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Love & Magic Academy:
Who Cares about the Heroine and Villainess?
I Want to Be the Strongest in this Otome Game World

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Love & Magic Academy: Who Cares about the Heroine and Villainess? I Want to Be the Strongest in this Otome Game World Vol.1

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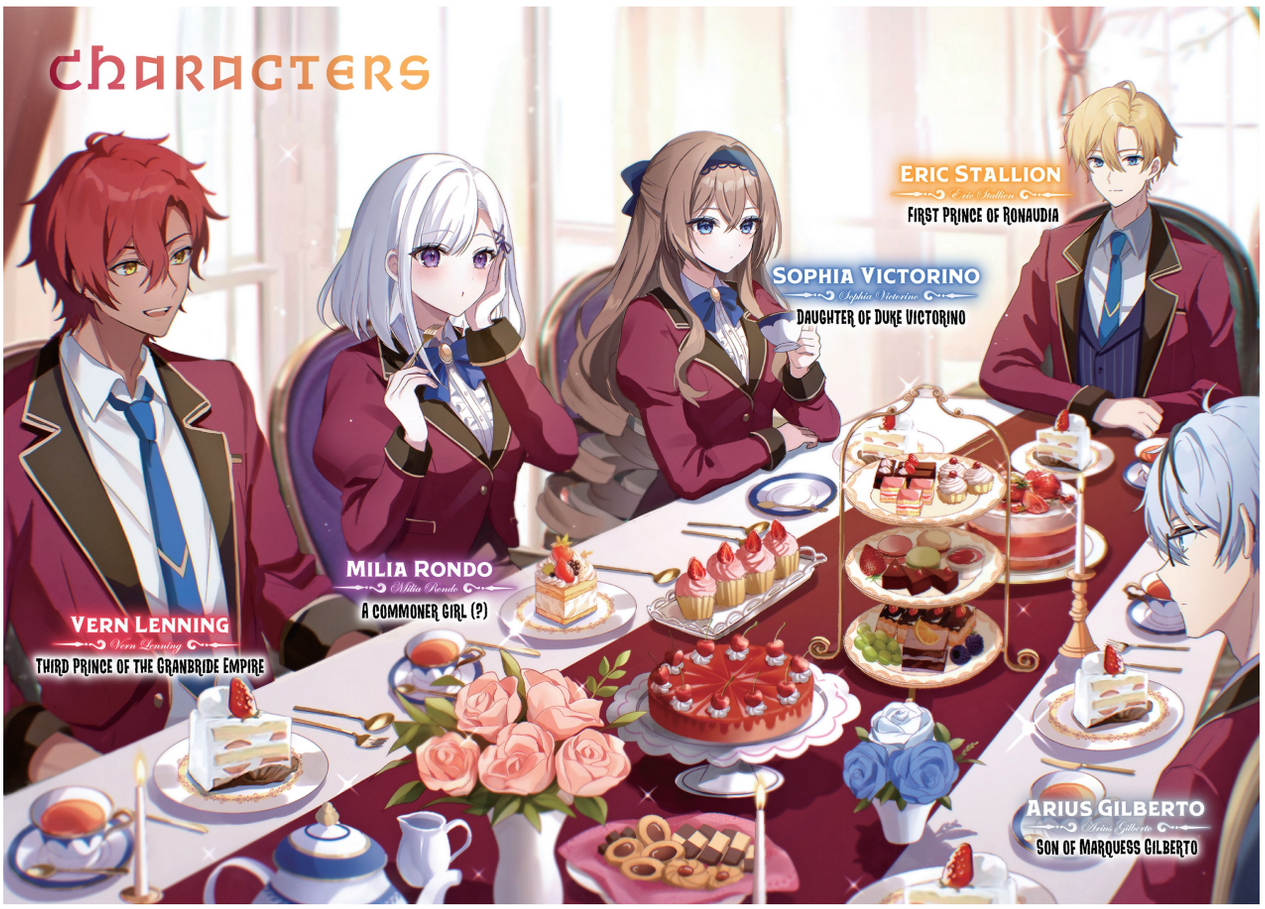
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Characters
Eric Stallion
Eric Stallion
First Prince of Ronaudia
Sophia Victorino
Sophia Victorine
Daughter of Duke Victorino
Milia Rondo
Milia Rondo
A commoner girl (?)
Vern Lenning
Vern Lenning
Third Prince of the Granbride Empire
Arius Gilberto
Arius Gilberto
Son of Marquess Gilberto


“Come on.
You react
too slow.”

Prologue

“YOU know, you’re an interesting girl.”

Right before my eyes, an attractive blond-haired, blue-eyed boy hedged a beautiful white-haired, indigo-eyed girl against the wall. That’s what they call the *kabe-don* move.



“Ah…”

Their faces were so close they could feel each other’s breath on their skin. The girls nearby broke into shrieks of excitement.

Seriously. So annoying.

We were at the Ronaudia Royal Magic Academy, the stage for the otome game *Love & Magic Academy*, which most people called simply Love Academy. Love Academy’s main character is a commoner girl named Milia Rondo, and the game opens when she enters the Royal Magic Academy. The story unfolds as she goes about her life in the dorms, where all students are required to live, having romantic moments with all the attractive potential love interests ranging from the kingdom’s twin princes to the son of a cardinal and even an international student from the Empire.

Oh, by the way, that white-haired, indigo-eyed girl was that main character: Milia Rondo. The blond-haired, blue-eyed boy was one of the love interests, Zeke Stallion, the second prince of the kingdom and one half of the princely twins.

Maybe it was because this was the world of an otome game, but all the students who were background characters in the game neglected classes and became absorbed in romance.

I, however, have zero interest in romance.

Once class let out, I slipped out of the Academy with one destination in mind…

“You’re all too slow,” I taunted.

And that was the depths of a deep dungeon.

I rushed through a pack of gigantic dragons, finishing each one with my dual swords. They disappeared one after another in a poof, leaving nothing but magic crystals behind.

Just because I was reincarnated into an otome game world doesn’t mean it has anything to do with me.

I am Arius Gilberto, son of the kingdom’s chief minister and one of the love interests of the Love Academy game.

I was reincarnated into the game world—that is true—but this isn’t about that. This is the story of how I completely ignore those ridiculous romance scenes and dive deep into dungeons.

Chapter 1: I Couldn’t Care Less About an Otome Game World

A baby cries.

It took me a moment to realize it was me crying. I was in a bed, lying on white sheets enclosed by a railing. And the crying baby was me. Meaning I was reincarnated.

I had been working in research, having stayed at my college as a researcher after finishing my graduate science degree. I was researching AI—and not those chatbots or whatever that was all the rage at the time—real AI with personalities and emotions.

No corporation would hire me to research something like that since it didn’t translate into money, but the college did.

I was always the sort of person who would become obsessed with one thing until I completed it to perfection. If I started a game, I would become entirely absorbed and stay up late to keep playing. It was the same with the AI research I started—I kept at it so much that I barely had time to sleep.

Which was fine. Or it was when I was a student and had nothing to focus on besides my work. However, once I was hired as a researcher, I also had to help with tasks such as class dissertations and other obligations on top of my work. My only choice then was to cut back on sleep. After a week of pulling all-nighters, my vision just went dark suddenly.

Dying from overworking in your twenties isn’t funny though, is it? In my case, it was because I was doing what I wanted to, so… no regrets.

“Oh, Arius, what’s wrong?” A woman with platinum-blonde hair and ice-blue eyes lifted me off the bed. She looked around twenty years old and incredibly beautiful, a charming and alluring person. The woman calmed me down with a puzzled expression on her face.

What was more interesting was I recognized her and that name she’d said, “Arius.” It—

“Rhea, is something wrong with Arius?” came a voice, and a handsome, scholarly-type man with silver hair and blue eyes came into view. I recognized him, too.

“Oh, Darius. I heard Arius crying and came immediately. He’d stopped crying by the time I got here, though.”

The father was Darius, the mother was Rhea, and the child was…me, Arius. Which meant I was reincarnated into the world of Love Academy as Arius Gilberto.

“Love Academy” was the nickname for the otome game *Love & Magic Academy*. I have no interest in otome games, but my childhood friend forced me to play it, and I played it to completion.

Arius Gilberto was one of the love interests, and his parents, Rhea and Darius, appeared if you played through his route. My friend went on and on about the game’s characters and setting, and everything came flooding back to me.

But did being reincarnated as a love interest mean I had to go to school at the Royal Magic Academy and end up embroiled in otome game scenes? I did *not* want to be surrounded by the main character and her love-brained love interests. Like, *seriously*. I had zero interest in romance.

I never once experienced romance in the twenty-five years of my last life. If I had enough free time to spend with girls, I would have instead used it for something I enjoyed doing.

Well, Arius doesn’t enter the Royal Magic Academy until he turns fifteen; that gave me time. I had just been born and had nothing else to do, so I figured I should spend some time contemplating my future.

As the “*Magic*” in the title *Love & Magic Academy* implied, the world it was set in was a fantasy one. Magic and monsters were usual. Even more interesting, the game had dungeon diving events. Despite being an otome game, the characters had stats like HP and STR. You could raise the characters’ levels like any other RPG game by defeating monsters in the dungeon events. Not that leveling up had any impact on the rest of the game.

According to my friend, Love Academy inherited the setting and system of an RPG that was canceled for being too conventional. If my new world also had levels and stats, I would be way more interested in that than the otome game stuff.

Curious, I shouted, “View stats!” It actually worked; a stats screen popped up and displayed my low numbers—I was just a baby, after all. But…as Arius was one of the love interests, he had stupidly high base specs. Wouldn’t he get ridiculously powerful if he started training as a baby?

No skills or spells showed on the status screen, but there was MP, meaning I should be able to use magic. I tried to imagine the act of moving mana and managed to manipulate it through feel.

Ah, Arius. High spec even as a baby.

I learned through manipulating mana for a while that, unlike the game, your stats didn’t just jump up when you leveled up. Instead, you gained levels by increasing your stats.

For example, increased INT and MP come from manipulating mana. Applying stress to the body enhanced the STR, DEF, and HP categories. Once your stat total reached a certain point, you leveled up.

I decided to use mana to apply weight to train my body. There was the question of what happens when a baby does weight training. I theorized it would make me grow faster—and it did. I was able to walk in just a few hours.

“Excuse me, I’d like you to teach me how to swordfight and use magic.”

By three months old, I was able to walk and talk. My parents were speechless, but they didn’t treat me like some monster.

“Rhea… Our dear Arius, he’s a genius!”

“He is! I should have expected as much from our child. Arius, we will teach you how to use swords and magic!”

They were delighted and taught me exactly what I wanted. Complete child-obsessed parents.

Darius was the chief minister in the Kingdom of Ronaudia, and Rhea was his wife. As you might have expected from Arius’s parents, they both had high specs. They taught me everything in an easy-to-understand way, and I quickly learned the basics of using a sword and magic.

Magic seemed similar to programming: the incantations were like the programming language, and reciting it built up the components that formed a spell. Running the components with mana like a circuit casts the spell.

Once you get used to it, you can skip the recitation by imagining the form, known as a contracted incantation. A more evolved spell-casting is the silent incantation, or silent casting, where you form the spell's entire construction in your mind.

Skills were learned by repeating them repeatedly, like forming an automatic activation circuit. For example, you could learn sword skills by repeatedly swinging a sword. You can also imbue skills with mana, allowing you to coat your blade in flames or send attacks flying away.

It was standard to use mana in some way during combat in this world, even outside magic and skills. You could strengthen your body by subconsciously covering it in mana. Humans could defeat massive monsters using their own bodies to withstand attacks, thanks to the mana surrounding them.

Technology in this world also seemed more advanced. Magic devices in the form of lamps and cooking equipment were widespread, books were made with a printing press, and the windows weren't made with just slatted shutters but with glass.

Another thing that made it feel a lot like it was a fantasy world was the airships. Carriages and ships were the primary transportation methods, but Ronaudia provided regularly scheduled airship flights between countries in addition to airships reserved for the royal family.

The more time I spent exploring, the more it sunk in that I was in the world of *Love & Magic Academy*. There were some differences between reality and the game, such as the fact that you didn't gain stats by leveling up—it was the opposite, actually—but it did feel like the game's system and world were remade into reality.

Even if this world was made by someone in the same way as a game, I didn't think of the citizens as just game characters. The people who stood before me definitely existed—they had emotions.

***

MY stats were pretty high by the time I turned two. My magic and skills were high enough to be used in actual combat, so I waited

until my parents were gone to sneak out of the house and test my power.

I'd learned the Scan skill, which detected creatures with mana within its area of effect and even reported their mana levels. Mana wasn't everything, but generally, the more mana something had, the stronger it was.

In the forest, I found a Wild Boar monster. As it rushed toward me, I calmly launched a Fireball at it. A blazing sphere spanning eight inches across crashed into the Wild Boar and exploded, engulfing the monster's body until nothing remained. Well, that was slightly anticlimactic, but it just shows how high-spec I was.

I chose a beast-type monster as my first prey because I'd feel less guilt killing that than a humanoid creature. Plus, handling the corpse in my current body would've been difficult, so I used Fireball to reduce it to ashes. Fireball was a tier-three area of effect spell. Spells varied widely and ranged up to tier ten simply because the creators reused the system of an axed RPG game. However, the highest you ever achieved in the game was tier four.

Darius taught me that monsters defeated in dungeons left behind nothing more than magic crystals, but monsters killed out in the wild left behind bodies like a normal animal would. It turned out he was right; maybe I should test out monsters in a dungeon soon.

After that, I occasionally slipped out of the house to test my training progress. My body's growth wasn't keeping up with swordplay training initially, but I learned the theory by training in my mind with combat scenarios. I advanced quickly once I grew more since I'd already learned the theory.

There were no particular struggles with learning magic. I increased my mana capacity by manipulating it, then learned every spell I came across. I had a general grasp of tier-five spells by the time I turned five.

Tier four is the highest a character can use in Love Academy, so I guess I was already stronger than what was possible in the game. I wasn't sure since my only points of comparison were my parents; they could easily use tier-five spells.

It seemed they approved of my development, as they hired private tutors for sword and magic training. From a pure stats perspective, my parents were still plenty strong to teach me, but

they were the chief minister and chief lady, making them busy enough that there were time constraints on what they could teach.

"Darius, I knew you'd become an obsessed parent if you ever had kids, but I didn't think you'd get this bad." The man speaking was in his late twenties, good-looking and ruggedly masculine, and had an exasperated expression on his bearded face. Even through his clothes, you could tell his muscles were worked until they were as strong as steel.

"And you're insisting your child is a genius? That's rich. Don't you think you're insulting us by telling us to be his private tutors?" The woman was in her mid-twenties, a mystical beauty with jet-black hair and eyes. She wore what looked to be an expensive red robe, making her seem to be a magic user.

"Don't be like that, Grey, Selena," replied my father, Darius. "But, I will admit to being obsessed with my son."

"I am also aware that I am obsessed with my son, but it's true. He is a genius," chimed in my mother, Rhea.

My parents were also highly specced in the appearance department; they weren't any worse than the people in front of us now.

"Even you, Rhea?" questioned Selena. "Well…if you insist. I suppose I could spend one day with two obsessed parents who happen to be old friends. I do feel bad for you, Darius, with how much time your stuffy job as chief minister takes up. And you must be sick of all the social calls you must make, Rhea."

"Yeah, no point inviting you two out adventuring like old times now that you've got a kid," commented Grey. "Guess I could at least listen to you brag about the sprout for a bit."

Huh, so they'd known each other for a long time. But more interestingly, my parents had been adventurers. I didn't know that. Maybe I should ask more about that later.

"Hmm. Interesting words coming from you two, but I wonder if you'll be singing the same tune once Arius shows you what he's capable of," countered Rhea. "Arius, show them a spell."

"Yes, Mother." I cast a spell that used electrical discharge to create an orb of light.

"Impossible…" breathed Selena. "That's the tier-five combined-elemental spell Lightning Sphere! And silently cast… Rhea, you didn't cast that, did you?"

“Selena, I know you can tell I didn’t.” Rhea smiled with pride; she really was obsessed.

Was silent casting all that uncommon? My parents cast spells using silent incantations. I thought it was normal to be able to do it that way from the beginning.

“Arius, next is swordplay,” continued Darius.

“Yes, Father.” I dispersed the Lightning Sphere and drew my child’s sword. I was still young, but using mana to train stimulated my growth. I was just under four feet tall and had enough muscle to swing a sword like anyone else, even if it was only a child’s sword.

I cast a series of spells—tier-one Strengthen and tier-three Fly and Haste—to make up for the difference in physical strength and reach for my opponent.

“Looks like you’re ready. Come at me, then, Arius.” Grey taunted with a fearless smile.

“Thank you, I will.” I activated the one-handed sword skill Flashing Blade and instantly closed the distance between us, aiming for Grey’s feet. It was hardest to avoid an attack to the feet, and my enhanced power and speed were comparable to an adult’s strength.

But Grey easily blocked my attack and flung me away. “Huh, not too bad. Your aim’s pretty good, too, but try not coming straight at me like an idiot.”

I quickly flew around, repeatedly using non-direct movements to attack him, testing every skill I had. Regardless, Grey blocked them all easily, and the match ended with me pressed against the floor.

“Grey! What are you doing? Your opponent is a child!” cried Rhea. She cast Lightning Sphere in her rage, resulting in something several times larger than the one I produced. Electricity cracked out from it with terrifying force. A direct hit from that would be instant death.

“Calm down, Rhea!” shouted Grey. “I haven’t hurt the boy. Seriously though, you’re only five years old, kid? Think I might like you.” He had a huge grin as he held his hand out to me. “And Rhea, Darius, sorry for making fun of you earlier. I accept. I’ll be Arius’s tutor.”

“I will, as well,” concurred Selena. “Arius, I’m sorry for not believing what you are capable of. As an apology, I shall teach you every skill I know.”

And so, Grey and Selena became my private tutors. It wasn’t until later that I learned they were two of the most powerful adventurers in the world.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 5)
Level: 25
HP: 255
MP: 455
STR: 85
DEF: 82
INT: 118
RES: 98
DEX: 85
AGI: 82

***

ME and Selena returned to our lodging and strategized. Darius told us to stay at his place, but being the adventurers we were meant that we just didn’t feel comfortable in a lord’s mansion. For me, I was way more at ease on the hard bed and dusty sheets of a cheap inn.

“Level 25 at his age,” I said. “And those stats. Makes me wonder what the heck the kid actually is, more than just a ‘genius.’”

I knew Arius’s capabilities because I’d used Evaluate on him, a skill that showed the stats of people with lower levels than you. The bigger the difference in level, the more revealed, up to even the skills and spells they could use.

After Darius and Rhea left our party long ago, me and Selena kept at it, and we both had to cover a lot of bases. We could use basic spells and skills, but we obviously had our own strengths and weaknesses.

“It seemed to me Arius was intentionally acting like a child,” pondered Selena. “I don’t believe he’s mentally a five-year-old,

either. Maybe he's a reincarnated individual... It wouldn't be impossible."

There were people in this world who had been reincarnated. Occasionally, there was someone you couldn't help but think they might be reincarnated, what with their mysterious knowledge and special abilities.

"Even if he is, he's definitely still Darius and Rhea's son," I stated. "And what I care more about is that I think Arius is worth training. He's obviously got a knack for these things, but the fact that he's level 25 means he's put in a lot of training." It wasn't like Darius and Rhea were training him like crazy. Arius must have been going at it on his own.

"Both talented and hard working? I like children like that. He still has a long way to go in terms of technique and experience, but that's what makes training him worth it."

An unbreaking spirit was also a bonus when it came to getting stronger. Arius had attacked me with everything he had, even though he knew I was more than he could handle. I'd thought it was dumb to play along with Darius and Rhea's obsession with their son, but now, Selena and I were both completely on board.

"Hmph, means we gotta train him like he's not a five-year-old. Might accidentally make his fire of potential fizzle out if we treat him like one."

Coddling him would just make him big-headed, and being overprotective would take away his opportunities to gain experience. We had to train him hard without consideration for his age.

"You're right," agreed Selena. "You'll have to be careful. You can be surprisingly soft when it comes to children."

"I know, I know. But seriously, we'll have to take a break from adventuring while we're Arius's tutors." I had no intention of being a half-assed tutor. I accepted the job—I was going to take it seriously.

"Oh? I don't think so. While one of us is tutoring Arius, the other can tackle dungeons solo. We can both use teleportation magic, after all. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Huh, you might be right. That way, our skills won't grow dull either."

“Exactly. Although, it will be best for both of us to be present when we take Arius into combat, of course. But when it comes to teaching, one of us will do.”

One thing we had to do was get Darius and Rhea’s approval to train Arius seriously. Since they did ask us to be his tutors, they should know what that meant.

The next day, we headed back to the Gilberto mansion early and talked to Darius and Rhea alone.

“Meaning, we’re planning on giving him our all when we’re training and not treating him like a kid,” I explained. “That all right?”

“Yes, of course,” stated Darius. “Treating him like a child would do him no good. It’s not just us being impartial as parents; we know Arius is no mere child.”

Rhea nodded along with him.

Looked like they’d recognize the possibility Arius might be reincarnated, too. He was their son in the end—no way they couldn’t notice.

“May I ask what the goal of training Arius is? To make him into an adventurer?” asked Selena with a serious expression. “There are a few careers other than adventuring that require strength, and we are inevitably talking about putting him on a path that leads to fighting.”

