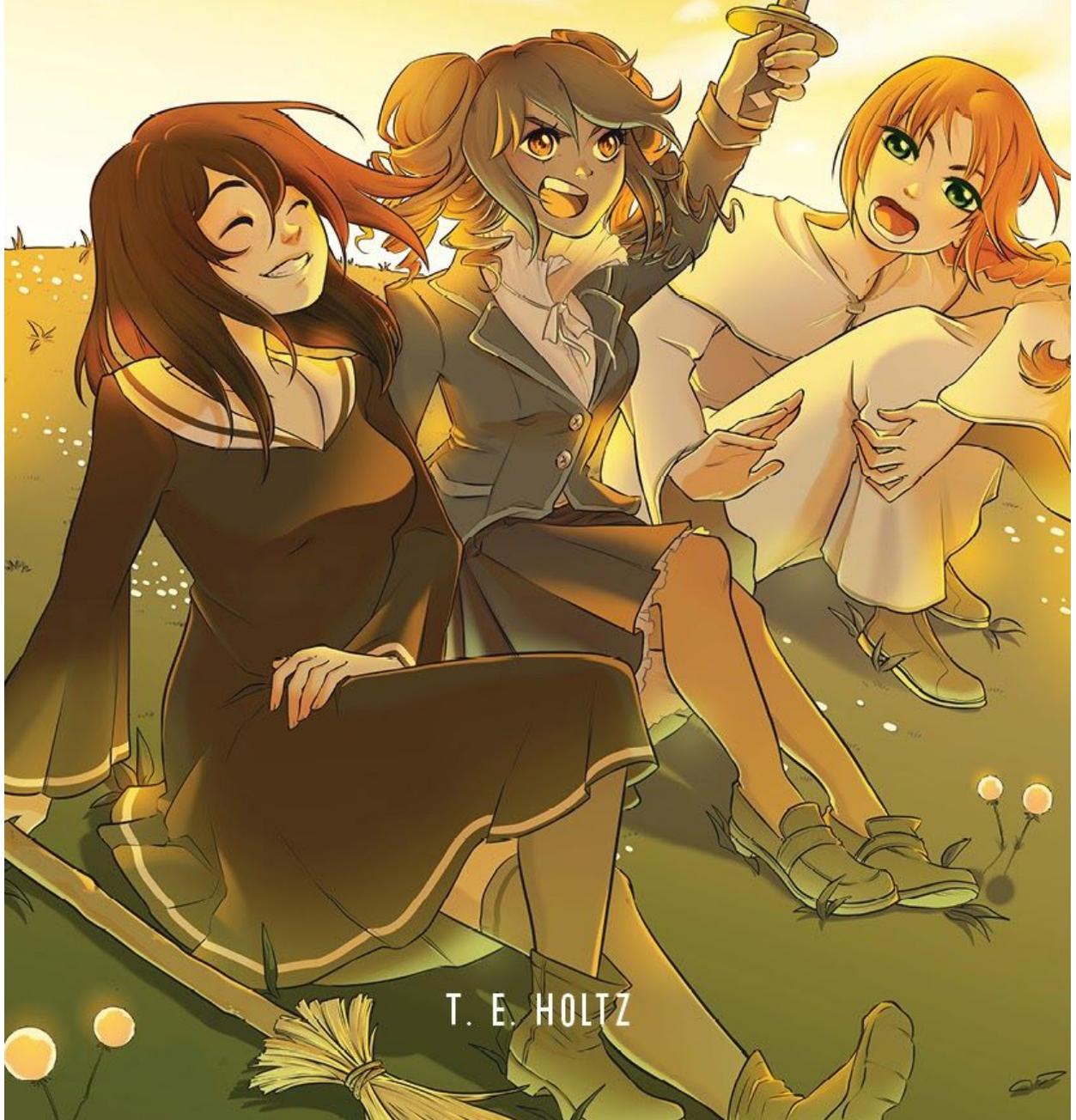


Magi of Gata

VOLUME ONE: I TOLD A LIE



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Magi of Gaia Series by T.E. Holtz

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Magi of Gaia

Chapter 1

Eren was happy. It wasn't unusual to see a smile on her face, but certain things could always bring out her cheerfulness. For her, right now, it was this exhilarating feeling that only came from flying. With the wind blasting her face at high speeds, blowing her long black hair in every direction, she couldn't help feeling a current of excitement flowing through her veins, no matter how many times she flew.

While she gripped firmly to the wooden broom that she straddled, she looked down at the expansive stretch of farmland below. She was high up enough to see the Varon River to the far west and could just barely discern the outline of the beautiful Sky's Reach Mountains to the northeast.

Contemplating this feeling a bit deeper, maybe "happy" wasn't the right word to describe how she felt. No, if she had to describe what she felt, she would say something along the lines of "My heart feels full," or "I feel complete right now." Of course, she'd never actually *say* such embarrassingly mushy-gushy lines out loud, but those were her true feelings in this moment while flying at a high speed over the tallest trees with the howling wind in her ears.

The fading chill that she felt as the morning passed reminded her that summer was now behind her, and the dark clouds in the distance suggested that her flight for the day would be cut short. Normally, this realization would diminish that "full" feeling from Eren's heart, but there was one thing that kept her in high spirits, and that was the rather sharp object poking her painfully in the thigh through her skirt pocket. The gift Eren was bringing along to show her friend was a bit of a nuisance, but it was going to be worth the look on Jorri's face when she saw what it could do.

Wanting to both stop the annoying poking, as well as take another look at the object, Eren reached into the pocket of her ankle-length black skirt and pulled out the small, oblong-shaped metal fragment. She smiled, knowing she was the only person in the entire realm of Gaia who knew what this unassuming piece of metal could do. Unfortunately, while she was thinking of showing it off, her grip on the metal piece loosened, and the rushing current of the wind caught it at just the right angle, sending it flying from her hand to the ground below.

"Ah!" Eren yelled out in a mixture of surprise and vexation. She was a decent magician, and not just by her own admittance, but there were still many types of magic in which she was not proficient. Tracing, a type of magic useful for pinpointing the

location of people and objects, such as a tiny piece of metal in a large open field, was one of the more troublesome abilities she had ever attempted. Knowing this, she instinctively spun around and dived at an angle that would best allow for her to catch the object.

Flying or, in this case, controlling an object that had been enchanted with a “flight” spell, was certainly one of her more suited skills. Still, at this angle and speed, she knew she might not quite catch the falling fragment, and then her whole plan to see Jorri’s excited smile would fall flat. With that thought in the back of her mind, Eren boosted the speed of the broom and stretched out her hand. It was going to be a close call. As a precaution, she enhanced her body so that, even if she did crash, she wouldn’t take much damage.

Eren tilted the angle of the broom farther down, nearly nosediving as the metal piece glistened in front of her. She hurtled toward the ground and stretched as far as she could as soon as the object was within reach. As her fingertips brushed the small piece of metal, she pulled up ever-so-slightly to straighten herself out just as she snatched up the fragment from midair. Eren then jerked the broom up with her free hand and began to level herself with the ground before raising her elevation again. It was a really close call, and she could have sworn she felt the toes of her shoes kicking the grass below. She had been warned not to do such risky maneuvers, and if Slaine had seen what had just happened, she would probably be in for a lengthy lecture. But what fun was flying if you removed the excitement?

Well, Eren thought to herself, that would only be a problem if she saw me, wouldn’t it? Laughing to herself, she rolled playfully through the air a few times after gaining back her altitude, another thing that would probably get her in trouble if she were caught.

As the rural area below slowly formed into a more populated small town, Eren sighted the structure she was searching for in the distance. The destination was easily spotted, even from the shadowed outline of the town. No matter what angle she approached from, Himmel Shrine was always the building that stood out the most, and not just because it was the tallest, but because of the way it was designed. Most other buildings were rather plain in comparison, but the shrine was different. To be more accurate, the shrine was more of a complex than a singular building, the parameter of the property coming very close to measuring a square mile.

