore a crooked smile. "Guess you can't wait," he murmured before blowing into the cup. "There. All good?"

The girl took the cup back and scrutinized it. "Mm." She nodded in satisfaction, gulped it all down, and finished with a contented sigh. Then, her eyes opened fully, blinking at Raid. "Uh... Good morning?"

"Mornin'."

"I woke up with the taste of milk tea in my mouth... Weird."

"Well, you did just gulp down a whole cup of it."

Realizing what that meant, Eluria hung her head. "Sorry for being floaty..." From the slight slur in her speech, she still seemed to be in the process of awakening.

Raid softly placed a hand on her head. "Don't sweat it. I've been enjoying myself, actually."

"You have ...?"

"Yeah. It's pretty fun, testing all sorts of stuff out. The brand of tea leaves, the water-to-milk ratio, the temperature, and even how long I let it cool for..."

"I've become a guinea pig..."

"By the way, the best combination was Ronfeld tea leaves brewed with an additional teaspoon of milk and steeped extra long to let the flavor seep in, then a drop of honey at the very end."

Eluria's eyes widened. "And the researcher is more serious than I thought...!"

"I've only ever brewed tea a handful of times, even counting my past life. I don't pay much attention when I make it for myself, but since I'm making it for you now, I want to make it as delicious as I can."

Although it had been a struggle at first, now it was just another part of his daily routine. Raid had always been alone in his last life, so he had never paid much attention to his meals and left all the little details to his subordinates or whoever else. But putting in that extra effort for someone else didn't feel bad at all, and more than anything, he'd simply come to love spending these peaceful days with precious company by his side.

"Want more?"

"Yeah. I want to drink it slowly this time."

"Go right ahead. Guess I'll also have a cup myself before getting ready."

Raid and Eluria spent a short moment of their morning enjoying their milk tea



After spending a leisurely morning together, Raid and Eluria headed for their classroom with far more time to spare than usual. Millis and Wisel were already chatting away in the classroom but turned wide-eyed toward the pair when they arrived.

"I-It's still morning, yet Lady Eluria already looks so alert...!"

"Her eyes are wide open, and her gait is steady... Unbelievable!"

Eluria pouted. "I don't get floaty *that* often..." Even exchanging such silly greetings with those two was now a staple of their school life. "I'm feeling great this morning thanks to the milk tea that Raid made me."

Millis gasped. "Raid...made you tea?!"

"Why am I the part you're shocked by?" he deadpanned.

"I mean, brewing tea is hard! It won't work if you just boil some barley or roast some leaves the same way you do back home..."

"Ah... Spoken from experience, huh?"

"Sadly..." The girl nodded. "When I first came to the capital, I got carried away and bought all these new kinds of tea I'd never seen in the countryside. Then, when I went about brewing them just as usual, I concocted this unbearably bitter mystery liquid...!"

"Yeah, I messed up at first too." Raid shrugged. "But I did see how tea was brewed in my past life, so..."

"Ugh, I nearly forgot! You're a hillbilly now but used to be the elite 'Hero' or whatever... Clearly, your membership in the Hillbilly Council must be brought into question!" Millis's shoulders sagged, disappointed at Raid's unexpected divergence in experience. Unlike Eluria, this country girl was always at full throttle bright and early every day.

Raid let her be and took his seat. Beside him, Wisel adjusted his glasses and asked, "I heard you two were summoned by the royal family. How'd it go?"

"Well, the princess played around with us, we were forced to participate in a party, a whole bunch of people thanked me for taking care of Eluria, and I guess we also made a bit of progress in our investigation?"

"Uh... Sounds like you've had a very productive past two days."

Raid shrugged. "Well, it's actually not that much. Basically, my status as a member of House Caldwin is a bit more secure, but now we have even more questions to rack our heads over."

"I see..." Wisel replied. "Speaking of, I didn't make much progress on my end either. I tried looking through the history of magic devices, but I could only confirm that there was really no trace of the country known as Altane." Wisel furrowed his brows and turned to Eluria. "How did you invent magic gear in the first place, Ms. Eluria?"

"Hm... I initially got inspiration from Altanian technology. Their land was poor in mana, and they had no culture of using magecraft. But they were skilled in...making weapons and stuff," Eluria explained, furtively casting a glance at Raid.

Raid noticed the girl mincing her words and breathed out a small sigh. "Simply put, Altane specialized in war and killing," he said with the kind of brazenness only a former citizen could dare possess.

Altane had been a grand empire that had comprised more than half the continent. However, everything it owned had been built upon slaughter, plunder, and war. "As Eluria said, Altane's land was poor in mana. The unstable climate and barren land made it difficult to raise crops. So," Raid murmured, "they went looking for blessed land to pillage."

Mana was said to be power born from the circulation of blood, but it could also be found in the land upon which humans lived. Rivers flowed through the earth, waterways meandered underground, oceanic currents were shaped by natural terrain and deep-sea trenches, lava coursed within volcanoes, and wind blew between rigorous mountains. The world itself produced mana under a plethora of conditions, and only with that mana could the world in turn function as it should.

However, Altane lacked that natural mana. To make matters worse, this

absence of a natural production cycle left the meager patches of mana that did exist haphazardly clashing and dissipating within the atmosphere. Hence, the climate and soil quality were terribly unstable, shifting and changing at the drop of a hat.

Altane's lack of knowledge and involvement in magecraft had been the finishing blow. Magecraft was the art of utilizing both natural and humangenerated mana to fulfill specific conditions and artificially trigger certain phenomena. It could have been used to abate Altane's environmental problems to a certain extent.

Alas, Altane had been intoxicated by the simplicity of taking from others. They invaded other nations and plundered their food and fertile land through war. Once one land had been exhausted, they would simply find yet another country to suck dry.

Such was Altane—a country with no future.

"War spurs on technological advancement," Raid continued. "People invent new techniques and skills when coming up with efficient ways to kill their enemies. Along the way, they pick up more knowledge and expertise, which they put toward future inventions." In fact, magic had been birthed from such a process; it had been invented by the Sage, then further developed by Vegalta in order to stand against the threat of Altane. "Instead of mana, Altane was rich in mineral resources. They applied the techniques and skills they'd developed for war to invent 'machinery' which could function without mana."

"Without mana...?" Wisel echoed thoughtfully. "How exactly did it work?"

"I'm not really sure since I wasn't an expert in the field..." Raid hummed. "But it basically produced energy from stuff like heat, water currents, or the cooperation of multiple functions."

"Hm... Fascinating. You must tell me more sometime." A spark had lit up in Wisel's eyes, reflecting the passionate flame of his craftsman spirit.

Still, he refrained from straying off topic. "But that explains things," he continued. "Magic gear was recorded as the Sage's invention, but I found it odd that its point of origin was never mentioned." Wisel took out his own magic gear. "Just like how humans think of flying after seeing birds in the sky,

technology is developed through inspiration from some sort of prototype. Nothing starts completely from scratch. Just as magic was born from magecraft, there had to have been *something* that inspired the creation of magic devices."

Raid hummed, impressed. "And that was how you noticed something was off."

Eluria also showed her approval with a thumbs-up. "That's very clever thinking."

"In any case..." Wisel held his chin. "Raid, did you notice Altane's mana problem back then? It would have been difficult to properly grasp the concept of mana if Altane had no magecraft..."

"Well, I knew it existed," Raid said, shrugging. "I'd also seen magecraft myself several times on the front lines. But by the time I figured out mana was related to our environmental problems, I was already an old geezer. I wasn't able to do much with the discovery since I died just a few years later."

To Raid, the nation of Altane had naught but a bleak future ahead of it. The food and land they took from surrounding countries had never been distributed fairly to the people. Most of it had either been consumed by the upper-class or fed to the soldiers to keep the war going. Because of that, their situation never improved. Even if they hadn't been felled by Vegalta, the nation would have eventually collapsed in on itself once the rampant starvation and poverty had killed off its population.

It was for that reason that Raid had put together an investigative team to study the differences between Altane and other countries with regard to their environmental issues. Back then, he'd been disparaged as the upstart Hero wasting the state's resources, but the present day had proved him right—the land's problematic mana had been neatly fixed, and former Altanian territories were now flourishing like never before.

"If only we'd known back then... Altane wouldn't have made so many enemies and might still be standing today," Raid murmured, his mind wandering back to his homeland that had failed to stand the test of time. As a child of Altane, Raid knew better than anyone that hunger and poverty backed people into a corner. His nation was no exception; they clung to war and

plunder to survive, incurring the enmity of many.

"Well, we can talk more about Altane later," he dismissed. "Did you find anything else?"

"Let me see... I've been trying to come up with magic gear that even you can handle, and so far I've...drafted up a..." Wisel trailed off, turning his head as if he just remembered something. Following his gaze, Raid and Eluria found Millis staring at them with a blank and dazed look on her face.

Raid nodded solemnly. "Don't worry. We'll need your help in other ways."

"I haven't said anything!"

"You brighten up the room just by being here," Eluria comforted.

"So I'm no better than decor?!" Millis's hands trembled as she began questioning her existence. However, it didn't take long for her to snap her face back up with renewed vigor. "I-I'm sure it's important to investigate the past, but we still have our duty as students of the Institute in the present!"

"Ah, right." Wisel nodded. "While you two were gone, we were briefed on this month's simulation exam—"

"Wisel, let me explain! Please, I beg you!!!"

Pressed by Millis's bloodshot gaze, Wisel clamped his mouth shut and nodded, taking pity on the girl who seemed desperate to contribute something. "Ms. Millis will explain from here, so lend her your ear, please."

Millis cleared her throat. "Ms. Philia said that our upcoming simulation exam," she began, "will serve as a drill for our integrated exam next month."

The Institute used two types of exams to grade the students; the simulation exam impacted individual grades, while the integrated exam was held in conjunction with other magic institutes across the land. The simulation exam generally involved dealing with manabeasts through various scenarios prepared by the Institute, but the integrated exam was a bit different.

"The integrated exam tests not only the students' ability to deal with manabeasts but also their ability to accomplish missions as a magician. Thus, in order to test our ability to communicate, coordinate, and make proper decisions, we will be competing against other people."

Raid hummed. "It's basically a competition between the students, huh?"

"Yessiree! Apparently, the overall results of all four integrated exams can impact each institute's power and budget. Besides that, it's also important for the students' futures as magicians, so I've heard it gets pretty intense!"

"That was a great briefing, Millis," Eluria praised, patting the girl's head.

"Heh! With this, I've been promoted to decor that can explain stuff!" She proudly puffed her chest up. "Anyway, our morning lectures will be the same as usual, but now our afternoon training will be conducted jointly with other classes until after the exam."

"Ohhh. The other classes, huh?" Raid hummed. "Now that's something to look forward to. We barely ever talk to them, and really only see them in the dorm cafeteria."

The Institute split enrollees into four classes where students spent their first year displaying their ability as magicians through the various exams. From the second year onward, students were given secondary assignments to more specialized classes and training that would help them build up whatever skills they were lacking. Finally, students graduated once they were judged to be capable of working as a magician.

In particular, first-year students rarely met those outside their class, as their classes took place in four separate towers. The reason for this segregation was due to differences that were bound to arise from each instructor's teaching style, as well as to allow the students to keep their abilities hidden before the integrated exam. Dorm room allocations were also arranged by class, and even in shared spaces like the cafeteria, students tended to cluster together by class and friend groups. Hence, there was truly little to no chance of getting involved with students from other classes.

"Well... I'm sure the Institute also wants the students to get some experience fighting humans and not just manabeasts," Raid muttered. One needed resolve to face human opponents. Even in desperate situations, it was often difficult for people to point their blade at someone with the understanding that they wielded the power to end another's life. This was likely the Institute's effort to

make the students more accustomed to fighting humans—especially since the incident in their last exam might have been orchestrated by a magic criminal who knew how strictly the area had been secured, lending to the possibility that there was a large-scale organization behind it.

"Oh, also!" Millis suddenly added, snapping Raid out of his thoughts. "The integrated exam will be conducted in teams, so to prepare we need to form units of five for the upcoming simulation exam."

Raid hummed. "So we'll need one more person, huh?"

"Oh..." Millis visibly deflated with a heavy sigh. "Actually, we don't."

Raid raised a brow and opened his mouth to ask why, but his question was obstructed by the interjection of a very lively cheer:

"Greetings! A lovely morning to you all!"

He turned his head toward the familiar voice and found a very chipper Fareg approaching their group. "Oh, what? It's you? What brings you to this side of the classroom, kid?"

"I'm not a—!" Fareg bristled, but he instantly snapped his mouth shut, cheek twitching. Then, he took a seat nearby and cleared his throat. "Ah, well... Isn't it about time for our training to begin?"

From that alone, Raid already had a feeling as to what was going on here.

As if to affirm his suspicions, Fareg put on an irritatingly refreshing smile and declared, "Let us do our best from today onward, my dear teammates!"



The Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic possessed large amounts of land. They had the main campus, surrounded by walls that loomed like a fortress, but they had also purchased Designated Danger Zones of all shapes and sizes—mountains, valleys, prairies, beaches, swamps, forests, and even abandoned cities and mines—giving the students all the space and terrain they needed to practice magic under various circumstances without causing external damage.

Although the Institute maintained strict admission criteria, they could never completely negate the possibility of their students causing explosions or losing

control of their magic. Sometimes, students or staff needed space to test newly developed spells. As such, Headmaster Elise, renowned as a great authority in the field of spatial magic, provided her magic devices to instructors to use when conducting basic training and sparring.

Larger scale combat and activities, however, were generally conducted at any one of the Institute's aforementioned territories—territories that were located in distant lands with nary a town or village in the vicinity. In order to cut down on the otherwise extensive travel time, it went without saying that students needed access to the Institute's teleportation devices to reach such locations for training.

However, Raid would only end up destroying said devices, so he was a bit of a special case in this regard.

"Say, Eluria."

"Yeah?"

"I wonder this every time, but do you really have to cling so close to me?"

"Yeah." Eluria nodded breezily, her arms wrapped securely around Raid. Indeed, in Raid's case, he always had to rely on Eluria's help to get to the Institute's training grounds—which required this particular position. "I consume less mana this way."

"Is that how it works?"

"Mhm." Eluria bobbed her head, still latched on to Raid's side. "Teleportation magic is about cutting out space and transporting it. The narrower that space, the less mana is consumed and the simpler the calculations get." During their last exam, she'd teleported an entire cave, but that was because she'd needed to secure a larger space out of consideration for their friends and classmates inside.

"Ahhh. I'm so used to seeing you two teleport in like this now..."

"Same here. It's almost scary how nobody in class even bats an eye anymore."

Wisel and Millis welcomed the familiar scene with a few serene nods. However, there was a new reaction on the scene today. "Goodness... How horridly inconvenient. To think you can't teleport or even use *any* magic device without Caldwin's help... I'd be tearing my hair out every day if I were you." Fareg huffed and folded his arms—but immediately gasped, eyes snapping wide open. "D-Do not take it the wrong way! It can't be helped that you were born with such a constitution! Yes!"

"God, you're such a pain in the ass... Just go back to acting normally," Raid grumbled.

Fareg's presence on their team, as well as his odd behavior, was not without reason. His followers, Valk and Lucas, had taken leaves of absence from the Institute following the previous incident. They weren't critically wounded but nonetheless needed time to recover and recuperate. Thus, they would be sitting out of this upcoming simulation exam, leading to the sudden change in the team arrangements.

Fareg had thought little of choosing a team, certain that his skill would have many reaching out to him—until he had been proved utterly wrong. When he saw their classmates forming groups around him, he finally approached them himself, but whether on account of his questionable attitude or his intimidating status as a Verminant, he was turned away at every doorstep and ended up very splendidly left out.

Alma then decided to place him on their team, since they had Eluria, of similar standing as Fareg's house, and also because she was certain the existing friend group would be teaming up—particularly because of the task given to Eluria for this simulation exam.

"You should worry about being nice to Eluria, not me," said Raid. "She'll be your teacher from today onward."

The supposed teacher hid meekly behind Raid, only peeking her head out to offer a small nod. "I'll do my best to teach you."

Eluria's task was for *her teammates* to pass the exam. The Institute had judged that Eluria was plenty capable as a magician and would almost certainly graduate by the end of her first year. Therefore, they decided to look ahead and set the goal of training her up as a future special-class magician—and one skill a special-class magician needed was the ability to instruct others. They needed to

be able to draw out others' strengths, from teaching them magic theory and concepts to guiding their students on how to carry themselves in practical battles. Alma had told her that this even involved reading and understanding others' magic in order to advise precise strategies and effective plans. Speaking of which, in Alma's case, Philia had been counted as proof of her ability as an instructor, as they had entered the field together and worked side by side.

Therefore, the Institute was no longer looking at whether Eluria herself would pass the exam, but rather whether she had the makings of a special-class magician.

Millis huffed, smirking at Fareg. "I'll have you know Lady Eluria is a very strict teacher. Can such a spoiled young master handle her lessons, I wonder? Hmmm?"

Fareg scoffed. "Obviously, I will easily fare much better than you commoners."

"He said it! He said the thing!" Millis cheered. "That means you'll be worse than a commoner if you complain at all, right? Then I'll get to call you a whiny widdle baby!"

"Why, you...! Then I'll prove I can handle it and call you a floundering farmgirl!"

"Ooh, so close! Too bad for you, my family raises not crops and vegetables, but sheep and cows!"

Wisel glanced between the bickering duo with a look of despair. "Do I really have to take the exam with these children?"

Eluria's expression wasn't much different. "And I have to be their teacher..."

It seemed they had a hard road ahead of them. Not too far off, another person sported a similar gloom about her; Alma was seated on the ground, hugging her knees while sulkily digging into the ground with her battle-axe. "Ughhh..." She dragged out a very hefty sigh. "Damn it... I really wanted to spar with His Excellency... I was so excited..."

"There's no helping it." With a wry smile, Philia placed a hand on her friend's shoulder. "The headmaster told you to stay on standby in case something goes

wrong... The other classes are participating too, so we need to stay on our toes."

Since all the other special-class magicians were scattered across the land fulfilling the king's orders, Raid's exam was to be handled by whoever became available first—which turned out to be no one, given the extremely short notice. Also, Eluria's demand for them to "share" the special-class magicians' oversight had yet to be deliberated, so this time around, Raid would be taking the exam just like any other student.

Alma had taken the chance to volunteer, using her task of observing and studying his powers as an excuse to spar with him, but she was rejected on account of her past reckless behavior.

The black-haired woman sighed yet again and glanced at her assistant. "Oh, well... Guess I'll settle for watching you spar..."

Philia blinked owlishly. "Huh? Me?"

"I mean, you've been nose-deep in your research ever since you started working for the Institute. I'm sure you've gotten a bit rusty. As the one who recommended you, I gotta make sure you're up to snuff, so go have a little brawl with some random student or something."

"Oh, uh... B-But as an instructor, I need to watch over the students... Besides, Al, you know my magic's not suited for combat like yours—owww!"

"Don't call me that. Also, you'll be battling *me* till sunrise if you're not up to snuff."

"Aaah... Th-The flashbacks of my school days are all flooding in...!"

Letting Philia's wails in one ear and out the other, Alma grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and dragged her off. Alma had initially brought in Philia to give herself a bit more freedom, but Philia probably felt more like a cow getting dragged to the slaughterhouse.

After seeing the two instructors off, Raid turned back to his teammates. "Let's get started too, shall we?" The students from the other teams were already holding discussions, showing one another their magic, and exchanging information.

"By the way..." Millis hummed. "Weren't you given additional restrictions, Lady Eluria?"

"Yeah..." Eluria's shoulders sagged in disappointment. "Ms. Alma told me I can't use magic above the third stratum anymore." To be precise, the order had come from Elise. Given that by using Polyaggregate Expansion and fifth-stratum magic, Eluria could fight on par with a special-class magician, it was decided that additional restrictions were needed for the upcoming exam.

Raid cocked his head. "But that shouldn't matter much to you, right?" "Right."

"Zero hesitation. That's the Eluria I know."

"But at the third stratum, it'll take me more time to form the aggregate spells," she added. "I'm also limited in my variety and speed, and I'll need to use up more mana to maintain everything to boot. I think it's a good restriction since I'll have a lot to keep track of." Eluria's brewing excitement was evident in the small quirk of her lips. Her restrictions might've sounded excessive for a trainee magician, but Eluria still had room to experiment and was enjoying herself quite a bit.

Wisel furrowed his brows and stroked his chin in thought. "But at the third stratum, even students might manage to push you back."

"Wisel's right," Millis agreed, frowning. "Anyone able to enroll in the Institute should be skilled enough to wield fourth-stratum magic."

Magic used in daily life and on magic devices was classified into the second stratum and below. Anything above that was the more lethal kind that magicians often handled. Specifically, third-stratum magic was used to hunt dangerous creatures, and even ordinary people could be granted permission to use it with sufficient reason. From a magician's perspective, magic of the third stratum held the bare minimum power; at most, it could be used to suppress a target.

It wasn't the kind of magic Eluria could use to significantly impact a battle even if she were to make good use of Polyaggregate Expansion. At the very least, with such limitations, she'd have to come up with a very solid plan and

intricate adjustments to deal with an Institute student. Hence, figuring out Eluria's role in the exam was a bit tricky.

"Lady Eluria and Raid might start taking different exams later on, so we should decide our roles as soon as we can, shouldn't we...?" Millis said.

"We should," Wisel agreed with a nod. "So long as we make our abilities and roles clear now, we should be able to expect invites to other teams after Raid and Eluria are inevitably separated from us." Excluding extreme cases like special-class magicians, most magicians moved in units and teams, meaning it was vital for students to establish their own strengths and roles in combat early on.

Unfortunately, not everybody could be expected to understand the importance of this matter. Fareg scoffed and shook his head. "Ah, commoners... So pitiful. If only you could also wield eighth-stratum magic or have a name as honorable as Verminant, then you wouldn't have to struggle so."

"But Fareg, you have all that and you still wound up on your own."

"Ugh, stop it! That actually hurts...!" Fareg's proud stance instantly crumbled under Millis's merciless retort. Setting his personality aside, his great status and astounding talent likely made it even more difficult for others to approach him.

"Then why not form your own team?" Raid proposed. "The three of you here plus Valk and Lucas—once they're back on their feet—makes a total of five."

"Aha! So I'll be the leader!" Fareg preened.

"Yep. That's right."

"I... Huh?" He stared at Raid, eyes wide and blinking. "Wait... Really? Me?"

"That's what I said. You'd be the leader."

"Then...everyone would have to follow my every word?!"

"Nah, not really," Raid replied with a shrug.

"Why?!"

"Your role as a leader isn't to boss your teammates around—it's to make decisions," Raid said. "When you were attacked by the armored dragon and

placed under great pressure, you were able to make the decision to flee—the right choice that saved the lives of two injured people under your wing. Your decisiveness is pretty outstanding."

Fareg gaped, utterly baffled as he received Raid's honest praise.

"But," he continued, "taking command and devising plans requires you to have a good grasp of your members' abilities, and giving orders while fighting is also pretty tough. You guys will lose out a lot if Fareg takes that role, so midcombat commands should be handled by Wisel instead."

Wisel hummed. "So the overarching flow and strategy will be up to Lord Verminant, while I'll command the battles from the ground."

"Th-Then what do I have to do?" Fareg asked.

"What do you want to do?" Raid asked back.

"Obviously, I want to magnificently mow all the enemies down with my magic!"

Raid shrugged. "You can do that, I guess."

"Are you even taking this seriously?!" Fareg snapped.

"Well, you said you could use eighth-stratum magic, which means you're pretty strong—and strong guys are good at causing mayhem and drawing attention. It gives everyone else more room to move around."

Eluria nodded in agreement. "I was thinking of placing Millis up front, but it's best for you guys to do what you want."

Millis froze. "Huh? Why me?"

"You're good at putting up barriers. I think you'd be able to handle the defenses on your own."

"Um... And by that, you mean...?"

"You'd bear the full brunt of the enemy's attacks, hold up like your life depends on it, and wait until your teammates do their thing."

A tranquil smile bloomed on Millis's face as she placed a gentle hand on Fareg's shoulder. "Looks like you're our leader now, Fareg. Congratulations."

"Stop looking at me like that! And get your hands off me!"

Millis must have been greatly relieved to have avoided becoming a glorified meat shield. Eluria's strategy wasn't exactly wrong, but nobody wanted to jump out into the front lines just to get beaten up.

"But..." Eluria furtively creased her brows. "Fareg might not be able to fulfill the role of a vanguard."

Raid cocked his head. "Really?"

"Those who can use powerful magic tend to have less experience fighting up front."

"Ah... I get it."

Eluria's father, Galleon, had mentioned something similar before. Modern-day magicians fundamentally fought manabeasts from mid-to long-range but usually drew to close quarters when fighting against humans. The reason for this was simple: humans, unlike manabeasts, could wield magic. Since magicians could block any wide-ranged high-powered attack with barriers and defenses, casting large-scale attacks would needlessly consume a ton of mana on both sides. So when fighting against other magicians, there was a need to close the distance between you and your opponent to keep mana consumption down and attack swiftly before they could put up their defenses.

However, people like Fareg who were blessed with a large mana pool tended to completely disregard the issue of mana consumption and just smash through barriers and defenses. Simply put, they could just brute-force a lot of things. Fareg said he could use magic up to the eighth stratum, which likely meant he had been training on the assumption that he'd be casting high-powered spells from mid-to long-range.

So, long story short...

"He's a weak-ass baby boy who's flimsier than a wet tissue," Raid concluded.