“That’s for him to decide,” Darius said. “It seems like he wants to be an adventurer.”

“We have no reason to object if it’s what he truly wants,” Rhea agreed.

But Selena wasn’t satisfied. “Let me ask what I mean more directly: Can we assume we’ve acknowledged that Arius could be killing humans? I know you two understand that walking a path of battle means he will be unable to avoid ever killing a person.”

“We know,” continued Darius. “As a parent, you must be lenient about these things. Grey, Selena, can I ask that you teach Arius everything he needs in order to survive?”

“Please, you two,” added Rhea, and the two bowed low. They’d made their decision.

And if that were the case, there was no need for us to hesitate.

“We got it. No holding back, no mercy just ’cause he’s a kid. We’ll train him good,” I said. With that decided, might as well get right to it.

***

“RIGHT, Arius, you’re exceptionally strong for someone so young. You could probably compete with most adults. But don’t think you can rest on your laurels just ’cause you’ve got a lot of mana. Doesn’t mean anything with how sloppy your mana control is. You’re seriously lacking in technique and experience, too.”

It was my first day with my tutor, Grey, and he was pointing out my flaws.

“I’m not as forgiving as your mom and dad. I won’t hold back on your training.”

His lessons started with mock combat, where he mercilessly called out my failures. It was stupidly hard but easy to understand. He didn’t just point out what I did wrong; he showed me how to do it right.

Nevertheless, he demanded a high level from me, which wasn’t easy to reach. I repeated that training as much as I possibly could while he critiqued me over and over.

“A spell’s power and precision are greatly influenced by how efficiently you use your mana. Learning a spell is just the first step. Just being able to use it doesn’t mean it will be useful in battle.”

Selena also demanded a high level from me. She and I could cast the same spell, but they’d look completely different. She drilled mana manipulation into me, starting from tier-one spells until I reached a point she was happy with.

Spells and skills weren’t as easy to acquire in this world as in the game. You learned them by actually studying, then improved them by using them in practice and combat. And you didn’t just get stat boosts and level-ups whenever. They only started to go up after you trained and used your abilities in a fight. For example, repeated exercise and battle could improve physical stats like STR. INT could be enhanced through studying and using magic.

Then there was my level. I’d thought the total of your stats determined your level, but according to Grey, level was an indicator of a person’s overall strength. My stats were twice the

average of other people at the same level as me. That kind of made me feel like level wasn't an indicator of strength at all, but it was just because I was abnormal. Most people had varying stats based on their strengths and weaknesses, so they all fell within a similar frame of reference to each other.

I mean, there probably weren't any other people who started training when they were a baby. It made sense my stats were out of whack.

After training and sparring came actual combat. First, they teleported me to an Orc lair.

"Arius, me and Selena aren't gonna lift a finger to help you. Wipe them out on your own," Grey ordered.

I've fought monsters before whenever I snuck out of the house to go hunting while Darius and Rhea were away. I assumed then that some Orcs would be a walk in the park.

"Forgot to mention," continued Grey, "offensive spells are off limits. Beat them all with your sword."

It was a fairly large lair. There were probably over a hundred Orcs. Defeating them all without offensive magic? That sounded like a pain, but I guess I had no choice.

I silent cast Strengthen, Fly, and Haste, then rushed in.

My sword, with its magic enchantment, split an Orc in two. But there weren't just normal Orcs in the lair; there were Orc Mages, Orc Priests, and Ogres as guards. Even so, I could block piddly Orc magic with the tier-three spell Magic Guard, and I wasn't weaker than the Ogres, thanks to my spell buffs.

There was a time in my previous life when I was into SLGs and MMORPGs, which meant I wasn't about to mess up just because enemies surrounded me. I cut them down individually while ensuring I knew where the monsters around me were.

I somehow managed to wipe them out while dealing with their strength in numbers and ranged attacks.

"Well, I expected no less of you, Arius," complimented Selena.

My next combat was deep in the forest. Selena cast the tier-five spell Monster Call, and packs of Black Wolves came at us howling.

"This time, do not use your sword. And no using your fists to kill them, either. Fight with only magic," she commanded.

Couldn’t she have told me that to start with? The Black Wolves were already nearly up in my face.

Selena believed a magic user who was bad at close combat was no magic user at all. Besides, you can just use defensive spells to guard against your opponent’s attacks, and there was nothing wrong with casting an offensive spell point-blank.

I put up the tier-three spell Barrier and then chain cast the tier-one spell Fire Shot since using a spell with an area of effect could also hit me because the monsters were too close. My only option was to cut down their numbers with a single-target spell.

Selena had drilled me on magic manipulation, and my spells increased significantly in power, speed, and precision. My series of Fire Shots sped out at nearly 200 mph, killing Black Wolves one after another.

But they just kept coming, no matter how many I took down… Wait. Come on, seriously? Selena was casting Monster Call again.

“Um, Ms. Selena, they’ll never stop coming if you don’t stop calling them,” I said.

“That’s not true. They’ll stop when you’ve eliminated all the monsters in the forest.”

Well…uh… Guess I had no choice but to do it.

They must have thought Black Wolves didn’t have enough oomph. It wasn’t funny the kinds of giant monsters that started to gather: Killer Bears, Mad Tigers, and all other sorts.

Still, I just kept taking them out with my Fire Shot. All I had to do was blow their heads away with a headshot or open a hole in their chest, going for the heart.

In the end, I wiped out more than 300 monsters. Any normal person would be out of MP by then, but I still had plenty. Part of that was because I had a massive reserve and didn’t waste any of my spells. Each shot took down a monster. Improving my mana efficiency meant reducing my MP consumption, even when casting the same spell repeatedly.

And, well, it went on like that. I was stuck fighting hordes of monsters like that every day. Each time, they had me fight more powerful monsters, but it was never anything I couldn’t defeat.

I was obviously improving, probably because Grey and Selena evaluated my strength and selected opponents I could only just defeat.

***

“THINK it’s about time,” expressed Grey about a month after he and Selena became my tutors.

They’d taken me out into the wilds to a cave. I looked closely and saw two rough-looking men hidden right inside the entrance as guards.

“People have been talking a lot lately about the group of bandits in that cave,” continued Grey. “Not that long ago, they attacked a caravan and killed everyone. There’s a bounty on them. Killing them is fine.” He looked at me with serious eyes. “Arius. If you’re gonna be an adventurer, you’re not gonna survive if you can’t kill people. This is a harsh talk to have when you’re this young, but you’re not some normal kid. We decided it was time after watching you this past month.”

“Your parents have also given their permission,” Selena stated, “but you don’t have to push yourself. You have the choice of living as a noble. We won’t force you to do this.”

I, of course, had never experienced killing a person in my previous life. This might be the world of a video game, but it was real life to me.

As of then, I was five, but I died at twenty-five, meaning mentally, I was close to thirty years old. Obviously, I knew what it meant to kill a human, and I wasn’t such an idiot that I had the simplistic thought process of, “They’re bad people. Therefore, it’s okay to kill them.” Knowing my personality, I knew I would regret killing people. But still…

“…I’ll do it,” I uttered.

I had been reincarnated into this world as Arius, one of the potential love interests for the heroine, but I didn’t want to go through school with all those love-brained idiots. Which meant I needed to make my own decisions now. I would not live as a love interest of Love Academy; I would become stronger as an adventurer.

Bandits, I am sorry, but you will have to be a stepping stone for that.

I advanced into the cave, not using area spells since they could have prisoners inside. I’d cast Invisibility and Silence and

slipped behind the backs of the lookouts. Without a word, I removed their heads.

And I was hit with my first experience of killing another human. I set that aside, not thinking about it for the moment.

There were close to a hundred bandits in the cave. I finished them all off with single-target spells or my sword. Several had metal armor on, but most had leather armor at best. Five had crossbows, while the rest had axes and short swords. Their strength wasn't a problem, probably because I'd defeated more powerful monsters.

Eventually, no one else was moving inside the cave, and I realized I'd wiped out all the bandits. It would have been easier to take them out with area spells since there were no prisoners after all, but hindsight is 20/20.

What bothered me more was what was left behind, the feeling of having taken lives—having killed people. I had no choice but to wrestle with those painful feelings. After all, I was the one who decided to do it.

Grey and Selena didn't say anything, even once the fight was over. They probably wanted me to think things through and find my own answers. I imagined several sleepless nights coming my way for a while afterward, but I swore to myself I'd get through it.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 5)
Level: 42
HP: 434
MP: 585
STR: 136
DEF: 133
INT: 188
RES: 160
DEX: 136
AGI: 134

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JUST as I'd reconciled within myself the fact that I'd killed people, my parents came to me with talks of my debut in the social

sphere. Most nobles of Ronaudia made their debut when they were five. A party was going to be held soon by the Royal Court, and I was invited.

I knew this was also my parents' attempt to help me. I hadn't been myself for a while after I'd killed those bandits; they could see it all too well.

Despite the invitation, I honestly didn't feel like going to a party then, but I could try to go with a light heart to knock myself out of this rut.

Parents are impressive, aren't they? Darius and Rhea must have been watching closely over me.

"Mother, Father, thank you for worrying about me," I said, and they both smiled softly.

"We heard from Grey and Selena what you're dealing with," Darius commented gently. "You've worked hard."

"I'm sorry, Arius. We couldn't do anything for you. It was something you needed to work through yourself."

"I know, Mother. I probably would have brushed off any attempts to console me, anyway. Thank you for watching over me."

"Oh, Arius…" Rhea pulled me into a hug, and Darius tousled my hair. It was a bit embarrassing, but that moment made me genuinely grateful I'd been reincarnated with them as my parents.

The day of the party came, and we headed toward the palace in a carriage. Formal clothing for men in this world wasn't a tuxedo like in my previous life. It consisted of a blazer and slacks, but you were free to have whatever color and design you wanted, which demanded a certain amount of style sense from you. Women wore dresses like my old world, though.

I wore a deep navy blue blazer with silver embroidery and slim-fitted slacks. Darius sported a jacket with the same motif but in a black fabric. Rhea was wearing an aqua-colored dress with a simple design.

"Arius, we've taught you the basics of noble etiquette. I'm sure you can implement them perfectly," expressed Darius.

"You shouldn't have a problem even when faced with His Majesty. You don't look five at all, and you're already a splendid gentleman," complimented Rhea.

The unrestrained praise was embarrassing. I was reincarnated, after all—I'd experienced a lot despite being young. I wasn't planning on turning meek in front of the King.

Our carriage pulled up at the palace, and I stepped out with my parents. The Kingdom of Ronaudia, which acted as the stage for Love Academy, was one of the largest countries in the world. The palace was constructed from luxurious white stone, just as the game depicted.

With my father being chief minister and my mother being chief lady, we were allowed into the palace without a security check. We walked down the spacious hallways, seeing palace servants, knights, and soldiers in armor working as guards.

However, I noticed a servant casually acknowledging Darius with his eyes. I activated Scan and saw he had far more mana than the other servants—not as much as Darius or Rhea, obviously.

I lowered my voice and asked, "Father, do you know that servant that just passed? The one with black hair. He seems stronger than a knight despite being a servant."

Darius smiled wryly and whispered into my ear, "My subordinates could be ruined if you find them out. He's a member of the Royal Intelligence Ministry. They slipped in amongst the servants to provide security. I'll give him a piece of my mind later. Please keep it to yourself that you noticed."

I later learned that Darius controlled the Royal Intelligence Ministry as part of his duties. He orchestrated various missions ranging from intel gathering to security for important figures.

Rhea may only be the chief lady and wife of the chief minister, but she used her strength as a former adventurer to assist the Intelligence Ministry and the Royal Ministry of Magic.

There were already a lot of nobles in the event hall inside the palace, as well as rows of opulent food and drink as befitting a party hosted by the Royal Court.

It was standard etiquette for lower-ranking nobles to arrive first at a party. Darius was a marquess, the second-highest noble title, meaning it was only expected that plenty of nobles would already be present when he arrived.

When Chief Minister Marquess Darius arrived, the nobles gathered around him to give their greetings. He and Rhea encouraged me to greet the other nobles as well.

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” I addressed. “I am Arius Gilberto, eldest son of Chief Minister Marquess Gilberto.”

While my father ranked higher than the other nobles here, only he had that higher title. I was nothing more than a marquess’s son. This meant that while there was no need for me to humble myself, it also wouldn’t do to act too arrogantly. That’s why I went for a polite but confident tone.

Incidentally, people were surprised to learn I was only five since I was nearly four feet tall. I also received compliments that I comported myself so well that they found it hard to believe I was so young.

Which made sense since I was reincarnated. At least I wasn’t going to embarrass my parents.

While I was greeting the nobles in the hall, the Three Great Dukes, the highest-ranking nobles of Ronaudia, arrived. There were three dukes in Ronaudia: Duke Jordan, Duke Crawford, and Duke Victorino. Their authority was second only to the King himself.

Even though my father had more actual power than a duke as the chief minister, it was a complicated power relationship between him and the dukes since he was a marquess.

The Three Great Dukes arrived at the exact same time, almost as if they had planned it because anyone who arrived earlier would have been seen as lower in rank. They couldn’t appear after the King, meaning all three dukes aimed to arrive at the last moment.

Well, I only knew a lot about noble society in Ronaudia because Rhea and Darius taught me. Even though they called them the Three Great Dukes, they weren’t equal. Jordan was seen as the most powerful, followed by Crawford and Victorino. I started my introduction from Duke Jordan.

Duke Jordan was an attractive man in his mid-thirties with a neat golden beard and hair. He appeared in the game on the route for First Prince Eric. In the game, he plays an evil role of trying to trap Eric, leading to a scene where the protagonist stands against him with Eric.

Well, I say “evil role,” but it was still ultimately an otome game. The worst he ever did was sort of bully Eric.

Next was Duke Crawford, who was a heavyset man in his forties. He didn't make an appearance in the game.

"So, you're the chief minister's son. As son of the chief minister, it would do you good to understand your position! We great nobles are what hold the Royal Family up!" expressed a boy my age. He was Duke Crawford's son, Ragnus, and it sounded like he was parroting something his father said. He appeared in the game as part of Prince Eric's entourage.

Last was Duke Victorino; he didn't appear in the game, but there was someone in his family I knew well.

"Master Arius, it's a pleasure to meet you. I am Sophia Victorino, Duke Victorino's eldest daughter." She stepped up when I introduced myself. The five-year-old girl had hair the color of milky tea and turquoise eyes. She was, objectively, beautiful, like an angel.

Not that I'm into little kids or anything.

In the game, Sophia is engaged to Eric and the rival to the protagonist. In short, she was what they call the "villainess." In the game, she and her troupe of nobles teased and bullied the heroine. Your standard stuff, it seems.

But Sophia's expression clouded over. Why was she looking at me like she wanted to say something? I didn't remember doing anything to make her act like that.

During our exchange, our parents went off on their own conversation with the Victorinos.

"Chief Minister, Chief Lady, I wish to discuss something with you. Could you possibly make time for a short discussion?" asked Duke Victorino, to which my father gave a stiff smile.

"Your Grace, is it regarding what you previously brought up? I believe I made my thoughts clear the other day," replied Darius.

"Please, Chief Minister. Could you not just hear us out?" entreated Duchess Victorino, coming on strong.

My parents couldn't directly turn down a duke's request. The Duke and Duchess Victorino nearly herded Darius and Rhea out of the hall.

"Arius, my apologies," called out Darius. "Please wait here for us."

And with that, they left behind Sophia and me, two five-year-olds.

“Sophia,” I began, “want something to drink while we wait?”

While I had been left alone with a girl, she was just a child. I dropped my formal speech style, feeling like I was babysitting.

When I returned with drinks, she said, “Thank you, Master Arius.”

“Sophia, you don’t have to speak so formally with me. You can just call me Arius.”

“But I am more accustomed to this way of speaking.” She looked flustered, and I told her it was fine then.

“So, Sophia, you looked at my face earlier, and it looked like you wanted to say something. You can go ahead and say it; I don’t mind.”

There was a flash of surprise on her face. Apparently, she’d found it difficult to say whatever it was. “Well… Master Arius, it seems to me you have gone through something incredibly painful recently. I was just thinking, you needn’t force yourself to smile, if you don’t want to.” She gently squeezed my hand as she looked into my eyes.

Something incredibly painful…? There was only one thing I could think of: having killed people. I’d thought I’d come to grips with that, but maybe it was still showing on my face. I couldn’t help falling silent.

“I’ve…said too much, haven’t I? I’m sorry, Master Arius,” she uttered, her head lowered in apology.

“No, that’s not it. You’re very kind, Sophia. Thank you for caring.”

I was grateful to my parents, Grey, and Selena for watching over me in silence, but Sophia caring for me even though she knew nothing brought about a simple happiness in me.

That reminded me; my friend once told me Sophia was actually designed to be a good person. It seemed that was true. She really was a good person.

“Master Arius…” began Sophia, her cheeks turning pink. She looked just as embarrassed as any other child when I thanked her outright.

After that, we chatted about this and that, such as our day-to-day lives and families. When our parents returned, we parted ways with smiles.

It looked like Sophia could be a friend.

But she was Eric's fiancée, which meant I shouldn't casually engage with her in conversation because I was a guy, right? Besides, I wanted to be an adventurer. There wouldn't be much opportunity for me to interact with her since she was a noble.

Eric didn't come up in conversation with Sophia, though. Was it possible they weren't engaged yet?

"Father, does Prince Eric have a fiancée?" I asked.

Darius looked shocked at the sudden question. "Arius, did Lady Sophia say something to you? In fact…"

That was exactly what the Victorinos wanted to discuss: Eric and Sophia's engagement. They wanted my parents to suggest Sophia as a candidate to the King because they had a close relationship with him.

"Political marriages are not uncommon amongst nobles," explained Darius, "but I have no intentions of getting involved as I don't like those sorts of arrangements. I've turned down His Grace several times and made it clear today as well."

Which meant Sophia and Eric weren't yet engaged. And there hadn't even been talks of it. Was there a chance they wouldn't end up getting together?

"You seem to have taken a liking to Lady Sophia," teased Rhea with a wide smile.

But the girl was only five, and I wasn't interested in that sort of thing.

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SOMETIME after that, the hall burst into an uproar. It seemed the King had arrived.

"Thank you all for coming. Enjoy yourselves!"

King Albert of Ronaudia was an elegant and attractive man in his late twenties with blond hair and blue eyes. He was so high-spec in appearance that Darius wouldn't one-up him in that department.

The others from the Royal Family followed King Albert. Once the Three Great Dukes finished their greetings to the King, Darius and Rhea urged me to approach him.

"It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Arius Gilberto, eldest son of Darius Gilberto." I knelt and bowed my head low. This

was the formal greeting a noble of Ronaudia used for the king.

"So, this is Arius?" he commented. "I've heard of you from Darius and Rhea. They're right; you don't look like a boy of just five at all. And it seems it's not just your appearance that is mature. Be at ease; let's have that greeting be the last of the formality."

The king smiled in amusement. He was far more affable than you'd expect from a ruler. Apparently, King Albert selected Darius as chief minister when he was still a low-ranking noble.

"I'm glad we get to meet, Arius," came a voice. I looked, and there was an attractive boy, elegant, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and the spitting image of the King. "I'm Eric Stallion, first prince of Ronaudia. It's nice to meet you."

In the game, Eric was engaged to the villainess Sophia and was one of the love interests in Love Academy, like me. He was the perfect prince, kind to everyone with a refreshing smile. Additionally, he was the most popular of all the love interests; he also appeared the most in the game's story, after the protagonist.

"Arius Gilberto at your service, Your Highness. It is my honor to be of your acquaintance," I greeted.

"Arius, I hate formality as much as my father does. Please, I'd be happy if you didn't bother with titles and formal speech with me."

I wasn't sure if that really was all right, but King Albert nodded, indicating it should be fine. "All right, Eric," I complied. "It's nice to meet you."

Eric nodded with satisfaction, and a strong smile burst onto his face. "Yes, that's good. You seem flexible. It's hard to believe you're my age. I think we'll be good friends."

The perfect Prince Eric of the game never had an expression like that. As you'd expect from a love interest in an otome game, he was love-brained. The Eric in front of me, though, didn't seem like that at all.

"You know, Arius, I'm starting to find myself interested in you," he noted. "Not as the chief minister's son, but you for yourself. It seems you might be even more special than everyone thinks."

I'm unsure if I have a right to say this, but Eric didn't seem like a five-year-old at all, either. Did he realize I might be someone who

was reincarnated? It didn't matter if he had, though. He wouldn't try to use me.

After that, I greeted the second prince, Zeke Stallion. Zeke was the younger twin and also a love interest in the game.

"Nice to meet you, Arius Gilberto. I am Zeke Stallion," he acknowledged. He looked exactly like Eric, but his hair was cut a bit shorter, and he felt somewhat rough around the edges, just like in the game.

Zeke hated being compared to Eric—who was far too excellent—and was kind of a bad-boy ladies' man in the game. However, he was only a child now, so he obviously wasn't interacting with girls yet.

There was one other child in the Royal Family. Eric and Zeke had an older sister, but her dislike of social events was a common topic. It seemed she wasn't going to be attending the party. The princess appeared in the game but wasn't an important character. As for the Queen, she had passed away, and King Albert didn't seem interested in taking a second wife.