It wasn’t strange to see people taking their daily walks around the building for exercise in the mornings, not only because it was a nice length to walk, but because the grounds were well-kempt by the clerics living there. Every day, the wooden walls were

scrubbed, the floors polished, the windows cleaned, and the garden was tenderly and painstakingly maintained year-round. Inside and out, the expansive building was kept in immaculate condition.

The large, wooden structure itself was a sight to behold from afar, but walking up to the entrance was enough to make anyone feel small. The first thing to catch the eyes of anyone approaching Himmel Shrine were the beautiful, massive archways that were held up by red-painted, thick, wooden columns that towered over the long cobblestone walkway that led to the front entrance.

The entrance itself was another enormous design that used thick, wooden doors that were too heavy for one person to open by hand and thus relied on a gear and pulley system that operated by a simple pull of a lever. That's not to say the doors were often closed, as they generally stayed open from early morning until nightfall, but just the sight of them was enough to leave an impression.

Anyone who might have needed to access the shrine before the doors were opened could just as easily enter through one of the many side doors. If asked, even the clerics living in the shrine would smile and tell you that the front doors were just for show, symbolic of a safe haven and the power of the goddess's protection.

Not being one to patiently wait at the entrance if she didn't have to, Eren dropped her elevation and scanned the area for her friend, luckily finding her right away, predictably enjoying the pleasant atmosphere of the garden.

Upon closer inspection, Eren could see that Jorri wasn't alone. Sitting next to her on the veranda was the third party of their Magi trio, Yuna. The girls were chatting away happily, having not yet spotted the flying girl.

There was no mistaking either of the two, even from Eren's height, as both sported rather unusual hair. While Jorri wore her hair in a modest braid, tied at the end with a small green ribbon, it stood out for two reasons. The first was that it was red, and a deep shade of ginger at that. Red hair was becoming more and more of a rare sight on Gaia, with an estimated population of less than half a percent in the entire realm. The second reason was her white robe and pale skin only seemed to make the redness of her hair look that much more vibrant.

Yuna was easy to spot for an entirely different reason. Her dark brown hair didn't stand out against the copper skin tone or her expertly tailored blue blazer. Yuna's hair stood out due to her curly pigtails that were meticulously tended to in the early hours of the morning by the staff working at her house. There was not a hair out of place, as expected of a high-class girl who understood the value of a strong first impression.

If by some odd chance you *somehow* didn't notice Yuna by her pigtails, there was one more thing about her that was unusual. Every day, no matter the situation or occasion, Yuna always had a sword firmly attached to her hip. At nearly two and a half feet in length from hilt to tip, the blade looked to be small for most people, but it suited her smaller frame perfectly. The blade rested in the black sheath attached to her belt.

Eren thought for a moment, debating on giving the two a scare by diving down on them. Knowing how Yuna might react to a surprise attack, though, she decided to approach the two normally. That way, at least she wouldn't end up in another stranglehold. Then again, the day was still young.

"Hey!" Eren called down to her friends, giving a warning of her presence before diving downward.

* * *

Cleaning the walls and floors of a large shrine was tough work. People might try to disagree, saying that it was mostly empty space, so it should go quickly, but those people had never spent an hour on a single room, with slightly damp cloth in hand, buffing a floor for the second and third time until you could see your reflection in the wood.

Just an hour before Eren had arrived, that was what Jorri had been doing.

She looked at her fingers, which had become pruned half an hour ago and were just now starting to feel a bit raw. The young cleric still had another full room to go after she finished off the current one, but she was nearly done now and was ahead of schedule.

After considering the condition of her fingers, Jorri decided she would take a short rest once this room was finished. While she would normally wait until all her chores were completed, she knew that today would be busy after Yuna arrived and thought it better to not let her chance slip away.

Thankfully, ceremonies and other services were not generally held in this room, so the amount of people that entered this space only consisted of residents who lived in the shrine, such as herself and the few volunteers who helped them when needed. That meant there was less mess to clean.

Unfortunately for the people in charge of cleaning rooms like these, as the summer came to an end, this room would transform into a place where younger children would take arts and crafts, boys would have their mandatory self-defense courses, and midwife classes would soon be held. The fall season always felt the longest.

After giving the floor its required second round of polish, Jorri evaluated the room one more time before nodding to herself. From the ceiling to the walls, she hadn't allowed a bit of dust to settle in the place.

A feeling of satisfaction filled her; she felt proud of her work. It was a shame that the next room would be even bigger, but if one thing in this world was certain, it was that clerics living in the shrine earned their keep.

The redhead picked up the large metal pail that was filled with warm, now dirty water she had been using for cleaning. She had emptied and refilled this bucket three times since she had started working on this room, but she was done with it for the next several minutes.

She left the room with the few cleaning supplies she had brought along with her and put them up properly, making sure she tossed the dirty cloths into the laundry area before washing her hands and heading to the dining hall.

The winding corridors of Himmel Shrine could be like a maze for those unfamiliar with the layout. The growth of the place over the years had made for some unintuitive designs and inspired many of the clerics to come up with creative shortcuts, one or two that required leaving through a side entrance and coming back in through a window. Needless to say, taking those shortcuts could get you in trouble, but some of them still did it anyway, especially the younger kids and students attending classes.

Jorri walked down several corridors, nearly circling to the other side of the large complex to the large dining area and kitchen. She wasn't alone in there as there were three other girls cleaning the area while nine or ten girls and women, along with one boy, gathered for a quick break.

Everyone was wearing the same white cloth robe as she was. It was made from soft, knitted material with a hood on the back that was only used by those girls who were trying to take a short nap. For newcomers, the early mornings could be tough, so they would try to get naps in when able, but eventually, their bodies would grow accustomed to it.

Well before ever reaching the dining hall, the lingering scent of the delicious breakfast that had been prepared earlier made itself known. It was hard not to have your appetite fueled just by being in its vicinity. This was all thanks to Morina, a girl who, though only seventeen—a full year older than Jorri—had unparalleled culinary talent.

Unlike most clerics who cycled through various chores each week, Morina was

always working in the kitchen, preparing meals for the clerics and volunteers. She loved to cook though, with her talents, many wondered why she stayed at the shrine. Shrines were places for people to come when they had nowhere else to go, but with her abilities, Morina could have gone wherever she wanted ... not that anyone was pushing her out the door, of course.

The single biggest difference between the large dining room and any other in the shrine was the smooth, white granite flooring used only for this area. This was likely to make it easier for clerics to spot spills and messes for cleaning. It was a smooth and simple layout design. The only problem that arose was that, after more than twenty years, the granite was finally starting to show its age with irreparable scratches and cracks. Talk of getting it replaced was often heard but never acted upon.

The dining hall was set for only thirty or so clerics at any given time, though there were more people who ate there for lunch. It mostly wasn't an issue, as some would eat their food earlier or later than others, depending on a variety of circumstances, not the least of which being what chores they were assigned that week. It was only during festivals and holidays when Himmel Shrine would host big events for the town that many more tables and chairs would be pulled out of storage and set up, changing the roomy hall into a packed space capable of holding upward of three hundred patrons at a time.

The kitchen that connected to the dining hall had three longstoves in the back, though one was enough for everyday use. To someone from another realm, longstoves were likely a curious sight, and the image of a stretched-out stove holding ten burners, a fryer, a grill, and three separate ovens was rather uncommon. Naturally, this wasn't the kind of appliance you would find in the average household, but it saved room for establishments that needed to cook large amounts of food on a daily basis and also saved on magical fuel costs.