"Mhm. A sad little twig who'd be pathetically crushed in close combat," Eluria agreed.

"What did I ever do to you two...?!" The merciless two-hit combo from Raid

and Eluria left Fareg on his hands and knees.

That said, there were certainly very few magicians who could fulfill the role of a vanguard. To begin with, the majority of a magician's work involved fighting manabeasts, not humans. Even among first-class magicians, those with experience in close-quarters combat were few and far between. In these cases, it was simply a matter of helping them build that experience.

"So," Raid said, turning to Eluria. "Does this mean I get to take him?"

"Sure. He'd be better off with you, Raid."

"Oh, right. Wisel." Raid turned to the bespectacled young man. "Could you lend me some gear you don't mind me breaking?"

Wisel gave him a forlorn look. "Raid, do you have any idea how costly it is to make magic gear?"

"I mean, I don't want to break it—it's just that the risk is there 'cause of my mana, you know? Anyway, it can be whatever, as long as it's decently sword-shaped."

"Then..." Wisel hummed and fished through the bag by his waist. "I've got this prototype that didn't turn out quite right." He deployed the gear into an ordinary and unassuming long sword. "The resistance and enhancement will be disabled once my mana runs out in about five minutes. Then, it'll revert into an ordinary sword-shaped lump of metal. Just keep that in mind."

"Got it. Thanks. I'll do my best not to break it." Raid took the sword in hand and swung it around with light and familiar movements. It certainly looked like a typical sword, but in his hands it felt more like a wooden practice sword that would crumble to pieces the moment Raid poured in the slightest bit of his power. He finished familiarizing himself with the weapon and placed a hand on Fareg's shoulder. "A'ight, kid. Let's start."

Fareg narrowed his eyes. "Start what?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm gonna train you."

"Train...me? How do you plan to do that when you can't even use magic?"

"Sure, I can't use magic, but I can still fight like a magician would." Raid pulled

his sword up and pointed its tip at Fareg. "Why don't we start with a good ol' spar? The goal will be to land one hit on the other. And I'll..." Raid hummed. "I'll start attacking after the first minute. You're free to do as you please till then."

Fareg grimaced. "To voluntarily take a disadvantage... You must be very confident."

"Well, I definitely don't think I'll lose. If I do, then I'll reward you in whatever reasonable way I can."

"Hah... Interesting. I'll play along then. And if I win..." Fareg drew his short sword and stood before Raid. "Then you'll never call me a kid ever again!!!" In a flash, countless balls of crimson flame manifested around Fareg, burning bright and crackling in the air. "Don't you dare think that you'll be able to brush this one off like last time!!!"

The army of fireballs charged at Raid all at once—a barrage so relentless, that his lone sword would do little to defend him. So Raid simply gazed at that incoming blaze, lowered his stance—and *jumped toward it*.

"Wha—?!" Fareg sputtered, not at Raid's seemingly reckless act but at what came after.

Raid twisted his body, almost sliding over the ground, and slipped right through the minuscule gap between the fireballs and the earth. Once the fireballs had zoomed past his eyes, he pushed against the ground with his hand and smoothly fixed his posture. "Whew, that's hot. Surrounding me wasn't a bad idea, but there's no point if you don't use another spell to fill the gaps, yeah?"

That attack *would* have been effective had his opponent been a magician. They likely would have chosen to set up their defenses, granting Fareg enough time to cast an even stronger spell to pierce right through. Unfortunately, his initial barrage wasn't enough to stop Raid.

"Well? You've still got time. What's next?" Raid grinned as he approached Fareg with leisurely steps.

The sight had Fareg gritting his teeth and clenching his short sword even tighter. "Then try *this* on for size!" He pulled his sword back, aimed its tip

toward Raid, and unleashed a powerful thrust. The blade was wrapped in flames that extended forward like a pillar—like a flame spear that was thrust to pierce through Raid. It was an attack so swift, he clearly intended to end this battle in one move.

"The faster an attack, the simpler its trajectory and the easier it is to dodge." Raid read the flaming spear's trajectory and dodged with a simple tilt of his head. "But..." He smirked. "You should know that too. You made a show of pointing your sword at me and enticed me to dodge the first blow..."

Raid casually leaned over, and the next second, the flaming speartip that approached his back split apart. "So controlling that flame and attacking me from a blind spot would be your *real* attack." Moments ago, the flame pillar, still connected to Fareg's weapon, had snaked behind Raid like a whip. After the first spear thrust came an attack from a blind spot—a two-step attack that utilized a feint. Indeed, catching the enemy off guard was important in combat.

"It's not a bad plan, but it doesn't work very well with your magic. Fire is bright and flashy, so it's easy to notice when you haven't dispelled it even after a dodge. Besides, the roaring flames don't make for a very effective surprise attack, do they?" Raid continued his stroll toward Fareg, his breezy smile never once leaving his lips as if to say he could read the boy's every move.

"Damn it... Damn it!!!" Unable to stop Raid's advance, panic began to set into Fareg's face. "I-I'm different from the rest! I'm supposed to be strong!" He stabbed his sword into the ground. "Don't look down on meeeee!!!" he howled.

Answering his fiery will, several blazing pillars shot up from the earth and reached out to the heavens. The pillars weaved together like threads and formed into a single humanoid shape—a crimson giant crackling in the air, its fiery arms clad in obsidian gauntlets, gripping dual flame blades as it looked down on Raid.

"Stop him, Crimson Champion!"

Heeding Fareg's command, the flame giant swung its blades down on Raid. In the face of this eighth-stratum magic, the best Fareg could wield, any ordinary magician would have been helplessly drowned in a sea of flames. However, to Raid, this was nothing he couldn't handle. After all, he'd blown away Eluria's tenth-stratum magic and even mowed down a special-class magician's army of the dead. Even then, Raid chose to face the flame giant head-on.

"I'm not looking down on you."

Locking his gaze on the flaming sword, he set his borrowed magic gear by his waist and raised his right arm. The next moment, the giant's crimson blades flew to the sky. Its hand had been knocked back by the heel of Raid's palm, sending its sword flying away.

"I just thought it was such a waste."

With fluid motions, Raid drew the sword at his waist and cut off the giant's arm from the bottom-up, painting the sky with a splash of blazing crimson.

"Such a simple counterattack wouldn't have worked, if only you'd known."

When your opponent held up their sword, you could knock it away by hitting their wrist or the hilt—this was such a fundamental concept even kids learned it back in his day. With the rise of magic and the heavy emphasis on fighting manabeasts, the people of this era tended to look down on close-quarters combat and techniques. But no amount of raw firepower could save an inexperienced magician from someone who knew their way around close-quarters combat.

"All right, your one minute's up."

Raid pointed his sword at Fareg. The boy had fallen to his knees after using up all his mana. Behind him, the lump of flames was gradually losing its shape, its obsidian armor crumbling to pieces.

"How... How can you smile like that?" Fareg mumbled, head hung in resignation. "I thought I was strong... People compared me to the daughter of Caldwin, but still, I was confident I had the strength to shut them all up...!" However, that confidence of his was so easily snuffed out. "And yet, not only did I freeze up when the time came... I couldn't even protect those two—no, they even got hurt because of me, and all I could do was flee like a coward...!" Fareg knew more than anyone just how weak and helpless he was now. He'd even lost to Raid with such a huge advantage in his favor.

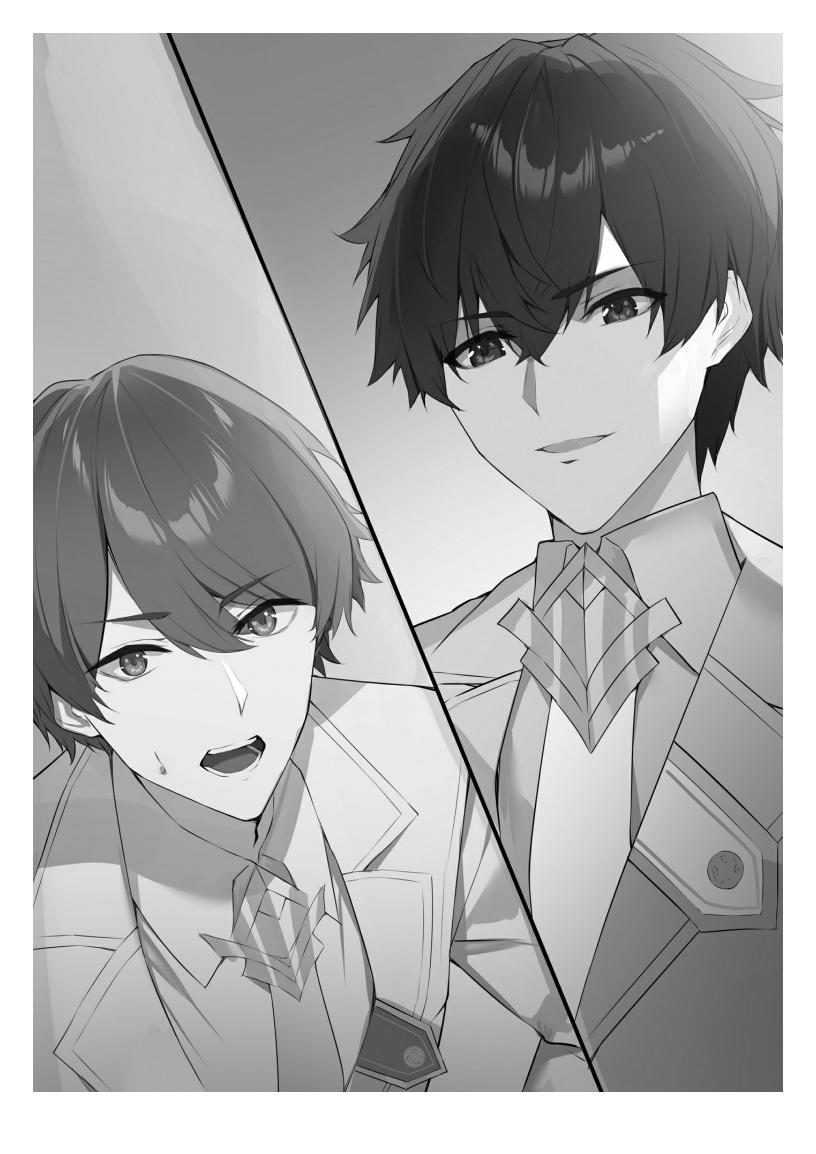
Raid calmly looked down at him. "But isn't that why you came to join us?"

Fareg snapped his head up, eyes wide. "You..."

Problematic attitude or not, Fareg still had the name and backing of the esteemed Verminants. It was hard to think that not a single person would let him into their group. Fareg could have forced his way in somewhere with his status, but in the end, he'd chosen to approach *their* group.

"Because of the accident, Valk and Lucas will have to sit out on this simulation exam and face the upcoming integrated exam while not at their best. You wanted to be strong enough to lead them when the time comes, so you came hoping to learn something from me and Eluria. Am I wrong?"

"H-How did you..."



"I mean, you're the one who carried them all the way to safety instead of leaving them behind. Of course you'd feel responsible and try to do something for them." Raid's lips quirked into a smile. He'd noticed Fareg's true intentions from the start—that he was doing this not for himself, but for his friends. That was why Raid thought Fareg suited the role of a leader.

"And from the looks of things, you're blessed with good combat senses. Just a few pushes from me, and you should be able to figure out a lot on your own." Raid swung his sword with smooth and familiar movements and looked down at Fareg with a fearless grin. "Yeah. I think you'll be able to learn my swordsmanship just fine."



As the distant sounds of battle reached her ears, Eluria bobbed her head. "Sounds like Raid's having fun."

Millis winced. "Uh, I'm not so sure... It sounds more like utter chaos and destruction to me..."

"I never expected Raid to ask Lord Verminant to spar," Wisel said.

"Oh, me either," said Millis. "Between them, it seemed like Fareg was the one with a grudge."

"Mm... The more of a handful a child is, the more gratifying it is to raise them —that's how Raid's probably looking at it." Eluria recalled the image of Raid with a sword in hand and a broad smile on his face. "Besides, in our past life, Raid was never able to pass his techniques down to anyone."

"Because he was too abnormally strong?" Millis asked.

"Yeah. I think he taught noncombat topics like tactics, strategy, leadership, and the like in a broader framework. But nobody ever inherited his fighting style." Raid could fight the way he did thanks to his robust body; it wasn't exactly the kind of fighting style that could be passed down to just anyone. However, magic was commonplace in this modern era. Although Raid's *power* still couldn't be replicated, at the very least, his *movements* could be learned with the help of physical enhancement and magic gear.

"I'm sure Raid saw something in Fareg." Eluria's lips relaxed into a soft smile. "And he probably also wanted to beat some sense into the scamp."

"Oh. Now that sounds more like Raid." Millis nodded.

Wisel drooped. "I don't think my magic gear's gonna make it out in one piece..."

Sounds of destruction and battle continued to rumble in the distance. The trio put their hands together, sending their thoughts and well wishes in that general direction.

In any case, Eluria was presently in charge of Wisel and Millis—for the exam, yes, but she also wanted to support them in whatever ways she could, considering this would affect their growth as magicians. "Wisel, Millis," she called. "Let's confirm your roles again."

"Yes, ma'am! My role is to hold down the fort while providing combat support with defenses and barriers!" Millis exclaimed.

"Mine is gathering intel and locating the enemy with my gear," followed Wisel, "as well as assessing the situation and giving commands based on what I've gathered. I'll also support the vanguard as needed."

Eluria nodded, satisfied by their responses.

Although she might not look it, Millis had scored relatively high on her Mana Aptitude Test, which was why the Institute had offered her a scholarship. More mana meant stronger offenses and sturdier defenses—a simple yet undeniable advantage in battle. The same advantage applied to having more mana branches, and in Millis's case, she had as many as four at her disposal.

Typically, a magician would need ample experience and swift judgment to make flexible use of their mana branches in the heat of battle. However, as support, Millis would have more room to breathe and turn her magic repertoire into a strong backing for the whole team. Not to mention she also had the flexibility to put up their defenses beforehand to grant herself even more time and space to think. Although Millis hadn't seemed too pleased with the idea when it was first brought up, Eluria wanted to strongly recommend she at least try that strategy.

Meanwhile, Wisel had two mana branches and an average mana capacity at his disposal. However, he could prepare a ton of magic gear on his own and thus take on a broader range of roles than the average magician. In particular, few magicians specialized in scouting and intel-gathering, making him a great asset in simulation exams that hosted a variety of scenarios as well as the integrated exams where practical combat would be tested.

Eluria had given much thought to how to best guide these two. Her long and thorough contemplation was punctuated with a very firm and decisive nod. "I wanna spar," she concluded.

"Argh! This is the one thing I find utterly uncute about you, Lady Eluria...!"

"Why are Raid and Ms. Eluria low-key battle junkies...?" Wisel wistfully turned to the sky, a tinge of despair seeping into his expression.

Wisel and Millis had sparred with them before. Just as they'd finally gotten accustomed to Alma's training, Eluria began slotting in some bouts with them in between, citing that there were many things to learn from an actual battle. Of course, Eluria had some self-imposed restrictions, but it was brutal nonetheless.

Millis sighed. "Now that I think about it, Ms. Alma's training started feeling easier right around the time we started sparring with Lady Eluria..."

"Yeah... Nothing could be worse than being thrown around without magic nearly a hundred times every session..." Wisel mumbled.

Through their sparring, Eluria had been teaching them how to use their bodies. The more efficiently a magician could move their body, the less mana they would have to spend on physical enhancement and had more to spare for other magic. There were other benefits too, like honing melee instincts, developing speed, and so on. So Eluria had shown them no mercy—the moment they revealed an opening, she'd send them flying and tumbling over the ground.

"But the more it hurts, the harder it is to forget and the faster you retain the lesson. It's a very effective way to learn," said Eluria.

"What a muscle-brained philosophy! Are you sure you're the Sage?!" Millis screeched.

"Ahh... I can still taste the blood in my mouth..." Wisel shuddered.

"We had a saying back in the day," Eluria casually preached. "No true warrior hasn't bled while training."

Theirs had been an era of war and conflict. You had no choice but to train like your life depended on it—because it really did. To quickly build up magicians who could stand against Altane, Eluria had subjected their nation's forces to her very own rigorous training—which, for some reason, only Tiana was excited to undertake. Eluria may have been hailed as the Sage, but at her core, she was a soldier through and through.

"Don't worry," she said. "You've been improving. You should be able to defend against about half of my blows now."

"So we only have to get thrown around fifty times, huh?" Millis chuckled emptily.

Wisel sighed. "I should go buy some more poultice before dinner..."

However, as the two finally steeled their resolve, a large and black shadow suddenly loomed over Eluria. She snapped her head up and found the cause: a huge black mass—a *dragon*—was flapping its broad wings in the clear blue sky. Eluria had seen that very dragon before.

"Huh?" A red-haired girl peeked out from the dragon's back. "What the...
You're not my classmates!" The ground rumbled as the dragon landed, and the girl hopped right off its back. "Hey there! Which tower are you guys from?"

"Um... We're from the eastern tower," answered Millis.

"Seriously?! That's totally opposite to my class! I'm from the western tower!" The girl began raining sulky little punches on her dragon's leg. "Lafika, you dummy! You said it was this way, and I trusted you. Hmph!"

The dragon—seemingly named Lafika—bowed its head and an apologetic growl rumbled out of its throat.

Then, the girl caught sight of Eluria, and her hands froze. "Oh! You were there during my exam!"

"Huh?" Millis blinked and turned to Eluria. "Do you know her?"

"Uh... I guess I know *about* her..." Eluria replied as she meekly hid behind Millis.

This red-haired girl had been introduced by Philia before Eluria and Raid took their entrance exam. She was Lufus Lailas, the Dragon Princess of the Celios Federation. She had been astride this black dragon back then, so Eluria hadn't been able to get a closer look, but now she could see the girl looked around twelve to thirteen years old and was even shorter than Millis.

Lufus tilted her head. "Hmmm? Why's she hiding behind you?"

"Oh... You see, this lady here always hides from unknown entities," Millis sheepishly explained.

"Wow! Just like an animal!" Lufus crowed, her pale crimson eyes sparkling with intrigue. She began circling around Eluria, her curiosity on full display. Meanwhile, Eluria shrank farther back like a cornered animal, clearly dismayed. "Oh, wait! Are you Eluria Caldwin?!"

"Y-Yes... I'm Eluria..."

"Wooow! Now that huuuge magic you cast back then makes a whole lot of sense! I've really been wanting to meet you ever since I heard Vegalta had a really strong person called the Sage's Reincarnation!"

"Th-Thank you...?"

"Uh-huh! And thank you!" With a big smile on her face, Lufus grabbed Eluria's hand and eagerly shook it up and down. She seemed to be a good kid, if a little too cheery for Eluria's comfort. "But you know, I'm super strong too. I won't lose!"

"Mhm. I heard you formed contracts with Celios's Guardian Dragons. That's amazing."

The Celios Federation was a country in the west made up of seven island nations. Their lands, abundant in nature and mana, were home to a wide variety of manabeasts, leading to the development of a unique language that allowed for communication with manabeasts. After magic became widespread, Celios successfully established coexistence with manabeasts through their specially developed summoning magic.

Among their native manabeasts, four dragon species served as symbols of Celios's nature and stood at the apex of all manabeasts; these were known as Guardian Dragons.

Celestial dragons governed the skies from the rigorous mountain peaks.

Bathysmal dragons ruled the waters from the deepest depths of the ocean.

Flarestorm dragons circled the volcanic region, demarking their territory.

Terracrown dragons lived amid all of the earth's blessings and beasts.

By standing at the top of Celios's manabeasts, these four dragon species protected the order and balance of nature, enabling the humans and manabeasts of the Celios Federation to coexist. Guardian Dragons were simply different from other manabeasts. Even their young could trample over other beasts. Once they grew to maturity, they could even gain and surpass human intelligence.

To Guardian Dragons, humans were lesser beings, just like any other manabeast; thus, it was nigh *impossible* for a mere human to subordinate one. Summoning magic was about conversing with manabeasts, acknowledging each other as equals, and forming a contract. Only then would the magician be able to place the soul of their contracted manabeast into a mana vessel and perform a pseudo-summoning. In other words, as long as Guardian Dragons recognized humans as lesser beings, the contract necessary for summoning magic could not be formed.

Records of an age of strife—dating much farther back than the era Raid and Eluria had come from—chronicled that some Guardian Dragons had formed contracts with humans in order to protect the seven islands of Celios. However, never before had there been a singular human contracted with all four Guardian Dragons.

Eluria hummed. "I've seen Guardian Dragons in books and literature but never in person."

"Really?"

"Yeah. But I heard they can be sighted frequently in Celios."

"They sure can! They all fly freely in the sky!"

"That sounds like quite the sight."

"It is! Etankile like napping above the clouds, and Marleficam peek out of the water from time to time! Flamavite love racing and frolicking on lava, and Magnifimos always nap and sunbathe in forests and plains!" Lufus was clearly enthused by Eluria's interest in her home country; stories of Guardian Dragons spilled eagerly from her lips. Incidentally, the names she used were the scientific names the people of Celios used to refer to Guardian Dragons. That she could cite these as naturally as she did their common names attested to her deep devotion to manabeast studies, all the more commendable considering her young age.

"The dragons live a lot more leisurely than I thought..." Eluria mused.

"Buuut..." Lufus stretched her lips into a wide grin as she gestured grandly to the black dragon behind her. "My number one is this girl right here!"

"That's...a skysteel dragon, right?"

Lufus gaped. "You know about skysteel dragons?!"

"Yeah. Not their scientific name, though."

"It's 'Voransfelm'! Size class: large! Type class: winged! Attribute: steel!"

"Oh. Wow."

"No, you're wow!" Lufus gushed, her eyes sparkling brighter than ever. "Skysteel dragons are so rare these days. It's so cool that you know about them!"

Eluria stiffly averted her gaze. "I... I just happened to read something."

Skysteel dragons were common back in Eluria's last life. In fact, Celios had even used them as military mounts. Their scales were sturdier than steel, and their internal combustion organ allowed them to maintain their robust bodies and stamina. They could fly and breathe fire, giving them many offensive capabilities as well. Eluria remembered them as a powerful dragon species.

However, even as early as a thousand years ago, there were already signs of their dwindling numbers due to constant military usage. That must be how they ended up an endangered species.

"You see, Lafika's been with me since I was really tiny! So to me, she's number one!" Lufus introduced her friend with great pride. The black dragon followed by lowering her head to Eluria—a very polite dragon. "Hey, Eluria! What kind of magic can *you* use?"

"Mm... Well, I can also use summoning magic..." Eluria cast a sideward glance to Wisel and Millis. She wanted to talk with Lufus a bit more, but she was here to teach her friends, so she thought it might be best to wrap up this chat now.

"Oh, don't worry about our bout! Please, go ahead and enjoy your conversation!" Millis exclaimed.

Wisel nodded. "I'm learning a lot just listening to you two. Don't mind us."

Relief was evident on their faces. They *really* didn't want to have that sparring match with Eluria. She drooped, a little crestfallen.

"Were you about to spar with them?" Lufus asked.

"Yeah. I was going to throw them around a bunch."

"Then spar with me instead!"

Eluria blinked. "With you...?"

"Uh-huh! I wanna see your magic! And besides..." Lufus leaped onto the black dragon's back and grinned. "Lafika and I won't lose to anyone."

Eluria squinted, her gaze lingering a moment longer on the girl's expression, but simply nodded. "Okay," she said, deploying her magic gear. She spun her staff around and then planted it on the ground. "Seeing you and Lafika made me miss my friend too."

Gathering her mana, Eluria manifested the spell while clenching her upright staff. In one swift motion, she yanked it out of the ground—now with a long chain connected to the base. Heavy and grating metallic sounds scratched the air as the chains dragged *something* from the abyss.

"Come out, Shefri."

A large wolf emerged from the depths, its pure white coat enveloped in a

golden mask and armor. The moment its body was fully freed from the earth, the wolf opened its ferocious jaws and lunged forward—at *Eluria*.

However, the girl wasn't the least bit fazed; she calmly bound its snout with the chains, snapping them shut, and soon its entire body, too, was securely chained. The wolf writhed over the ground, angry growls rumbling from its throat.

Eluria looked down at the wolf with a satisfied nod. "Full of energy, as always."

"F-Full of energy?! 'Fully intent on eating you' is more like it!" Millis exclaimed, aghast.

"Shefri's just playful. Do you want to pet her?"

"I plan to die of old age with all my limbs intact, so no thanks!" Millis felt cold sweat run down her back at the sight of the drool slipping from the wolf's snapping jaws and swiftly retreated.

Again, Eluria was a bit crestfallen. Shefri actually liked being petted.

Lufus narrowed her eyes at the large wolf. "Wow... I can't believe you thought to contract with a mana-eating wolf."

Anyone well-versed in summoning magic would agree. Mana-eating wolves were ferocious large manabeasts native to Vegalta. They lived in areas where mana gushed from the earth, and, as their name implied, they liked eating mana—a dietary preference so savage and indiscriminate, they devoured it from any source they could lay eyes on: nature, manabeasts, humans, and sometimes even their own kind. Magicians who attempted to tame these beasts found them so aggressive and volatile that they rarely listened to orders and would not hesitate to attack their summoner. For this reason, even the magicians of Celios, known as they were for their intimacy with manabeasts, had long given up on trying to tame them.

"Shefri's a very smart girl," Eluria said as she petted the chained wolf. "She knows she'll never win against me."

