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Prologue

Once, in a certain land, there lived a man known as the Hero. A master of weapons of every kind, he charged into battlefield after battlefield, turning many hopeless battles to his land's favor with his unyielding strength. He stood tall and proud till his final days, and thus did he inspire the people's awe as they lauded him as their Hero.

Once, in a neighboring land, there lived a woman known as the Sage. She refined the art of magecraft into a new form called magic, overturning disadvantageous battles as she promulgated her skills across the nation. Her magical arts brought the land to new heights, and thus did she inspire the people's admiration as they lauded her as their Sage.

Two geniuses with two sets of strengths were born in two different lands. Their relationship, however, could be aptly demonstrated with but one simple interaction:

"Hey. I had a feeling you'd show up."

In the middle of the battlefield, Hero Raid Freeden hefted a broadsword far larger than his own stature over his shoulder. Normally, one would never stop to heed the enemy's words, but the girl floating in the air quietly responded to him.

"Yeah. Since I heard you'd be here too."

Her voice was but a wisp, yet it somehow carried clearly through the air and to his ears. The girl was perched comfortably atop her staff, her immaculate silver hair fluttering leisurely behind her. Then, when she trailed her eyes over the chaos that Raid had created all around him, her lips twisted into a scowl.

"Stop breaking stuff," she whined.

"Huh? Well, what do you want me to do? If we let you secure your supply route, then our base over here's good as gone, and you'll all be free to waltz right past."

"Yep. That's the plan. So..." She trailed off, then mumbled, "I can't just leave you be." In the blink of an eye, countless sigils formed in the air around her—a manifestation of magic, the new art that Sage Eluria Caldwin had created herself. "I brought a big one today."

"Sounds great. Maybe we'll finally settle this during our hundred-somethingth battle?"

"Today will be...our 629th."

"Already? Thanks for always keeping count."

"Only because you always forget..." Eluria grumbled, frowning.

"What do you expect? I'm dumb, unlike you." Raid shrugged as he pointed the tip of his broadsword toward the floating girl. "But," he continued, "I can't be looking too lame in front of those calling me their Hero."

In the face of Raid's wide and toothy grin, Eluria just silently nodded. "Yeah. As the Sage, I can't lose either."

The magic circles glowed brighter, and Raid pulled his broadsword back as he stood ready for battle. For three days and three nights, the two fought. They spared not a single second for rest yet showed no signs of slowing. Far from it, in fact—their movements only grew sharper as time passed, almost as if they were enjoying every moment of it.

However, as a true testament to their evenly matched strength, their clash here would meet no conclusion. It was only when the tides of battle shifted not for them, but for their respective armies, that their own bout came to an end with them swearing to settle things next time before rushing to the aid of their allies. Then, they would meet once more on the next battlefield, where sword and magic would collide yet again.

Such was the routine of the world's strongest, the Hero and the Sage, each and every battle. For Raid, there was only one word that could describe their relationship:

Rivals.

The one and only person in the world he could fight with all his might and

with the greatest joy from the bottom of his heart—that was what the Sage, Eluria Caldwin, meant to him.

However, that relationship could not last forever. Someday, they would settle once and for all which of them was truly the strongest. Death came equally to all, and even this enjoyable rivalry was bound to meet its own kind of end.

For these two, that end would come knocking on their doorsteps fifty years after their first meeting.

"The Sage is dead?" The wrinkles on Raid's face deepened as he heard the soldier's report. "Are you absolutely sure about that, Ryatt?"

"Y-Yes, sir...! This information was sent via an urgent report from the spy we sent into Vegalta, so we suspect it to be highly reliable!"

Raid scoffed, ruffling his bed of pure white hair. "Seriously? I always thought I'd kick the bucket first."

Eluria Caldwin was not a human; she was an elf, a race that had a lifespan of several hundreds of years. Raid had every right to assume that he, with his human aging and stiffening joints, would eventually bring a natural end to their years-long rivalry with his loss and subsequent death. The end that actually stood before them left a terrible taste in his mouth.

"A-And with this news, you have been issued a decree from above, Your Excellency Freeden."

"What? Are they done with a geezer like me now that the Sage is dead?"

"N-No..." The soldier's expression twisted bitterly for a moment. "Our nation of Altane has ordered you...to take advantage of the chaos left by the Sage's death, lead our entire army into Vegalta, and bring an end to this long-standing war."

The order left Raid at a loss for words. The stifling silence was only torn when his anger turned palpable in the air. "Are you *seriously* saying that?" he growled.

The soldier flinched, freezing up in fear, but swiftly fixed his posture. "Your

Excellency," he began, his features heavy and burdened. "As your accompanying standard-bearer, I am keenly aware of the hopes that you and the Sage carry within your hearts each time you cross swords. That you fought to ensure the weak and powerless would not be senselessly caught in the cross fire, too, is something that any who have set foot upon the battlefield know well."

Both nations saw unprecedentedly minuscule losses in troops throughout the war, something that should have been unthinkable with combatants as powerful as the Hero and the Sage wielding their power in the forefront. Raid, however, fought one-on-one with Eluria at every chance with precisely that goal in mind—one that Eluria herself likely shared.

Thus was born their routine of facing off at every battle, carrying upon themselves the lives of those behind them...and the hope that their warring nations would someday set their weapons down and look toward a peaceful future together. However, their wish never reached those in power. At the very least, the upper echelons of Raid's homeland of Altane showed not a single morsel of sympathy.

"That is why I am exceedingly vexed!" the soldier continued, tears welling up in his eyes. "The esteemed Sage, who sought peace alongside you, has perished! I...cannot bring myself to use her death for war when I am still beside myself with grief!"

The wrinkles on Raid's face deepened once more, this time from the upward curl of his lips. "You sure know just what to say to make this old man happy."

The soldier must have spoken from the bottom of his heart, and it was safe to say that anyone who saw the Hero and the Sage's battles up close would share those sentiments as well.

With that in mind, Raid slowly got to his feet. "I'll need to pass those words on to her," he said as he unequipped his armor, removed his gauntlets and gaiters, and tossed it all aside.

The soldier watched on pensively. "Your Excellency, what are you doing?"

"Hm? Just going for a little walk. All this equipment isn't doing my poor ol' back any favors."

Raid's gaze fell upon the broadsword leaning against the wall—his irreplaceable partner throughout all these years of fighting against the Sage. Then, he took it in his hands and stabbed it into the ground.

"I can't go visiting my friend all dressed for war, now can I?"



How exactly this story will be passed down through the generations remains to be seen. For those witnessing it with their own eyes, however, only a single, unified thought came to mind:

Hero Raid Freeden was a monster.

He broke right through the surveillance network laid out across the battlefront, repelled all the armed forces that attempted to suppress him, and charged straight into the royal capital of Vegalta like there was no tomorrow. More shocking yet was the fact that he left not even a single corpse in his wake, as if to embody the wish that he and the Sage carried all along.

By the time he arrived at the capital, the soldiers had bolstered their defenses to maximum capacity in preparation for the Hero's invasion.

"Halt! If you take a single step—" The bellowing soldiers instantly fell speechless when they caught sight of Raid.

The recipient of their gazes, however, merely curled his lips into a fearless smile. "Yo. Sorry 'bout this. I'm a bit tight on time, though, so you gotta let me through," he murmured as his eyes swept right past the funeral procession. "But I can't say I wasn't expecting this kind of welcome...being your enemy and all!"

One step, then another. Raid forced his trembling legs against the ground and trudged onward, a viscous sound squelching beneath his feet with each step.

The blood pouring from his body painted the ground and carved out his path.

In this moment, he was the very image of a wounded beast. His body was entirely drenched in blood and covered in wounds, and his clothes were reduced to tattered rags and singed scraps. Stone spears and ice blades formed by magic jutted out from where they had pierced his back and legs.

Despite it all, Raid did not stop.

"I'll drop dead for you guys once I'm done talking to her... So just this once..." With blood trickling down from his mouth, he glared at the soldiers who were standing stock-still and roared out like a ferocious beast. "STOP GETTING IN MY WAY!!!"

The casket was finally within his sights, so he made a mad dash toward it. Not a single soul was left to stand in the Hero's way. Battered as his body may have been, his figure was the most gallant around.

Finally, he reached the Sage, asleep within her casket, and called her name.

"Hey, Eluria."

But of course, no answer came.

"Oh, come on... You're actually dead? Feels like you're 'bout to jump me any second now."

Even as she lay within the casket, Eluria was truly beautiful. She looked no older than a girl in her teens, just as she did that day they first met on the battlefield fifty years ago. However, her unaging body could no longer move.

"Jeez... Your pupils are all way too strong, you know? Not as strong as you, of course, but they fire their magic like a buncha lunatics. It was real hard holding back and not killing 'em."

Despite the blood gushing from his numerous wounds, Raid grinned as he gazed at Eluria's prone form. However, her eyes would never meet his again.

"I knew it... You really are something else. I'm just some idiot, but you thought all about your nation's future. I mean, just look at all these people mourning your death..."

He dragged his dimming vision across his surroundings, at all the people who had gathered to mourn the loss of their great and beloved Sage. Every last one of them was shedding tears of grief. As he took in the scene, Raid's vision suddenly began to blur as well.

"In the end, we never got to settle who was stronger, but I still got to fight someone like you for more than fifty years of my life... Man, what a blast..."

Raid felt his strength leave him as he collapsed onto his knees, but he mustered every last bit he had to string these final words together.

"If only...we weren't on opposing sides..."

With his fading consciousness and rasping voice, he laid bare his true feelings for the Sage who had walked along the battlefield with him.

"I'm sure...we could've been friends."

Raid looked up at the heavens with a bright smile on his face. His vision began to darken, as if that motion took every last vestige of strength he had left.

"You know...I think I was...actually..."

His body turned numb, and an odd floating sensation embraced him before his mouth could form those last words. Even then, Raid was satisfied. He was able to convey these feelings he had been holding on to for the past fifty years.

However, he couldn't say that he was entirely without regrets. He wasn't able to fulfill the one promise he made with Eluria back when they first met.

"Let's settle who's stronger between us, once and for all."

The promise they made while facing one another from opposing sides of the battlefield—that was the last thing on Hero Raid Freeden's mind as he gazed up at the heavens and passed on.

Chapter One

Those were the final memories of Hero Raid Freeden.

"Raid! Get down here!"

Now, he was just casually letting out a great big yawn as he descended the stairs in his home. "What's up, mom?"

"Don't give me that!" his mother snapped, her face pale as a sheet. "What in the world did you do?!"

"Um, nothing that I know of ...?"

"Well, the village chief just told me that some aristocrat from the royal capital came looking for you this morning!"

"An aristocrat... So, a magician?" In the present day, those who specialized in magical combat were known as magicians. "Sounds like that's got nothing to do with me."

"I thought it was some sort of mistake too. But it turns out the aristocrat asked for you by name," his mother said with a sigh. She settled down onto a chair, looking a little more collected. "Just how did things turn out this way...?"

"It's probably no big deal."

"Wow. Nothing ever fazes you, does it? I always thought you were a bit different from the other kids, what with how little you cried or how mature you acted..."

"I mean, it's not *that* shocking." Raid sheepishly scratched his cheek. Of course, it wasn't as if nothing ever shocked him; he'd just been through so much that these days it took a lot to truly surprise him.

After all, when he opened his eyes again after his death, he found himself a thousand years in the future—with all his memories as Raid Freeden intact, to boot. He even looked exactly the same as he had in his youth.

After living a life of war and hardship, the Hero had barged into the Sage's

funeral, littered with wounds, and breathed his last by her casket. And then...he woke up as a baby. To say he was baffled would be quite the understatement indeed.

Not to mention, a thousand years had passed since then. His homeland of Altane had fallen and disappeared without a trace; the neighboring nation they had been at war with was now known as the Magic Kingdom of Vegalta; and magic had gone from being the arcane art of a small nation to a practice that was commonplace all across the world. Faced with all these changes, Raid found it rather difficult to be shocked by much else.

Besides, eighteen years had already gone by since he began this second life. He'd grown accustomed to this changed world, where all was at peace with no grand wars in sight. Counting his past life, he was mentally close to being ninety years old. It would be harder to find something that *would* faze him at this point.

He snapped out of his reverie when his mother placed a hand on her cheek. "Maybe," she muttered, "it has to do with how you can't use magic?"

In this modern world, magic was accessible to all. The Sage had invented it, and those who inherited her will had diligently researched and studied what she left behind. As a result, magical techniques had developed and promulgated so far and wide that even civilians could use the simpler forms.

However, Raid couldn't manage even the slightest spell.

"Well, my big brother and little sister are both pretty good at it. Guess I had to balance the scales for 'em?"

"That's how you rationalize it?!"

"I mean, you just gotta live life and let go of what's beyond your control. Besides, I don't need magic to help plow the fields and carry stuff around for the villagers."

"Well, I don't really plan on nagging you if you say you're content..."

However, Raid had no response for that.

In this world, everyone looked up to magicians. They possessed mana and skill

that far surpassed the average person and used those abilities to protect the common folk's peaceful lives from dangerous manabeasts. Naturally, magicians tended to be quite renowned and were thus showered with both admiration and envy from all sides.

Inversely, anybody who couldn't use magic was considered worthless. The kind of magic you could wield determined what kind of occupation you could take, and only certified magicians were allowed to take on combat-related occupations. This was now a world of magic elitism, so to speak. Even the man once known as the Hero was worthless without any magical capabilities and would never be allowed to fight so long as he wasn't a magician.

But Raid was in no way dissatisfied with his current life. Compared to his past life ravaged by war and conflict, where many lives were taken and lost upon the battlefield, this current world was the epitome of peace. Plowing the fields in a tranquil countryside village was a nice and refreshing way to live, he could say for sure.

However, the little itch he felt never disappeared. The Hero in him still craved battle. He just wanted to unleash his all and have a fun fight. That was his one little dissatisfaction, but there wasn't much he could do about it. His current life was simply one of fieldwork and raising the crops with care.

"Guess I'll head over to the village chief now," Raid said. "Shouldn't keep 'em waiting too long. It must be pretty urgent if they know my name."

"If it turns out you did cause a problem, can I just pretend not to know you?!"

"Sure."

"What a depressing response! Never mind! I will bear the responsibility with you as your mother!"

"Have you considered that maybe I *didn't* cause a problem?" Raid chuckled wryly at his mother before heading off to the village chief's house.

He made his way through the village while gazing at the placid scenery and feeling some stares on his back, courtesy of the villagers who were watching him from a distance. In typical countryside fashion, word that he'd been summoned by an aristocrat had already spread. This would probably be the talk

of the village for a good while.

A little farther down the street, an unfamiliar sight caught his attention: a magic automobile, an iron vehicle that moved not by horse but by mana. Such a contraption would've been unfathomable a thousand years ago, but magical techniques had significantly evolved since then. The Sage had created not only the craft of magic but also the concept of mana circuits that could activate simple magic as long as mana was supplied. With further advancements made over time, the circuits had become deeply ingraved in people's daily lives.

Of course, magic automobiles in particular were not as widespread. Only those on the more elite side of society could privately own one. For example, renowned aristocratic families that produced talented magicians for generations, or old and prestigious households that had long and venerable histories. Since someone of such reputable standing had specifically summoned Raid, his mother's harried reaction was quite justified—as was the village chief's.

The elderly man, who had been restlessly pacing back and forth, snapped his head up once Raid arrived. "What in the world did you do, Raid?!"

"Huh. I just got a real odd sense of déjà vu."

"Like I care! I feel like I just lost ten years of my life!"

"Are they that big of a deal...?"

"Just hurry it up! And whatever happens to you ain't my business, got it?!"

"Got it."

"Argh! Do you take me for a chief who doesn't care 'bout his villagers?!"

"Déjà vu again," Raid remarked dryly. "But thanks, Chief."

Despite the extraordinary circumstances of his visit, Raid's dynamic with the village chief was just as casual as ever.

"So, who is it?" he asked as he followed the elderly man into his residence.

"All I know is that I was called by some aristocrat."

"'Some aristocrat'?" the chief echoed incredulously, his features growing tense. "You weren't called by just *some aristocrat*. The one who summoned you

is an incredibly influential collateral relative of the royal family who also happens to be widely known all across the Magic Kingdom of Vegalta."

Raid blinked. "And why would someone like that be looking for me...?"

"I don't know."

"I wish you hadn't called me until you did," he deadpanned.

"You'll know once you get there, or so I was told. Even I wasn't given many details."

"But I've barely ever left the village."

"That's why I don't know." Creases formed between the chief's brows. "Look, just go in and see," he urged with a slow nod. "You might know something after all."

"All right. See ya."

Raid stepped in front of the drawing room and slowly opened the door. The next moment, he fell speechless.

Pale silver hair as brilliant as a full moon's glow.

Blue eyes as deep as the endless ocean.

And an impassive expression set upon delicate features.

It was like gazing at an image that came straight from his memories, but Raid knew this couldn't be. A thousand years had passed since then, and besides that, *she was dead*. He saw her corpse with his own eyes.

"Long time no see, Raid."

Yet here she was, calling his name with that same chiming voice he knew all too well. Standing quietly on the other side of the door was none other than Eluria Caldwin herself.



After Raid entered the room in a daze, Eluria ordered her attendants to wait outside. Once the two of them were alone, she sat down on the couch and nodded.

"Long time no see, Raid," she said once more, her azure eyes meeting his. The seat cushion had sloped under her weight, telling Raid that she wasn't just a figment of his imagination.

His silent staring prompted Eluria to tilt her head in concern. "Raid?"

"Oh, my bad—I mean, my apologies."

The silver-haired girl frowned. "Why are you speaking so formally?"

"I believe this is the proper etiquette to uphold when in the presence of a distinguished member of House Caldwin."

His answer only deepened her concern, her brows knitting closer together. "Don't tell me...you don't remember?"

"Pardon me. Have we met, perchance?"

Eluria's shoulders visibly sagged in disappointment. She painted such a pitiful picture that even Raid felt bad just watching her.

He scratched his head with a sigh. "Have you come in search of the man once known as the Hero?"

She snapped her head up in an instant—but immediately wilted once more. "The Raid I knew didn't talk like you, though..."

"Hang on a second. We'll end up going in circles at this rate."

"That sounded a lot more like him."

"Because I am..." Raid sighed. "As the Hero of Altane, I had to meet the nation's bigwigs sometimes. I at least spoke politely when the situation called for it, you know?"

With that, the spark returned to Eluria's eyes. "Then you are Raid!"

"Sure am. Might as well ask too—you're the Eluria I remember, yeah?"

"Eluria Caldwin. Born and raised in Vegalta. Approximately two hundred years old. My hobby is reading, and my favorite drink is warm milk tea. When I'm tired, I like to nap under the sun."

"Only the first two bits are things I would know..."

Her head drooped again. "Sorry..."

There was certainly precious little he knew about her. They only ever met on the battlefield, and while they did exchange a few words here and there, he knew next to nothing about her personal hobbies or preferences. On the contrary, however, there *was* one thing he could use to confirm her identity.

"How many times did we fight?"

"Six thousand three hundred and twenty-nine times."

"Cool. Not like I remember."

"Yep. I always had to remind you." At that point, all the tension finally fell from her face. "Thank goodness... It really is you." With tears welling up in her eyes, Eluria placed a hand over her chest and nodded to herself in relief.

Meanwhile, Raid breathed out a sigh and plopped down on the couch. "I never thought we'd meet again, let alone like this." Who could've imagined they'd reunite with their dead rival a thousand years in the future? "Come to think of it, how were you able to find me?"

"Since I'd been reincarnated, I figured you'd be around too."

"You just went looking with zero evidence? Wow..."

"My intuition is evidence enough," she said with a smug quirk of her lips.

But more importantly, a certain word had caught Raid's attention. "You said you 'reincarnated'? What does that mean?"

"Simply put, it's when a person lives their next life while having inherited all their memories and abilities from their previous one. More precisely, it's the effect of reincarnation magic."

"Wait, magic? So you cast it?"

"No, it wasn't me." Eluria shook her head. "To be clear, 'reincarnation magic' is just a provisional label on my part. It exists in theory, but I have no way of executing it."

Raid hummed. "I see what you're getting at."

Although she wasn't exactly the most articulate person out there, he could

piece together a rudimentary understanding. Basically, Eluria had determined what the *effects* of reincarnation magic were, but the *methods* of casting said magic were beyond her.

"So, even the founder of magic herself doesn't know? Must be some pretty crazy stuff."

Eluria indignantly puffed up her cheeks. "Not even the Sage knows everything," she grumbled.

In any case, their reincarnation wasn't Eluria's doing. Of course, Raid had no recollection of doing anything of the sort himself. The Hero and the Sage had reincarnated together a thousand years into the future... It would be too much of a stretch to wrap it all up as a pretty little coincidence.

"Well..." Raid shrugged. "There's no use in *me* racking my head over something even *you* don't understand."

"Mhm. You don't know what you don't know," Eluria concluded very philosophically. "There are just way too many question marks in our case. I tried digging around a bit, and apparently, reincarnation magic should perfectly replicate the target from their past life. But I'm completely different."

"You are?"

Eluria's eyes instantly sharpened into a glare. "You didn't notice?"

At that moment, Raid's gut told him that he'd be in a world of trouble if he couldn't give an answer, so he took another good look at the girl before him.

Her silver locks were as beautiful and immaculate as ever.

Her eyes were the same deep ocean blue shade he remembered.

Age aside, she still looked to be around fifteen to sixteen years old.

As for her figure... He'd never looked too closely in his past life, but he recalled that her height was around average, and that the curves of her figure and the slightness of her limbs were feminine enough at a glance, all the same as they were now.

In conclusion, nothing had changed.

Unable to stand his silence any longer, Eluria began restlessly fiddling with her hair. It was only then that Raid finally found what he was looking for: the characteristic pointed tips of her ears had turned very familiarly rounded.

"Wait... You reincarnated as a human?"

"Yep." Eluria lifted her hair to fully show him. "So now, I have matching ears with you."



"Well, me, and the rest of humanity..." Raid chuckled wryly. This change basically meant that the two of them would age and grow old together this time. "Now that I think about it, the village chief said you were a collateral relative of the royal family. Are you some big shot this time 'round too?"

"A super big shot, I think."

Raid's eyes fell half-lidded, exasperated at her stunning eloquence. "Right... Sure. Um, how 'super,' exactly?"

Eluria hummed. "One of my pupils was from the royal family, and she took on my surname, and now they're known as the house that inherited the Sage's name."

"Oh, wow. That is a super big shot."

This was now a world of magic elitism, after all, where many legends and stories sang praises of its founder, the Sage. Undoubtedly the house that inherited her name carried immense influence. All this was a result of Eluria's own efforts toward passing her techniques down to future generations, so the fact that she herself had a stable backing in this life was a wonderful turn of events.

However, Eluria simply looked at Raid and asked, "What about you...?"

"Yeah? What about me?" he asked back.

"What's your life like now?"

"I plow the fields here, cut some trees there, and carry stuff for peddlers sometimes too."

There was a long silence before Eluria murmured, "Why?"

"Well... 'Cause I can't use magic."

For the record, Raid had certainly put in effort to learn. He studied what were now considered the basics of magic, asked his far more talented brother and sister to teach him, and tried all sorts of things, but to no avail. Even the most elementary of spells, ones that even kids could manage, were beyond his grasp.

"How were the results of your Aptitude Test?"

"That thing we take when we turn twelve? Well, the apparatus completely broke down the moment I touched it, so the person from the Association gave me an earful."

In this world, children took the Mana Aptitude Test when they turned twelve. Should the mana capacity computed by the apparatus reach a certain value, the child will be labeled as a magician candidate. If the score met an even higher standard, then they could even look forward to invitations from the various magic institutes across the land. By graduating from one of these institutes, they could then follow the glorious path of a magician.

However, Raid's problem came *before* all that. Forget casting magic, even just directing his mana into anything that had a mana circuit ended in nothing but utter destruction. So, when the measuring apparatus used for the Mana Aptitude Test was very predictably reduced to smithereens, not only did he have to sit through the official's long-winded lecture, but he also received a notice declaring that his mana aptitude was a big fat zero. Thus ends the story of how he had come to be *officially* labeled as incompetent.

Still, Raid didn't let any of that get to him. If getting all stubborn about magic could cause trouble for those around him, then he very much preferred to just live by earnestly tending to the fields and lending the villagers his aid in his own way.

However, the girl before him seemed oddly offended by his humble countryside life. Eluria's brow crumpled and she stuck her lip out in a pout. "But you're the Hero," she whined.

"Well, I was the Hero," he sheepishly corrected.

"And you're about as strong as me."

"I won't deny that. But this world is all about magic now. Melee weapons are treated as curios and decorations, and even if they weren't, only magicians are permitted to engage in combat."

Although the creases between Eluria's eyebrows deepened with each passing word, Raid's assessment of the modern world was accurate. Those who couldn't use magic were labeled as incompetent. No matter how strong you actually were in nonmagical ways, you wouldn't be allowed in combat. All you

could do was live out your life in anonymity. Raid was still just one human in the end; with both his own station and the world around him completely changed, there wasn't much he could do.

Eluria nodded once before lifting her face and slowly parting her lips. "Raid," she said, her voice coming out in a near whisper, "marry me."

His jaw dropped. A stunned "huh?" was all he could muster after a long bout of silence.

"I guess you'll have to start as my fiancé."

"Hold up. Don't go progressing these marriage talks on your own."

However, the girl who'd made the spontaneous proposal looked dead serious. "My, or rather, House Caldwin's close affiliates can take the Magic Institute's entrance exam regardless of their aptitude. Just show them how strong you are, and you should be able to become a magician too. Then, you can fight just like before. It's the perfect plan."

"But isn't that kinda unfair...?"

"Not at all," Eluria promptly responded. She most certainly wasn't joking around. "It's just... You were really strong. Strong enough to go toe to toe with me for more than fifty years. And you weren't just strong—that's why you were called the Hero." She hung her head with a frown. "But now, nobody cares about you just because you can't use magic. It's dumb. I don't like that."

Right now, she was speaking as his rival of fifty long years. The Hero and the Sage knew and acknowledged one another's strengths better than anyone, which must be why Eluria felt the need to make such a proposal, however outlandish it may be.

Still, at present, Raid was but a young man from the boonies who couldn't use magic, while Eluria was a young lady who held status and power second only to royalty. Should the worst happen, he might end up dragging mud all across her noble name. He couldn't possibly assent to such an absurd proposal.

"Look, I appreciate the thought, but—"

However, the moment he tried to turn her down, Eluria interrupted him with

a very familiar line:

"Let's settle who's stronger between us, once and for all."

It was the promise they had been unable to fulfill in their past life, the one and only regret that plagued Raid's mind till his dying breath. Raid's brow furrowed. "It's so unfair of you to bring that up now."

"Not at all," Eluria repeated impassively, her pure and unclouded blue eyes seeing straight through him. "You should be thinking the same thing."

And she was right—his answer was already decided.

Over fifty years of battles had brought changes to the responsibilities they carried on their shoulders. Defeat of either the Hero or the Sage could have led to the annihilation of their respective army and nation. That was why they kept ending their bouts in draws like actors following their script, always fighting seriously yet never drawing out their full strength.

But if he could dare to wish again...

"I won't run or hide, so come at me anytime."

Raid responded the same way he had to that promise from a memory long past.



After agreeing to Eluria's plan, Raid packed only his barest necessities and headed for the royal capital with her. As he gazed absently at the passing scenery outside the magic automobile, he found himself mumbling, "Man, who would've thought, huh?"

Granted, he had always seen Eluria as more than just an enemy, even in their past life. They could read each other well enough to have that unspoken agreement to avoid huge losses for both their armies. That was precisely why he thought they could have become good friends if they hadn't been on opposing sides. But for whatever reason, forget the sides they stood on—the entire world and era they lived in had changed. Heck, they even jumped right past the friendship stage and ended up as rivals-turned-future-spouses.

Meanwhile, the very person who brought forth this crazy idea was trembling

on the seat in front of him with a terribly stiff and nervous look on her face.

"Eluria?" he called.

No response.

"Hello? Eluria Caldwin?"

"Y-Yeth?!" She replied with a splendid bite of her tongue. The girl's face flushed as she hung her head. "Sorry..."

"Uh, no need to apologize, really..." Raid scratched his head.

To be honest, he'd seen this coming. Although they had only ever met in the context of war, there were still a few things he could glean from their fifty-years-long acquaintanceship—and one of those things was that Eluria likely sucked at socializing.

There was a time when elves had been feared for looking uncannily similar to humans despite being of a different race entirely. They lived amid nature and avoided interacting with humans. Raid didn't know why Eluria had decided to jump into human society, but it was surely no easy task to alter the behavior that had been rooted in her by her natural disposition and the environment she grew up in. Case in point, even the people in *his* country had known that the Sage disliked humans and avoided the limelight.

Looking at that very Sage right now, though, he found it more likely that she just didn't know how to talk to people in the first place. So, he decided to take the helm of this conversation. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

"A-And what would dyat—ah."

"Wait. How about we pretend you *didn't* just bite your tongue again? We won't be getting anywhere at this rate, so just bear with the embarrassment, okay? Do it for me and my attempt to start this conversation, please."

In the face of Raid's onslaught of desperate pleas, Eluria mutely nodded despite the flush overtaking her cheeks.

"Regarding my inability to use magic," he continued. "Do you have any ideas?"

"As in, why?" she slowly asked.

"Yeah. I figured you might know something, since you invented it and all."

An intrigued spark lit up in Eluria's eyes. "Hm... It's probably because of your mana."

"My mana?"

"Yeah. It'll be easier to understand if you think of mana as water," she began, twirling her finger in the air. "Normal mana is like water, which means it flows easily through the path—the mana circuit. But your mana is like a rock. It doesn't flow at all, and trying to force it through will just destroy the path itself."

"Ohhh. So *that's* why the test apparatus broke." The problem did only crop up whenever he made a conscious effort to use magic or to inject his mana into something. Otherwise, even the automobile they were currently riding would have broken down when he stepped inside.

"I don't know how you ended up with that kind of mana, but I know for sure that it won't work with the magic system that I made. You'd need to formulate a specialized theory and make a new kind of mana circuit from scratch—catering to your type of mana, of course."

"Would that take a long time?"

"It took me a hundred years to formulate the basis for current magic theory."

"So I'll be a geezer again by the time it's done," Raid concluded.

"Since I'm human now, I'll be a granny by then too..."

If even the founder of magic herself needed a hundred years, then it would be practically impossible for anyone else. "Thanks, Eluria. You just completely solved my eighteen-years-long mystery."

The girl reluctantly asked, "Did you want to use magic...?"

"I wonder... I guess I did want to try it out since it was your thing and all, but it's no big deal if I can't." It wasn't so much the fact that he couldn't use magic, as it was the reason that had been bothering him. Finally getting the answer was plenty rewarding in itself.

Eluria bobbed her head, satisfied with his answer. "You're fine as you are,

Raid. You wouldn't be able to beat me with magic anyway."

"Oh? Confident, are we?"

"Of course. I won't lose to anyone in that department." Eluria let out a smug little huff as she puffed her chest out.

Seeing her like that, Raid knew that bringing up a magic-related topic had been the right choice. They just had to keep the conversation going, and Eluria should start loosening up too.

A tiny tug on his clothes snapped him back to attention. "Hm? What is it?"

"Well, um..." Eluria's gaze swam nervously around the compartment until she finally found her resolve and parted her trembling lips. "Thank you...for agreeing to my plan."

"That should be my line," Raid replied. "You came up with it for me, so thanks."