There were two other noteworthy things about the kitchen, the first being the large refrigerator and freezer tucked into the corner, each with a different amount of frost charms to keep them at their appropriate temperatures. The second was the drop-off window that connected to the dining hall where people would place their discarded dishes for cleaning and any leftover food for compost. Otherwise, the kitchen looked like any you would find in the restaurants of most moderately advanced realms.

After giving the usual round of pleasantries and greetings to her fellow residents, Jorri grabbed a cup and filled it from a nearby kettle of fresh herbal tea. As she poured, its gentle aroma filled her entire being.

Was that a hint of ginger she smelled? There was no doubt this had been touched by the loving hand of Morina. That girl could turn even a simple cup of tea into a masterpiece.

Jorri carefully brought the drink to her lips but stopped when she noticed the lone male in the room, a boy two years her junior, giving her a pleading look. The imploring eyes cried out from under his thick eyebrows and over his button nose, partially enhancing how pitiful he looked.

“Jorri,” the boy’s frail-sounding voice called out to her, sounding distressed. “Help me out.”

She sighed under her breath at the situation the young man had found himself in, yet she grinned all the same. It was apparent why he was in trouble, as two young women, one on either side of him, were holding onto each of his arms tightly and trying to “persuade” him to cooperate with them.

“Oh, come on,” the girl on his left said playfully, her bright blue eyes intently staring at the trapped boy. “I don’t bite.”

The blonde girl attached to the young man’s right arm shook her head and looked away as she stated in a sing-song voice, “Not what I heard, Mika ...”

“Venora!” the first girl, Mika, cried out in surprise.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

Mika debated the accusation shortly before relenting. “Well, maybe a little,” she said with a toothy grin, making the nervous boy even more panicked.

He gave another pleading look to Jorri.

Jorri smiled and gave a shrug. “This is why you’re supposed to take your self-defense courses seriously, Vahan,” she teased.

“Jorri, come on!” Vahan called out to her.

Feigning a sigh and shrugging, Jorri walked up to the table and reluctantly put the cup of tea down. “All right, you two,” she proclaimed in a firm voice. “That’s enough. Leave him be.”

“But Joorriiiii ...” Mika whined.

“Just let us have some fun with him,” Venora protested.

Jorri had known these two for several years, and it was obvious that they weren't planning on taking this too far, but Vahan just looked too pathetic to be left alone with his captors. She raised both hands and gave them a very solid flick to their foreheads.

Both girls winced and grabbed the sore spots, making unpleasant, whiny noises.

"No means no!" Jorri stated in the same firm tone from before.

"You're no fun, Jorri," Venora grumbled, but both girls obediently released their hold on Vahan and left the table, returning to their unfinished chores. They had had their fun, even if it was short-lived, and would likely continue teasing the boy tomorrow, unless Edith was around.

Jorri shook her head. That was just how things were with girls and boys. If Vahan had been more prudent about his self-defense training, he might have been able to handle those two better, even if they were just playing around and didn't mean any real harm. Still, Jorri's mind wandered at times like these. If the rosso virus wasn't present, would things be any different?

The rosso virus was present on every realm in known existence and had killed roughly three out of every five males born. For most people, this was a fact of life and had been for all of recorded history. It was a plague that no realm had yet to eradicate, even for those with medical technology far surpassing Gaia's. It was a true mystery and the bane of all expecting mothers.

Yet, even though it was only a fantasy, Jorri wondered what a realm would be like that had as many men alive as women. More than likely, not much different. After all, it was in a boy's nature to need protection; that was practically genetic. It was fun to think about what a realm like that might be like, but at the same time, she couldn't imagine it.

Picking up her tea once more, the redhead smiled at Vahan, and the room appeared to brighten a little as she did. Jorri just had that kind of smile.

She gave a nod to the grateful young man, who thanked her as she left the dining hall. Finally, with nothing to interrupt her peaceful mood, she took a long sip of the warm beverage that had been teasing her nose for the past few minutes. The flavor was rather tangy but mild and soothing at the same time, she thought. It was difficult to tell exactly how Morina made something so amazing, but just one sip was enough to begin warming her all the way through.

Just as she thought to go strike up a conversation with one of the volunteers, a young girl who was studying to be a veterinarian, one of her fellow clerics hailed her

attention.

“Jorri, Yuna’s carriage is about to arrive.” Then girl had waist-length, wavy, dark brown hair. Her smile would have made her look very much at peace if not for her sharp, hazel eyes that made others feel as though they were being measured on some invisible scale. Her glaze and toned, athletic physique could, at first, cause a person to feel tense around her, but it never took long for her sweet, cheerful personality to shine through and bring back a feeling of ease.

“Already?” Jorri hadn’t been expecting Yuna for another few hours, so she wasn’t prepared at all. “Okay. Thanks, Edith. I’ll go welcome her.”

Edith gave a quick nod then went back to her chores, which unfortunately was bathroom duty.

Jorri finished her tea more quickly than she would have liked then went to meet her friend at the shrine’s entrance . She had wanted to have all her work done before Yuna arrived so they could enjoy the day together, but it seemed like that wasn’t going to happen. She would just have to wait until Jorri was done before they went out anywhere, but she would extend her break for a while so they could have time to talk before Yuna settled in.

Once she was in sight of the entrance, Jorri could see that her friend had already arrived and was watching as her attendants unloaded eleven large, heavy-looking bags from her carriage.

She walked up and stood a short distance away, next to High Priestess Kathrin, and watched the ensuing chaos as it began almost immediately.

Yuna was already in mid-argument with her senior-most staff, her pigtails swaying and bouncing whenever she moved her head. “I told you already; I’m fine. There’s not even a scar.”

“Yes, but you know how your parents worry,” a bespectacled woman, dressed very formally in black pants and a white, long-sleeved top, despite how hot the day would become, told Yuna, pleading for her understanding.

There was a noticeable difference in height between the two, partly because the older woman was slightly tall, but mostly because Yuna was so small in stature.

“Zierre, it’s my job to ... What are you girls doing?” Yuna’s tone changed as she directed her attention to the other attendants who had begun to lift up the heavy luggage and carry it toward the shrine’s arched entryway. She had said “girls,” despite one of the

attendants being male, not to intentionally ignore him, but because she was referring to a group of people who were mostly female.

“My lady, your parents don’t think you should—”

“*My parents* aren’t here,” Yuna interrupted Zierre. “Honestly, I should have never told them about that fight. One realm crusher gets a lucky hit on me with an enchanted dagger and suddenly they get all overprotective,” Yuna huffed before turning her attention back to the staff. She gave them a stern look that made her intentions clear. “Put those down.” Her tone left no room for argument.

Slowly, they did as they were told.

Zierre tried to protest, knowing her efforts would be in vain. “Lady Yuna, please just let them help this once.”

“I’m not some incapable, spoiled, little rich girl, Zierre,” Yuna replied without even looking in her general direction. She took a deep breath and held it in for a moment closing her eyes and beginning to strengthen the mana within her body. She could feel every muscle in her body become very tight then return to a normal state. Her outward appearance never changed, but as the mana was redirected and controlled, Yuna’s body underwent a metamorphosis that made her once fragile body into a more durable, stronger, more agile organism. This type of magic was her specialty and fell under the category of “enhancing.”

After casting the spell on herself, Yuna looked up with a nod and grabbed the near dozen incredibly heavy bags, lining five or six along each of her outstretched arms and carrying them all toward the front entrance with ease. Yuna smiled as she casually strolled under the archways with the two overstuffed armfuls of luggage.

Zierre sighed and quickly gave out some instructions to the remaining staff before following behind. “My Lady, that doesn’t look very dignified ...”

“Don’t care,” Yuna sang, finally catching eyes with the two waiting out front for her. She waved an arm in greeting, as though it wasn’t restrained in the slightest. “Hey! It’s been a while!”

Jorri laughed cheerfully. “We saw each other just two weeks ago!”