After my greetings with the King and two princes, I had a moment to myself, so I decided to grab some food.

"You really can clear a plate, Arius," noted Rhea in surprise.

I hadn't noticed it was that much, but a tower of empty plates was on the table in front of me. "My tutors' training makes me hungry. Maybe I should have restrained myself a bit more since we're at a party."

"No, it's not a problem," said Darius. "You do need to mind your manners, but there's nothing wrong currently."

"That's right, Arius. Don't worry about what others think. Eat up," added Rhea.

The two of them had taught me the table manners of this world, which weren't all that different from my previous life—not that I ate that often in my past life in places that were picky about manners. I was taught when I was a kid, then sort of naturally picked up the rest over time.

It was around then that the hall burst into an uproar again. It seemed there was a new guest. But wouldn't arriving after the King be a breach of etiquette?

The large double doors opened to reveal a man in his forties in what appeared to be white religious garb, but it was quite

extravagant with its gold-thread embroidery. Behind him was a retinue of people in similar religious outfits.

“Cardinal Luis Patelier, I don’t remember inviting you. Am I mistaken?” questioned King Albert as the group of people in robes approached. He was smiling, but his eyes weren’t.

At his words, ten servants drifted casually toward the group. The eye signal from Darius and the fact that my Scan reacted with large amounts of mana told me those servants were his subordinates and agents of the Intelligence Ministry.

“My, my, King Albert. I appreciate you greeting us personally. You are correct in not inviting us. Does our presence cause you some sort of…inconvenience?” asked the Cardinal.

“No, no inconvenience at all. You are all welcome, of course.”

The King’s eyes met the Cardinal’s, and sparks flew.

Cardinal Luis was unofficially the most powerful man regarding the Church’s influence, which spread beyond the kingdom of Ronaudia. Politically, the Church and the Royal Family were enemies.

Love Academy did touch on this part of the world’s background, but I learned the details from Darius. Among the group of people in religious garb, there was also someone that I recognized.

“I’m honored to see you after so long, Your Majesty. Oh, Prince Eric and Prince Zeke, you’re here as well. I had no idea.” The child, who appeared to ignore the princes intentionally, was Marth Patelier.

Marth was Cardinal Luis’s son and another love interest. He was an androgynous-looking boy with bright hair, basically cast as the feminine boy. He was also a bit mean-hearted, an impression he already gave off as a child.

“Not to worry, Marth. I don’t stand out like you do, after all,” commented Eric. Not that there was any way the perfect, good-looking prince could ever not stand out. However, he didn’t seem to want to engage with Marth in conflict. Despite Marth’s jab, Eric smiled confidently. The two were rivals in the game, too.

Marth glowered at Eric. “Your Majesty, if you’ll excuse me. I’d like to enjoy the party.” He gave a graceful bow to only King Albert, ignoring Eric, then walked away toward the nobles with his father.

The arrival of Cardinal Luis turned the party into a political battleground. King Albert worked to contain the Cardinal, who was walking around like he owned the place.

There was a reason the King didn't refuse to allow the Cardinal to join the party, which was quite simply that chasing away the head of the Church's authority after he went to the effort of coming would cause animosity among believers. King Albert didn't want that hostility, especially since many of the country's residents were followers of the Church.

So, despite the Cardinal's disrespectful attitude, the King showed him the magnanimity of a ruler. That didn't mean the King planned to back down quietly. His smile remained as he locked eyes with the Cardinal, and tensions rose.

I had no interest in the outcome of a competition between the King and the Cardinal, and I knew struggles for authority happened in the world of Love Academy, just like any other place.

Although, I did learn a lot today.

I learned Sophia, the villainess, was actually a good person. And Eric, one of the love interests, wasn't a love-brained idiot but a really strong person. There was the chance they'd both change as they grew since they were children, but it showed me that even the characters were living their lives normally—with no connection to romance.

Discovering that alone was enough to make going to the party worth it.



Chapter 2: The Adventurers Guild

TWO years have passed since I met Grey and Selena. Now, I was seven.

The two were active adventurers, so it wasn't like they were constantly my tutors for those two years. One would solo a dungeon while the other was teaching me, other than when they took me out for a fight. After all, they both could use teleportation, so one would just pop out to a dungeon for the day.

On the other hand, I spent every day from sun up to sun down doing Grey's and Selena's intense training. Sometimes, the three of us went to a dungeon, but they only accompanied me as my tutors; they never stepped in.

I felt I'd grown quite strong over those two years. I could use spells all the way up to tier ten, and my mana usage had reached a level Grey and Selena approved of. My sword skills improved as well, and I learned how to use advanced skills in actual combat.

Still, I was nowhere near Grey and Selena. Growing stronger just made me keenly aware of the difference between us.

One day, they dragged me to the Adventurers Guild without explaining why.

"Hiya, Gignas. Everything ready?" Grey asked an older man clad in incredibly expensive-looking clothing.

"Of course. But…you can't mean it's for this child?"

"That's exactly what I mean." Grey grinned at the dumbfounded man.

Before I could ask what was going on, they led me to a training room in the basement of the Guild. There waited ten adventurers fully equipped.

"Right, Arius, you're gonna spar with this group."

"Uh…may I ask why?" I questioned.

"We'll explain after. You should have no problems taking on these ten with your strength."

The adventurers shot hostile looks at Grey's provoking comment.

Grey. Could you not say things like that?

“Grey, I may respect you, but I can’t let a comment like that slide!” exclaimed one adventurer with long, curly hair. He was a large swordsman, probably in his mid-twenties. There was a silver tag hanging on a chain around his neck. Grey and Selena told me before that a silver tag corresponded to a B-rank adventurer.

The lowest rank was F, and the highest was SSS, making nine ranks in total. There were only ten SSS-rank adventurers in the entire world.

“I have to agree. We’re not going to hold back just because you introduced that boy!” The complaints continued with the red-haired adventurer standing next to the original complainer. He was probably around the same age as the first and wore a stern expression. He looked like a traditional fighter holding his sword shield.

Not all the adventurers had adventurer tags on, but the ones that did wore B rank tags. I used Evaluate to check the adventurers’ stats. Their levels ranged from the fifties to the seventies, meaning B-rank adventurers were fairly strong.

Evaluate allowed me to check the stats of someone with a lower level than mine. If the difference was large enough in my favor, I could see the skills and spells they could use. Conversely, if they were higher than I was, I could supplement by increasing my Skill Proficiency in Evaluate, but there was a limit to what I could do with Proficiency alone. Even if I increased my Proficiency with Evaluate to the max, I couldn’t see Grey’s or Selena’s stats.

Interestingly, spells didn’t have anything like the Skill Proficiency level. There were several ways of increasing the power of a spell, from forming more precise mana circuits to improving your manipulation of mana. You could even change what the spell did by altering the components of the spell circuit.

“Douglas, Marco, you can say whatever you want when you’ve won,” remarked Grey. “Arius, feel free to take them all on at once.”

I could tell Grey was intentionally trying to provoke them. Selena also didn’t seem inclined to stop this, meaning I had no choice but to do it.

“All right. I suppose I’ll get started,” I resigned.

At that point, I was just over four foot six and didn’t look anything like a seven-year-old. All my equipment was loot I found

in dungeons, so I probably didn't look particularly weak.

In this world, magic armor adjusts its size to the wearer. This meant it fit fine even on a child like me. Still, these were rough-and-tumble adventurers. I understood how ridiculous it seemed for them to take on a child. I even sympathized with them. They didn't look like they'd been given a choice in doing this.

"Tsk, why don't you consider what it's like having to deal with a pipsqueak like you!" shouted one.

"I can imagine," I said. "I was dragged here, too. Why don't we just get this headache over with?"

I drew my two swords. Growing taller meant I was now using normal weapons, not ones for children. These were also magic items found as loot in a dungeon. I used two swords to increase my attacks because I always fought solo. My offhand also got stronger as I constantly trained with it.

"A dual-wielder? Pff. Think you're pretty cool, huh? All right then, come at me! I'll beat you to a pulp," taunted the long-haired adventurer, provoking me with his greatsword still in its sheath. He wasn't taking me seriously at all, was he?

"If you insist," I countered. "But don't complain later."

"What did you just—"

I closed the distance between us before he could finish and slammed the flat of one of my blades into his stomach. He went flying back, smashed against the wall, and lost consciousness.

The adventurers' jaws dropped at my display of power.

"What the… You got to be kidding me. How's a kid get that strong?" said one incredulously.

"He must be using Strengthen. He might be a magic swordsman," replied another.

"No," I stated. "I haven't used any spells yet."

Did they really have enough time for commentary?

I continued by hitting the red-haired adventurer with my blade. He groaned and slumped over.

"You shouldn't underestimate your opponent just because they're a child," I retorted. "Those who do are the first to die."

I hated being looked down on. I did feel sympathy for them because they were dragged into this without a choice, but I had no intention of showing mercy to an idiot who let their guard down when facing an opponent with a weapon.

“Bastard! You dare mess with us!”

The rest of the adventurers, unsurprisingly, drew their weapons and attacked. The problem was that I was always sparring with Grey and Selena, and these adventurers were sloppy compared to them.

“It’s no good if you can’t judge your opponent’s strength,” I noted. “Also, none of you are working together. I guess you’re not normally in a party together, are you?”

I dodged their attacks as I finished them off one by one. It would’ve been easier if I used my skills, but they were too powerful, and I could end up killing someone.

When all was said and done, it took less than ten minutes to take out the ten adventurers. Two groaned. The other eight were unconscious.

“Could you tell me what this is about now?” I asked Grey. My biggest question was why I had to fight these adventurers even though he knew I’d win.

He gave a sheepish grin. “There’s an age restriction on being an adventurer. Can’t be one if you’re not fourteen. We needed to prove your strength to get an exception for you.”

Right. That made sense. All the same, he could have just explained that to me in the first place.

“This…child…defeated all of them… They were all B rank…” murmured the man in fancy clothes.

“All right then, Gignas, you better stick to your word,” announced Grey with a grin, clapping the shocked man on the shoulder.

“Yes, of course, just…”

I learned later that Gignas was the Grand Master of the Ronaudia Royal Adventurers Guild. Basically, he was the head of the Guild in this country.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 7)
Level: 128
HP: 1038
MP: 1756
STR: 402
DEF: 400

INT: 535
RES: 465
DEX: 405
AGI: 401

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WE went to the Adventurers Guild's reception room, and they immediately registered me. I quickly understood why they did it privately: I was registering not as Arius Gilberto but simply as Arius. They decided things would get messy if people discovered I was the chief minister's son.

However...

"Grey, this boy, his name is Arius. Is he perhaps—"

"Gignas, I don't think it's appropriate to question an adventurer about their background," cut in Selena, silencing Gignas. He seemed to have realized I was the son of Chief Minister Darius Gilberto. That was probably why he brought us to the reception room.

It wasn't all that surprising that he knew the name of the chief minister's son. Darius and Rhea had been SS-rank adventurers and Grey and Selena's companions. Anyone connected to the guild who knew the relationship between those four could guess who I was just with the name "Arius."

"Of course. I'm sorry. However, people will find out quickly if he adventures in Ronaudia," noted Gignas.

"Won't be a problem. We'll be leaving the country. The dungeons here aren't enough for Arius anyway," remarked Grey.

Shouldn't we have registered me with the Guild of that country then? There wouldn't be many people outside Ronaudia who knew the name of another country's chief minister's son.

"Arius, it just so happened it was more convenient to receive a special exception here in Ronaudia to have you registered," whispered Selena in my ear like she'd read my mind. And, come on, whispering in my ear without warning? That was definitely awkward—she was a black-haired, dark-eyed beauty after all.

The two seemed to have realized I was reincarnated, but Selena still treated me like a child. I guess it couldn't be helped, though; I did look like a child.

“There is a precedent here as Darius was allowed to register at twelve,” she continued. “The Guild in Ronaudia has been lenient on the age restriction for a long time, and Grand Master Gignas can’t say no to us.”

So, we had to do it in Ronaudia to force them to accept me. Nevertheless, I still didn’t find Selena’s explanation very convincing. I could already go into dungeons without being an adventurer so long as Grey and Selena were with me. We didn’t need to get an exception for me in the first place. Or so I thought.

“Right, Arius,” began Grey. “You’re now officially an adventurer. From now on, we won’t be tutors and pupil; we’ll be adventurers together in a party.”

“Wait, what?”

“Why are you so surprised? Of course, this would happen.” Selena smiled teasingly.

Another thing I learned later was that Grey insisted he and Selena wouldn’t fight alongside me until I was an adventurer—which meant they made me an adventurer because they acknowledged my strength enough to join their party.

But wait. I was nowhere near high enough level to be in a party with those two; I knew that much. Regardless, I was honestly happy that they’d accepted me.

“By the way, Arius, we need to get permission from Darius and Rhea for you to join our party,” said Grey. “We agreed to be your tutors, but no promises were made beyond that. We can stop this whole thing here. What do you want to do?”

“There’s only one thing I would do, sir. I want to join your party, please,” I replied. I had no reason to turn down their invitation.

“Hey, Arius. If we’re gonna be in a party, stop with the ‘sir.’ Just call me Grey.”

“He’s right. Call me Selena.”

“Uh… Right. Of course, Grey, Selena.”

“Yes, that’s perfect. I’m looking forward to having you with us, Arius,” smiled Selena.

That evening, Grey and Selena told my parents I’d become an adventurer and that I was going to be joining their party.

“Of course, we have no objections,” Rhea expressed. “This is what Arius decided.”

“Agreed. And we’ll have nothing to worry about when he’s with you two,” concurred Darius.

It had been a long time since the whole family sat down to dinner together. Rhea was so busy with her work at the Intelligence Ministry and Ministry of Magic that she certainly couldn’t cook dinner herself every day. Tonight, she did for me.

“I made plenty, Arius. Eat up.”

The spread consisted of a lot of meat, just how I liked it, with rows of plates holding mounds of food covering the table.

“Thank you, Mother. The food you make is the best.”

She watched happily as I ate with enthusiasm. “I suppose it will be difficult for us to share dinner like this now that you’re an adventurer.”

I already wasn’t at home often because I was off in dungeons with Selena and Grey or on far-off expeditions to take down monsters. Now, the three of us were planning to have a go at dungeons throughout the world. I would barely be home.

“There’s nothing to be done about that,” sighed Darius. “Children have to leave the nest at some point. It’s just a little earlier than most for Arius. Let’s send him off with smiles, Rhea.”

“I know. Just… Arius, don’t do anything too extreme, even if you are with Grey and Selena.”

“I won’t. Thank you, Mother and Father.”

It was too early for a child to leave home at seven. I would understand if they were opposed, yet they were sending me off with smiles—I was truly grateful for that.

The two of them likely realized I was reincarnated. They would have gotten a vague idea of it through their seven years as my parents. Grey and Selena had noticed, after all. That was probably why they didn’t hold back one bit from the moment they met me when I was five.

These four people probably wouldn’t mind if I told them how I died in my previous life. The fact that they never asked meant they accepted me for who I was now, regardless of my previous life.

I also had no intention of being bound by my past life or saying anything about it. Someday, after growing up in this world,

when I can objectively look back at my previous life, maybe I'd talk about it with them over a drink.

"Arius, can I ask you to promise me one thing? I don't mind that you're becoming an adventurer, but you also have the option of succeeding me as chief minister. Please don't forget that," said Darius, his expression serious.

The position of chief minister in Ronaudia wasn't hereditary, but King Albert trusted Darius and supposedly wanted to make me, his son, the next chief minister. I bet that was Eric's doing.

I'd met Eric several times at social events over the years ever since my societal debut at the party in the palace. He told me then that he would be king and wanted me as his chief minister. Unlike in the game, Eric wasn't a love-brained idiot. He was stronger than you'd expect from a child, unpretentious, and a good person, even if he did like his schemes.

I'd also met Sophia, the villainess in the game, several times after that; she and Eric did become engaged shortly afterward. I don't know exactly what led to it because my parents weren't involved, but King Albert seemed to agree with Duke Victorino's proposal.

Duchess Victorino's eyes were filled with light ever since Sophia's betrothal to Eric. When I saw Sophia at social gatherings, we would greet each other and nothing more. There were no opportunities for conversation. She seemed to be a good person, though. I would prefer it if she didn't become the villainess, like in the game.

I also met some of the other love interests from Love Academy then, including Second Prince Zeke and Marth, son of the Cardinal. We'd never had a full conversation, just exchanged some casual words.

"In the end, however, the decision is up to you," continued Darius. "I doubt you'll limit your options for the future. That's why I would like you to continue your studies even while you are adventuring and attend the Royal Magic Academy when you turn fifteen."

It was a requirement for successors of noble titles in Ronaudia to graduate from the Royal Magic Academy, but that was also the setting for the game. I had decided I wasn't going to

live my life as a love interest; I was going to get strong as an adventurer and live life my way.

However, Eric and Sophia were both good people and not love-driven at all. There was a chance the other love interests and even the game's protagonist were also perfectly normal people. Well, I knew Marth was mean.

"I will, of course, continue my studies, Father," I promised. "I wasn't planning on demanding more than I already have."

And so, I thought it would be fine if I did go to the Academy. I didn't plan to become chief minister—I was going to be an adventurer.

Besides, it was another eight years before I'd start attending the Academy. I didn't need to put that much thought into it just yet.

Darius skipped grades and graduated from the Academy when he was twelve before becoming an adventurer. I didn't plan on doing the same. I also knew that despite my departure, Darius and Rhea wouldn't be lonely; the family would grow quickly. That winter, I would become an older brother.

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EVEN though I had become an adventurer, there was still a huge gap between my level and Grey's and Selena's. The two of them adjusted to adventuring at my speed out of necessity, which did make me feel bad, but my only option was to become stronger.

The first dungeon I attempted after becoming an adventurer was the medium-difficulty dungeon Carlat's Tomb. I'd already gone into easy-difficulty dungeons before I became an adventurer to gain combat experience. Selena and Grey said I could easily handle even the medium dungeons, but I advanced cautiously as it was my first time.

Going up a difficulty in dungeons didn't necessarily mean the first floor of the medium-difficulty dungeon would have monsters equal to the final boss of easy-difficulty dungeons. In some cases, easy dungeons begin with level 5 monsters and rise to level 50 on the deepest floor. Medium dungeons might have around level 10 spawns from the get-go, then monsters over level 100 toward the end. The enemies' strength was like a sliding scale, which

increased along with the floor count in the more challenging dungeons.

"All Selena and me are gonna do is moderate the enemy's numbers when there're too many," stated Grey. "You're mostly going to be handling things on your own, Arius."

"Yeah. I'll need to be able to handle this much, at least."

Carlat's Tomb was fairly large at fifty floors. We explored every nook of each level until I'd seen the entire map. I could easily handle all the monsters from a simple power perspective until floor 40. Past floor 45, my level was still higher than the monsters', but I fought them almost entirely solo. It started to get rough when there were a lot of them.

"I'll help a little," offered Selena.

"No, it's all right. I can't say they're not causing me any damage, but I still have plenty of HP and MP."

I wasn't just being stubborn. I'd calmly analyzed the situation, and I could use healing magic.

"All right. Then keep going as far as you can."

I didn't have a naïve belief they would save me if I were in danger. I couldn't very well be a true member of their party for who knows how long if a measly medium-difficulty dungeon gave me trouble.

The spawns' levels surpassed one hundred by the time we were on the final floor.

True to its name, Carlat's Tomb had a powerful stream of undead on display. The most powerful versions of Vampires, Liches, and Undead Dragons spawned several at a time. My strategy for a guaranteed victory was first to cast a tier-ten area attack Light element spell, Divine Light of Annihilation, then cut down what remained with advanced sword skills.

Certain spells were more advantageous against different monsters. The Light element spell Divine Light of Annihilation worked best against the undead. When using a sword, attack motions could become messy if I relied too much on skills, so I adjusted my timing and movements.

"Anyway, next up is the final boss," I proclaimed. I'd fought the whole way there on my own; Selena and Grey were probably bored, but I thought it was the right choice.

"For the final boss—" started Grey.

“I’ll obviously manage something on my own,” I interrupted. “I mean, I will definitely defeat it.”

“All right. I’ll leave it to you then.”

“Arius, if it’s too much, accept it’s too much,” interjected Selena. “No one will compliment you for going into a reckless fight.”

“I know.”

The final boss of Carlat’s Tomb was the No-Life King. His minions were high-level Soul Eaters. Final bosses tended to have magic resistance, probably so they weren’t defeated immediately, but that didn’t mean magic didn’t work on them at all. I launched a preemptive chain attack of Divine Light of Annihilation to chip away at the King’s HP.

Against Light element spells, the monsters’ movements became sluggish. I had plenty of MP left, so if I just kept casting Divine Light of Annihilation…

The No-Life King disappeared in a poof, leaving behind nothing but a massive magic crystal and dropped loot.

“Uh…”

I basically just bashed it to death with a blunt instrument, didn’t I? Here, I wanted to gain more experience with close combat.

“Well, in a way, that was the right strategy,” noted Grey. “It was the most surefire way, considering your MP.”

“I agree. You gain nothing from being picky about your method. What’s important is that you win,” stated Selena.

They weren’t disappointed with my performance.

And that was my first time taking on a medium-difficulty dungeon.

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SIX months later, I’d gone through ten medium dungeons. I’ve learned from my experience in Carlat’s Tomb and was careful not to bash the final boss to death with a spell.