A grin stretched over Lufus's face. "I knew it. This is gonna be a blast!" As soon as she hopped onto the black dragon's back, Lafika's two enormous wings

spread and lifted them high into the air.

Eluria craned her neck to follow the sight. She brandished her staff and unleashed the chains that bound the large wolf. "Shefri," she uttered. "Go."

The wolf's pointed nose whipped around to the black dragon. Shefri howled out to the heavens before running toward her enemy. However, the dragon was currently so high up in the sky, even the large wolf wouldn't be able to reach it with a generous leap. This had been Lufus's intention, but Shefri was hardly stalled. She simply kicked off the ground—then landed on an invisible foothold.

"Wha-?!"

The wolf jumped again, going from foothold to foothold, swiftly ascending toward the black dragon in the sky. Lufus stared in shock, but it wasn't the wolf's approach that had stunned her. After all, even wingless manabeasts could fight in the air as long as their summoner supported them with magical footholds and surfaces. Although minute differences existed per region, the gist of this strategy remained the same. Knowing this, Lufus had attempted to first secure the positional advantage, then planned to destroy whatever foothold Eluria would make for her wolf.

However, Eluria was a step ahead. Since destroying the foothold would render her wolf unable to approach the flying enemy, she simply made the foothold invisible to the human eye. This way, Lufus wouldn't be able to instruct her black dragon to destroy them, while Shefri, a mana-eating wolf especially sensitive to mana, could see it all. As proof, she was currently jumping from foothold to foothold by detecting Eluria's magic.

By the time Lufus predicted where the next foothold would take form, Shefri was already done using it. Lufus could not spot them fast enough to order their destruction, and Shefri was moving too quickly to leave any opening.

From there, Eluria could once again read Lufus's next move.

"Lafika! Spew fire around that wolf!"

The black dragon stopped fleeing from the approaching wolf and opened her jaws, revealing a dazzling light deep in her throat—the skysteel dragon's breath

of fire. Since Lufus couldn't see the foothold, they just had to attack the general area where it was likely to form. No matter how large Shefri might be, she couldn't escape this fire bath unscathed. If she dodged, then they would still succeed in destroying her foothold and slowing her approach.

"Shefri, wait." Heeding Eluria's orders, the wolf paused atop a foothold.

The dragon's fire breath mowed the next invisible foothold down—which was followed by a huge *explosion*. The sudden blast rattled the black dragon's balance, tilting its airborne body. "Ack!" Lufus yelped.

Eluria's invisible foothold had been made of oxygen, compressed and reinforced with magic. The fire breath had ignited it all, generating an explosion. Eluria had even taken care to arrange them so the majority of the damage was dealt to the black dragon and barely reached Shefri.

White smoke now blanketed Lufus's surroundings, and the blast had broken her balance. Now that she had completely lost sight of the wolf, Eluria could make the next move. "Shefri... Go."

The large wolf leaped out of the white smoke and bit into the black dragon's body. Lafika's steel scales creaked under Shefri's fangs, drawing a pained roar from the dragon.

"L-Lafika! Calm down!" Despite Lufus's orders, the dragon writhed and thrashed, losing her balance and plummeting toward the ground.

Celiosian magicians often mounted their manabeasts in order to give detailed orders with their manaspeech and execute swift evasion and defense. However, this exposed the summoners to attacks too. The earlier explosion had greatly obstructed both of their senses, rendering them unable to detect the approaching wolf. Because the black dragon was thrashing about, Lufus couldn't give proper orders. The end result was the black dragon falling to the ground with a loud crash.

Not too far from the billowing dust cloud, the pure white wolf landed on its feet and ran over to Eluria—of course, in another attempt to bite her, which failed spectacularly as the wolf slammed right into a transparent wall.

Eluria nodded. "Good girl," she praised as Shefri barked and growled beyond

the wall. Soon, her snout and body were chained once more.

As she placed a hand on Shefri's head, Eluria turned her attention to the cloud of dust, where the black dragon lay on the ground, groaning in pain. "You should send Lafika back. Mana-eating wolves leave wounds that constantly leak mana, so you can't heal her. Shefri had her teeth in for a while too, so she must've eaten a ton of mana."

There was no such thing as "death" for summoned manabeasts. Their bodies were temporary vessels made from the summoner's mana and remotely manipulated by implanting the actual beast's soul. However, the beast could still feel the pain of the vessel. Running out of mana could damage their physical body, and the vessel's death could impact their very soul. At worst, the contracted beast could be lost forever.

The black dragon was no longer in a state to fight. Any summoner would have to acknowledge this as their loss by now...or so Eluria thought.

"We're not...done," Lufus grunted, leaning against the black dragon.

Instantly, Shefri began thrashing wildly against her chains.

"Lafika will never lose... Never!!!" Lufus bellowed, her eyes wide and desperate. The black dragon raised its head from the ground and unleashed a blazing ball of fire.

The wolf, still wrapped in chains, leaped out in front of Eluria and was engulfed in flame. "Shefri!!!" Amid the raging blaze, her wolf's pained cry reached Eluria's ears, prompting her to instantly disconnect Shefri's soul from her vessel. The wolf limply flopped over and disappeared into beads of light. As the wolf's form dissipated, Eluria heard metal clattering to the ground—scales as hard as steel. They had been shot out along with the ball of flames and had pierced Shefri's body right before she was dismissed.

Anger flared within Eluria as she glared sharply at Lufus and her dragon. "You went too far," she snapped. One wrong move and Shefri could have been lost. Eluria wouldn't have said anything had this been a fight to the death, but this was just training. Lufus should have dismissed her black dragon the moment the match was decided. "This is a spar. You shouldn't make any lethal attacks to either the summoner or the beast in—"

"Sparring or not, it's all the same to me." Lufus returned Eluria's glare, her pale crimson eyes blazing fiercely. "Lafika and I can't lose. No matter what." That wasn't the face of someone with an unwavering belief in her friend's strength. Anxiety, pressure, frustration—that was all Eluria could see.

The black dragon stood quietly, embodying her master's resolve. Blood gushed from her wounds and she wavered from the mana loss, but her feet remained planted on the ground as if to say they hadn't lost yet.

Eluria narrowed her eyes at the sight and opened her mouth, but her next words were cut off when thick stone pillars rained down from the sky and surrounded the black dragon, bending to form a cage.

"S-Sorry about this... Could I step in?" uttered a weak voice from behind Eluria. There, with magic gear in hand, Philia stood, sporting a very apologetic look. "I received a report that a spar was going on...but Lady Lufus's manabeast will likely end up in critical condition at this rate, so we will be ending this here."

Lufus opened her mouth, a protest on the tip of her tongue. However, when she realized that Philia was an instructor, she snapped it shut and quietly nodded. Instructors had the authority to punish their students if they misused magic, got involved in crime, or attempted dangerous conduct. Lufus wasn't Philia's student, but if Lufus resisted now, she would later receive punishment from her own class instructor.

"I ask for your understanding, Lady Eluria," said Philia.

There was a long silence before Eluria pouted. "Mm."

"P-Please don't look at me like that!"

A firm hand landed on Eluria's head. "Hey, cheer up."

Eluria quietly looked up. "Raid?"

"Yo. I was training the kid when I saw you brawling with the Dragon Princess from the other class. So I called Ms. Philia just to be safe."

"Mm... But what about Fareg?"

"He said he couldn't move, so I left him behind," Raid said with a nonchalant shrug, but notably, Fareg had been training in magical combat since childhood.

For him to be rendered immobile, Raid must have either given him some ridiculous training or simply beaten him up that badly.

"And you over there, Ms. Dragon Princess," he called, turning his head. "If you're looking for some clear-cut outcome, then you'd better back off now. Winning a bout doesn't mean much."

Lufus frowned. "It does to me."

"What I'm saying is that you should take a better look at the *essence* of your victory." Raid pointed at the black dragon that lay limp and powerless within the stone cage. "A single win earned by putting your precious dragon's life at risk is worth far less than dirt, if you ask me."

Lufus opened her mouth to say something but simply closed it again. She undid her magic and watched as the black dragon dispersed into beads of light. "It may be worthless..." she muttered, voice trembling, "but we need to grab it anyway."

The girl turned and silently walked away, looking small and forlorn.



After Lufus left, Raid and Eluria learned from Philia that she was not only the daughter of the head chief of all seven Celiosian islands but also shouldered great expectations due to her unprecedented contracts with the Guardian Dragons. It was no exaggeration to say that the girl had her very nation's honor on her back.

Celios was a nation with a long history and a strong pride in its magic, much like their friendly neighbor Vegalta. However, their pride lay solely in their summoning magic. They had developed a special mana-based language for communicating with manabeasts; formed a unique environment for coexistence with manabeasts; and their taming techniques were essentially the root of summoning magic. This culture, and these techniques, were what made the nation known as Celios. But as a consequence, the development of their other magical techniques had lagged behind, especially when compared to Vegalta, where magic had developed much more broadly. Even magic devices were less commonplace in Celios.

Hence, great expectations had been placed upon Lufus. If she could outshine Vegalta's magic and show the world the peak of their nation's summoning magic, then she could prove that Celios was on equal grounds with the most prominent power in the continent. Such grand expectations...were far too heavy a burden for such a young girl.

But there had to be more to it, Eluria was sure. Lufus's gaze was filled with a firm and unwavering resolve, but there was clearly something more there—something beyond just the desire to meet the expectations placed upon her.

"Somebody's spacing out more than usual today."

Blinking her eyes back into focus, Eluria was greeted by the sight of Raid holding a cup in his hand—filled with milk tea, of course. She nodded. "I was thinking about Lufus."

"The Dragon Princess? Hm, yeah... Even I could tell something was going on with her."

"You think so too?"

"Uh-huh. I only saw part of your spar from a distance, but... How do I put it? It looked like she was just obsessed with winning rather than the fight itself. Really desperate... Like she'd been backed into a corner." Raid stroked his chin in thought. "I mean, I get that she needs to put on a good show since her nation's honor is banking on her, but then why didn't she go all the way? Since we've heard about her here, I'm sure she heard about you back in Celios. If I were her, I'd have whipped out the Guardian Dragons to secure the win from the get-go."

Eluria hummed. "Lufus is pretty young. Maybe she was too prideful?"

"If that was the case, then she'd have summoned the Guardian Dragons from the start just to show off. Besides..." Raid grimaced. "Would someone drunk on their own ego have that intense look in their eye?"

At the end of their spar, Lufus looked like she was about to cry—like she'd been cornered or was being hunted. Eluria had felt all her anger fly out the window the moment she saw that expression.

"Jeez... This is reminding me of the old days," Raid groused.

"The old days...?"

"Yeah. In Altane, children were often conscripted into the military—it was basically just a roundabout way of culling the number of mouths to feed. So the kids always fought like madmen on the field, desperate to save themselves and to prove they were worth something. That girl had the same look in her eyes."

"You mean...Lufus is the same?"

"Who knows? We live in a different era now, and only she would know the reason." Raid's bitter expression loosened with a soft sigh. "I just know that...she must've come to this institute carrying some additional, personal burden," he murmured, gazing into the distance.

Raid was very good at reading people; he could see their true nature and understand what kind of person they were. Not even the slightest detail escaped his notice. That was how he'd been able to fulfill his role as the Hero while also serving as the general of such a large army. Whenever Eluria had faced the Altanian army, she could always feel from their united front that they had a deep trust in him.

In that regard, she was actually a little jealous. Although she'd succeeded in promulgating her craft of magic, she had avoided interacting with others by burying herself in her research. She could only dream of being as charismatic as Raid. Of course...she only realized much later that she, too, had actually been charmed by him.

"By the way, Eluria..."

"Yeth?!"

"Oh. Been a while since you've done that."

"I-It's your fault for suddenly calling my name...!"

Raid arched a brow. "You mean, like I do every day?"

Eluria tried to cool her flushed face by shaking it left and right. "Wh-What is it...?"

"Well, I've been wondering about that little fella..." Raid's gaze fell to Eluria's lap. A puppy, white as snow, was lazing about, belly exposed and legs paddling

restlessly. The little thing noticed Raid staring and let out a teeny bark. "Is that your summoned beast?" he asked.

"Mhm. She worked really hard and got badly hurt, so..." Eluria brought her finger to the puppy, letting her nibble on it like a snack.

The final blow in the spar had greatly worn down Shefri's soul—which sounded extreme, but it simply meant that Shefri was in a sour mood because she'd been hurt, so Eluria was apologizing by feeding her some mana. That said, this was still a sensitive matter; if the exhausted manabeast wasn't attended to, they might get fed up with their summoner and choose to break the contract. Therefore, in such cases, it was imperative to lift their spirits.

"The summon's body is made of mana, so making it smaller minimizes mana consumption," Eluria explained.

"You made her so small, she's lost all that majesty she had before..."

Eluria held Shefri's front legs and stretched her upward to show Raid. She still *looked* like a wolf—just so miniaturized that she could only be perceived as a dog. "Do you want to pet her?" Eluria offered.

Raid froze. "Can I...? With my mana? She won't...blow up, will she? 'Cause if she does, I can promise you I'll be too traumatized to leave bed for at least three days..."

"It's fine. Her body is made of mana, but the mana has been applied to form a physical body. It's no different from petting an actual dog."

"Th-Then don't mind if I do..." Raid slowly reached his hand out. When he softly laid it on the puppy's fluffy belly, Shefri wiggled about. "Ooh... It's been so long since I last pet a dog..."

"Do you like dogs?"

"Cats, dogs—I like any animal. But they don't like me... They always run when I approach, so I can rarely pet them," Raid murmured as he continued petting Shefri's tummy, an unusually wide and blissful smile on his face.



"Mm... Then do you want to carry her?"

"Can I?"

"Sure. Her fangs and claws are clipped, so it should be safe."

Eluria held up Shefri in front of Raid's face. The puppy's tongue was out and tail was wagging excitedly. Raid slowly raised his arms to hold her—

## Chomp!

Shefri opened her mouth wide and bit right onto Raid's face. A few seconds passed silently as the wolf-turned-puppy savored the frozen man's face. Then, she released him with a disappointed bark—one that sounded very much like a "Yuck!"—before leaping back into Eluria's chest.

"Sh-She's just a bit grumpy today because she's tired...!"

"Right... Besides, I'm just a stranger to her... Of course she wouldn't wanna be pet by me..." Raid slumped, a glum air now hanging around him.

The thought then came to Eluria: mana-eating wolves were sensitive to mana, so Shefri might have had an instinctive aversion to Raid's unusual mana. "Could it be that...animals have been avoiding you because of your mana?"

"Wait, really?!" Raid instantly loomed over Eluria with eyes more bloodshot than she'd ever seen.

"Y-Yeah... Animals have sharper senses than humans. They use their smell and hearing to pick up on mana and assess other creatures..."

"Ugh..." Raid hung his head and drooped his shoulders in heavy disappointment. "Now that you mention it, I've had an inkling that was the case... One time, some wild dogs attacked our camp but fled the moment they saw me... Another time, we were forced to take shelter in a bear's cave but the bear willingly gave up its spot and just booked it... Oh, I was practically our army's walking beast repellant too...!"

"Such a wild and eventful life," Eluria mused.

"So that was all 'cause of my mana, huh? Then there's not much I can do about it..." Raid crumpled to the ground with a sigh, looking terribly depressed.

Eluria peered down at him, a troubled frown on her lips. This certainly wasn't something they could remedy so easily. Eluria *could* ask Shefri not to run from Raid, but he might only feel more hurt seeing the puppy tolerating his touch against her will. Still, Eluria couldn't help but feel bad when he clearly liked animals so much yet couldn't even touch them.

The Sage desperately racked her brain for a solution. The genius progenitor of magic, an art that had swept through the world like a storm, turned the gears in her head and searched for the best possible solution to this new conundrum before her.

After a long and thoughtful silence, she finally found her answer! Eluria lifted her face, now bright with inspiration. Setting Shefri down on the couch, she instantly formulated her magic and patted Raid's slumped shoulders. "Hey, Raid," she called.

"What...?" he answered, voice dreary and glum as he slowly lifted his head. "It's fine, really. I've already resigned to my fate, so you don't need to comfort \_\_\_"

Raid froze at the baffling sight before him. Here was Eluria, still seated on the couch...but now with a pair of snow white *cat ears* on her head. Heck, a *tail* was even swaying leisurely behind her to match.

"Since you can't pet animals, you can pet me instead," declared Eluria with an infinitely smug look on her face. Her cat ears twitched and tail wagged proudly.

Raid gaped at the girl for a stunned moment before snapping his head away to stifle his laughter. "O-Of everything you could've come up with, you really... Pfff...!"

"Wh-Why are you laughing...?!"

"S-Sorry... It's just, putting on cat ears and a tail, and then being so smug about it... That's just so you... Ha ha!" Raid's shoulders shook up and down as he failed to stifle his laughter.

Eluria wasn't quite expecting this reaction. In her mind, she'd pictured his face lighting up in joy and gratitude as he immediately reached out to pet her head. The girl puffed her cheeks up. "So you don't wanna pet me?" she grumbled.

"I do, I do! Actually, it really suits you. I *have* been thinking you're kinda like a cat." Raid grinned as he gladly pet Eluria's head.

Although she was a little vexed, she still dutifully responded to the touch by flapping her ears.

```
"So?" Raid asked. "What next?"

"Hm... I'm a cat, so I'll sit on your lap."

"Sure."
```

After Raid sat on the couch, Eluria followed by taking her seat on his lap. She shuffled about for a moment, trying to find the best position, and nodded. "Wonderful. A very comfy lap."

```
"Well, thanks."

"Could Shefri sit too?"
```

"Sure thing. You're pretty light. Even a dozen more Shefris are no problem for me."

"You heard him, Shefri. Come here." Eluria beckoned the puppy over, and she hopped onto her summoner's lap with a small bark.

Raid chuckled. "This probably looks really hot and stuffy from the outside..."

"Call it warm and cozy," Eluria replied smugly. She leaned against Raid's chest and hugged Shefri against hers, placing the puppy within Raid's sight. "And you even have double the coziness with the both of us here. Now, you may pet me to your heart's content."

"All right, don't mind if I do. Thanks." Raid's lips turned up wryly as he began patting her head.

A big hand and a familiar weight—it reminded Eluria of long ago, when her father used to pat her head with a gentle smile on his face. The last time she saw him was before she headed for the royal capital. That day... Yes, that day, just like any other, her father had patted her head with the same tender smile on his face.

Eluria looked back at her memories—at her father's unchanging figure within

them—and quietly wagged her tail.

## **Chapter Three**

One week after the incident with Lufus, Millis sat in the cafeteria with eyes ablaze as she exclaimed for the umpteenth time, "I want to go out to the capital!!!"

Of course, her friends simply continued eating their meals without a care.

"Throwing another fit, Millis?" asked Raid.

"You romanticize the capital too much," muttered Eluria.

Undeterred, however, the girl responded with fiery passion. "Yes! Yes, I most certainly do! Stylish stone pavements with not a single peeking blade of grass! An orderly cityscape birthed from thorough and professional urban planning! Stalls that sell food other than cheese and dried meat! I dearly wish to experience the capital in all of its urban glory!!!"

After being deterred on their very first day off, Millis never gave up on voicing her desire to go out to the capital, but today her passion was burning more intensely than ever. This time, there was one person who hadn't yet learned to let the girl's ravings go in one ear and out the other.

Fareg scoffed. "It takes so little to please the bumpkin... I'm almost envious."

However, Millis looked unoffended by the biting sarcasm. After all, the nobleman was presently slumped over the table, trembling and twitching all over. She simply looked down at him and said, "Honestly, Fareg, your dedication to getting a word in despite your disastrous state is very commendable."

"Shut up! I couldn't move even if I wanted to...!" Fareg gritted his teeth with effort, but his body refused to budge.

In contrast, Raid looked on with a satisfied nod. "Millis is right. It's great that you've got the energy to run your mouth now. In the beginning, you'd always pass out the moment training ended."

"How about you just don't run me so ragged each time?! These days, there's always a gap in my memories from the end of training to when I wake up in the morning! I'm actually scared!"

Raid shrugged. "After you pass out, I carry you back to the cafeteria, force some food down your throat, then toss you into your room and leave the rest to Valk and Lucas. You're fine."

"Ooh, so that's why I'm all dressed and cleaned when I wake up in the— No, hang on a second! What do you mean, you 'force food down my throat'?!"

"I pick a decently nutritious meal from the cafeteria, borrow a magic blender from the kitchen, then pour the liquefied food down your throat."

"You've been doing that to me while I was *unconscious*?!" Despite his lively shrieks, Fareg was still too exhausted to even slam the desk in frustration.

Wisel watched them both with a curious tilt of his head. "Right, you two have been training together. What exactly have you been doing?"

"I've been teaching this kid a type of close-quarters combat known as swordsmanship," Raid replied. "Though he can't exactly copy my technique, so I'm having him practice the movements and support magic needed to replicate my movements."

Over the past week, Raid had been rigorously training Fareg. In the distant past, schools of swordsmanship taught specific forms and precise techniques, but what Raid wielded was less "swordsmanship" and more of just "sword fighting techniques" he'd learned on the field. Simply put, his swordsmanship was self-taught; much of it was impossible without strength like his, rendering him the only one capable of such a fighting style back in the day. However, now it could be artificially replicated with physical enhancement and other supporting magic.

Fortunately, Fareg was a fast learner and a skilled fighter. He could formulate the spells needed to replicate Raid's movements, so their training was progressing more quickly than expected.

There was just one tiny problem:

"I don't have enough mana to replicate your movements, you freak! Each

spell uses up less mana than offensive magic, but I can't sustain it long enough!"

Raid hummed. "Good luck with that, I guess."

"You talk as if it isn't your problem!" Fareg snapped.

"Well..." Raid scratched his cheek. "I know magic theories and whatnot, but managing mana consumption isn't exactly my area of expertise..." Fareg was replicating Raid's fighting style with mana, but Raid always fought with pure physical strength and had never used magic himself. He had no idea what it felt like to consume mana and couldn't give advice on how to manage it. "Maybe Eluria can help you out?"

Eluria hummed. "I could try, but I might not be much help either. As a Verminant, he should have already learned combat-based mana management techniques in childhood."

"Of course I have," Fareg said. "Moreover, mana management is greatly dependent on the individual's senses. Even Caldwin wouldn't be able to teach me much at this point."

Eluria nodded in agreement.

Wisel, who'd fallen into thought for a while, lifted his face. "Lord Verminant, could I take a look at your magic gear for a sec?"

"Wh-What are you going to do...?!"

Wisel narrowed his eyes. "I'm a Blanche artificer. I won't snap it in half like Raid did."

"A Blanche artificer... Right! Th-Then I can trust you!" The sight of Fareg's precious gear snapping in two must have been terribly traumatizing, as even with that reassurance, he very reluctantly handed his short sword over to Wisel.

Wisel squinted, closely observing the short sword in his hands. "The manufacturer is...Workshop Estogenia, huh? The mana circuits have been pruned for repair, but it's been fixed as closely as possible to its original settings. The artificer must be very skilled."

"Of course!" Fareg preened. "Estogenia has been making House Verminant's gear for generations! Why, their most skilled craftsman is even currently under

our employ!"

"Hmmm... But now I see the problem." Wisel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "To compensate for the lost mana circuits, they had to repair it in such a way that unapplied magic costs far more mana to cast."

Fareg blinked. "Really...?"

Wisel nodded. "Until now, you've mainly been using long-range high-power spells. The artificer must have referred to the mana usage history recorded in the circuits and applied the limited mana cost reduction to your most commonly used spells. A great remedy, really, but it's working against you now that you're changing your fighting style."

"Ugh... In other words, I have to put in another commission...?"

"Is that a problem?" asked Wisel.

"Well... When I had this repaired, father scolded me very harshly... 'How could a magician break his own gear?!' he yelled... Who knows what he'll say to me if I ask for another repair?!"

Raid shrugged. "What's the big deal? A rich kid's gotta help keep the economy running."

"I don't want to hear that from you, of all people!" Fareg slammed his hands on the desk in protest, his anger finally overcoming his exhaustion.

Raid nodded at the sight. It was good to see he was regaining his energy already.

Wisel hummed. "Lord Verminant," he called. "If you don't mind, I could try making adjustments to your gear."

"Could you?!"

"Sure. My family's on good terms with the artificers at Estogenia, so we've exchanged magic gear a few times to learn from one another. I should be able to repair your sword if I refer to some of Estogenia's gear while I work."

"Please do! I don't want to be scolded by my father anymore!"

"All right. It's not every day I get to take a close look at House Verminant's

gear. This'll also serve as a good reference for me in the future. With that in mind, I don't mind doing this for you free of charge."

"Thank you... Thank you, Blanche artificer...!" Fareg grabbed Wisel's hands and looked at him like he'd saved him from the pits of hell—the scolding from his father must have been intense.

At that point, Millis gasped and snapped her head up. "Wisel, you're going to do all that work in your family's workshop, right?"

"Yeah. Like last time, I plan on spending my day off working back home."

"And Fareg," she said next, "you'll be joining him, right?"

"Obviously. I'll be specifying the new magic I need applied to the gear, and I'll also have to test it myself in case adjustments are needed."

"Then that means..." Millis smirked. "Raid doesn't have anyone to train, and Lady Eluria would only end up with more work if she held training with one absentee. In other words..."

"We'll be spending our day off sparring with you and beating you to a pulp," the pair concluded in sync.