"But I just brought it up out of nowhere... Weren't you...annoyed?"

"Dumbfounded was more like it. You *did* just skip over the explanation and straight-up propose to me, after all."

"B-Because I figured you'd be able to fight again this way...!"

"Well, there's definitely not any other options..."

Although she'd seemingly brought it up out of nowhere, getting engaged to a member of House Caldwin was certainly the only way to change Raid's status quo. Since he couldn't use magic, he wasn't even allowed to take the entrance exam for any magic institute. His brother and sister had scored above standard on the Mana Aptitude Test and were currently studying at a magic institute, but that hardly warranted special treatment; in the grand scheme of things, they were still just some fairly talented bumpkins.

To top it all off, nonmagicians were prohibited from engaging in combat. As widespread as it was in present-day society, magic could still be a lethal weapon in the wrong hands. Thus, barring emergency situations and extenuating circumstances, anyone found to have engaged in combat without proper certification was to be severely punished.

There was always the option of throwing caution to the wind and just duking it out with one another, but it would be nigh impossible for the two of them to unleash their all without catching anyone's notice—and if someone with as much status as Eluria were to be punished, the very future of the nation may be shaken.

All in all, if Raid wanted to have a fair and square, no-holds-barred battle with Eluria to settle their rivalry once and for all, then it was best for him to become a magician himself. As someone who couldn't use magic, the status of "House Caldwin's fiancé" was just the kind of backing he needed.

However, Raid did have just one other reason for agreeing to this plan.

"In any case," he continued. "This is also pretty helpful for all the investigating we'll need to do."

"Investigating...?" Eluria parroted blankly.

"I'm talking about our circumstances—how we both reincarnated a thousand years into the future together. There's no way it's a coincidence, right?"

The Hero and the Sage had been reincarnated into the same era, both with their past memories intact. It was hard to see it all as just random chance. In which case, a *third party* had to have come into play.

"If someone had a hand in our reincarnation, then we'll need to find them and make 'em spill what exactly they're up to. Even if it does turn out to be a coincidence, there's still no harm in knowing. If I were to remain a member of the lower class, I'd have to leave all the digging to you, but that's frankly too much for just one person's plate."

If even Eluria didn't know yet, then the information they needed might be hidden not only from the general public but among magicians as well. Looking for that kind of information required proper status and position, so Raid had better secure those for himself. Taking all that into account, Eluria's proposed "engagement" was undoubtedly the best move they could make at present.

"But still, are you fine with this?"

There was a long silence before Eluria asked, "Me?"

"Getting engaged to me," he clarified. "It may have been in the past, but we were still enemies, weren't we? Don't you think I might just jump you out of nowhere and try to kill you?"

"Not at all."

"You have the survival instincts of a rock."

"But I know you wouldn't do such a thing." Eluria puffed her cheeks up, looking a little vexed. "If you were that kind of person, then you wouldn't have fought with me so earnestly for more than fifty years."

"Fair point," Raid relented. "I guess I trust you for that same reason."

She paused for a moment. "You trust me?"

"Of course. We wouldn't be talking now if I didn't."

His honest response left a small and beautiful smile blooming on Eluria's face, the kind she never would've worn on the battlefield. "Thank you for trusting me," she said, looking genuinely relieved.

Getting to see a new side of her had Raid smiling in return. "Sure thing. Thanks for trusting me too."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"And here comes another circle for us to go around in..."

"Th-Then let me ask you a few things now...!" Eluria nodded vigorously as if she'd been waiting for this chance all along. "Like what kind of things you like, or what you did outside the battlefield, or what you've been doing since you reincarnated..."

"Oh... Well, it'll definitely be weird if an engaged couple barely knows each other. You should tell me about yourself too, then."

"Mm... What do you want to know?"

"Maybe your hobbies, for starters?"

"Reading."

"Or something you like—"

"Warm milk tea."

"Um... And how do you usually spend your time?"

"Napping under the sun."

"Wow, that all sounds so oddly familiar..." All the information she'd provided to prove her identity came back around in the most unexpected way. Raid decided he needed to come up with some better questions.

"If you're done, then it's my turn now," said Eluria.

"Sure. Hit me with it."

"Okay... Then, your hobbies?"

"I practically lived on the battlefield back then, and I don't really have any now."

"Something you like?"

"Anything edible's good."

"How do you usually spend your time?"

"Depends on how I feel that day."

"I got a whole lot of nothing from all that..." The lack of any real information left Eluria's shoulders dropping in disappointment. However, she soon clenched her fists with a new wave of determination. "N-Next question! I have more!"

"Ask away. We've got plenty of time until we reach the capital."

Eluria racked her brain for her next question, and Raid waited patiently. With each question asked, they would learn just a bit more about each other than they did before. It would have been unthinkable in the past, but they were no longer enemies. They could take all the time in the world getting to know one another bit by bit.

Raid smiled, enjoying every moment of it, as he began to ponder what he should ask Eluria next.



Long ago, Vegalta was but a small nation within the vast continent. At most, it

was known for its unique art of magecraft, but even that saw little practical use due to all the catalysts, incantations, and preparations it required. Magecraft could hardly keep up with the ever-changing flow of war and essentially left their forces defenseless when fighting against enemy soldiers.

However, everything changed with the emergence of the Sage. Her mana circuits invention solved a large bulk of their problems by serving as a substitute for all the prerequisites of magecraft, giving their nation's forces the speed and adaptability they desperately needed in battle.

With that, Vegalta gained enough power to rival the much larger Altane and finally attained victory in the war that had stretched between them for over a hundred years. Thereafter, magical technology gave Vegalta's standard of living a significant boost over their neighbors. They made their soldiers specialists in magical combat and ruled over the entire continent with overwhelming strength.

That was how the Magic Kingdom of Vegalta came to be.

In all honesty, Vegalta's reign had come as quite the shock to Raid who'd only ever known of it as a small nation back in the day. "Wow. It's really changed a lot," he marveled as he gazed out the window of the magic automobile at the royal capital's scenery.

The capital of Vegalta looked far more developed than Altane had ever been. Its cityscape was thoroughly embedded with magical advancements. Lamps were powered by underground mana veins, drinking fountains functioned on mana produced by water currents, and even the pavement was maintained with curing magic. Just a cursory glance around was enough to catch sight of at least one form of magical technology.

"Last I was here, it wasn't all that different from Altane."

Eluria tilted her head. "You've been here before, Raid?"

He'd come to the royal capital of Vegalta only after he'd heard of the Sage's death, so it was a given that Eluria herself didn't know. "Well, it's an old story," he said, dismissing her question. "Speaking of stories, are there any left about me?"

"Mm... I guess there *is* one..." Eluria hung her head. "But a thousand years have passed, so it's a bit, um, embellished."

"Oh? How so?"

She vehemently shook her head. "I-I can't tell you...!"

From how she was acting, it didn't seem to be a very flattering story, but that, too, was only a given. After all, the history books were always written by the victors. As Vegalta's bitter enemy, Raid couldn't really argue, no matter how heinously they chose to depict him in their narrative. As it stood, even a nation as large as Altane had already been wiped off the face of history.

Eluria seemed to have read something in his expression, as she flailed her arms around in a panic. "I-It's not a bad story! It's just, I don't think it actually happened..."

Now that just made him even more curious. Unfortunately, their conversation was cut short by a soft knock from the partitioned driver's compartment.

"Oh," said Eluria. "We're at my house."

"Great. Now my stomach's starting to hurt." After all, Raid would soon be meeting his fiancée's parents. While he had managed to pass this trip off as "some business in the capital" to his own mother and the village chief, they were going to have to explain everything properly to Eluria's parents if they wanted to make use of House Caldwin's status.

Raid sighed. "I've never done this, even in my past life..."

There was a brief silence before Eluria quietly asked, "Really?"

"I spent my life on the battlefield, after all. Besides, I never knew when I was gonna drop dead, so I didn't want to start a family just to leave them behind. I just rejected any proposals of that sort..." He slumped sullenly.

For some reason, this seemed to have perked up Eluria quite a bit. "Hm... I see," she murmured, her fists clenching tightly as a small smile formed on her lips.

Suddenly, a thunderous voice shook the air.

"ELURIAAAAA!!!"

A large man came rushing out of the mansion with a terribly frazzled countenance. He appeared to be in his midthirties, but the wrinkles decorating his face showed that he was likely older than he looked.

Eluria hopped right out of the passenger's compartment. "Father, I'm home."

"Yes, welcome back! But no, that's not the point! I heard you traveled quite far again!!!"

"Yep, I did."

"Such an honest response! Good job!!!"

"I even left a note and told the servants this time."

"Taking care that we won't fret over you, I see! Splendidly done!!!"

"So I think you worry too much."

"Leave me be! Fathers worrying about their cute daughters is simply the way of the world—a law of nature, I say! That is why I think about nothing but you all day!!!" Eluria's father threw his head back and let out a hearty laugh.

Raid heard that Eluria's family held the most status in the kingdom after royalty, so he was expecting her father to be rather strict, but he instead turned out to be quite the lively and open-minded fellow. From what Raid could see, the man might just hear them out, especially if it was at the behest of his cute daughter. Things were looking up for him.

"Also, I want you to meet my fiancé."

"I see! Denied!!!"

Despite his hopes, Raid was cut down in a single decisive blow. It was so decisive, in fact, that it paired well with the refreshing smile that spread across her father's face.

"I, Galleon Caldwin, hereby declare that for so long as my pupils remain black, I have no intention whatsoever of allowing Eluria to have a husband!!!"

"But he's already here."

"He's already here!!!"

"Yep, in the automobile. His name is Raid."

He couldn't possibly stay inside now that she had so kindly pointed him out. Raid steeled his resolve and stepped down from the automobile. That moment, Eluria's father, Galleon, flashed him a wide and toothy grin.

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"You are Raid, I take it?!"

"Yes, I am certainly Raid..."

"I see! Now go home!!!"

"My apologies. I'm afraid I can't."

"Okay! Then come in!!!"

"Wow. You're very reasonable."
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"Personally speaking, I have no intention of handing my daughter over to a man who came from god-knows-where! However, I am not the head of House Caldwin, so I don't have the final say!!!"

"Not the head...?"

Sensing Raid's confusion, Eluria tugged on his sleeve with a hum. "House Caldwin is a matriarchal household," she explained.

The fact that the Sage was female had been widely known back in their era, so it made a lot of sense for the household that inherited her name to be led by a woman. This meant that the head of the house was actually—

"What is all this commotion?"

A lone woman stepped out of the house, her dignified voice carrying crisply through the air. Her silver locks were reminiscent of Eluria's, but the same could not be said for her piercing gaze and austere demeanor.

"Galleon, explain."

"Eluria has brought her fiancé home!!!"

"I see. Also, please step back; you're being quite loud." She coldly brushed her husband aside before shifting her gaze toward Raid. "I am Alicia Caldwin, the head of House Caldwin."

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance. My name is Raid Freeden." He got down on one knee and humbly lowered his head.

Alicia didn't even bat an eyelash. Her icy gaze trailed over his figure, studying him. "I have not heard that family name."

"I hail from a family of commoners, in a mountain village in the Aluryes district. As we have not received the honor of a title, it is but a matter of course that the head of House Caldwin would not know of me."

"But for a countryside commoner, your etiquette seems rather wellpracticed," she pointed out, her sharp gaze unwavering.

"As one who has come to offer my greetings, I have made the utmost effort to uphold proper decorum in your presence." For good measure, Raid made sure to bow his head as well.

He waited for Alicia's response, but all he heard next was a sigh. "Eluria."

"Yes, mother?"

"He's more put together than you, isn't he?"

"I know. Isn't he amazing?"

"Eluria, my statement was meant as a sarcastic comment toward you, as well as an expression of my concern for my daughter's future."

"Ohhh." The girl nodded a few times.

Seeing that, Alicia could only let out another, bigger sigh. "In any case," she continued. "You've chosen this young man as your fiancé, correct?"

"Yeah. I finally found him."

There was a long silence before Alicia hummed. "I see." Then, she offered her hand to Raid. "Please raise your head. You may also speak more freely with me."

"Oh... That would be great. I'm not very accustomed to this, you see."

"Quite. I could tell from your mannerisms. However, it was evident that you were being mindful of your words and conduct before me, and *that* is the essence of proper decorum," Alicia remarked with a quiet nod. "You paid House Caldwin your sincerest respects. Turning you away would be akin to dragging mud across our family name. You are welcome as our guest."

Looking just as dignified as she had when she first stepped out, Alicia turned on her heel and sauntered right back inside. This meant that she had, in the meantime, acknowledged Raid as a guest and should be willing to hear him out.

However, he could only lapse into a long and pained silence. "Eluria..."

"What is it, Raid?"

"I have to ask *that* woman to 'please accept my engagement with your daughter so I can use your family's status'?"

"There is such a thing as tact," offered Eluria.

"And that's also up to me, huh..."

"Do your best, Raid."

"You should also do your best..."

"Mhm. I'll also do my best." Eluria clenched her fists, showing a very commendable amount of determination. Unfortunately, he was pretty sure those efforts would bear no fruit.

With such sullen thoughts in mind, Raid stepped right into the looming mansion.



The servants guided him to an annex that was a short distance away from the main mansion. The annex's size and structure were by no means lacking even in comparison to the main building, indicating that it was very likely used to entertain fellow aristocrats and guests of higher status.

Once they reached the reception room, Alicia sent the servants away. "Now then, shall we begin?"

"Before that," Raid slowly said. "Are Eluria and Mr. Galleon not joining us?"

"Those two are unsuited for such conversations. My husband will only disrupt us with his boisterousness, while my daughter is inarticulate and cannot express herself well. I believe we will have a much more productive discussion between just the two of us." Alicia rained her harsh judgment down on the absent two while calmly tipping her teacup against her lips.

Still, the situation was plenty nerve-racking. Alicia was not only his fiancée's mother but also the head of the house that was second in status to only the royal family. Now, he had to ask her to permit his engagement to her daughter. He felt beyond awkward, to say the least.

Perhaps sensing his nerves, Alicia began speaking more casually. "No need to be on your toes. I really do only want to understand what's going on, and I'm asking this of you from a place of equal footing."

Raid took a brief pause to subtly cast his eyes down, feigning thought. Then, he let out a sigh and nodded. "I will take your word for it, then. I also came here to talk, and I'm not very good with such double entendre anyway."

Alicia furrowed her brows into a glare. "Despite that, you seem to know how to place the right pause before speaking," she noted.

In actuality, internally, he was practically an old man, so he wasn't necessarily unfamiliar with the implicit exchanges that were common in these kinds of conversations. She was quite the sharp lady to be able to glean that.

"The reason I seek this engagement is to use the Caldwin name and status."

Alicia paused only for a moment. "That was Eluria's idea, yes?"

"Correct. You can confirm it with her."

"No need. You are Raid, after all."

He arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

Alicia cast her eyes down. "When she was a small child, that girl told us that she wanted to look for a person named Raid Freeden."

"She's been searching for that long...?"

"Indeed she has. When asked why, she would only shake her head and insist that 'he *must* be out there.' We assumed it to be a child's fleeting fantasy and paid it little mind."

They probably never expected her to actually bring "Raid" home.

"Frankly speaking, that child has always been an odd one. Her magical talent was astonishing, yes, but even at a more fundamental level, she was simply

different from the rest. As a toddler, she never cried...and she even looked at me, her own mother, with great fear in her eyes."

Raid had been told something similar by his own mother, but Eluria seemed to be a more extreme case. The girl, who was already timid and awkward in her past life, had been thrown into the world a thousand years in the future with nary a familiar face in sight. She probably couldn't help but shy away despite knowing in her head that Alicia was her birth mother.

Living in such a strange and unfamiliar environment must have been a huge struggle for her, yet she still went looking for Raid. She had no leads, no proof, no way of knowing if he was actually out there somewhere, but she never gave up and kept searching for him regardless.

"I see," was all he could muster, a quiet and solemn whisper.

Alicia's expression softened at the sight. "I will tell you now that so long as you are Raid, I have no qualms about permitting the engagement."

"You would entrust your house to a man who came from god-knows-where just by Eluria's word?"

"I would. For that is the path she has chosen for herself." A small smile formed on Alicia's lips. "Strange or not, Eluria will always be my daughter. I would much rather she seek out her own form of happiness than to force her into an unwanted marriage for our house's posterity. Is that not what any parent would want for their child?"

In that moment, Alicia was speaking not as the head of House Caldwin but as Eluria Caldwin's mother. With such a prodigious yet peculiar child who looked upon her own mother in fear—just what did Alicia feel? What tumultuous thoughts did she struggle with, until she came to this decision as Eluria's mother? Raid couldn't even begin to imagine.

Not to mention that she was also the head of the house second only to royalty. Surely, the scrutiny from both inside and outside the family was nothing to scoff at. Even then, she chose to prioritize her daughter's happiness above all.

"And you?" Alicia looked Raid straight in the eye, testing him.

To enter House Caldwin meant to live alongside Eluria, all the way until death do they part. However, that was not a future he *needed*. If all he cared about was fulfilling their past promise and settling their rivalry, then he didn't even need to become a magician—they could simply fight without a care for the world. Even investigating their reincarnation would still be possible, albeit more time-consuming and with fewer means at their disposal. This engagement was useful to them, yes, but not *necessary*.

However, Raid felt his lips naturally tug into a smile. "She is my one and only equal in this world."

He thought back to all their time together on the battlefield. She'd come flying whenever she heard that he'd be there, concocted new spells just to fight him, and when those failed, she'd think of something else and come back with yet another strategy in hand. No normal person would ever come to like the person trying to kill them, but neither Raid nor Eluria could be considered normal anyway.

"Until now, we have always been apart," he quietly continued. "But just as Eluria has been looking for me all this time, I have also never forgotten about her."

Not once in his eighteen years after reincarnating had he ever forgotten about her. This world was chock-full of magical advancements and mundane peace, nothing at all like the past they'd fought and lived through, but Raid had still thought of her at the most trivial of times. What would she think of this world? How would she react to present-day magic? If she were alive now, would she be living peacefully just like him?

And if Eluria were here in this world too, then...

"I wish to stay by her side."



Seeing the tranquil smile on Raid's face, Alicia nodded in satisfaction. "Very well. That proposal of yours gets a passing grade from me."

"Such high standards," he remarked wryly.

"There is little words alone can prove. Actions and results speak loudest of all." Alicia raised her finger and continued, "I have three conditions for acknowledging your engagement to my daughter. First: you must take care of Eluria in many ways."

"I'm afraid that's a bit too vague for me to work with..."

"That's just how concerning that girl is..." Alicia replied, equally exasperated. "She will someday inherit the Caldwin name, yet she remains shy, inarticulate, and lacking in etiquette. Dare I say even those issues are merely the tip of the iceberg..."

In their past lives, Eluria had been free to act as she pleased because she was the Sage. However, now that she was a member of the venerable House Caldwin, she needed to carry herself with appropriate grace and tact outside.

"If you stay by her side, you should at least be able to assist her."

"I don't have much confidence myself," Raid admitted.

"Compared to Eluria, you're doing great."

"I see you have much faith in your daughter..."

"Well, I suppose your etiquette is rather antiquated, but that might actually leave a good impression on the types who take excessive pride in their family history, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"You're saying that as the head of one of the oldest families in the kingdom...?"

"Why not? We Caldwins uphold our duty and pride as the house that inherited the Sage's name, while other families simply prattle on about their pointlessly long existence." Alicia propped her elbow on the table and sighed in exasperation.

She'd initially come across as quite the austere woman, but her true

personality was starting to seep through.

"Second," she continued. "You must enroll in the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic and become a magician."

"Rest assured, we had that planned from the start."

"It's easier said than done," she warned. "Renowned talents from all across the continent gather in the magic institute here in the capital. Mere talent will lead you nowhere, and only those who can graduate in the shortest time are considered true geniuses."

Alicia's expression turned cold once more as she raised her third finger.

"Third, you must prove yourself during your stay at the Institute. There are many who wish to form connections with the Caldwin name, and even more who will reproach you for your pedigree. You must display enough power to silence them all."

"And...how should I do that, exactly?"

"Obviously, just show them who's boss," Alicia said as she rolled her sleeve up and raised her fist. How absolutely dashing. "The Institute does not test only magical theory; their criteria also includes magical combat, on-field adaptability, and so on. My daughter may not look it, but she gives even me and Galleon a hard time when we spar."

"Ah... Well, we certainly can't judge a book by its cover..." Raid absently replied as he averted his gaze.

He'd already fought against Eluria for more than fifty years in their past life. He remembered struggling quite a bit since she was not only strong in actual combat but also clever when it came to military tactics when they involved magic. For her, a spar against her parents was probably no more than child's play.

"In any case," he continued. "I believe you have no cause for concern in that regard."

"I'm certainly looking forward to seeing how strong you are, especially since Eluria acknowledged you herself."

"Of course. I'm quite well-versed in magical combat."

"How reassuring. So, what kind of magic do you use?"

"Oh, I don't use magic."

That moment, Alicia's face froze over like the biting winter. "Would you care to repeat that?"

"My apologies. It would be more accurate to say I can't use magic."

"I wasn't asking for a correction." Her expression grew colder by the second. Finally, she let out a heavy sigh and turned toward the door. "Galleon, come in."

Her husband came barging in with an invigorating roar. "Ohhh!!! Did you call for me, Alicia?!"

"You're too loud. Come in *quietly*," she hissed, and the large man shuffled in, meek as a mouse. "I want you to assess his strength."

Raid reluctantly asked, "Am I not prohibited from combat as a nonmagician?"

"This guest annex also happens to be a royally certified magic training facility. Because the interior is endowed with mana output restrictions, even nonmagicians are permitted to perform combat within the premises. This is where we usually spar with Eluria."

In other words, she brought him here with the intent to test his strength.

Alicia stood from her seat. "I will go and have a talk with Eluria. You can release him once you deem he is strong enough to enroll into the Institute."

"Understood! Come now, Raid! Let's have a fun little spar, shall we?!" The large man moved his body around, his bones audibly cracking here and there. "The general perception is that magicians fight from mid-to-long-range! However, when fighting one-on-one against human opponents, the true essence of battle lies in close-quarter combat using physical enhancement and magic gear!!!"

Magic gear referred to equipment that was optimized for use by magicians—for example, the bracers that Galleon was currently wearing on his arms.

"I shall lend you some of my gear! Do you have any preferences?!"

"Unfortunately, any magic gear I use will break down, so I will have to decline."

"Okay! No gear for you, then!!!"

"I was actually hoping you'd call it off in consideration of my safety." Contrary to his statement, Raid began stretching his body and warming up. It had been eighteen years since he had last had a proper battle. That said, he always made sure to keep himself in tip-top shape, so he expected no issues this time around.

"By the way, how do I pass this test?"

"Hm! No matter how well-versed you are in magical combat, I think you'll find landing a hit on me will still prove difficult! Thus, I will declare the match your victory should you succeed in evading all my blows for one hour!!!" With that, Galleon knocked his bracers together with a confident grin on his face. As someone who married into House Caldwin, he was undoubtedly stronger than most. In other words, he would serve nicely as a good reference for measuring the ability of present-day magicians.

"In that case, I suppose I'll dodge all your attacks and get one hit in too."

"Oho?! If you can do that, then I will grant you the right to call me papa!!!"

"Please just let me call you 'dad' like a normal son-in-law," Raid deadpanned. "Oh, right. One more thing." He looked Galleon in the eye as the corner of his lips curled up. "I hope you won't have any problem with me blowing this entire annex away too."

It was the very same smile he'd worn back when he was still called the Hero.



Inside her room in the main building, Eluria passed the time while seated in her chair, until the sound of a light knock on her door had her whipping her head around.

"Raid...?"

However, her visitor was not who she'd been hoping for. "It's me. I'd like to

talk with you. May I come in?"

Eluria lowered her head and murmured, "Okay." She watched as Alicia quietly opened the door and entered her room. "How's Raid?"

"Galleon is with him now. I wanted to get your side of the story as well." Her mother softly smiled as she took a seat on the couch. Eluria followed suit and took the seat in front of her. "Firstly," she began. "He is undoubtedly the same Raid you have been looking for, yes?"

"Yeah. There's no mistaking it. He's definitely the Raid I know."

She had never forgotten about him, not even once. Even after reincarnating a thousand years into the future, she would think about him nearly every single day. Now, she'd finally found the man himself.

"I never thought you would actually find him," Alicia admitted.

"Mhm... I was getting a little worried too."

Eluria hadn't had any basis to believe that Raid had reincarnated as well. All she had was a single, desperate plea. She was like a child throwing a tantrum, demanding that after reincarnating a thousand years into the future and ending up all alone, she should at least be able to have this.

"But...he really is here." She found a smile naturally tugging on her lips as she recalled their reunion. The way his eyes grew wide in shock—it was just like that time they had first met, back when they were neither the Hero nor the Sage just yet.

A wry smile formed on Alicia's face as she watched her daughter's shifting expression. "You really do like him," she mused.

When she heard that, Eluria quietly nodded.

"That's right... I like Raid." She bravely voiced her feelings loud and clear...and then slowly turned red in the face, hanging her head lower and lower like a turtle retreating into its shell. "P-Probably... I think...?"

"Why are you sounding less confident by the second?" Alicia replied flatly.

"Because I never thought about it that way before...!" Eluria began to pat her own face as if to will the redness away.

In their past life, they'd always been enemies facing off from opposing sides. To her, Raid was that odd human who'd always fought her head-on with that confident grin on his face. She had only realized that she liked him when she had been on the verge of death.

In her efforts to promulgate magic across the nation, she had worked herself to the bone. Her consciousness grew muddled, and by the time she came to her senses, she was already a thousand years in the future. Back then, the first thing that came to her mind was the Hero, that man who struggled against even his own aging body just to settle his rivalry with her.

She had realized it then—that she wanted to see him again.

She wanted to see his smile again.

She wanted to have fun with him again.

And if she could ever see him again, then...

"This time, I want to tell him how I feel."

That was her one regret from her past life, the wish that had been obstructed by the differences in their races and positions. It was to finally fulfill that wish that Eluria went looking for Raid while clinging onto the thinnest strand of hope that he had reincarnated as well.

As she listened to her daughter, Alicia curiously tilted her head. "You two are rather similar."

"We are...?"

"Like how you speak," she elaborated. "You always sound as if you're talking about the distant past or act as if you're looking very far back..."

"I-I'm just not good with words...!" Eluria frantically waved her hands around.

"Oh, is that so?" Alicia narrowed her eyes. "Well, so be it. You don't need to tell me if you don't want to."

Eluria hadn't told her parents about her reincarnation. She did consider it, especially since they were the descendants of someone she had known. However, she felt as if sharing that secret would diminish her one connection with Raid, so she just couldn't bring herself to.

"It's our secret," she murmured.

"Yes, yes. I won't ask anymore." Alicia patted her daughter on her head.

Eluria nodded meekly. "Thank you," she said, her lips softly tugging upward.

"So, you were able to tell him, right?"

Her smile froze. "Huh?"

"You decided your engagement with him, so you must have told him that you like him, right?"

Eluria fell silent, desperately thinking back on everything she'd said until then—but no, she hadn't told him yet. She thought back again to what happened from the moment they met up until this point—no, she *really* hadn't told him.

Alicia watched as her daughter began trembling like a cornered deer and sighed in exasperation. "I knew you were a shy and inarticulate child, but to think you didn't even tell him..."

"Th-That's not... I had all these thoughts running through my mind, and then the topic of marriage just popped out of my mouth...!"

She wasn't lying; reuniting with Raid had her brain working at full capacity. It was probably the fastest her mind had ever run in her life, so much so that she had found the perfect solution of lending Raid the Caldwin name and status in but a flash of inspiration. As a result, however, her feelings had been unable to keep up with her thought process, ultimately and tragically leaving the "I like you" bit in the dust.

"And... I wanted Raid to smile..."

The smile he always wore whenever he fought was nowhere to be seen when she met him again. Now, all she could glean from his smile was some distant sense of resignation. Because of that, Eluria had gotten ahead of herself, brought up the engagement as a solution, and lit a fire under him with their past promise—all because she wanted to see him smile like he did before.

"To think he was able to say what he did under such circumstances... What a man..."

Eluria curiously tilted her head. "Did Raid say something?"

Alicia just smiled brightly in response. "I can't say. You must ask him yourself after you tell him how you feel."

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"Uh... Huh?"
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Alicia giggled at her daughter's flustered reaction. "This is turning out to be rather amusing. I was considering rejecting the engagement if he had proved himself unworthy, but I'm now of the mind to have Galleon train him instead."

Eluria paused. "Are father and Raid doing something together?"

"Indeed. I presented him with a few conditions if he wanted me to approve of your engagement. However, he claimed he couldn't use magic, so Galleon is presently testing his strength."

Silence.

"Mother," said Eluria.

"If you're going to ask for Galleon to hold back, then it's a no, Eluria. Not being able to use magic on top of having a lower-class pedigree will draw far too much criticism onto him. We need him to have an acceptable level of strength if he is to—"

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Then speak frankly."

"Yeah. Frankly speaking—"

Eluria was interrupted by an explosion coming from the annex. Just a moment later, they could hear the sound of the building collapsing into rubble.

"Father is in danger," she finished.

Alicia was agape. "Huh?"

"I forgot to tell you, mother. Raid is really strong."

"Wait... But he can't use magic, right?"

"No, he can't. But he doesn't need to."

Due to the nature of his mana, Raid couldn't use the magic system that Eluria had invented, so "he can't use magic" was by no means a false statement.

However, Raid had constantly fought on equal footing with her a thousand years ago. It took far more than just some ordinary magic-less human to achieve such a feat. As for his strength, even Eluria had no other way of putting it.

"Raid is simply and purely a strong human."

The very next moment, they heard another thunderous sound nearby. When Eluria approached the window, she could see a cloud of dust dancing about in the air and heard Raid yelling from within.

"Heeey! Anybody there?!" he called.

"What's wrong, Raid?"

"Oh, Eluria! Did you see Mr. Galleon fly this way?!"

"Nope."

"Seriously?! Damn it! I made sure to hold back too!"

"What did you do?"

"Hah?! Well, I asked him if he didn't mind me destroying the annex, and he said I should give it my best shot, so I did!"

Alicia's jaw dropped even further as she listened to Raid's frazzled recollection.

Indeed, just as he said, Raid had simply punched Galleon. That was all he ever did, be it now or back in the past when he ran across the war-torn battlefield. There were no cheap tricks or clever strategies at play—just a single human with physical strength that far surpassed any common sense. It was so simple, so powerful, and so frighteningly absurd, but there was truly no other way to describe it.

A single swing of his fist was all it took to knock anything down, magical or not. It was with this pure and monstrous strength that Raid had crushed everything that stood before him—and also how he had come to be known as the peerless Hero.

"Isn't he strong, mother?"

Eluria smiled as she watched her mother standing stock-still, staring at the one and only Hero who was able to rival the Sage.

With immense pride and fond giddiness swelling in her chest, Eluria wore a blooming smile on her face as she showed off the Hero she had fallen in love with. "The person I like is the strongest in the world."

Chapter Two

Many things happened in the month after the Caldwin estate's annex was reduced to a sad pile of rubble.

First, Raid informed his mother and the village chief back in his hometown that he was officially engaged to the daughter of House Caldwin and would not be returning home for a while. His mother's reaction was as follows: "Wow, what a creative prank! You won't be pulling the rug from under me, but I do want to see how your dad will react when he gets back, so I'll zip my mouth just for you!" On the other hand, all the chief said was, "If you're staying in the capital, then send us some souvenirs, will you?" Raid decided he'd just ignore them both for now. They probably wouldn't mind.