I became an older brother while working on my seventh medium dungeon. They were twins named Sirius and Alicia. I thought I’d end up with a brother *or* a sister and was surprised to

get both at once. I immediately teleported home when I got my father's Message.

"Arius, meet your little brother and sister," welcomed Rhea with a joyful smile.

There were two babies with silver hair asleep on the white bed sheets. They were so small, the newborn babies. I didn't have brothers or sisters in my previous life, so I didn't know what it felt like.

"You're an older brother now, Arius. Come back every once in a while, to see your siblings," Darius asked gently.

"Yes, at least come back for their birthday," added Rhea.

And that would mean I could see my parents as well. I needed to make sure I did that much, at least.

***

AFTER going through ten medium-difficulty dungeons, our party went to start the hard-difficulty dungeon Yukilis's Prison. I had gone through all the ten medium dungeons nearly solo, so I was pretty confident I'd grown stronger over the past six months, but the hard dungeon was still no walk in the park.

It was basically standard for monsters to spawn in groups of ten or more, and multiple groups attacked simultaneously. So, yeah, there were a lot of them, and the weakest ones were above level 50.

"Arius, be aware of all directions," barked Grey.

"And make sure you know where Grey and I are at all times. Keep in mind what we may do next as you choose your next move," commanded Selena.

They began participating in that dungeon, but they only helped me briefly. Once there were fewer monsters, they'd stop fighting and leave the rest for me. Made sense; they were fighting with me to train my cooperative skills.

Just the same, I scraped by until about halfway through the dungeon. Once we got to the lower floors, I was losing contests of strength with the monsters.

"This one's tough," I muttered before I could stop myself as I fought a powerful demon with blood-red scales and wings called a Bloody Demon. All monsters before this, other than the final

bosses, I could kill in one hit, but this Bloody Demon was still alive despite me hitting it with both swords at full strength.

Bloody Demons had tough scales and a lot of HP, and their claw attacks had a petrifying effect. They could even use up to tier-seven spells, making them tricky opponents.

That would have been manageable if I was *just* fighting a Bloody Demon, but it spawned along with a powerful Flare Dragon and giant horse monsters wreathed in black flames called Nightmares.

"Not being able to kill it in one hit means your mana manipulation isn't good enough," stated Grey.

"He's right. Focus, Arius. You're strong enough to take it down," continued Selena.

The two of them had easily eliminated all the monsters other than my share in the blink of an eye.

"Hurry up and finish them off, or you're gonna get surrounded," warned Grey.

"You're not being so naïve as to think we'll save you, are you?" wheedled Selena.

Yeah, I knew, because they were hard on me.

I conjured an image of mana running along my swords and honed my senses. If I focused too much and failed to be aware of the monsters around me, it was all over—I could not let them attack while I wasn't guarding.

I struck out with a vision of mana focusing onto my blades the moment it struck, and the Bloody Demon split in two. I followed that momentum and finished off the rest of the monsters.

"Yeah, that's basically the idea," remarked Grey. "You pick things up quick, don't you?"

"Oh, Grey. Just be straight and compliment the boy when he does something like that," chided Selena. "Arius, don't forget what that felt like, and give today's fights everything you have."

The problem was that I found myself overpowered again as we went further in. Still, I increased the precision of my mana manipulation as I continued fighting. I could take them down like normal as my stats and level increased.

Three months after repeating this, we finished off Yukilis's Prison. I did have to fight the final boss on my own since Selena

and Grey would instakill it if they fought. It took me an hour, but I did manage to beat it.

"Eh, you scraped by with a passing mark on that one," reported Grey.

"I agree. You could do better, Arius," Selena concurred.

I wasn't expecting criticism immediately after, though I knew they were harsh on me because they had high expectations.

"Could the two of you show me how you would have defeated it? For reference." I wanted to know what I was lacking.

"I don't mind, but I'm not sure it'll teach you much," Grey pondered.

"I'm sure you know we won't hold back," Selena stated.

I didn't quite understand what they meant.

They took turns fighting the final boss solo. The moment it respawned, it disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving only a magic crystal behind.

"You've got to be kidding me..." I whispered—I couldn't even see Grey move.

It was the same with Selena; she literally instakilled the final boss, and I didn't even know what spell she cast.

They usually annihilated the monsters in the dungeon instantly when they fought with me, but it felt like they weren't taking it seriously. The level difference between us was just too massive. I didn't learn anything at all. I hadn't realized it, but I'd gotten full of myself. They must have shown me their true strength because they'd noticed that.

"How did you two get that strong?" I asked.

"The standard way: keep training and fighting while thinking about what we can do to get stronger."

"You won't get any stronger if you fight without focus. I think you learned that during this dungeon, didn't you?"

She was right, I had. I was finally able to defeat that monster by focusing on my mana. If I'd continued to fight without thinking of increasing the precision of my mana manipulation, I probably would have still been struggling against that Bloody Demon.

"I learn so much being with you two," I professed. "Did you have tutors that taught you how to fight? Or role models you aimed to be like?"

“Nope. I picked up some things by watching others, but it was pretty much just finding my own way,” said Grey. “I got to this way of fighting by thinking it through. No part of me thinks I’m the best I can be; I will get stronger.”

“It’s the same for me,” Selena echoed. “Different things suit different people, so you have to think about what *you* need and adjust as you go. The other thing is not to place limits on yourself; otherwise, you’ll never get past them. All that’s left is how far you’re aiming to go.”

The two of them were very deliberate, and that was how they got so strong.

“You don’t think about wanting to be better than someone else?” I asked.

“Nope,” Grey declared. “I’m after the strength that I want for myself.”

“It has nothing to do with others,” conveyed Selena. “If you decide you want to beat someone else, then that becomes your limit.”

They wanted to be as strong as possible and didn’t have their sights set on others.

I admired them for that.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 8)
Level: 225
HP: 2325
MP: 3472
STR: 698
DEF: 694
INT: 925
RES: 808
DEX: 696
AGI: 692

Chapter 3: A Meeting

MY success in the hard-difficulty dungeon Yukilis's Prison made me an S-rank adventurer.

"Ya little shit. You're just dragging down Grey and Selena! A kid like you, an S-rank adventurer? Pretty damn arrogant!"

And there was a sudden increase in the number of people who came at me because I was a child.

"And your point is? If you have no business with me, I'll be leaving."

Which was why I beat the snot out of those six A-rank adventurers and left them in a back alley. They looked like they couldn't believe it.

Selena had appeared at some point and said with an enchanting smile, "This is what happens if you don't know how strong Arius is. I will warn you, however, that you shouldn't engage with him if you don't want to die."

"Uh, Selena, I'm not *that* brutal."

"There ain't nothing wrong with killing someone who has no idea what strength is. That's what you lot think, isn't it?" Grey taunted with such hostility they scrambled over each other to escape.

Honestly, it was ridiculous that I had to deal with people like them, but I believed if someone requested a fight with me, I'm obliged to accept.

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OVER the following two years, the three of us dove into hard dungeons around the world. While they might all be called hard-difficulty, their difficulty varied significantly.

There were four classifications for dungeons: easy, medium, hard, and extreme. Even so, there was a cut-off limit on the high end, and everything above that was hard difficulty.

Extreme-difficulty dungeons were unique, and only seven existed in the entire world. Taking on one of them was my current goal, though it wouldn't happen for a while.

"These Fortress Golems are seriously tough. And the Fenrirs and Phoenixes have impossibly powerful attacks," I noted.

Fortress Golems were heavily armored monsters well over twenty feet tall. Fenrirs were Ice-element monsters, while Phoenixes were Fire-element monsters. Both were in the most powerful class of monsters.

Worst of all, up to six groups could spawn at once.

We were in the lower levels of the Guney's Great Labyrinth dungeon. It had 200 floors and was one of the most difficult of the hard-difficulty dungeons.

"Yeah, but you can handle this much, Arius," Grey told me nonchalantly.

"Absolutely. It'd be odd if you couldn't," quipped Selena.

They made it sound like a done deal.

The recommended level for Yukilis's Prison was 250. Guney's Great Labyrinth's recommendation was 500. That vast difference in level was why I struggled with these battles.

"I know," I said. "I know if I can't beat them, I can't advance."

I honed my mana and made an attempt at the most powerful monster. As I concentrated my mana into a single spot of my sword, the head came clean off.

If the monsters were strong, I just needed to get stronger. Fighting with Grey and Selena made me take that as a given. They might have been overwhelmingly powerful, but they didn't start that way. Like me, they got stronger by continuing to think about *how* to get stronger while they fought.

I got reincarnated into this otome game world, so I decided I wouldn't live as a love interest in Love Academy—I would get stronger as an adventurer.

Initially, I had a vague idea of wanting to be stronger, but things were different now. I wanted to become stronger like Grey and Selena. They were my ideal: not aiming to be better than anyone but simply continuing to pursue strength.

Although, I understood how arrogant of me it was to say that considering how lacking in power I was. That's why I wouldn't tell anyone.

“I’m seriously hungry. Why don’t we go get an early dinner?” I asked.

While we worked on Guney’s Great Labyrinth, we stayed at a nearby town called Carnell in the country of Duchy of Crista. Not that distance meant anything since even I could use teleportation magic. Still, many adventurers in Carnell were taking on the Great Labyrinth, so it was a convenient place to gather information.

Well, my party members had already cleared the Great Labyrinth, so we didn’t actually need the information, but it was good practice for me to learn how to.

One aspect of the Great Labyrinth was that while the lower floors were among the most challenging in all the hard-difficulty dungeons, the upper floors weren’t that much more arduous than a medium-difficulty dungeon. That meant there were even D-rank adventurers trying out the dungeon.

Taking on the dungeon was easy enough, but only a handful of adventurers managed to conquer it.

“Ah, it’s Grey! Come have a drink with us!”

“It’s our treat, Selena!”

We arrived in the Adventurers Guild, and the other adventurers scrambled over each other to talk to us. Grey and Selena were famous. There were no adventurers who didn’t know their names, and everyone liked them because they had such easy-going personalities.

“We’re happy to drink with you all, but we’re starving. Give us a chance to fill our bellies. Master, bring me whatever alcohol and food you’ve got lying around,” exclaimed Grey.

“Could I have white wine and the cheese platter, please? I don’t mind whatever else you add on,” asked Selena. “What would you like, Arius?”

“I want meat. Master, I don’t care what kind of meat, just bring me whatever you can serve up quickly,” I requested.

I was only ten but now over five feet tall, which made me look like a middle schooler. I looked old enough to become an adventurer without needing an exception, so I imagine I didn’t seem out of place in the Adventurers Guild. Not that many adventurers in their early teens were trying their hand at a hard dungeon.

Oh, and the person we called Master was the head of the food and drink department of the guild. We weren't the only ones who called him Master; everyone did.

"I'm going to go exchange the magic crystals while we wait for the food," I relayed.

"Thank you for always taking care of that," said Selena.

"It's the least I can do."

They were fighting below their level for me. I had to at least do the menial tasks for them.

And that day, we defeated a lot of monsters, so I had a mound of magic crystals in my Inventory. Inventory was a tier-ten Space-element spell. Things in Inventory weighed nothing, and time even stopped for them. It was pretty convenient.

I was on my way to the counter where there were Guild staff when my eyes met those of a girl heading toward our table. She was fourteen or fifteen with ash-gray hair cut into a bob. Objectively speaking, she was pretty enough she could make an appearance in Love Academy as the protagonist's rival.

I'm not into girls in their early teens, but she seemed to have some other idea in mind because she was, uh, glaring at me…for some reason? I passed her as she shot daggers with her eyes and went to the counter because I wasn't interested.

"You don't mind if I just go in, do you?" I asked the staff. There wasn't enough space on the counter to hold all the magic crystals I'd gathered. Like usual, I went into the back and spread them out in the storage room.

I told the staff I'd be back later for the money since I knew it would take time for them to appraise it all and returned to the table.

"E-excuse me… You two are the SSS-rank adventurers, Grey and Selena, right?"

I arrived just as the girl from a moment before approached our table.

"My name is Jessica Lowell. I'm a B-rank adventurer. I…I really admire you two! M-may I shake your hands?"

"Sure, I don't mind a handshake," Grey happily answered. "We're fellow adventurers, after all; drop all that formality."

"Grey's right. It makes me happy to hear you admire us. Since you're here, why don't you stay for a chat?"

“S-sure! If you don’t mind!”

There were nine adventurer ranks, ranging from F to SSS. Selena and Grey were two of only ten SSS-rank adventurers in the world. And, while it might be odd coming from me, Jessica was quite the adventurer if she was B-rank at her age.

“Ah, Arius, you’re back. Food’s here,” welcomed Grey. On the table were plates of food and three glasses of alcohol. There was no minimum drinking age in this world, so even ten-year-old me could drink without a problem. “Jessica, you order whatever you want. Our treat.”

“Thank you, Grey!”

Selena and Grey sat on one side, meaning Jessica and I naturally had to sit on the other.

“Arius, this is Jessica. She’s gonna be eating with us. Jessica, this is Arius,” introduced Grey.

“That hardly explains the situation, Grey,” added Selena. “We just met Jessica and invited her to eat with us.”

“I see. Nice to meet you, Jessica,” I greeted.

“Nice to meet you, too.” For some reason, she glowered at me as she said that.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Jessica?” asked Selena.

“N-nothing! More importantly, tell me about you two!” Jessica completely ignored me while Grey and Selena spoke, but I had no idea what made her act like that. Maybe she was hungry. I focused on eating myself.

The seasoned adventurers had also noticed her attitude and gave me awkward smiles, yet they didn’t seem inclined to chastise her behavior. Guess they wanted me to handle my own problems.

I scanned the room and saw a group of young adventurers looking in our direction with concern. Her companions, maybe? I mean, she was clearly looking to pick a fight with me. I’d be worried for her, too, if I were her friend. Should have stopped her before she got started then, shouldn’t you?

I polished off three large platefuls of food. Having had my fill for the moment, it was time to deal with Jessica.

“Hey, Jessica,” I began. “If you want to say something to me, just say it. I don’t think I like your attitude.”

Not that I was actually angry. She was just a child, after all. I believed that if someone requested a fight with me, I was obliged

to accept. There had been a lot of people making fun of me for being a kid, and I found that a show of strength was the quickest way to shut up idiots treating me disrespectfully.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Are you sure you're not imagining it?" she replied, feigning dumb but still glaring at me.

"Really now? Because it's pretty obvious that you can't stand me. Maybe it pisses you off that I'm with Grey and Selena because you admire them so much." I couldn't think of any reason someone would give me the stink eye immediately after meeting me. And Jessica's expression told me I was on the money.

"You're younger than me, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm ten. What about it?"

"*What*? No way. You're…you're seriously ten years old? You're not an adventurer, then?" She clearly wasn't expecting that. "I thought we weren't that far off in age…"

From her perspective, I was an adventurer younger than her, with less experience, chatting like friends to the people she admired. That spurred her antagonistic attitude toward me, but then she discovered I was more of a child than she imagined. Was she quickly realizing how embarrassing her actions were?

"For your information, I've been going into dungeons since I was five, and I became an adventurer at seven. I imagine I have more experience than you," I countered.

"No way. This has got to be some joke, right?"

"Arius is telling the truth, Jessica," warned Selena. "And he's an official member of our party."

That made the adventurers around us burst into a buzz. They knew I was always with Selena and Grey, but they never imagined I was a party member. Well, no one would think these SSS-rank adventurers would bring someone who looks like a newbie into the party.

I'd, of course, reported to the Adventurers Guild that I'd completed hard-difficulty dungeons, but that would have been to the Guilds in other towns, and I wasn't in the habit of bragging about my exploits.

Besides, no other adventurers in Carnell had picked a fight with me, maybe because I looked old enough to be an adventurer. I'd never needed to use strength to make them see reason, which

meant the only people in town who knew how strong I really was were my tutors.

"More experienced than me at *ten* years old…?" repeated Jessica. "And in Grey and Selena's party…?" She was in a fluster, unable to sort through that information.

I was actually starting to feel bad for her, like I'd bullied her or something. "Look, Jessica, that's just how it is. If you understand now, I won't hold it against—"

"W-wait just a second! You haven't convinced me yet!" she shouted as she snapped back to her senses, and her voice carried to all corners of the Guild. All eyes gathered on her. "Arius, fight me! I want to see if you're as strong as you say you are. If you defeat me, I'll accept you're a member of Grey and Selena's party!"

Wait. Why did it have to come to this?

"Yeah, a showdown!" cried someone.

"Good luck, both of you!" yelled another.

"I bet a silver coin on Jessica. She's a B-rank adventurer."

"I'll put two golds on Arius! If he's in their party, then he's got to be tough."

The peanut gallery was working themselves up into a frenzy. Apparently, they were planning to go into full spectator mode and enjoy the match.

Should I just leave it be, refusing to engage with something this idiotic?

Jessica looked serious, though. She was holding her gaze on me, her expression sober.

I could easily see through her attitude that she admired Grey and Selena. She likely made it to B rank by using them as a goal. But it wasn't her they chose for their party, it was me, a younger child. They were free to choose whoever they wanted, but why would they choose me and not her? She wanted this match with me so she could learn the answer.

"Arius, maybe you should go along with the match," suggested Grey.

"These sorts of things are good for you every once in a while," added Selena.

They didn't seem interested in stopping it.

If I thought about it, Jessica wouldn't have gotten the wrong idea if I'd just shown how strong I was in the first place, but it

wasn’t my thing to go around flaunting my power. Guess this sort of thing was inevitable, then.

“Fine. If that’s what it takes to convince you, then let’s have a match,” I relented.

The adventurers grew even more excited when I accepted. *Come on. There’s nothing for you lot to be so happy about.*

We went downstairs to the Guild’s training facility because we decided the match would be a spar. I stood off with Jessica, ignoring the adventurers working themselves into a frenzy around us.

Jessica used a bastard sword that could be used one or two-handed while I dual-wielded two long swords. I dual-wielded because I mostly fought solo and wanted to increase the number of my attacks. There was basically no difference between how well I could fight with my left hand and my right hand.

It would be an insult to Jessica to hold back. The match was over in an instant.

I closed the distance between us before she could even move and shattered her sword with one strike. She was shaken at losing her weapon, unable even to react, but she admitted defeat without any argument.

I’d assumed the adventurers would complain about how pathetic the anticlimactic match was, but they surprised me with their reaction.

“H-hey… Did you see any of that?” asked one.

“Nope… I couldn’t track him at all…”

“That was incredible! That’s what you get from someone Grey and Selena picked!”

What I heard instead were words of praise and shock. Seriously, I didn’t do that to make all of you happy.

After the match, Jessica’s attitude toward me changed, as if she were a completely different person. Well, that might have been an exaggeration. She was still older than me and acted like she knew it.

“Well, I promised. I acknowledge you’re strong, Arius,” she admitted. “But you’re still weak compared to Grey and Selena. Make sure you work hard so you’re not holding them back. I mean, don’t take me the wrong way. I know you’re working hard, just…

work…harder. And if you ever have time, feel free to spar with me again!”

What the…? It did feel like she was looking down on me, but she didn’t seem to mean any harm by it. What annoyed me more was how much she talked to me. I mean, I could at least spar with her now and then. If you ignored her childishness, you could see she was trying hard, which I liked.

But still…dealing with her every time I came to the Guild…

And honestly, I didn’t like the way Grey and Selena looked at us with tacit approval in their eyes. I had zero interest in romance, and Jessica only considered me a rival anyway.

“Hey, Arius, I’m going to get stronger until I get Grey’s and Selena’s approval!” she proclaimed.

“Good luck. For both of us. I’m going to keep working until I can stand beside them as equals,” I replied.

My interactions with Jessica, a girl who was close to me in age in appearance only, ended after a few months. Our party had completed Guney’s Great Labyrinth, and we were leaving Carnell.

“Arius… Register me for Message!” demanded Jessica when I told her.

Message was a tier-one spell that could send text between people who’d registered each other regardless of distance.

“Sure, I guess,” I said. “I won’t contact you, though.”

“J-just… Just register me already!”

In the end, I added her. Because she made me.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 10)
Level: 438
HP: 4492
MP: 6701
STR: 1354
DEF: 1350
INT: 1812
RES: 1579
DEX: 1354
AGI: 1352

***

THE head of the giant, eighty-foot-tall Red Dragon went flying. The giant Dragon disappeared in a poof, leaving a huge magic crystal and loot behind.

"Welp, guess that's the end. It was a bit disappointing," I commented.

"That's how strong you've gotten. Today, you can be proud of yourself," Grey complimented.

"Then tomorrow, you can tackle training with zeal again," continued Selena.

We were in the hardest of the hard-difficulty dungeons: the Dragon's Palace.

After finishing the Great Labyrinth, we spent the next year completing all the hard dungeons. Completing the Dragon's Palace made me feel like I could see Grey and Selena in the distance now—I was catching up to them. At any rate, they were still way stronger than me.

We eventually decided to try our hand at an extreme-difficulty dungeon. There were only seven of them in the world, and they were fundamentally different from all other dungeons. From the very first floor, you encountered wicked monsters that left the final boss of the Dragon's Palace in the dust. And that was just the lowest of the extreme dungeons in terms of danger.

"So, uh…how many of them are there?" I asked.

"Who knows? Don't have time to count them. Just gotta take 'em down," replied Grey.