"Wrong! Very wrong! I'm not trying to turn myself into a punching bag here!" Millis snapped, pointing decisively at them. Her lips stretched into a grin, like a child who'd received a gift from the heavens. "For our day off, let's all go to the capital together!!!"



The royal capital was structured in layers around a small mountain. The castle stood at the very center on the peak, while one layer below were the aristocratic houses that had supported Vegalta since ancient times. Another step down were the guard posts, offices, banks, hospitals, and other public institutions. These establishments formed a fence that separated the aristocrats and royals from the lowest layer, the base of the mountain, which was the area colloquially known as the capital.

Vegalta once prospered by trading with its neighboring countries, a legacy still evident today from the many shops and businesses that lined the capital's

streets, further propelled by the many visitors and merchants passing through each day. The aesthetic streets were filled with both historical significance and modern-day magical technology; in particular, those from the countryside would find many new cutting-edge magic devices they had never seen before. A marketplace regularly opened for these wares, as well as a much wider variety of goods that passed through this central point of the country. The capital was very important not just to the sightseers but also those who came to do business.

"We're finally here! Vegalta's capital, the biggest metropolis in the country!!!"

Today, a very excited countryside bumpkin had come to these famous streets. Her friends watched over her from a very safe distance.

"You good now, Millis?" Raid called.

The bumpkin, Millis, blinked. "Huh? Why am I the only one getting excited here?"

"I mean..." Raid shrugged. "Everyone else lives here. It's pretty hard to get excited over your own backyard."

His three other companions nodded in agreement. Eluria and Fareg were the children of venerable aristocratic houses; they'd had quite a splendid view of the capital all their lives. Wisel's family workshop was located within the market so there wasn't much for him to gape at.

"B-But Raid, you're from the boonies just like me! Don't you feel the least bit moved by this wonderful urban scenery?!"

"Well, I definitely found it cool at first. But I've gone around quite a bit while living in the Caldwin estate, so I'm used to it now."

"Ahh, that's right... You're the Bogus Backstabbing Bumpkin..." Utterly depressed, Millis bequeathed Raid with the oddest, most shameful title of all. Still, he could only feel pity seeing the girl so down in the dumps.

Fareg looked at Millis and huffed. "We're only headed to the industrial sector, after all. It's full of workshops—nothing even a bumpkin like you would frolic over." The outer area of the capital was the sightseeing sector, while the inner area was the industrial sector. The latter was where workshops and magic

device factories were located, frequented mostly by craftsmen and merchants who'd come to do business and stock up on goods. It certainly wasn't made to appeal to tourists. "Why not go run around the sightseeing spots like the bumpkin that you are?"

"No!" Millis exclaimed. "To me, the industrial sector is also a splendid part of the city. After all, there aren't any factories or workshops back in the boonies!"

Fareg looked just about done with her. "Anything goes for you, doesn't it...?"

"You wouldn't understand, Fareg... Day in, day out, all I saw were the same old plains and mountains! Sightseeing? Just stare at the sheep and cows all day! If you're lucky, maybe you can catch one of the cattle giving birth! The most thrilling story I've got for you is that one time an old man went missing, but we just found him after a few hours! So to me, everything here *is* a novel sight!!!"

"Yes, all right... Just go and get your fill of the capital already, you exhausting country girl." At this point, even Fareg couldn't help but look at Millis with pity. He must have sensed that denying her urban dreams any further would push her over the edge. "Really..." he sighed. "Today should be a day off, but I already feel so drained. To make matters worse, people keep staring because *some* of us are standing out..."

"I agree." Eluria nodded. "I don't like all these stares either."

Fareg glared at her. "I was talking about you, Caldwin."

As he said, most of the gawking was directed at Eluria. The casualwear she'd donned had done nothing to suppress her stunning beauty. Heads turned without exception, and with her silver hair—a rare color in Vegalta—many could deduce her identity and gasped in awe. That said, the staring was mostly because she was hiding behind Raid, clinging onto his sleeve and peeking out from behind his back.

The girl saw no issue with this and curiously cocked her head. "But I always do this. What's the problem?"

Raid nodded, glancing down at her. "You're all good in the Institute, but you might get lost on your own out here. I also feel safer with you holding on to my sleeve like this."

"Mhm. It's important to hold on to your lifeline."

Fareg stared at the girl with a heavy look of disappointment. "She's also from a historical household *and* is praised as a greater talent than me... I can't believe this."

"Well, I'm sure many feel the same when looking at you and your hopeless attitude, Fareg," replied Millis.

"You've been getting a bit too comfy around me, you lousy bumpkin!"

Behind the bickering two, Eluria cast her eyes down and trembled. "I'm...as hopeless as Fareg...?"

Raid placed a hand on her shoulder for comfort. "Don't let it get to you. You're just hopeless in a different way." He felt bad that he couldn't completely deny it.

The five boisterous students stepped into the industrial sector. As the passersby dwindled in number, so did the vibrant streets shift into more boorish and cluttered roads. The people along these avenues were clad in work clothes or dressed as merchants. Finally, the group stopped in front of a relatively small and weathered building.

"Welcome to my home—Workshop Blanche," said Wisel.

Millis craned her neck. "Huh... For a famous workshop, it's rather small, isn't it?"

"Ms. Millis, you can go ahead and just call it shabby."

"Oh, okay. It's rather shabby, isn't it?" Millis corrected.

"Well, it looks different on the inside. I wouldn't go so far as to call it a Blanche family policy, but we do tend to use all profits on the development of new magic gear and procuring parts and materials. So the exterior hasn't been a priority." Wisel chuckled wryly as he produced a key from his pocket.

The group stepped inside, walked past the reception area, and entered the main workshop.

"Here is Workshop Blanche," Wisel declared, "a proud producer of magic gear for generations."

The sight left his four classmates' jaws on the floor. There were piles and piles of tools in every corner of the workshop, from the standard swords and spears to protective armaments like bracers and gaiters, to instruments, farming tools, fishing gear, and so on.

"Whoa..." Raid marveled. "Are these all magic gear?"

"No. These are models we use as reference when making gear." Wisel approached a gigantic hammer and easily lifted it. "Our client tells us their mana branches and magic specializations, and from there, we calculate the necessary mana circuits and determine the best shape and materials for the gear. Then, after finalizing the overall design and the mana circuit layout, we commission a magic inscriber to engrave the circuits."

"Wooow..." Millis gaped. "Usually, staves or weapons come to mind when I think of magic gear, but I guess they actually come in all shapes and sizes."

"You're free to look around," Wisel offered. "I closed up shop for today. The place is all ours."

Millis gasped. "Really?!"

"Yeah. We've got work to do, after all." Wisel rolled his sleeves up and went to the workbench. "Lord Verminant, may I see your gear?"

"Okay... But I'm going to cry if you fail!"

"Just leave it to me. I'll show you how well a Blanche artificer works." Wisel took Fareg's gear and held his right hand over it with narrowed eyes. "Output composition," he uttered. The gear was wrapped in a gentle light, while the crystal in his left hand filled with rows and rows of text. "It seems my diagnosis was correct. The magic formulae for your most frequently used spells are anchored, so all other types of magic would be repelled. Are these five the types you've been using most recently?"

"R-Right... Those are the ones I've recently formulated in training."

Wisel hummed, gazing fixedly at the rows of text. "It's definitely a big change from the branches you were used to using. There's no need to change the overall shape of the gear, but I'll need to make some adjustments to the converter and stabilizer."

The converter in magic gear basically changed the inputted mana into a different branch color. Although this decreased the output, it expanded the types of magic the wielder could cast. For magic that required stability like support or healing spells, passing the mana through the stabilizer could help maintain the output at the desired level.

These components were very familiar to Raid. "Huh... You made real good use of them for magic, I see," he said to Eluria.

"Mhm. Neat, isn't it?"

"You looted these techniques from Altane, right?"

"The stuff was just lying around on the battlefield, so I restored, analyzed, then applied them to magic," said Eluria with a smug quirk of her lips.

Converters and stabilizers had been components of Altanian machinery, originally made to process an energy source called electricity. Eluria had taken the Altanian weapons Vegalta had secured during the war, dismantled them, and worked out how to run them with mana instead. Raid had used such weapons himself, but even he didn't know how they worked. On the other hand, Eluria had simply dismantled a few and had not only figured out how they worked but even managed to apply them to her own craft. With such brains, it was no wonder she'd been praised as the Sage.

Raid's mind had wandered to the past, but he soon snapped out of it when he saw Wisel's face clouding over.

"This...might be a problem."

"A problem...?" Fareg gulped.

"I can make adjustments to the converter and stabilizer, but since your spells will be in constant use, I'd also like to increase the mana efficiency. But to do that, I'd have to shift the positions of the mana circuits."

"Then...just shift them?"

"Shifting the mana circuits means erasing the existing ones and drawing out new ones. We artificers devise the overall design and the most efficient mana circuit layout, but inscribers are the ones who actually carve them." Fareg's eyes widened. "You mean you can't inscribe mana circuits?"

"I can, but the problem is that our mana branches aren't compatible." Wisel sighed and turned to Eluria. "If I'm not mistaken, Ms. Eluria, you're compatible with all six branches, correct?"

"Mm... You're not wrong, but I've never inscribed mana circuits before."

"Ah... I see. There's not a lot to fix here, but the work is still pretty precise. I'd prefer passing it to someone with experience."

Fareg raised a brow. "Don't you know a magic inscriber you can ask?"

"I definitely do, but Blanche's partnered inscribers also frequently work with the upper class. Working on House Verminant's magic gear is a pretty grand experience for an inscriber, so they might let it slip and House Verminant might hear about it."

"No! Anything but that!!!"

Wisel sighed in resignation. "Right. Roger that. As an artificer, I *really* don't want to hand an incomplete product back to its wielder, but the circumstances are what they are. I'll just repair what I can and—" He paused, feeling a hand on his shoulder. Wisel lifted his head from his workbench.

Millis stood beside him, grinning from ear to ear. "You know," she said smugly, "I happen to have experience inscribing mana circuits."

Wisel blinked. "What?"

"It takes a long time to call an inscriber out to the sticks, so I used to repair broken magic devices myself. Why, I was even dubbed the Device Doctor back in our village!" she preened, proudly raising her finger in the air.

Wisel mulled it over for a moment before nodding. "All right. I'll find you some magic gear—I want you to copy its circuits. You're free to use the tools we have here." Wisel found her an iron plate to work on.

"Yes, sir! Does it work the same as with magic devices?"

"Generally, yes. But magic gear circuits are far more complex and detailed than those on ordinary devices. The slightest deviation can drag the mana efficiency down."

"Hmmm. Okay." Millis shrugged and weaved around a pen-like tool for a while. "Here. Like this?"

Wisel blinked owlishly. "Huh?"

"I just replicated it at the same size since you didn't specify anything. Was that okay?" Millis held the plate up in front of Wisel, revealing an intricate pattern made of shimmering mana.

Wisel took the plate and stared at it wide-eyed, adjusting his glasses over and over in disbelief. "No way... It's *perfect*?!"

"Wah ha ha! Behold—my power!!!" Millis raised her hands in the air like a proud champion. She looked the happiest they'd ever seen to date. Wide grin still plastered on her face, she whipped her head around to Fareg and chuckled ominously under her breath. "Fareg," she cooed. "Do you want me to inscribe your gear's circuits? Well? Do ya?"

The boy grunted. "Urgh... S-State your demands...!"

"Oh, you make me sound like such a villain! I don't really have any demands right now... How about we just say you owe me one, hm?"

"That's even scarier! I'd rather you give me a clear demand now!"

"Mwa ha ha! Then may you live in fear of me henceforth!" Millis even made an effort to get up on a chair so she could look down on him. She looked like she was having the time of her life.

Fareg gritted his teeth and looked up at her like a defeated warrior, but beside him Wisel simply adjusted his glasses once more and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Lord Verminant," he said somberly. "You must let her do you this favor. You *must*."

"And be indebted to this unhinged country girl?! Are you crazy?!"

"We'd be hard-pressed to find anyone else who can inscribe circuits this skillfully, even among the professionals—I can guarantee you this as an artificer. In fact, she's so good I have to wonder why she even bothered taking the magician course."

"I thought it sounded cooler and more city-like!!!" Millis proudly declared.

"Can we really trust this simpleton with my gear?!" Fareg wailed.



"I'll draft the layout and give her directions, so it'll be fine. Since she's this skilled, we can even proceed with the initial plan and produce the best possible output!" Wisel grabbed Fareg's shoulders with a crazed smile, his craftsman's spirit blazing at the opportunity to optimize his work. "I swear I'll make this magic gear the best it can be! So just save your worries for another day and let Ms. Millis work!!!"

"Ack! F-Fine, fine! I don't care anymore! Just do as you please!" Pressured by the looming artificer, Fareg turned pale as a sheet and nodded.

Wisel and Millis instantly did a high five. They were getting along quite well at the expense of Fareg's anxiety.

"I'll get started on the new mana circuit layout," said Wisel. "Ms. Millis, I want you to copy it perfectly, just as you did earlier."

"Just leave it to me! Also, I'm feeling kinda thirsty!"

"Lord Verminant, go buy her something to drink."

"So you're putting me in her debt and turning me into her gofer?!"

"The inscriber's words are absolute. We've also got adjustments to make after the repair. Things are going to get busy around here."

Raid and Eluria watched the three lively students with warm smiles.

"Looks like they're having fun," said Eluria.

Raid nodded. "It's good for youngsters to be so full of energy."

"You're a youngster too, Raid."

"I'm a geezer on the inside."

"To me, you'll always be a youngster."

"Well, if you ask me, you're a kid both inside and out." Raid chuckled. He turned his head when he noticed someone approaching. "Hm? What's up, Millis?"

"Ah, I just felt the familiar warm gaze of my village elders from over here."

"Did you just come here to call me a grandpa?" he deadpanned.

Millis shrugged. "Why don't you two take a stroll outside? Wisel seems oddly riled up. I think we'll be working for quite some time."

They turned and saw Wisel drawing out the gear's blueprint on his workbench. Fareg sat beside him, providing the details.

"It's a nice day off in the capital," Millis continued, "so why don't you two go on a date?"

Raid and Eluria both cocked their heads and parroted, "Date?"

"Why does it look like neither of you have heard the word before?!"

"Hey, I've heard it," Raid retorted.

"Me too." Eluria nodded proudly.

"Weird... I could've sworn it was just an ordinary word..." Millis muttered, looking at the two in exhaustion before heaving a sigh. "Very well. Then I shall entrust you two with a very important task today!"

Millis's eyes snapped wide open and she pointed firmly at the pair. "Raid and Lady Eluria," she declared, "you two must now go on a shopping date!!!"



Just like that, Raid and Eluria were kicked out of the workshop. They now stood on the streets of the sightseeing sector with identical blank looks on their faces.

"Raid."

"Yes, Eluria?"

"Time for a strategy meeting. We need to confirm the status quo."

"Sounds good. Gotta keep our cool."

"Firstly, we've received orders from Millis to purchase tea." Eluria held out a memo pad the girl had given her—a list of several tea brands. "We're both familiar with these brands, so no problems there."

"Yep. I also know where the store is. I've seen it before on my walks around the capital."

"But we've clearly been allocated too much time for this simple task." Even if they were to factor in some unforeseen obstacles, heading to the store and back to the workshop should hardly take thirty minutes. "Current time is thirteen hundred hours. However, Millis has forbidden us from returning until evening—precisely, until seventeen hundred hours."

"Why're you using old military time?"

"I just felt like it." The intense look in Millis's eyes when she'd given them this task reminded Eluria of her superior officer giving orders on the battlefield. Unfortunately, Millis's orders weren't as precise as that of a military commander. "Additionally, she specified we must 'do something date-like' before returning. I believe we must first define the parameters of this directive to determine our course of action."

"Agreed. Basically, we need to decide what activities count as 'date-like."

"Mhm. So, Raid," began Eluria. "Have you ever gone on a date?"

"Nope. Never."

"Me neither."

And just like that, their strategy meeting reached an impasse. The pair stared blankly at one another for a long and suffocating moment.

"So..." Raid murmured.

"What now?" Eluria asked.

So many questions, so few answers. The pair wistfully looked up at the sky. Of course, they knew what a date was—it was when couples went out and did...whatever on their day off. Unfortunately, that was the extent of their knowledge.

Raid sighed. "I recall my subordinates talked about it sometimes, but I always just let it go in one ear and out the other since I figured I didn't need to know..."

"Same here..." Eluria drooped.

A thousand years ago, Raid and Eluria had been known far and wide as the Hero and the Sage. They had been constantly swamped with work and ran around the battlefield nearly every single day. Eluria had even spent all her free time researching magic in her room. By then, she'd already had budding feelings for Raid, so she hadn't the slightest thoughts of entering a relationship with her fellow elves or the humans around her.

"Millis specifically said 'shopping date,'" Eluria recalled. "So there must be a high chance that *shopping* dates are different from *ordinary* dates in some way."

"Well, it just sounds like she wants us to shop for stuff while we're out..." Raid scratched his head. "Is there anything you want?"

"Not really."

"Me neither. I've already bought everything I need."

Yet another impasse and more stifling silence.

Eluria staggered on her feet and dizzily clutched her head. "It can't be... We can't accomplish the mission...?!"

"No, this isn't a mission..." Raid watched the girl with a crooked smile before his gaze wandered to the side. "Hm, come to think of it... Back when I lived in the village, I'd sometimes go to town with my sister. She always said that it was fun just looking around even if we didn't buy anything. She'd still pester me to get her food from the stalls though."

Eluria lifted her face and stared at Raid. "You have a sister?"

"Yep. She's three years younger than me, so she's around your age. I also have a brother three years older than me. Unlike me, they both scored high on the Aptitude Test, so they left the village to study at a different magic institute."

"Hm... Then you might see them at the integrated exam."

"Oh, you're right. They always write that they're too busy to come home, so they probably haven't heard about my enrollment here yet. Guess they'll be in for a surprise if we ever run into each other, huh?" Raid's lips quirked into a grin as he imagined his siblings' reactions.

Eluria also found herself smiling at the sight.

"Anyway..." Raid nodded. "How 'bout we just look around for a bit? No pressure to buy anything. It's already past lunchtime, so we can even eat while

we walk, then buy some snacks for the others later."

"Mm... I've never done that before. Sounds fun."

"Then it's decided. Well, I'm still not sure if that counts as date-like, but other people seem to be doing it too, so it should be good."

"Okay. With this, we can safely fulfill Millis's—" Eluria froze mid-nod, her gaze drawn to a man and woman passing by. They were all smiles and laughter as they walked together, looking very much like a couple. Sealing the deal, however, were their interlocked hands.

The girl stared at the sight for a while longer before dropping her gaze down to her own hand, still pinched onto Raid's sleeve. Although she hesitated for a moment, Eluria mustered her courage and nodded firmly. "Mm!" Eyes clenched shut, she held her hand out to Raid.

He slowly looked down. "Uh... What is it?"

"H-H-Hand! I wish to...h-hold hand, please!"

"Calm down. Your language faculties are malfunctioning." Raid sighed at the sight of the girl's beet red ears and gently patted her on the head. "Holding hands isn't a big deal now, is it? You always cling to me when you're floaty. I mean, I even help you get changed and have to put you into the tub myself..."

"Th-This is this, that is that...!" And to Eluria, that wasn't just an excuse. She never intended or remembered anything she did in her floaty state; her memories of those times were foggy at best. Also, Raid had held her hand before, but Eluria had never initiated the hand-holding herself. "S-So...please!"

"Well... If you're okay with it." Raid shrugged and took her outstretched hand.

The next second, a miniature bomb exploded in Eluria's head. "T-Time out!" she gasped.

Raid let go as requested. "Right. I was worried you were gonna pass out."

Eluria drew her hand back and tried to calm herself with deep breaths. Her face was flushed, and her heart seemed to be jumping from her chest. "Wh-What a fearsome battle...!"

"I didn't realize my hand was that scary."

"It kind of is...!" In fact, to Eluria, hand-holding was far more menacing than an actual battle. Now that she'd initiated it, she couldn't help but feel exceedingly conscious and embarrassed. If it had been that bad after just a few seconds, they couldn't possibly walk the streets while holding hands.

Seeing Eluria's expression crumble in frustration, Raid stroked his chin in thought. "But you're fine with holding my sleeve?"

"Y-Yeah... Since there's no direct contact..."

"Hm... Then could you summon your manabeast?"

Eluria raised a brow. "Shefri?"

"Yeah. Might as well walk her while we're at it."

"O-Okay..." Eluria took a deep breath to calm herself and weaved the spell together—a tiny Shefri manifested at her feet with a peppy bark. Of course, Eluria didn't forget to place a collar and leash on her. "Um... What now...?"

"Great. Then how's this?" Raid reached out and held the leash in Eluria's hand.

Her eyes widened, realizing what Raid had been intending. Now that they were both holding on to the same leash, it somehow felt as if they were indirectly holding hands.

"Doesn't it still feel like we're holding hands?" Raid grinned. "We don't have to do things the same way as others, especially if you'd wind up too nervous to even enjoy yourself. So let's just do whatever you're comfy with and have a good time."

Eluria gazed at Raid's lighthearted smile. He was always like this, so caring and considerate. He took to heart her awkward hand-holding request and even came up with a way to honor it despite her nerves. He let her pinch his sleeves and hide behind his back, never trying to force her to the front, always waiting until she was ready to step out herself. Day by day, Eluria found a bit more courage welling up within her heart.

"Let me know if this is too hard for you. We can just go back to usual if that's better too."

"Mm... I think I'm fine for now." Her palms felt a little sweaty, but she clenched them tight and cheered herself on.

Raid was standing right there, waiting patiently like always—so Eluria smiled and took a step forward. To walk next to the person she loved with her head held high, she would do her best with this courage that had bloomed within.



As they walked through the capital, Eluria grew more comfortable, and by the latter half of their outing, she was already back to her usual self. Her grip remained firm on the leash and she showed no signs of leaving Raid's side, but she looked quite at ease thanks to Shefri's presence.

Once they were seated on a park bench, Raid let out a sigh and watched as the vibrant blue sky was gradually dyed a faint vermilion. "Time sure flies, huh?" he murmured.

Eluria nodded as she took small sips from the milk tea they'd bought from a stall. "I barely even noticed it getting so late."

They'd bought Millis's tea and some snacks for their friends, gone window shopping while strolling around the capital, and bought whatever food piqued their interest from the market stalls. Just like that, time seemed to pass by in a flash.

"I've never taken my time walking around the capital. It's a very novel feeling," she said.

"I know. There was definitely lots more to see than I expected," Raid agreed. He'd seen most of the main streets and stores on previous walks, but he'd never looked very closely. However, thanks to Eluria's incredibly curious soul, they'd found themselves peeking into even the most unassuming shops and generic stores. Raid had also enjoyed the journey, especially since he wasn't alone for it. This was the kind of fun he never would have been able to experience on his own. And there was even a cherry on top of his good day. "Not to mention," he added, "Shefri's finally warming up to me."

"She sure is. I'm glad."

As they looked down at their feet, the dog responded with a happy little bark.

At the start, Shefri had been wary of Raid and stuck to Eluria's side, but their long walk eventually paid off—now the pup would sometimes bark as if calling out to him.

"If only she'd let me touch her too...!"

Eluria sighed. "You probably need a bit more time for that."

Raid looked down at his feet. The dog barked what sounded like a smug agreement before leaping onto Eluria's lap. He'd tried approaching her a few times, but Shefri always ran from his hand and fled to Eluria. It seemed more warming up was necessary for the next step.

"If you're okay with it, Raid, could you walk Shefri with me again sometime?"

"Oh, gladly—anytime. Heck, I'd walk her even if she wanted to go out at night."

"I see the Hero takes dog-walking very seriously..."

"Well, I've never been able to touch animals much until now...so this is essentially my once-in-two-lifetimes opportunity to get close to one!" Raid clenched his fists, eyes blazing.

Eluria watched his burning passion with a wry smile—until her eyes were drawn elsewhere. "Huh?"

"What's up? Something catch your eye?"

"Yeah... I think that's Lufus over there."

Raid followed Eluria's gaze beyond the park's fountain to see a familiar redhaired girl. She was seated on a bench but looked quite restless, looking around as if she was waiting for someone—and it seemed that person just so happened to have arrived. Lufus's expression brightened as she turned to look. A woman in Celios's native folkwear approached, escorted closely by two guards.

"Mom!" Lufus excitedly ran over to her. "Thanks for coming all this way! Are you okay? You must be tired!"

However, her mother showed no response to the girl's bright smile and simply looked down at her, expressionless.

"Why the sudden visit, though?" Lufus continued. "Oh, you don't need to worry about me—I'm doing great in the Institute! There's not much green space compared to Celios, but instead they've got tons of magic devices I've never seen before, so life is super convenient here! The food here is also different, but they all taste really good!" Lufus rambled on with a bright and innocent smile on her face, recounting her new and recent experiences. "Oh, oh! And I also—"

SLAP!

Pale crimson eyes widened at the sudden stinging pain. A lost and feeble whimper spilled from her lips as she raised a shaky hand to her cheek and turned to her mother.

The woman's face showed nothing but biting cold. "Lufus," she said, voice low and unfeeling. "It seems you have yet to summon your Guardian Dragons in your time here."

Lufus flinched. "B-But...!"

"Are you going to say that the skysteel dragon is enough against your fellow students?"

"R-Right! Lafika is strong, so—"

"Yet you lost to the Sage's Reincarnation."

Lufus trembled. "How...?"

"Everything you do in the Institute is reported to me—and that includes your training. I've been told you recently lost to Eluria Caldwin in a spar."