Then, Alicia officially approved their engagement as the family head. In addition to the first three conditions, she also threw in a very encouraging yet oddly spiteful, "Blow them all away as thoroughly as you did our annex."

As for Galleon, who had gone flying from the shock wave of Raid's punch...he was safely found, treated with healing magic, and was now back on his feet and had even returned to work. "It seems your father-in-law was barely an obstacle for you!!!" he'd bellowed with a hearty laugh, so Raid assumed that he'd gotten approval from that side too.

All that, along with a few other preparations, kept him busy for a whole month.

"Ohhh. What a huge crowd."

Today, Raid arrived at the exam grounds in front of the Institute and looked around in wonder.

The Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic was the oldest and biggest magic educational institution on the continent. There were many other magic institutes scattered across the land, but the one here in Vegalta, the birthplace of magic, was known as the most prestigious of all. The latest and most cutting-

edge magical technology could be spotted all around the campus, and their library was a treasure trove of knowledge across all magical fields of study. The instructors were even illustrious magicians who were still active in their fields. Getting accepted into such a prestigious institute was a splendid splash of gold onto one's personal record, and simply being accepted as an entrance examinee served as proof of excellent mana capacity in some places.

Examinees of varying ages and appearances were gathered on the grounds. Some were clearly in their thirties, while others seemed to be the minimum age limit of twelve. The older examinees had likely already studied at another magic institute before knocking upon the gates of this royal institute. Their outfits only added to their diversity, from those who wore unfamiliar ornaments to those clad in what seemed to be the traditional clothing of foreign nations. Even in this world of magic elitism, the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic proved to be a special and sought out place.

"Now that I think about it... You're sixteen, aren't you?"

"Yep," answered Eluria. "I'll be turning sixteen this year."

"Why didn't you enroll here when you were twelve?"

"Because I was looking for you."

"Well, sorry 'bout that..."

"Also," she added, "my enrollment was delayed because of my house's circumstances."

Raid raised a brow. "Circumstances?"

"The princess was also going to enroll at the time, but if we'd come in together, I'd have ended up placing first in everything. So, for the royal family to save face, the king personally asked me to postpone my enrollment."

"The king asked you himself, huh... Now that's something."

"Yeah. The sweets he gave me back then were also something," Eluria mused, bobbing her head as she reminisced.

Although the Caldwins held the most status after the royal family, they couldn't simply disregard the wishes of their monarch. Alicia had settled the

matter and postponed Eluria's enrollment.

However, that wasn't the only reason she'd agreed.

"By the way, Eluria..."

"Mhm. What is it?"

"How long do you plan on staying glued to me like that?"

The girl had latched onto Raid's back the moment they stepped onto the exam grounds and meekly pinched onto the hem of his shirt all the way.

"But...everyone keeps looking..." she murmured, shrinking even further behind him.

In the past month, Raid had come to understand just how shy Eluria truly was. As the child who displayed magical talent befitting the house that inherited the Sage's name, people had started to refer to her as the Sage's Reincarnation. They didn't really know how on point they were with that moniker, although she *was* closer to being the Sage herself than just her reincarnation. Regardless, anyone who dabbled in the art of magic would naturally find themselves drawn to the person who had earned such a title.

Her looks weren't helping much either—icy silver hair that shone softly beneath the sunlight, deep blue eyes that sparkled like gems housing the vast ocean within, and delicate features that could take the breath of any, regardless of age or gender. Not to mention her figure (slender enough to earn the envy of any other female) only seemed to accentuate her modest bust.

Anybody would find their eyes drawn to such a beauty. However, for the timid girl, such gazes were nothing more than sources of discomfort. As a result, she had remained at his back all this while.

"I'll just stay here behind you..."

"But it's really hard to walk."

Eluria tightened her grip on his clothes. "Would it help if I got on your back...?"

"It won't help *your* problem, that's for sure." Raid let out a sigh and scratched his head. "I'm sure they don't mean anything weird by it. They're all just staring

'cause you're cute."

Eluria flinched and, for the first time, lifted her face. "'Cute'...?"

"I'm sure in the past you being an elf had also been part of why people stared, but they're still doing it now, even though you're just a human. So what else could it be?"

The girl behind him quietly asked, "Do you think so too, Raid?"

"Hm? My opinion doesn't really—"

"It matters a lot, so tell me." She pressed her lips into a thin line as her grip on his shirt grew even firmer.

Fearing for his shirt's well-being, Raid decided to give her an honest answer. "Well, of course I do... I'd want to show you off to everyone, even."

Eluria's lips slowly loosened into a small smile as she finally let go of his hem. "Thanks," she whispered, shuffling over to walk by his side. "I'll make sure you can show me off all you want, then."

Raid gazed at that girl who was now holding her head up high. "In that case," he said, "how 'bout you let go of my sleeve too?"

"Th-There are still too many people... It's my lifeline...!"

"Are you gonna die if I toss you into the crowd?"

While Eluria did walk with a much more confident gait than before, she was unfortunately still clinging onto Raid's sleeve for dear life. She certainly wasn't impressing anyone with that look, but baby steps were progress all the same.

"We will soon begin the practical exam!" announced a male staff member, raising his voice for all to hear. "Examinees with letters of introduction, please approach one of the staff members in the vicinity. As for examinees in general admission, please gather toward the flag!"

Soon, most of the examinees all around began flocking toward the flag. Raid and Eluria, on the other hand, approached a female staff member who was standing nearby.

"Excuse us," called Raid. "We have letters of introduction from House

Caldwin."

"May I verify them?" She took the two letters that Alicia had prepared and quietly nodded. "Lady Eluria Caldwin and Lord Raid Freeden. I have verified your letters of introduction. Please allow me to escort you to the exam grounds." She wore a friendly smile as she led them through the halls.

"I never thought I would have the honor of escorting members of House Caldwin. We have heard much about you even within the Institute, Lady Eluria."

"Mm. Thank you...very much." Eluria bowed stiffly, looking far too much like a cornered little animal.

Then, the staff member shifted her gaze toward Raid. "As for Lord Raid..." she began reluctantly. "My apologies. I am not very learned and have yet to hear of your name or household. Could you be an associate of House Caldwin?"

"Raid is my fiancé," answered Eluria.

"Ah, I see. Your fiancé..." she parroted absently, then whipped her head around. "You have a fiancé, Lady Eluria?!"

"Yep. We got engaged a month ago."

"Oh... Congratulations?"

"Mhm. Thanks." This time, Eluria thanked her with a firm and satisfied nod.

"Lord Raid, do you hail from a distinguished household...?"

"No, I'm kind of just tagging along. Please don't mind me."

"I-I'm afraid that's a rather difficult request! Anyone in Vegalta would be curious about the fiancé of the Sage's Reincarnation!" The staff member drew closer to Raid, looking enthusiastic.

"Ahhh..." He winced and held his hands up in front of himself. "Well, I figured that would be the case..."

Whether he liked it or not, there'd be a lot of attention on him as Eluria's fiancé. That was precisely why he needed to prove himself worthy—which entailed not only passing the entrance exam, but passing with flying and leaping colors.

Raid sighed. "Talk about nerve-racking."

"You'll be fine. You're Raid," said Eluria, clenching her fists in encouragement.

"Thanks for the unfounded reassurance," he replied, placing a hand on her head.

Soon, they emerged into a vast space that had been temporarily arranged outside the Institute grounds. Something that looked like an apparatus was in the distance, set up in a way that would have your back to the Institute should you face it.

"These are the exam grounds for our VIPs," said the staff member.

Raid hummed. "How do I say this...? It's rather modest for a VIP space, isn't it?"

"I am afraid so..." she agreed with a wry smile and an apologetic bow.

"Examinees with letters of introduction tend to wield powerful and dangerous magic, so this must be done to avoid any damages to the premises." Examinees were expected to give their all for the assessment, so this was a very understandable arrangement by the Institute to avoid any damages to their apparatus and property.

"Whoopie! Look out below, 'cause here comes a big one!"

Among those currently taking the test was a red-haired girl who cheered from far overhead. She sat astride a humongous black dragon that had Raid and Eluria craning their necks just to see.

Over the past millennia, magic had developed in many ways. While magicians still created fire or ice from thin air and shot them as projectiles like they did in the past, now they could also freely form those elements into weapons of their choice, enhance their own physical capabilities and senses, or even raise their natural recovery speed to revive lost tissues with healing magic, among many other fascinating techniques.

The summoning magic the dragon rider used was one such example. It was generally perceived as the kind of magic that could subordinate the dangerous creatures known as manabeasts and freely bring them forth to do battle for their summoner. Subordinating a manabeast, however, required the summoner

to not only provide their own mana but also to be deemed worthy by the creature itself, making this magic rather tricky to handle.

Despite that level of difficulty, the black dragon showed absolutely no hostility toward the girl and was obeying her every command.

"Ah..." Sensing their curiosity, the staff member explained, "That is Lady Lufus Lailas from the Celios Federation."

"Celios Federation..." Raid mumbled. "That's the nation across the strait that coexists with manabeasts, isn't it?"

"Indeed. The Federation is made up of seven chiefdoms and specializes in summoning magic. They are a meritocratic society, specifically in the sense that one's subordinated manabeasts determine one's value and status."

"Why would someone from there come all the way to Vegalta's magic institute...?"

"Well, although the nations stopped going to war with each other a long time ago," the staff member began, "countries still seek to produce their own skilled magicians. Furthermore, if those magicians can produce outstanding results in the magic institute located in the birthplace of magic itself, then their home countries can gain the upper hand in diplomatic matters."

"Basically, they're now warring by proxy. Is that it?"

"Precisely. Because it also spurs on the development of magic, the king of Vegalta endorses this interstate magic race and has even publicly promised various benefits for the top graduate's home country. Thus, we select renowned cream-of-the-crop talents from other countries, receive applications from foreign royals with astounding mana capacities, and so on."

Vegalta wasn't the only nation that placed importance on magic. With the benefits promised by the king of Vegalta himself and the advantages to be gained in the diplomatic scene, foreign nations desperately sought to produce great magicians from their own soil.

"As a matter of fact, Lady Lufus is a blood relative of one of the Celios Federation's chiefs," she continued. "She has subordinated all four Guardian Dragons, the symbols of their nation, and is thus known across the land as the Dragon Princess."

"Ohhh. That's pretty impressive," he marveled, gazing at the jet-black dragon in the distance.

Then, Eluria suddenly began tugging on his sleeve. For some reason, her brows were knit together in apparent displeasure.

"What's up?" he asked.

The girl mumbled, "I can use summoning magic too."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'd expect no less from you."

"And practically every other kind of magic there is."

"Uh-huh. Show me something flashy next time."

"Yeah. I'll knock your socks off for sure." Eluria's eyes were filled with an unusual fighting spirit, looking as if a fire had been lit under her. Did all this remind her of their war-torn past?

As they finished talking, the staff member led them to their designated spot. "Well then, please attack that with your magic." She pointed to the apparatus in the distance. "It is endowed with several layers of magical defenses. Your results will be determined by how many of those barriers you can destroy within the time limit."

"Will any method do?" Raid asked.

"Certainly. The most common method our examinees use is breaking through with brute force, but some even deconstruct and disassemble the magic itself. The latter, however, requires deep and overarching magical knowledge, and is thus a very rare strategy."

Long story short, they just had to hit it as hard as they could.

"I will be in charge of your assessment," said the staff member. "Which of you would like to go first?"

"Mm. I guess I'll go." Eluria took a step forward and took up the baton that hung by her waist. Then, she quietly uttered, "Deploy."

In response, the baton morphed into a staff that matched her height. Affixed

onto its tip was a deep ocean-blue gem shining with a faint glow, encased in two ring structures. Brandishing her personalized magic gear, Eluria set her sights on the apparatus in the distance.

"I want to show off for Raid," she whispered, "so I'll take it up a tiny notch."



Her hushed voice was swallowed up by a gigantic, roaring pillar of flame that rose toward the heavens. All the surrounding air was drawn in, rumbling with the bizarre sound of burning and crackling oxygen. The crimson column painted the bright blue skies with its own flaming red hue.

Soon, not even a single trace remained of what was once at the very epicenter of that explosion. The surroundings had been reduced to scorched earth, littered still by smoldering embers.

Everyone who witnessed the spell fell utterly speechless. In the face of such overwhelming strength, they all came to understand what it truly meant to stand at the peak of all magic—to be granted the title of Sage.

However, the Sage herself looked as impassive as ever as she spun around. "How was that, Raid?"

"That was even flashier than before."

"You did say you wanted to see a flashy one," she said smugly. "But I also made sure to disable the defenses and barriers right before my attack landed so the impact wouldn't weaken. I can be pretty nifty too."

"Oh, wow. It's like a full course meal of destruction."

"Yeah. I put my back into it a bit," Eluria preened, her cheeks flushing. She looked like she was itching for more compliments, so he obliged by giving her a pat on the head.

Meanwhile, the stupefied staff member finally regained her voice and turned to Raid. "Y-You don't seem very shocked by that display..."

"Well, I'm already used to it, so..."

"But that attack could very well be classified as tenth-stratum magic, the strongest kind there is! I've never seen anyone aside from special-class magicians achieve such a feat!" she gushed in a jumbled mix of excitement and awe.

Still, Raid had certainly seen similar sights many times already. In their past lives, Eluria hadn't simply relied on ostentatious magic like the one she'd just cast; she'd had all sorts of powerful yet precise techniques that were

specialized for battle, among which were large-scale attacks that could even be used on entire armies outside of her one-on-one clashes with Raid. Compared to those, this little stunt was definitely on the tamer side.

"More importantly, Eluria," said Raid. "What are you gonna do about that?" "That?"

"You know, that hellscape you kinda left behind." He pointed at the scorched ground. Although the flame pillar she made with magic was gone, the fire it left behind was still devouring the earth even as they spoke.

Eluria stared at the scene and blinked. "It's...pretty, I think?"

"I wasn't asking for a review..."

"Then I'll extinguish it with another spell."

Raid shook his head. "I feel like you'll just end up flooding the Institute, so I might as well take it from here." Raid stepped forward as if taking Eluria's place. "Excuse me, miss. How would you assess me if I were to blow all that away?"

"Huh? Oh, um... Those flames were created with magic, so you would need magic of the same stratum to offset it," answered the staff member. "In which case, you would receive the same grade as Lady Eluria."

"Oh. That's perfect, then."

Raid swept his gaze over the sea of flames spreading out before him and slowly pulled his fist back. An electrifying surge welled up within him, almost as if his body itself were shifting gears. With a small and sharp exhale, he swung his fist—

"Hup!"

The shock wave that burst from his fist blew the encroaching blaze away in an instant. An unsettling *boom* shook both the earth and air, while the force of the blow had gouged out the ground along its path. With that, all the flames surrounding them had disappeared, leaving nothing but a vast wasteland filled with splotches of black and brown.

"Phew. Been a while since I blew your magic away."

"Your punches are still as refreshing to watch as ever."

"That was definitely a bit tricky, though... I guess I did have weapons and armor back then."

"That was plenty. You really are strong, Raid." Eluria stood on her toes and placed her hand on his head. She seemed to be struggling quite a bit, so Raid made a mental note that he should bend down for her next time.

"Ummm... Excuse me, you two...?" The trembling staff member looked a *moment* away from bursting into tears as she held out a magic device used for communication. "The headmaster told me...to bring her the idiots who are causing a ruckus outside."



After being escorted by the frightened staff member, Raid and Eluria found themselves in the headmaster's office.

"You two are definitely gonna have to hold back on campus," she said in lieu of a greeting, not even standing from her lavish seat. "First, Eluria Caldwin."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've heard from the king that you're an outstanding talent when it comes to anything magic, and I've certainly seen it for myself from this very office."

"Thank you very much."

"But at this rate, someone might actually end up dead, so could you tone it down to the fifth stratum at most within the premises? Otherwise, I'll have to expel you."

Eluria visibly drooped at her words of rebuke. "Okay..."

The headmaster shifted her gaze to Raid. "Next, Raid Freeden."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What the heck are you supposed to be? I don't get it."

"Headmaster, your question is too ambiguous. I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Well, that makes two of us," she snapped back. Her face was scrunched up in frustration as she let out a heavy sigh. "I may not look it, but I've been the

headmaster of the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic for nearly a hundred years now, and I've *never* seen anyone like you." Headmaster Elise Lammel let out yet another hefty sigh, her distinctive pointed ears drooping a bit. "I figured Eluria might pull something, but I never expected the other one to be beyond our comprehension too..."

"Ha ha, my bad."

"Ha ha, my bad, my ass!!!" Elise's ears began twitching angrily, her finger pointed right at Raid. Unfortunately, her outburst was quite lacking in impact, for the unaging elf looked no more than a petite twelve-year-old girl. It felt more apt to say she was being swallowed up by, rather than sitting on, her chair.

Raid furtively leaned over and whispered to the girl beside him. "Eluria."

"Hm? What is it?"

"I knew elves were unaging...but doesn't the headmaster look even younger than you did?"

"Elves typically stop physically aging between fifteen to twenty years old, so their appearances tend to vary quite a bit. It's not strange for one to be even tinier than I was."

"So, you mean...she stopped growing even earlier...?"

"Such is the sad, sad fate of the elven race." Eluria sighed.

"Hey! Did you just call me tiny?!" Elise's pointy ears seemed to have picked up on that one particular word. She began slamming her hands on her desk, her golden pigtails bouncing furiously behind her. Sadly, all Raid could see was a child throwing a temper tantrum.

Satisfied after a few more desk slams, Elise finally sank back into her chair with a sigh. "Anyway, Raid," she continued. "That thing you used wasn't magic, right?"

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"Not at all. I can't use magic."
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"A punch."

[&]quot;Then what was it?"

"I still don't get it...!" Elise held her head in dismay. Such a young girl, yet she already had so many burdens on her shoulders. "But, uh...can you control your strength?"

"Yes, I can."

"Then could you hold back on school grounds?"

"I'd rather not."

"Well, I'd rather you not destroy the Institute!!!" she wailed.

"As someone who can't use magic, I've been tasked by House Caldwin to achieve outstanding results," Raid explained. "I can certainly limit my strength, but I also need to avoid having my engagement to Eluria ended." Among the conditions that Alicia had given him was to "show everyone who's boss." He didn't want to lose his chance because he was pulling his punches.

Elise winced. "I've heard about all that from Alicia too," she admitted. "Despite being informed beforehand, I still underestimated your strength. That is unmistakably my fault." The headmaster nodded. "In that case, Raid, what if I allowed you to lift your restraints only for exams?"

"In other words, I'll be allowed to use my true strength whenever it affects my grades?"

"Exactly. It's fine on a regular basis too, as long as it doesn't match up to whatever insanity you pulled today. If this historical magic institute were to be damaged," she said grimly, "then I'll be in for a real bad scolding."

"That's quite the personal reason..."

"Getting scolded at a hundred-plus-years-old is very emotionally damaging..." Elise gazed into the distance as she laid her heart bare. Such a young girl, yet already so much pain in her eyes. "In any case..." she continued, changing the subject. "I never thought I'd hear the names Eluria and Raid together like this."

Raid arched his brow. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I suppose you two wouldn't know," she mused, smiling. "This is a story that was passed down only among us elves. I myself have only heard just a bit of it from my grandpa."

Eluria suddenly raised her hand in a flurry. "H-Headmaster!"

"Hm? What is it, Eluria?"

"N-Nice...weather today...?"

"Hm... Well, the sky was flaming red earlier, but I guess so?"

Alas, the Sage's abysmal communication skills rendered her utterly powerless.

Ignoring the girl who was clearly panicking, Raid asked the headmaster once more, "Why is my name passed down among the elves?"

"Strictly speaking, it's the name of someone who lived a thousand years ago and was known as the Hero. The story is about what he did when the Sage died."

Eluria had mentioned something similar—that a story about the Hero had been passed down, but because a millennia had gone by, it had been pretty thoroughly embellished.

"What kind of story is it?" he asked, his face stoic.

"Wh-Why so serious? It's not that grand a tale, you know?" Elise replied, leaning away a bit.

"Ah, I'm just curious since it's about someone with the same name as me." No matter how badly it painted him, this story was still the one meager bit of information about him that had remained after his death. It wouldn't hurt to know.

"Hmmm... It's not exactly the kind of story boys are into though?"

"Even so, I'd like to hear it."

"Well, if you insist..." Elise sighed, looking like she couldn't be bothered. "It's about how the Hero was in love with the Sage."

Raid felt his mind blank out for a moment. "In love...?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who?"

"The human known as the Hero was in love with the elf known as the Sage,"

Elise very kindly reiterated. "You know, my grandpa told me about this back when I was a kid, and it's just the type of story any girl would love!"

Actually getting started on the storytelling seemed to have flipped a switch in Elise, as she now looked increasingly enthusiastic.

"The Hero was the Sage's enemy, see? But they both wished for peace and always made sure that neither of their armies would sustain extensive damages —for more than *fifty years*!"

"Oh... Really..."

"But then, in the middle of the war, the Sage suddenly fell ill and passed away. When the Hero heard of her death, he charged right into Vegalta's capital by himself!"

"Ha ha ha. What a guy," Raid chuckled awkwardly.

"He suffered many fatal wounds along the way, but he was unstoppable! Why, you ask? Because he needed to say his goodbyes to the Sage! Gosh, isn't he just the coolest ever?!"

Elise narrated the story with great passion, her eyes sparkling like a maiden preaching of love. Meanwhile, Raid couldn't help but cast a glance at Eluria. She had turned her face away, but he could see that her ears were bright red.

"Back then, elves always distanced themselves from humans, but the Sage being an elf never mattered to the Hero! Thanks to him, we're able to live alongside humans today!"

"Wow... That's great."

"As a fellow elf, I just can't help but feel jealous of the Sage, you know? Her enemy turned out to have such strong feelings for her! She never got to learn about them, of course, but I'm sure she would've been happy!"

Raid cast another glance at the Sage, who was listening to this story. She was trembling all over, her head hung down in a desperate attempt to hide her flushed face. He feared she might be a few seconds away from exploding in embarrassment.

"We actually have many works that were based on this tale and—"

"Headmaster, thank you very much for sharing this story with me. However, Eluria doesn't seem to be feeling very well, so I'm afraid we will have to excuse ourselves."

"Hm? You're right. Her face is all red... Is she okay?"

"She just flushes easily, so she's fine."

"Okay. Well, that was all from me anyway," said Elise. "You two should go ask a staff member where to meet up with the rest of those who passed the exam. And don't forget what we agreed on, all right?"

"Understood. Please excuse us now."

They bowed their heads to Elise before hurrying out of her office. The moment Raid shut the door behind him, a heavy sigh fell from his lips.

"I see now," he mumbled. "Well, it's definitely not a bad story."

"Yeah... I don't really know why, but the Hero is really popular among the elves, so that story about us b-being in love popped up." Eluria gave her own flushed cheeks a few pats. "I think it's probably some kind of mistake, or maybe a story somebody made up... I didn't tell you because I thought you might find it unpleasant."

It was a story about what happened after Eluria had died. Without knowing what had actually happened, it was only natural for her to assume that the Hero's popularity among the elves led to the creation of a fictional and dramatized love story between him and the Sage.

But Raid knew very well where it actually came from.

After all, he most certainly had rushed to Eluria's side when he heard about her death, charged into the enemy nation all on his own, and arrived at her casket while bleeding out, where he ultimately took his last breath. He never imagined those events would be passed down as a love story, of all things.

"I knew it... That story isn't real, is it?" Eluria's face twisted apologetically as tears welled up in her eyes.

Seeing her like that, Raid could only sheepishly ruffle his own hair. "It is," he quietly admitted.

Eluria froze. "Huh?"

"Those things really happened."

"Wh-When I died...you came to see me?"

"Sure did."

"On your own? Even while getting all beaten up?"

"I mean, I needed to get to the capital, but I couldn't just kill all your disciples, could I? That one-sided beating they gave me definitely wasn't a fun time, though."

"Th-Then...!" Eluria's face turned even redder than ever before, but she looked him straight in the eye and quietly asked, "Then, what were you trying to say to me at the end?" She gripped firmly onto his sleeve, as if to say she wouldn't let him go. "The story I read ended at the part where the Hero tried telling the Sage something... I really want to know what it was...!"

Those final words probably never reached anybody's ears, as Raid had run out of strength before he could even utter them himself. So now, he just quietly mumbled, "I didn't say anything."

"B-But it was in the other books too! You were trying to say something!"

"I just felt like flapping my mouth like a fish."

"With your dying breath...?!"

"I know I just said it myself, but that does sound pretty stupid, doesn't it?"

"Wh-What were you trying to tell me?! What was it?!"

"More importantly, let's go look for a staff member so we can meet up with the other students already." Raid brushed her questions aside and began searching the halls, dragging Eluria along, still desperately latched onto his arm.

His final words... He had uttered them then and there because he thought they would never meet again. But here they were anyway, reunited and together once more. Surely, he'd get the chance to tell Eluria herself someday.

A soft smile formed on Raid's lips as he walked down the hall.

Eventually, Raid and Eluria found a staff member who told them that the other students who'd passed the exam were already waiting in their classrooms and guided the two of them to theirs.

"It's Lady Eluria!" somebody called the moment they opened the door, triggering a wave of murmurs around the classroom. Just one step in, and Eluria was already surrounded by a wall of people.

"I saw the magic you used on the exam grounds, Lady Eluria!"

"We've heard much about you, but I never imagined you'd already be able to wield tenth-stratum magic. You truly are worthy of the Sage's name!"

"Although I only caught a glimpse of it, the sight of that crimson pillar rising to the heavens was simply breathtaking! Such astounding talent already far surpasses many magicians! You inspire us all, Lady Eluria!"

Waves and waves of praise poured from the students' lips. As for the recipient of those compliments... Well, Eluria was quite flustered, to say the least. Each time she tried to respond, yet another barrage of enthusiastic chatter would ram into her, and all she could do was frantically look left and right with her mouth agape.

Cornered like a little animal, she pointed her trembling finger toward her companion. "R-Raid is way cooler than me...!"

In a single unified motion, the students turned their heads toward him.

"Ohhh! I witnessed your astounding feat as well! You were able to offset Lady Eluria's tenth-stratum magic; surely, you must be a great talent yourself!"

"As impudent as this may be, I'm afraid I haven't had the honor of ever meeting or even hearing of you. Could I possibly ask for your name and household...?"

"Seeing as you are accompanying Lady Eluria, you must be an associate of House Caldwin! Moreover, you must have avoided public appearances in order to hide your true strength, just as Lady Eluria had!"

Faced with the students' barrage of questions, Raid put on a pleasant smile. "First, I would like to thank everyone for such a warm and enthusiastic

welcome. My name is Raid Freeden, and as you have said, I am to be considered an associate of House Caldwin."

"Freeden... This is the first I have heard of that household. Are you from a foreign nation, by chance?"

"I'm afraid I must disappoint you, for I come from but an ordinary family of commoners," Raid clarified. "Because of my pedigree, I am often faced with prejudice in my pursuit to study magic... But without even knowing my name, everyone here has graced me with such generous praise. The nobility and sincerity you embody has left me truly and deeply moved."

"N-Not at all... It is only right for those with great ability to be given just praise!"

"Indeed... The esteemed Sage herself was seen for her great talents rather than her race. As students of the magical arts, we must carry ourselves magnanimously and see people for their true, rather than superficial, worth."

Although some of their expressions had tensed when they heard he was a commoner, Raid's thoroughly courteous demeanor helped him avoid any outright ire.

Differences in class always existed, no matter the era. Even when he was known as the Hero and granted the position of general for all his military feats, there had certainly been no shortage of people who would look down on him for his lowly birth. Raid's experience from that old life made him accustomed to handling this sort of thing.

Of course, there would always be those who were difficult to deal with regardless.

"Hah! As if we would believe he's worthy of such praise."

The crowd around Raid parted to reveal a young man with ruffled red hair. He seemed to be about the same age as them and had two attendants, also of similar age, behind him.

"Are you suggesting that a mere *commoner* was able to offset magic of the tenth stratum?" the red-haired boy scoffed as he shot Raid a disdainful glare. "Unfortunately, I'm not foolish enough to accept such ridiculous claims, nor do

you look strong enough to live up to them anyway."

Raid simply plastered a smile on his face. "Why, it is but a matter of course that someone as talented as Lord Fareg of House Verminant would hold such strict standards."

In the month before the entrance exam, Alicia had given Raid a thorough rundown of the royal family and other influential households within Vegalta, among which was House Verminant. Like the royal family and House Caldwin, their household had a long and prominent history of producing great magicians for generation after generation. Their achievements were particularly outstanding in the field of magical combat and manabeast subjugation. Adding to that their deep and long-standing loyalty to the nation, the king himself had conferred them with the unique title of Magic Knights.

Their son, Fareg, was especially blessed with great talent and mana capacity, so much so that he would have surely been praised far and wide as an unrivaled genius had an anomaly like Eluria not appeared. Unfortunately, being born into such high status and honorable lineage—on top of manifesting outstanding talent and being revered by society—was bound to warp a person's character. As a result, Fareg had become a hopelessly narcissistic little rascal whose only pleasure in life laid in finding fault with others—Alicia's words, not Raid's.

"And in the first place," continued the so-called little rascal. "You claim to be an associate of House Caldwin? That's nothing but an affront the venerable house that has protected Vegalta since ancient times."

"I see my background is causing you much concern," Raid replied. "Please rest assured, the head of House Caldwin, Lady Alicia, would gladly verify my identity for you, should you choose to reach out to her."

"That's not what I meant! I'm saying that it's simply absurd for a lowly peasant like you to be in this magic institute at all! What were the Caldwins thinking?!"

"Regardless, I have been told that I passed both the written and the practical exams with above-average scores, and I have received Headmaster Elise's own approval as well. Moreover, the Institute's policies dictate that one's social standing should have no bearing when pursuing the art of magic created by the

Sage, as it—"

Fareg clicked his tongue, laying his anger bare. "Stop trying to throw me off-course by prattling on like some annoying geezer!"

Unfortunately for him, however, public opinion had already cemented. One remained courteous and polite, while the other kept yelling hotheadedly. It was obvious how anyone watching would view such a scene. Even the boy's own attendants tried to calm him down.

"Lord Fareg, perhaps you should stop here..."

"Treating an associate of House Caldwin so harshly could have consequences even for House Verminant's main branch—"

"Shut up! Are you both trying to admonish me now too?!" Fareg spat back at them. Raid thought he looked every bit the spoiled and stuck-up brat that Alicia had described so scathingly. "He calls himself an 'associate of House Caldwin,' but I bet he's just some servant who was sent here to take care of their daughter! He's all bark—"

"Ah, my apologies. I've forgotten to mention that I am Eluria Caldwin's fiancé."

"—and no…bite…" As Fareg's voice grew smaller, so did the surrounding throng lapse into silence.

Taking that chance, Raid turned to the girl beside him and smiled. "The instructor should be here soon. Let's take our seats, Eluria."

"O-Okay...!"

Raid blatantly took her hand in his and began scouring the room for empty seats. It went without saying that the crowd behind them erupted into shrieks and shouts soon after.

"Lady Eluria is engaged?!"

"That very same Lady Eluria who was said to show no interest in anything but magic?!"

"Even though she supposedly only converses with people outside her house a handful of times each year?!"