“That was Magi work. It doesn’t count,” Yuna informed her. “Besides, I meant it’s been a while since I stayed at the shrine.”

“True,” Jorri conceded. “Well, it’s a bit early for lunch. Want to have a cup of tea?”

“Sure, just let me put my bags in my r—” Yuna stopped abruptly, as though she just remembered something of dire importance. With a large, fake smile, she asked, “Who made the tea?” She wasn’t trying to be so transparent about her worries, but she wasn’t one to hide her feelings either.

“Morina. Why are you asking?” Jorri asked, her expression souring.

Yuna avoided eye contact with the cleric. “No reason. Just curious. Oh, look, I have so much to unpack,” she stated before suddenly dashing through the large open doorway and inside the building.

“Even *I* can make tea properly, Yuna!” Jorri shouted, chasing after her. “And don’t run in the shrine while carrying all that!” The demanding voice trailed off in the distance as she tailed the pigtailed girl through the corridors.

High Priestess Kathrin, who had remained silent throughout the scene, stood there with a grin before finally asking Zierre, “Don’t you wish you were that young again?”

Zierre gave a look of defeat and shook her head. “I was never that young.” She cast a hopeful glance at the older cleric. “Want to trade? Jorri seems much easier to deal with—less willful.”

Kathrin laughed. “Then you haven’t spent enough time with her yet. I’ll take them both off your hands, though. I can always find a use for a magician not afraid to use her powers freely.”

The neatly dressed Zierre frowned. “So Jorri still has hang-ups about that?”

“She’s becoming a little less reserved about using magic lately, thanks to Yuna, Eren, and all her friends here, but she’s still dealing with the guilt.” Kathrin spoke softly about the sensitive topic and motioned that they head inside, ending the unpleasant conversation there.

* * *

“I didn’t expect to see you here today,” Eren said, slowing her descent to the ground and letting her feet land on the grass before dismounting the broom. She considered putting her enchanted tool away but decided to hold onto it until she knew she wasn’t interrupting anything important.

Yuna gave a tired look. “I decided to take an early weekend. The new supervisor of our Eastern Windon branch has been insufferable. She seems allergic to work. And being around her makes me wish I were in the mines with everyone else.”

Jorri gave a small laugh. "It's true. Yuna's been complaining about her for the past twenty minutes without rest."

"I'm not complaining," Yuna retorted defensively. "I'm stating facts."

"You said she's a man-hungry lunatic who doesn't understand the value of hard work and that she tells bad jokes."

"All facts."

Eren chuckled. If there was one thing you could say about Yuna, it was that she was passionate about anything she put her mind to. Alongside her responsibilities as a Magus, she was also in the midst of learning the ins and outs of her family's mining business which, while not the biggest business in Gaia, was certainly the most profitable. They specialized in mining out high-quality crystals, most capable of being turned into sources of energy that could power large households for over a month before needing to be recharged. Neither Eren nor Jorri envied her having to take over that kind of high-end company. Both could easily imagine themselves crumbling from the stress of trying to run a major business while still performing their duties as Magi.

"What about you?" Jorri asked, directing the conversation back to Eren. "Have you been to any interesting realms lately?"

"Oh yeah!" Eren exclaimed, having almost forgotten her original purpose of coming to the shrine. She reached into her skirt pocket and produced the metal fragment she had brought with her. "I wanted to show you this."

Both girls leaned forward to get a look at the small object in Eren's hand.

"It looks like a rock," Yuna stated, unsure of what reaction her friend expected to receive from this.

Eren waved her hand dismissively with a cocky look on her face. "Don't judge it until you see what it can do. Jorri, is that drink hot?"

The sudden change in topic caused the redhead to stumble a bit before answering, "Um, oh, yeah. It's tea, so of course it's hot."

For just a moment, Eren thought to tell Jorri that she had met a lot of people from other realms who enjoyed cold tea, but she didn't want to get off track. "Can I borrow it?"

"Borrow?" Jorri mumbled in confusion but handed over the beverage without a fuss.

Eren grasped the ceramic cup from Jorri's hands before promptly dropping the small piece of metal into the tea, creating a *plop* sound as the water consumed the item.

"That's not *borrowing*!" Jorri protested, saying goodbye to Morina's delicious tea. She suddenly wished she had savored the first cup a bit more and regretted telling Eren she wasn't drinking something cold.

Ignoring Jorri's complaint, Eren counted to herself for thirty seconds before reaching into the cup, making sure it wasn't going to burn her fingers first, and pulling the small bit of metal out. Without allowing anyone the chance to say it didn't look any different from before, she pinched the piece tightly with both hands then pulled at it. In response, the metal fragment stretched out with ease.

It appeared as though the fragment was unfolding and showed no signs of contracting as Eren brought her hands back together. Instead, the segment of stretched metal drooped loosely like a partially melted steel bar. Eren continued to stretch it out more and more, but there seemed to be no end to how much she could stretch it out without tearing it. Eventually, the small metal fragment was turned into a thin sheet that was half as big as her.

"That's amazing!" Jorri shouted in excitement.

Eren smiled at her reaction. It was exactly how she knew Jorri would respond. Whenever she brought something new or interesting from another realm, the redhead would suddenly become energetic and lively, even if it was something simple like what she had brought today.

"Yeah, it's really amazing, Eren," Yuna said, sounding a great deal less enthusiastic. "Where did you happen to find it, I wonder."

The accusatory tone made it clear Yuna knew exactly where she had claimed the prize, but Eren wasn't quite willing to fess up.

Avoiding eye contact, she replied, "A friend gave it to me."

"Oh, a friend? Anybody I know?" Yuna was toying with her at this point.

"P-Probably not." Eren continued to look away, this time pretending to just now notice the storm clouds rolling over the shrine. "She lives pretty far away."

"Like, in another realm?" Yuna asked pointedly, finally getting to the point.

Eren hesitated but answered the question as honestly as she could allow herself.