"Once we draw them in a bit more, I'll cast an area attack spell. Then utilize the gaps to fight," strategized Selena.

The forms of giant Angels clad in full plate armor approached from far in the distance of this vast space. My Scan detected more than 1,000 monsters, and each one was putting off mana far more than the last boss of the Dragon's Palace.

A floor in an extreme dungeon had no walls; it was just a space. There was nowhere to hide, and all the monsters on the floor attacked you at once. The fighting didn't stop until you defeated them all.

A cluster of white meteorites formed of compressed mana appeared near the high ceiling and rained down on the Angels.

The tier-ten spell Meteor Shower cast by Selena and me marked the start of the battle.

One moment of distraction meant your life. One miscalculation on when to retreat meant a total party wipe.

And that’s where we fought amidst that tension and stress.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 11)
Level: 658
HP: 6788
MP: 10247
STR: 2038
DEF: 2033
INT: 2718
RES: 2388
DEX: 2038
AGI: 2036

Chapter 4: The End of Adventuring Life

A white blade of compressed mana stabbed into the monster's massive forehead. The winged giant, with a wingspan of nearly 350 feet, was shrouded in what seemed like a limitless supply of mana.

But, at the end of a life-or-death, twenty-four-hour-long battle, the creature disappeared with a puff of smoke.

"You finally took it down. Now you've caught up to us," Grey declared.

We'd spent a year taking on the first extreme-difficulty dungeon. This was Grey and Selena's second time through the dungeon since they'd completed it with Darius and Rhea.

But this was still just the beginning for me.

There was a set order in attempting the extreme dungeons, starting from the easiest; you couldn't enter the next one until the previous ones were completed.

"From here on out, we're also going into uncharted territory since Darius and Rhea left the party when we set out to try these dungeons last time," noted Grey. "We had no choice but to give up on the second extreme dungeon."

The monsters that spawned on the first floor of the second extreme dungeon were more powerful than those on the final floor of the first one. That meant we were already in place to be contenders against the dungeon. We had to continue growing stronger.

"Ah, this is the best. It's only in battle when you can really feel alive," I expressed.

"You're saying that, too?" asked Grey. "Looks like you've turned into a wonderful battle maniac, just like us."

"Grey, that's rude. I'm not like you two," countered Selena.

"You're the only one who thinks that," Grey retorted.

Anyone else who saw us grinning as we kept killing monsters would think it was strange, but who cared about that? In the middle of a battle that could go either way, taking moments of my

life, feeling myself grow stronger... It was more fun than I could bear!

Grey and Selena wanted to grow stronger, never stopping, because they knew this feeling, and I felt like I finally understood.

But it was unexpected when they said they'd influenced me too much. They had influenced me, but there was no doubt this feeling was indeed mine and mine alone. If the strength I sought was beyond the sort of fight that cut away at my life, then I would continue to fight, giving up as many chunks of my measly life as was necessary!

***

THREE and a half years later, we continued taking on extreme dungeons. The final boss of the fifth extreme dungeon was, quite simply, far beyond what you would even call a monster.

There were still two extreme dungeons we hadn't explored, and we knew of an even more horrifying dungeon that wasn't widely known about. We knew this because there was proof in the fifth extreme dungeon. That meant no one had ever made it beyond the seventh extreme dungeon.

Regardless, it was around that point that we ran out of time. I had turned fifteen. That was the age I promised my father I would enter the Ronaudia Royal Magic Academy, the setting for Love Academy.

"Grey, Selena, I'm leaving the party. I'm not going to ask you to wait for me," I divulged. Our parting was brief; it's not like it was the last time we'd ever see each other.

I had no intention of living as a love interest of Love Academy, but graduating from the Academy was a requirement in Ronaudia for inheriting your parent's title, and Darius told me not to limit the options for my future.

I did learn that Eric and Sophia were both good people. The other love interests and protagonist might be good people, too, so I decided I'd be fine with at least attending the Academy.

The last time I saw Eric was seven years ago, so he could have changed since then. Not that I thought someone as strong as him would devolve into some love-brained idiot.

“You going to take a break from adventuring while you’re in the Academy?” asked Grey.

“No, I have an idea. I will have limited time, so I don’t know how much I’ll be able to test it out,” I replied, and the two of them grinned. If anyone could, it was these two to guess what I had in mind.

After I left the party, Grey and Selena paused their attempts at extreme dungeons and went around the world, taking on other dungeons again. It would be pretty hard for the two of them to take on the sixth extreme dungeon.

Grey seemed like he might try his hand solo at an extreme dungeon, but Selena, who claimed she wasn’t a battle-obsessed maniac, apparently planned on taking it easy for some time.

“Let’s get the party back together once I graduate from the Academy,” I offered. “I don’t plan on just playing around these three years, after all.”

Even on the off chance I really did become the next chief minister, Darius wasn’t going to retire right away.

We promised to meet again in three years and went our separate ways.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 15)
Level: ????
HP: ????
MP: ????
STR: ????
DEF: ????
INT: ????
RES: ????
DEX: ????
AGI: ????

***

THE otome game *Love & Magic Academy* was set in the Royal Magic Academy, which was in the capital of the kingdom of Ronaudia.

I was from the capital, but I spent the past eight years traveling around the world as an adventurer. Quite honestly, I

wouldn't know how to answer if someone asked me how it was living in the capital.

White walls surrounded the city, and a sprawling complex was in the center. All students had to live in the Academy dorms, making this my first time living alone. Since I lived in rented lodging while adventuring, I was used to doing things myself. Even though it was my first time living alone, it wasn't that big a deal.

"This my room, then?" I asked. The small room was at capacity just with the bed, desk, bookshelf, and a small wardrobe.

The Academy grounds had separate girls' and boys' dorms, which were then divided into noble and commoner dorms. The noble rooms were like those suites you might get in a hotel with separate rooms because nobles brought their servants or ladies-in-waiting to the Academy with them.

I didn't need servants, and cleaning would be more annoying in a larger room, so I asked for a commoner room. That was just an excuse, however. The real reason was that living with nobles would be a pain in the ass.

"The Kingdom of Ronaudia was founded 826 years ago in continental calendar year 108 by the first king, His Majesty Brose Stallion…"

A week had passed since I'd entered the Academy. The classes were…uh, well, I wouldn't want to complain, but if I had to give my honest opinion, they were dull. The magic and sword skill classes were far below my level. And math? I had a graduate degree in science in my previous life. Being asked to solve problems I would've seen in Mathematics 1 of my degree was pointless. Even the geography and history classes were boring since I'd continued my studies while adventuring. I'd learned everything in those classes on my own already.

"*There are suspicions of a secret agreement between Duke Butler of the Holy Kingdom of Brisdan and Count Coen of Ishtobal Kingdom. The agreement is…*"

"*The investigation into the background of Captain Francesca of the Imperial Knights has found…*"

I received Messages from the various information sources I employed around the world. Intel was a fundamental skill for

adventurers, and I gathered status information worldwide without concern for the cost. My only thought was, why is someone like me holding the most recent information on the world's state in their hands, even bothering with these classes?

Foreign language classes were also pointless since I'd learned those languages while I cleared dungeons in those countries. I could speak like a native in them, leaving nothing to learn from the teacher.

I also hated wasting my time, so I decided to work on my own things while in lectures. The only benefit to me in attending the Academy was the free access to the well-stocked library. There's no such thing as wasted knowledge, so I always read during class.

That might make it sound like there was no point in me going to the Academy at all, but that wasn't the case. Going to the Academy was a reason in and of itself because there was something I wanted to confirm.

"You like books, don't you, Arius? Although, you really should be paying more attention in class."

"I'm making the best use of what I've got. And I'd pay more attention if the classes covered something more interesting," I responded to the opulent, golden-haired young man with a refreshing smile who took good-looking to perfection. It was Eric Stallion, the first prince of Ronaudia.

It had been eight years since I'd seen Eric. As expected, he hadn't changed that much since he was a child. Well, it did look like he'd been polished a bit more.

He was another love interest like me, but he wasn't love-addled. He was kind toward everyone, easygoing, and generally a good guy. Well, he did like his schemes and was the kind of cunning person you shouldn't drop your guard around. Even so, I didn't dislike that aspect of him.

Eric seemed to have something on his mind because he stared into my face. "You know, I can't seem to get used to you wearing glasses," he observed. "What's that about?"

True to Arius's look in the game, I was wearing a pair of black-framed glasses.



In the game, Arius was a sort of intelligent, glasses-wearing, good-looking type who was quiet and non-assertive.

“How many times have I told you, Eric? My eyesight has gotten worse,” I replied, which was a lie, of course.

Things would get complicated if word got out that I was Arius, the SSS-rank adventurer. This was just to be on the safe side. I mean, it wasn’t like an adventurer who fought on the front line would ever wear glasses.

Anyway, let’s stop thinking about the glasses.

The problem in front of me at the time was Eric’s entourage.

“Arius, how dare you act that way toward His Highness! You are the chief minister’s son; you need to know your place!” complained one of the entourage members.

Well, he was perhaps a bigger deal than just calling him “an entourage member.” He was Ragnus Crawford, son of Duke Crawford, one of the country’s Three Great Dukes. I met him several times at social events before I became an adventurer at seven. Even as a child, he was full of himself, which seemed not to have changed at all.

“I don’t mind, Ragnus,” Eric said coolly. “I asked Arius not to be formal with me when we were children.”

“But, Your Highness—”

“I also told you it was fine to call me by my name.”

“Your Highness, I could never do that!”

Ragnus couldn’t seem to accept that I spoke casually to Eric or that I, the chief minister’s son, didn’t join his faction.

All students were ostensibly equal at the Academy, regardless of status, but Eric’s entourage brought the nobles’ faction wars into the Academy regardless. It seemed Eric himself didn’t mean to drag that here with him.

“Ragnus, you are too inflexible,” commented the prince. “Anyway, let’s stop standing around talking. I’d like to invite everyone to lunch to deepen our friendships.”

Royals like Eric had a separate dining room in the Academy. The Royal Family’s cooks prepared lunch daily, and it was standard practice for the royals to invite other students to join them. Eating lunch with Eric in the game was one way of increasing how much he liked you.

“Will you join us, Arius?” asked Eric.

“No, thank you. I eat alone out of principle. Go on without me.”

I did unenthusiastically take him up on his offer the first day. You never saw the lines of his entourage in the game, but it was annoying to listen to them in real life as they tried to suck up to him. Eric just had a frustrated smile during it.

“Again?! How dare you, Arius!”

“Ragnus, could you please cut it out? Arius, we’ll have lunch together another time.”

“Sure. If I feel like it.” It’d cut into my lunchtime if I stayed to talk any longer. I wrapped up the conversation and left the classroom to head toward the cafeteria for the regular students.

It was a large hall with tables arranged like in a food court, and students of the Academy ate there for free.

I picked up a prepared lunch plate and sat at a random empty table. Lunch was pan-fried chicken with potato salad and corn chowder. It was a surprisingly commoner-esque menu even though 80 percent of the students were nobles. But the food was also surprisingly good.

I told Eric I eat alone out of principle, but there was no one to eat with me anyway. It’s not that I was unsociable or anything; I was just annoyed by the eyes I could feel from the people around me. And I’m not trying to brag, but I did have my father’s silver hair, my mother’s ice-blue eyes, and good looks since I was the love interest of an otome game.

That was why I got all sorts of steamy looks from the girls and jealous looks from the boys. Well, if our positions were reversed, I’d at least glance at me, too. The girls wouldn’t take their eyes off me. If I noticed and reacted in any way, they’d break into high-pitched shrieks, making the boys even more jealous…

Come on, it’s seriously annoying.

I didn’t care what others thought, and trying to talk to any other students in those conditions was a pain in the rear. That’s why I chose to ignore all the looks in my direction and eat alone.

And it was fine. The food was good, after all.

That’s when I noticed someone else eating on their own. They sat at the very back of the cafeteria at an otherwise empty, spacious table. I’d crossed paths with her a few times. She was a plain-looking girl named Noelle Balt with glasses and braided hair.

Like me, Noelle went to the library almost every day, where we naturally met that way. She was in every way a bookworm girl, even reading a book now while eating.

Noelle must have arrived after me because I hadn't seen her when looking for a place to sit. Not that I would consider moving seats now to eat with her, not with how annoying the looks were. And she could be socially clumsy. I didn't want to drag her into that mess.

I planned to eat my food quickly and leave the cafeteria, but something happened before I could.

"You, commoner, who gave you permission to sit in our seat?!"

The hysteric shout echoed through the cafeteria. My eyes darted to the source and saw Noelle surrounded by noble girls. Those ten girls, looking like nobles in every way possible, penned her in, and Noelle glanced up from her book to see them.

"Permission?" she echoed. "I sat here because there was no one here."

"Of course there wasn't. Because it's *our* table."

"What? But...there's no sign saying that."

The noble girls laughed at her confusion. "No sign? Such a commoner. You clearly have no common sense. You can't even fathom *why* the table was empty."

Noelle's expression said she had no idea what the girl was saying.

Two noble girls grabbed Noelle by her shoulders and dragged her out of the seat.

"Hey! Stop—agh!" In the struggle resulting from her resistance, Noelle's plate of food flipped over and dirtied her uniform. "Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Could you please not make such a scene? You're just flailing for no reason."

"Oh, I know. And look, she's filthy. I don't know how you find the courage to go out in public like that."

The nobles sneered at her, and that's when I decided I couldn't let this continue any further.

I stood and turned to the noble girls. "Hey, cut it out. No matter how you look at it, Noelle didn't do anything wrong. You did."

Right as I stepped in, their eyes flicked to me, and they cried, “M-Master Arius…”

I was famous, after all: Arius Gilberto, son of the chief minister. The other students also looked at me, but I ignored them and knelt next to Noelle.

“Arius…” she began.

“Noelle, you should try to be more aware next time, too,” I chided, then silent cast the tier-one spell Cleanse, making her uniform as neat and tidy as it had been originally.

The uproar among the students was because I cast it with a silent incantation. Apparently, there weren’t many students who could silent cast.

“Thank you, Arius, but I didn’t do anything wrong…”

“I know.” I looked at the noble girls and addressed them. “Status isn’t supposed to mean anything in the Academy, which means anyone is free to sit at this table, no matter who they are. You’re in the wrong for forcing your made-up rules on people.”

The noble girls couldn’t respond because the Gilberto family had a higher rank. I wasn’t interested in anything as pointless as rank, but if they wanted to bind themselves, so be it.

Instead, they turned their eyes to one of the girls in the center, begging for assistance. She had hair the color of milky tea and eyes the color of turquoise, the perfect beauty who could turn anyone’s head. Sophia Victorino, daughter of Duke Victorino, one of the Three Great Dukes, and Eric’s fiancée. In the game, she was the protagonist’s rival, the so-called “villainess.”

But at five years old, she showed me kindness when I met her at a party in the palace, even though we’d only just met. She was a good person.

Afterward, she became engaged to Eric, and we did nothing more than greet each other when we met in public. I became an adventurer when I was seven and stopped attending social events, meaning it had been eight years since I’d seen her.

Even now, she was the only one of the noble girls surrounding Noelle who looked sorry. It felt like she was making herself go along with them.

“Master Arius, as a noble yourself, you should be aware that the claim ‘status means nothing here’ is merely lip service, and there are unspoken rules. It is common sense among the students

that they must abide by these unspoken rules. I believe she is in the wrong for ignoring that," Sophia replied firmly, except it definitely seemed forced to me.

I could imagine why. Information gathering was a fundamental skill of adventurers, after all. I fully understood the power relationships between the nobles of Ronaudia.

It wasn't that I didn't understand noble society, after all—I just hated it because it was a pain.

The girls present were daughters of nobles belonging to Duke Victorino's faction. Sophia was obligated to protect the other girls as the daughter of said faction's leader. She had that obligation even if the girls were in the wrong.

"I'm aware of the unspoken rules," I answered calmly, "but this has gone too far. It's your responsibility to stop them, isn't it, Sophia?" Sophia started to complain about my impolite tone, but I stepped in close and whispered in her ear before she could. "Sophia, you actually agree with me, don't you? You don't have to force yourself to go along with something you don't want to do."



We were close enough to feel each other's breath. The lovestruck girls nearby squealed. I knew this wasn't the sort of thing I should be doing to Eric's fiancée, but the other girls would hear if I didn't, which would force her to deny it.

There was a crack as her palm struck my cheek with full force, her face beet red. It would have been easy to avoid the slap, but I didn't. Dodging would have damaged her standing.

"What in the… What are you doing, Master Arius?!" she demanded.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I was enchanted by your beauty."

Which was, of course, a lie.

Her face turned even redder while there was another round of squeals from the girls and more jealous looks from the boys.

I ignored them all, however. I took Noelle's hand and pulled her out of the circle of noble girls. The scuffle about Noelle would be forgotten because I made more of a scene than she did. The nobles also wouldn't lose face because I was the one who took Noelle out of there.

For the love of… *This* was why dealing with nobles was such a pain.

"A-Arius…" started Noelle.

"Don't try to go back for lunch there. I'll give you something to eat later."

"I… That's not it… M-my hand…"

I realized then that I still had hold of her hand. But why was her face so red? "Oh, sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"N-no, it doesn't hurt… Just, holding hands suddenly, it makes me blush…"

I didn't catch the last part because she mumbled it too quietly, but as long as it didn't hurt. Should probably get out of there since all those looks were annoying.

"Wait here a second, Noelle. I'm going to put away my dishes," I relayed. Noelle's dishes were being cleared away by the staff as ordered by the nobles. I hated imposing on people, so I cleared mine away before taking Noelle out to the courtyard.

None of the students were in the habit of eating packed lunches in the courtyard, so there were few people there at this time of day. I sat on a bench, pulled bread and a drink from my

Inventory, and gave it to Noelle. I was an adventurer—I always had food and drink stored for emergencies.

“Oh… A-Arius, thank you.”

She looked surprised by the sudden appearance of bread. Maybe she wasn’t used to Inventory. I also had warm food in my Inventory, but she had eaten half of her lunch. A bit of bread should be enough for now.

“Let me know if you want dessert,” I offered. “I have ice cream.”

“Really? I would like some, then.”

Girls do like sweets, after all. I pulled a dish of ice cream and a spoon from my Inventory.

“Um… Arius… It made me really happy that you helped me back there.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I just did it because they were making me angry. Anyway, hurry up and eat. Lunch break will be over soon.”

“R-right. It’s really nice. The ice cream.”

For some reason, her face was red again. Maybe she just felt uncomfortable saying thank you so openly.

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I met him at a party at the palace when I was a shy young girl. Despite being the same age as me, he seemed so grown up, nothing like a five-year-old. For some reason, however, it looked like he was enduring something incredibly painful.

But, being as shy as I was, I couldn’t possibly bring myself to say anything. I couldn’t even look at him as he suffered. However, he noticed and encouraged me, insisting it was fine to say something if I wanted to.

I hesitated but expressed what I truly felt, “You needn’t force yourself to smile, if you don’t want to.”

He went quiet, and I thought I’d gone too far. I tried apologizing, but he said, “No, that’s not it. You’re very kind, Sophia. Thank you for caring.”

And I found myself enchanted by his carefree smile. This smile wasn’t forced. It was a true smile from the heart. I was so happy to have him compliment me.

We spoke for a little while after that. He was my first friend since I was so shy. That thought went through my head as I smiled and bade goodbye.

But that was the only time we ever spoke. I later became engaged to Prince Eric, so my parents kept me away from all boys other than the prince.

I saw my friend at social events, but we exchanged nothing more than hello.

Then he disappeared from the public when we were seven. It was only later that I heard from Prince Eric that he had become an adventurer.

We spent just a short time together, but it was still a precious memory for me. I can still clearly remember his carefree smile, something grown up about him despite being only five years old.

But then I met him again after eight years…

“Sophia, you actually agree with me, don’t you? You don’t have to force yourself to go along with something you don’t want to do.”

He tried to hide it behind his glasses, but I could see his ice-blue eyes that seemed to see right through people and the confident smile on his lips.

Arius Gilberto, what in the world were you thinking?! How dare you address me without a title. We weren’t children anymore.

He whispered into my ear. I could feel his breath on me… It was entirely thoughtless of him!

I was now engaged to Prince Eric, the first prince of Ronaudia. If His Highness had seen… Well, considering what Prince Eric was like, he would likely have let it slide with his usual refreshing smile.

Not because he trusted me but because I was just his partner in a political marriage. He had no interest in me.

Duke Victorino was one of the Three Great Dukes of Ronaudia. Ours was the oldest of the three houses, but our power was waning. My marriage to Prince Eric was our one-in-a-million chance. That was what my father stressed, and I was well aware of it myself.

I had no intention of being childish and refusing to do it because it was a political marriage.

Still… I had a sliver of hope that I could enjoy my time as a student at the Academy as my last period of freedom ever.

Obviously, I knew I wouldn't be completely free. There were always nobles of the Victorino faction surrounding me.

Even though my engagement to Prince Eric increased House Victorino's power, I still couldn't neglect relationships with the nobles of our faction. Connections were important within noble society. If I lost the trust of the nobles in our faction, if we found ourselves standing alone, then House Victorino would lose all strength.

But still, even so, and not because *he* said so, I did not think it was right to humiliate people just because they were commoners. Wouldn't that be humiliating our own people? They were commoners too. And 20 percent of the students at the Academy were commoners. Did we have to thoroughly humiliate them for being so? They were our fellow students. Could we not all get along with no regard to status?