Most of the comments were backhanded jabs at Eluria, but he decided to let them be, instead placing his focus on navigating his way to a less-populated spot in the noisy classroom.

Raid smirked. "Did you see that look on his face? Man, what a riot."

"I forgot how petty you can be sometimes," mumbled Eluria.

"You make me sound like such a bad person. Those arrogant types can lead even their own allies into sticky situations. Isn't it better to put 'em in their place sooner rather than later?" Raid said, looking greatly pleased.

In stark contrast, Eluria's eyes narrowed into a glare. "I finally understand why the soldiers of your country were so good at following orders..."

In any case, Raid figured he might as well rake Fareg over the coals every now and then. After all, he *had* been expressly told by Alicia that the boy "is kind of an embarrassment to us historical households, so try knocking some sense into him if you ever get the chance."

When Raid glanced to the side, he noticed that Eluria was looking down. "What's wrong?" he asked.

The girl didn't respond for a long moment before finally mumbling, "Your hand..."

"Oh, my bad. Did I pull too hard?"

Eluria smiled softly as she gently squeezed back. "No. It's fine."

As Raid cocked his head in confusion, someone nearby called out to them. "Excuse me, you two. These seats here are empty, if you'd like." They turned toward the voice to find an almond-eyed young man with light brown hair pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Sure. Thanks man," Raid said as he took a seat.

"No problem. Nobody was approaching me, so I was getting kind of bored." The boy smiled wryly as he swept his gaze over the classroom. Perhaps the peculiar air about him had kept the other students at bay. He offered his hand to Raid and introduced himself. "Wisel Blanche. Nice to meet you."

"Blanche?" Eluria mumbled with a tilt of her head. "I've heard that name

somewhere before."

"I'm sure you have. I'm from a family of magic artificers. The gear you yourself use, Lady Caldwin, was made by none other than my older sister."

Eluria let out a small gasp and hurriedly bowed her head. "P-Please tell her that I'm using it with care..."

"She'll be very happy to hear that. Well, not like she wasn't already over the moon the moment she'd been commissioned to make gear for none other than the Sage's Reincarnation." Wisel nodded and turned to Raid. "Ah... Should I address you as Lord Freeden?"

"Nah. Just my name will do. I may be with House Caldwin now, but I'm still a commoner from the countryside. Feels weird to have a title attached to my name."

"Then you can just call me Wisel too. I grew up around sweaty craftsmen, so I'm not really good at speaking formally and all that."

"Oh... M-My name is okay too...!" Eluria eagerly piped in. As always, she seemed to have gained much enthusiasm for conversation the moment magic was brought up.

"All right. Ms. Eluria it is, then."

"But why would an artificer come to study as a magician?" she asked.

The Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic offered classes for not only magicians but other magic-related occupations as well, such as magic artificers who manufactured and maintained the magic gear that magicians used, or magic inscribers who engraved mana circuits into the various parts and ornaments attached to said gear. Classes were divided to provide the most specialized education possible, meaning Wisel would normally be in the class for magic artificers.

The bespectacled young man nodded at Eluria's question. "You see, I value practicality above all," he explained. "I want to find out what magicians look for or don't care about when it comes to their gear. Watching them in action will make great reference, on top of my own experience. My goal is to create more practical gear this way."

"So, you're studying as a magician...in order to become a magic artificer?" "Pretty much. Though it might rub others the wrong way, I'm sure."

Becoming a magician depended heavily on the talent and mana capacity one was born with. Many failed to reach even the standard score on their aptitude test and had to give up on the path of a magician, settling for working as artificers or inscribers instead. In the eyes of those people, Wisel was treating the magician track rather frivolously.

"Makes sense to me," Raid said, shrugging. "Crafting good gear counts toward the Institute's founding principle of 'for the pursuit and advancement of magic.' Anyone who picks a bone with you just doesn't know what they're talking about."

"Mhm. What's important is that you're eager to learn," Eluria agreed.

Wisel found himself chuckling wryly. "I know I'm the older one here, but those certainly sound like wise words to me," he mused. "Come to think of it, I heard that Raid blew away Ms. Eluria's tenth-stratum magic."

Magic was generally classified into ten strata, based not on its nature, but rather on its scale, speed, mass, power, and impact. The magic that Eluria wielded would fit into the highest rank: the tenth stratum. Of course, this was no more than its assigned label within a set framework; the kinds of magic she used in her past life would have been difficult to even classify within the modern ranking framework.

"The tenth-stratum magic goes without saying, but I'm really curious as to how Raid blew it away too. Could I take a look at your gear?"

"I don't have any."

Wisel blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Any magic gear I use breaks down, so I don't own any."

"That's ridiculous. Inscribers always engrave physical resistance and mana load reduction so that magic gear can bear any kind of magic. They can't possibly break so easily."

"The mana circuits break down because Raid's mana is unusual," Eluria

explained.

Wisel held his chin in deep thought. Then, he pushed his glasses up and took a baton from his waist. "Then try breaking this one."

Raid blinked. "Seriously...?"

"I have extras. More importantly, as an artificer, I want to know why or under what conditions the magic gear you use could be breaking down." He handed the baton over to Raid, looking more serious than ever. He'd initially come off as a levelheaded young man because of the way he looked and carried himself, but he seemed to be rather passionate when it came to magic gear.

"By the way," he added. "That gear right there is my custom-made article. I want lots of people to test it out, so it boasts of not only broad functionality but also impeccable durability that can withstand consecutive usage for—"

"Cool."

Right in the middle of the artificer's impassioned speech, Raid used his mana to mercilessly snap the baton in half. Wisel's glasses seemed to have been collaterally victimized, as a clear crack ran through its lenses.

"My... My masterpiece...!" he cried.

"Didn't you say I could break this?!"

"I did... I'm just shocked by how easily it broke..." Wisel pushed his cracked glasses back up before taking the broken magic gear into his trembling hands. After studying it for a good while, he turned toward Eluria. "If I may, I'd like to ask for your diagnosis as someone knowledgeable in magic."

The girl hummed. "Roughly speaking, Raid's mana doesn't fit within the current standards of magic as a system."

"I see... So that's how it looks from a theoretical standpoint."

"What does it look like to you...?" Eluria asked.

"Honestly, I can't say. Your hypothesis certainly has bearing considering he broke through all the gear's safety features, but that doesn't explain why it gets physically damaged too." Wisel looked over the pieces that his baton had been reduced to. "Until I can observe and analyze it a few more times, I can't really

reach a conclusion, much less take a guess. Bluntly put, this is a complete mystery to me."

With his analysis finished, Wisel turned to Raid and quietly asked, "How did you get that kind of mana?"

Raid's lips twisted into a strained smile. "Who knows? It was so long ago, I can barely remember anymore." His body had been this way for almost as far back as he could remember, so he couldn't pinpoint a cause or trigger even if he wanted to.

More importantly, there was something else bothering him now. He spun around and asked, "Why're you eavesdropping on us back there?"

The response to his question was a loud and painful-sounding thud.

"Owww! What business does this desk have being so hard?!"

The three of them took a peek over the desk and found a girl cradling her head while rolling around on the floor. Her golden hair looked soft to the touch, although it was unfortunate that she was presently using it to sweep the floor. When she saw them all staring, her eyes snapped open with a gasp.

"Aha ha... S-Suspicious person, I am not..."

"Talk properly or I'll hand you over to the authorities," Raid deadpanned.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Millis Lambut, seventeen years old, born in a small village on the very edge of Norberg! There weren't any other kids around me, so the sheep were my only friends! I managed to enroll here on scholarship and am currently in the process of trying my very dang hardest to make some human friends too!!!"

"I'll leave the final verdict to you, Eluria."

"I like her energy. Ten outa ten."

Raid nodded. "Congrats. You've been promoted from 'suspicious person' to 'classmate.'"

"HOORAAAY! I would like to thank my past self, who spent an all-nighter getting that introduction down pat!" The girl who'd introduced herself as Millis raised her fists in triumph, nearly moved to tears by Eluria's kindness.

Raid, too, felt like crying when he thought about how her introduction had taken an entire night to concoct. "So, why were you listening in on our conversation?" he asked.

Millis laughed sheepishly. "The other conversations went way over my head, so I was on the prowl for any I might be able to join in, and that's when you lovely people found me."

"Ever considered speaking up like a normal person?"

"Absolutely not! Everyone else is saying stuff like, 'Goodness, the tea party you hosted the other day was simply delightful' or 'Pray tell, has your territory been blessed with a bountiful harvest this year?' or whatever! What can I even contribute to those conversations?!"

Raid shrugged. "Try 'Dear me, I gathered so much wool this year, several of my shears have been damaged beyond repair' or something."

"You don't have to make it so obvious that you couldn't care less!" Millis wailed and slammed her hands on the desk a few times.

Of course, Raid could understand the girl's hesitation to approach the other students. Magicians may value talent and ability, but that didn't negate the impacts of status and pedigree. Those from wealthy upper-class families who had significant economic leeway, inherited great mana capacity thanks to their aristocratic bloodline, or had access to excellent magic education from a young age would of course have greater chances at becoming magicians.

The Institute didn't want to let any outstanding talents slip by because of this, which is what led to the establishment of the scholarship system.

Unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that these scholars would have grown up in completely different worlds from their fellow schoolmates. Not to mention that some higher-class individuals wouldn't be very pleased to see those without any notable background aiming to become a magician just because they had a bit of talent. From Fareg's blatant disdain to the students' subtle reactions to Raid earlier, it was easy to imagine how Millis would fare around them.

"But I've heard," Millis continued, looking up at Raid, "that you're from the boonies too!"

"Don't lump my hometown in with a certified backwater district like Norberg."

"Oh yeah? Then where are you from?!"

"Aluryes."

"Aaand here pot meets kettle! All you guys have are mountains and forests and rivers!"

"Well, Norberg only has mountains, period."

"Hah! I'll have you know we also have our local specialty of meltwater, so take that!"

"And we have high-quality timber and an orange plantation."

"Oh, please! Those can't possibly top our...um...a-all our sheep, you know...?!"

"You really ran out of local specialties after water and sheep..."

"Okay, I'm so sorry all my hometown has going for it are fluffy wool and yummy water, but this girl's gonna end up all by her lonesome at this rate, so please be my friend, classmate from the countryside...!" Whether she was just that afraid of being alone or simply didn't want to let go of this group of people she could actually converse with, Millis threw all her dignity out the window as she prostrated herself with her forehead on the ground. It was truly pitiful.

Eluria silently stood from her seat and offered Millis her hand. "I'll be your friend."

"Huh... Y-You will, Lady Eluria...?"

Eluria hesitated. "You don't want me...?"

"O-Of course I do! I'm thankful and grateful and so very joyful! I couldn't possibly be more 'ful'-filled than this!" She took Eluria's hand and shook it vigorously, a bright expression blooming on her face.

Raid and Wisel watched on with identical wry smiles.

"I'm Wisel. I'll gladly be your friend too, Ms. Millis," he said, stepping forward and offering his hand.

"You already know, but I'm Raid. Guess we're countryside buddies now."

"Okay! It's great meeting you both, Wisel and Raid!" The girl merrily shook both their hands as well.

Raid noticed that Eluria had a small smile on her lips. "Pretty unusual for you to reach out," he remarked quietly.

Eluria hummed. "She just reminded me of the past."

"The past...?"

"Mhm. The disciple who took my surname begged me to take her on like that." She watched Millis with a warm gaze as she reminisced. "So I thought that I just had to take this girl's hand."

"Sounds fine by me. You definitely won't get bored around her, that's for sure."

"Yeah. I especially liked her introduction."

"Wow, you really do like her a lot..."

"Her choice of words is very unique too. That gets a lot of points."

Eluria seemed to have more than taken a liking to Millis, showering her with a fond gaze and singing her praises. As they say, your efforts will never betray you. All the time and practice Millis put into her introduction turned out to be worth it after all.

"Also, I thought she was kind of similar..."

"Hm? To your disciple?"

"Um... To her pet dog."

"Oh... I can see that, actually." Raid turned his half-lidded gaze back to Millis.

"Hooray! I now have three human friends! The human race has been added into my list of friends for the first time ever! What a momentous occasion!!!" She was jumping in joy now that she had accomplished her goal, not unlike how a dog would run restlessly around the yard after seeing sunny weather. "Everyone, thank you so much for—huh? Why are you all looking at me so

warmly? And Lady Eluria, why are you patting my head?!"



"It looked really soft and fluffy."

"Ooh, soft and fluffy is just my thing! My hair right here is so fluffy, in fact, that my grandfather once mistook it for wool and nearly sheared it off my head while I was napping with the sheep! The fluffiest shearing survivor in Norberg!"

"Mhm. Very fluffy."

Millis offered her bed of hair with oddly copious levels of enthusiasm, which Eluria just continued petting contentedly. Surely, if Millis had a tail, it would be wagging excessively right about now.



After a short while, a staff member entered their classroom. After congratulating them all on passing the entrance exam, they were told that their magic studies curriculum would be oriented to them at a later date by the magician who would serve as their instructor.

What the staff member came to brief them on today was everything they needed to know regarding campus life. Of particular note was that students of the Institute were to live in the attached dormitories, and while they were all free to do as they pleased on their days off, they would need to submit a request form should they wish to return home for an extended period of time.

Finally, the staff member guided them to the student dormitories. However, at present, Raid and Eluria were both frozen stiff as they stared at the room assignments.

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"Eluria."

"Yeah..."

"Looks like we're sharing a room."

"Yeah..."

"Don't they normally split the boys and girls here?"

"Yeah..."

"What do you think's for dinner later?"