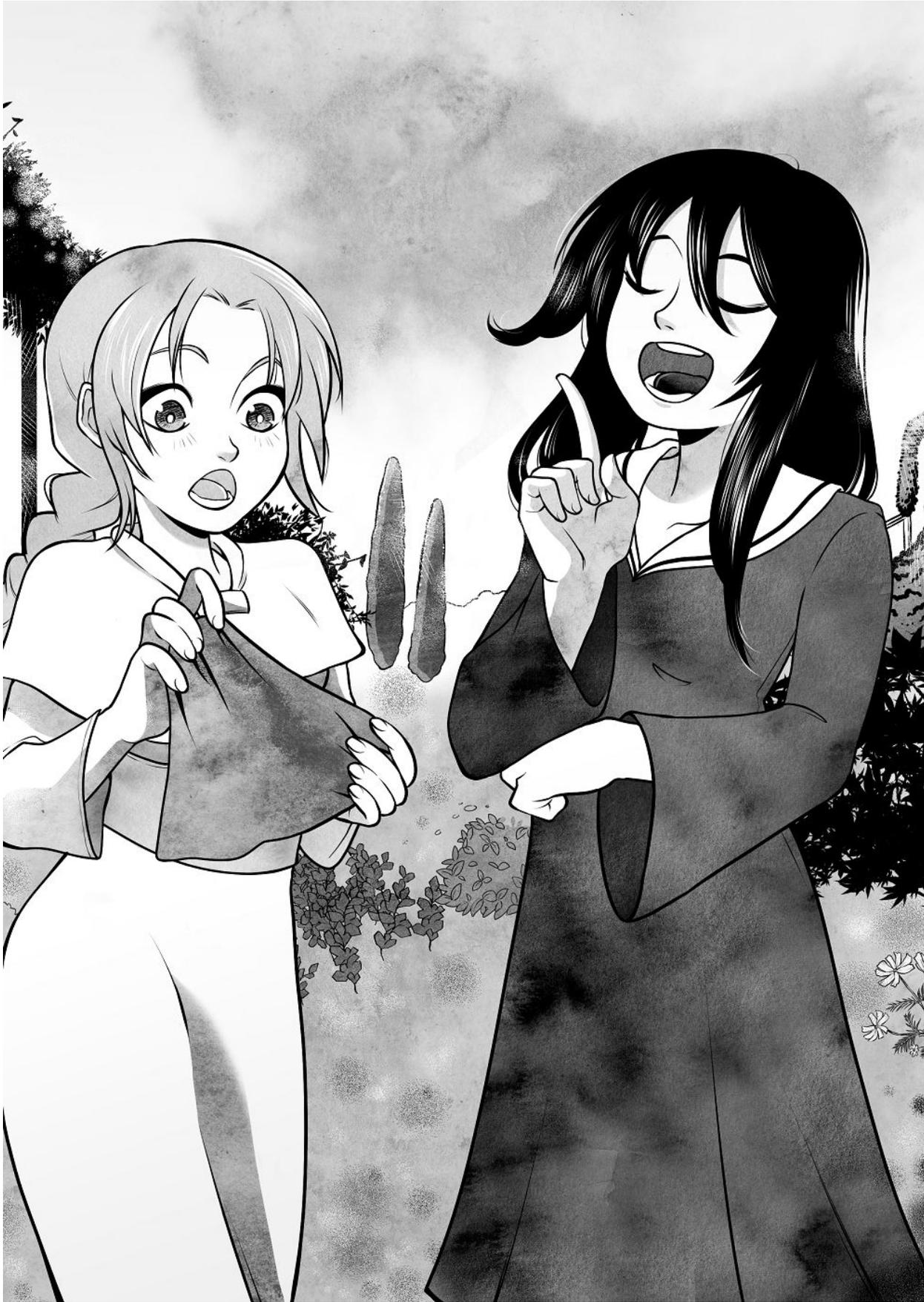
“Maybe.”

“You know you’re not supposed to bring strange things from other realms, Eren!” Yuna scolded. “There are reasons we have so many rules in place about this type of thing, right, Jorri?” She looked over to her right, only to notice the cleric had already gotten up and moved from the veranda, cautiously taking hold of the stretched metal as Eren offered it to her.

Jorri’s eyes widened. “Oh, it’s sticky. I thought it’d feel like whatever it was you gave me last time. You know, that little ball?”

“You mean *rubber*?”

“Yeah, yeah. That.” Jorri continued to examine the flexibility and texture of the metal object in her hands, but somehow she accidentally managed to twist it into a weird shape as it began sticking to itself. “Ah, I’m tangling it.”



Yuna sighed heavily. “Jorri, you’re not helping.” She paused for a moment then gave another glare. “What was that about a ball from *last time*?” She tried to keep pressuring the two but was being completely ignored at this point as Jorri started asking about the material. She didn’t feel like arguing any further after all the annoyances from her work, so she just rolled her eyes, leaned back against the wall, and listened to Eren’s explanation of what the metal was used for in its home realm.

“Once it dries, it becomes hard again, so you can mold it into any shape and it will stay that way,” Eren explained, feeling like a teacher giving a lecture. “There are a lot of uses for it, and not just practical, but artistic, too. You just have to make sure it doesn’t get splashed with hot water because it won’t be able to hold its form anymore.”

Jorri started packing the large sheet back into a small ball but couldn’t quite get it back to its original size. After a moment of frustration, Eren explained that it would take a lot of work to get it back to its natural state, as it had absorbed a lot of water and now had many small pockets of air trapped inside due to being stretched out so much. “To get it back to being that small, you’d need to slowly dry it out and constantly knead out the air bubbles,” she informed.

“You really absorbed a lot of information from the people in that realm, didn’t you?” Yuna’s tone bordered on impressed, even though she was trying to still sound peeved.

Eren shrugged. “I had to make sure I wasn’t going to bring something back that might have been dangerous in some way, so I learned everything I could about it. I even made sure it wasn’t poisonous in case an animal or some little kid thought it was food.”

“Good thinking,” Yuna praised, but then she fully flipped her attitude back to normal as she said, “but you still shouldn’t have brought it in the first place.”

Before Eren could make any sort of defense for her actions, she felt a few droplets of water against her arms and face, then a few more. In a matter of seconds, a slow drizzle befell the town of Himmel, and Eren could see bright flashes of light behind the dark clouds. It looked like the heavy storm that she had noticed earlier was finally arriving.

She watched Jorri slowly make her way back to the protective cover of the veranda’s roof as she carefully molded the sticky material into what looked to be a bird of some sort.

Once Jorri was shielded from the rain, she reached out with her free hand and caught a droplet of rain in her palm. She closed her fist around it tightly in victory.

“Good. Now, I won’t get sick. Yuna, Eren, you both should do it, too.”

Yuna groaned. “Jorri, you’re not an old lady. Stop following those weird superstitions.”

“All superstitions are grounded in some truth,” Jorri stated defensively.

“So you really think you’re giving someone good luck by tapping your foot in the doorway before entering their bedroom?”

“That’s not for *good* luck. That’s to keep the *bad* luck out!”

While the two bickered over trivial matters, the drizzle was beginning to turn into a full rain. Eren didn’t feel like sitting down, so she decided to cast a simple barrier around herself.

By learning to manipulate the mana found inside oneself, another person, everyday objects, the very air around you, and the universe as a whole, one could very easily create what others might view as “magic.” There were countless ways to use mana, and while some were more common and categorized, other types of magic weren’t so easy to define.

For a protective barrier, the category it fell into was called “casting.” Casting referred to the manipulation of mana that was outside of the body in the immediate vicinity. While the host magician could do numerous things with this energy, creating a physical wall of mana was one of the simplest and most effective tools to stop unwanted harm from befalling on herself or others. Barriers were very sturdy but not unbreakable. They could easily be broken if the magician’s concentration was interrupted or another magician’s power overwhelmed them.

Turning mana into a tangible form consisted of three steps. First, Eren needed to collect it from her surroundings, willing it toward her from all directions. It wasn’t a demanding task as mana was all around her. It was in the soft breeze brought in by the storm, in each raindrop that fell around her, coursing through her body and through her outstretched arm. Mana was one of the most plentiful resources in all the world, so there were no worries about not having enough to perform her task. In her mind, she visualized it as a sky-blue mist that engulfed everything.

Next, the mana needed to be shaped into the desired design or formation. Through her will, she began to encircle the gathering mist around her, moving it at high speed and shaping it into a sphere large enough to fit two people comfortably. It was a bit large for what she needed, but it was the size she was most comfortable with. She found it

easiest to move a barrier of this size along with her.

Finally, after enough mana had been gathered and shaped, she willed it into a physical existence, triggering the end of the spell and releasing the unused mana. This was what separated a magician from a normal person—the ability to control and manipulate mana at will.

With her spell cast, all that remained was a real, *serviceable*, transparent barrier that made it look as though she were trapped in a large bubble. This casting spell took place all within less than two seconds, but in the heat of a moment, she could cast it almost on reflex.

Eren looked up as the drops of rain became increasingly larger in size, hitting the barrier and streaking down the sides. It was funny to think that she was using this spell for something as nonthreatening as rain when just a couple of months ago she was using the same barrier to protect her from the scorching flame of a fire elemental magician who had mistaken her for an enemy. Then again, what was the point of being a Magus if she couldn't make practical use of her magic, just like with flying.

After watching Jorri craft a less-than-impressive bird, calling it a marin, despite the tail feathers being so short, Yuna suggested they go out for lunch. Jorri objected, saying she still had to finish her chores but was assured their outing would only take a couple of hours at most. Jorri made a face that showed she wasn't convinced but agreed to go anyway. As long as she finished cleaning by the end of the day, she didn't mind. She just preferred to get it out of the way early.