"Lady Sophia, is something wrong?"

Rachel's voice brought me back to reality. I was in the cafeteria eating lunch with everyone in the faction. They all seemed satisfied because he had taken the commoner away with him. They were enjoying their food while chatting.

"It's nothing, Rachel," I reassured her.

Rachel was the daughter of Count Cranos, who belonged to the Victorino faction. She was the kindest of the students in my faction and would never lead the group into bullying commoners, unlike the others.

Her presence there was my salvation.

I just...couldn't get his face and what he told me out of my mind: "*It's your responsibility to stop them, isn't it, Sophia?*"

I knew that; I did. But it wasn't just my faction. Many of the noble students had an elitist mentality. He and I were in the minority.

And I had a responsibility to protect my faction. If there was an issue between them and other students, I had no option but to take their side...

"Lady Sophia, you don't seem well, after all," Rachel noted with concern. "Perhaps it's only to be expected with what that boy did...that Master Arius and his indecent behavior."

"I-indecent...?" I couldn't stop my face turning red.

She was right… He crossed a line by doing that! He didn't even know me, yet he goes spewing such nonsense… But I just… couldn't get his face and words out of my mind!

Because I…

"Everyone, I have something to say," I began, and everyone stopped talking to look at me. "Earlier, with Master Arius, I don't condone his behavior, but what he said has some logic. That student sat at our table because she didn't know the rules. If such a thing happens in the future, could we not show them our noble, tolerant hearts instead?"

Everyone sat dumbfounded.

"Lady Sophia… Are you saying we must prioritize commoners over ourselves?"

"Impossible. Lady Sophia would never show favoritism toward commoners."

Those two with their smug faces were Isabella and Laura. They were the ones who led the complaints against that student and grabbed her by the shoulders—and the ringleaders when it came to humiliating commoners.

"Of course not," I replied. "But it has nothing to do with the other person's rank. I am saying I would like you, as nobles, to show leniency and a generous heart."

"Oh, Lady Sophia, you are *too* kind!"

"I could not agree more! In fact, I believe it is our obligation as nobles to educate those ignorant commoners."

They didn't have any ill will toward me, but they did believe it was only natural to look down on commoners.

"Yes, that is also one of our obligations, but I believe it's important for us to be merciful," I continued. I was certain my words didn't reach their hearts.

That was the most I could do. I couldn't go so far as to oppose my group to protect other students. But having done that, my heart still felt heavy. Was it really the right thing to protect them? For the faction?

"*Sophia, you actually agree with me, don't you? You don't have to force yourself to go along with something you don't want to do*."

Oh, his face and his words…they wouldn't leave.

What I *truly* wanted was…

Stats
Sophia Victorino (Age 15)
Level: 14
HP: 51
MP: 75
STR: 34
DEF: 33
INT: 50
RES: 42
DEX: 35
AGI: 34

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I was in a vast room with a high ceiling. Twelve dragons, each over thirty feet tall, jostled together. They were those so-called Ancient Dragons. With fangs and claws of gold and scales as hard as metal of every color, the dragons all unleashed their breath attack as they charged, and—

I was on the final floor of the Dragon's Palace, a hard dungeon on the opposite side of the continent from Ronaudia. The Dragon's Palace was the most difficult of the hard-difficulty dungeons, and I'd gone through it once four years earlier with Grey and Selena.

I dodged the dragons' breath and slipped through the horde, using two swords gleaming with wicked light to finish each one off, one by one. They disappeared in poofs, leaving behind nothing more than magic crystals. I finished all twelve off in about five minutes.

"Right. Next is the final boss," I breathed out loud.

A set of massive double doors was at the end of the final floor. I opened the door and was greeted with the sight of a space several times larger than the previous one. In the center was a gigantic dragon that made the Ancient Dragons from before look cute in comparison. This was the final boss of the Dragon's Palace: Red Dragon King.

"Come on. You react too slow," I taunted, speeding up as I moved out of the fire breath's line of effect before it could be unleashed, though it could change its aim in the process. I closed

the distance between us while dodging the attack by a hair's breadth, slid myself under its massive body, and slammed both of my blades into it, my momentum taking me along the floor as my swords sliced open its stomach.

"Well, that's not enough to defeat you now, is it?" I stated.

As planned, the red dragon was still alive. Having whiffed with its metal-melting inferno breath, it attacked this time with its claws and fangs. It moved faster than you'd expect with a body that large, but it was still too slow to deal with me.

I circled to the back of it before it could face me and got in another hit from behind. Even with that, it was still breathing. I rushed up its body and took a flying leap, where I rammed my blade into the underside of its jaw.

With that, the dragon finally disappeared in a poof, and a massive magic crystal and loot appeared in its place.

Love Academy had taken on the setup of an RPG that had gotten the axe for being too old-fashioned. It would be more accurate to say that the otome world ends with the Royal Magic Academy in the capital and the region around it. Everything outside that was 100 percent an RPG world.

The Ronaudian government protected the cloistered world of the Academy, and the love-brained students there lost themselves in the world of the game.

It feels pretty surreal when you realize that, doesn't it?

I didn't plan on inheriting the chief minister role, but I did promise my father I'd attend the Academy for three years. Eric was a good guy anyway. There was a chance the other love interests and the protagonist of Love Academy were good people, too, and I planned to find out.

Classes ended at three in the afternoon. After class let out, I teleported to the Dragon's Palace. I could teleport to most places because I'd gone with Selena and Grey around the world and registered teleportation points in all the different areas.

Even after starting classes at the Academy, I was still adventuring since we were free to do what we wanted in our spare time. I'd left the party because I didn't want to force them to make accommodations to suit me, hence going solo into the dungeons.

Part of me just wanted to see how far I could get on my own.

It had only been fifteen years since I'd reincarnated here. There were probably loads of people stronger than me. If you looked at it another way, I could still aim higher.

I was confident I could handle the first extreme dungeon right now, even on my own, but it was all over if I failed while running solo—I needed to proceed cautiously.

Going through the Dragon's Palace got me used to solo combat. I could handle those fights fine. I planned to try out an extreme dungeon.

"Eh, should probably leave things there for today," I reasoned. I used the teleportation pad in the dungeon to go outside. Then, I used my own teleportation magic to travel to a town with a Guild. I planned to exchange my magic crystals and loot and get something to eat.

Teleport meant I could go to any town I'd registered, and I'd decided to go somewhere where I'd met the people before.

The Guild was overflowing with adventurers. Clocks had just ticked past six in the evening, but there was a two-hour time difference between there and Ronaudia, meaning it felt like eight to me. Adventurers were in the pub located in the Guild, drinking and being rowdy.

"Ah, it's Arius. Here at the same time as always, I see."

"Hey Gale. And that's because I don't wing it like you do."

The person who called out to me was A-rank adventurer Gale, a fierce-looking man with a scar on his cheek. He was quite a bit older than me, twenty-eight possibly, but we had an easy time talking to each other.

This town, Carnell, was one I visited five years earlier when we were exploring Guney's Great Labyrinth. We stayed there for about three months.

All the adventurers I met then were good-natured people. They were easy-going when they talked to me then, even though I looked like nothing more than a ten-year-old uppity brat at the time. A big part of that was because I'd been with Grey and Selena, but there were plenty of other people who tried bullying me in other towns we went to before Carnell because I was a kid.

Well, I just shut them up by showing how strong I was.

There was an open seat at Gale's table, so I sat without waiting for an invitation. "Besides, it's nearly curfew," I continued.

“I wouldn’t make it if I didn’t come at this time. Master, bring me whatever food and drink you want, so long as it has a lot of meat.”

The man I called Master was the same person running the dining establishment branch of the Guild five years ago.

“Curfew?” asked Gale. “What do you mean? You got a girl or something?”

“No, nothing like that. Just personal circumstances.”

I hadn’t told the other adventurers I was attending the Royal Magic Academy. They didn’t even know I was the son of Ronaudia’s chief minister. That was because I’d registered as just “Arius” rather than “Arius Gilberto.” Even Ronaudia’s nobles and the others at the Academy hadn’t realized the SSS-rank adventurer Arius, who completed extreme-difficulty dungeons with Grey and Selena, was the Arius Gilberto. Nonetheless, they knew I was an adventurer since I hadn’t attended social events for eight years.

Arius wasn’t an uncommon name, and I’d asked my parents to pretend they knew nothing if someone asked them if I was the SSS-rank adventurer Arius.

Normally, there was no way a parent would hide the fact that their son was an SSS-rank adventurer, but things could get messy if people found out I was Chief Minister Darius Gilberto’s son. I’d have to greet the royals and nobles whenever I went somewhere and make appearances at social events—I had no intention of wasting my time on anything so pointless.

“Hey, Gale, I’m going to exchange my magic crystals. Pay for my stuff when it comes,” I asked as I gave him a gold coin and went to the Guild’s reception counter.

“Welcome, Arius. I imagine you have plenty of magic crystals today too. Please take them out once you’re in the storage room. They won’t all fit on the counter.”

That was Imelda, one of the Guild employees I met five years ago.

“If you can’t get the money together for these by the time I leave today, I don’t mind picking it up tomorrow,” I replied. Imelda wasn’t surprised when I pulled out huge amounts of magic crystals from my Inventory. I’d done something similar five years ago when going through Guney’s Great Labyrinth.

“I can’t say I’m surprised at this point, but… The number and quality of crystals you bring each time is just…”

Every day, I traveled to the last floor of the Dragon's Palace, defeating monsters for about five hours straight. The monsters of the Dragon's Palace were stronger than the ones in Guney's Great Labyrinth, so they gave out higher-quality magic crystals. I also spent a long time getting the monsters to respawn so I could fight them again, meaning I had well over 500 crystals.

***

I returned to the table with Gale and the others to find my food and drink already there. I chowed down on the mountain of meat while washing it down with cool ale.

"Master, I'd like seconds. And a refill of ale," I requested.

"You know, Arius, I always wondered how much you could eat, and you still seem to have the appetite of a growing boy. You're fifteen, right? An old man like me can't eat all that," commented Gale.

"What are you talking about? You're only twenty-eight. And an adventurer's body is their wealth. Eat up," I conveyed.

"Nah, I'm fine getting my nourishment from my ale. Anyway, Arius, Jessica came to the Guild today. She's finally back after her long trip."

"Jessica? She's still based in Carnell then, I take it."

Jessica was the only adventurer in Carnell five years ago who picked a fight with me. It was technically true I silenced her with a show of strength because she was coming at me, but saying it like that made me feel bad.

She was fifteen years old five years ago, making her twenty now. She must have grown up a bit. I remember she was a complete child back then.

"Come on, Arius. What's with that weak reaction?" asked Gale.

"That's just how it is. All that happened was she came at me five years ago." I shrugged.

"That's what you're saying? She's always been a pretty girl, and now she's quite the beautiful young woman. But you're good-looking yourself, so maybe you've got your pick of the litter anyway."

"What are you on about? Our relationship isn't like that."

After settling things five years ago, Jessica still bothered me whenever I came to the Guild, but not trying to pick a fight or anything. It was a hassle, but it was just two people who knew each other interacting.

Which reminded me that she forced me to register her for Message. She'd sent me several messages like, "*How are Grey and Selena?*" and "*Which dungeon are you going into right now?*" None of it was ever anything that important. I usually just responded with "*Fine*" or the dungeon's name.

"Hey, Arius… You're sure you're not just actually… Eh, never mind. You were never one for lying. Now I'm starting to feel bad for Jessica," uttered Gale.

"Seriously, why are we talking about this?" I sighed.

"Jessica seemed like she wanted to see you when I mentioned you were in town."

"Yeah, she probably thinks I'm with Grey and Selena. Tell her I'm on my own." She admired those two, after all.

"It's not that. I already told her you're on your own. She was still excited about seeing you."

"I doubt she is. If she was, why'd she leave rather than wait for me? She was probably disappointed when she learned Selena and Grey won't be coming and then left."

"You clearly don't understand women. She didn't want you to see her covered in grime from her long trip. I bet she needed time to spruce herself up."

I was well aware that I didn't understand women. Not that I wanted to hear it from Gale, who was single at twenty-eight despite making decent money as an A-rank adventurer.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, the Guild doors burst open with a bang, and a girl with ash-gray hair cut into a bob strolled in. In her blue breastplate, the beautiful girl—no, I couldn't call her a girl at that age anymore—the young woman could make an appearance as the protagonist's rival.

Even if we could debate whether "girl" or "woman" was most appropriate, there was no debating she was gorgeous.

"Hey Jessica," I greeted. "Long time no see."

She was taller than five years ago and had grown more around the…uh…well, she had just grown more. Jessica was still in her adventuring gear despite what Gale had said about her going

to change. I knew he'd misread things. However, her sword and armor did shine like she'd polished them.

"Arius? Is that really you?" she replied.

It wasn't all that surprising she'd be shocked. I'd grown even more than her since I was ten. I was now over six feet tall and more muscular. Regardless, I always had a slim muscular build no matter how much I trained, maybe because I was a love interest.

"Yep. But unfortunately, Grey and Selena aren't with me," I relayed.

"Gale already told me. But seriously! Why didn't you tell me you were back in Carnell? I would've come back sooner if you'd sent me a Message."

"It wasn't the sort of thing you needed to know. Besides, I've never sent you a Message first, just replied."

"Yeah…I know," she uttered, sounding disappointed.



Gale jumped in at this point. “Come on, Arius. Don’t be so cold. Jessica’s working hard to catch up to you. She even finished a hard dungeon.”

“G-Gale! What are you on about? That has nothing to do with him!” she yelled.

I couldn’t figure out why Jessica was so flustered. “Huh, did you go through Guney’s Great Labyrinth then?” I asked.

“No, I haven’t tried the Labyrinth yet. We finished a hard dungeon called Vistelta’s Gate.”

Well, Guney’s Great Labyrinth was the most difficult of the hard dungeons. It’d be rough if that was the first hard dungeon they tried. “Even so, if you finished a hard dungeon, that means you must be S rank now,” I pondered.

An adventurer’s accomplishments determined their rank. Completing a hard dungeon was a significant enough achievement to raise someone to S.

“Yep, I am. But it’s not because I’m working hard to catch up to you or anything! I’m…still nowhere near to catching up to you.”

I became an SSS-rank adventurer three years ago after completing my first extreme dungeon with Grey and Selena. There were only ten SSS-rank adventurers in the world, which meant that on top of having achieved something worthy of going up, you needed to defeat an existing adventurer and take their place in the ranking.

Obviously, I did defeat an SSS-rank adventurer; it was kind of a default win.

“Eh, it doesn’t matter anyway,” I replied.

“What? What do you mean it doesn’t matter?” demanded Jessica with a pout. Even after five years, that part of her hasn’t changed.

“Well, it doesn’t matter what the reason is for that. You made it to S rank through your own strength. I think you should be proud of how hard you’ve worked.”

“Arius… Yeah, yeah, you’re right!” She smiled, her cheeks turning pink for some reason. Well, she was a bit of a pain to deal with when she was in a bad mood. Better for her to be in a good mood.

“Anyway, Jessica, considering how you’re acting, I have to ask, did you need me for something?” I asked. “And take a seat; who

likes standing and talking… Uh, there aren't any open." All the seats at the table were filled by Gale, his party members, and me. "Well, you're not alone anyway. Maybe we should move to another table."

An adventurer had come into the Guild, following Jessica with a grin. She was a Beastwoman—a girl with cat ears—wearing black leather. She looked about the same age as Jessica.

"M-Marcia! When did you get here?" asked Jessica. It seemed she hadn't realized the girl had come in and seemed to panic.

"Hey, Jessica, is he that Arius you're always talking about?" questioned Marcia.

"Y-yeah, but promise me you won't say anything *unnecessary*."

"Don't worry, I get it." Marcia turned to me. "Nice to meet you, Arius. I'm Marcia Espell. I'm an S-rank adventurer and in a party with Jessica. I've heard *loads* about you from her. But don't worry, Jessica, I won't say anything unnecessary."

"Liar! You're trying to imply something right now!"

I couldn't believe how much of a fluster Jessica was in. Had she been talking bad about me or something? "Anyway, looks like I don't need to introduce myself." I stood up. "Gale, let's get drinks again sometime."

"Sure thing. You go spend time with Jessica. I'm not so indelicate a man that I'd stand in the way of young love."

"G-Gale! What are you saying?! Arius and I don't have that sort of relationship," retorted Jessica.

Gale seemed to be going off and making his own assumptions, and what he said definitely *was* indelicate.

***

I invited Jessica and Marcia to move to an open table with me.

"Food and drink are on me today," I offered. "We're celebrating you moving up to S rank, Jessica. You can order whatever you want, too, Marcia."

"Thanks, Arius," uttered Jessica.

"Ooh, Arius, as generous as always. All right, Master, bring me your most expensive bottle! And one each of all your food, starting from the most expensive stuff!"

I had no idea what Marcia meant by “as always,” but she did seem like the bubbly type.

“Hold on, Marcia!” exclaimed Jessica.

“No, it’s fine,” I interjected. “But, Marcia, make sure you eat everything you order. It’s an insult to the person who made it if you don’t.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I have room for all this and more.”

They brought out enough food and drink for three people, and the table was completely covered in dishes due to Marcia’s hefty ordering.

“Marcia… Arius, I’m sorry,” proclaimed Jessica.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I responded, also eating the food and drinking ale. Someone might have wanted to say something since I’d eaten plenty at Gale’s table, but I really could keep on going. “Anyway. What did you need from me?”

“Uh, well, it’s just…been so long since I’ve seen you. I just wanted to talk. You’re not with Grey and Selena anymore, right? Did you leave their party?”

“Yeah. Right now, I’m going solo into dungeons since I have to return home to take care of things. I couldn’t force them to work around my personal circumstances.”

“Oh…so you’re alone. It’s a shame you can’t see Grey and Selena. If you did, then I’d… Wait. Did you just say you’re going back home? You’re leaving?!” She panicked again for some reason.

“I think you misunderstood. I’ve already gone back home. I Teleport to dungeons every day.”

“You teleport every day? Why would you waste MP like that?”

The Teleport spell was tier ten and consumed a lot of MP. The further the destination, the more MP it used, so I understood Jessica’s confusion. It wasn’t a problem with the amount of MP I had.

“There’re things I’m doing in my hometown. That’s why I go to dungeons in the evening.”

“Oh… You seem busy.” It looked like she wasn’t expressing herself very well, which wasn’t like her.

“Jessica, if you want to say something, just say it.” I felt like I had said that before.

“Huh? N-no, there’s not anything…”

Marcia grinned. “You get sloppy when it matters most, Jessica. Although, it’s kind of cute.”

Okay, but more importantly, someone should be saying something about how all the food Marcia ordered had disappeared while Jessica and I were talking.

“Marcia! You’re talking too much!” jumped in Jessica.

“Jessica, honey, just leave this to me.” Marcia’s grin widened. “Arius, you’re the youngest person ever to become an SSS-rank adventurer, right?”

“Yeah. What about it?” At twelve, it really was the youngest entry in history, but the whole “youngest” aspect didn’t feel real to me since I was reincarnated.

“Hm. You don’t seem to think it’s a big deal.”

“I don’t. It’s got nothing to do with age. Come on, Marcia, what scheme are you trying to butter me up for?” She had to have some ulterior motive for bringing this up out of nowhere.

“Oh, come on. There’s no scheme. It’s not like I’m thinking of sponging off you or anything.”

“Marcia! You’ve already sponged plenty off of him!” Jessica protested.

“Okay, okay. Let’s move on from that topic. Arius, I have a request. Would you join our party?”

“What?! Marcia! What are you saying?” Jessica jumped to stop her, but Marcia didn’t seem inclined to listen.

“We’ve gone up to S, and, sorry to brag, but we’re pretty strong. I want to see how strong an SSS-rank adventurer is.”

There was some sense to her logic. You didn’t see people with such admirable thought processes often.

“Right now, I’m trying to see how far I can get on my own. I have no intentions of joining a party,” I replied.

“Could I ask you to make a special exception? We are celebrating Jessica making S rank, after all.”

“Marcia! Arius has his own things going on. You’re just bothering him with your demands!” interrupted Jessica. Was she trying to look out for me? She treated me worse before; maybe she’d matured.

“Jessica, do you want me to join your party?” I asked.

“I can’t… I mean…yes. I’m sorry, I just…I do”

She was serious about wanting to get strong. Jessica admired Selena and Grey, and being like them was her goal.

“All right. I’ll join your party then, just for this one weekend,” I agreed.

“Wha… Really? Are you sure?” Jessica’s expression burst into happiness.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m not in such a rush that I can’t adventure with you for two days.”

Rushing was a no-no when it came to tackling an extreme dungeon solo. Besides, Jessica had been B rank five years ago, and now she’d reached S rank. I wanted to reward someone who worked that hard.

The problem was whatever Marcia was scheming.

“Marcia, I’m not going to be having you doing something ridiculous,” I put forth. “I’m only going to party with Jessica.”

“Whatever could you mean, Arius? I have no intentions of doing anything.”

She played dumb, but I could tell what she was thinking. It seemed she was under a mistaken assumption; Jessica and I didn’t have that sort of relationship.

“Right, it’s nearly my curfew,” I said. “I have to get back. Master, the bill, please.”

It was pretty expensive because Marcia ordered so much, but it wasn’t a problem with all the money I earned from my solo adventures.