"Yeah..."
```

Her brain had completely short-circuited, retaining only enough functionality to bob her head every few seconds. As such, Raid took it upon himself to approach a nearby staff member to confirm.

"Excuse me. It looks like Eluria and I are assigned to the same room..."

"Hm? Ah, yes. We have been informed by the headmaster that you two are engaged..." The staff member's expression remained blank, as if wondering why Raid was asking at all. "Occasionally we have enrollees who are already married or engaged aristocrats. Barring special circumstances, we always ensure that they are given utmost consideration by assigning them the same room."

"Ah, right..." Engagements and marriages were public affairs, and any rumors of discord between couples could cause a scandal for both parties' households. In which case, it was safer to place them in the same room from the start.

"Thank you kindly for your explanation." Raid excused himself and went back to where Eluria was waiting.

"W-Was it a mistake...?"

"Nope. It's Institute policy for engaged couples to share a room, apparently."

The girl sighed, looking somewhat relieved. "That's good. I'll be more at ease with you than anyone else." It seemed like she wasn't actually too upset by this whole room sharing arrangement.

"Let's go drop our bags off in our room then."

"O-Okay..."

The pair headed for their dorm with their key and a guide map in hand. Once they arrived, they took a gander around.

The room felt a bit cramped to Raid since he'd spent the past month in the Caldwin estate, but it was more than enough space for the two of them to live in. It was furnished with not only a toilet and bathtub but even magic appliances for air conditioning, heating, cooking, and whatever else they could need. Though, much of these weren't likely to see much use by aristocrats who were accustomed to having servants tend to their needs. In fact, the dormitories already had an attached cafeteria and large baths for communal

use, and the Institute's staff would even come by to collect and do their laundry for them.

Their next stop was their sleeping quarters, which was also very well-furnished. There was a closet, a vanity dresser...and only one bed.

Raid stared at that lone, singular bed for a long while before nodding decisively. "I see. It's definitely big enough."

"Y-Yeah... I think there's enough space for us both."

"I might as well ask: are you okay with sleeping on the same bed?"

"Y-Yes... I am!" Contrary to her response, she sounded very stiff. "What about you, Raid...?"

"I don't mind either. I sleep like the dead anyway."

"I, uh... I might toss and turn a lot."

"You're pretty lightweight, so I doubt I'll wake up even if you bump into me."

"I'm also bad with mornings..."

"My body clock is on the dot, so I can just wake you myself."

"And I sometimes get really floaty when I'm half asleep..."

"You sure are a handful even in your sleep."

Eluria buried her flushed face into her hands. "Sorry..." Her expression had been pinched in discomfort since they entered the bedroom, likely thinking of how much trouble she'd be causing him by sleeping on the same bed.

"But..." She pursed her lips as she looked up at Raid. "I don't want to be alone, so let's sleep together...please."

Raid smiled wryly and dropped his hand onto her head. "It's no big deal," he reassured her. "We'll be living together from now on. If you keep bottling everything up just 'cause you don't want to bother me, then you're gonna wear yourself out real quick. I'd appreciate it more if you tell me whenever you're uncomfortable."

"Really ...?"

"Really. I'm all ears, anytime."

"Okay... It's a promise." Eluria held her pinky out. "You should also tell me if something bothers you."

"No holds barred, yeah?" When Raid also held his pinky out with a grin on his face, Eluria finally smiled again. "Guess we can discuss this in detail while we eat dinner."

"Um... Then should we head to the cafeteria?"

"No, House Caldwin's honor might end up at risk if others hear this conversation... We should just eat here tonight."

Raid walked over to the kitchen and looked through their cooking utensils. A quick peek into the magic refrigerator revealed not only drinks but also all sorts of ingredients inside. The staff would probably check these whenever they dropped by to clean the rooms and replenish the supply as needed.

Eluria quietly crouched down beside him. "You can cook?"

"Simple stuff, yeah. There were times I had to cook while camping out."

"Nostalgic," Eluria murmured, nodding repeatedly as she reminisced. "I used to hunt any rabbits I found near the battlefield."

"Oh, what? You did that too?"

"Mhm. At first, I was treated as a noncombatant mage and was practically no different from an ordinary soldier, so I had to eat fruits and wildflowers too."

"Oh yeah. Back then, we couldn't even boil water or the smoke might lead you guys to us. Instead, we squeezed grapes to hydrate ourselves."

"Same here! It did taste good, but our clothes would get really sticky from the juices."

"Ahhh. Your uniforms were white, weren't they? Ours were black, so stains didn't really stand out much." Raid chuckled. "But wasn't there that one time you literally picked up on my scent 'cause I didn't notice the stain on mine?"

"I remember that! I happened to be downwind at the time, so I could smell the fruit juice!" Eluria's voice grew more spirited as they talked about the past. Amid their pleasant conversation, Raid's kitchen preparations proceeded smoothly.

Eluria shuffled over to his side. "Now I feel like having one of those simple meals again. Maybe just season meat with salt or boil vegetables in water."

"You're actually craving those now...?"

"The nostalgia might make them taste better. Besides, *this* is something I can help with." She tied her hair and rolled up her sleeves with practiced movements before taking a kitchen knife in hand. "I'll chop the vegetables."

"Sure thing. I'll boil the meat."

"I'll also leave the seasoning up to you."

"By 'seasoning,' you mean dumping salt all over it, right?"

Eluria nodded once. "Salty stuff really hits the spot after a long and hard battle..."

Their cooking preparations continued with their lighthearted chatter and the soft sound of Eluria's chopping in the background.

"I haven't cooked with anyone since I was a kid," she muttered.

"You're talking about back in your elven settlement?"

"Yeah. I remember my mom praised me a bit back then," she recalled as she continued chopping the vegetables, her face an impassive mask. "But..." Her hands stopped moving. "That was the only time she ever did."

Raid cast her a sidelong glance before slowly placing his hand on her head. "But look at you now. Your name is being praised all over the world even after a thousand years."

The girl's gaze lingered on the vegetables before she nodded quietly.

"Had your mother known, I'm sure she would've praised you for that too."

A meek smile slowly formed on Eluria's lips. "Yeah..."

It was a familiar story, the kind everyone heard from somewhere at some point—that geniuses were beyond comprehension, that they saw and felt the world differently, and that because of this, they were detested and ostracized

by those around them. Such was Eluria's tale, and also...

"What kind of child were you, Raid?" The girl's ocean blue eyes peered straight into his.

Raid stared back at her for a moment before softly shaking his head. "Who knows? It was so long ago. All I can remember is that I was always alone." As he watched over the fire burning on the stove, his mind wandered back to those memories that had faded through time. "Now, my body's as strong as can be, but I was actually a really weak kid, always stuck in bed with a fever. My parents were just sick and tired of me."

Raid didn't hate them for it. At this point, he had come to accept it as an inevitable product of the era he was born into. His homeland of Altane had been a country with an immense wealth gap and endless greed for foreign lands. It was common practice for children who were born in impoverished villages to leave their homes and enlist as soldiers, but Raid had been too weak for that. His mother had, in essence, nursed him purely out of parental obligation.

Amid that dull cycle, however, came a turning point in his life.

"I couldn't stand being a burden, so I kept training every time my fever went down. But then I'd end up with another fever, and my parents would get fed up again... Rinse and repeat, and before I knew it, my body ended up like this."

"You mean, as robust as it is now?"

"Yep. Of course, I was over the moon. Forget running around outside like the other kids—I'd gotten far stronger than all the other villagers."

Raid hadn't just wanted to get rid of the suffocating feeling of not being able to do the sorts of things that others took for granted. He mostly just wanted to stop causing trouble for his mother and to make her proud instead. Although she only ever had spiteful words for him, she was still undeniably his mother. The young child never doubted for a second that she would be thrilled if he got stronger than everyone else.

"But...I got too strong."

A child no older than seven was already far too powerful. He was stronger

than the other kids, stronger than all the adults—stronger than everyone. When the villagers saw that, they all would glare at him from a distance and utter:

"Raid isn't human. He's the child of a monster."

He ended up being loathed by the villagers, as was his mother for birthing such a monstrosity. She began lashing out at him more harshly than ever, eventually refusing to acknowledge the monster as her own child. Soon, they rid themselves of him by handing him over to a passing band of mercenaries.

Taking pity on Raid, the mercenaries cursed at his mother and the villagers for the way they'd treated him, but their kindness didn't last for long either. As they watched Raid kill their enemies with overwhelming violence and return alive and unscathed no matter how dangerous the battle, the mercenaries he believed to be his allies began calling him a monster too.

Soon, there was nobody left around him.

"So, after I left the village, I continued working as a mercenary, jumping from battle to battle, hoping that maybe there was someone out there just like me... Of course, there was no such person. But all my achievements in battle eventually landed me the title of Hero. You can never know what life has in store for you, huh?"

In the end, his tale wasn't all that different from Eluria's. To surpass others was to stray from their frame of understanding, and the two of them had strayed greatly from even the broadest of those frames. Just as Eluria was feared as a genius of unparalleled intelligence, Raid was ostracized as a warrior of unparalleled strength. Of course, that they'd ended up being lionized as the Hero and the Sage was the most unparalleled irony of all—so much so that Raid found a bitter and empty smile forming on his lips at the mere thought.

However, he soon dropped his gaze in confusion. "What are you doing?"

"Mm... Nothing...!" Eluria had apparently finished chopping the vegetables and was now standing on her toes while stretching her arm up toward his head.

Recalling the mental note he'd taken after their entrance exam, Raid casually bent down for her, letting her hand fall atop his head.

"Good job, Raid."



He blinked. "What?"

"You did really well."

"What brought this on all of a sudden?"

"You praised me earlier, so I'm just praising you back," she mumbled, still quietly patting him on the head. "I think anyone would be happy to receive praise. You just never realized that because you were always alone."

Eluria's eyes turned soft as a tender smile formed on her lips. "But I'm here now, so you're not alone anymore," she said, almost like a mother gently encouraging her child. "Whenever you work hard, I'll be right here to praise you lots."

The only response Raid could manage after a long pause was a quiet and unplaceable hum.

"Besides," she added. "I'm older than you, so it's only right."

"Aren't you younger than me?"

"In this life, sure. But if we add in our past lives, then I'm definitely qualified to be like a kind of big sister to you." She smugly puffed her chest out. Unfortunately, be it that chest, her face, or even her mannerisms, she looked much more like a child than anybody's big sister.

Still, Raid smiled softly and murmured, "Thanks, big sis."

"Mhm. I'll praise you lots and lots."

Even before they finished cooking, the two had exchanged lots of head pats with one another.

♦

After dinner, Raid and Eluria discussed their room-sharing policies, although the only thing of note was how they would share the bathroom. The final verdict was that Eluria would get priority use, as proposed by Raid in consideration of giving her room to change, and also because he figured she'd be able to relax more in a private bathroom than a shared bath given how shy she was.

"All right... Guess that about wraps things up."

"Mhm. It was a good talk."

With all that out of the way, Raid plopped right down onto the bed. They had both finished bathing and changing into their sleepwear, and were now ready to turn in.

Looking back, Eluria could only recall seeing Raid in armor in their past life, then in civilian attire while they were in the Caldwin estate. Seeing him in just a simple shirt and a comfortable pair of pants felt different and new.

As she gazed absently at the sight of Raid in his night clothes, she realized that he was also staring at her. "What is it?" she asked.

"Well, I was just wondering..."

Eluria looked down at her clothes, a dress with soft colors and a thin cardigan on top—nothing too out of place.

With his cheek resting on his fist, Raid raised his other hand and pointed. "You've been hugging that pillow for a while now. Why?"

She blinked. "Just 'cause?" She blankly tilted her head while hugging the pillow tighter. "I always hug something when I sleep."

"Ahhh. Because it helps you sleep better?"

"Yeah. It's comforting." Back on the battlefield, Eluria had always slept while hugging her trusty staff, so she'd unknowingly developed a habit of hugging something in her sleep. She would always hug a stuffed toy back at the estate, but she certainly couldn't bring one with her to the Institute, so she used the pillow in its place.

Raid gazed thoughtfully at her for a moment longer before handing over his own pillow. "Then use mine too. You should have one for your head."

Eluria looked down at his fluffy offering. "But what about you?"

"I got used to sleeping with my head on my arms. Using a pillow actually makes it harder for me to sleep." When she continued to stare at it, he added, "Well, if it bothers you, I can just go buy another one over the weekend. Don't sweat it."

"Hm... Okay."

Eluria smiled and watched as Raid folded his arms behind his head. He always came off as wild and violent when fighting, but after spending time together these days, she found that he had a surprisingly gentle and considerate side to him too. Like the way he'd given her priority use of the bathroom because he knew how shy she was. She felt a bit bad, letting him give way like that, but she was also glad to have learned something new about Raid. She kind of wanted to brag about him to someone, if she ever got the chance.

"I'm gonna hit the hay now. I leave the lights to you."

"Sure. Good night."

Eluria waved her hand and watched as Raid slowly closed his eyes. Not even a minute later, his breathing had evened out into a peaceful rhythm. He must have developed the ability to fall asleep on demand in order to catch up on as much shut-eye as possible in the middle of war.

For no real reason, she stared at his sleeping face for a while.

Then, for no real reason again, she decided to get a bit closer.

Raid showed no signs of waking, looking like he was already in deep sleep. Eluria watched his face from much closer than they ever had been during the day. However, her cheeks turned redder and redder, so she had to make a tactical retreat. She felt as if she'd just done something she shouldn't have and began patting her own cheeks in rebuke.

"But," she mumbled to herself, "I need to tell him someday."

Ever since she spoke to Alicia about the engagement, Eluria had set a single goal for herself: someday, she would tell Raid how she felt about him. Without getting embarrassed, she wanted to look him in the eye and tell him that she liked him.

Once Raid became a magician, once they finally settled who was stronger, and once they found out why they reincarnated... When that time came, he would no longer have any reason to stay with her.

So she needed to tell him...that she wanted to be by his side even after

everything was over.

However, at present, just staring at his face was enough to make hers go red. Eluria shook her head from side to side, almost feeling frustrated at herself for being this way. Still, this was undeniably who she was.

"Every little step counts," she encouraged herself with clenched fists.

Deep in her thoughts, Eluria found her mind wandering to the past. Long before she came to be known as the Sage, in a time when magic had yet to be acknowledged by the populace, Eluria had met Raid for the very first time.

"Oh, that's amazing. That one you're using is really strong."

Despite being her enemy, Raid had praised her magic with a smile on his face. He stood atop the battlefield, where they'd come to take the other's life, and flashed her such a pure and innocent grin.

Magic was something that took all her knowledge and wisdom to make, something she had poured her heart and soul into. What the humans around her and even her own mother had berated as pointless, Raid had praised instead. He was the first and only person who had sympathized with the lonely and incomprehensible genius.

Eluria was certain that she had unknowingly developed feelings for him even back then. She'd wanted to see that brilliant smile and hear him say "that's amazing" again the next time they met, so she'd given it her all and worked on it little by little, until she had refined her craft into what was now known as magic.

It was because Raid had been there that Eluria had grown into the Sage.

He was just like her, but also stronger and cooler than her. He was the hero who saved her from loneliness.

"You know what, Raid? You're really amazing."

While gazing fondly at her very own hero, Eluria praised him one more time with a blissful smile spreading across her face.

Chapter Three

The next day, Raid woke up at his usual time. A sidelong glance revealed that the clock hands pointed to six in the morning. However, there was something quite unusual about his awakening this time, making his lips twist into a scowl.

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"Why's my body so heav—"
"Hnnn..."
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Only when he tried to get up did he notice what was wrong: Eluria was beside him, groaning quietly. His mind blanked, reeling as he recalled yesterday's events—he had completely forgotten.

Evidently, the pillow Eluria was hugging last night hadn't suited her tastes and was now miserably banished to the edge of the bed. The girl had apparently deemed Raid's arm a fit replacement, as she was currently clinging onto it instead. All her tossing and turning had ruffled her prim dress, exposing her pale legs beneath the upturned hem.

When Raid tried to pull his arm back, she held him tighter and wriggled in place.

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"Hm... Nnn..."
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After finding a satisfactory position, Eluria settled back into slumber with a blissful and contented look on her face. She was the very epitome of defenseless in this moment, clearly at peace even within her dreams.

But Raid couldn't just leave her be. It wasn't as if he was completely unmoved by seeing her so defenseless, but given that they were an engaged couple at present, there was a certain line that mustn't be crossed.

"Thank goodness I'm a geezer on the inside," he mumbled to himself before shaking Eluria's shoulders. "Hey, get up. It's morning."

"Hnnn...?" The jostling sensation and his voice drew her eyes open by a smidge—that is, until she slowly closed them again.

"I volunteer as your alarm clock, and *this* is what I get? Come on, wake up." Raid tried to pry his arm free again.

"Nuuu..." However, Eluria refused to release him and even began nuzzling her face against his arm. She certainly wasn't lying when she said she was bad with mornings.

"Go take a bath. That should wake you up."

"Baaath...?" The word itself was somewhat effective already; Eluria's eyes, although still glazed over and muddled with sleep, finally opened halfway.

"You have enough time for one, but you don't have to."

"Bath... I want..."

"Then go. I'll get dressed and make us some break—"

"Join..."

Raid froze. "What?"

"Join...me..." she mumbled, latching back onto his arm.

She certainly seemed far too out of it to go to the bathroom on her own. Raid sighed in resignation and got on his feet. "Fine, I'll join you. Don't trip over yourself, okay?"

Eluria responded with an unintelligible grumble that Raid assumed to be a mangled "okay," as she grabbed onto his shirt and obediently waddled behind him. He fetched her Institute-issued uniform along the way and even retrieved her undergarments from her bag while doing his best not to look. Then, he headed to the bathroom and used the magic heater to warm up the water for her.

Raid had no issue using any of their magic devices, as they were all powered via mana circuits connected to the mana storage tank installed in their room. It had been loaded up with Eluria's mana yesterday, obviously, so none of these devices had to fear for their lives—so long as Raid didn't pour his own mana into them.

"There, hot water's ready. It's all yours."

Eluria blinked, her head drooping to the side. "Why...?"

"Now that's a question I wasn't expecting to be asked here," he deadpanned. Raid felt like he finally understood what Eluria meant yesterday when she said that she "gets floaty" when she was half asleep. This debacle in front of him was the "floatiness" Eluria was talking about, as well as one of the "many ways" he needed to take care of her, as per Alicia's request.

Oblivious to Raid's woes, the girl tugged on his shirt and mumbled again, "Join me..."

"Okay, hang on. I'm afraid I have to stop you right there."

"But...you said 'fine'..." Eluria's brows weakly furrowed over her half-open eyes. "You said...you'd join me..." Her cheeks puffed up as she repeatedly tugged on the hem of his shirt.

As she was now, Eluria was unlikely to listen to reason. It was also safe to assume that she would stay this way until she fully roused from sleep. Strangled groans escaped Raid's throat as his mind was plagued by intense internal struggle. In the end, he slouched exhaustedly and relented, "I'll hold your hand while you're in the tub... Take it or leave it...!"

"Mm." Eluria gave a very firm and satisfied nod.

The moment he heard the sound of rustling clothes, Raid snapped his head away and wrapped a towel over his eyes.

"Huh... Why're you doing that ...?"

"I have a habit of wrapping a towel around my eyes when I'm in the bath."

"But then you can't see..."

"Don't you know I'm the Hero? I can still perceive what's around me even without my sight."

"Wooow..." she languidly drawled. Raid could hear her clapping slowly too. Eluria seemed to accept whatever she was told in this state.

"There, I'm holding your hand. Go take your bath already."

"Mm... Okay." He heard her take a step forward and dip into the tub. "So

warm..."

"That's good."

"Mhm... So happy..." Eluria sighed softly. "So warm... So happy."

"I bet it is. You're soaking in the tub, after all."

"Nooo..." Raid heard her mumble and felt her squeeze his hand over and over. "So warm," she repeated. Eluria sounded like she had a really blissful smile on her face right now. It was just too bad he couldn't see it.

Even then, he put on a smile that likely mirrored hers. "It sure is."



It wasn't until after she finished her bath that Eluria finally returned to her senses. Now, she walked along the halls while looking up at the man beside her in concern. "Why do you look so tired, Raid?"

"Ah... Nah, don't mind me..."

To be frank, he had a hard time even after she finished her bath. Eluria hadn't fully roused until after she'd wiped herself down with a towel, dried her hair with a magic hair dryer, and put her underwear and uniform on—all of which Raid had to explicitly instruct her to do. As if that wasn't bad enough, she'd handed the towel over for him to do the wiping, insisted the hair dryer was broken when she was actually holding it the other way around, and even got him to hook her skirt on for her... Basically, she'd made him do everything for her anyway—and he'd done so with his eyes completely covered the entire time, no less. Raid believed he had every right in the world to be exhausted.

"I was...really floaty, wasn't I?"

"Yeah..." Raid drooped. "That was...something else."

"I-I'm not usually like this...!" she insisted, her face flushing. "It only happens when I'm really tired or wound up..."

Incidentally, Eluria had absolutely no memories of her floaty time. She was probably more than just half asleep in that state. Raid figured he could spare her the details of this morning's disaster since he could easily imagine her passing out if she ever came to know.

With all that behind them, the two walked into their classroom and approached Wisel and Millis, who were seated at the same spot as yesterday.

"Oh! Good morning, you two!" Millis crowed, waving.

"You're cutting it pretty close," Wisel said, also raising his own hand in greeting. "There's barely any time left before class starts."

Raid took his seat and sighed. "Well, some stuff happened..."

"Y-Yeah... Stuff happened," Eluria mumbled as she followed suit.

Millis looked at them both with a smile spreading over her face. "Oh dear, oh my! Now, what could you two *lovebirds* have been up to last night?"

Raid sighed. "What do you mean? We just slept."

"Oh, really? Then let's have Contestant Number Two give her answer!" The girl loomed over Eluria with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Da-dun! Question: what did you do last night?!"

"Um... Last night, Raid and I made dinner together and gave each other some head pats."

"Goodness, such a harmonious relationship you two have!"

"Then, we slept in the same bed."

"O-Oh my! And then?!"

"And then, I slept like a log and woke up this morning."

Millis blinked. "Hm?" She spun her head around and asked Raid, "What? Did you not, well...you know?"

"What the hell are you trying to get us to say?"

"Well, I mean... You see, I'm at that age now too, and I happen to know a bit about certain adult desires and whatnot, so I was hoping to get some reference for when the time comes..."

"You idiot. We're only engaged." Their relationship was one wherein they planned to be wed in the future, but they certainly weren't a married couple yet. Raid looked Millis in the eye and chided her, "Having premarital sex during your engagement is unacceptable."

"Ohhh... I don't hear about this stuff in the boonies. Is it a bad thing?" "It's punishable by death, at worst."

"That bad?!"

Wisel, who had been listening from the sidelines, piped in. "I've heard about that old custom, actually. Engagements could be canceled due to all sorts of circumstances, so couples were prohibited from physical relations until their marriage was official," he recalled. "It's not much of a thing these days, but I can imagine a household as historical as House Caldwin abiding by it."

"Oh, what? It's just an old custom?" Millis sighed before offering a small and solemn nod. "The aristocrats of the past must've had a hard time finding love if they could end up losing their lives over it."

Meanwhile, the other two tilted their heads in bewilderment.

"Huh? Is that how things are now?"

"I didn't know that either," Eluria admitted. "I'd have to ask my mother."

"Well, I won't do anything either way. It's not like this changes my views."

"I never cared about anything outside of magic, so I don't really get it either..."

"Guess we can just carry on as usual, then."

"Yeah. That sounds good to me."

"Why do I feel like you're already more than an engaged couple anyway?!" Millis snapped.

It turned out that society's virtues had changed in the last thousand years. Although Raid was conscious of those changes to a certain extent before now, there were simply far too many other matters that they needed to prioritize at present, such as safely graduating from the Institute or uncovering the reason for their reincarnation. Anything else could come after all was done and dusted.

"Isn't our instructor here today?" Raid glanced at the clock and saw that class should have started already.

They were told that class assignments had been decided after thorough

deliberation based on their entrance exam results, as well as their personal and family backgrounds, and that each class would be assigned an instructor. However, theirs had yet to arrive.

"Now that you mention it, it's already class time," Wisel noted in agreement. "Did they run into some sort of problem?"

"Or maybe they got lost?" Millis suggested playfully.

Raid hummed. "I highly doubt it, seeing as even you got here on time."

"Am I just some klutzy bumpkin to you?!"

"Don't worry, Millis," said Eluria as she patted Millis's head in comfort. "You're a very smart girl."

Suddenly, a huge blast blew one of their classroom walls to smithereens. The sound of the wall crumbling and the cloud of dust it kicked up had several students screaming. From within, a shadowy figure slowly approached.

"Whew! Just in the nick of time. Elise would've nagged my ears off if I was late."

The sound of the person's footsteps clacked leisurely against the floor, the new arrival unfazed by the panicked shrieks all around. Finally, a woman with flowing black hair emerged from within the cloud of dust, confidently taking her place behind the instructor's lectern. Although she appeared no older than her midtwenties, her movements were clearly sharpened through experience and showed no vulnerabilities.

The black-haired woman swept her golden eyes over the students in the room. "Hey there, class. I'm your instructor for the year."

In stark contrast to her nonchalant greeting, the students began clamoring among themselves, admiration and awe swirling noisily in the air.

"Isn't that Alma Kanos of the Black Flag...?"

"But wasn't there just a bulletin saying she was ordered by the king to eliminate that large-scale dragons' nest in the east?"

"Besides that, I've never heard of a special-class magician becoming an instructor!"

Magicians were ranked by skill and ability, with everyone starting from the fifth class the moment they earned their certification. A magician's class dictated the kinds of manabeasts and dangerous creatures they would be assigned to handle, and only by accumulating achievements and proving their strength could they be promoted to a higher class.

Among them, there were fewer than ten magicians ranked as special-class. It was a prestigious rank granted only to those who could wield tenth-stratum magic and had single-handedly subjugated an ultra-sized manabeast. While manabeast exterminations were normally commissioned via the Magicians' Association, those of the special class received their orders directly from the king and were mainly in charge of dealing with large-sized, ultra-sized, and even unclassified manabeasts. They spent their time either guarding state-designated danger zones or jumping from place to place to fight manabeasts, leaving very few chances to catch sight of them even in national affairs.

If the Sage was the legendary figure who created the foundation of magic, then special-class magicians were the living legends of this present era. It was unthinkable for such a grand figure to be an instructor.

The black-haired woman, Alma, clapped her hands, looking as if she'd been expecting their reactions. "Yes, yes. Shocking, I know. Quiet down so I can explain," she drawled. "I was asked by the king and the headmaster to be your instructor, you see—the reason being that they urgently needed someone who could handle two very 'extraordinary' students, just in case things go awry."

"Um..." One student hesitantly spoke up. "Pardon me for asking, but were you not sent to exterminate a dragon's nest recently?"

"Hah? I smashed that thing to bits ages ago."

The nonchalance of her statement almost made it sound as if she wasn't talking about an entire nest of large-sized manabeasts. Dragons only built nests during their mating season—which also came with an increase of aggression—and large-scale nests housed multiple such beasts inside. Dealing with these kinds of nests normally required enormous funds and time from the state, as well as the participation of several thousands of forces.

"I tossed all the cleanup to the others, so it'll probably take a while for the

official announcement to come out," she said, shrugging. "Anyway, when I reported back to the king, he offered me this position—saying I've been handling some pretty heavy jobs recently and to think of this as a break. I accepted, and here we are."

With all that out of the way, Alma looked over the students once more. "I know how things work around here since I graduated from this institute, and you all know how strong I am too. I'm sure I won't disappoint as an instructor," she said with a confident grin.

Excitement and anticipation lit up the students' faces. Alma herself looked satisfied at their reactions and gave them a big nod.

"All righty then. Let's get this boring orientation over with, shall we?" She took a piece of chalk in hand and began writing on the blackboard with large, flourishing strokes. "Enrollees were split into five classes of thirty students. Your grade for the year will be computed from the sum of your individual and class grades. Those whose total grade exceeds the standard will have earned the qualification to graduate and become magicians."

After covering the blackboard in her extravagant handwriting, Alma turned to face the students again. "The important thing here is your class grade. Even getting the highest possible individual grade won't bring you to graduation if your class grade is too low. This system is in place because a magician's professional duties place great emphasis on working as a team."

A magician's job mostly entailed handling magic crimes and exterminating manabeasts and other dangerous creatures, but that didn't mean they only had to deal with the criminals and beasts themselves. Evacuating nearby citizens, securing safe escape routes and shelter, and rescuing any people stranded in dangerous locations all fell under a magician's responsibilities—and there were very few who could perform all that single-handedly.

Of course, Eluria and special-class magicians certainly could, but there were only a handful of such geniuses in this world. In order to handle any and every possible situation, most magicians formed teams, sometimes even moving in companies of several dozen magicians for the larger-scale missions.

The class grade system had been incorporated into the Institute's curriculum

in order to ensure that future magicians would function satisfactorily and unproblematically in such environments.

"Individual assessments will happen once a month via simulation exams that will present a variety of practical scenarios, while class assessments happen four times a year via integrated exams that will be conducted under various conditions with other classes and institutes. Both of these exams will directly tie into your assessment, so make sure to keep this in mind."

Having explained that far, Alma furrowed her brows. "And then, hm... Gimme a sec. Elise gave me a manual for instructors, so I'll just read through it real quick." She took a small book from inside her jacket and began flipping the pages. "Ummm... For lectures, we'll be tackling the theoretical concepts of the six branches of magic, the physical traits and behavioral characteristics of manabeasts, the importance of basics such as stamina and mana when working as a magician, the methods for efficient magic deployment..." Alma mumbled the contents of the pocketbook under her breath—but suddenly snapped it shut and declared, "A'ight! I can't be bothered to read all that! They say that experience is the best teacher, so off to practical lessons we go!"

After tossing the book aside, she reached into her jacket once more, this time taking out a silver handbell decorated with ornate engravings. "First, let's go somewhere we can all run wild," she said, grinning.

The moment Alma softly rang the bell, the students' vision swam and their surroundings changed drastically. When their vision cleared, an endless expanse of blue skies and green plains spanned out before them. The breeze blew against their skin and rustled their hair. The fresh scent of grass and earth it carried made it apparent that this wasn't just illusory magic that inhibited one's sight and perception.

"This is an alternate plane made with the magic device that Elise, the headmaster, crafted herself," Alma explained. "Nobody can leave until I disable it, and nothing we do in here will affect the outside world."

She deployed her magic gear and hefted it over her shoulder. It was a large battle-ax with broad blades that spanned outward like a pair of wings, and on its tip was a piece of black cloth that fluttered in the breeze like a flag. "Let's

see... So, anyone wanna step up as my sparring partner? A jack-of-all-trades would be nice since I do need to teach you kids while I'm at it."

The woman's lighthearted tone did nothing to stop the students from looking at one another in bewilderment—rightfully so, since they would be sparring against a special-class magician. Even if some of them had learned a thing or two before enrollment, not many would already be equipped with practical experience.

"Come on, don't look so tense. I'll make sure to hold back, and I won't hurt any of you either. Beginners are welcome with open arms, no experience needed!" Her bright smile would have certainly looked welcoming...if she wasn't swinging around that terrifying battle-ax as she spoke.

Still, she was able to successfully recruit a volunteer anyway.

"In that case, I shall be your opponent," said Fareg as he stepped out from the crowd of students. "I can use magic up to the seventh stratum, and I have also trained in magical combat since my childhood days in order to become a magician."

"Wowie. Well, aren't you an impressive young lad?"

"Not at all. This is simply my duty as the son of House Verminant." His chest swelled with pride from Alma's praise. "I can also use three magic branches, all to an above-average standard in—"

"Then maybe I should fight a bit more seriously?"

Unfortunately, he seemed to have gotten a bit *too* carried away. Fareg froze at her nonchalant remark before he slowly and hesitantly asked, "Um... Did you not say you would be holding back?"

"Sure I will. But you should be fine if you've been training since you were a kid, yeah?"

"M-May I ask what you fighting more seriously entails, specifically...?"

"Eh. A few bones, maybe?"

"Hang on a second! Why is breaking my bones a given when you're supposedly going to hold back?!" The boy's face paled as he took a small step

back.

Just then, Alma's gaze shifted to the side—a student's hand was raised into the air. That student stood right beside Raid. "I want to try."

"Oh? You wanna go too?"

"Yeah. I want to try fighting you, Ms. Alma."

"I see you've got more guts than that boy over there. And your name?"

"Eluria Caldwin."

"Ah... One of the 'extraordinary' students the headmaster told me about. I recall you're not allowed to go beyond the fifth stratum, so I'll also—"

"It's fine... No need to hold back," Eluria interjected, leisurely deploying her own gear. "More importantly, will you be okay?"

Alma narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

"Should I hold back for you?" the girl asked with a quiet nod.

A jet-black gale blew violently before Eluria's face. The shock wave of the blast sent the nearby Fareg tumbling over the ground, while the other students let out shrieks and shielded their faces.

"Oh? You weren't bluffing, I see." Alma flashed a toothy grin, her black-winged battle-ax resting on her shoulder. By her feet, a gigantic pitch-black skeleton arm was crawling out of her shadow. The arm, created by Alma's magic, was surrounded by a dusty black gale and clattered eerily like bizarre otherworldly laughter.

She had launched a surprise attack without any warning. Had this been a match conducted under set rules, Alma would have been booed for being cowardly and unfair. However, there were no such things as rules in real battles —Eluria knew that better than anyone else.

"That was a pretty hefty punch too, and you still blocked it. Not bad at all." Alma observed the silver shield of light, as well as Eluria's breezy expression behind it. "Whoa. What's with that? You slotted some mana diffusion into it? That would block both physical and magical attacks then. You're pretty nifty, aren't you?"

"Mhm. I'm good at these things."

"Interesting. I take it you've got more up your sleeve?"

"Do you have any requests...?"

"Not really. Only that you come at me seriously." Alma wore a fearless grin as she pointed her battle-ax at the girl. "I wanna see how many bones I'll need to use against you."

The next moment, Alma's shadow began to writhe beneath her. Countless bones scraped and scratched against one another, sending eerie high-pitched noises rattling across the plains. Jet-black skeleton arms spawned from within her shadow like a den of serpents.

However, Eluria didn't even bat an eyelash. She simply gazed at the horde of large skeleton arms while twirling her staff around. "Then I'll give you all I've got."

Seeing the two of them prepare for battle, Raid raised his voice and called out to the other students. "Those of you whose legs haven't given out, help the others move back! And don't forget that guy who's out cold over there! I'm sure those two are being mindful, but you better watch out for any shock waves!"

"O-Okay!" Upon hearing his instructions, the students returned to their senses and moved to get some distance from the brewing battle. A couple retrieved Fareg, who had passed out after being knocked away, while others lent a shoulder to their classmates.

After seeing the rest of the class off, Raid turned toward Wisel and Millis. "What about you two? I'm gonna stay here since it looks like it's gonna be a fun watch, but you should move back with the rest if you don't want to get hurt."

Wisel shook his head. "I'd like to stay too. We have a special-class magician and someone who was able to block her attack. I believe there's much to learn from watching their fight up close."

"Aha ha... I don't think I could run even if I wanted to..." Millis whimpered, her legs trembling.

"Then stay behind me. I can deal with whatever comes our way."

Millis shakily nodded and scooted behind Raid.

"So that's a special-class magician's magic. Fascinating," Wisel marveled, placing his fingers by his magic glasses as he observed the two. "Her branch is...mainly black, isn't it?"

"Seems about right," Raid agreed. "Probably some blue mixed in too."

Magic could generally be classified based on its nature into six branches that were labeled as colors:

Red manifested and unleashed objects and phenomena.

Blue transformed the essence of objects and phenomena.

Green manipulated objects and living beings.

Yellow overwrote concepts and laws.

White strengthened preexisting qualities.

Black applied nonexistent qualities.

Magic formulae were constructed with each magician's most compatible branch as the core, then adding in other branches that would help serve the spell's purpose. Down the line, the spells were generally grouped as summoning magic, enhancement magic, spatial magic, teleportation magic, and so on, but those who specialized in the field identified them based on these six fundamental branches.

Additionally, the core branch of a spell depended solely on the magician's compatibility. Most magicians only had one color that they could use as the core, while some had two or three.

"Argh! Are you serious?! You're actually using it all!"

"Yeah. I told you I'd give you all I've got."

However, the founder of magic, the Sage, was a different story entirely. Her fighting style was the very embodiment of versatility. She created a tree and used its roots to entangle the approaching skeleton arms; parried the incoming blows with invisible walls; pressed the front lines back with a wall of light; and

used the openings she created to send beasts made of flames toward Alma. Eluria stayed true to her promise of "giving her all" and cast a breathtakingly wide array of magic. This was a feat only she could achieve because she could freely use all six branches as spell cores.

"Wow... Lady Eluria is fighting on equal footing with a special-class magician..."

"Yeah... It's amazing enough that she can deploy so much magic all at once, but the fact that she can control them all so precisely too... I'm truly at a loss for words." Wisel knit his brows together in confusion. "But from what Instructor Alma said earlier, Ms. Eluria should be limited to fifth-stratum magic and below, shouldn't she? Instructor Alma is clearly using much stronger magic, so nothing Ms. Eluria uses should stand a chance."

"But she's pushing back... No, she's even *overpowering* Ms. Alma's magic, isn't she?" Millis asked, wide-eyed.

As the two frowned in confusion, Raid cast them a glance and quietly asked, "Do you know how many spells she's using right now?"

"How many...?"

"I still can't believe it myself, but my glasses show that she's undoubtedly using dozens at once..."

"A thousand," Raid murmured.

Wisel and Millis froze, their eyes finally prying away from Eluria's figure to stare at Raid in shock. "What?"

"She's using a thousand spells. More than that, frankly."

"Wha... No, wait..." Millis sputtered. "More than a thousand...?"

"Right now, she's threading together multiple spells that are so intricate, they can't be detected on their own. Wisel, what your glasses picked up on are the finished products."

"Hang on... You mean..."

Each individual spell was certainly no stronger than fifth-stratum magic. However, even the stars were only minute specks that ultimately painted a tremendous and marvelous night sky altogether.

"She's constructing spells," Raid revealed, "not with mana but with other spells."

By deploying countless little spells and bundling them together, Eluria was able to offset the impact of Alma's higher-stratum magic through sheer magical mass. It was a ridiculous technique that no ordinary person could ever think up.

"I think she called it Polyaggregate Expansion." The sight of Eluria gracefully waving her staff around reminded him of her gallant figure on past battlefields. "Ah, that sure brings me back."

With a trembling voice, Wisel asked, "And you can see all of it...?"

"Of course I can," he answered, his gaze never once leaving the girl who wielded such beautifully honed technique and finesse atop the battlefield. "I've been watching her all this time, after all." Whenever he looked at her, even the battle-hardened Hero felt like a young boy captivated by the sight of countless stars spreading out endlessly across the night sky.

Even in this moment, he couldn't help the bright smile that made its way onto his face. "She's so earnest, so dazzling, I just can't bear to turn my eyes away."

Soon, a momentary lull came into Alma and Eluria's back-and-forth.

"So, this didn't work either, huh?" Alma sighed.

"But you fended off all my attacks. I'm impressed, Ms. Alma."

"I am supposed to be the instructor here, so I'm not sure how to feel 'bout that..."

"But," Eluria mumbled, "you're not fighting seriously yet, are you?"

That moment, the look on Alma's face changed. "That's right... At this point, I guess it'd be pretty rude of me not to give you my all too." Her lips curled into a smile as she stabbed the base of her battle-ax into the ground. The black cloth on its tip fluttered warningly like a flag in the wind. "Come. It's time for the march."

Heeding Alma's command, the skeleton arms that were peeking out of her shadow began to tremble. They squirmed and rattled and pushed against one

another. Like ferocious soldiers eager to jump into war, they stretched their arms out toward the surface.

"Begin the war, my Dead Man's Brigade."

The skeleton arms stretched from Alma's shadow, and the bodies they were attached to emerged—giants made entirely of bones. With their fleshless arms, they crawled up from the depths of the cramped shadow, springing up one after the other.

Countless armed skeleton warriors soon followed. Military engineers rode atop bone chariots, while dragoons soared through the air, standing upon dragons with rotten wings. On land, the cavalrymen rode headless horses, while rangers commanded beasts that were ready to chase and sink their teeth into any fleeing enemies. There was even a military band playing war songs that left any who listened trembling in fear.

The peaceful plains were drowned in an army that had crawled up from hell.

Alma lifted her battle-ax, hoisting the fluttering black flag with it. "Get ready, 'cause I'm gonna give you my all too." The commander of the dead army flashed their enemy a fearless smile, her golden eyes firm and unwavering. Then, she slowly and ominously parted her lips.

"If you want to get past this black flag, then you'd better come at me ready to die."

Her heavy and foreboding warning elicited a reaction from Eluria for the first time. The girl froze, her eyes trembling and voice coming out in a shaky mumble. "How...do you know that line?" She began constructing her magic, hostility brewing ferociously in her gaze.

"Oh dear. Did I touch a nerve?"

"Yeah... There's only one person in this world who can say that." Glaring at the army of skeletons, Eluria brandished her staff and summoned countless magic circles around her. "I have some questions for you, so I'll be taking it up a notch."

"Go right ahead—since I am too!" Alma waved her large battle-ax like a conductor orchestrating the battlefield. A skeleton giant responded to her will

by swinging the large sword in its hands, unleashing a heavy blow that sought to trample over all, no matter friend or foe.

Eluria squinted at the incoming attack and began stacking her magic up to defend—until the sword soundlessly came to a halt.

This time, it was Alma who was stunned. "What...?"

The sword her skeleton giant had swung, ready to mow the entire battlefield down, had been stopped by a single human's hand.

"Sorry for crashing your little spar."

Puzzled, the skeleton giant began to struggle, trying to pry the sword away, but to no avail. Its blade remained stuck in place—that is, held by Raid's right hand with nothing but pure strength.

"But you see... I can't just sit still after hearing someone use my line."

He tightened his grip over the blade—then *slammed* it down to the ground with a deafening roar, along with the giant that was holding it, no less. Raid didn't stop there—he swung the giant around and mowed down the surrounding skeletons, smashing them all to bits and pieces in the process. A single move was all he needed to take a bite out of Alma's magical army of the dead, leaving behind a cloud of dust large enough to cover their surroundings within the vast plains.

Alma warily narrowed her eyes at the spectacle she had just witnessed. "And I'm guessing you're the other 'extraordinary' student?"

"Raid Freeden. Nice meeting ya, Teach."

"Well, I'll be... Looks like I've got another oddball on my hands." Alma looked him up and down. "You obviously didn't use magic, so how were you able to stop mine?"

"I happen to have some questions for you too. How 'bout a quid pro quo?"



That black cloth on Alma's battle-ax... It had taken Raid a while to notice since the crest was mostly faded and barely discernible.

However, hearing the line Alma uttered earlier gave him certainty. That was something Raid had always declared on the battlefield, back when he fought for a certain nation as their Hero. It was a nation that had been wiped off the face of this world and should no longer exist.

Raid glared fiercely at Alma and demanded, "Why the *hell* do you have Altane's standard with you?"

However, the woman's golden eyes revealed nothing but a simmering spirit for battle. "Who knows?" She tightened her grip on her battle-ax. "I don't really get what you're on about, but why should I answer first when—"

"WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU ALL DOING?!"

Alma was interrupted by an ear-piercing bellow that shook the entire space. Even the two who were in the middle of their confrontation had to cover their ears at the sheer volume that assaulted their eardrums.

"Ah, crap... Can you actually see what goes on in here?"

"Ya damn right I can!" Elise's angry voice continued to rattle the air. "I just came to take a little peek since I was worried about those two, and lo and behold, I find you using tenth-stratum magic against your students! What the hell, Alma?!"

"Um... I thought it might be rude of me not to?"

"Well, cut it out! Besides, we're the ones who asked Eluria to limit her magic, yet here you are busting out your tenth-stratum magic on the girl! Have you no shame?!"

"None at all. Can we continue?"

"I literally just told you to cut it out!!! This thing wasn't made to withstand magic this strong, you hear?! I'm gonna get real mad if you break my magic device!"

"Okay, okay, fine..." Alma sighed in disappointment as she withdrew her skeleton giants back into her shadow. "You heard her, Eluria. Guess we gotta

shelve our battle for now."

"Mm... Too bad."

"Well, from the looks of it, you'll definitely become a special-class magician, no sweat. Let's just make sure to have our rematch someplace Elise can't find us then."

"Okay. I'll look forward to it."

"And you're planning this right in front of me now?!"

Alma and Eluria smiled wryly at one another under the headmaster's angry rebuke.

"And Raid," Alma said next. "You good with this too?"

He was silent for a moment before closing his eyes in resignation. "Well, it's not like I have much of a choice."

"Don't worry 'bout that. I'll make some time for us to have a nice little chat later," she assured him. "Still, I did come here as an instructor, so I can't keep my other students waiting too long, now can I?"

With all that settled, Alma turned her attention back to the rest of the class. "All right, spar's over," she declared with a crisp clap. "Everyone, gather 'round! As for that guy who passed out, just dump some water over him or something."

The students, who had put quite a bit of distance between themselves and the battle, began shuffling back at their instructor's call.

"To conclude, you'll all be able to have flashy brawls like ours if you work hard at becoming a magician." Alma wore a wide grin and placed a hand on her chest. "So make sure to give it your all!"

However, the students had just witnessed a battle between those who stood at the apex of all magicians. Their expressions were crestfallen, looking as if their confidence had been snuffed out of their very souls.

"So that's how special-class magicians fight... They're on a whole 'nother level..."

"I felt kind of good about myself after scoring well on the entrance exam, but

now I don't even know if I can become a magician at all..."

"Same here... I guess our magic doesn't actually amount to much..."

The students' glum remarks had a scowl forming on Alma's face as well. "Hey, what's gotten into you all? Didn't you kids work really hard to get into this institute? You'll never be able to grab what's already within your reach if you give up before even trying, you know?"

"No, well... I suppose that's true..."

"Besides, you all saw how awesome I was earlier, didn't you? Well, this very awesome magician is going to be teaching you for one whole year. You should know what that means." Alma hefted her battle-ax over her shoulder and flashed her students a bright and trusty grin. Behind that grin was the confidence of a proud warrior who ruled over the battlefield and bravely paved the way for all. "So believe in yourself—that you can become stronger than anyone else—and follow my lead."

Before her fearless smile and uplifting words, the students held their heads up high with reinvigorated looks. "Yes, ma'am!!!"

Alma nodded, satisfied. "Good answer! Now then, we'll start training with the most basic of basics you'll need as a magician!"

The students straightened their backs and waited for Alma's next words with bated breaths. Their instructor opened her mouth, drew in a short breath, and declared:

"All of you, get to running till your legs give out!!!"

The absurd training course that came out of her mouth completely betrayed the bright and enthusiastic grin on her face.



The students had been released from the alternate plane once class time officially ended.

"Ahhh... I can feel all my exhaustion melting away..." Millis deflated into the enormous bath with a long sigh of relief.

"Large baths sure are relaxing," Eluria agreed with a small sigh of her own.

"I know, right? Having my own tub in the room is convenient and all, but it just doesn't feel the same as the hot springs I always went to near the mountains!"

The two girls were having a nice and relaxing soak in the dormitory bath after Alma's intense training.

"Um... Thank you for inviting me," said Eluria.

"Oh, it's nothing! Actually, I should be thanking you for carrying me all the way here, Lady Eluria..." Millis bowed her head with a crooked smile.

Eluria had ended up with the task of carrying her classmates back to the student dormitories, as barely any of them could move a muscle after Alma's training. Unfortunately, she couldn't use teleportation magic to efficiently send them over, since any magic that influenced space was of the sixth stratum at minimum. Her classmates had to settle with being transported to the dorms while magically tied together like a bundle of hay.

In any case, Eluria was quite happy that Millis invited her. She was far too shy to ever brave such a large public bath on her own.

"I still can't believe you and Raid were fit as a fiddle after that hellish training... You two are certainly something else."

"We're both used to it." Moving without sleep for days at a time and missing out on sufficient rest were all par for the course during wartime. Compared to those days, this little training session was far from exhausting. If anything, Eluria felt her *mind* was more worn down.

"Ah, but it's too bad your spar was interrupted partway, isn't it?" Sensing her friend's dampened mood, Millis smiled and clenched her fists in encouragement. "But you'd normally be able to use tenth-stratum magic, so I'd say you essentially won!"

"Mm... Thanks," Eluria replied absently. Contrary to Millis's assumption, Eluria didn't actually care about how that spar had turned out. No, something else was weighing on her mind.

How had Alma known the line Raid had said so often in their past life? And why was she hoisting the standard of his homeland—a place that had been long

forgotten by history? Raid should be on his way to meet up with Alma in pursuit of those answers right about now, but Eluria just couldn't get the two of them out of her mind, nor clear this unsettling feeling from her chest.

However, she was soon snapped out of her thoughts when she noticed Millis staring at her. "What is it...?"

"Well, I've been thinking..." the girl began. "Lady Eluria, aren't you just too cute? Your hair is silky smooth, your skin is so fair and unblemished, and your breasts are really nice too... I see the gods have their favorites!"

"I-I don't think my breasts are *that* big..." Eluria mumbled, submerging herself into the water. "I think...yours are bigger."

"Tut-tut, Lady Eluria. 'Tis not the size but the shape that matters most!" Millis preached. "And not only is your chest perfectly shaped, but even your butt, thighs, back, and waist look so soft and smooth and supple to the touch! Truly an SSS-class figure! I believe the rest of humanity would gladly agree with a roaring round of applause!"

Millis's lively voice, echoing within the bathroom walls, began to attract the curious stares of the other students.

"Sh-Shush! You're too loud...!" Eluria hurriedly hushed the noisy girl before letting out a small, nearly inaudible sigh of relief.

"By the way," Millis continued. "How do you spend your days off, Lady Eluria?"

The girl tilted her head. "My days off?"

"Uh-huh. We'll be allowed to leave the campus on our days off, so I was curious as to how the esteemed young lady of House Caldwin enjoys spending her free time."

"I like to read and nap."

"The esteemed young lady lives even more leisurely than the bumpkin," Millis whispered, aghast.

"I also taste test different kinds of tea sometimes."

"Ooh, nice! Tea in my hometown is practically synonymous with dandelions,

so I'd love to hear about the more luxurious kinds!"

"Dandelion tea is nice too."

"You've tried it before?! That stuff just tastes like roots with a dash of soil!"

"But it's really healthy. I like those kinds of drinks too."

"Oh, I get that! It kind of grows on you, doesn't it?" Millis beamed.

Although Eluria wasn't very sociable, she didn't hate people like Millis who proactively started conversations, asked questions, and even reached out to her, like how Millis had invited her to the bath. In fact, Eluria didn't hate socializing at all—she just wasn't good at carrying conversations while reading others' moods. That was why she could be very talkative when it came to topics she could contribute to such as magic, but was hopeless with anything else.

In that sense, Millis was just the kind of person Eluria could get along with. Besides, she was also just a kind and likable girl to begin with. Earlier, when she'd noticed that Eluria seemed to be feeling down, Millis had changed the topic and brightened up the mood for her.

So this time, Eluria thought to bring up a topic of her own. "By the way, Millis," she began. "There's something I want to ask you..."

"Yes? How may I help you?"

"I want to give someone a present, but I'm not sure what would make a good gift."

"Oh, you're giving Raid a gift?"

"I-I didn't say it was for him yet...!"

"Well, you do have 'I love Raid' written all over your face for everyone to see..."

"N-No, I don't..."

"Ah. I see." Millis solemnly gazed into the distance. "So, you didn't even realize it yourself. Mm-hm. Okay."

Eluria had yet to confess her feelings to Raid, so she had been trying her hardest not to be too conscious of him, lest it show in the flush of her cheeks.

However, it turned out that she had long been found out by everyone else around them, if Millis's reaction was anything to go by.

Even now, the girl was staring blankly into the void. "I get the feeling he's kind of noticed it too but is *veeery* slightly off about something, but you're also a *teeeeny* bit off about another thing, which means you're both practically in sync anyway, which ultimately ends with us hoping you two will just hurry up and exchange your wedding vows already. Strange, isn't it?"

"I-I'm trying to ask you about a present here...!" Eluria sandwiched Millis's cheeks and pulled them back on topic. "I want to give him something to celebrate his enrollment."

"Hm... Honestly, I haven't known you two for very long, so I'm not quite sure if I'm the right person to ask..."

"Well, I've never given anyone a present to begin with..."

"Ahhh. In that case, the safe choice would be to gift him something you think he'd like."

Eluria tried to think about what Raid might like. There was a very, very, very long silence between the two girls before she finally managed, "A whetstone and some oil...?"

"Oh, wow. I can *actually* see him being happy with that," Millis said, caught between shock and exasperation.

"I'm pretty proud of the idea myself."

"I suppose I did enjoy taking care of my work tools quite a bit. Since Raid is also from the boonies, I don't see why he wouldn't like that kind of present."

Of course, Eluria had proposed the idea with the upkeep of weapons and armor in mind, but what Millis said was certainly more appropriate for the modern era.

"Still..." Millis continued, frowning slightly. "That would work as an ordinary thank-you gift, but if you're hoping to commemorate something, then wouldn't it be better to gift him a nonconsumable?"

Eluria blinked. "Really...?"

"Yes. That way, the gift can serve as a reminder of whatever it is that you're commemorating."

"Ohhh." Eluria nodded eagerly at Millis's advice. This time, she tried to think of something Raid would like that wasn't a consumable good.

Another very long and stifling silence passed.

"I can't...think of anything..."

"Please stop looking like it's the end of the world! It's too early to give up!"

Unfortunately, Millis's words were of no comfort for Eluria. Although she only recently started spending time with Raid, they had still known each other for over fifty years now. She found it hard to believe—and frankly quite depressing—that *nothing* came to mind despite their long history. To make matters worse, she was over two hundred years old now. The fact that she couldn't even think of a present for the person she liked left Eluria feeling increasingly frustrated with herself.

"I am so very sad..." Eluria sank into the tub, her words bubbling miserably from beneath the water.

"Nooo! Don't do it, Lady Eluria! You can't wash your problems away like that!" Millis frantically pulled her back up, although she was unable to stop the girl from metaphorically drowning in her sorrows. "Well... I suppose Raid *does* give off the impression that he has his whole life together," she acknowledged with a sigh. "So he's rather hard to read. He's not exactly the type who's easy to shop for."

"Yeah..."

"Then how about this? Try thinking back to a time he looked really happy—you might be able to work something out from there."

"A time when Raid was happy..."

For the third time that night, a long and thoughtful silence fell between the girls. Eluria sifted through her memories, searching desperately for any wherein Raid seemed to be enjoying himself. Finally, she found her answer.

"Raid...looks really happy whenever he fights."

Millis blinked. "Huh? You mean, like a battle junkie?"

"No. You see, whenever he's fighting, he always has this really bright smile on his face." It was a smile so dazzling, so full of life and mirth, she just couldn't bear to turn her eyes away—the smile that Eluria had loved for the longest time.

The girl uttered her heartfelt wish, a smile softly tugging on her lips, "I want to give him something that will make him smile that way again."

"OH MY GAAAHD!!!" The next moment, Millis unleashed a feral squeal and pounced on Eluria. "That was the cutest darn thing I've seen all week! That sweet maiden-in-love smile! Gosh! Are you trying to make *me* fall for you, Lady Eluria?!" she gushed, relentlessly patting the girl's head and nuzzling her cheek.

"Huh? W-Wait, that tickles...!" Eluria's hands flailed helplessly in the water.



After Millis got her fill, she clenched her fists with wide and blazing eyes. "All right! I give you my full and wholehearted support! If there's anything I can help you with, anything at all, then just say the word and it shall be done!"

Eluria blinked. "Really?"

"But of course! Why, I would even accompany you to the ends of this earth!"

"Are you sure?"

"On second thought, please keep your requests within reasonable bounds!!!"

Millis was a very honest girl, through and through. Of course, just the sentiment alone made Eluria very happy.

"Shall we finish up our bath now?" Millis proposed. "We got so engrossed in our conversation that we've been in here for quite a while. It wouldn't do for us to fall sick from soaking too long."

Eluria agreed with a short nod. The two girls got up from the bath and returned to the dressing room together. However, as Eluria wiped herself dry and put her undergarments back on, Millis couldn't help but cast a few glances her way.

"By the way," she reluctantly began. "I was wondering this earlier as well, but..."

"Mm. What is it?"

Millis's face was slightly flushed as she leaned in closer. "About your underwear..." she whispered. "May I ask if those are your tastes or his?"

Eluria blinked. "My underwear?"

"Um, it's just—the design is saucier than I could have ever imagined."

Eluria looked down at her own undergarments. They were black and decorated with flowery lace. The girl tilted her head in confusion. "Is it weird?"

"Well, no... It certainly suits you. It's just that it's such a stark contrast to the docile impression you normally give off that it almost feels immoral. I'm also a girl, but even I find myself feeling a little stimulated...!"

"Hm... I don't really care how my undergarments look, but my mother said I

needed undergarments befitting the daughter of House Caldwin. So she got these tailored for me before I left for the Institute."

"Wow... Your mother is more prepared than you are..." Millis lamented. Seeing Eluria cluelessly tilt her head yet again, all she could do was place a supportive hand on her friend's shoulder. "Lady Eluria, let's go buy some ordinary underwear for you on our next day off."

"I have enough, though...?"

"Those must be saved for when they are needed the most. Only when the time comes for you to challenge yourself must you seek out that underwear and find the courage within you."

"Um... O-Okay...?" Eluria could only helplessly nod her head in utter confusion in the face of Millis's uncharacteristically solemn expression.



After parting with Eluria at the student dormitories, Raid had returned to the empty classroom and waited. Some time later, the door loudly slid open, and he slowly lifted his head.

"Sorry for the wait. Elise just wouldn't stop nagging my ears off..." Alma sheepishly scratched her head while smiling apologetically.

However, Raid didn't deign her casual greeting with a response. He wasn't here for a chat with his instructor; right now, she was a possible enemy he needed to be wary of.

"Since you came, I take it you're willing to talk." His homeland of Altane no longer existed in the present and had even vanished from history itself. Despite that, Alma bore their standard on her battle-ax. "I'll ask you again," he said, voice low and dark. "Why do you have Altane's standard with you?"

Alma, however, looked puzzled. "From how you're speaking, I'm guessing 'Altane' is the name of a country?"

Raid's eyes narrowed. "You'd better not be feigning ignorance after waving that thing around on your axe."

"I'm being honest with you here. If anything, the fact that you're calling it a

standard at all has *me* scratching my head." Alma heaved out a sigh. "So here's *my* question: how did you know that piece of cloth was a standard?"

"Does that mean I shouldn't have been able to tell?"

"That's right. As you said, the cloth on my battle-ax is definitely a standard. But you see...only those who have inherited the Kanos name should know that." Alma's eyes narrowed into a wary glare. "Answer me. Who the hell are you?"

Raid met her blazing golden eyes and fell silent in thought. Alma didn't show any reaction whatsoever upon hearing Altane's name, yet she knew that what she had was a standard. Such a thing would normally be impossible, but Raid had already experienced the impossible. After all, the Hero and the Sage had reincarnated together a thousand years after their death—and he was sure that this new incongruity he was facing was connected to that mystery as well.

Having made his decision, Raid nodded firmly. "Sorry. I can't answer that."

The woman hummed, unimpressed. "What, so you're allowed to feign ignorance? Is that it?"

"Not exactly. I won't answer *that* question, but I'll answer anything else. You're free to use my answers to make your own guess as to who I am."

Alma paused for a moment before the corners of her lips slowly curled up in realization. "I get it. Clever, aren't you?"

This way, Alma would be free to choose what questions to ask—in other words, what *information* to reveal—and if Raid managed to provide the specific answers she was looking for, then she could make her own deductions regarding his identity.

On the other hand, Raid could get her to one-sidedly provide information without giving any himself—and if Alma could deduce his identity despite that, then she would have proved herself worthy of his trust.

"All right. Go on. I've been asking away all this while, so it's your turn now."

"In that case..." Alma hummed in thought. "What do you think of the moon shining up in the night sky?"

"Beautiful, except when planning a night ambush. That's just my opinion, though."

"I don't mind. Then what's your opinion of...a meticulous person?"

"Serious and diligent. Not very flexible, but not bad at heart. I prefer someone like that as my subordinate."

"I see. How about..."

The question-and-answer continued with the two dancing around their words and trying to get a read on each other. Alma asked a wide range of questions, from harmless ones like "How would you react to being rudely awoken from a nap?" and "What do you think of the sea?" to more specific questions like "How would you handle someone who was a disruption to order?" and "What's the most important thing to consider on the battlefield?"

At some point in this back-and-forth, the tension had fallen from Alma's face. All that remained was a soft and comfortable smile on her lips, as if she were flipping through an album filled with precious memories.

Finally, she nodded. "The next question will be my last."

"Oh? Done already?"

"Yes." Her eyes glinted meaningfully. "Because I'm certain *you* will be able to answer this."

Raid already had an inkling as to what her final question would be. Everything Alma had asked until now were things only a certain person would know—someone Raid had only known for a few years at most but hadn't forgotten about just yet. That person had accompanied him on the battlefield in his final years, listened with utmost sincerity to even the most mundane chatter and unmemorable small talk they exchanged, and kept a constant record of it all in his journal.

He was an exasperatingly yet reliably meticulous man.

"Who am 'I,' Your Excellency?"

Raid's lips naturally tugged into a smile. "There was only one person who called me Your Excellency instead of General."

He was the Altanian soldier who stayed by the Hero's side as his exclusive standard-bearer—the same man who had grieved the Sage's death and shed tears for her on the day Raid last saw him.

"Isn't that right, 'Ryatt'?" As the answer to this final question, Raid softly called the name of his former subordinate whom he now saw in the woman before him.

Alma let out a quiet breath. "So the person referred to as 'His Excellency' in the journal... That was you," she whispered, her golden eyes glistening with tears.

"And you?" Raid asked. "How are you related to Ryatt?"

"He's my ancestor—the very one who wrote the journal that's been passed down through House Kanos for generations," answered Alma. "He also served as His Excellency's standard-bearer."

Outside of battle, Ryatt had usually worked as Raid's assistant, looking up to the elderly general with envy and respect. He was meticulous, serious, and not very flexible—to the point where he'd never failed to record any insignificant little conversation they'd had each day.

"You're saying that thing was passed down for a thousand years?" Raid huffed. "He really was a meticulous guy."

"That was just how much he respected you."

A millennia was by no means a short span of time, but Ryatt's efforts had seen his journal through—all to leave behind the vestiges of the Hero he had come to respect and admire.

Alma sighed. "As promised, I won't ask about your circumstances, even if I am pretty darn curious as to how someone from a thousand years ago is alive right now."

"That'd be for the best. Honestly, I have no idea either. I came to talk to you to find some clues."

"Ahhh... I see. In that case, I'll share whatever I can with you. If I don't, my ancestor might just start haunting me in my sleep."

"That guy was pretty scary whenever he got mad," Raid agreed as he and Alma both chuckled. "Then let me ask you again: you really don't know about Altane?"

"Not at all. I've never heard of that country before. The journal was passed down along with the standard, but it never mentioned that place."

That wasn't too unthinkable. Although Ryatt greatly respected Raid, he was terribly disillusioned by their nation's command to advance their army after the Sage's passing. It was well within the realm of possibility that he had intentionally purged the name "Altane" from his journal thereafter.

However, there were *other* words that had apparently not come up where they should have.

"Have you heard of 'the Hero' and 'Raid Freeden'?"

Alma nodded. "Sure have. I've dabbled in archaeology and history while conducting magic research, so I've picked up a few elven stories and legends along the way."

"But not from Ryatt's journal?"

"Nope. Though I was wondering if they were related somehow..."

The title of Hero had never gone unmentioned when Ryatt spoke about Raid. Ryatt may have addressed him as "Your Excellency" on a regular basis, but there had been times when he used his title of "Hero" too. It was unthinkable that he'd never used it even once in his journal—which could only mean one thing:

"Someone intentionally erased the Hero's existence from history."

Alma knit her brows together. "But we're talking about a personal journal here. I'd understand public records, but privately owned documents? There's no way. Besides, wouldn't there be traces of falsification?"

"You're right. Common sense dictates it's impossible. But..." Raid cast his eyes down, his gaze glinting sharply. "Far too many things outside the realm of common sense have happened already."

The same strangeness could be applied to the nation known as Altane. Losing their Hero, then the war, then even their place in history... It was a rather

understandable series of events, so Raid never paid it any mind. However, his reunion with Eluria had rekindled the spark of doubt within him. No matter how it came to fall, Altane had still been a large nation that spanned half the continent—and Vegalta had triumphed over said nation to bring the land together. Why wouldn't it be included in their history?

It was for this reason that Raid had spent much of his stay in the Caldwin estate poring through their history books and records. The fact that he found not even the slightest trace of Altane within those pages had turned his suspicion into certainty.

"But it also doesn't make sense that it's still being passed down among the elves," he continued. "Why not erase everything while they were at it?"

Alma held her chin in thought. "Could it be because it was passed down *orally* in that case?" she proposed. "Because elves are unaging and long-lived, they have a tradition of passing important information and techniques down orally rather than via tangible records. There *are* books about the Hero and the Sage, but those were supposedly based on the folk tales."

Raid listened intently to Alma's theory and nodded. "I see. That would explain why the information exists only among the elves."

Elves had nearly thrice the lifespan of humans and typically lived for almost three hundred years. If the method that this hypothetical culprit used worked on documents and written text but couldn't affect people's memories, then that would certainly explain how the existence of the Hero had only been passed down among the elves.

"I highly doubt that the elves began warming up to humans within just a few decades, so they wouldn't have carelessly shared that information with the humans—all the more if they deemed it important enough to pass on orally," Raid surmised. "Within that time, everyone from that era eventually died, so the information ended up circulating as a fable of sorts instead. That seems to be the most plausible flow of events."

"By then, the Sage's existence was already a fundamental pillar for Vegalta as a nation," Alma added. "Even if stories and accounts of someone who stood on par with her popped up, those in power probably didn't bother drawing any

attention to it since it wouldn't serve their narrative."

Thus, the existence of Altane and its Hero were thoroughly covered up. This all pointed to the fact that *something* had happened after Raid and Eluria died. However, there was far too little information at present for him to even hazard a guess.

"Oh well," Raid groused. "Just let me know if you think of anything else. You'd probably know more than me, since you mentioned studying history and whatever else."

"Well, sure..." Alma gave him a pointed look. "Still, you're already treating this special-class magician here like a subordinate instead of an instructor... You've got guts, I'll give you that."

"Why not? Consider it my privilege as your ancestor's superior officer."

"Also," she continued. "You don't have to answer this, but could Eluria also be...?"

"I'll leave that up to your imagination."

Alma looked up to the ceiling, face pale and gaze blank. "Oh, wow... Did I just pick a fight with the *actual* Sage? We even agreed to have a rematch after she graduates... I'm gonna end up a pile of ashes if she goes all out on me, aren't I?" No instructor could've expected that the cheeky student they taught a little lesson to would turn out to be the very Sage who *created* the magic system they fought with.

Raid shrugged. "Welp. Better just brace yourself for a beating then."

"Have you no heart for your precious subordinate's descendant?"

"Unfortunately, I'm just an incompetent little student who can't even use magic. You're on your own, my dear special-class magician *instructor*."

"Ha ha ha... God, what a bratty student I have...!"

Raid boldly ignored Alma's glare and quietly stood from his seat. "Let's stop here," he concluded. "I'll be counting on your help from now on."

The black-haired woman also got on her feet. She performed a prim salute that reminded him of his past subordinate, but with a bright and toothy grin on

her face. "As you wish, Your Excellency Freeden."

Chapter Four

When Raid told Eluria everything he'd learned from Alma, she responded with a few nods, a few hums, and punctuated it all with a very curt "I see." Frankly, he was expecting more shock in the mix, but he realized that this wasn't exactly an unprecedented turn of events from Eluria's perspective—after all, her very own disciple was the one who had passed the Caldwin name down for generations.

As for any questions that cropped up, Eluria similarly concluded that they were lacking too much information at this point to deduce what could've happened in the distant past. For now, all they could do was to carry on as usual while gathering information. At the end of the day, they were still students of the Institute, so there was a limit to how much investigating they could do on their own. Now that they had a special-class magician on their side, it wasn't a bad move to leave some things to her in the meantime.

Thus, their days in the Institute passed uneventfully. Of course, they still had daily, hellish practical lessons from Alma, after which Wisel and Millis would always wistfully mutter, "I hope we live to see yet another day," but Raid could see that the two of them were making progress.

Their first exam was fast approaching. It was at this point, just two days before the big event, that Millis asked their group after their meal in the dorm cafeteria, "Does anyone have plans for our day off?"

"I'm going back home to do some maintenance on my magic gear," answered Wisel. "I've got a lot, after all."

"Ah..." Millis nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like a lot of work."

Over the past month, they had gotten to know one another's skills and strengths. Wisel wasn't particularly outstanding when it came to magic, but he had great on-field adaptability thanks to all the magic gear he had at his disposal. This meant he specialized in support rather than actual combat.

"I plan on making full use of my day off to prepare for the exam," he finished.

"Whaaat?" Millis drawled, blatantly disappointed. "And here I was thinking the four of us could hang out together on our first day off..."

"Didn't they tell us that the day off before an exam is for resting our bodies and preparing our gear?" Raid pointed out. "You're probably the only one who's raring to turn that day off into a day out."

The day after tomorrow was the day of their simulation exam, which would impact their individual grades. The Institute had set the day prior to it as a day off not only for the students to face the exam fully rested, but also to give the instructors and staff members time to do any setup or preparations needed for the exam.

"Eluria praised your mana control, but you do remember she also told you to work harder on your combat skills, right?" Raid sighed. "Go do some independent training or something."

"But... But we already go through Ms. Alma's training from hell every day, don't we?!" Millis stubbornly wailed as she threw herself over the table. "And the capital is so close, I can practically smell it! Especially since I've smelled nothing but mountains, meltwater, and sheep my whole life! Can't I have some fun as a reward for all my efforts?!"

"I understand how you feel. But you should just give up."

"Raid, you heartless fiend! Don't you know girls can't live without treating themselves every now and then?! Tell him, Lady Eluria!" She puffed her cheeks up defiantly and whipped her head around to get her friend's support.

However, Eluria said nothing. She even seemed to be nodding off.

"Oh dear... She looks really tired."

"She's been this way for a while now." Raid sighed. "She stays up late conducting some sort of magic research. Some nights I even end up going to bed before her. It's taking longer to wake her up in the mornings too."

"Now that you mention it, you've been barely making it to class on time, like you did the first day."

Wisel's observation certainly wasn't wrong. The "floatiness" that Raid had gotten a taste of that first morning had made a comeback in recent days, leaving him thoroughly drained each time. He'd had to coax Eluria into the bath, help her get dressed while blindfolded, and sometimes he'd even resorted to carrying her to class on his back.

"I can't imagine she's studying for the exam, and there's no way she's this worn out from Alma's training... I'm a bit worried."

"Oh... Sh-She's probably fine!" Millis insisted. "Everyone in the Institute is paying close attention to her, so she might just be working extra hard to meet their expectations!"