“Any idea where you want to go?” Eren asked, not making eye contact with Yuna as she spoke, instead directing her attention to the increasingly darkening clouds above.

She couldn't have explained why exactly, but she loved stormy weather. If for no other reason, this kind of weather was the best for staying home and relaxing. The sound of a heavy downpour falling on her roof set the mood to read or take a nap. Just thinking about it made her feel listless.

“I was planning on going down the road to the usual place, but since it's raining, and since *you're* here”—Yuna gave Eren a smirk—“we can go wherever we want.”

The way Yuna recruited Eren into helping with their travel, informing her instead of asking, was typical of her. Eren knew she was just kidding around but decided to prod the aristocrat for getting cocky. “It's bad manners to always rely on your elders like that.”

She knew immediately that she had struck a chord when Yuna's smirk vanished. In its place, a deathly serious glare drilled into Eren. "Don't start with this again, Eren. You're only seven minutes older than me. *Seven. Minutes.*"

Eren managed to hold back her huge grin and gave a sage nod. "That's the kind of response I'd expect from a young person like you. I imagine I'd have behaved the same way seven minutes ago."

"You bring this up all the time, and I keep telling you—"

"So, any ideas on where we can go to eat?" Jorri asked, stopping Yuna before she let herself get too carried away by Eren's goading. While impressively calm and collected in the worst of crises, Yuna was oddly weak to being teased. She was a classic example of "can't take what she's giving out." Then again, maybe they just knew all the right things to say to her when they wanted to get a reaction. They had known each other all their lives, so they were all open books to each other.

"Yeah." Eren nodded, dropping the issue with Yuna without any more thought on the matter. "I know a place in Branhamere that just opened up a few weeks ago. I've only eaten there once, but it was really good."

"Branhamere?" Jorri had only heard the city's name in passing a few times and had never been there before. It was more of a place she learned about in school or met people who had lived there for a period of time. "Isn't that in the Northern Hemisphere?"

"Yeah, but winter just ended there, so it's starting to warm up now. I don't think we'll need to grab coats or anything. I'll check to make sure it's not raining first, just to be sure."

In less than a second's worth of effort, an oval-shaped portal appeared in front of the girls. The outer rim of the portal, referred to more commonly as a "gate," was a brilliant scarlet color while the inside was a swirling vortex of nearly pitch-black mana. This spell, categorized as spatial magic, was Eren's specialty. It created a link to places all over Gaia that Eren could travel to any time she wished. Hopping around Gaia with ease was the *least* impressive part of her abilities.

Neither Jorri nor Yuna were even remotely surprised by the sight, as it was so commonplace to them to see Eren appearing and disappearing through these gates. While Jorri had no talent for this type of magic, Yuna had a moderate affinity for it, but it was imprecise, so in times of emergency or when they had to fulfill their roles as Magi,

they relied heavily on Eren for quick travel.

Eren stuck her head through the swirling mass, disappearing completely from her shoulders up, and then pulled back out. “It’s perfect,” she declared. “The sun is warm and the breeze feels just right.” She gestured for the two to enter the gate ahead of her. Once they did, she followed, closing it behind her the moment she exited the other side.

The sudden transition from the heated noon of fall to a breezy spring afternoon was one of the easier transitions the girls had in recent memory, as their last outing had taken them from a freezing, late winter night to a scorching summer day. At first, it had been nice to get out of the cold, but it hadn’t been long before the three were reminded of how cruel the sun could be, especially in a humid town next to the ocean. They would still sometimes argue over whether it was better to be overly hot or overly cold.

Eren’s gate opened on the outskirts of the city, only a short walk from the restaurant. She could have easily opened a gate right in front of the establishment, but the weather was nice and she was happy enough to just walk and enjoy the day. From the position of the sun, she imagined they would be treated to a wonderful sunset by the time they finished eating.

Without thinking too hard about anything, she tuned out the quiet whispers of the people around her. Mostly, they were just the excited murmurs of how the Magi had suddenly arrived out of nowhere, but if that was all they were saying, she wouldn’t be trying so hard to ignore them. Anything she heard that she didn’t like, she’d just forget she heard it and keep going. Trying to distract herself, she listened to Jorri and Yuna talking as they followed behind her.

“No, no,” Yuna was arguing with Jorri. “She *will* eventually accept my offer. You don’t have that kind of raw talent and just ignore it. When you’re that good with a sword, you want someone to challenge you, and it’s all the better when that person is just as good as you are.”

“She’s happy with her life the way it is, Yuna.” Jorri sounded exasperated. This wasn’t the first time they’d had this discussion, and she knew it wouldn’t be the last. “She wants to live in peace. She’s had enough violence in her life.”

“It’s not violence! It’s *competition*, Jorri. Competition,” Yuna snapped in the cleric’s direction and gave her a miffed look. Her pigtails flew around and sprang back into their proper place. “It’s hard to explain. It’s all about a warrior’s spirit. You don’t like fighting, so you wouldn’t understand. Some people crave competition and seeing their hard work pay off.”

Jorri rolled her eyes. “Fine. Ask her again. Get rejected again.” She turned and pointed sternly at Yuna. “But when she tells you she’s not interested, you have to accept it.”

Yuna clicked her tongue. “Of course she’ll refuse the first time I ask. That’s just part of the dance. Don’t you get it? She’s not really saying *no*; she’s saying *I’m not sure*.”

“So you’re planning to just keep bothering her?”

“*Encouraging* her!” Yuna corrected. “All she needs is—”

“We’re here,” Eren stopped the two’s arguing with her announcement, gesturing to the entrance of a small restaurant. It was a quaint little building, unrecognizable as a restaurant, aside from a small, wooden sign on the door that read “*The Delicate Touch*” in fancy lettering with a bold red color that drew the eye. Peeking in the window showed little activity, but it wasn’t empty. A few customers sat, chatting idly as they enjoyed their food.

Yuna gave the building a scrutinizing look. “It looks more like someone’s house than a restaurant. I’m not complaining. I just hope there are more than three items on the menu.”

Eren tilted her head toward the door, motioning for Yuna and Jorri to go inside. “Once you try the food, you won’t care how big the place is.” She paused for a couple of seconds then nodded confidently and added, “In fact, if you don’t like the food, we’ll do some training when we get back to the shrine.”

“You’re training with me whether you like it or not,” Yuna informed her with a self-assured look.

With a grimace, Eren decided to stop talking. Her attempt at getting out of training while being praised for finding a good place to eat had backfired without Yuna even considering the proposition. She hung her head as she opened the door and was greeted by the server, a young woman in her mid-twenties with short, chestnut-colored hair and a receding chin. She wore a wide smile that made small dimples appear on her cheeks.

“Welcome to The Delicate *TCK*—” She all but choked on the words as she saw the trio at the entrance. “... Touch,” she squeaked out. It was easy to imagine that if she had been carrying a tray of food or drinks to a table, it would have ended up on the floor.

Eren held up her hand and casually stated, “I’m back,” completely ignoring the odd reaction from the woman and the attention it garnered by the few other patrons. A

half-dozen pairs of eyes were now all staring at the doorway in disbelief.

“This is one of the few reasons I don’t like eating out at new places,” Yuna grumbled, but only just loud enough for the other two to hear. “We should have eaten at the shrine.”

“This was your idea,” Jorri reminded her.

“Yeah, but Eren didn’t have to listen to me.”

“Okay, then I *won’t* be training with you later,” Eren said, beaming at the girl in the blue blazer.

Yuna met her with an unamused frown. It only made Eren’s smile grow wider.

“Please, take a seat anywhere you like. Oh, or I can seat you. W-Whichever you prefer,” the server nervously told them, motioning to the few remaining tables in the small room.