“What do you mean by curfew?” asked Jessica.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I have to get back early because of things going on back home.”

There was a two-hour time difference between Ronaudia and Carnell. If I was going to make the dorm’s ten o’clock curfew, I needed to leave the Guild before eight. Not that anyone would know if I broke curfew since I used Teleport to go straight back to my room, but it would be a hassle if someone did catch me. I planned to stick to curfew as best I could.

“Arius… Thank you for joining my party!” Jessica expressed.

What was with this meek Jessica? And Marcia was grinning like crazy, too.

“All right, I’m heading out,” I told the group.

“Good night, Arius.”

I left the Guild with Jessica watching me go.

***

I first met Arius when I was fifteen. There was this arrogant kid with my heroes, Grey and Selena, and Arius was that kid.

But...things are a little different now.

The person I admire the most now, more than anyone, is... I-it's embarrassing, and I'll never admit it to him, but it's Arius.

Let me start over from the beginning. First things first: why I admire Grey and Selena so much.

My parents run an apothecary in a town called Trinica. They used to be adventurers, and they started teaching me to fight when I was little. However, it wasn't like I was seriously thinking about being an adventurer when I was a kid. I only started really wanting to get stronger when I met Grey and Selena. I doubt they remember, but they saved me. No way they'd remember. I'm just one of the many people they've saved.

A horde of Kobolds attacked Trinica when I was a kid. Trinica's a small town with about 2,000 people living in it. A little town like that can't even hold out for long against a horde of monsters.

My parents, being former adventurers, ran right out to fight and defend the town. I was only eight then, and they told me to hide in the house. But being the dumb kid I was, I decided I was going to fight too. I took my practice sword and rushed out of the house.

I heard human screams and Kobold growls. The adults were on the walls that protected the town, so I rushed up the stairs to join them.

At the top, I saw so many Kobolds scaling the walls to attack us. They looked like beasts with their fangs bared. I was terrified.

The adults were fighting desperately, but it was only a matter of time before the Kobolds breached the walls.

And then they came: Grey and Selena.

"Ya'll've done a good job."

"We'll take everything from here."

They made their heroic appearance by air using Fly and wiped the Kobolds out in an instant. I can still see it all clearly.

I heard later that they rushed out the moment they received the support request from Trinica's Guild without even hearing any of the contract's conditions.

From that day, Grey and Selena became my heroes and the goal I strived toward. I wanted to be like them so much that I threw myself into sword and magic training.

It was on my fourteenth birthday that I became an adventurer. Even after becoming an adventurer, I wanted to hurry up and be strong like them. I always stood at the front, whether when fighting monsters or diving into dungeons. I never retreated, no matter how powerful the monsters were.

I lost party members like that; they claimed they couldn't keep up with me. And yet, I still worked myself to the bone and managed to reach B rank in just a year.

Right after that, I headed toward the town of Carnell. There was a hard-difficulty dungeon there, Guney's Great Labyrinth, known to make or break adventurers.

All I could do at first was look at them from afar. It wasn't like they asked for my admiration or anything; they were like gods, sitting out of reach up in the clouds.

For some reason, there was this uppity, silver-haired boy with them. That was Arius. How could some weakling almost certainly younger than me be with Selena and Grey? I'd worked *so* hard to get to B rank by age fifteen. There was no way someone younger could be any stronger than *me*.

Thinking back, I was pretty full of myself, wasn't I?

This arrogant kid probably just knew Grey and Selena through someone. It seemed even more unfair to me that he was with them just because he'd had that connection, and I got even angrier.

That's why I started picking a fight with him. And in the end? It was no contest.

I hated it, but I had to admit he was strong. He was absurdly strong, that was true, but it wasn't just that either. I learned that he'd been working so much harder than I had. I could understand how much effort he'd put in because I'd been scrambling to work hard, too.

He'd done crazy training every day since he was little. Even after joining Grey and Selena's party, he didn't rely on them when

fighting. However, he didn't look desperate like I did, and that was because he thought this was all just the way things were for him.

I readily accepted I could never compete with him. But, at the same time, I wanted to be like him.

It's embarrassing, and I'll never say it to him, but Arius became another hero of mine—another target to aim for.

I was happy because I could talk to him every day at the Guild. Those days didn't last long, though. The three of them finished Guney's Great Labyrinth and were about to leave Carnell.

As they were heading out, I made Arius register me for Message. I'd make up some reason to send him a Message, but he never started any conversations with me.

In the end, I realized Arius didn't want to keep talking to me.

I threw myself into growing even stronger so that he would finally acknowledge me, and I became an S-rank adventurer five years after we parted ways.

But, three years before I managed that, Arius became an SSS-rank adventurer, same as Grey and Selena. No matter how hard I worked, I could never catch up to him. At that rate, he would never acknowledge me…

Just when I started to think that, Arius suddenly returned to Carnell!

N-not that I was happy to see him again or anything!

He was pretty random about sending Messages. He didn't even tell me he was back in Carnell. I just wanted to give him a piece of my mind.

Besides, it wasn't like he…

"You made it to S-rank through your own strength. I think you should be proud of how hard you've worked."

He complimented me on my training. And…he would even join my party!

"Arius… Thank you for joining my party!"

I did just about manage to be straight about that, but, oh, what do I do? I'm so happy; I feel like I'm going to burst into a grin! It'd be way too embarrassing if Arius saw me like that, and Marcia would *definitely* say something she shouldn't.

And so, I desperately resisted the urge to smile.

***

CLASS the following morning was sword fighting. Swordplay classes were necessary despite it being the Royal Magic Academy because most noble students attended the Academy rather than the school for knights.

Our sword class was held jointly with Class A, which I was in, and Class B of the first-year students. Class B had Sophia, whom I had that little run-in with yesterday, and another Love Academy love interest.

By the way, I keep my glasses on for sword class.

Our classes went to the open space of the training grounds, over 500 square feet. Sophia noticed me and glared in my direction. Her entourage also started whispering secretively among themselves.

“Arius, it looks like something happened between you and Sophia yesterday,” Eric observed, looking at Sophia. It didn’t feel like he was trying to criticize me. He still had his usual refreshing smile on.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Someone I know had an altercation with her and her group. I stepped in to help calm the situation and was enchanted by Sophia’s beauty.” It wasn’t the sort of thing I bothered hiding, so I was straight about what happened. That said, the part about being enchanted by her was a lie.

“So it seems. There was a rumor you tried to kiss her.”

“Onlookers just misinterpreted what was happening. I just stared into her eyes.”

“Arius, you dastard! Lady Sophia is Prince Eric’s fiancée!” Ragnus, one of Eric’s followers, exclaimed as he barged into the conversation.

Well, he *was* the son of a duke, so he was too important to be called just a follower.

“I am aware of that, of course,” I replied cooly. “I can’t help it if her beauty enchants me. Regardless, I’ll apologize if Eric’s angry.”

“How dare you! You should understand your place by now!” Ragnus was getting even more worked up, but Eric’s smile remained cordial.

“Ragnus, I’m not bothered about it if Arius didn’t try to kiss her. Although, Arius, I would also appreciate a little more caution from you. She is my fiancée, after all.”

“Of course. I’ll be more careful.”

Eric’s engagement to Sophia was just a political move. Even in the game, he didn’t have strong feelings for her. If he really were enamored with her, there would be no space for the protagonist to come in.

“But, Your Highness—”

“Ragnus, class is about to begin,” Eric announced, cutting off Ragnus.

The teacher arrived, and we began our sword training. Our class split into boys and girls, each using half the training area as they started stretching. We then picked up our swords from the equipment room; the boys used real swords with dulled edges, and the girls used wooden swords.

We were now in our second week; last week, we learned basic swings and stances.

“Right, break into pairs and start sparring,” barked the teacher.

It took everything I had to keep myself from shouting, “Hey, hold up just a sec.”

Were they really trying to say we were done with basics after just that first class? Anyone who’d mastered the sword knew how important foundational training was.

We were getting way ahead of ourselves. It would be one thing if the students were at a decent level already, but most of these students’ sword arms were a joke.

“Hey Arius, normally I’d spar with His Highness, but let me show you what it means to be a knight!”

Guess I was going to be sparring with Ragnus. Not that I remembered agreeing to be his partner.

He stepped toward me, striking with everything he had. I parried. I focused on parrying because holding back could give me bad habits.

“Dammit! Why can’t I land a hit?!” he demanded.

I didn’t need to show him how strong I was, so I spent the entire time parrying. I did think he was slightly smarter when he dropped his sword all by himself after getting too worked up.

“Impossible… There’s got to be some mistake…”

I left Ragnus dazed where he was and sat at the edge of the training area. At least he wasn’t spouting some tedious claims that

I must have been cheating or something.

"You're Arius Gilberto, son of Ronaudia's chief minister, correct?" called out a boy approaching me. He was full of confidence and just over six feet tall. I gave him a once over and noticed his brown skin, hair so red it seemed to be on fire, and a trained, muscular physique.

He was the love interest in Class B, the international student Vern Lenning, Third Imperial Prince of the Great Granbride Empire.

"I saw how you handled that sword earlier," he ventured. "You're no amateur. I suppose that's what I should expect from the son of two former SS-rank adventurers."

Out of all the love interests in the game, Vern's stats were second only to Arius's. And he was the best swordsman.

"You seem to know a lot about my parents, Prince Vern."

My parents had completed an extreme-difficulty dungeon with Selena and Grey, meaning from an accomplishments perspective, they had the qualifications to be SSS rank. Still, they retired before challenging other SSS-rank adventurers.

"It only makes sense I'd research the important people of the country I was studying in. But that's not what's important right now. Spar with me, and don't hold back like you were before."

He towered over me, looking down with a daunting attitude. It was a typical pattern of behavior among tall guys.

"Sure, I don't mind," I conceded.

At any rate, I was taller. I stood and met his gaze, and, maybe out of competitiveness, he casually rose slightly onto his toes and smirked.

Eh, it might be a good experience, learning how to deal with an imperial prince a little too in love with himself. Ever since I'd become an adventurer, I'd experienced over and over dealing with people who mocked me for being a child. The right answer was to just shut them up with force, right?

"Let's do this, Arius!" proclaimed Vern.

He didn't come at me as recklessly as Ragnus had. Instead, he closed in slowly and swung with everything he had when he put himself where he wanted to be.

I parried, and the second attack followed immediately. Another parry followed by a third swing. One more parry and the

cycle continued.

“I thought I told you not to hold back!” Vern stopped and glared at me.

“I am not holding back, Prince Vern. I’m fairly certain I’m very seriously parrying your attacks.”

“Cut the crap! Attack me!”

Just like in the game, Vern’s stats and level were high, but only high for a student at the Academy. If he were an adventurer, he’d be C rank at best. If I seriously attacked him, it’d end in an overkill, even with a blunt sword.

But holding back could make me develop bad habits, and I didn’t want that.

I guess in situations like this…

“Fine. I’ll attack,” I replied.

“Just what I want— Wh-what the?!”

Vern was stammering because his sword suddenly shattered into a billion pieces.



“My former SS-rank adventurer parents did train me, after all,” I asserted.

Even an A-rank adventurer could shatter a sword. It probably wouldn’t be that weird for the son of former SS-rank adventurers to be able to do the same. However, shattering a sword without hitting the person holding it took a bit more fine-tuned control of mana.

“Arius, you…” Vern looked between his blade-less sword and my face, “you are amazing! There’s no one like you in Granbride!”

Well, that was a direct compliment. Guess he was a pretty good guy after all.

“You exaggerate, Prince Vern,” I stated. “I’m sure plenty of people in the Empire could do that.”

“I mean, even so… Arius, I’ve got to admit, you’re pretty strong.” He held his right hand out toward me, probably for a handshake. I didn’t like this sort of action-hero-esque energy, but I had no choice. I took his hand. “Let me start over with a real introduction. I’m Vern Lenning. It’s nice to meet you, Arius. Drop the ‘Prince’ from now on and just call me Vern.”

“All right, Vern. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

The surrounding students were all focused on us. I didn’t care what others thought of me, but I honestly felt a tiny bit uncomfortable with Vern’s energy coming on so strongly.

I noticed Sophia and her entourage were among the students watching. Eric had joined the group from the periphery and was talking to her.

“Should’ve expected as much from Arius. Prince Vern is one of the most powerful students in the Academy, but Arius is literally of a different level,” I heard him say.

“Your Highness…” she responded.

Eric was a good person, but you couldn’t let your guard down around him. Sometimes, one of his casual comments, or rather a comment he pretended was casual, had a force behind it. If anyone in Ronaudia realized I was an SSS-rank adventurer, it’d be him.

But let’s set that aside for now. Even just looking on from the sidelines, Sophia and Eric did really look good together.

Not that an adventurer like me had anything to do with the world of Love Academy, but I did know how good a person Sophia

was. I didn't want to see her get jerked around by those love-sick idiots until she turned into a villainess.

But I did have a question.

Sophia, why are you glaring at me?

***

I was reincarnated into the otome game *Love & Magic Academy*, dubbed "Love Academy" by fans. And I think...I was reincarnated as the protagonist, Milia Rondo.

I can't say for sure because my memories about my previous life, other than memories about the game, are all pretty hazy. I can't even remember who I used to be...

I do remember liking the game, but I feel sort of...sad whenever I think about it. I might have played it with someone very important to me, but I can't remember who that person was. All that comes back is that sadness.

Maybe this whole reincarnating-into-a-game-world and even my memories from my past life are all delusions—but I don't think they are. My memories of Love Academy are just too vivid.

There is a way I can check if they really were delusions. Thanks to my magical talent, I was accepted into the Royal Magic Academy, where Love Academy is set. If things happen as I remember them, it'll prove my memories from my past life are real.

I encountered my first game scene after arriving in the capital from my hometown in the countryside. On my way to the Academy, I saw a little boy get hurt after dodging a noble's carriage. I healed his wound with the Heal spell.

"Thanks, miss!" exclaimed the boy.

"No thanks necessary. I'm just glad you're all better," I replied.

I confirmed that Eric Stallion, First Prince of Ronaudia and one of Love Academy's love interests, saw it all happen. I was wearing my uniform for the Academy, which let him know I was a student there.

When I arrived at the Academy, a handsome blond-haired, blue-eyed boy called out to me.

"Everything about you screams 'country girl.' What a lame haircut."

He was Eric's twin brother, Zeke Stallion, the Second Prince of Ronaudia. He was another of the love interests, and my favorite according to the memories of my past life.

"I imagine that's true," I admitted. "I am, after all, a commoner country girl. Nobles of the capital couldn't possibly know what it feels like to be me."

"I-I didn't... I mean, that wasn't..."

Just like in the game, that line threw Zeke off-kilter. Zeke is an assertive type of good-looking guy, but he gets flustered the second he realizes he hurt the other person.

"Prince Zeke, who is that girl?" came a voice.

"Ah, Sasha, she's...just someone I bumped into."

The voice belonged to a beautiful girl with neat rose-gold hair and aqua eyes. She was Sasha Blancard, daughter of Marquess Blancard and Zeke's fiancée.

"Really? *Really*?" She stared at Zeke. The setup is that she really does love Zeke.

"Really," I interjected. "We just ran into each other. There's nothing between us. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to sort through my belongings."

Milia, the protagonist of Love Academy, is a *tsundere* character. In the beginning, she's indifferent toward her love interests. They're not used to that kind of treatment, and it draws their attention to her.

Zeke looked at me, flabbergasted, but smirked at the last moment. That was Milia and Zeke's first scene together. And yeah, it went exactly as I remember it.

Now, I'm certain my memories of my past life are real.

I still feel sad when I remember the game, though. I loved it in my past life. It's a miracle to get reincarnated into the world of a game you love. I'll keep acting out Milia from the game; I don't want to destroy this world I love so much.

Events unfolded after that just as I remembered them, and I carried them out with cool detachment.

In the second week of my life as a student, it was time for the event that would introduce me to the third love interest, Arius Gilberto, son of the chief minister.

I went to the Academy's library, the scene where we would meet. There was something in class that the studious Milia didn't

understand, so she visits the library for research. There, she meets Arius, another person who enjoys studying. It's the clichéd scene where they reach for the same book, and their fingers overlap…

"Noelle, that's the wrong formula. Didn't I tell you to use this one?"

"Oh, you're right. I can always count on you to catch that sort of thing, Arius!"

Arius was tutoring a plain-looking girl with glasses and a braid.

This scene was *not* in the game. And Arius, he seems… different. He's the brainy, glasses type. Kind, quiet, and shy.

The Arius talking to the girl wore glasses, but he did not look shy at all. He was well over six feet tall, and you could see the muscles even through his uniform. And, I don't really know how to explain it, but he had this presence that was totally different from the game.

Obviously, he stood out; he was attractive enough to be a love interest, but this Arius was the exact opposite of quiet and kind. He seemed full of himself, egotistical, all "look at me, look at me."

But…why? Why does Arius look like a completely different person from the game? In my confusion, I accidentally met his eyes.

"You there," he called out. "Why have you been staring at me?"

His ice-blue eyes seemed like they could pierce through anything, and he had a confident smile on his lips. It was like…he realized I was just acting out Milia's role. Also, I felt like I'd seen that expression somewhere before. But I couldn't…I couldn't remember who made it.

"Uh, I'm sorry!" I yelled.

"Hey, wait!"

I brushed off his hand as he tried to stop me and ran from the library. Even though I didn't know why, I felt almost ashamed for some reason.

While returning to my classroom from the library, I remembered the next event. Milia is walking down the hallway in a daze as she remembers touching Arius's hand when she bumps into a noble student and gets dragged into a mess.

The instigators are Sophia, the villainess and Eric's fiancée, and her entourage. Eric happens to pass by where he sees Milia

standing up dauntlessly to the nobles, increasing his affection toward her. Their relationship deepens when he rescues her from the nobles.

“Ah, sorry…”

“Wait just a minute, you commoner!”

My shoulder bumped into a noble girl, and she went to start something with me. So far, it has played out like the game. But I realized something was different.

“Isabella, Lady Sophia asked us to show commoners our merciful hearts,” cited one.

“You’re right, Laura. But Lady Sophia is just kind; it’s not like she prohibited us from doing anything.”

“That is true… There is no way Lady Sophia would prioritize commoners over us, after all!”

These lines weren’t in the game.

The girls, who looked like nobles in every possible way, stood blocking my path. This was when the villainess would appear in the game, but I didn’t see her anywhere.

“So, commoner, I’m going to teach you what happens when you are rude to nobles,” proclaimed one. They grabbed my arms and marched me out into the courtyard.

This also happened in the game, but Sophia still wasn’t showing her face.

There was one other thing that was different from the game. I didn’t know why, but Arius had chased after me from the library and was watching me.

Stats
Milia Rondo (Age 15)
LVL: 22
HP: 92
MP: 128
STR: 51
DEF: 50
INT: 74
RES: 73
DEX: 52
AGI: 50

***

I felt someone staring when I was talking to Noelle in the library. That person was a girl with pure-white hair and indigo eyes. That's right. This is when the protagonist, Milia Rondo, meets Arius. But I did not intend to go along with the Love Academy scenes.

"You there. Why have you been staring at me?" I projected, intentionally sounding cold. I wanted to see how she'd react.

"Uh, I'm sorry!" she yelled and dashed off. Something was odd about that reaction. Milia in the game would have gotten angry then.

"Hey, wait!" I chased after her, my curiosity growing. It was easy enough to catch up to her since I knew about the next scene that followed right afterward. I decided to watch from a distance.

"Ah, sorry..."

"Wait just a minute, you commoner!"

This was the start of the scene where Milia bumped into a noble girl's shoulder.

"Isabella, Lady Sophia asked us to show commoners our merciful hearts," prompted one of the noble girls.

"You're right, Laura. But Lady Sophia is just kind; it's not like she prohibited us from doing anything," stated the other.

"That is true... There is no way Lady Sophia would prioritize commoners over us, after all!"

This scene shows Milia standing up to Sophia; then Eric steps in to mediate. But Sophia was nowhere to be seen as her entourage dragged Milia out into the courtyard. Did that mean Sophia wasn't involved like in the game? I'd get an answer faster if I just asked her directly.

I went to the Class B room for the first-year students.

"Ah, Arius! Did you come to see me?" proclaimed the rough-edged, brown-skinned boy with hair like fire. He flashed me a smile of white teeth.

That's right, Vern was in Class B with Sophia. "No, I'm not here for you," I answered. "I need to talk to Sophia."

I walked right past Vern and went to Sophia's desk. The lovelorn girls in the room were focused on the two of us, probably because we were the subject of rumors spreading around the Academy.

“What are you doing, Master Arius?” Sophia asked.

“Sophia, drop the ‘Master.’ I don’t care if you just call me by my name.”

“*You* are the abnormal one for addressing everyone without their titles!” Her face turned red for some reason as she gave me an accusatory look.

“Whatever, anyway, some girls from your faction just dragged a commoner student into the courtyard. Do you know anything about that?”

“They…what?!”

Sophia rushed out of the room.

I went to chase after her, but before I could leave the room, Vern projected, “Hey, Arius, don’t you think you’re being a bit cold to me? We are best friends, after all.”

When exactly did we become best friends? I couldn’t stop the wry smile from appearing on my face and stated, “Then are you coming or what?”

He was the third prince of the Granbride Empire. Maybe he could be useful.

“Of course I am! I take it something’s going down, what with Lady Sophia running out of here.”