Raid narrowed his eyes at the girl. "Do you know something?" His gaze only sharpened when Millis visibly flinched and began sweating bullets.

Recently, the two had been going to the large bath together every night. Sometimes, Eluria would even head to Millis's room, saying she was going to teach her magic. Raid never said anything about it since he figured they were having some quality girl talk...but now, that didn't seem to be the case.

"B-But what about you, Raid?! You now have as many eyes on you as Lady Eluria, so you should be careful too!" Sensing the tides turning against her, Millis blatantly redirected the conversation.

Motivation aside, what she said was certainly true. Everybody knew that Alma, a special-class magician, had become an instructor, so they had naturally heard about how Eluria fought on equal footing with her, as well as how Raid stopped her tenth-stratum magic with his bare hands and mowed it all down to boot. The story spread among the students like wildfire, so Raid was starting to garner some attention now too.

"Also," she added, "you and Ms. Alma have really been getting along recently, haven't you?"

Wisel hummed. "Come to think of it, I heard her call you 'Your Excellency' before. What was that all about?"

"Oh... It's kinda like a nickname. She's the grandchild of an old acquaintance who used to call me that, you see."

"No, I'm afraid I don't see..." Millis deadpanned. "How do you even end up with that kind of nickname to begin with?"

"I just kept beating an old man at chess... Something like that."

Ever since their talk, Raid would sometimes meet with Alma after class to exchange information. Over the course of these meetups, however, calling him "Your Excellency" had become a habit for her. Now, whenever they'd run into each other in the halls, she would casually greet him, "Oh! Hey there, Your Excellency!" and leave Raid to bear the brunt of the curious stares of those who'd heard. He'd told her to cut it out, but the woman had just laughed him off and told him to say it was a nickname or something. She was so ridiculously carefree, Raid almost couldn't believe she was Ryatt's descendant.

"Well, I'm at the mercy of the exam conditions anyway. I might end up utterly helpless without magic. I won't know till the day of."

Wisel cocked his head. "That's certainly quite the handicap, but your strength is so far removed from the realm of common sense, I think you'll manage something anyway."

"Agreed! I mean, you could even stop Ms. Alma's magic!"

Raid smiled sheepishly at his friends' encouragement—when a bold and spiteful voice cut into their conversation.

"Tsk... The peasants are so rowdy today."

They turned their heads to find Fareg glaring daggers at them. Although he didn't look as worn out as the other students, he certainly wasn't in any better of a mood.

"As if everyone fawning over such a lowly commoner wasn't unpleasant enough," he hissed. "Now, I also have to deal with riffraff who've mistaken this cafeteria for a playground."

"Oh... I-I'm sorry." Millis meekly bowed her head, genuinely apologetic for having been too loud.

Fareg snorted at the girl. "Do commoners not even know how to apologize properly? When bowing to those above you, you must prostrate yourself until

your forehead touches the ground."

Millis's brow furrowed in frustration. "I will apologize for causing a ruckus," she said again. "But you have no right to speak to me that way."

"What's this? You dare talk back to me?" The aristocrat's lips twisted into a devilish smirk. "I'll have you know that we're worlds apart, you and I—be it our worth in this country...or our talent at carrying on the Sage's legacy!"

Fareg drew his magic gear from his waist and deployed it into a short sword. The sight of Millis's dumbfounded expression stretched his grin wider over his face.

"Lowly peasants should know who they're not allowed to bark at!!!"

The tip of Fareg's sword flashed brightly, crimson flames bursting forth and roaring out toward Millis—but their path was cut off by a single hand. Raid crushed the flames in his grip and nonchalantly shook his left hand, brushing the embers off.

He hadn't even bothered turning around. "Hey, kid."

"'K-Kid'...?! You dare call the proud son of House Verminant a—"

"Oh, you're definitely a kid, if I've ever seen one." Raid's eyes slid to the left, piercing Fareg with a glare. "Do you understand what you just did?"

Fareg scoffed. "Obviously, I was teaching this uncouth peasant a—" He was cut off with a short yelp, unable to finish his own sentence.

Raid had stood from his seat and grabbed Fareg by the crown of his head. "Doesn't seem like you do, so let me spell it out for you," he said, darkness in his tone. "Magic is something that has been used to take countless lives. You just drew it against another person—so I take it you're prepared to be killed in turn?"

Pinned under the man's oppressive gaze, Fareg couldn't utter a word.

"You said something 'bout the Sage's legacy? Well, guess what? That Sage made magic with everything on the line and *never* used it as thoughtlessly as you did. It's not something for a brat like you to play around with like a toy."

The grip on his head tightened, and a pained groan escaped Fareg's lips.

"If you wanna brag, then use your own achievements instead of your house's prestige. If someone's pissing you off, then show 'em how it's done instead of yapping on like a spoiled brat. And if you can't do any of that..." Raid released him with a shove. "Then you're the one who needs to learn his place here."

The aristocrat staggered backward. "Ugh... Y-You savage brute...!"

"So I got demoted from commoner to brute, huh?" Raid sighed. "Well, this brute's got a bullheaded kid to punish." He reached out toward the short sword lying on the ground.

A crisp sound rang in the air as Fareg's magic gear snapped into two.

"MY GEAAAR!!!"

Raid breezily tossed the broken sword aside. "We'll call it even with this. Now get lost."

"M-My gear..." Fareg fell to his knees, trembling. "After father told me to take good care of it too...!"

"Stay strong, Lord Fareg!"

"We can just tape it back together! The master might not even notice!"

As Fareg sat there looking like his soul had been sucked out of his body, his two followers frantically hauled him out of the cafeteria. Raid watched them flee before returning to his seat.

"You okay, Millis?"

"Oh, yes... Thank you very much..." The girl nodded in a daze. Then, she gasped and snapped her head up. "Wait, no! I am *not* okay! What do you think you're doing, looking all cool while Lady Eluria isn't watching?! Are you an idiot?!"

"Oh, the things I deal with..." Raid gazed exhaustedly into the distance.

Wisel hummed. "Actually, I'm surprised none of that woke her up."

They turned their heads to find Eluria swaying precariously on her seat with her eyes closed.

"Lady Eluria, wake up," said Millis as she shook the girl by her shoulders. "You

mustn't sleep here."

"Hn...?" Eluria blearily opened her eyes and rubbed them for a while, before slowly getting up...and plopping back down on Raid's lap. She shifted her position for a moment, patted Raid's chest like a pillow, and finally hummed in satisfaction before falling right back asleep.

Raid's gaze narrowed. "I think she took that a bit too literally."

"Huh? What on earth? What is this cute little creature?" Millis tilted her head as she observed the sleeping Eluria.

"It looks like her homing instinct has registered Raid as her nesting territory," Wisel noted as if studying a migratory animal.

Raid looked back down at the girl leaning against him and began shaking her shoulders. "Get up, Eluria. You should sleep in the dorm room."

Eluria squirmed on his lap and began nuzzling her head against his chest. "Nu," she replied very intelligently.

Silence.

"Wait," Raid said, aghast. "Wait, hang on! You get floaty even with just a nap?!"

"'Floaty'?" Millis echoed in confusion. "What is that even supposed to mean...?"

"It's such a pain in the ass to explain..." Raid took another look at Eluria, and there was no mistaking it—she was definitely floaty. "Basically, it's like she's half asleep, but a whole lot worse."

"Ohhh... So Lady Eluria acts like a child when she's sleepy." Millis hummed and gave the drowsy girl's cheek a few pokes.

Meanwhile, Wisel stroked his chin in thought. "Some people do take a while to regain their bearings after waking from deep sleep, but it's pretty rare for that to happen even with a quick nap."

"You two are so unfazed..."

"We've spent enough time with you two that most things aren't very shocking

anymore," Wisel admitted with a crooked smile. "I'm actually more concerned that we're starting to gather too much attention here."

At that point, Raid finally noticed that a few students were staring curiously at them from all around the cafeteria, likely because of their little scuffle with Fareg. It certainly wasn't a good idea for them to stay in a common area now, considering all the antics a floaty Eluria could get up to.

Raid sighed. "Sorry, guys. Looks like we gotta head back early. Could we leave our plates to you?"

"No problem. Ms. Millis and I can handle it."

"Sure thing! I'll see you both at the exam!"

With Eluria perched on his back, Raid left the cafeteria under the watchful eyes of the other students. The girl nuzzled her head against him, her arms wrapped securely around his neck.

"Jeez... I don't know what you're up to, but don't push yourself, okay?"

"Need to...make you happy..."

Raid blinked. "Me?"

"Mm... So that you'll smile like before... I'm making..."

Eluria suddenly fell silent midsentence, so Raid curiously turned his head, only to find the girl's face flushed completely red. Her lips trembled as she frantically looked around, taking stock of her own situation.

"Huh... Wh-Why am I on your back...?!"

It seemed like the nap meant that her floatiness didn't last as long. Eluria buried her face in her hands and began flailing her legs in a panic.

"I c-c-can w-walk!"

"Hey, stop thrashing around. You'll bite your tongue."

"B-But... I'm heavy...!"

"If anything, I'm worried you're too light."

"Huh... B-But..."

"It's fine. Just stay put till we get back to the room."



Eluria pursed her lips for a moment, then curled into herself on Raid's back. "Okay," she mumbled. Satisfied, Raid resumed walking, but Eluria soon spoke up again. "I might...push myself a bit more, though."

"Just keep it in moderation."

"You won't ask why ...?"

"Millis seems to know what's going on, and you're not likely to do anything too dangerous without telling me," he explained. "So I'm sure you have your reasons for keeping it a secret."

"You don't have to be so clever," Eluria grumbled as she rained a few sulky little punches on his back. Raid thought he was being pretty considerate of her. What an unreasonable passenger.

"Anyway, you've got nothing to worry about since I'm right here with you. Just go ahead and do your thing."

"Mm... Thanks." Eluria buried her face into his back with a sigh of relief. "I always feel at ease now that you're with me."

Soon, she fell back asleep, her breathing slow and relaxed against Raid's back.



The role of magicians was to wield their immense power and abilities for the greater good—that is, to protect the peace and happiness of those around them. Needless to say, whether or not an individual was worthy of such a heavy responsibility needed to be determined with utmost strictness and impartiality.

The two types of exams conducted by the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic served this very purpose. Today, one of those exams was being held.

"Allow me to explain the simulation exam once more." Alma spoke to her students with uncharacteristic sternness in her voice. However, her tone was not the only difference. They were currently gathered not in their usual classroom but at the entrance to a vast forest surrounded by looming mountains.

"As I've said before, you're about to enter a Designated Danger Zone where manabeasts run rampant. Keep in mind that your very lives are at risk here."

Manabeasts were beasts that had mutated due to surrounding ambient mana and, as a result, developed bodies much larger than ordinary beasts. However, as it turned out, they had undergone evolutionary changes over the past millennia that left Raid needing to recalibrate his perception of them. For example, crossbreeding had produced creatures that were manabeasts *from birth*. This had also led to a boost in their population and diversity, as well as the expansion of their territories over the years.

Mana-rich areas that were highly conducive to the birth of manabeasts were labeled as "Designated Danger Zones" and civilians were prohibited entry. Magicians were stationed in regions where manabeasts were suspected to emerge, where they patrolled the perimeters of the Danger Zones and eliminated any beasts that encroached on human territory. They also regularly stepped inside to cull any booming populations.

"This is an E-rank Designated Danger Zone, the least dangerous kind," Alma continued. "Moreover, this one currently only has small-sized manabeasts, since we instructors have cleared out all the medium-sized manabeasts we could find yesterday. It shouldn't be too dangerous unless things go awry."

Alma narrowed her eyes warningly. "But carelessness and complacency can lead to injuries, emergencies, and in the worst cases, *death*. Never forget that. Understood?"

She watched as the students nodded tensely before continuing.

"Now then, on to the contents of this simulation exam. The simulated scenario for this exam will be rescuing civilians who accidentally strayed into the Designated Danger Zone." Alma pulled out a doll from thin air. "Several of these dummies have been placed all around the Danger Zone. You must find, recover, and transport them, then return to this entrance area by the end of the exam. Of course, the more dolls you recover, the higher your score."

"Question," one student said with a raised hand. "You've explained before that simulation exams apply to our individual grades. If we wish to score higher, would acting alone be for the best?"

"Unfortunately, I'll have to hit you with an 'it depends.' You'd definitely get a higher grade if you did everything yourself, but the most important thing here is

accomplishing the goal—that is, the *rescue*—which would definitely be easier with a team."

Basically, accomplishing everything alone would net the student a higher grade but also run the risk of complete failure.

"That ends my explanation!" she declared with a loud clap. "Exam starts in thirty minutes. You're free to prep your gear and hold strategy meetings till then."

The students began splitting into their own groups. Raid and his friends were no exception.

"All right. Guess we should come up with a plan," Raid said.

"About that..." Wisel sheepishly cleared his throat. "I think we're just going to be dead weight. Since this is an individual assessment, wouldn't you and Ms. Eluria be better off by yourselves?"

"Agreed," murmured Millis. "We've been getting better thanks to Ms. Alma's training, but we're still worlds away from you two. It may be best for just me and Wisel to pair up."

"No." Raid firmly shook his head. "Eluria aside, I'll definitely need you two."

Wisel raised a brow. "That's...an odd way to put it."

"This exam simulates a *rescue operation*, and our rescue targets are *unmoving dolls*. Now, what kind of people do you think they represent?"

"Hm... Maybe people who are too afraid to move?" Millis replied.

"Or perhaps they can't due to an injury," Wisel proposed.

Raid slowly nodded. "You're both correct. Placating a frightened victim, healing an injured person, and transporting them to safety—these are all difficult to accomplish alone. I can't use magic, so my hands are tied if the doll specifically needs healing magic. That's what I meant when I said I need you two."

Wisel hummed. "That doll was a magic device. Chances are it's got some sort of mechanism in place."

Millis's brow raised. "You mean, we might not be able to transport them unless we approach them as a group or cast healing magic on it, or stuff like that?"

"Yep." Raid nodded. "So, I can handle any manabeasts we run into, Wisel can transport the dolls with his magic gear, and Millis can disable whatever mechanism is on the doll. That'd be our best formation."

He was near certain of his analysis. Not only did Alma implicitly recommend working as a group, she also emphasized that they needed to "find, recover, and transport" the dolls. She wouldn't have included "transport" in that list if it wasn't an important component in reaching the goal. Lastly, given the nature of simulation exams, it was best for them to assume they would be based on actual real-life scenarios.

This exam posed a high risk of failure should a student get too greedy and face the challenge alone. Inversely, it should be an easy pass as long as you didn't lose sight of its purpose. Raid found it rather fitting for a first exam.

"But what about Lady Eluria?" asked Millis.

"Mm... I'm not allowed to join up."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. The headmaster herself told me I have to work on my own during exams. Apparently, it'll be too hard to assess the others if I group up."

"Oh... That makes sense." Millis nodded solemnly. Memories of Eluria's incredible magic were probably playing in her mind right about now.

Although she was restricted to the fifth stratum or lower, the power, speed, and scale of her magic still far surpassed that of ordinary magicians. If she took the exam with other students, it would be hard to judge whether their results were attributable to a whole team effort or just Eluria's participation.

"But I agree with Raid's idea," she continued. "Just carrying dolls doesn't make for a very meaningful exam. There has to be some sort of gimmick."

"Picking up on that might very well be part of the exam already," Raid added.

Wisel stared at them with a crooked smile. "I'm impressed you both

concluded so much so quickly."

"I thought we were just gonna find and carry a bunch of dolls..." Millis admitted.

"I just had a feeling," Raid and Eluria said in complete sync. They both had plenty of experience rescuing injured soldiers from the battlefield, saving allies who were left behind in enemy territory, and everything else along those lines.

While their group was wrapping up their plans, a pompous scoff piped in from behind. "You fools understand nothing!"

They turned their heads to find Fareg with a fearless smirk on his face.

"Hey, kid," Raid greeted lightly. "You're just bursting with energy today."

"Stop calling me a kid! We're not that far apart in age!"

Unfortunately for him, Raid had taken to calling him a kid since their little runin the other day. "And? I take it you have a different idea in mind?"

Fareg snorted. "But of course. I believe this exam has another goal besides rescuing the dolls."

Raid furtively raised a brow. "Another goal?"

"Indeed. Instructor Alma explained that there were no medium-sized manabeasts in the area—but she never mentioned *large-sized* manabeasts!" Fareg unveiled his completely off base theory with astounding confidence. "I would wager there is just one within this Danger Zone, and that defeating it will grant a significant boost to our grade in—"

"Nah, there's no way," Raid interrupted.

"I'm still talking!!!"

"Pitting magicians-in-training against a large-sized manabeast? Forget injuries—the Institute could very well have student *deaths* on their hands. They wouldn't make such a problematic move."

"Think what you will. At the very least, I most certainly have the power to exterminate one!" Fareg proudly raised his magic gear in the air. It turned out his pleasant mood today stemmed from having had his sword fixed yesterday.

"With my gear back in my hands, I can now wield my full strength to—"

"Hm? Why does it look shorter than before?"

"BECAUSE YOU BROKE IT!" Fareg snapped. "Even my house's artificer took one look at it, shook his head in resignation, and just repaired what was left!"

"Good thing you got a skilled artificer working for you, huh? Don't get too carried away just 'cause you can use magic."

"Why, you...! I'll make you eat your words!" he spat out before leaving with his two followers in tow.

Millis scratched her cheek with a sheepish laugh. "Aha ha... I guess he's got his eye on you now... Sorry about that, Raid..."

"Don't sweat it. He's had his eye on me from the start. Besides, seeing as he still walked up to us after being shamed in front of a crowd the other day, I'd say he's got nerves of steel just about as thick as his skull."

"Oh... Now I'm starting to feel bad for that aristocrat instead..." Millis watched Fareg's retreating figure with much pity. The boy probably hadn't the faintest idea that he was the recipient of such a compassionate gaze.

"All right. Let's get going," Raid said.

Eluria nodded. "All of you take care."

"Thanks. You too, especially since you'll be all by yourself." Raid placed his hand on Eluria's head then naturally lowered his own, letting the girl's hand fall on his in return.

Wisel and Millis stared at those two with identical blank gazes.

"They're being all lovey-dovey right before the exam..."

"Take it as the confidence of the strong." Wisel sighed. "We're going to turn weird too if we get dragged along at their pace."

"Agreed... This is going to be dangerous for us normal people. Let's stay on our toes."

The two nodded firmly, brimming with determination.



Some time had passed since the students had entered the Designated Danger Zone. Raid, Wisel, and Millis were progressing smoothly through the manabeast-filled forest.

"Hup!" Raid whipped a clean kick at a manabeast that had charged toward him, knocking it against a tree before it could so much as let out a yelp. "Alma was right. The beasts here really aren't that strong."

"I find it hard to trust the assessment of the guy who just sent one flying without magic..." Millis mumbled a short distance behind him.

Wisel nodded beside her. "Watching up close like this, it's painfully clear how abnormal his strength is."

Even the smallest manabeasts were about as big as humans. The one Raid had just sent flying looked like a wildcat much larger than an average human. Normally, fighting one bare-handed was practically suicide.

"I am holding back, though. Going all out would damage the forest. Besides, I don't want their blood to get on me."

Wisel hummed. "That's a good point. Since all manabeasts mutate into ferocious carnivores, they'd be drawn to your bloody scent and slow us down."

"I wouldn't want to walk beside Raid while he's drenched in the blood of his victims anyway..." Millis sighed as they continued their trek through the forest. "I wonder if Lady Eluria is doing all right. I know she's strong, but she's still just one person."

"She'll be fine. Even if a thousand manabeasts like the one I just kicked were to surround her, she'd still be able to handle 'em using just first-stratum magic."

There were as many ways for magicians to fight as there were stars in the sky. The most basic style of combat was unleashing attacks from mid-to-long-range, but enemies could easily launch surprise attacks or push through with their numbers. In such cases, magicians switched to close-range magic, made possible by their magic gear.

Magic formulae could be applied to the mana circuits that were inscribed into the magician's gear. This was how incantations and other preparatory steps were bypassed to shorten the casting time, allowing magicians to adapt to the ever-changing flow of battle and fight seamlessly in high-speed close-range combat against other magicians.

Magicians had a wide variety of combat styles at their disposal depending on which magic they'd applied to their gear. This usually included some sort of physical enhancement, as well as any other kind of magic the magician specialized in. Creation magic, for example, could form a sword of flames. Barrier magic instantly secured a safe space, while shield magic deflected enemy attacks. In close quarters, where adaptability was just as important as raw firepower, even weaker magic could be plenty to defeat your opponent.

Of course, all this was possible thanks to none other than the Sage.

Eluria had her own unique ways to shorten the prerequisite spell steps even without gear, but they were too difficult for ordinary people to replicate. Not only had she proposed a method that would be accessible to all, she had even learned martial arts in order to verify her formulated theory. She had also used those martial arts skills to fight against Raid in close quarters in the past, but the most impressive part was always the way she put in all that effort just so that others would be able to use magic as well.

"Eluria can easily take down an ordinary person, bare-handed *and* without magic, you know?"

"Oh, please. Are we talking about the same petite little Lady Eluria here? There's no way she'd win without magic." Millis laughed him off with a wave of her hand.

Magic truly had become mainstream in the modern world. The martial arts, swordsmanship, and other physical combat techniques that were commonplace a thousand years ago had mostly become obsolete.

"But now that I think about it, Raid, the way you move does stand out from other magicians," Wisel noted with a hum. "That's just as intriguing, if you ask me."

"Oh? Should I give you a little lesson next time, then? If you ask me, all your magic gear makes you more suited to fighting close-range. You can definitely make use of it in practical combat."

"That sounds great. I'll take you up on that offer."

"Whaaat..." Millis drawled. "I'm not really into kicking and punching others..."

"Eluria should know more 'bout that side of things, so why not ask her? Even just learning some basic self-defense or simple movements can change a lot."

As they walked, Wisel narrowed his eyes. "It might be a bit late for this," he muttered, "but you and Ms. Eluria sure know a lot about the weirdest things."

"Oh... Well, you know." Raid shrugged. "House Caldwin has a thousand years of history, so they've got a whole library of old books. Lots to learn from there."

"That makes sense for *her*, but aren't *you* originally a commoner from the countryside?"

"That's true..." Millis hummed. "I can tell from our conversations that you've spent a long time in the countryside, so when did you two even get engaged?"

"Hm... Around two months ago."

Millis's brow furrowed. "Two months ago? I dunno... The trust you two share sure doesn't feel like something that was built in just two months. But considering your status, there's no way you're old friends or something, right?"

Raid found himself a bit lost for words at Wisel and Millis's sudden interrogation. He'd spent quite a lot of time with these two during class and had come to trust them, so his lips had become rather loose around them.

"Well, Eluria and I will tell you guys about it later." Although he was attempting to close this line of questioning, Raid did actually shelve it into the back of his mind for later. He thought that he should discuss this—along with a few other things—with Eluria once he had the chance.

Sharing the truth with other people was something they needed to carefully consider. Thanks to his subordinate's journal, they now knew that *someone* had supposedly purged history of anything related to the Hero. Whoever came to know of this hidden truth might be dragged into danger.

There were just far too many unanswered questions on their plate at the moment.

Why had the Hero and the Sage reincarnated a thousand years into the

future?

Why had the existence of the Hero been mostly, yet not completely, erased?

Why did Raid have such an unusual power? What kind of power was it, if not ordinary mana? How would it affect him and those around him? Was it connected to their reincarnation somehow?

And on top of all that...

How did Eluria Caldwin die?

Records had attributed her death to illness, and Eluria herself didn't seem to have noticed any oddities with her own death. However, it likely hadn't been some elven disease Raid had never heard of or even an assassination, as Eluria would have brought it up with him by now if it had.

Unfortunately, any who might've held the answers to the mystery of her death were now dead themselves, nor was there any way for Raid to figure it out now that a millennia had passed. All that remained were these scattered bits of incongruity, and Raid just couldn't leave it be.

As he was lost in his thoughts, Wisel came to an abrupt stop. "Wait. There's something up ahead."

Millis gulped. "I-Is it another manabeast?"

Wisel tapped on his glasses as he peered into the distance. "No, it's a cave... It looks natural." This was the same magic device he'd used to analyze Eluria and Alma's spar on their first day of class. The glasses could be used to observe traces of mana, body heat, and other things normally invisible to the naked eye. Adjusting the magnification could also allow him to scout the area ahead. They were proving very useful in this exam.

"Any manabeasts in the vicinity?" Raid asked.

"None... I don't see any."

"Then we've got ourselves a hit. That cave definitely has at least one doll inside."

"Huh?" Millis turned to him. "How can you be so sure?"

"Wouldn't you look for a safe place to hide if you were injured while running from manabeasts? Seeing as the dolls aren't just haphazardly strewn around the forest, we can assume they've been selectively placed with certain scenarios in mind."

They hadn't seen any dolls on their way here, which pointed to the likelihood that they were placed in specific locations.

"I'll take the lead," said Raid. "Wisel, watch our backs. Millis, you support him."

"Got it."

"R-Roger that!"

Raid placed the two behind him and stepped into the cave. He didn't sense any presences inside, but he could make out a silhouette within the darkness. "Wisel, could you check?"

"It's the same thing Instructor Kanos showed us," Wisel confirmed. "There are...a total of five."

Millis gasped. "That many?!"

"The scenario here is probably that they ran as a group. They might break if I touch them, so the rest is up to you two." Raid stepped back out of the cave to watch out for any manabeasts.

In the meantime, his teammates got to work.

"This mana circuit..." Wisel hummed. "It's set to detect multiple heat sources, probably so that it'll unlock if two or more people come."

"Wow... It's just like Raid said."

"How are the others, Ms. Millis?"

"Ummm, I think they're the same as—"

BEEEEEP!!! When Millis reached out to one of the dolls, it jolted and screeched.

"AAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

"What? What happened?!" Raid called from outside.

"It's fine! The doll probably just activated!" Wisel hollered back, wincing at the high-pitched echoing. He looked down at the thigh of the ringing doll. "It looks like...it reacted to your mana and started a timer."

"Wh-Which means...?"

"Well, the count is going down, so it's probably a time limit for something..."

"Could this doll represent an injured person...and the timer is counting down until they die...?" Millis asked.

Wisel's gaze sharpened. "That's very likely. We can't move an injured person before stabilizing them, after all."

"Th-Then let's hurry and treat it! Just leave it to me! Lady Eluria taught me some healing magic and even gave me her stamp of approval!" Full of confidence, Millis deployed her magic gear—a staff—and swiftly brandished it over the doll, enveloping it in a faint light.

BEEEEEEEEP!!! In response, the beeping sound grew shriller, echoing loudly within the cave walls.

"AAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

"What is it this time?!" Raid called again.

"Stop screaming in my ear!" Wisel smacked the girl—who was much louder than the doll—upside the back of her head.

Millis gingerly rubbed her throbbing head with teary eyes as she gave the doll another look. "W-Wasn't healing magic supposed to defuse it?!"

"It did react though, so we should be on the right track..."

From outside the cave, Raid suggested, "Maybe the order you administer the first aid matters too."

"The order...?" Wisel parroted.

"Suddenly closing the wound with magic might leave the patient susceptible to infection. Try assessing the condition of the wound first."

"Th-The wound? But this is a doll! It isn't wounded!"

"No, wait..." Wisel leaned closer over the doll. "The position of the mana

circuit might be an indication of the wound's location. Aside from mana detection, this specific area has some pressure sensitivity installed as well."

"B-But we only have five minutes left...!"

Raid glanced into the cave and took a closer look at the doll's thigh. The count had fallen past the five-minute mark. If they couldn't give the doll proper treatment within the remaining time, it would die.

"F-For first aid... Um, I first have to...!"

"Calm down, Millis. I'll guide you, so follow my instructions carefully. Wisel, I need you to regularly check the mana circuit's status." After giving them each their instructions, Raid kept his voice low to calm Millis down. "First, cast detoxification magic around the wound—the mana circuit."

"G-Got it!" Millis did as she was instructed. This time, her magic didn't trigger any alarms.

"A portion of the circuit has been defused," Wisel announced.

"D-Does applying pressure on the wound come next?!"

"Before that, gag its mouth with some cloth. Sometimes, the stress and pain get to the patient, and they try to bite their own tongues in the middle of treatment."

"U-Understood!" Millis wrapped her handkerchief around the doll's mouth.

"Next, apply pressure on the wound and arteries, then put the patient to sleep. Since the wound is located in the femoral region, you should raise the leg above the heart, suppress the bleeding, then check the condition of the wound again."

Face set into a serious expression, Millis continued applying first aid treatment on the doll while following Raid's instructions and noting Wisel's updates from the side.

"And finally...!"

She cast healing magic once more—the timer finally stopped.

"I-It's done...right? Right?!"

"Yeah." Wisel looked over the doll and its companions. "All the mana circuits, including those on the other dolls, have been defused. Looks like saving this one was the condition to unlock all of them."

Millis shakily sank to the ground with a huge sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness...!"

"You did great," Raid praised.

"Raaaid... Thank you so muuuch...!" Millis looked like she was about to break into tears now that all her wound-up nerves had unraveled. She had worked with a life-or-death scenario while under a strict time limit. As the one conducting the treatment, Millis had had a huge responsibility on her shoulders.

Raid approached Wisel. "You did well too."

"No... All I did was watch the mana circuits. Ms. Millis deserves all the credit here."

"That's not true. In actual practice, it's critical to monitor the patient's condition—which is what the mana circuits represented. There are also times when someone needs to talk to the patient to distract them from the pain. Your role deserves just as much praise."

"Wow. You're making me feel pretty good about myself here," Wisel said with an unusually bright smile on his face. However, he soon schooled his expression and lowered his voice. "Say, Raid... Have you seen people on the verge of death before?"

"Hm? Where's this coming from all of a sudden?"

"I mean, your instructions were incredibly precise. I felt like they could've only come from personal experience," he explained, a slight tremble in his voice.

Seeing the boy like that, Raid cast his eyes down and gave him an honest answer. "That's right... There were some I managed to save, and others I just couldn't. These guys here may just be dolls, but I still think that you two did something wonderful today."

He thought of all the people who'd senselessly lost their lives to the brutal war. Friend or foe, it didn't matter—those they left behind would grieve all the

same. Raid had seen it all far too many times.

"So thank you for saving this one," he told the two, a bitter smile on his lips.

Wisel stared thoughtfully at him for a moment. "Raid, you—"

"AAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

"For the love of god, will you cut that out?!" Wisel snapped at Millis.

"B-But look! Someone's coming!" Millis shakily pointed toward the cave entrance.

Wisel and Raid spun around. From the forest, three familiar figures were rushing their way.

"They're..." Raid squinted. "That Fareg kid and his lackeys?"

Millis gasped. "D-Don't tell me... Are they here to snatch these dolls from us?!"

"No... Something's off." Wisel adjusted his glasses, observing the three for a moment. Then, his eyes widened. "Raid! Bring them here right now! They're injured!"

In a flash, Raid was out of the cave and approaching the three students.

Fareg noticed him and raised his head in shock. "Y-You're Caldwin's—"

"What happened to them?"

Fareg's followers, both covered in wounds, were leaning on either of his shoulders. One's arm was dangling, while the other's leg was bent in an odd direction.

Raid checked that they weren't in critical condition before lifting them both over his shoulders. "Come to the cave for now. It's safe from manabeasts, at least."

Fareg violently flinched the moment Raid mentioned manabeasts. His eyes looked dull, noticeably lacking the vigor they had been filled with at the start of the exam. His face was horribly pallid too. Raid curiously scanned the boy's condition as he quietly led him into the cave.

"Millis! I'll leave these two to you!"

"Huh?! The real thing out of the blue?!"

"Their lives aren't in danger—just a couple broken bones. I only did a quick once-over though, so be sure to check again. I need to talk with this guy."

Raid turned his head and looked Fareg in the eye. "All right, kid. What happened to these two? Were you attacked by a manabeast?"

"A manabeast..." Fareg slumped down to the ground, trembling all over. "I don't know... I don't know...!"

Raid frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It was definitely a manabeast...but I've never seen anything like it! I never thought such a monster existed!" The boy kept muttering under his breath while shaking uncontrollably.

"Raid," Wisel called from where he'd posted up outside. "This doesn't look good."

"Do you see something?"

"Not clearly, but something's moving in the forest. At the very least..." His voice faintly trembled. "It's not just some small or medium-sized pest. A manabeast the likes of which we've never seen before...is lurking nearby."

The next moment, something moved within the forest up ahead.

From the lush greenery came the sound of trees bending and snapping like dried twigs. Something squirmed within, its jet-black shell glinting under the sun like a well-polished suit of armor. The large figure equipped with that armor was mowing the sea of trees down as it moved—and then, it slowly raised its head.

A dragon.

Pitch-black scales canopied its long neck, all the way up until a sturdy shell encased its snout like a helmet. The monster slightly parted its jaws, revealing a red maw and countless white teeth hidden within. It turned its distorted head around, trailing its dark, bloodred eyes over the surroundings.

ROAAAAR! It unleashed an earsplitting sound that shook the air and sent tremors across the forest.

Its ferocious gaze was locked on their cave.



"Millis, Wisel! Take these guys deeper into the cave!"

No sooner had the dragon roared than Raid instructed his teammates to retreat. Amid the trembling from the dragon's oncoming charge, Wisel and Millis hurriedly carried the two injured students deeper inside. Fareg, whose legs had given out, was dragged along by Raid—when a huge collision shook the cave and left rocks crumbling around the entrance.

The dragon's enormous body hindered its advance, the entrance only big enough to fit its head. Even then, it hungrily snapped its jaws at the retreating students and unleashed another angry roar.

Fareg let out a small shriek and covered his ears. "W-We were attacked by that thing...!"

"What? Don't tell me you picked a fight with it...?"

"No! I mean, we did go looking because I thought the Institute might have prepared something, b-but I didn't think we'd actually find anything, so when we saw it I froze up... Valk and Lucas got hurt trying to protect me, a-and then I...!" Tears streamed down the boy's face as he clumsily strung his words together. In the end, all he could do was curl into a ball. "I'm sorry...!"

Was he apologizing to the two who'd been hurt in his stead? Or to Raid and his teammates, for bringing the dragon here? Whichever it may be, his voice was full of guilt and regret.

"If only...I hadn't acted so foolishly...! If only I hadn't prattled on about looking for a large-sized manabeast, then this wouldn't have happened...!"

Raid looked down at the crying boy and quietly placed a hand on his head. "What're you crying for, kid?"

"Huh...?"

"You could've abandoned your friends and made a run for it after seeing that thing, but you didn't. You ran all the way here while carrying them."

Raid could imagine how hard it had been to run all this way while supporting two injured people. Fareg was covered in dirt, so his legs had probably given out a few times and sent him tumbling to the ground. Any one of those times, he could've abandoned his friends and continued running on his own, but he'd stood back up again and again just to bring them to safety.

"What you did is worthy of praise. *These* are the times you should hold your head up high," Raid said, grinning. Then, he turned to his two teammates and asked, "Can you guys maintain a barrier while administering treatment?"

Wisel paused for a moment. "Ms. Millis might expend all her mana on the treatment, but I have a few magic devices for making barriers. We should be fine."

"Good. Keep yourselves safe after I leave the cave."

"W-Wait... Do you plan on fighting that thing?" Fareg looked at him in horror. "It's impossible! I tried attacking it earlier, but magic—"

"Doesn't work on it—right?" Raid glared at the dragon in front of them. "That thing's an armored dragon. It's a manabeast that feeds on lodes of ore in mountains and gorges. By absorbing the metals and mana ores within, it develops an armor-like outer shell—and because that shell contains mana, it can diminish and repel external mana as well."

Once upon a time, when Vegalta had turned the tables on Altane thanks to the Sage's invention of magic, Altane had devised a plan to throw a certain dragon-type manabeast into the front lines. They captured an armored dragon and unleashed it into the battlefield, pitting it against Vegalta's magicians. However, the Altanian forces had failed to control the beast, and it had begun rampaging and causing casualties on both sides.

Fareg's wide eyes trembled. "How...do you know that...?"

"Well, it's a bit of a long story."

"Whatever the case, you're being rash! We should wait for the Institute to send help once they realize something is wrong!"

"That's right... Eluria would probably get here much sooner than them too. But either way, we don't have time to wait around like sitting ducks." Even as they spoke, the armored dragon continued ramming its head into the cave opening in an attempt to reach them. Each collision sent tremors throughout the cave and rocks crumbling from the ceiling; it was very likely that the first impact had already weakened the cave's structure considerably. They would all be buried alive at this rate.