To be fair, the inside of the restaurant looked extremely cozy. The chairs were a plush, garnet velour with very thick, firm cushions. One look at them made you want to sink into their embrace and stay there for the rest of the day. The tables were made of maple wood and carved with a design that made it look like leafy vines were wrapping around the legs. Yuna did a double take when she realized the top of the tables had built-in holders for the cups and glasses. That was a first, and she had to admit that she liked the idea, even if she wouldn’t use it in her own home.

While deciding to choose a table near the back corner, they noticed the light aroma of cinnamon rolls emanating from the kitchen. Jorri must have caught a particularly good whiff as she stopped in her tracks and closed her eyes.

She tilted her head slightly upward, hoping to catch the scent in the air again. “I think I know what I want for dessert,” she told the others. Her voice was quiet, and she had a happy, dreamy look on her face.

“What? Did they stop feeding you at the shrine?” Yuna joked.

“Sweets are a luxury. You either buy them with your allowance or go without,” she replied matter-of-factly.

Eren laughed. “Your shrine head is so stingy.”

Before Jorri could counter that statement, the server from earlier stood beside them, asking if they were ready to order, or attempting to ask, at least. Having not yet

checked to see what the menu offered, Jorri asked if there was anything she recommended. The server stumbled over the shop's specials, still looking as nervous as ever. Jorri nodded and ordered a lightly seasoned denalli.

“You come all the way to a nice little place in Branhamere and order the denalli?” Yuna asked, baffled. “You can get denalli anywhere.”

True enough. It was a cattle that wasn't hard to come by most anywhere in the world, but Jorri shrugged and said that she wanted to see if the piri-piri marinade was any good.

Yuna waved off the explanation, still thinking Jorri was wasting an opportunity to try the local foods. She looked to the server. “I'll have the roasted talitia, but could you make sure to use extra lemon zest? I want it to have a very strong citrus flavor.”

The server acknowledged the extra accommodation and took note of it on a small pad.

Jorri turned to the pigtailed girl and gave her an aggrieved look. “You got on me about ordering denalli then go and order a snake to eat?”

“Serpent! When it's made to be eaten, it's called a serpent!”

The attempt at deflecting didn't pass, however, as Jorri continued to stare at Yuna without any change in her expression.

“Like I said, you have to try out the local cuisine when you leave the country. It's ... well, it's common courtesy and, um, shows respect for the culture of the area.” She gave a gesture with her hand as she finished, as though to punctuate the obvious facts of her statement but looked far too uneasy for it to work on the cleric.

Jorri gave her an exhausted look then turned back to Eren, who was sitting across the table from them. “So, Yuna is eating snake today. What about you?”

“It's serpent! Serpent!” Yuna corrected her loudly, though it didn't matter as neither of the two paid her any attention.

Eren gave it some thought before ordering the potato soup, saying she was so impressed with it the last time she had it that she wanted to try it again.

Yuna was too tired from her exchange with Jorri to try to argue the same point all over again, so she gave only a half-hearted nod.

Eren stifled a laugh at the defeated look then took in a deep breath as her heart

filled with warmth.

Of all the things she'd learned in watching and talking with people from other realms, the most important thing she realized was that everyone had their own ideas about what friends and family were supposed to be. In Gaia's case, this was exactly it—sitting around a table for a meal, teasing each other and joking around. This seemingly meaningless banter was what proved they were a family, not the fact that they were born as Magi.

While lost in thought, Eren barely registered the server coming back and presenting the group with their food. They politely thanked her then continued their conversation at their usual pace. They joked and teased one another, discussed the small details of their lives that had changed since they last got together like this, and enjoyed each other's company above all else. If time had frozen in this moment, Eren wouldn't have had any objections at all. Of course, that didn't happen and the meal ended all too soon.

Eren placed her spoon in the empty dish and sighed contently. "That was even better than the last time." She looked to her companions. "So? What do you think? Good or spectacular?"

Yuna was still picking at the meat of the large, flat serpent on her plate. The portions here were larger than she had expected. "I have to admit, I'm impressed. It's definitely closer to 'spectacular'. I wouldn't mind coming back here again sometime, right, Jorri?"

Jorri's eyes went wide for just a moment as she was prompted to respond. She looked down at the half-eaten denalli, the cut of meat stained red with the piri-piri marinade, before giving a weak smile. "Y-Yeah! I can't wait."

The two eyed her suspiciously. It wasn't difficult to tell when Jorri was lying, and she only did so when she was trying to be polite. Between hurting someone's feelings with the truth and lying to spare someone from grief, she had an arguably bad habit of doing the latter.

Eren frowned. "You didn't like it?"

On the bright side, Jorri knew she was a bad liar, so she wouldn't try to keep it up when she was caught. "Well, I had expected the denalli to be a bit spicier. The piri-piri just came off as bitter with no benefit to the flavor of the meat."

Eren and Yuna stared at Jorri briefly in complete silence before both shouting out in unison, "SPOILED!"

"W-WHAT? Why? Why am I spoiled? I'm describing the dish honestly!" Jorri took

offense to the unexpected allegations being hurled at her. She didn't see how not liking a dish was being "spoiled."

"I have an entire kitchen staff dedicated to making meals at any given time, day or night, and you are *still* a thousand times more picky than I am, Jorri!" Yuna charged.

"You don't understand," Jorri protested. "This food wasn't made with care and consideration for the people eating it. I don't taste the love."

Laughter overtook Eren unexpectedly at Jorri's appraisal. "*Taste the love?* Jorri, you are such a boy!"

"Don't be rude," Yuna said, finishing off her water. "Jorri's actually *useful*."

The two both reacted strongly to Yuna's words; Jorri by heaving a loud sigh, and Eren by rolling her entire head back and groaning, "There she goes again." Yuna's opinion of most males was not positive, though she made one or two rare exceptions.

Instead of starting on Yuna for the hundredth time about not being so judgmental, Jorri stood up and started to walk off toward their server. "I'm going to order some dessert. I think I want to try their cinnamon rolls."

"But they might not be made with *love*," Yuna jabbed.

Jorri came to an abrupt stop and turned back to Yuna, staring at her without a trace of her usual sunny demeanor. With absolute seriousness, she informed her, "All desserts are made with love. Don't even joke like that."

"I'll go with you," Eren said, getting up from her seat and leaving Yuna to steal a bite of Jorri's half-eaten denalli, which she thought was just fine.

Jorri walked up to their server, who was just making her way back out of the kitchen, and gave a friendly wave. "Oh, hey, could I please put in an order of cinnamon rolls?"

"And I just want to go ahead and pay for mine," Eren chimed in from behind.

Looking flustered, the server acted as though this was the first time she had ever been asked to do such tasks. "Sure! Yes! We can do that ... or both of those things, actually. Um, I'll put in the order after we pay, if that's okay with you."

Eren laughed. "You're too nervous! Calm down. We're fine with whatever way you choose to do it," she said cheerfully.

The happy-go-lucky attitude Eren gave off seemed to relax the young woman who

nodded. “Sorry. When I signed up for this job, I expected that I would only be serving a small group of locals. Seeing the Magi walk in was a bit of a shock,” she explained candidly as she led the two to the front counter, took out a key from her pocket, and opened up a small drawer with a meager bit of money inside of it. “That will be twenty-six serri.”

Eren reached into the pocket of her long, black skirt and fished out a purple cotton pouch, her wallet, tied neatly with a bright silver twine that threaded the small loops at the top of the fabric. She pulled the string, untying the slip knot that bound the wallet closed, and then reached inside. After hunting through the pouch for exact change, she pulled out four bits of copper, two ten-pieces, a five-piece, and a one-serri coin. The bits of metal were all uniform, rectangular and indented in the middle. Tiny writing along the backside of the copper pieces all read “*Blessed by the Seven*,” while the front had a group of four insignias, all representing the four continents of Gaia.