"N-No, I didn't lose! That was a draw—"

"Eluria Caldwin has been permitted to use no higher than fifth-stratum magic by the headmaster," her mother interrupted. "Despite that, you stood no chance against her, and after the match was settled, you even resorted to something as cowardly as a surprise attack. Yet you call it a *draw*? You dare claim yourself an even match?"

"B-But... But I had to..." Lufus's voice felt weak and miserable beneath her mother's merciless rebuke.

Alas, the girl's pitiful figure stirred no sympathy in her mother. The woman

merely looked down at her and spat, "As I thought, I should have gotten rid of that skysteel dragon before you entered the Institute."

Panic washed over Lufus's face in an instant. "Wh-Why?! You said Lafika could come with me if I enroll in Vegalta's magic institute!"

"That was because I deemed it important for your mental stability. Still, you refuse to summon your Guardian Dragons and insist on using that inferior species... To make matters worse, you failed to properly assess your opponent's strength and lost miserably."

"But... But Lafika's really strong too! She could hold her own against a Guardian Dragon! And besides, she understands me better than any of the other—"

"All meaningless excuses before the Guardian Dragons' overwhelming strength." Lufus's mother looked down at her, adamant till the end. "I understand that despite the fact that you managed to form contracts with the Guardian Dragons, you are yet unable to control them fully. However, that is no reason for you to remain so fixated on a single skysteel dragon. I must teach you not to be such an obstinate child."

"Th-That's not what you promised! You said you'd let Lafika stay with me if I could keep winning until I graduate!"

"I did." Her mother looked down, not an ounce of maternal care in her gaze. "But you've already lost, haven't you?" Within her cold and unchanging eyes was a biting callousness that thought nothing of disposing of a single dragon for the honor of Celios. "Your role is to represent the honor and dignity of Celios, not the strength of your little dragon. Most importantly..." The woman's gaze darkened upon her daughter. "Those who've lost are worth nothing."

Her words were ruthless till the very end. For better or for worse, Lufus knew her mother well. "I-I'll win for sure next time—in the exam! I'll show you I can win, so please...!" The girl desperately begged her own mother, tears streaming down her face as she struggled to protect her precious friend.

Faced with such a sight, Eluria couldn't hold back any longer and stepped in. "You're wrong," she asserted. Her voice, quiet but firm, elicited a change in the woman's expression for the first time.

"You are—"

"Eluria Caldwin. I sparred with Lufus as I'm sure you know," said Eluria, anger simmering beneath her quiet introduction. "She and Lafika were plenty strong. Besides, summoning a manabeast you can't properly handle can lead to disaster, so Lufus was right to choose her skysteel dragon." Eluria's gaze slid to the crying girl. "And in the first place, that fight wasn't a draw. It was Lufus's victory."

The woman's gaze narrowed almost imperceptibly. "So you wish to hand her the win out of pity?"

"No. The spar was declared a draw when an instructor intervened, but I can say with confidence that Lufus won that match," Eluria declared with unwavering resolution. "I stopped attacking because I judged that it was over, but Lufus didn't give up and went back on the offensive. I was clearly too conceited. If it were a real battle, Lufus would have won."

"But it was not a real battle. For this spar—"

"That doesn't change a thing. Spars are essentially simulations of real battles. It was my mistake to treat it so lightly. If it were a real battle with lives at stake, then Lufus simply took the best course of action for survival. You could hardly call her actions those of an obstinate child."

Eluria held her gaze firm against Lufus's mother, and the two fell into a stifling silence.



Just then, Raid stepped in with his head bowed. "Pardon me. May I speak?" The woman turned her sharp gaze to him. "And you are...?"

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Raid Freeden, and I am Eluria's fiancé. As a member of House Caldwin, first and foremost, I would like to apologize for her interruption." He lowered his head again and cast a glance around them. "And while this may sound rude," he continued, "I simply wish to remind you that we are currently in a public space. Your conversation seems to be drawing curious attention. In order to avoid causing any misunderstandings, I believe it would be for the best to continue this discussion elsewhere."

As Raid had said, other civilians wandering the park were starting to look their way due to the commotion. Lufus's mother noticed this as well and quietly closed her eyes. "You speak the truth. Thank you for your advice, Lord Freeden." She furtively bowed her head before turning back to her trembling daughter. "In any event, that was all I had to say to you. I will decide your future depending on the results of your upcoming simulation exam."

Lufus could no longer raise her head and only hummed weakly in response. Her mother spared the miserable figure no second glances before spinning on her heel and leaving with her two escorts.

Raid watched the three of them get farther and farther away before landing a light knock on Eluria's head. "Don't jump out so suddenly. Looks like she's here on an unofficial visit, but Lufus's mother is still an influential figure in Celios. Ms. Alicia would've lost her mind if you started something here."

Eluria slumped. "Sorry..."

"It's fine. I was about to step in anyway. I'm better at handling these things, so you can leave it to me." Raid chuckled and landed another gentle knock on her head.

Then, Lufus began heading out of the park, her steps feeble and lifeless.

Eluria reached out to her. "Lufus—"

"Sorry about that," the girl said, her lips straining into a smile. "But...this is Lafika's and my problem, so you don't need to worry! Anyway, I won't lose in

the simulation exam, okay?!"

Her burst of false vigor had already dissipated by the time she spun around. Lufus trudged out of the park, carrying with her both responsibility and resolve far too heavy for such a small and innocent back.



After Lufus left, Raid and Eluria hurried back to the Institute with their friends who had spent the day at Workshop Blanche. Evening had crept up on them, so the five immediately went to have their meals in the cafeteria.

"Oh my, goodness me!" Millis threw her head back and laughed. "The food tastes so good today, doesn't it?!"

In stark contrast, Fareg heaved a very heavy and burdened sigh. "Did I just make the worst mistake of my life...?"

"Oh, please! Isn't it only natural to help one another in times of need? Ha ha ha!" The girl gave his back a few hearty slaps.

Raid stared at the odd sight for a while before leaning over to Wisel and whispering, "Hey... What's up with those two?"

"Oh... Well, Ms. Millis wanted to know exactly how big of a favor she'd done Lord Verminant, so I computed the approximate value of her work today..."

Raid gulped. "How much was it?"

"This much." Wisel held up five fingers, his face grim.

"Five hundred thousand...?"

"No. Five million."

Raid's jaw dropped. "You're kidding."

"I swear on my honor that I am not. This number was calculated from the standard magic inscription fee, based on the mana branches, size, and the complexity of the mana circuits' layout in this specific commission. Moreover, it's already a reduced rate considering she's a nonprofessional."

Raid turned his gaze to Millis. "Wouldn't she be better off as an inscriber then...?"

"I strongly recommended it to her too, but apparently, 'They're gonna fawn over me way more back at home if I come back as a magician!' so she said she'd think about it after graduating."

"She's burying her own talent to gain honor in the boonies..."

"Well, I can't say it's a bad move. I mean, I'm studying as a magician to better my skills as an artificer. In the same way, Ms. Millis can still hone her dexterity and speed as an inscriber by studying a variety of magical skills in this course. There are many cases of magicians becoming inscribers after retirement."

"To top it all off," Raid added, "she's basically got the kid in her pocket, so she'll always have a fail-safe to fall back on." Millis had essentially placed the son of a renowned aristocratic house in her debt. Raid could understand why she was over the moon.

"Thanks to Ms. Millis, I was able to make much higher quality repairs than expected. A very satisfying job well done for me as an artificer," Wisel preened.

Raid arched his brow. "Why do I get the feeling the fee blew up 'cause you got too carried away?"

"It's only right that people be compensated for the fair value of their work. Moreover, House Verminant has many valuable connections, so this was an incredibly profitable favor." Wisel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a smile. He wasn't wrong per se, but Raid was starting to feel that Wisel was just as wicked as Millis.

"So, Lady Eluria..." With a smile as bright as her future, Millis turned her attention to Eluria and asked, "How was your date with Raid?"

However, her enthusiastic question received no response.

"Huh? Lady Eluria?"

"Hm...? What is it, Millis?"

"Oh, um... I was asking how your date went."

"Ah. It was very fun. We went around all sorts of shops, had some skewers from the stalls, and walked around with Shefri," Eluria replied, her tone somewhat blank and absent.

Millis leaned over to Raid and whispered, "Did something happen?"

"Hm... Kind of. We ran into some trouble at the end. But it's not a big deal, and the outing itself went well, so don't sweat it."

"Well, you're pretty thoughtful and considerate, so I wasn't really worried there..." Still, Millis looked at Eluria in concern.

Eluria likely couldn't get Lufus out of her head, but whatever the case, it was another family's matter—possibly even another *country's* matter entirely. It would be unwise for them to stick their noses into it, nor could Eluria just go around talking about it, if only for Lufus's sake.

Suddenly, Eluria whipped her head up, grabbed her tray, and jumped to her feet. "I'm getting seconds."

"Seconds?" Millis cocked her head. "But didn't you get a smaller serving because you were still full from some skewers?"

"I guess I'm still hungry," Eluria said, clearly in a hurry.

Raid followed her gaze and realized what was going on. "All right. Guess I'll get a second serving too."

"Huh? You too, Raid?" asked Millis.

"Yep. The line looks pretty long, so we might take a while."

"Roger that," said Wisel. "In the meantime, Lord Verminant, how about we talk about making you some new magic gear?"

"Wh-What? New magic gear?! That's the first I'm hearing of this!"

"Awww. Come on now, Fareg. You could at least hear him out," Millis cooed. "It's new magic gear, made by none other than Workshop Blanche. And you'd be the first to use it too!"

"R-Really? I guess I could at least hear you out, then..."

"Great! You see, I was thinking about custom features best suited for your new fighting style..."

Raid watched as Fareg easily succumbed to Millis's sales pitch and lent an eager ear to Wisel's proposal. He feared one day he'd look away only to find the

kid had been duped into buying a whole assortment of bizarre goods. For now, though, he turned around and weaved through the cafeteria, following Eluria until she stopped in front of another table.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked.

"Huh?" Seated at the table was Lufus, lifting her face in surprise. Her wide eyes also caught sight of Raid greeting her with a wry smile and a casual wave. "Um... You're Eluria's..."

"The name's Raid Freeden. Eluria's been pretty worried about you, so she came over the moment she saw you."

"I-I was going to say it was a coincidence..." Eluria murmured.

"Right after what happened earlier? No chance." Raid gave her head yet another knock and turned to Lufus with a grin. "Anyway, could we talk while we eat?"

Lufus looked stunned for a moment but soon flashed them a bright smile. "Sure! Let's eat together!"

The pair took their seats, and Raid began with some small talk. "Looks like you're on your own here. You don't eat with any of your classmates?"

Lufus hummed, her smile strained. "Not really... I'm one of the youngest in my class, and I can only use summoning magic, so there's not much to talk about."

Or so she claimed, but there was likely another reason for her seclusion. Although her mother had berated Lafika as a lesser species, only top-tier summoners could form contracts with dragon-type manabeasts. Among them, Lufus had contracted with Guardian Dragons and passed the exam with just a skysteel dragon—a clear indication of her pure and natural talent as a magician, and at such a young age to boot. Raid could easily imagine the jealousy felt among her peers.

"Also... I'm sorry, Eluria." Lufus hung her head. "When we sparred, I thought I had to win no matter what... I was just so desperate not to lose, so I hurt your wolf... I'm sorry." The girl's pale crimson eyes glistened with tears as she lowered her head.

Eluria simply shook her head in response. "It's okay. Shefri's not mad." "Really...?"

"Mhm. And didn't I say so in the park? I was wrong to just decide it was all over."

"Th-That's not true! It was just a spar, so I really should've stopped when Lafika couldn't move anymore...!"

"Like I said, spars are simulations of real battles. I was at fault for failing to consider all possibilities."

"But if I'd just acknowledged our loss, then Lafika wouldn't have pushed herself so hard either!"

"She just answered to your will. She's a great partner."

"Shefri too! She listened to you really well!"

Lufus and Eluria flailed their arms around, arguing one second and praising each other the next.

In the end, Eluria quietly lowered her arms and whispered, "I won't lose next time."

Lufus visibly stilled.

"For the upcoming simulation exam, I've been restricted to third-stratum magic. But I'm still confident I can win, and I plan on putting in my best effort."

Lufus knew from their spar that this wasn't hubris. Summoning and subordinating a skysteel dragon was essentially eighth-stratum magic, perhaps even the ninth when considering the vessel's mobility. Meanwhile, Eluria had overwhelmed her with mere fifth-stratum magic and a canine species inferior to dragons. Even setting aside her Polyaggregate Expansion, Eluria already had the advantage over Lufus in terms of combat experience. Restrictions be damned, Eluria would almost certainly win now that she'd resolved herself to exert her utmost effort.

That was why she had insisted to Lufus's mother that she wasn't simply pitying the girl. Eluria acknowledged the result of the spar as a product of her conceit because she wanted to declare that next time, she would win no matter

what.

"I have my own goals. They may not be as burdensome as yours, but I still have a promise that I need to fulfill at all costs." A thousand years ago, Eluria and Raid had promised to settle their rivalry once and for all. Now, fulfilling this promise was something they needed to do—a ritual they needed to pass—to move forward in their relationship. They had to put an end to their history as rivals in order to start anew. "So I can't lose. No matter what," Eluria declared, head held high.

In contrast, Lufus's face twisted bitterly. "You're really strong," she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. Slowly, shakily, she parted her lips as if confessing. "I'm... I'm just someone who managed to form contracts with some Guardian Dragons. But actually, all I ever wanted...was to become a magician with Lafika. She's been by my side since I was born." Lufus pursed her lips. "But my professor told me that I could do it. I trusted him and talked with the Guardian Dragons for a bit, and they accepted me and formed the contracts."

Eluria raised a brow. "Your professor?"

"Yeah. Professor researches Guardian Dragons. He's even taught me all sorts of things, even stuff that's not in the books." That was how Lufus had ended up forming contracts with the symbols of Celios's nature—and shouldering a responsibility far too heavy for her age. "At first, mom was really happy. You see, we're from a concubine's lineage, so the harder I worked, the more grandpa would praise us."

The achievement of forming contracts with Guardian Dragons far surpassed any limitations their official status imposed. Put another way, however, this reduced Lufus to the Guardian Dragons' summoner in their eyes—not entirely dissimilar to how people hoped and expected for Raid to fulfill his role as the Hero.

"Mom started getting mad whenever I'd summon Lafika... She hated that I wouldn't call the Guardian Dragons I'd contracted with."

Eluria narrowed her eyes. "Because you couldn't handle them properly?"

"Right... Guardian Dragons are very prideful. They get really mad if I don't make their vessels with enough mana, and sometimes they ignore me just

because they don't feel like listening."

Summoning magic was unique in that it was heavily affected by the summoner's relationship with their manabeast. Recalling a disobedient manabeast could dampen their relationship and even lead to a cancellation of the contract. However, simply letting the beast run wild could damage the surroundings and even cause casualties.

"I tried explaining it to my mom..." Lufus chuckled emptily. "But the Guardian Dragons never hurt me, and to her, any negative consequences would only serve to flaunt their strength, so it doesn't matter."

Despite that, Lufus still refused to summon them—not just because she didn't want to hurt anyone, but also because she didn't want others to hate the manabeasts she'd subordinated.

"I kept summoning just Lafika, so my mom started hating her and threatened to forcibly break our contract... I promised to keep winning at the Institute so she'd let us stay together."

This was where Lufus's obsession with winning stemmed from, as losing meant being separated from her friend. For Lufus, who'd been with Lafika all her life, it was just one step below having to watch the dragon die.

"But..." Lufus pursed her lips. "Mom wasn't wrong. Everyone's expecting me to summon my Guardian Dragons. And I remember how hard we had it before I formed contracts with them. She worked really hard just so I could study as a magician..." The girl hung her head low. "So I just...don't know what to do anymore."

Lufus was helplessly caught between her precious friend and her mother's expectations. Any young girl would struggle when placed in such a tough spot, but Lufus wasn't even granted the luxury of struggle. Her upbringing, her country, and even her family loomed over her, pressing her to do what was best for them.

Eluria gazed at the young and burdened girl and offered her a small nod. "Then fight me with all you've got."

Lufus slowly raised her head. "What...?"

"It's refreshing to go all out. So fight me." Eluria nodded a few times, entirely satisfied with her proposal.

Lufus stared at her, stunned to silence. Raid took pity on the poor girl and decided to translate. "I think what Eluria wants to say is that the process is more important than the results."

"Um... As in, it's not about winning or losing?"

"Pretty much. If you go all out and win, then great. If you still lose, then that's that. Not much else you could do."

"But... But then my mom would..."

"If you go all out and summon your Guardian Dragons and *still* lose, then it would be practically impossible for anybody else to win either. If anyone complains then, just tell them, 'Sorry, try someone else,' and book it."

"B-But that's so irresponsible!"

"And what's so wrong with that? Sure, you're talented, but they're the ones who put such extreme expectations on you. And when you fail, they start nagging you? Sounds to me like *they're* the irresponsible ones here." Raid chuckled. "Either you win and shut them all up, or you give it your best shot and lose anyway. Simple, right?"

"But... But I..." Tears spilled from Lufus's eyes and trailed down her cheeks.

Raid landed a gentle knock on the girl's head. "Until now, you've always lived for others. At least when fighting, you should fight for yourself without a care for the world." He ruffled her hair and flashed her a toothy grin. "Besides, if something happens, I'll deal with it."

"You will...?"

"Sure. You saw Eluria's magic in the entrance exam, right? Well, I was the one who blew it away."

"You blew it away...? You mean you also used tenth-stratum magic?"

"No. I just punched it."

"You...punched magic?" Lufus cocked her head, question marks popping out

one after the other. A very standard response; Raid was already used to it.

"Anyway," he continued. "Whatever happens, Eluria and I can handle it. As we've said, you just have to fight with all you've got."

Instead of backing him up, however, Eluria blinked blankly. "Um?"

"Huh?" Raid blinked back.

"Well... I want to go all out against Lufus, so I was hoping you would handle whatever else may come." She firmly shook her head. "So it's all up to you."

"Well, I don't mind..." Raid narrowed his eyes. "But just how hard do you plan on fighting?"

"Super hard."

"Oh no..."

"I helped you go all out last time, Raid, so now it's my turn." Eluria clenched her fists, determination blazing in her eyes. It almost looked as if she were raring to go regardless of Lufus's whole situation. "I need to let loose once in a while, or else I'll get rusty."

"But you've been restricted to the third stratum for the next exam, haven't you?"

"Working under restrictions just changes the limits I have to overcome, not the fact that I have to overcome them."

"Ohhh. Such wise words."

As she watched the two converse, the corner of Lufus's lips twitched upward. Soon, a bright smile stretched over her face. "Okay! Then I'll fight you with my all, Eluria!"

"Mhm. I'll look forward to it."

"You can't lose to anyone else until then, okay?!"

"Of course. Same goes to you."

"Then it's a promise!" Lufus held out her pinky.

Eluria looked down at the small finger and smiled. Pinkies linked and promises

made, the two nodded with refreshed faces.

Lufus jumped to her feet. "All right! I need to train extra hard from now on! Eluria, Raid, thank you for listening to me today!" The girl waved her hand with a bright smile on her face. On her way out of the cafeteria, she turned back around and waved again a few times.

Once the girl finally left, Eluria quietly called, "Raid."

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to fight Lufus with all I've got. I think that's what that girl needs right now." She quietly cast her eyes down. "So I'll leave everything else to you."

"Sure thing. I mean, it's not like I'll actually have much to do when—"

"No, you definitely will." Eluria's face stiffened, a foreboding light brewing beneath her gaze. "I've been wondering why Lufus never summoned her Guardian Dragons. Given how fixated she was on winning, that would've been her best card." Despite that, the girl had refused to summon them. Though Lufus had just given them an explanation, now another question had popped up. "After hearing her reason, I now have concerns about her contracts with them to begin with."

Raid narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Lufus talked about the Guardian Dragons getting angry when she doesn't make their vessels with enough mana. But that means they know she doesn't have enough mana for them but they still keep their contracts with her."

"Is that supposed to be a contract-ending issue?"

"Try imagining yourself in their shoes. Someone orders you around and sends you out into the battlefield but only gives you a much weaker body than you need. How would you feel?"

"Well... I'd manage to fulfill the orders, but I guess I'd be annoyed."

"Manabeasts feel the same. It's natural for strong ones to feel vexed about being placed in a weaker body, and that's especially true of the superior and prideful Guardian Dragons." Eluria narrowed her eyes. "Some manabeasts don't care about this issue if they've been with their summoner since they were young and have formed a deep bond of trust. But I find it unnatural that all four of her Guardian Dragons are maintaining the contract despite the clear inadequacy of their contractor."

Nothing could be said for certain at this point, so her concerns were just that —concerns, and nothing more. But at the very least, this was the second time they'd come across unusual dragon behavior recently.

"Another manabeast problem?" Raid groused. Last time, they'd encountered armored dragons—manabeasts that should have been extinct. Now, these Guardian Dragons were acting strangely. "If Celios was involved in the last incident, then I can understand why armored dragons, of all manabeasts, were involved..."

"We can't deny the possibility. I think the Institute is also investigating the possibility of the involvement of summoning magic, so we won't know until we hear the findings from Ms. Alma." Eluria nodded, but that wasn't all on her mind. "I'm also concerned about that 'professor' Lufus mentioned."

"The person who recommended she form contracts with Guardian Dragons, right?"

"Yeah. Lafika seemed very accustomed to humans, but Guardian Dragons only live in the wild. Lufus could very well have been eaten alive before she could even form the contracts." Despite that, this 'professor' asserted that Lufus would be able to do so—almost as if he knew her future.

Eluria looked Raid in the eye and said, "I trust you. So I want to leave things to you." If this was somehow related to Raid and Eluria's circumstances, then it was possible that Lufus was just being used. Eluria wanted Raid to save his strength to keep Lufus safe—and to know that she trusted him to do so no matter what.

What else could he say in the face of that unwavering trust? "Sure thing. Leave it all to me," he replied, a confident smile on his face and a fist over his chest.

Eluria found her own lips tugging into a smile. "I also have one more request."

"All right. Hit me with—"

Before Raid even finished speaking, Eluria fell flat as a pancake on the cafeteria table. Her face paled and her body trembled. "Please...carry me to our room..."

"You..." Raid looked down at the miserable girl. "You ate too much, didn't you?"

"Yeah... My stomach hurts so bad, I can barely move..." Eluria had continued eating her meal throughout their conversation with Lufus. She didn't have a particularly small appetite, but she'd had a light meal before dinner and now two servings in the cafeteria. Anybody would be absolutely stuffed after that.

"Jeez... You didn't have to eat it all," he chided.

"I learned long ago to never waste food...unfortunately..."

"Well, I commend you for sticking to your values. Now let's get you back to our room so you can take some medicine." Raid crouched down and waited as Eluria sluggishly climbed onto his back.

"Mm. Your back is very comfy."

"Well, yeah. I've gotten pretty used to carrying you on it..."

"I'd appreciate it if the ride isn't too shaky..."

"Yes, yes. Leave it to me, dear passenger."

"Mhm. I'm leaving it all to you." Eluria beamed and patted Raid's shoulder.

"Also, I know it's kinda late to be saying this, but are you fine riding on my back? You were so embarrassed to hold my hand earlier."

"My mind recognizes this as the position used to carry injured soldiers on the field. So I'm good."

"You're so weird sometimes..."

Securely carrying Eluria on his back, Raid left the cafeteria and headed back to their dorm.

After leaving the cafeteria, Lufus rushed back to her room. She took a moment to catch her breath before pulling out her desk drawer, revealing a small magic communicator inside. The girl took it in her hands, drew in another deep breath, and yelled at the top of her lungs, "Professor! I have a question!!!"

On the other end, she heard some things tumble chaotically to the ground. A moment of silence later, a voice carried across. "Owww... Is that you, Lufus?"

"Yeah! It's me!"

"You sure sound chipper today... Did something good happen?"

"Uhhh, I lost in a spar and got slapped by my mom!"

"God, I just woke up... Spare me this heavy talk, please..." the professor mumbled. "But...since you've contacted me, you must have some urgent business, right?"

"Yeah. I know you told me to only use this for emergencies, since it can only be used once...but there's something I really need to ask you right now." Lufus tightened her grip on the device and asked, "Can you teach me how to handle a Guardian Dragon?"

There was a subtle pause from the communicator. "You want to completely subordinate one?"

"Yeah. Otherwise, I won't be able to beat Eluria." Lufus had gotten a taste of Eluria's formidable prowess. Her magical skill went without saying, but even her coordination with her manabeast and the strategies and decisiveness she wielded in battle... Lufus was overwhelmingly weaker in all those aspects. In that case, she needed to compensate with overwhelming power—something she could gain from the dragons that stood at the zenith of Celios's harsh wilds. If she could just handle that power, then nobody could stop her. "So at the very least, I want to properly subordinate one of them."

"Hm, I dunno... I doubt subordinating one would lead you anywhere."

"But the Guardian Dragons should—"

"Oh, my bad. I meant that you absolutely can't win," said the professor, his tone as lighthearted as always. "Because the person you're trying to fight now is

an absolute existence. It's not a simple matter of whether or not you can whip out your Guardian Dragons. After all, if they're the apex of all manabeasts, then she's the apex of everything in this world."

The professor paused for a moment. "Aha. Sorry, sorry. I don't mean to snuff out your resolve. I just want you to know who exactly you're trying to fight."

"So I just...can't win...?"