"Wisel, put up a barrier once I leave."

"S-Stop! You're walking to your own death!"

"I think you're misunderstanding something here. I'm not trying to sacrifice myself or anything," Raid said as he slowly approached the dragon's snout.

Over a thousand years ago, an armored dragon just like this one had caused immense casualties on the battlefield. Vegalta's forces had struggled to counterattack as their magic wouldn't work on it, and they couldn't even defend themselves as the beast could pierce through their barriers and shields. The Altanian forces had run around like headless chickens, only to be eaten or crushed by the very beast they'd unleashed.

Then, amid the chaos and despair of the battlefield, the rampaging beast was slain by a single man. As the one who had saved the people from an unprecedented tragedy, this man had gone on to be granted a certain title.

"After all, the Hero can beat that thing senseless."

Raid swung his fist and smashed it into the armored dragon's head, warping its metal shell and sending it tumbling across the forest floor. With the cave entrance now freed, he strolled out while clenching and unclenching his fist.

"Huh. You're pretty tough. Guess I never noticed since I used my sword last time."

The dragon slumped over the ground, the slightest hint of emotion surfacing on its red orbs. In the face of this overwhelmingly powerful being—this human once known as the Hero—the armored dragon felt *fear*.

"What a throwback... When was the last time I fought you?"

The dragon's only response was an earsplitting roar and a feral swing of its arm. That arm was far larger than Raid, and the power behind it was more than

enough to pulverize a puny human to bits. However, Raid didn't even spare it a glance. He just raised his right arm—and it *stopped*. The massive blow did nothing to move him even a smidge from where he stood.

"Ah, well. Everyone but the Sage was too weak for me to bother remembering."

Raid clenched his left fist and felt the power in his body surge toward it. Then, he glared at the atrocious face in front of him—

"That's including you, you damned mutt."

—and swung an uppercut into its jaw.

The sound of rupturing flesh was muffled beneath the shrill screech of metal as the huge beast went flying far above the trees. Soon, it crashed to the ground with a large rumble and a huge cloud of dust.

"Tsk... Still can't break the armor, huh?" Raid glowered as he watched the dragon stagger to its feet.

The dragon had frozen up in fear but was still standing its ground. Its eyes were as red as the raging flame of wrath simmering within its gaze. The beast was clearly intent on fighting back.

To make matters worse, it seemed it wasn't alone. In the distance, Raid could hear several similar roars ringing through the air. It was safe to say that this one here wasn't the only armored dragon in the area. At worst, there could be more than ten of them in this forest.

"Fighting all of them bare-handed will take way too long," he grumbled.

Raid would have no issue breaking past them on his own, but doing so with two injured people under his wing was another story entirely. He couldn't take his time fighting in this area either, as the shock waves from the battle could collapse the cave anytime.

His face twisted in frustration as he searched his mind for the best course of action, but he wasn't able to come to a decision before strands of light rained down from the sky and entangled the armored dragon. The beast roared at the sudden assault and violently thrashed about, but to no avail. The strands only

wrapped tighter and tighter around its large body.

"Sorry I'm late," said a delicate voice from above.

Raid raised his head. "Yo. Fancy meeting you here."

"I was putting some dolls down at the entrance when Ms. Alma told me they found several unidentified manabeasts in the area. She asked me to retrieve any students I could find."

"Several, huh? So this fella really isn't alone."

"They don't have an accurate count, but they're so short on hands that all the instructors present have been recruited *and* they lifted my restrictions."

Eluria hopped off her staff and turned toward the cave. "Millis, I'm going to send you all over. Stay put and maintain the barrier. Repeat."

"Y-Yes, ma'am! The barrier will be maintained!"

"Mm. Good girl."

Then, there was nothing where the cave used to be. It was almost as if the space surrounding it had been scooped out. In that one instant, Eluria cast a teleportation spell large enough to transport an entire cave.

"With this, everyone in our class has been secured."

"Uh, why'd you secure the cave too?"

"The ambient mana is unstable because of all these armored dragons. It'd have been messy if I tried to transport only the humans."

"So you transported the entire cave? Damn, you're crazy."

Eluria indignantly puffed her cheeks up. "I don't want to hear that from the guy who sent an armored dragon flying with his bare hands..."

"Um, Eluria?" called a voice from her inner pocket. "We just received a cave over here. Can I go ahead and assume the students we ordered are inside...?"

"Yep. Five people, minus Raid. Did you find everyone on your side?"

"Sure did. All the students, including those from other classes, have been secured. We've got some injuries but nothing life-threatening. All the instructors

have retreated too."

Eluria finished receiving Alma's report via the magic device and nodded. "Okay. Good," she said. "Please keep the students safe. We're going to blow them all to bits now."

"Huh? Wait a second. What are you planning?!"

"Magicians aren't a good match against armored dragons. Raid and I will blow them all to bits."

"No, wait! I didn't say you could—"

Eluria cut the device off and wandered over to Raid's side. "Raid," she called, looking suspiciously smug. "Do you want to go all out for the first time in a while?"

"Go all out...? I mean, I guess I can take *one* out if I punch real hard—"
"Great. I'll help you."

Eluria brandished her staff with a smile on her lips, and the air began to shift. The bright mana flowing through her staff coalesced into one point and started taking shape.

"I've been thinking," she murmured, "about what I could do so that you can go all out like before—so that you would smile again like you used to." Unlike a millennia ago, Raid had no weapon he could use. Some sloppy weapon that just looked like a sword wouldn't last even a second under his strength. "Then, I realized—my magic would be able to withstand it."

Her mana converged to form the shape of a broadsword larger than Raid was tall—his other half that had cleaved through countless battlefields by his side.

"It's a bit late, but congratulations on getting into the Institute, Raid," Eluria muttered, turning her flushed face away.

Raid stared at her for a stunned moment before bursting into laughter. "Ha... Ha ha! I see! You're giving me a gift to celebrate my enrollment!"

"Wh-Why are you laughing...?!"

"No, well... I just thought it was really like you," he said with a mirthful grin.

"Making a sword with magic and giving it as a gift... You're the only one who'd think to do something like this."

"I-I thought it would make you happy...!" The girl flushed even as she maintained her magic.

"Happy?" Raid chuckled. "Oh, I'm beyond happy."

An electrifying sensation surged within his right arm as he took up the sword. He could feel her magic clashing with his power and dissipating, but the sword maintained its shape thanks to Eluria's constant efforts.

"This is your magic—of course it can withstand my power."

The sword was a coalescence of magic, made of many little spells through Polyaggregate Expansion, the very technique Eluria had once contrived to defeat Raid. Born from her memories, the sword perfectly replicated his trusty partner, from its size, shape, and length, down to even the littlest chips and marks on its blade.

The Hero took the magic sword, crafted by none other than the Sage—the woman who had once been his enemy but now stood right by his side.

"Now that I think about it," murmured Eluria. "This will be our first time fighting together."

"Well, yeah. We used to be enemies, after all."

A small smile bloomed on her face. "But now, we're together."

"A united front after a thousand years? Heh."

Raid hefted the broadsword over his shoulder. "Now then... It's time to put this awesome present to good use." He gripped the magic sword with both hands and readied his stance. He felt his power crackling throughout his body and snapping against Eluria's magic like a torrent of lightning.

He wasn't looking at the half-dead armored dragon before him. No, what the Hero had set his eyes on wasn't something so insignificant.

"I'll show you what my full strength looks like."

He had fought against Eluria many times in the past, but not once had Raid

ever shown her everything he had. The reason was simple: it was because he was the Hero, the very symbol of his nation. The soldiers under him risked their lives to protect their homeland and its citizens, and even the Sage promulgated her magic and brought waves of change across the land all for the sake of protecting their future. They couldn't afford to lose that future to something as meaningless as war. With far too many things to protect, Raid had always had to suppress his strength in some way.

But now, he was nobody.

"It's been a real long while, but I guess the body never forgets!" he howled while baring his teeth.

Raid's unique mana violently surged forth and distorted its surroundings. All he did was draw his broadsword by his waist, and the ground sank beneath the pure and absolute power flowing from his body.

"Take a good look, Eluria Caldwin."

He spoke not to the Sage, but to the girl he longed to do battle with from the bottom of his heart—his rival whom he respected the most in this world.

"This is—my all!"

Shouting out, Raid swung his broadsword with all his might.



The world was devoured by pure and overwhelming power. A single swing, embodying the Hero's everything, was unleashed to erase the world itself—a single swing from the man once known as the world's strongest.

Eluria witnessed it all from start to finish. The captivating sight that spread out before her eyes left her at a loss for words.

There was nothing left.

The firm earth had been gouged out to the depths, and the forest that had grown over the land throughout centuries was gone without a trace. The white clouds hanging across the blue sky had parted to make a path for the sheer power that burst through them. Even the light shining down from the sun high up in the heavens had been distorted.

All that remained was a vast wasteland lined by an endless horizon...

"Well? Did my all surpass your expectations?"

...and a single human with a toothy grin on his face and a broadsword on his shoulder.

Eluria smiled as she gazed upon his figure. "Yeah. That was amazing."

"Seriously? That's all you got for me?"

"It was so amazing that 'amazing' is all I can think of."

"Guess I can give that a passing grade." Raid chuckled.

Eluria's mouth curled up in glee at the sight. "I knew it. You're happiest when you fight."

"Hm? Really?"

"Really. But..." She guiltily hung her head. "You can't just keep this with you like a normal sword. Sorry..."

The broadsword was gradually shrinking over his shoulder. As impressive as Eluria's magic may be, it couldn't constantly withstand Raid's mana. The moment she stopped putting effort into it, the sword would dissipate.

Raid quietly shook his head. "What? You thought I was happy 'cause I finally got to use a sword again?"

Eluria blinked. "You weren't?"

"No. Well, I was happy, but..."

The reason Raid smiled whenever they fought wasn't simply because he enjoyed battle. That wasn't enough to make him smile from the bottom of his heart. The most important part lay elsewhere—and he gladly told her with the brightest smile on his face.

"I always have a blast 'cause I'm with you."



A little while later, Raid and Eluria made their way to the instructors' standby point, where they wound up sitting on the ground with their knees folded beneath them and a very angry Alma looming over them.

"Look, Eluria... I know I'm the one who lifted your restrictions. And Your Excellency, I commend you for dealing with all those unidentified manabeasts. I really do. But you see..." She raised her hand and pointed at them. "I don't recall telling either of you to *change the goddamn map*."

The forest that once stretched behind them was no more. Even the slopes that could once be seen in the distance were gone without a trace. All that remained was a seemingly endless horizon.

"We were having too much fun and couldn't stop," Raid and Eluria admitted in perfect unison.

"I see. Well, I get that."

"You're not supposed to agree with them!!!" came Elise's shrill voice from the communication device, along with the sound of a few desk slams. "How the hell did you two end up purging the exam grounds from existence?!"

"I made a sword with magic..." began Eluria.

"...and I used it to blow everything away," finished Raid.

"I hate how perfectly in sync you crazies are today!!! I'm the one who's gonna have to report all this to the higher-ups, you hear?! If that's all you have to say, then they're definitely gonna demand more details! Worst yet, they'll probably scold me too!" Elise wailed. Such a young girl, yet she already had so much

struggle in her life.

The headmaster sighed, deciding to let it go for now. "So, Alma... How's the investigation going? The reinforcements I sent over should be working on it, right?"

"Yeah. Well, the place was wiped pretty dang clean thanks to two certain someones, but I'd wager there are still a few things for us to find. After all," Alma said, her voice dropping darkly, "even my magic was only half effective on those things." Alma's gaze sharpened as she proceeded with her report. "Based on the student testimonies we've gathered, we can confirm that the manabeasts had the ability to nullify and deflect magic. I experienced that as well—any magic I tried to use was unstable due to the fluctuation of the mana in my body and in the atmosphere."

"You mean...these things had the perfect countermeasure against magic?"

"That's putting it lightly. Those manabeasts affected even my Dead Man's Brigade. Since my mana was weakened, my soldiers became brittle and their movements were all wonky."

There was an uncomfortable pause on the other side of the device. "I see... We definitely can't take this lightly if they could hinder even tenth-stratum magic. I'll pull back the reinforcements and form a specialized investigation team instead."

"A'ight, sounds great. I'll ask around one more time and see if the students remember anything else." Alma ended the call with the headmaster and turned to Fareg, who had been waiting quietly nearby the whole time. "So, your group actually engaged with the manabeast, yeah?"

The boy nodded grimly. "Yes. We encountered an unknown manabeast during our search. My teammates, Valk and Lucas, were wounded trying to protect me. From the manabeast's appearance, I determined that it was a dragon-type, so I made sure to tread over a patch of hollwack grass to erase our scents and set fire to a portion of the trees so it wouldn't be able to trace our body heat. After that, we hid in the cave and decided to wait for help."

"I see. You made all the best decisions in such a dangerous situation. Good on ya." Alma grinned and gave Fareg a firm pat on his shoulder. "Take it easy in the

rest area over there. We're passing everyone for this exam, so no worries there. But..." She looked Fareg in the eye, then swept her gaze to Millis and Wisel, who were off to the side. "We'd like you all to keep this on the down-low for now." Alma scratched her head and groaned. "You see, we dealt with all the manabeasts in this Designated Danger Zone the other day and even had the instructors on strict watch today."

"Um... So, that means the manabeasts seemingly appeared out of nowhere?" Millis asked.

"Exactly. But to be honest, we also can't rule out the possibility that there were holes in our surveillance network. At present, we need to take in any and all possibilities as we proceed with our investigation."

Unfortunately, Alma couldn't give the girl a very clear answer. The Institute had surveyed the Designated Danger Zone just the day prior and had people stationed all around on the day itself. Despite that, dozens of large-sized manabeasts had managed to infiltrate the area. If it weren't just some unfortunate mishap...then they had to take into consideration the involvement of a third party or the possibility that one of their staff members brought the beasts in. If international politics were to come into play, then heck, even *students* could become suspects in this case. With so much still banking on an investigation that had yet to be conducted, Alma's order to keep things quiet was understandable.

"Well, even a few students from the other classes saw the manabeasts, so all we're really asking of you here is to not go yapping about it everywhere until after the investigation's been concluded," Alma finished with a heavy sigh. "Now then, you kids are all free to go. You two troublemakers, though—you're staying."

"But we're students too. Let us go," Raid protested halfheartedly.

"I'm craving something salty for dinner," Eluria remarked absently.

"Can it. Get over here." Alma grabbed them both by the scruffs of their necks and dragged them over to a secluded area.

Once they were alone, she spun back around. "So, Your Excellency... You don't mind Eluria hearing this, do you?"

"Not at all. Actually, she'd probably know more about armored dragons than me."

"Yeah..." Eluria nodded somberly. "Those things gave me a tough time in the past."

Alma hummed, brows furrowed. "So, those manabeasts are called armored dragons?"

"You don't know them either?" Raid asked, a bit taken aback.

"Nope. I've never fought a manabeast that can impede magic. I mean, it really is a bad sign when even that Verminant boy doesn't know."

"Oh, right. That kid's house specializes in fighting manabeasts, doesn't it?"

"Right. House Verminant rose to prominence through manabeast subjugations. They not only have records of all the beasts they've exterminated but also constantly gather information on beasts from all across the land." Alma's eyes narrowed. "And the son of that house said he *didn't recognize this one*."

Raid hummed. "Any chance it's just his lack of knowledge?"

"You heard him flesh out the countermeasures against dragon-type manabeasts earlier, didn't you? Well, he got 'em all right—took perfect advantage of their characteristics and behavior too," Alma assessed. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have made it to the cave before being eaten alive, much less with two injured students in tow."

"Ah. By the way..." Alma paused for a moment to turn to Eluria. "From what I've learned from His Excellency, I should really be speaking to you more respectfully...but honestly, I can't be bothered. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. I like being treated as a student, actually."

"Awesome. So, Eluria," Alma continued. "What exactly is that manabeast?"

"Armored dragons are dragon-type manabeasts that live in mountains, gorges, and anywhere rich in mineral resources. They mainly feast on ores to develop their unique outer shell," she explained. "But since the ones we saw today had shells that were developed enough to nullify magic, there's a high

chance they had been specifically fed mana ores."

"And I take it you're not speaking from present-day knowledge...?" Eluria nodded.

"Then this is all making very little sense," Alma muttered, her brows furrowing. "Magic history is my area of expertise, so I've learned about manabeasts that can interfere with magic. But you see, there are none of them left today."

"What...?" Eluria asked, stunned.

"They were hunted to extinction," she explained. "With magic so integrated into society, anything that could inhibit it was a great threat to the world. Not even the beast species they evolved from were spared. That all happened a few centuries back, and public records show that their total extinction had been confirmed. In other words..."

Alma's sharp yet perplexed gaze met theirs as she slowly parted her lips.

"That manabeast doesn't exist in this era."

Epilogue

The details of the incident were publicly released by the Institute at a later date.

Several unknown large-sized manabeasts had infiltrated the exam grounds, and the follow-up investigation had yet to identify their origins. The staff members present at the scene the day before and the day of were placed under suspicion. After thoroughly investigating their backgrounds, scrutinizing any possible suspicious movements, and even confirming their alibis with third-party testimonials, the Institute judged that there had been no tampering from the inside. The Institute would continue investigating the possibility of an outsider culprit, strengthen their security, and form a specialized response team.

Although the disclosure of all the details of the incident left some of the students anxious, the fact that the Institute gave just as much transparency to their planned countermeasures and responses did give the students some solace as well.

However, Raid and Eluria found themselves with a different cause for concern. A manabeast that should have been extinct had somehow reappeared in this era—similar to how the Hero and the Sage had reincarnated a thousand years into the future. They had no idea if this incident had to do with their reincarnation, but they certainly found it hard to believe that it was completely unrelated.

With such apprehensions still plaguing their minds, the pair returned to their life in the Institute with the rest of the student body. Not much later, however, Raid already found himself holding his head in dismay.

"Eluria, no... I told you, anything but this...!" His distressed gaze was set on the bed, where Eluria was presently sleeping with a look of complete and utter bliss. "You went back to sleep?! How could you do this to me?!"

"Hn... So bright..."

"Yeah! 'Cause it's already morning!!!"

"But... Still sleepy..." Hiding from the wretched light, the girl stuffed her face into her pillow. The movement ruffled her sleepwear, exposing her milky legs and even a glimpse of her underwear, but that was the last thing on Raid's mind right now.

"I get that, I really do! We did a ton of investigating instead of resting after the exam, after all!"

"Mm... You wanna sleep too ...?"

"That's not my point! Classes start again today, you hear?!"

Eluria stubbornly refused to get up, shaking her head still buried in her pillow. "Nuuu... Five more minutes..."

The clock continued to tick, class time looming ever closer even as they spoke. Normally, Raid would have urged her out of her floaty time with a bath, but they didn't even have the time for that today.

"You can't be serious! Your mom's gonna have my head—and our engagement—if you get a tardy mark on your attendance!"

"Mm... Carry me..."

"On my back, right? Right?!"

"Nu... Want hug..." Eluria stuck her lip out and shook her head, a spoiled child through and through.

Raid gave in, lifted her up in his arms, and brought her all the way to the dressing room.

"Thanks," she murmured.

"Sure! Now get dressed!"

"'Kaaay..." Eluria blearily nodded...and started undressing on the spot.

The moment he caught sight of her bare skin, Raid reflexively whipped his head around.

"Huh... My underwear..."

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"It's probably around there somewhere! Look harder!"

"Uniform..."

"I set it on the box for you!"

"Okay..."
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He listened to her soft and floaty voice accompanied by the sound of rustling clothes.

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"Huh...? My blouse...has too many buttons..."

"I'm sure it doesn't! Start from the bottom up and it should be good!"

"Still too many..."
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Raid opened his eyes to the glorious sight of Eluria with her cheeks puffed up and blouse buttons splendidly mismatched.

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"Stupid buttons... Forget it..."
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"Then you try," she mumbled, sulkily tottering closer to Raid. Eluria spread her arms wide and puffed her chest out. "I can't do it...so you try."

Raid looked between Eluria's unkempt appearance and the clock a few times before ultimately giving in. "Fine, I'll do it! Hold still!"

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"Wooow... Raid, you're so good at buttoning blouses..."
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Eluria drawled her nonsensical praise as she ruffled Raid's hair for a while. By the time Raid finished helping the floaty girl get ready and dragged her out of their room, they only had a few precious minutes saving them from a tardy mark.



"Oh! They're here!"

The moment Raid entered the classroom with a half-asleep Eluria on his back, their classmates surrounded them and poured a wave of excitement over them.

[&]quot;Don't give up! Try a little harder! You can do it!!!"

[&]quot;Gee, thanks!!!"

[&]quot;Mhm. A professional buttoner..."

"Lord Raid! Is it true that you subjugated a large-sized dragon in the exam?!"

"And an unidentified manabeast, at that!"

"I heard you even fought it by yourself while protecting some other students!"

Raid looked at each of them in bewilderment. "Where did you hear all that...?"

"Lord Fareg told us! We were all sharing our sightings of the manabeasts when he told us about everything you did!"

"He said you sent one flying through the air!"

"Did you use tenth-stratum magic just as Lady Eluria had before?!"

"Could it be that you were the one who blew the entire area away? Or was that something you did with Lady Eluria?!"

Raid dragged his gaze over to the farther end of the classroom where Fareg was seated. The boy seemed to be watching the commotion by the entrance, but when he saw Raid looking his way, he turned his head away in feigned disinterest. Raid's lips quirked up into a wry smile at the sight.

He excused himself from his classmates and headed to their usual seats.

"Cutting it close again, huh?" Wisel said in lieu of a greeting.

"Oh dear. I see Lady Eluria is quite floaty today," Millis mused.

"Yeah... I thought we were gonna be late for sure..." Raid sighed as he placed a hand on Eluria's head.

The girl was clinging to his arm with her eyes closed, but his touch slowly roused her. "Huh...? The bed's gone..."

"Guess I now know where you were last lucid this morning..."

"And why is Raid so close to me...?"

"For the record, you're the one clinging to me."

Eluria's eyes finally snapped open at that. She started trembling as her fair cheeks flushed with color. "S-Sorry..."

"It's fine. Not like it's the first time it's happened..." Raid froze mid-shrug, realizing his mistake. He slowly turned to the girl and found that her shaking and blushing had intensified.

"N-Not the first time...?!"

"Right... You usually come to your senses after taking your seat."

"Wh-What do I usually do ...?"

"Eh, well. Stuff like waking up surprisingly early just to throw yourself on me then falling back asleep right there, or patting my head for no apparent reason, or walking out of the dressing room in just your undergarments—"

Eluria buried her face in her trembling hands. Finding no other outlet for the building shame inside her, she wordlessly hung her head and rained her tiny fists on Raid's back in protest.

Wisel and Millis watched from the sidelines and nodded solemnly.

"I see you two are all lovey-dovey even in private."

"Actually, they should be like that *only* in private," Wisel pointed out. "They just do it so naturally in front of us all that we're slowly getting desensitized."

Raid arched a brow. "I don't recall ever doing anything of the sort."

"I-I don't act like that outside..." Eluria agreed, still beet red.

Millis scratched her head. "Now I have to wonder what actually classifies as 'lovey-dovey' in your minds..."

"Well, it's not like you're doing anything improper." Wisel nodded. "Besides, it's good for husband and wife to get along well."

"Not husband and wife. Just engaged," Raid and Eluria corrected in perfect harmony.

Wisel's eyes fell half-lidded. "Well, the 'getting along well' part holds true, at least," he deadpanned. "Anyway..." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Last night, you guys said you had something to tell us today. What is it?"

"Oh, that's right. What could it be?"

After some discussion, Raid and Eluria had decided to share the truth of their

past identities with the people they trusted. They may have only known Wisel and Millis for little under a month, but that was enough for them to understand what kind of people they were. Moreover, these two didn't have as much influence as, say, someone from House Caldwin or the Institute, so there was no risk of things spinning out of control with this choice.

Perhaps they also wanted to see how ordinary people would react to the truth. After all, they might just end up laughing them and their silly little story off.

"I was the human known as the Hero."

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

So Raid and Eluria revealed the truth with lighthearted smiles. No matter how absurd it sounded or how many mysteries their circumstances may be shrouded in, there was never a need to fret, for they were the Hero and the Sage—once known as the world's strongest. Come what may, they could surely handle it together.

If there was something that neither of them could have imagined even in their wildest dreams, it was that the one thing they had always longed for deep inside finally became a reality.

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

The Hero and the Sage, once enemies on opposing sides of the battlefield, were now standing side by side with big smiles on their faces.



Afterword

Greetings, distinguished readers. My name is Washiro Fujiki.

This series was born from a truly simple string of thoughts. In manga and other fictional works, aren't there always those scenes where rivals settle things once and for all with an epic fight to the death? Then, with their dying breath, they would say something along the lines of, "Maybe in another life, we could've been friends...!" bringing a dramatic and heart-wrenching end to their rivalry. To that, I found myself declaring, "Then friends in another life you shall be!!!" which then spurred on my imagination and made me ask, "But how would that actually work out?" Finally, add in a healthy dose of my own selfish desire that screamed, "I want a cute girl to propose to me!" and we've got ourselves this story where two rivals were "reincarnated and engaged."

The physically strongest Hero and the magically strongest Sage become a couple and run wild through the new world at the speed of light. Alas, will the shy and awkward Sage ever muster the courage to confess her feelings to the Hero?! That's basically what this story is about. Please cheer on our cute little Eluria. She's trying her very best.

My inspiration was so simple, I've already run out of things to say. I'm not quite sure what else to do with this unusually long page allocation for the afterword. I suppose I can share some behind-the-scenes of writing this story.

I took a super long time to come up with the character names. From how it sounds to the ear and feels on the tongue, to the meaning behind it, to the impression it gives off... Just racking my brain over all that took me three whole days. As an author, the characters in my books are practically my children. Besides, a name is something that will stick with you for your entire life. Can you blame a parent for thinking so long and hard over their child's name?

Take for example our protagonist this time around. "Raid" is a word that means assault, attack, strike, siege, and so on. It gives off a very strong and offensive impression. In MMO games, there are those raid bosses that can't be

defeated unless the players challenge them in large numbers. Also, if a hero is the *ray* of hope that breaks past any hopeless situation, and we think of "raid" as kind of like a past tense to that, then his name could mean "hero of the past," which then represents his background and even foreshadows future developments.

Now you may be thinking, Wow, the author's really thought it all out! because of how I laid that all out, but the truth is that I just came up with some suitable logic for it in about thirty seconds, so please don't trust me. I will, however, trust my future self to come up with something nice for future developments.

I suppose this just goes to show that anything can make sense with the right explanation—but anyway, I digress. Let me move on to my words of thanks.

To my editor, thank you always. Things were pretty hectic this time around, but just know that through it all, I was putting my very best efforts...into my game. I met the deadline, so please don't be mad. Yay!

To Heiro, thank you very much for all your wonderful illustrations. My editor and I had to put our hands together to worship the handsome male characters. Truly, our eyes have been blessed.

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 Stories

The Hero and the Sage Have Undergone Special Training

Food was necessary for survival. Not only did it help one build a stronger body, but it even contributed to the stabilization of internal mana. Eating food could even ease physical fatigue, so its role in mental stability could not be understated.

Food was certainly not a matter so frivolous that it could be chosen with a remark as whimsical as "Hey, what's this Secret Menu item over here? Looks fun! Let's order this and try it together!" In which case, one would have to bear the consequences of their choice.

Millis paled as she stared at the dish on the table. "Wh-What do we do...?"

"Ms. Millis... We aren't really going to eat this, are we?"

"But Wisel, we can't waste perfectly good food...!"

"I agree... I just can't help but wonder if *this* counts as 'perfectly good food.'" Wisel furrowed his brow as he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

His gaze was set on the dish before them. It was...red. There was no other way to describe it. It was just red. *Very* red. It almost hurt his eyes just to look at it, and the smell was so sharp, he felt like the very insides of his nasal cavity were being pricked and stabbed. He even felt like he might start tearing up.

"Ohhh." Raid leaned over the dish. "That sure looks spicy."

Eluria hummed. "I think they used capsico."

"C-Capsico...?" Millis whispered, aghast. "I've heard of that fruit! They say that a single lick is enough to fell a dragon!"

"What?! Are you sure this is fit for human consumption...?" Wisel shuddered.

"Unprocessed, even a single bite of the fruit is lethal, but it's perfectly edible

once cooked. In fact, it can help expel impurities through sweat and even stimulate internal mana flow. It's very helpful." Eluria bobbed her head in approval as she casually scooped up a spoonful of the dish. Then, she popped it right into her mouth and chewed. "Mm... It has some kick to it, but it's good."

Raid followed suit and took a bite as well. "Oh, you're right. It tastes like spicy stew. It could be spicier though, if you ask me."

Millis stared at them both in disbelief. "Th-They ate it, just like that...!"

"And they're even commentating on the flavor! What beasts...!"

Raid sighed. "Come on, it's not as bad as you're making it out to be. Why not try some too?" he said, offering the dish to them.

Millis and Wisel flinched as the crimson disaster neared them, but the sight of Raid and Eluria chewing away, completely unfazed, loosened some of the tension in their shoulders.

"W-Well..." Millis gulped. "It can't possibly be harmful, can it...?"

"Yeah... I've heard that spicy food is actually healthy and good for fatigue."

They both took a spoonful each and carried it into their mouths.

"AAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

The next second, their screams echoed against the cafeteria walls.

"Hee, hoo... O-Owww?! Just breathing hurts...!" Millis stuck her tongue out, desperately huffing through her tears.

"It's like a hot stone is passing down my esophagus and into my stomach...!" Wisel's face twisted in agony as sweat poured down his forehead like a waterfall.

Raid and Eluria watched the two with curious frowns.

"It's not that spicy, is it?" Raid wondered.

"Nope. It's much tastier than a poison dragon's stomach or horned bear meat."

"Ah, yeah..." Raid agreed, thinking back. "Horned bear meat smells way too nasty to eat. I've also tried royal moth larvae, but they tasted horrible and my

tongue was paralyzed for an entire day after. Uck."

"I totally get that. Even if I needed the sustenance, I'd think twice before eating it again..."

Millis stared at the two in despair. "It's no use, Wisel... Their baseline is miles from ours...!"

"How the heck did you two even think to eat those things...?!"

Raid and Eluria finished the dish while fondly looking back on their past experiences and feeling grateful for modern day cuisine.

The Sage Is a Super-Duper Smart Person

Eluria was thinking. She was thinking very hard.

Her exquisite intellect had once crafted the founding theory for modern-day magic and paved the path for the world as they knew it today. Such profound thought and intricate insight now worked at full capacity in search of answers to a new question, ultimately leading her to where she stood now:

"I hereby commence a discussion on...my undergarments." Indeed, she stood, hosting her very own Undergarments Forum with an unfathomably grave countenance. "Thank you for your attendance, Millis."

The one and only participant, Millis, clenched her trembling fist as a strangled groan escaped her throat. "Hnghhh! Lady Eluria! I'm afraid your joke is beyond comprehension for my poor ol' countryside brain!"

Eluria's cheeks puffed up indignantly. "It's not a joke. I'm serious," she grumbled. "You brought up the topic of my undergarments before. I believe we must thoroughly exhaust this topic."

"And so...you followed me back to my room?"

Eluria and Millis had gone to the bath together again, and Eluria figured now was as good a chance as any to address the topic of her undergarments, which Millis had brought up the last time. It was a very efficient course of action, if she did say so herself.

"To preface," began Eluria, "I hypothesize that there were no issues with the garment itself or my method of wearing them."

"Well, yes... No need to hypothesize there..."

Eluria nodded, satisfied. "So now, we must investigate what exactly the issue was."

"I wouldn't say there was an *issue*... I just voiced my personal thoughts on the matter."

"Right. You claimed you were 'stimulated' by my undergarments."

"Are you just trying to call me out?!" Millis slammed her hands over her desk, eyes brimming with tears. She certainly *seemed* very stimulated. "Ugh... Firstly, I will say loud and clear that there was nothing wrong with your undergarments, Lady Eluria."

"Of course. My undergarments are perfectly fine. They fit comfortably no matter how roughly I move around, and the material is so absorbent that sweat never pools in my cleavage. They're soft on the skin, and the strings make them easy to put on and take off. I would personally give them a very high product rating."

"Wow! That's one satisfied customer!"

"Mhm. I like it a lot." It seemed Alicia truly knew her daughter well—she'd chosen the perfect undergarments that checked all of Eluria's boxes. Eluria would give her mother's impeccable judgment a ten out of ten too. "So," Eluria continued. "I want to know what exactly compelled you to bring it up."

"Uh, well... It was just much...sexier than what people usually wear... I was also stunned by how good you looked in it..."

Eluria hummed in thought. "In other words, it's not the kind that's worn on a daily basis?"

"I-I suppose not...?"

"Then we must clearly define 'everyday undergarments."

"Hm...? Why do I feel like I'm gonna be here till morning?" Millis finally realized what she had gotten herself into and stared longingly at her bed. A very

expressive girl, through and through. "Well..." She sighed. "For a commoner like me, undergarments are usually very plain... I mean, nobody sees it, so comfort typically takes precedence over design..."

"A fair point... But," said Eluria, her lips smugly quirked up. "I am often seen in my undergarments, so it makes sense that mine are fancier."

"Huh?" Millis blinked owlishly. "Y-You mean, you and Raid—"

"Because people always stare at me in the dressing room."

"Ah, yes, how could I ever forget?!" Millis wailed, throwing herself over her desk. "Right... You always draw people's attention..."

"Mhm. My mother told me to conduct myself as the proud daughter of House Caldwin. She must have foreseen that many eyes would be on me even in dressing rooms."

"Yes... I wholeheartedly agree with that conclusion..." Millis muttered, looking far too done with it all.

With that, Eluria's concerns were now alleviated, and she had even splendidly upheld the dignity of House Caldwin. Eluria nodded firmly, satisfied with their fruitful discussion.

The Sage's One-Man Challenge

Although Eluria had once been hailed as the Sage, even she had her own weaknesses—and buying something on her own happened to be one of them.

In her past life, she'd hardly had any experience with this task. As she'd been an elf, she had always needed to be wary of people's attention, so her disciples would often take care of things for her. After reincarnating to this era, her many maids and butlers at home would handle such matters for her.

But today, Eluria found herself standing stock-still in the cafeteria, facing this challenge alone.

"I want pudding...!" she said through gritted teeth.

Eluria was in the mood for some pudding—very much so. She'd had a

delicious evening meal, enjoyed a nice long soak in the bath with Millis, and had been leisurely passing the time with a book, when the craving had crashed down on her like a thunderbolt.

"I should've bought it while I was still with Millis..."

She found the task much easier to do with a companion. Eluria wasn't quite used to being by herself, so her nerves always skyrocketed when she attempted this alone. At first, she'd considered inviting Raid, but she couldn't bring herself to ask for his help just to buy one measly cup of pudding.

In the end, she'd made her way to the cafeteria all by herself—a testament to her firm resolve to consume pudding this very evening.

Eluria gathered her wits about her and skittishly flitted over to the cafeteria staff. "E-Excuse me...!"

"Hello! How may I help you?"

"Um... I came to buy pudding..."

"Pudding? Then please choose from this list." The staff member politely offered her the menu.

Eluria nodded and slowly pointed. "Um... Th-The custard pudding, please."

"Okay. Just one?"

"Yes... Wait, no. M-Maybe two..."

With a smile, the staff nodded and went to prepare the girl her evening treat.

Eluria had worked so hard to come all the way here, so she didn't want to eat her hard-earned pudding alone. She was already treating herself to a late-night snack—why not enjoy it with the person she liked too?



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The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged: Volume 1

by Washiro Fujiki

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