“Here you go,” Eren said, offering the change to the server.

The server reached for the money but stopped short, remembering something. “Oh, that’s right!” With those words, she grabbed a small silk handkerchief and draped it over her hand before extending it out toward Eren for her to place the money onto. “When you came the other day, I wasn’t prepared at all, so the owner told me to go out and buy this in case you came by again.”

Both Eren and Jorri stared at the handkerchief. Both knew what it was for, but Jorri, trying to hide her discomfort, looked away, pretending to find interest in a couple in the back corner of the restaurant who kept shooting curious looks their way. Eren, however, kept her eyes on the white cloth, not moving or saying anything.

After a short while, the server started to get nervous again. “I-Is this not okay? Should I get the owner?”

Not wanting to cause a scene, Eren returned to her senses, shaking her head and giving a smile that was anything but genuine. “No, no. This is ... normal,” she assured her. She placed the money on the silk cloth and watched as the woman wrapped it up securely and placed it in a separate, smaller lock box within the current one that was opened.

Jorri, glancing back as she heard the drawer closing, tried to change the subject. “You want to try my cinnamon rolls?”

Hearing Jorri’s voice brought Eren back to her normal self, and she pushed the fuzzy, complicated feelings down. She stuck her tongue out and remarked how she ate

too much to even look at any more food, waving off the very idea of attempting to stuff herself further.

The two made their way back to the table where Jorri waited for her dessert to arrive. Yuna started asking Eren about the new realms she'd visited since they last saw each other, and the girl in black gladly went over all the amazing places she'd visited, including one that had been so ravaged by dangerous animals that the people there had to create domed habitats with artificial lighting and food for themselves. The only way they could communicate with other villages was through an underground tunnel system.

“Stories like that just make me worry that you're going to get hurt traveling around to unknown places,” Jorri commented.

“It's fine. A few wild animals aren't going to hurt me.” Eren waved off her concerns. “I'm actually thinking of going back there to see if there's anything they need me ...” She stopped, and all the three became silent, concentrating on an alarm that simultaneously went off in their minds.

This was it—an alert that all Magi received to inform them that someone had intruded into their realm. The feeling was a strong tingle that was able to rouse them from the deepest sleep, similar to the startled feeling one would have if a large pane of glass dropped from above and shattered at their feet with a deafening crash. Along with it came the knowledge of where the gate that brought the unexpected visitor had opened up. In this case, they could sense the gate opening around five miles from the coast of Jesbar, a country in the northern continent of Azestrine.

It was time to get to work.

Yuna was the first to her feet, striding toward the exit. No one noticed her slipping the fifty-serri coin, an amount much more than her bill would have been had she been expected to pay in the first place, by her plate before standing.

Jorri and Eren hurried out of their seats and followed, Eren grabbing her broom from behind the table where she had set it down.

They were hailed by a call behind them. “Ms. Valle, don't you want your cinnamon rolls?” the server asked, frantically waving her free hand in order to get their attention.

“Oh! Yes, please save them for me!” Jorri called back, turning and walking backward to make eye contact with the young woman as she left. “We'll be back soon, so please keep them warm.”

With a polite bow of her head, the server showed she would comply with the

request.

Once outside, Eren opened a gate as close to the point as she could to where they had sensed the intruder had landed. Yuna entered first, as she was the most physically and mentally prepared for any sudden attacks that might occur; she acted as the vanguard of their trio. That's not to say the person who arrived in Gaia's realm unannounced was certain to be hostile, but it was better to be safe than sorry. For the most part, those who arrived here were just lost and confused, and it didn't help matters that most didn't speak the Gaian language.

To meet with these intruders, often dubbed "realm crashers," to assess the situation, and to fight against any hostiles who threatened Gaia's peace—these were the duties of the Magi. It wasn't a choice; it was a job inherited by birth. For twenty-five years between the ages of thirteen and thirty-eight, all Magi were on call to do this duty. In exchange for this fate, the Magi were regarded as heroes by the people of Gaia and treated with love, respect, and admiration ... sometimes to the point of it being overbearing.

Yuna stepped through the gate to meet with the unknown traveler and found herself in a thinly wooded area with a thicker forest to the west and a grassy field to the east. To make matters worse, it was the dead of night in this area.

This placement was a mixed bag. It was good because there were no people she would need to worry about evacuating, but it was also bad because if the intruder was a fire elemental magician, the forest could potentially become a fiery battleground. She would need to approach this carefully.

Looking around, it didn't take long to find the person of interest. She couldn't make her out very well in the dark, but the figure was moving out from the forest and toward the open field. If that was the case, it was likely she wanted to get her bearings and a good view of her surroundings. Maybe she didn't even know she wasn't in her own realm anymore. It was a common occurrence but trying to explain what Gaia was and how it connected to other realms tended to be difficult.

Yuna went to wave the other two in through the gate, but they were already filing through impatiently, annoying Yuna that they were negating the point of her coming through first to survey the situation. She motioned for them to keep quiet and follow her.

Jorri and Yuna walked softly over the grass and leaves while Eren sat on her broom and floated through the air alongside them.

As the person came to the foot of the clearing, she slowed to a stop and looked around. The trio in pursuit cautiously stepped out from the wooded area and called out to her from a distance, close to fifteen yards away. So far, the girl seemed calm, so Yuna assumed she wouldn't act aggressively without reason. That was the hope. The best possible outcome was one where no one got hurt.

She held her hands up as she spoke. It was as close to a universal sign of nonaggression as there was. "We're not here to fight. Let us help you," she called out loudly but in a steady, gentle voice. The chances of her actually understanding what she was saying were extremely slim, but she hoped the meaning behind her words was clear.

The girl turned to face the group, finally giving them a clear view of her, though their only source of light was the moon. She seemed to be a little older than them, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old. Her broad forehead and hanging bangs gave her face a heart-shaped look.

There were a few things about her appearance that gave them pause. While her clothing mostly consisted of a tattered blue shirt and matching skirt, it was her accessories that stood out, most notably four overly large bracelets, or rather, two bracelets and two anklets, with inscriptions written on them in a language they didn't recognize. There was also a thin tattoo wrapped around the girl's neck that bore the same writing as the bracelets.

"Inscription magic, probably," Eren whispered.

Yuna nodded. "If that's the case, we need to be careful."

"You're never careful," Eren replied, only receiving a shrug and smile in response.

"I think she's peaceful," Jorri commented. "I'm going to see if she'll let me use bonding magic on her so we can talk."

Yuna hesitated but agreed, saying she and Eren would back her up if things took a bad turn.

Before Jorri could take more than two steps forward, the girl finally called out to them.

"Are you three ... Magi?"

While it was surprising that the girl spoke Gaian, it wasn't unheard of. Often, languages would be very similar to one another, having common roots in similar histories. Once in a rare while, they would find someone who spoke their language,

albeit with an accent. Most of the time, though, bonding magic was used to transfer information from one person to another—be it memories, feelings, or common information like language. This category of magic was akin to sharing part of oneself with another person, hence the name “bonding.”

No, they weren’t all that surprised by the fact that the girl could speak their language without the use of magic. What *did* surprise them was the fact that the girl knew who they were. A complete stranger from another realm should certainly not know of the Magi unless having met them before or if they knew someone who had. Maybe another magician from this girl’s realm had fallen into Gaia before and been able to return home safely. It wasn’t an impossibility.

“We are,” Yuna answered. “How did you know?”

The girl tensed and took a deep, unsteady breath. “Because I’m here to kill you.”

A heavy silence fell over the group.

Before long, Yuna glanced over at Eren. “Somebody you know?”

“I don’t know anyone who wants to kill me!” Eren yelled then paused for a second and added, “I think!”

“All right, then,” Yuna said, putting her hand on the hilt of her blade. “It looks like this is going to get messy.”