"Ahhh! D-Don't cry! I'm sorry! I won't know what to do if you cry on me!" The flustered professor soon cleared his throat. "Fret not, child! There is something we can do for you to stand a chance."

"Really ...?"

"Really. You just have to subordinate all four of your Guardian Dragons."

"A-All four...? But that's impossible! It's hard enough to handle one, so how \_\_"

"It's impossible for you now," corrected the professor. "As I've said before, you'll be able to perfectly subordinate them in time. They know that too, which is why they formed the contracts with you despite your current lack of mana. So..."

The professor paused shortly before his next words resounded clearly in Lufus's ears.

"All you have to do is borrow some of that power from your future."

## **Chapter Four**

After Eluria and Lufus's dramatic spar, the instructors made arrangements to keep their students apart during training. However, even outside of class time, Raid and Eluria didn't run into Lufus in the dorms or anywhere else on campus. Alma heard from the western tower's instructor that the girl had requested permission to use a training hall after class for independent study. Alma couldn't pry any further into another class's business, but the instructor looked rather pleased, so Lufus was probably doing well.

In any case, Raid and Eluria had other matters that needed their attention—namely, their upcoming exam.

"A'ight, listen up. Here's your briefing on the next simulation exam," Alma drawled. She stood behind the instructor's lectern and dragged a piece of white chalk across the blackboard. "This one's pretty simple compared to the last: for the duration of the exam, you will move with your respective teams and earn points for each student you incapacitate."

"Question," said one student. "How exactly would a student be deemed incapacitated?"

Alma nodded and took two bangles from her pocket. "That'll be up to these magic devices. When these things come in contact with third-stratum magic or above, the wearer will be forcefully teleported off of the exam grounds. Basically, you'll be declared incapacitated the moment this thing is triggered." She equipped one herself and showed the class. "This bangle generates an invisible layer of mana over your skin. Once it detects enough foreign mana or a certain level of impact, consider yourself teleported and eliminated. Keep in mind that it can't differentiate between ally and enemy mana, so be careful not to come into direct contact with your teammates' magic either."

She then raised the second bangle into the air. Unlike the one she'd equipped, it shone with a golden luster. "Each team will get just one of these golden bangles," she continued. "It functions the same way as the standard

bangle, but it's worth more points."

"Um... Are we free to decide who in our team will wear that one?" another student asked.

"Oh? Good question. The answer is: yes, you are free to decide. Your strongest fighter, sturdiest defender, fastest runner... Whoever you settle on, I'd recommend keeping it in line with your team's strategy. After all, if the wearer of this golden bangle is incapacitated..." Alma grinned. "Your team will receive a *huge* point deduction—and possibly end the exam with a negative score, which will be carried over to the next exam."

Should a team lose before earning any points, then even an excellent score on the next exam would only help them break even or, at best, reach a minuscule positive; anything less than the best-case scenario would keep them in the negatives. Anybody who failed to crawl their way back up from there had only one fate awaiting them.

"If your score is in the negatives once all of this year's exams are over and done with..." A grim shadow cast over Alma's eyes. "You'll be excluded from the secondary class allocations next year and be dropped from the Institute."

One couldn't become a magician simply with greater mana capacity or superior magical combat ability. The skills magicians needed the most were adaptability and decisiveness. Magic was merely a means, and it was up to the magician to use it to accomplish their goal. Only those who could accurately assess the situation and swiftly decide the best course of action were granted the right to use magic as a weapon.

"Magicians aren't permitted failure. Never forget that your failure could lead to death, be it yours or others', so keep your minds sharp as a blade at every second."

The students responded with a spirited "Yes, ma'am!" and Alma nodded in satisfaction. She then patted Philia's shoulder. "That's all from me! I've got some extra briefings to give to the problem children, so direct any other examrelated questions to Philia, 'kay?"

"R-Right!" Philia exclaimed. "If you have any questions or concerns regarding the exam, anything at all, feel free to come to me!"

As the students gathered around Philia, Alma hefted a sigh and approached Raid's group. "All right, I've got an update for Team Problem Children."

Raid blatantly turned to Fareg. "She's talking 'bout you, kid."

"Why'd you specify me?!"

Millis drooped sullenly. "Now we're problem children too..."

"Ms. Millis, let's just do our best as the least problematic children around here."

"Great to see you're all full of energy. Though..." Alma shifted her gaze to the side and looked down at the only person in the group who wasn't quite as peppy. Eluria was lying on her side, fast asleep, using Raid's lap as a pillow. "Care to explain why this girl slept through her instructor's briefing?"

"Simply put, she hasn't gotten enough sleep," Raid said.

"Have her exam preparations been that intense?"

"No... I was doing a final bit of training with the kid before the exam, but I didn't leave her a note, so she waited up for me in our room."

"Aaand now he's flaunting their relationship," Alma muttered.

"So," Raid continued, "she tried to stay up and waited restlessly by the door until I came back."

"What is she, a clingy house cat?" Alma bent down and gave Eluria's cheek a few pokes.

In response, the girl's eyes cracked open a smidge. "Hng," she uttered quite intelligibly, before sluggishly getting up and glomping onto Alma. Then, to everyone's surprise, she nuzzled her face against the woman's chest. "Soft n' fluffy," she drawled, then peacefully plopped back down on Raid's lap.

Alma looked down at the girl, utterly bewildered. "The heck was that...?"

"Seek no meaning behind Floaty Eluria's actions," preached Raid.

"You're saying I just got a face shoved in my cleavage for no good reason?"

"If I had to say, she probably picked up an unfamiliar scent and decided to overwrite it with her own. Or something like that."

"You know, I'm not so sure about treating your fiancée like a cat..."

"You've got it wrong, Ms. Alma!" Millis cheerily chimed in. "Lady Eluria picks up on other female scents, but she never shows any interest or even approaches other males! Moreover, she'll always, without fail, make her way back to Raid in the end. She's so infatuated, it's permeated her natural instincts!"

"You guys sure are chipper right before the exam..." Alma sighed, shaking her head before getting back on track. "In any case, I came here to tell you that your exam criteria has changed, Your Excellency."

"Again?"

"Well, you wouldn't be able to use the bangle, right? We can't ensure your safety, so it's been urgently decided that you'll be scored the same way as Eluria—through a proxy."

"Ah. I figured." Raid shrugged. Of course, he saw it for what it was: a blatant attempt at sabotage. His inability to use magic devices and gear was well documented by now, and the exam parameters should have been finalized long before the students even began training for it. There was no way they made such a dramatic change at the last minute. Not to mention, what could Raid even teach a last-minute proxy when he can't use magic?

Unbeknownst to them, however, Raid had just the person for the job. "Well, you heard her. Have at it, kid." He grinned, placing his hand on Fareg's shoulder.

The boy turned to him, brows furrowed dubiously. "You really want *me* as your proxy?"

"Yeah. It's not every day I teach someone else, and I've even trained you in my style of swordsmanship. Why wouldn't I choose you as my proxy?"

"That's not what I meant." Fareg cast his eyes down, his tone strained and low. "If... If I wind up helpless like in the last exam, then you'll take the fall with me."

If Fareg, as Raid's proxy, were to fail the exam, then all the blame would be piled on Raid. That, combined with his lack of magical ability, might even be enough to push him to expulsion. Raid was aware of this, but his smile was as

carefree as could be. "Let me ask you this," he said to Fareg. "Do you plan on doing badly in this exam?"

"O-Of course not! I am the proud son of House Verminant! I'd be dragging mud across my family name should I score poorly here!"

"Well said. So you'll do." Raid chuckled. "Most people who cling to their pride and honor are good-for-nothings. Only those who show that they can back it up are the real deal." Fareg had already proven the worth of his pride by sticking with his injured friends in the last exam, so Raid was confident in his decision. "Anyway, don't sweat it too much and just carry on as you would. I'm pretty sure I've taught you enough to fare well in actual battle. Even if you fail, we'll just say I've got bad taste in pupils and call it a day."

Fareg scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous... I don't plan on having a repeat of last time." He clenched his fists and showed a twisted grin. "I swear on the Verminant name—I will emerge victorious in this exam."

Raid nodded and turned to Alma. "Then it's settled. Tell 'em my proxy will be Fareg Verminant."

"Roger that," replied Alma. "But man, this, I gotta see. When they hear your proxy is the infamous young master of House Verminant, even those whiny bigwigs will tumble right off their seats."

Fareg narrowed his eyes. "Hang on a second, Ms. Kanos... Just what kind of reputation do I have?"

"I've heard some aristocrats call you a special-class yapper with tenth-stratum attitude."

"Ha...ha ha..." A low and menacing laugh spilled from Fareg's lips, now twisted into an evil grin. Soon, his eyes were ablaze with anger. "I'll show them! I'll show them and shut them all up!"

Frankly, he was just reaping what he'd sowed, but it seemed to be serving as good motivation, so Raid kindly decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

"Also..." Fareg mumbled once he'd calmed down. "Why is Ms. Alma calling a peasant like you 'Your Excellency'?"

"Don't call me a peasant," Raid deadpanned. "It's kinda like a nickname. I played a lot of chess with her grandfather, and I was pretty good, so he started calling me that."

"Uh-huh." Alma backed him up with an enthusiastic nod. "My grandpa told me all about him. He's kinda like an exceptional little brother to me, so I also took to calling him by his nickname."

"Ohhh, I see! Actually, I know how to play too, and my father is quite fond of the game. I should introduce you two sometime!" Fareg wholeheartedly believed their story and nodded with sparkling eyes. It was at times like these that his upbringing as a sheltered young master really stood out. Raid worried the boy might actually be swindled one day.

"Moving on..." Alma turned to Raid and Eluria. "I've got additional information for you two. Could we step out for a bit?"

"Sure. Eluria, get up. We're stepping out."

"Nu..." The girl was reluctantly pulled to her feet as she blearily rubbed her eyes.

Raid guided her down the hallway as they followed Alma. Once they'd reached an isolated corner, the instructor finally spoke up again. "So," she began. "You wanted to hear the results of the investigation, right?"

"Yep. Eluria was so curious, she couldn't sleep." As it turned out, the real reason Eluria had stayed up late waiting for Raid was because she thought he'd been retrieving the results from Alma.

"Ah... I put it on the backburner 'cause I was busy preparing for the exam. I guess I should've gotten the report out of the way first."

"Nu... It's fine... Thanks for investigating..." Eluria gave a very wobbly, sleep-deprived bow.

Alma chuckled and placed a hand on her head. "Uh-huh. You're very welcome." Then, she nodded and smoothed her expression. "From the start, it's been suspected that the exam incident was carried out with summoning magic. Any magicians who've used summoning magic even once are being questioned. Celiosians are also being asked to cooperate and are under continuous

questioning."

"That sounds about right, given that we still don't know the scale of the culprit's movements," Raid remarked.

Since multiple armored dragons had appeared at once, it was hard to think of it all as the work of an individual. A large amount of mana was needed to make a single manabeast's vessel, and that amount swelled immensely with increasing size and number. It was near impossible for a single person to summon tens of large-sized manabeasts like the armored dragons. It would only be possible for someone of the caliber of a first or special-class magician, all of whom were renowned individuals. Thus, an organized crime was the more likely theory in this case.

"Anyway, that's how Celiosian magicians ended up placed under suspicion..."
Alma cocked her head. "But since we've found some of the manabeasts'
remains, those suspicions are highly likely to clear up soon."

Vessels made through summoning magic dissipated once mana ran out. Since remains of the armored dragons had been found, the possibility then shifted away from summoning magic, thus stalling the investigation at the interrogation stage.

"Also," Alma continued, "you asked about a magician that Lufus called her 'professor,' but frankly it's such a common title it hardly serves as a lead. Either way, I'd say chances are low that Lufus Lailas is directly involved."

"Mm... Okay. That's a relief." Eluria nodded, one weight finally off her shoulder. Judging from her speech and expression, she seemed to be fully awake now.

"Well, that's it for my report. Anything else you wanted to know?"

Raid hummed. "I'll be sitting out the exam, right? What should I do then?"

"I dunno—have some tea, enjoy the show?"

"Seriously...?"

"Why not? You and Eluria have been relegated to emergency combat forces, so it helps if you stay on standby. Wouldn't you prefer that too?"

"I'd also be more at ease if you conserve your strength, Raid." Eluria nodded in agreement. "And I'd be happy if you could watch me."

Raid cocked his head. "You would...?"

"Mhm. Didn't I tell you before that I'd knock your socks off? So just sit back and watch. After all..." Eluria spun around, full of confidence as she cast a daring glance back. "It's been a while since I've fought for real."



Exam day was always preceded by a day off. This time around, Millis no longer prattled on about going out to the capital, so each of them spent their free day in their own ways. After all their preparations and rest, the students finally welcomed the day of the simulation exam, located in a valley they had previously visited for training.

Raid sighed. "I feel really bad for being literal baggage every time..."

Eluria shook her head, her arms still wrapped securely around him from the transportation. "No need to feel bad. This barely uses up any mana."

Millis watched the two while letting out a peaceful sigh. "It just doesn't feel like the day's started until I see you two like this."

"You said it," Wisel agreed. "Now it just feels like any other training session. What a relief."

Fareg looked between his teammates, face scrunched up in confusion. "Why are *you* deriving emotional support from their flirting?"

Raid chose to ignore them all. It wasn't as if he and Eluria were doing this to show off. He shrugged and swept his gaze over the group. "Good luck. I'll be watching."

Eluria nodded. "We'll do our best," she said, waving her hand.

Raid turned and parted from his classmates, blending in with the busy Institute staff as he made his way toward the instructors' tents. He soon spotted Alma's and opened the flap—only to be greeted by the extraordinary sight of the black-haired woman sprawled over a plain couch.

"Mornin', Your Excellency," she drawled, not even bothering to get up.

Raid looked down at her, eyes narrowed. "Aren't you a bit too comfortable?"

"Huuuh? Why not? Nobody's watching." Alma's feet hung off the edge and swayed leisurely above the ground. This woman had even taken her shoes off. She might as well have come in her pajamas. "Philia's in charge of all my major duties as an instructor, and I've got nothing to do until an emergency crops up. So I'm gonna sit here and watch my cute little students give their all."

Raid raised a brow. "While enjoying some tea and snacks?"

"Awww, don't be such a stick in the mud now. Here, want a cookie?"

"Forget it... Just set up the screen already."

"Fine, fine. As you wish, Your Excellency." Alma stuck her lip out and lazily started up the magic device in front of her. Instantly, several screens appeared in the air.

Raid looked up with a short sigh of admiration. "Wow... So these display the students' perspectives?"

"Righty-o. This here's a remote projection device that works within the barrier set up by our beloved Headmaster Elise Lammel. It picks up on the coordinates of the students' bangles and displays the scene around them."

"So...the headmaster made all this?"

"Sure did. Elise may have absolutely zero talent for combat, but she's a true genius when it comes to crafting magic devices. Before taking her seat as the headmaster, she even contributed to advancing the standard of magical technology by decades in one leap."

Raid hummed. "And yet she prostrated herself before us while bawling her eyes out."

"Yeah, well...unfortunately, she's as immature as she looks. That's why she sucks at fighting and ended up the headmaster here." Alma shrugged and, after revealing the headmaster's unexpected feats to Raid, operated the magic device with smooth and familiar movements. "Now then... Shall we take a look at the highly anticipated Team Problem Children?"

Amid the sea of screens, the one that displayed some very familiar faces was

pulled to the front—and the very first thing they heard was a certain country girl's cry.

"Ughhh... Do I really have to wear the golden bangle? I'm so nervous, I feel like my stomach's going to do a cartwheel out my throat!"

Eluria nodded firmly. "You're the best suited for it."

"But you and Fareg are stronger than me..."

"Millis, what do you think is the worst-case scenario in this exam?"

"Well... Everyone gets annihilated and our golden bangle is triggered?"

"Exactly. Fareg and I will be physically in battle, so the chances of our bangles activating would increase. Depending on the situation, Wisel might also join in the fray. As our team's support, you have the lowest chance of getting hit. In fact, the best strategy would be for the wearer of the golden bangle to hide somewhere far from the battlefront."

Wisel nodded. "That would take away from the team's offensive capabilities but at least prevent total annihilation. I'm sure the other teams took measures along these lines to keep their points as secure as possible."

"Mhm. Unlike last time, Ms. Alma didn't say how or when the exam will end. But since the points come from defeating others, it definitely won't keep going until everyone's down. So I surmise that our goal is to survive for a certain period of time."

"Ugh, she figured it out," was very clearly written all over Alma's face. Raid found her reactions far more amusing than the actual "show" playing out in front of him.

Beyond the screen, Millis hummed. "So it's best for us to avoid combat as much as possible?"

"No. We should annihilate any team we run into."

"Lady Eluria is out for blood today!" Millis shrieked.

Eluria indignantly puffed her cheeks. "I didn't mean it that way..."

Wisel, at least, seemed to have understood her. "Basically, it's not a given

that we'll be fighting one team at a time. Others might form alliances, merge with other teams to compensate for their incapacitated members, and so on. Anything could happen on the field, so we should decrease our competitors at every opportunity—that's what I presume Ms. Eluria was getting at."

"Exactly. What he said," Eluria approved with a double thumbs up. Then, she turned to Fareg and said, "After Wisel locates the enemy, you will decide whether we go in for the attack."

Fareg narrowed his eyes. "And you're okay with leaving that to me?"

"Yeah. You're the leader today, so I'll follow." Eluria smoothly deployed her magic gear. "Once the attack commences, give out orders according to the intel available to you. Can you do it?"

Fareg scoffed. "Would I say I can't after all those times I talked down on the peasants?"

"Good answer. Then..."

Wisel stopped her with a raise of his hand. "Sorry to cut in, but I've detected mana signals in the distance. Ten people—their movements look coordinated. I suspect they're two teams who've formed an alliance to increase their chances of victory." He tapped on his glasses a few times and squinted. "Lord Verminant, what's your call?"

"Hmph... Isn't it obvious? We annihilate them." Fareg drew his short sword and uttered, "Unleash!" The next moment, his blade was engulfed in dazzling flames, swelling outward to form a fiery sword taller than Fareg himself, quite similar to the magic sword once crafted by Eluria.



Fareg tightly gripped his sword with both hands and lowered his stance. "We proceed as planned!" he ordered as he kicked the ground and shot out in the direction Wisel had indicated. Left in his wake was a booming sound loud enough to draw the enemies' attention.

"Wh-What? Did a fight break out?" one of their opponents asked.

"No, we're under attack! I see an enemy at seven o' clock! Prepare for battle!" bellowed another, probably their leader. The others faced Fareg and began deploying their spells.

A broad smile stretched over Fareg's lips. "You think you fools can stop me?!" Before any of the enemies could fully manifest their magic, he twisted his body and swung his sword. The flames spread out into the air, drawing a blazing curtain that obstructed the enemy's view.

"Tsk... Just shoot! He can't dodge just 'cause we don't see him!"

Heeding the leader's orders, the students unleashed their attacks. Stone spears, wind blades, icicles—a vast array of spells bombarded the fiery curtain, seeking to subdue Fareg hidden behind it. However, behind the parting flame there was nothing—and so the students breathed out in relief. Surely, one of their spells had hit him, and the bangle had teleported him away.

Unfortunately for them, that one moment of comfort cost them dearly—they had already fallen into Fareg's trap. There was no time to react when Fareg, up in the air and backlit by the sun, triggered a blast from his feet to propel himself back down to the ground.

"Here's the first!" he roared, swinging his flaming sword just as he landed.

In one fell swoop, all the students were blown away by a scorching wave. The leader, who'd been caught at the very center of that explosion, was enveloped in light and disappeared.

"Damn it! He got Santos! Deploy defensive magic and fall back!"

"Put up defensive magic—in the middle of all this?!"

The students screamed at one another amid their burning surroundings. The flames obstructed their view of not only Fareg but also their own allies, making

it difficult to effectively set up their defenses.

"Just put it up already! Or we'll all be eliminated!"

"I can't with all these flames around! Somebody put them out first!"

"Seriously?! The enemy's right under our noses!"

Moreover, with their leader eliminated, the chain of command had broken down, causing a delay in the team's reactions.

Fareg didn't waste that chance and leaped out of the swaying flames. "And here's the second!" The sword drew a clean arc, starting from Fareg's waist and slashing through the enemy's shoulder. Their bangle activated, sending them away just like the last.

Far from the blazing battlefield, Alma watched the fight with a sharp gaze. "Hmmm... He's got an interesting new fighting style, I see."

Raid grinned. "After seeing his magic in action, I thought this suited him a whole lot more."

Such brilliant and dazzling flames could be used not just as a means of attack but also to blind the enemy and conceal one's figure. It helped to close the gap and bring the battle into close quarters, and it also let Fareg hide and reappear as he pleased, causing chaos among the enemy ranks and granting many chances for surprise attacks. The force of the blasts even enhanced mobility; like earlier, Fareg could use it to leap into the air or rush back down, reinforcing his speed and flexibility at close range.

"Fareg's got some good judgment too," Alma added. "He jumped up with a blast the very moment the opponent's magic collided with his wall of fire, effectively masking the sound. Then, he made use of the backlight from the sun to avoid their line of sight and take out their leader first."

His first move had been to crush the enemy's chain of command. From there, incapacitating the rest of the flustered members was just a matter of time.

"Also..." She squinted. "It's such a flashy fighting style..."

"What else do you expect from a show-off like him?"

"I dunno... I think he's just taken after his teacher." Her exasperated gaze

shifted to Raid.

He couldn't really deny it. His fighting style was all about brute force and pure strength, so of course it'd get even more ostentatious the moment fire was added into the equation.

"But..." Alma hummed, her lips twisting oddly. "I'm not sure if flashy is good here. Plus, he should've incapacitated the others first."

In the span of their short conversation, Fareg had incapacitated a third member, but the decrease in numbers actually helped his opponents move more freely. The remaining two members had solidified their defenses and were now waiting for a chance to counterattack. Moreover, the team that had likely formed an alliance with them was now on the move. Having located Fareg due to his loud and showy attacks, they were approaching from behind for a pincer move.

"Fareg succeeded in bringing the battle to close quarters, but he's isolated from the rest of his team. He didn't take out the rear supports capable of defensive magic, so it's only a matter of time before he's pincered by—" Alma suddenly fell silent as she shifted her gaze to another screen.

There, Wisel was on the move while observing the scene through his magic glasses. "Lord Verminant," he whispered. "The other team is moving as planned. We're moving out."

"Roger! And make it quick if you can! I don't want to waste mana keeping these guys here!"

"Got it. Ms. Millis, ready the wall at Lord Verminant's four o'clock. Make it three hundred wide—that should be big enough for all of them."

"Aye aye, captain!" Millis responded with pep in her voice before stopping in place and deploying her gear—a plain wooden shepherd's crook. When she stabbed it into the ground, the bell attached to its tip chimed like a sweet melody. "Now then..." The girl clenched her fist and swung it against the upright crook. "Pardon the violent intrusion!!!"

The next moment, an earthen wall burst from the ground and loomed over the second team, blocking them from pincering Fareg. They halted their tracks and looked up at the wall in distaste.

"Tsk... Did that guy's teammates do this?!"

"Probably. One's coming this way."

"So the wall and the teammate will stall us, while the rest head over to join as reinforcements?"

"Then let's ignore the one headed for us and prioritize breaking this wall. We can stop the rest from joining up and take them down one at a time."

Their advance had been stalled for just a moment; the second team resumed running toward the wall. Wisel closely observed their movements, eyes wide and gaze sharp, refusing to miss a single detail.

"I'll smash through. The rest of you charge in once it's clear," said one of the students. He stopped running and took his stance, pointing his spear toward the wall.

Wisel's eyes flashed like a predator's as he finally spotted what he'd been waiting for. Without stopping his approach, he spread his arms wide to deploy a pair of magic gauntlets. His eyes narrowed and his gaze focused on the student brandishing his gear. Then, Wisel smashed his fists together and uttered, "Rupture!"

Besides the high-pitched sound ringing in the air, nothing of notice happened—at least, for most of them. The spear user, however, froze in place and widened his eyes in bewilderment.

"What're you just standing around for?!" one of the running students shouted back at him.

"W-Wait! My gear isn't working!"

"What?! It's malfunctioning now, of all times?!" The student stopped running and brandished his own staff. "I'll take over! Hurry and—"

Wisel's gaze followed the staff wielder's movement, and he clashed his fists together yet again.

The student's face paled, his earlier vigor gone with the wind. "Wh-Why...? It was working a second ago!"

Without their gear, the students were unable to breach the wall. In that time, Wisel had managed to catch up to them. He observed the distance between him and the spear user, then tightly clenched his fist. "I've been spending my days getting beaten up by a girl smaller than me," he murmured as he poured mana into his gaiters and kicked off the ground, instantly accelerating. "So I hope you don't mind me letting off some steam!"

He slammed the heel of his palm into the student's body. The impact triggered the bangle and sent him away with a flash of light. The remaining students watched their teammate disappear and pointed their weapons at Wisel.

"Charge in together! There are still four of us here! There's no way we can't handle a single—"

Immediately, Wisel spun on his heel and dashed away.

"What the heck?! A hit and run?!"

"Sorry," Wisel chuckled. "I just wanted to do a quick durability check on my gear. Besides..." He cast them a backward glance. "I was just here to stall!"

The students were so focused on Wisel's assault that they'd failed to notice what was happening right before their eyes. By the time they did, however, a large shadow was already looming over their heads.

"Wait... If he was just stalling us, then what was this wall for ...?"

Their gazes shakily turned upward—to the earthen wall that was still rising with a low and ominous rumble. They initially thought it had been put up to cut off their approach...but now they realized that the top of the wall curved, stretching out like a tidal wave as if to embrace them. Finally, a large crack ran through the towering barrier.

One of the students shakily opened his mouth. "Oh, crap...! Somebody smash that thi—"

Before the student could even finish his sentence, the wall failed to sustain its own weight and collapsed over the remaining teammates with a loud rumble. Within the cloud of dust, four lights flashed then faded.

Detecting no more reactions in the vicinity, Wisel nodded in satisfaction. "The plan worked out better than expected."

"Hooray! We crushed 'em like a buncha bugs!!!"

"Ms. Millis, I get that you're happy, but you sound a bit too much like a hooligan."

"I didn't get my turn..." came Eluria's sulky voice through the communicator.

As the team's colorful reactions played out on the screen, Alma roughly tugged on Raid's arm, eyes wide and sparkling. "Whoaaa! Hey, Your Excellency! What's that thing Wisel did?!"

"I don't really understand the theory behind it, but apparently those gauntlets produce a subtle mana wave that can temporarily cause magic gear to malfunction."

"Whaaat... That's nasty." Alma continued shaking Raid, but her face had turned pale. The effects might be temporary, but causing magic gear to malfunction essentially neutralized magic, as they'd seen from how the students had failed to destroy the wall.

Raid shrugged. "It's all thanks to his broad knowledge of magic gear."

"Still, he's practically nullifying magic, you know? Isn't that just too overpowered? I can see the magician industry falling to shambles if that thing hits the market."

"It's not that extreme," Raid said, shaking his head. "Apparently, you have to aim for the exact moment mana flows into the gear, so it can't disrupt magic that's already been cast. The effects only last about five seconds, and the user needs to specifically direct the manawave at the target, so it can only work on one person at a time. To top it all off, the gauntlets are susceptible to breaking from excessive use."

Alma hummed. "Oh... Then that's why Millis put up that wall."

With Millis's skill in defensive magic and barriers, she could've easily made an invisible wall, but it seemed she'd opted for a very blatant earthen wall to draw the enemy's attention. Knowing they'd try to use magic to break through it,

Wisel then paid close attention to their movements to discern when to activate his magic-nullifying gear. He closed the distance, stopped them from casting their spells, and bought time until the wall collapsed.

The actual plan was for them to fall back at that point and let Eluria deal the finishing blow, but the magic nullification had caused the enemy much more confusion than they'd expected, so they'd ended up getting done in by the wall alone.

"Earlier, Fareg said he was keeping the first team in place. He must've intentionally left the rear support intact to make the other team *think* they were being stalled... He essentially baited them, huh?"

"Probably, yeah. Which is why the other team prioritized breaking through the wall."

"Wow... This gets a lot of points from me. Fareg's flashy fighting style was a diversion, and so was Millis's wall, and even Wisel's magic nullification. After all that, Eluria swoops in to deal the finishing blow..." Alma shuddered. "That's not the kinda strat average students can come up with."

"Well..." Raid scratched his cheek. "That's 'cause Eluria and I taught 'em."

Raid had been the general of the Altanian army, and Eluria also had experience leading her own troops into battle. So Raid had advised them on the broader principles and overall direction, while Eluria had guided them on the finer strategies and tactics. With two experienced war veterans as their coaches, it'd be weirder if their team's strategies weren't more advanced and thorough than that of their peers.

"Still, they're the ones who worked the hardest," said Raid.

Fareg had gone from fighting at mid-to long-range with powerful magic to using swordsmanship at close quarters. Despite his numerous complaints, he never once fled from Raid's training.

Wisel had learned how to closely observe enemy movements in battle, both to effectively utilize his magic-nullifying gauntlets and to properly fall back from the front lines. In the process, he'd been flung around by Eluria countless times.

Millis had also worked hard to master her support role, learning to judge the

best time to use which spells and remembering how long each lasted, not just in her head but with her senses. Like Wisel, she'd been taught by Eluria how to maneuver in close quarters.

All their efforts bore their fruit on this practical stage today.

"Hmmm..." Alma tilted her head left and right. "To think their teamwork and tactics are this honed despite Eluria's restrictions... Under normal circumstances, they'd score highest by a landslide...that is, until Celios's Dragon Princess busts out her Guardian Dragons," she finished with a grimace.

"Are they that strong?"

"Well... I've never fought any before, and there aren't many records of battles against them either, since they're known to be mild-mannered so long as you don't step into their territory. But..." Alma's lips twisted bitterly. "There was one incident on record two hundred years ago that involved a special-class subjugation of a Guardian Dragon."

"Special-class? Really?"

"Yes. A tourist thought it would be funny to go into the dragon's territory and got eaten alive for it. To make matters worse, that tourist happened to be a Vegaltan aristocrat. Due to the tourist's status, the subjugation forged ahead despite Celios's objections."

"So what happened?"

"A complete wipeout, of course."

"Ah... So Guardian Dragons are as strong as a special-class magician."

Alma shook her head and quietly clarified, "Five."

Raid blinked. "Five...?"

"Five special-class magicians were dispatched, plus thirty first-classers and nearly a hundred second-classers. It was a large-scale operation, but every last Vegaltan magician dispatched to Celios was annihilated...by one single Guardian Dragon." Alma sighed. "Of course, magic has vastly developed since then. I doubt I'd be *completely* helpless against them, at least."

"But..." Raid furrowed his brow. "I know they're strong, but they're still just

manabeasts, aren't they? Were the elite forces of that era really just...obliterated so helplessly?" No matter how tough a dragon's body might be, they were still beasts by nature. It was hard to imagine so many humans with the complex art of magic at their disposal would be so easily wiped out by just a single beast.

Alma nodded, understanding his doubts. "Your Excellency, what do you think is the difference between Vegalta and Celios's manabeasts?"

"Well... I've heard that Celios's land produces more mana than Vegalta's, so their manabeasts are stronger too."

"In addition to that, their beasts are also more intelligent."

"More intelligent?"

"Yes. Celios uses a unique language to communicate with manabeasts. Through that, their beasts have attained some degree of rational and logical thought. Some dragon species can even comprehend human speech and pick up on their subtle emotions."

"But that just makes them smarter than ordinary beasts. There's so much more thought put into human battle—" Raid froze, mouth agape as it finally dawned on him. Through manaspeech, Celios's manabeasts had attained greater knowledge and intellect, bringing their mental faculties much closer to that of the human mind. In that case, they would be capable of comprehending the workings of human techniques as well.

Alma simply nodded, confirming his thoughts and somberly imparting the core reason those magicians of the past had been annihilated. "Guardian Dragons," she whispered, "are manabeasts that can *use magic*."



After defeating the first two teams, Eluria's group continued racking up win after win. Their progress was so smooth, Fareg and Millis now had their arms around each other's shoulders and were skipping together like best friends.

"Hee hee hee! We are the champions!"

"Ha ha ha! I wholeheartedly agree with you for once, country girl!"

In stark contrast, Wisel watched them with a terribly sunken face. "Ugh... I'd kill for some of that excess energy..."

Eluria placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's natural for you to be most exhausted, Wisel. Pinpointing the right moment to use your gauntlets already requires a lot of focus, and on top of that, you're also using your other gear to scout for enemies and analyze the field. Your head must be really pooped."

Their impeccable teamwork was a product of all their efforts, but Wisel had taken on a particularly hefty burden, both physically and mentally. Dodging attacks in close quarters kept him constantly on his toes, and nullifying the enemy's magic required intense focus. He was even in charge of scouting for enemy presences before each battle. He may have willingly accepted the role, but that didn't change the fact that he carried many responsibilities.

That said, his teammates were by no means slacking off. Fareg was leading the charge and making the decisions. Constantly drawing the enemy's attention left him no room to drop his guard until each battle was over. Millis didn't physically exert herself as much, but she had to be as attentive and precise as Wisel. Not to mention her golden bangle was a constant weight on her shoulders, so her mental load was nothing to scoff at either. The two of them may have been frolicking about now, but riding on the adrenaline of their victory was their way of coping with their fatigue.

"But I think we should be fine by now," said Eluria. "We've crushed six teams, and the last few were already a few members down and focusing on defending their golden bangle."

Millis hummed. "Come to think of it, that last team we scouted out had four members, right?"

"Right. Whoever's still in the game at this late stage must have already figured out the true scope of this exam. They won't be biting at every chance for points; they'd be focusing purely on surviving until time runs out. We should avoid engaging with them, especially since we're also tired."

"I agree," Fareg said with a heavy sigh, finally looking a little less tense after letting off some steam. "During our last few battles, I sensed some teams moving away from us. We're steadily encountering fewer and fewer students as

time passes. I'd say the only teams still on the prowl are those who lost their golden bangles and are trying to recover their losses."

Indeed, the battle was far from over for some—Eluria was no exception. "Then now would be a good time for the three of you to find a safe place to hide until the exam ends."

Fareg froze. "Wait... What about you, Caldwin?"

"I'm staying. I have a promise to keep." She plopped right down on the ground. "I'll wait for Lufus right here."

"H-Hang on! You mean Lufus Lailas, the Dragon Princess of Celios?!"

"Mhm. We swore to fight today."

"Are you crazy?! I know they call you the Sage's Reincarnation, but there's no way you can win against Guardian Dragons with your current restrictions!" House Verminant was an old household that had initially established itself through manabeast subjugations. They were well-versed in all manner of manabeasts, even those beyond the borders of Vegalta. In fact, a number of House Verminant's magicians had also participated in the failed Guardian Dragon subjugation two hundred years ago, leaving a terrifying record of their threat for later generations. "They grow by absorbing mana from the land and environment—it's enough to manifest magic of the tenth stratum!"

"Wow. You're so knowledgeable."

"Stop clapping, damn it! I'm trying to dissuade you here!"

Eluria lowered her hands with a pout. She was genuinely impressed, but he just yelled at her. That wasn't very nice.

"Anyway! There's no way our bangles were made to withstand a Guardian Dragon's magic! If worse comes to worst, you could be blasted to smithereens even before you're teleported back to—"

"But we promised to fight with all we've got," Eluria quietly interrupted. "I'm not good with words like Raid...so I didn't know what I could say to Lufus."

Anyone could pick a partner in this battle, and most would probably choose Lafika. It wasn't as if Lufus's mom would die or her country would collapse even

if Lufus were to betray their expectations. Then wouldn't it be better to stay with your friend and just mend your relationship with your mom in time? That way, you can all live happily ever after—a fairy tale ending that everyone would applaud.

But life wasn't a fairy tale, and no bystander could ever know how Lufus felt.

Nobody else had lived with Lafika all their life, and nobody else experienced the love that Lufus's mom had once shown her. Only Lufus could know, because they were her burdens—her story—that no one else could ever truly understand. If it were such a simple matter of picking between the ending others preached to her, then she wouldn't have struggled with the choice.

"That's why I chose to have this fight with her."

There was no need for words in a fight. Perhaps amid a clash of wills and spirits, Lufus would finally see what she truly treasured deep in her heart.

"Because I also found many precious things in battle."

Eluria invented magic, met Raid on the battlefield, developed new spells and techniques, helped others learn them, and thought long and hard about how magic could help improve everyone's lives. She even fell in love over those fifty years. Eluria had found many treasured things in her life on the battlefield.

"I want to face Lufus head-on...so that she can find her precious things too."

Fareg hefted out a sigh and shook his head. "Fine... Do as you wish. We'll find a safe place to hide so we won't get in the way."

"Mm. You can go on ahead to prepare our victory party."

"Hah! Smiling so confidently, so assured of your victory... Like husband, like wife, I suppose."

"We're not husband and wife yet."

"Whatever. You two battle junkies should just get married and duke it out already." Fareg rolled his eyes and left.

"Lady Eluria! I value my life, so I'll also be taking my leave now!"

"I'm dipping out too. I'd rather not get involved."

"So blunt, you two. Nice." Eluria nodded and saw her teammates off with a wave.

She plopped back down in the middle of the open plains and turned her gaze up to the sky. It was eerily quiet, as if the intense exam had been but a passing mirage. She paid no attention to the time passing as she watched the clouds pass by.

Then, a large shadow loomed over her. A black dragon descended, backlit by the sun, and atop the dragon, vivid red hair fluttered in the wind—a sight just like the one she'd seen that day they first met.

"Eluriaaa!" Lufus beamed, waving her hand in the air. "Sorry I'm late! I stuck my teammates somewhere safe!"

"That was very nice of you," Eluria replied, her voice as soft and impassive as ever.

Lufus landed on the ground with a smile. "I came to fulfill our promise," she said, her expression quickly turning calm and somber. "You see... In the end, I just couldn't choose. I love Lafika a lot, and I don't want to let my mom and country down. I also don't want to disappoint the Guardian Dragons who chose me." Her expression, once marred with uncertainty, was now clear and resolute. She held her head up, her pale crimson eyes firmly meeting Eluria's.

"So I choose...everything." Lufus put her hands together and activated her magic gear, a pair of jeweled gloves over her hands.

In the distance, a brilliant pillar rose toward the sky. Lava flowed through the earth, seeking to turn all to ash, and from the river of hell emerged a colossal snout. A gigantic dragon walked slowly amid the lava, illuminating its surroundings with its red-hot scales—a flarestorm dragon, one of Celios's Guardian Dragons, a species that ruled as the apex of all manabeasts of the volcanic regions.

But that wasn't the end.

Thunderclouds painted the once-clear skies, revealing a platinum dragon clad in lightning—a celestial dragon.

The ground sank as if sucked into the depths, and water gushed forth from

within, heralding the arrival of an azure dragon lurking beneath—a bathysmal dragon.

The earth rose and parted, revealing an earthen dragon whose body loomed large as a mountain—a terracrown dragon.

All four dragons oozed mana and an overwhelming presence that prickled Eluria's skin even from afar. However, trumping that immense pressure was genuine wonder and awe that spilled out as a sigh from her lips. All four Guardian Dragons of Celios were now gathered together in one spot. This was a sight unique to this time and place—a sight never before seen.

"This is...my full strength, Eluria...!" Having painted this wondrous picture, Lufus now stood with a strained expression and beads of sweat dotting her temple. She had broken past her limits and squeezed out every bit of strength she had in order to give Eluria her all—a conviction so strong, it seemed she was even ready to risk her life.

Now, Eluria needed to answer in kind. "I see that you're taking this seriously..." She brandished her magic gear and stabbed it upright into the ground. "But I won't lose."

She pulled the staff and drew one chain out of the ground, then two, then three... Unlike when she'd summoned Shefri, these chains were thin and numerous, grating against one another as they emerged from the abyss. Finally, ten large wolves appeared, their snouts set with golden masks and weapons of similar luster in their jaws. They stood in line and glared fiercely at the Guardian Dragons.

"Mausha, Mibiri, Tatun, Nonne, Tanon, Sheeta, Sabia, Nanne, Tisan, Kumil." Eluria called each of them by name. "Your opponents are a little scary this time, but go out and make your mom proud."

Howls resounded through the air in answer, signaling the start of the battle, as the wolves dashed across the plains all at once.

Lufus's lips formed into a smile as she heaved heavy and ragged breaths. "No number of mana-eating wolves...can devour all their mana...!"

As if to prove Lufus right, the flarestorm dragon opened its jagged jaws and

revealed a brilliant light—an attack that was the culmination of all the Guardian Dragon's blessings: its large body and immense mana, its special organs, and finally, the magic it had gained through its transcendent intelligence. Coming together, a fiery beam shot out and scorched the earth.

Eluria swiftly shielded her face and put up defensive magic. Although the beam hadn't directly crashed into her, the heat waves alone broke through her defenses and assaulted her skin. "Mausha!"

One of the wolves yelped, signaling that none of them had been hit. However, the beam had gouged the earth, littering the scorched land with billowing flames and deeply limiting the wolves' mobility—their one advantage over the gigantic dragons.

But Lufus wasn't quite done yet. "Flarestorm dragons aren't the only ones who can use magic," she warned.

The celestial dragon was shrouded in thunderclouds as countless spears of lightning flashed all around it.

The bathysmal dragon roared and formed enormous orbs of ice from within the gushing waters.

The terracrown dragon clad itself in surrounding earth and rock while morphing its tail into a stout earthen sword.

None of these attacks paled in comparison to each other.

The wolves were far smaller than the dragons, so even the slightest graze could be fatal. Just getting hit by the shock waves had already taken a lot out of them. They couldn't just devour the dragons' mana like Shefri had with Lafika, since the dragons had far too much—and even if they could, they'd have to find a way to get past their disastrous surroundings first.

Eluria was also in a tough spot. Even if she hadn't been restricted, the dragons' attacks were too fierce for any ordinary defensive magic to hold up against. Any wall or foothold she could make to approach would be swiftly wiped out. Their one chance would be to wait for Lufus to run out of mana, but if the wolves failed to dodge any attack within that time, their souls could take fatal damage.

They were given no openings for a counterattack, nor could they keep defending and evading for long. All the while, the Guardian Dragons would continue their relentless assault, unleashing one attack after the other from their nearly infinite mana pool. It was a hopeless battle with not even a pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel.

However, Eluria quietly whispered, "Shefri's pups are all brave, just like her."

Indeed, none of the wolves facing off against the Guardian Dragons showed the slightest hint of fear. They bared their fangs, fully confident that their mother's contractor would orchestrate their victory.

"Carry out your tasks, proud wolven warriors."

Heeding their master's orders, the wolves charged toward the dragons once more, each carrying their golden weapon in their jaws and their assigned task in their heart.

The celestial dragon looked down at the wolves and unleashed its lightning spears. The wolves instantly dispersed, leaving only one to face against the incoming attack. The wolf threw its weapon—the golden greatsword—which clashed with the lightning spear, but the sword failed to withstand the dragon's lightning and fell to the ground scorched.

Right before the spear could pierce through the wolf on its descent, Eluria dispelled the beast's vessel. The beads of light left in the wolf's wake were parted by lightning and dispersed in a flash.

"Take this offering of gold, these weapons that house our valiance and victory."

Another wolf dashed between raining orbs of ice. The ice crashed into the ground, exploding into sharp fragments and painting the wolf's body in many little cuts, but the beast did not stop. The wolf stabbed its large golden spear into the earth and gouged out the ground as it ran.

"For their luster shall draw stairs to the heavens above."

Similarly, the other wolves ran around with their weapons in their mouths as the terracrown dragon swung its ragged tail. None of the wolves were crushed beneath the attack, but the rocks and dust that were sent flying mercilessly crashed against their bodies.

Despite that, none of them were deterred. Their bodies were littered with wounds and blood spilled from their cuts, but not one of them faltered. Whenever one went down, the others would take their place and fulfill their roles. One after the other, the wounded wolves dissipated into beads of light.

"And behold. Our pride stands resolute, our souls firm and indomitable."

Amid the wolves' gallant figures, Eluria continued to quietly string her words together. They carried through the air and finally reached Lufus's ears.

The girl's eyes widened in realization. "An incantation...?"

The art of chanting had birthed countless miracles in the distant past but had become obsolete with the advent of magic and mana circuits. This craft was difficult to pass down, as many factors influenced its efficacy, and the conditions and catalysts needed were as many as the stars in the sky. As such, it was easily rendered useless when the Sage invented magic.

"O stars of the skies. Receive this toll and hear our prayers."

Eluria swung her staff, weaving word after word like a hymn of worship, just as the rituals of the distant past once had.

"Welcome your valiant companions into the heavens and hear their prayers."

She chanted to the stars above with grand movements and flourishing steps, just as dances had once been dedicated to the miraculous beings beyond human comprehension.

"Let your fangs embody your glory, spilling the blood of our enemies."

Like a lost lamb seeking guidance, Eluria reached her hand out to the heavens.

This ancient art of offering prayers and rituals for a miracle was the basis of the Sage's knowledge and the origin of magic. It drew mana not from the human body but from nature's abundance and gathered it all together to borrow the power of the stars in the heavens and bring about miracles.

This was the art once known as *magecraft*.

"Fangs of the Heavens."



Whispering the final verse, Eluria clenched her staff and swung it down—and the stars followed, raining down from the heavens. They burst and scattered into countless fragments that burrowed into the Guardian Dragons' bodies, piercing them, and smashing them to the ground. The star fragments mowed the area down, ravaging it like wolves biting down on their prey.

Finally, as the cloud of dust cleared, the aftermath revealed itself to the few still standing.

"Ah..." Lufus fell to her knees.

The Guardian Dragons were gone. The scorched earth, the gushing waters, the flashing lightning, and the rumbling rocks were no more. Everything had been returned to nothingness.

"It's my win." Eluria turned to Lufus with a smile, then flopped down on the ground as well. "Ugh... It's really so inefficient compared to magic..."

Mana circuits and magic gear dramatically reduced the mana cost when casting magic. Needless to say, before the advent of such magical techniques, magecraft required a huge amount of mana—and with the immense scale of this particular spell, Eluria had completely run herself dry in one go. She had unleashed a single powerful attack that contained her everything, just as she had promised Lufus.

"I gave you everything I've got, Lufus. How was it?"

The red-haired girl got off Lafika's back and stared at the empty expanse before her. "Yeah... You did...and I lost," she muttered. "I... I gave it my all too...but I still lost..." Her face scrunched up, tears pooling in her eyes and spilling over her cheeks. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry...!" she cried, sobs racking her body.

Who was she apologizing to? Her mother, who had raised her and believed in her? Her country, who had such high hopes for her? Her Guardian Dragons, who were no doubt hurt in this battle? Her friend, who couldn't even fight by her side this time? Or to herself, for just not being enough?

Only Lufus knew the answer, and that was enough. The emotions billowing within her heart belonged to her and only her. It wasn't something for anyone

else to thoughtlessly comment upon.

All Eluria could do was put on a smile and say, "You were really strong." Praise for her opponent who'd exerted her best effort—this, she could offer.

Lufus wiped her tears with trembling hands even as new ones immediately replaced them. "Yeah... I made you give your all, so of course I am...!"

"Mhm. You drew out my full strength. Be proud."

"So arrogant!"

"Of course. It's my privilege as the winner."

"You don't look very cool though?" Lufus chuckled as Eluria puffed her chest out while looking so battered.

Eluria laughed with her. The two girls' smiles were soft, like a weight had been lifted from them.

Then suddenly, Lufus *collapsed*. Her small body fell limply to the ground, like a puppet with cut strings. "Huh...?" The girl blinked, her face pressed to the dirt, her gaze blank and lost.

Eluria frowned. "Lufus...?"

"Ha ha, sorry... My body's really hot...and I can't move..."

Lufus's weak and rasping voice was then drowned out by a thunderous roar.

Eluria snapped her head around to locate the sound, and her eyes grew wide. "What...?" She saw them in the distance—the Guardian Dragons she should have defeated just moments ago. Their vessels, enveloped in shining mana, had taken form once more.

"Ugh!" Wet coughs racked Lufus's body and blood spilled from her lips. "Why...? I didn't...do anything..."

"Lufus! Stop your summoning magic! You're going to run out of—" Eluria snapped her mouth shut. Something was off.

Lufus had summoned the Guardian Dragons *and* Lafika. Although Lafika's vessel didn't cost as much mana as the Guardian Dragons, she was still a dragon, so the amount of mana needed to summon her was nothing to scoff at.

Moreover, Eluria assumed that Lufus had drawn out her mana to the limit to just barely manage four incomplete vessels; otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to summon all her Guardian Dragons at once. However, if their vessels *had* been incomplete, the dragons would have rampaged, rebelling against their master, and perhaps even begun fighting among themselves. Instead, they had their sights set firmly on Eluria and her wolves throughout the battle, meaning the Guardian Dragons had been completely subordinated to Lufus.

Eluria turned her gaze down to the girl on the ground. "Lufus... What have you done?"

Lufus coughed weakly and answered, "P-Professor said I didn't have enough mana...so I had to 'borrow some from my future'..."

"Wait..." Eluria focused her attention on Lufus's mana—it was flowing with a sickening dark purple color, coursing throughout her body and slithering around her like a venomous snake. "Wh-What is this...?" Eluria had never seen mana of such color before. It was rooted firmly in her heart which pumped it throughout her body.

"Ack...!" The moment the purple mana swelled, Lufus's face contorted in agony and more blood gushed from her small mouth.

There was no mistaking it. That mana was eating away at her body, multiplying against the girl's will while whittling away at her own life.

"No way..." Eluria gritted her teeth, recalling what Lufus said just moments ago. "The mana is being produced...at the cost of your life force?" She used her mana to check Lufus's body and found no abnormalities with her internal organs. The bleeding was coming from her oral cavity, and she'd been coughing up blood because her body was refusing to swallow it down.

Mana was generated from the circulation of blood. Due to this purple mana, Lufus was now producing excess blood, so her body was bleeding to expel the excess and make way for the newly produced blood. And all this mana produced at the cost of her life force...was being used to form and sustain the Guardian Dragons' vessels.

Moreover, Lufus's body was not the only abnormal thing around here. The Guardian Dragons, in their regained vessels, roared toward the heavens. Their

eyes were seething with rage as they glared at Eluria.

"Why...?" Lufus rasped. "Why...are you so angry...?" With hazy eyes, the girl looked up at the dragons, and her lips trembled as they parted. "Why...do you need to kill Eluria...?"

But Eluria didn't have the time to pay attention to Lufus's foreboding words. Having regained their vessels, the Guardian Dragons could attack at any moment—and if they attacked her, she'd be utterly defenseless. Eluria had already depleted her mana and could barely even stand—she couldn't defeat the four Guardian Dragons in her current state, with or without restrictions. Even if she could, they would simply suck out Lufus's life to reform their vessels a third time.

Eluria could neither face the Guardian Dragons nor save the girl suffering before her—had she been by herself, that is. But now, in this world, there was one person she trusted more than herself.

"I leave the rest to you...Raid."

Her whisper was drowned out by the sound of a large iron pole crashing into the ground before her. A jet-black flag fluttered amid the billowing dust, and standing leisurely beside it was the most reliable and unshakable man she knew.

"Sure thing. Leave it all to me."

Raid wore the same lopsided grin he always did, its brilliance never faltering no matter where or when Eluria saw him. He lifted the iron flagpole and stabbed it hard into the ground. Then, with a fearless smile, he uttered a familiar warning:

"As long as I'm here, nobody's getting past this black flag."

The dragons stirred, turning their eyes to the sudden interloper. Seizing the opportunity, Raid tossed a magic communicator and a mana recovery drink to Eluria. "Sorry, I can't use it. Connect to Alma yourself."

"Mm. Okay." She nodded and activated the device.

"Hell yeah! My aim's still on point!" the woman cheered.

Eluria blinked. "Raid... How did you get here?"

"Oh... Do you remember that big guy in Alma's Dead Man's Brigade?" Raid nonchalantly pointed at the black flag beside him. "Well, I grabbed onto this flagpole and then he chucked it as hard as he possibly could." The absurdities of this man never seemed to end. "Anyway, I couldn't exactly tell what was going on through the screen. Give it to me short and sweet."

"Don't defeat the Guardian Dragons. I don't know how, but Lufus is producing mana at the cost of her life force, so she'll lose even more if their vessels are destroyed."

"Got it. Guess I'll be their playmate for a bit then."

"Yep. I'll do something about Lufus."

"All right. She's all yours!" Raid kicked off the ground and leaped into the air.

The Guardian Dragons roared the moment they saw him approaching. Strangely, their eyes were curled up as if they were sneering. What could another measly human do? They were Guardian Dragons, the apex of all manabeasts. Mere humans were powerless before them. Their confidence burst through the air, riding on their roars.

The celestial dragon manifested lightning in the air and compressed it into spears of brilliant white flashes. The spears crackled, scorching the air around them, ready to unleash at the speed of light—a barrage so fatal, no ordinary human could have even hoped to see it approaching before the spears blitzed through their body and burnt them to a crisp inside out.

However, there was one thing Guardian Dragons did not know, and that was how exactly the Hero of the past had held his ground against the Sage.

Raid's eyes were set on the looming lightning spears. The moment one closed in on him, he pulled his shoulder back to dodge—then, his right hand darted out and firmly *grabbed* it.

"Not bad," he said with a toothy grin. "It's got a nice tingle to it!!!"

Raid swung the lightning against another incoming spear. Lightning and lightning clashed, rattling the air with a shrill buzz. The spear he'd caught

dissipated in the clash, but Raid didn't bat an eye and simply plucked a replacement from the oncoming barrage. Lightning crashed, over and over, until the dazzling onslaught ceased.

Only then did the Guardian Dragons realize how abnormal this puny human was. Before Raid could resume his approach, the flarestorm dragon opened its maw, light bubbling within. Soon, a fiery beam shot out, seeking to turn all it touched into ashes.

Raid simply cast the beam a sideward glance and clenched his left fist. "Good kids...wait their turn!" With a broad swing, he smashed his fist against the beam —it was forcefully deflected, scorching the air and splitting through the thunderclouds above.

The scene was reminiscent of the Hero and the Sage's battles. Either because of his robust body or the nature of his mana, Raid could physically touch anything unleashed with magic. No simple spell could harm him so long as his hands could simply crush all in his path. In fact, the stronger the magic used against him, the stronger the weapon he could commandeer. His ability to use his enemy's magic against them was damning for Vegalta's war effort and prevented Eluria from grasping victory over him a thousand years ago.

Raid was the natural enemy of any who wielded magic.

Now, this natural predator turned his attention to the roaring terracrown dragon and the earthen cannonball it was forming from the ground.

The imposing sight did nothing to faze him. "You wanna splash around in the mud? I'm honestly a bit too old for that..."

The dragon didn't wait for him to finish before hurtling the boulder through the air.

However, Raid simply watched on with a smile as he breezily lifted his leg. "How 'bout you go play with your friends instead?!" A single kick sent the gigantic boulder flying to the bathysmal dragon, gouging a dent into its large body and drawing out a shrill scream.

It was a truly absurd fight—such was the Hero's signature.

After making sure that the Guardian Dragons were fully focused on Raid,

Eluria turned her attention to the communicator in her hands. "Ms. Alma. Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear! Looks like His Excellency's running absolutely wild over there..."

"If you can see us, then I want you to assess Lufus's condition."

A short silence passed. "What the...?" came Alma's quiet mutter. "Is that actually mana?"

"I've confirmed it on my end too. There's no mistake," Eluria replied. "My diagnosis is that a spell is generating mana in exchange for her life force. I don't know what kind of mana this is, so I can't act carelessly."

Simply dispersing the mana eating away at her body wouldn't do much; the spell placed on her would just continue taking her life force to produce more. Eluria couldn't be sure that terminating the spell would work either, as it was put together with unknown mana. Lufus would run out of life force long before Eluria could even come close to analyzing and decoding it.

Eluria was left with but one choice: "I have to purge the spell from her body through mana infusion."

"What? Will you infuse yours?"

"No. Lufus wouldn't be able to bear any adverse reactions in her current state." The moment mana of different quality was infused into Lufus's body, there would be negative side effects. Eluria didn't know if the girl could survive it as she was now. That said, she had no time to look for a human with compatible mana.

However, there was still a way.

"Lafika." Eluria turned her gaze to the black dragon anxiously nuzzling her master's side. < Your vessel contains Lufus's original mana.>

Lafika turned her head to the familiar language.

<We might be able to save her with that...but your soul might break.>

This was a gamble, even for Eluria. She would have to extract the mana from Lafika's vessel and infuse it directly into Lufus's body, forcefully purging the

spell. After discussing the topic of Raid's mana, Eluria had been studying mana infusion. However, she had no practical experience, and this was a special case she had never quite anticipated: a human and her contracted manabeast. The contract deepened the connection between their mana and souls, so the force of drawing out the mana could impact Lafika's soul. At worst, it could shatter, reducing her real body to naught but an empty shell.

Lafika quietly raised her head. < I don't mind.>

Eluria's eyes snapped open. < You can use manaspeech?>

Manaspeech was, simply put, conversing through mana. This granted manabeasts, who lacked human vocal cords, the ability to communicate. However, while most manabeasts could comprehend meaning and intent, there were very few reports of any reaching the level of speech. More than anything, it was impossible for a manabeast to learn the language without a genuine and heartfelt desire to communicate with their contractor.

<Please save her.> Lafika's mana-infused words rang tenderly in Eluria's mind, while her eyes remained on Lufus's prone form, watching over the girl as she had her entire life. <Lufus has always been by my side, always caring for me...</p>
Always calling me her lafika.>

In the ancient language of Celios, "lafika" translated to "dearest friend." The precious word was a gift from the people of Celios to the manabeasts whose lives had intertwined with theirs. Lufus had never once betrayed the meaning cradled within that word. Throughout the process of forming contracts with the nation's strongest manabeasts and receiving the ire of her own birth mother, not once did she abandon her dearest friend.

<Please... Please, save my dearest friend.> Lafika bowed her head, a thousand emotions and more housed within that subtle gesture and quiet plea.

Eluria placed a gentle hand on the dragon's head. "Okay," she whispered. "I promise to save her. No matter what." She turned and deployed her gear, weaving her mana between Lufus and Lafika.

Mana was the embodiment of one's life, and Eluria believed it was also the *soul*. It circulated through the body along with the blood, carving the path of the individual's life into their very being, becoming the very essence of

everything they lived.

And right now, Eluria was about to forcefully extract that very soul.

She didn't know what effects this could have. Lafika's soul might lose its place and her body might rot away as an empty shell. So at the very least, Eluria placed her prayer, her wish, into the name of this new magic. Even if her body withers away, please, may this soul incarnate into a new life...

"Soul Incarnation."

Eluria's solemn whisper was followed by Lafika's pained roar. The soul carved into the dragon's very being was being ripped apart, and through the unbearable pain, flowed into Lufus through the thread between them. The path Lafika had lived reached Lufus and washed over the mana eating away at the girl's life, purifying her body.

Finally, as the dark purple mana completely disappeared from Lufus's body, the Guardian Dragons in the distance roared. Their vessels, formed by the purple mana, crumbled apart. With vengeful and agonizing screams, they dispersed into beads of light and disappeared.

"Lafika...?" Lufus's eyes weakly pried open as she called for her friend. The black dragon nestling beside her was dispersing into light, just as the Guardian Dragons had. "Lafika... Answer me..."

No more than a feeble whimper came in response.

Even then, Lufus's lips formed into a wobbly smile. "Thank goodness... We promised to be together forever..." Her hand reached out, shaky and desperate, as the black dragon faded to nothingness. "So you can't leave me... You can't..."

Alas, her hand grasped at thin air. Lafika's mana completely dissipated, and her vessel was on the verge of disappearing from this world. Even then, Lufus tenderly caressed the contour of that fading image.

"Because you're...my dearest friend."

The black dragon's voice could no longer reach Lufus. All Lafika could do was watch her smile—the same smile she had watched from right by her side, every day until this very moment.

Lafika seared that precious smile into her fading consciousness and disappeared among the stars twinkling in the sky.

## **Epilogue**

The incident in the second simulation exam was simply declared an accidental rampage from Lufus's Guardian Dragons—which wasn't entirely wrong. Lufus had lost control over her summons, so it was simply a matter of a student failing to control their magic. Despite the adverse ending, the encounter reinforced the knowledge that Celios's Guardian Dragons were powerful even today, consequently boosting the nation's status. Although Lufus had lost control over them, her status as their contractor was undeniable, and the rest of Celios similarly coexisted with such powerful manabeasts. Not to mention the prestige of summoning magic, which made all these feats possible, also noticeably increased.

Neither Lufus nor Eluria had intended for such reactions, but they had somehow contributed to upholding and promoting the honor of Celios.

Meanwhile, Alma received a scolding from their little headmaster, because she had sent out a student to deal with the Guardian Dragons' rampage instead of stepping up herself as a special-class magician. To that, Alma argued back by saying, "His Excellency had a means of dealing with the dragons, which I judged as effective in my capacity as a special-class magician. Thus, I instead prioritized aiding Eluria and Lufus, who were in more dire need of rescue." She was practically just rambling off the top of her head, but she kept a straight face through it all and somehow defended her stance.

Incidentally, Eluria was also scolded, because she had cast large-scale magic despite her restrictions. To that, she impassively argued, "I had foreseen the possibility of the Guardian Dragons running wild and believed I needed to deal with them before things got out of hand. Also, I used magecraft, not magic."

Unfortunately, she didn't fare as well as Alma, as Elise simply snapped back, "Magecraft is also a no-no!" landing her with yet another restriction on her plate.

And while she was at it, Elise finished things off by scolding Raid too, saying

that even if he was confident in his ability to deal with the dragons, he should still keep in mind that he was just a student of the Institute. To that, Raid argued, "Is it the Institute's philosophy to raise magicians who cannot step up against their station to save human lives?" to which Elise brilliantly responded by bursting into tears on the spot.

Quite literally, she started bawling her eyes out like a little kid. "Those guys at the Association are gonna be so mad at me again! No matter what happens, it's always my fault, my fault! I'm doing my best too! Why won't anyone praise me?! Waaah!!!" she wailed while helplessly slamming her hands on the floor. She looked genuinely frustrated, so the three targets of her scoldings all gathered around her and showered her with head pats and praise.

Finally, on the morning of their usual postexam day off, Raid entered their bedroom and marveled, "Wow... What a sight."

Eluria was curled up on the bed, sleeping with a blissful expression...while surrounded by eleven sleeping dogs. Their bed had fallen into a state of unprecedented fluffiness.

The mana-eating wolves had fought a very hard battle against the Guardian Dragons, so to make it up to them, Eluria came up with the idea of sleeping with Shefri and her pups. The idea was very well received, as all the wolves—or dogs, for now—began running around Eluria, jumping onto her and licking her face, arms, and legs. Wolven dignity be damned, their tails wagged at full force as they relished their master's full and undivided attention.

That burst of excitement ultimately resulted in this mountain of fluff on their bed.

"Hnnn..." Eluria shuffled within the pile of fluff and quietly sighed.

Unfortunately, they had plans today, so Raid had come to wake her up. Yes, he needed to wake her up... He needed to, but...

"I might wake these fellas too..."

He didn't want to disturb them when they were sleeping so soundly, but that wasn't the only reason. One dog was curled up into a ball, one was completely stretched out, one was flopped on its side, one was lying on its back, and one

was even sleeping completely splayed out... It was an entire collection of adorably snoozing dogs.

Raid staggered at the sight. Normally, he couldn't get close to animals no matter how dearly he wished to. This was a sight he might never see again for the rest of his life. He very desperately needed to sear this into his memories.

"I mean... We've still got time, so..." He absently murmured an excuse to himself, his lips already melting into a smile as he relished the fluffy paradise before his eyes.

Suddenly, Eluria bolted up. "Too hot," she grumbled, patting the dogs one by one and sending them off into beads of light.

"M-My doggy paradise... It's gone...?!"

Eluria finished off a big yawn and a nice stretch, then turned to Raid with an arched brow. "What are you saying? Are you floaty, Raid?"

His expression instantly shifted from despair to genuine shock. "Huh? You're not?"

She shook her head. "Nope. No floatiness today."

He was sure she'd be a floaty mess today, given how she'd exhausted all her mana yesterday, but her speech was clear and her movements were sharp.

"Come on. Let's get ready." Eluria hopped right off the bed, getting ready for the day all on her own. She spun around and smiled at Raid. "We can't keep Lufus waiting."



After the Guardian Dragons' rampage, Lufus had been taken to the hospital in the capital. She had suffered severe mana deficiency and a number of adverse reactions due to the foreign purple mana that had temporarily taken root in her body. Although she had regained consciousness, it was decided that she would be hospitalized for further observation.

Today, a few guests came into her hospital room.

"Ah! Eluria!" Lufus sat up on her bed and smiled.

"Hi, Lufus. How are you feeling?"

"The doctor told me I still have to rest, but I just had breakfast, so I'm bursting with energy now!"

"Mhm. You sound very energetic." Eluria's lips tugged into a smile as she saw the girl's cheery expression.

"Oh, oh! Also, look!" Lufus gently lifted the blanket over her lap, revealing a small black dragon snoozing quietly under the sheets.

Eluria's eyes widened. "Lafika?"

"Uh-huh! A teeny tiny Lafika!"

"Yeah. She's very tiny and cute."

Lafika's eyes instantly snapped open. Her small beady eyes stared at Eluria's finger reaching out to poke her, then she quietly huffed and settled back down.

"I was so worried I lost her yesterday..." Lufus's pale crimson eyes watered a bit at the memory. "But she made it back!"

After Lufus regained consciousness, Eluria told her what happened...and that her spell attempting to heal her ended in sacrifice. Lufus cried and wailed, forcing herself up despite her damaged body and begging Eluria, asking if Lafika was okay.

<Lafika, how are you feeling?> Eluria asked the tiny dragon in manaspeech.

The black dragon slowly raised her head. <I can no longer move very well, neither in my original body nor my vessel.>

<! see...>

Eluria had asked Wisel to extract data from Lufus's magic gear to check Lafika's condition. Her soul had avoided complete destruction, but as Eluria had thought, their deep connection through the contract had drawn out more than half of Lafika's soul. Perhaps once Lufus recovered her mana, Lafika could grow big enough for Lufus to ride once more, but the dragon's real body in Celios would probably remain disabled for the rest of her life.

As for the larger portion of her soul...

"Don't worry! I'll take great care of Lafika for the rest of my life!" Lufus proudly placed a hand over her heart.

It seemed the spell that utilized the purple mana was something that had used the soul as well, as Lafika's soul had flowed in as if to fill in the life force that Lufus had lost.

Eluria frowned. "Are there really no changes to your body...?"

"Hmmm... I'm not sure. Maybe I'll grow some wings or a tail later?"

Although she still looked human, Lufus now housed a mix of human and manabeast souls. It wouldn't be strange for it to physically manifest in some way.

"But...I'm really happy." Lufus gently caressed Lafika, a small smile gracing her lips. "Now Lafika can stay with me forever."

With their souls now intertwined, there was no telling what would happen if their contract were severed. Lufus could very well lose the life force she'd regained and die young, and something similar might happen to Lafika if Lufus were to die.

The two now shared one life; despite that, Lufus had the biggest and happiest smile on her face. "Thank you, Eluria!"



"And you know," she continued, "I wouldn't mind having wings or a tail. Then I'd match with Lafika!"

< I don't want to see you looking like that... > the dragon grumbled.

"Oh! Then you should wear a ribbon! I gave up before 'cause you were too big, but look at you now—so adorable! I can dress you up all I want!"

The black dragon huffed in exasperation and just quietly curled up on the girl's lap once more.

"Ahem!"

Eluria and Lufus turned around. Raid and Alma were standing with their backs against the wall.

"Well, now that we've checked up on you and all," Alma said, "how about we start the discussion? We did set up this meeting for the investigation— ostensibly, at least."

Lufus's expression hardened as she nodded meekly.

"So tell us," Alma began. "Who taught you that spell?"

"Um... My professor."

"I'm guessing you're not referring to your instructor at the Institute?"

"No... I met my professor in Celios. He reached out to me because he was researching Guardian Dragons and wanted to learn more. He also taught me magic and shared all sorts of stories about manabeasts, and even came with me when I formed my contracts with the Guardian Dragons..." Lufus's voice grew smaller and smaller as she spoke—understandably so, as she'd been betrayed by a teacher she had placed her trust in. Her so-called "professor" had done the unforgivable.

"Could you tell us your professor's name?" Alma asked.

"Sure! It's..." Lufus trailed off, her mouth hanging open. She blinked for a moment before her face slowly scrunched up. "Huh? Mm... Hmmm?"

Eluria raised a brow. "What's wrong?"

"Well... I could've sworn he wrote his name down for me before..." Lufus

hung her head, desperately scouring her memories.

The three guests exchanged glances. Lufus didn't seem to be faking her confusion.

"You never called him by his name?" Raid asked.

"Well, no... He wrote it on a paper and showed it to me once, saying he was very conscious of how unusual his name was. So I just called him 'Professor'..." She could recall all that, but not his name.

Raid hummed. "But you do remember what he looked like, right?"

"Yes! Professor was an elf!"

Alma's eyebrows shot up. "Well, that's some good info right there. Anything else?"

"Um... He was about as tall as Raid, had silver hair like Eluria, and... Oh! He looked really weak and flimsy! Kinda like a twig!"

"Ah, such brutal childlike honesty..."

In any case, this could be counted as progress. They now knew not only how this professor looked but also that he was an elf—a very striking bit of information. However, that wasn't all they came to ask today. Lufus had said something when the purple mana began eating away at her life.

"When the Guardian Dragons reappeared," Eluria muttered, "what did you hear them say?"

Lufus flinched, a tinge of sorrow on her face. "Um, well..."

"It's okay. I won't get mad. Besides, this could be a clue for us." Eluria looked Lufus straight in the eye, encouraging her to speak.

The girl gulped and steeled her resolve. "I heard the Guardian Dragons' voices through their mana," she began. "They were so mad... They felt like completely different beasts."

"They were mad...at me?"

"Yeah... They kept calling your name over and over, screaming that they had to kill you..." Lufus pursed her lips and took a quiet, shuddering breath. "They

had to kill you...because those were the Hero's orders."

Her voice, hushed as a dewdrop, spread a chilling ripple of silence throughout the hospital room.

### **Afterword**

Greetings, distinguished readers. My name is Washiro Fujiki.

I feel very blessed to be able to say that *The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged* has gotten a second volume. This is thanks to all you readers out there. I will put my greatest efforts into ensuring you can continue to enjoy this book.

You might find it difficult to go out because of a certain something that seems to be spreading around recently. I do hope you can enjoy this book if you happen to find yourself in the mood for reading—while watching your health, of course.

Now then, I would like to pose you all a question: do you like cats and dogs?

Me? I spend my days burying my face into my cat's fur and breathing it in like air. It's practically like oxygen to me by now—I simply can't go a day without huffing my cat.

However, I know that people all around the world have different preferences. Some are cat people, while some are dog people. Others are possibly bird people, rabbit people, hamster people, reptile people, freshwater fish people, Tasmanian devil people—why, perhaps even southern tamandua people! But despite this sea of varying opinions, we all share one point of commonality: our love for cute things!

Here, I would like to present this work's cuteness ambassador, Eluria, and slot her into the brain rot formula of "cute + cute = uber cute." All that's left is to roar out, "FUSION!!!" and to mash the two cutes together. This was how "Eluria with animal ears" came to be. I believe that placing cute animal ears and tails on cute girls is the true path to world peace. Therefore, I placed animal ears on Eluria in this volume as a prayer for the story to someday welcome a peaceful ending.

I'm joking, of course.

I was planning to ramble on and on about what this volume was about, but we've actually begun to delve into the more serious part of the plot. And it was within that serious plot that I dropped an animal-eared Eluria. I even increased the page count just to add in that bit of Eluria cuteness. Because cuteness is very important, yes.

This work is a romantic reincarnation fantasy where past, present, and future are entangled in a deep web of complexities, plus a cute Sage. Whether you're here for the mystery, the romance, or for the adorable Sage, please consume this work as needed while following the recommended dosage.

Now that I've finished filling up the pages with my nonsense, let me move on to my words of thanks:

To my editor, I know I completed this volume with a brilliant buzzer beater, swooshing in my draft just a few hours before the deadline, but I'll probably do it again. I'm pleading guilty now. Though, I think you might actually punch me for real next time, so I'll do my best to turn it in early.

To Heiro, thank you again for all the wonderful illustrations. Fareg, who'd taken a spot among the main cast against all odds, looked so cool that I raised my fist to the heavens with a tear solemnly trailing down my cheek. Really, I was so moved.

Finally, to everyone involved in the production of this book, as well as the readers who gave this novel a chance, I offer you my sincerest thanks.

Washiro Fujiki

## **Bonus Short Story**

### An Excellent Sage Can Also Be a Good Dog

Raid and Eluria stepped out of the shop, Millis's tea leaves now purchased and secured.

"So, what next?" Raid asked. "I'm getting a little peckish, so how about we grab some food while we look around?"

"Sure. Shefri got hungry while she was waiting too." Eluria rubbed the dog's belly, earning a happy little yelp. Shefri had waited calmly on her leash outside the shop—clearly, her patience warranted a hearty reward.

"If we need to feed Shefri too, then we should go for some meat. They should be selling grilled skewers in the market."

"No need to go to the market," Eluria said, pointing down the road. "There's a stall selling meat right that way."

"Oh? Now that's new. You know a place?" Raid hadn't been expecting that. After all, Eluria herself had fully acknowledged that she was a homebody and rarely strolled around the capital.

However, the girl shook her head. "I don't know the place. I smell it."

"You...smell it?"

"Mhm. I smell delicious grilled meat over that way."

Shefri let out a cheery bark while facing in the same direction, clearly in agreement with her master. Alas, Raid neither picked up any such scent nor spotted a stall within his view. He didn't doubt them, what with Shefri personally vouching for it, but wherever this stall was, it definitely wasn't anywhere nearby.

"Come to think of it," he muttered, "you mentioned locating me with your sense of smell before..."

"Mhm. I'm confident in my nose."

"I think you're just a dog."

Eluria puffed her cheeks up. "I am not," she grumbled. "My sense of smell isn't *that* good."

"Why don't you tell me one way you've used your sense of smell?"

"Whenever I got lost in the capital, I'd often find my way back by following familiar scents."

"Yep. You're definitely a dog..."

"S-Surely, everyone does that...!" she protested, flailing her arms about, but even that now looked reminiscent of a jittery dog in Raid's eyes. Eluria sulkily swiveled her head away, lip stuck out in a pout. "Fine. If you insist, then I'll acknowledge that I behave very similarly to a dog."

"You sure you're okay with that, Sage?"

"But," she continued, casting him a sideward gaze. "In that case, I believe a just reward is in order." She confidently stuck her head out to Raid. "Here."

Raid blinked. "Hm?"

"I found us a stall and saved us the trouble and time of walking to the market."

"Well... I guess you did."

"In other words, I am a good girl," Eluria concluded, bobbing her head in satisfaction before once again proudly offering it to Raid. "Therefore, I demand a just reward."

"So...you want me to pat your head?"

"A very suitable reward of my choosing."

"I didn't know dogs could demand suitable rewards of their choosing," Raid deadpanned. Nevertheless, he gently patted the girl's head.

Eluria's expression softened blissfully. "Mm. I've received my reward."

"Great. Lead the way, then."

"That requires a separate payment."

"Well, I can pay as much as you want," Raid said with a chuckle, giving her another head pat.

"Excellent. Leave it to me." The very puppylike Sage beamed and skipped ahead with light and cheery steps.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

### **Newsletter**

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

# **Copyright**

The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged: Volume 2

by Washiro Fujiki

Translated by Joey Antonio Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Washiro Fujiki Illustrations by Heiro

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

<u>j-novel.club</u>

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: November 2024