He was actually pretty sharp. “Yeah, something like that. Just don’t go and do anything, all right?”

“I understand, my friend!” He showed his pearly whites.

He wasn’t a bad guy. A bit much, but not bad.

When we arrived at the courtyard, we saw the girls of Sophia’s faction surrounding Milia. Sophia hurried over and broke through them.

“Lady Sophia!” they cried, guilt written all over their faces. Only the two who first attacked Noelle looked unbothered.

“Lady Sophia, we’re educating a commoner,” started Laura.

“Exactly. You said you understood that, Lady Sophia,” continued Isabella.

“I did say something along those lines…”

As the daughter of Duke Victorino, Sophia was obligated to protect the girls of the families in their faction, even if those girls were in the wrong. This could be a turning point for Sophia.

I had no interest in the love story scenes, but I was the one to spur Sophia into action—I was responsible for seeing this out.

“Well, that’s what this is, so we’ll just continue,” remarked Isabella. “We’re making sure that commoner knows where she belongs. Now, know your place and pay for running into me, a noble!”

The noble girls forced Milia to the ground.

“Let me go!” she cried. “I’m sorry for running into you, but I’m not the only one who did something wrong!”

Milia did resist, but it was still one against many. They pinned her to the ground. Her face was covered in dirt. Isabella sneered and raised her foot to stamp on Milia’s head.

“Stop, Isabella!”

That was the first time I’d ever heard Sophia issue a command.

“Lady Sophia?” Isabella asked incredulously. “Are you saying you’re siding with the commoner? That can’t possibly be true.

“It can’t be,” countered Laura. “Our kind Lady Sophia would never give *us* an order.”

“Isabella, I told you to stop! Do you understand what you’re about to do?” Sophia glared at the two. “This isn’t about whose side I’m taking. As nobles—no, as *humans*, you should be ashamed of your actions!” Her expression showed her resolution. “I *will not* permit you to harm other students!”

Sophia’s change took Isabella and Laura aback, but they still attempted to resist.

“Lady Sophia, are you saying you are abandoning us? Members of your faction?”

“That can’t be true. Nothing more precious to a noble than their fellow faction members.”

They were trying to invoke the faction for their defense, but those words weren’t going to resonate with Sophia now that she’d made her decision.

“The faction is irrelevant if you intend to act in a way that shames you as humans. In fact, if I allowed such behavior, it would harm House Victorino’s name. If you continue, you will no longer be a member of House Victorino’s faction!”

As Sophia wasn’t the head of the House, she didn’t have that authority, but the fact that she announced it in front of her members showed how firm her resolution was.

Isabella and Laura realized this. Their faces went pale, and they fell silent.

“All of you, take your hands off that girl this instant.”

“Y-yes, Lady Sophia!” chimed the girls holding Milia down as they jumped back from her.

Sophia walked over to Milia, not caring that her own clothes were dirtied. She put her arms around Milia to help her sit up before bowing her head low. “Members of my faction have committed a grave insult against you. You have my sincerest apologies. I swear on the name of House Victorino that I will make amends.”

Sophia, the daughter of a duke, was bowing to a commoner. That alone shocked the noble girls, driven silent by the realization of just how great their mistake was to have forced Sophia to apologize on their behalf.

“You don’t have to… You… You didn’t do anything,” muttered Milia, flustered by Sophia’s heartfelt apology.

And that reaction from Milia seemed off to me.

“I am responsible for the actions of my faction,” Sophia urged. “I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Sophia Victorino. May I ask your name?”

“O-of course. Milia Rondo.”

“Well then, Miss Milia. I promise I will compensate you for what happened here. Today, however, I must speak with them. If you’ll excuse us.” Sophia locked her eyes on the noble girls again.

Just as I was starting to think I wouldn’t need to step in with how things were going, I heard a voice.

“Well, things seem to have taken an incredible turn.” It was Eric. He appeared on the scene with his refreshing smile.

“Prince Eric…” murmured all the noble girls simultaneously, including Sophia.

Eric was originally a key character in this scene, so it made sense he’d be there. Yet, things went entirely differently from the game.

Sophia walked up to him. “I must apologize to you, Your Highness. By acting in a way that shames themselves as humans, the people of my faction have also brought shame to you. Please, punish me however you see fit.”

There was no hesitation in her, only resolution. When she said punishment, she probably considered the possibility that he would end their engagement. Isabella, Laura, and all the other noble girls didn't seem prepared for that possibility, but who cared about them anyway?

"Eric," I began. "I know I shouldn't be stepping in right now, but could I say one thing?"

And here I thought I wouldn't need to step in. I also knew no one asked me for my help, but I was the one who compelled Sophia into doing this. I had a responsibility to keep the worst from happening.

"Master Arius…" twittered all the noble girls, working up differently from when Eric made his entrance. I was the one who stirred things up with them at lunch, after all.

"Those girls acted on their own without Sophia knowing anything. I saw them dragging the other girl into the courtyard. When I told Sophia, she rushed right out here. I saw everything after that. Sophia didn't do anything wrong."

"What he says is true. Prince Eric, I can confirm Lady Sophia did absolutely nothing wrong," confirmed Vern.

"Prince Vern!" shrieked the girls, bursting into another flurry at the entrance of the third love interest.

Their reaction implied they were wondering why Vern was even there. The answer was, of course, that I brought him along as insurance. Eric was a good guy, but in some ways, it was impossible to know what he was thinking, and this scene was the one in the game that solidified Sophia as the villainess, which meant the more people we had to testify on her behalf, the better.

"I'm a little surprised to see you here, Prince Vern, but I can see the two of you mean to protect Sophia. There's no need; I never doubted her." He responded with his usual uplifting smile. "Those of you who harmed that girl, I'll leave Sophia to handle. I never felt the need to step in and deal with things as a prince."

The noble girls sighed in relief at Eric's words, but it didn't mean they were forgiven.

"That's good then," I stated. "All right, Vern, we should leave." Sophia couldn't have her talk with the girls with us there. "Oh, before that, Milia, was it? Wait just a sec."

I moved over to Milia and cast Cleanse and, just in case, Heal. Her clothes and body mended themselves, like nothing ever happened. People were always surprised when I silent cast spells, and they were again, but Milia seemed the most shocked this time.

Probably because it was her first time seeing me use magic.

“Huh…? How can Arius cast Heal?” she whispered so quietly that I didn’t catch everything. It didn’t really matter anyway, but there was definitely something off about Milia.

Eric, Sophia, and even Vern were completely different from what I imagined based on the game, but that wasn’t the only thing with Milia. She felt off, like she was just someone acting out Milia’s role. I had no proof, though, since I’d only just met her.

Anyway, with that done, I decided to leave.

“Master Arius, wait, please!” Sophia called to me.

“I told you, stop with the ‘Master.’ What do you want?”

“Thank you for protecting me. I just…I don’t understand why you would be kind to me. And…I’m not sure if it’s right for me to say this, but I have an obligation to take responsibility for the actions of my members. It doesn’t make sense that I’m the only one who goes unpunished.”

She was looking straight at me. This seemed to be the real Sophia. The fact that she was a good person hadn’t changed since she was a child, but she had grown stronger.

“You don’t need to thank me,” I stated. “I just did what I wanted and told the truth. The whole ‘taking responsibility for your faction’s actions’ thing makes sense as an organization, but I don’t care about factions.”

“But A— Master Arius, you’re a noble as well. You can’t survive if you have no concern for factions.”

Heard that? She nearly called me Arius without an honorific but stopped herself.

“Doesn’t matter to me. My parents haven’t built up a faction. Besides, it’s pretty unlikely I’ll inherit my father’s title.”

“What? But you’re the eldest son of House Gilberto, aren’t you?”

“I am, but my parents said I can do whatever I want, and I have a younger brother and sister.”

Sirius and Alicia were born not long after I became an adventurer, and they were turning nine this year. I'd only seen them when they were born and every year on their birthdays, and I've lived in the dorm since returning to the capital. I did see them once before moving into the dorm. All in all, I still didn't feel like an older brother to them.

"It's unlikely you'll inherit your father's title? Arius, this is the first I've heard of this," asserted Eric, joining the conversation with his energizing grin, but his eyes weren't smiling. "I'm going to be in trouble if you don't become my chief minister. I can't handle all the difficult issues alone as king."

"You'll be more than capable, Eric. If you end up overburdened by some chance, just make someone else your chief minister."

"Apologies to your siblings, but I'm not considering anyone but you for the position."

Uh, well, I wasn't really suggesting them for the job. Still, saying that to me made no difference. I wasn't interested in being the chief minister.

"This conversation is getting off track. If there's nothing else you want to ask me, Sophia, I'll be leaving," I directed at her.

"No, that was it... I'm sorry for keeping you here."

She was glaring at me again for some reason. Maybe it was because, from her perspective, I had too much freedom.

But being bound by status and factions? No, thank you.

***

"***YES***, *that is also one of our obligations, but I believe it's important for us to be merciful*."

I made that statement that seemingly protected commoner students, and it put distance between me and my faction. It was what it was; I didn't say anything incorrect.

But the result was this.

He appeared in my classroom with ice-blue eyes that seemed to pierce through me.

"Some girls from your faction just dragged a commoner student into the courtyard. Do you know anything about that?"

"They...what?!"

There was distance between me and the faction, but I hadn't thought they would ignore me and go off on their own like that. But, if what he said was true, then I could not simply say, "Well, I had no idea."

It would be like abandoning my responsibilities as Duke Victorino's daughter.

I ran as fast as I could to the courtyard and found everyone in the faction surrounding another student. I felt dizzy when confronted with that reality.

"What in the world are you doing?!" I cried, and they all looked at me with guilt—all of them except Isabella and Laura.

"Lady Sophia, we're educating a commoner."

"Exactly. You said you understood that, Lady Sophia."

I struggled for words because I was the one who tolerated their behavior.

"Well, that's what this is, so we'll just continue," asserted Isabella. "We're making sure that commoner knows where she belongs. Now, know your place and pay for running into me, a noble!"

They all forced the commoner student to the ground.

"Let me go!" she cried. "I'm sorry for running into you, but I'm not the only one who did something wrong!"

She resisted, but they forced her down. Isabella sneered at the girl's dirt-covered face and went to stamp on her head.

Did I really intend to stand there and watch? Then, his words came back to me: "*Sophia, you actually agree with me, don't you? You don't have to force yourself to go along with something you don't want to do*."

I didn't want to hear it from him—I already knew!

"Stop, Isabella!"

That was the first time I'd ever issued a command to my faction members.

"Lady Sophia? Are you saying you're siding with the commoner? That can't possibly be true," Isabella asked.

"It can't be," expressed Laura. "Our kind Lady Sophia would never give *us* an order."

Isabella and Laura tried to goad me, but I had no intention of backing down.

“Isabella, I told you to stop! Do you understand what you’re about to do? This isn’t about whose side I’m taking. As nobles—no, as *humans*, you should be ashamed of your actions!” Saying that would likely cause everyone in the faction to leave me. “I *will not* permit you to harm other students!”

“Lady Sophia, are you saying you are abandoning us? Members of your faction?”

“That can’t be true. Nothing is more precious to a noble than their fellow faction members.”

“The faction is irrelevant if you intend to act in a way that shames you as humans. In fact, if I allowed such behavior, it would harm House Victorino’s name. If you continue, you will no longer be a member of House Victorino’s faction!”

I knew perfectly well I didn’t have that authority, but I could not allow them to get away with this.

“All of you, take your hands off that girl this instant,” I commanded.

They hurriedly released the commoner student.

I moved over to the girl and helped her sit up. “Members of my faction have committed a grave insult against you. You have my sincerest apologies. I swear on the name of House Victorino that I will make amends.”

It was only right that I would lower my head to her. She was harmed because I hesitated.

“You don’t have to… You… You didn’t do anything.” For some reason, the girl with pure-white hair and indigo eyes was flustered.

I had to admit, even as another girl, she was incredibly charming, utterly different from a girl like me, with nothing charming about her at all.

I introduced myself, and she told me her name was Milia Rondo. I promised her I would make things right and was planning on speaking to the girls of my faction.

“Well, things seem to have taken an incredible turn.” It was then that Prince Eric appeared. It only made sense he’d hear about the incident, what with all the fuss it caused.

I had no intentions of hiding, so I bowed my head to him and apologized. As his fiancée, my foolish actions brought shame to him as well. I was prepared to accept whatever punishment he gave. If that meant the end of our engagement—a huge blow to

House Victorino—then so be it. That was how extreme a sin my members had committed, and me, for standing by and doing nothing.

"Eric. I know I shouldn't be stepping in right now, but could I say one thing?"

But then he appeared in front of me when I'd already decided.

"Those girls acted on their own without Sophia knowing anything. I saw them dragging the other girl into the courtyard. When I told Sophia, she rushed right out here. I saw everything after that. Sophia didn't do anything wrong."

Why…? Why would he say those things to protect me? He'd even told me what Isabella and the others were up to. I couldn't understand why he would do that. He'd even brought Prince Vern, who also stood up for me. Was that for me as well?

"I'm a little surprised to see you here, Prince Vern, but I can see the two of you mean to protect Sophia. There's no need; I never doubted her," divulged Prince Eric. "Those of you who harmed that girl, I'll leave Sophia to handle. I never felt the need to step in and deal with things as a prince."

My faction members were relieved, but what were they thinking? It didn't mean they were forgiven.

"That's good then. All right, Vern, we should leave. Oh, before that, Milia, was it? Wait just a sec," Master Arius asked as he approached Milia.

He silent cast spells as he did, but that wasn't what I was bothered about.

"Master Arius, wait, please!" As he went to leave, I called to stop him. After all…

"I told you, stop with the 'Master.' What do you want?"

"Thank you for protecting me. I just…I don't understand why you would be kind to me. And…I'm not sure if it's right for me to say this, but I have an obligation to take responsibility for the actions of my members. It doesn't make sense that I'm the only one who goes unpunished."

That girl was hurt because I stood by and did nothing. My burden of sin was significant.

"You don't need to thank me. I just did what I wanted and told the truth. The whole 'taking responsibility for your faction's

actions' thing makes sense as an organization, but I don't care about factions."

He smiled like it didn't matter. It wasn't a refreshing smile like Prince Eric's; it was a confident smile, like he could see into your soul. I found myself captivated.

"But A—Master Arius, you're a noble as well. You can't survive if you have no concern for factions." He kept telling me to stop using an honorific. I nearly called him "Arius," but I couldn't do it in the end. I couldn't bring myself to switch to a first-name basis after everything.

"Doesn't matter to me. My parents haven't built up a faction. Besides, it's pretty unlikely I'll inherit my father's title."

That unexpected statement threw me off balance. He was the eldest son of House Gilberto, wasn't he?

"I am, but my parents said I can do whatever I want, and I have a younger brother and sister."

No noble would ever renounce their right to inherit their family's title, but he seemed serious. I couldn't fathom what he was thinking.

"It's unlikely you'll inherit your father's title? Arius, this is the first I've heard of this," Prince Eric interjected. "I'm going to be in trouble if you don't become my chief minister. I can't handle all the difficult issues alone as king."

"You'll be more than capable, Eric. If you end up overburdened by some chance, just make someone else your chief minister."

"Apologies to your siblings, but I'm not considering anyone but you for the position."

That wasn't because His Majesty told Prince Eric to do so. I believe it was because he honestly did trust Master Arius. I didn't understand why, and it made me jealous.

"This conversation is getting off track. If there's nothing else you want to ask me, Sophia, I'll be leaving," concluded Master Arius.

How could he maintain that confident smile? Or did he really just not understand anything? No, I knew he wasn't some ignorant fool. That meant he had decided to renounce his title, knowing full well what that meant because he had no interest in status. And compared to him...I lacked determination.

That vexed me, and I found myself glaring at him.

***

WHAT? *Why did Sophia bow to me?*

Milia Rondo is the protagonist of Love Academy, who stands boldly against Sophia and her entourage even when surrounded by them. Eric comes in to save her, and their feelings for each other grow. Sophia becomes jealous and sets off down the villainess path… That's how that scene should've ended.

But in a complete turn from how the game was supposed to go, Sophia ended up saving me. Then there was Arius and Vern, who weren't even supposed to be involved in the scene. What did it mean that they were there?

There were too many differences from what I remembered.

There was Arius, a completely different person from the game, with a smile that seemed to say he saw through people. Based on their conversation, it sounded like it was Arius who changed Sophia.

And Arius in the game couldn't use the Light element spell Heal.

Are my memories of my past life figments of my imagination? Or is this place different from the game because it's actually real life?

I don't know what's right. I'm so confused.

Just as I was about to leave the courtyard, Arius whispered to me, "Milia, do people ever tell you that you tend to make assumptions about others? The thing is, the people you're dealing with are humans too. They sometimes do things you never expected."

He had a confident smile and ice-blue eyes that seemed to see through me. I've seen that expression before; I know I have. But I just can't remember…who it was.

"Don't convince yourself you know what sort of people they are," he continued. "If you don't think about why someone might do something, you'll never be able to understand them."

He was right, I imagine. It was just…someone told me the same thing a long time ago. I think. Even though it couldn't

possibly be true, these vague memories of this person I couldn't remember seemed to line up with Arius.

"I appreciate the warning! And thank you for what you did before. I'll be going now!" I replied.

"Hey, you—"

What is this feeling...?

After spitting out a hasty goodbye without pausing, I fled.

Chapter 5: Jessica and Her Party's Strength

I met the overbearing Vern two weeks after starting classes at the Royal Magic Academy, and there have been many events with Milia and Sophia since.

Every day after class, I ate with Jessica and Marcia while Gale and his party pestered us. It was fine; I was still progressing steadily in the Dragon's Palace.

I was again on the final floor of the Dragon's Palace, taking on the final boss after forcing the trash monsters to respawn repeatedly. I didn't repeat the fight with the final boss because this run spawned with only one monster. My goal was to take on an extreme dungeon solo, and you never encountered just one monster at a time in those. Fighting just one monster wouldn't be good training for me.

Triggering the monsters to continue respawning helped me focus on my ability to fight continuously for an extreme dungeon.

And so, it continued that way until the weekend. I had promised I'd join Jessica's party for two days, so I went to the Adventurers Guild in Carnell on Saturday morning and found Jessica and Marcia chatting with other adventurers.

However, something was weird.

"Sorry, Arius. My party members are insisting they come along. Do you mind if the rest of the Silver Wing members come?"

In addition to Jessica and Marcia, there were three young men and one more young woman. I even knew some of them.

"I don't mind if there are more people, but I don't plan on looking out for all of them," I answered. I wasn't good at teaching. Protecting, I could do at least.

"No, that's fine," Jessica confirmed. "Thank you, Arius! Right, let me introduce you to everyone."

The members of the S-rank party included Jessica, a fighter; Marcia, a scout; another fighter, Allen; their tank, Jake; an offensive mage, Mike; and a healer, Sarah.

In this world, you learned each spell or skill on its own, meaning there was no concept of jobs or classes. It was normal for adventurers to form parties and each member to take on a specific role.

That being said, the composition of the members of Jessica's party changed quite a bit from five years ago. I only recognized Mike and Sarah; Marcia wasn't present five years ago.

Well, each person grows at their own pace and aims for different things. It wasn't uncommon for party members to swap out because of that. Jessica probably had her own thoughts on it.

"Huh, so you're Arius, the SSS-rank adventurer? Rumor has it you made it to SSS rank by riding on Grey and Selena's coattails," taunted Allen, showing hostility out of nowhere. Were there really still people who thought that?

"Allen!" exclaimed Jessica. "Don't be rude to Arius. He's joining our party because I asked him to."

"Listen to Jessica. You shouldn't be saying things like that just because you're hung up on their relationship," teased Marcia.

"H-hey! What are you on about? I just want to reveal this guy for what he really is!" countered Allen.

Uh...did he seriously mean that? Because I was quickly losing interest if he was bringing Love Academy energy into the dungeon. I wasn't planning on wasting these two days.

"I have my doubts about Arius's abilities, too. There's no way someone can be SSS rank at his age," added Jake, joining in the offensive. This started a heated argument with Allen and Jake on one side and Jessica and Marcia on the other.

It wasn't even like I cared what other people thought of me. Could they do this somewhere else, somewhere where I wasn't?

"Um, Arius, sir... I'm sorry," began Sarah, looking apologetic. Thing was, she had a history, and she didn't stop Jessica's rampage five years ago.

"You know, I'll admit I'm annoyed, but I am the youngest here. You don't have to bother with politeness and calling me 'sir' or anything," I offered.

Jessica was the youngest member of the Silver Wing. Everyone was in their twenties.

Mike gave an awkward smile. "We have to show you respect, sir. We know how strong you are."

He also had the same history from five years ago as Sarah.

The argument seemed likely to continue for a while, so I used Evaluate on everyone because I had nothing better to do. Their levels and stats were what you'd expect for S-rank adventurers.

"Arius, sorry that took so long," Jessica professed. Did they finally reach some conclusion? In the end, Allen and Jake would still be joining us. "I won't let them complain anymore. Do you think you can deal with them?"

Uh, their attitudes did not make it look like they would behave, but whatever. "What dungeon do you want to go to anyway?" I pivoted. "I'm happy to do whatever you're doing."

"With you in our party, there's no way we're doing anything but Guney's Great Labyrinth. You're working through that one solo anyway, right?"

Nope. I was working on the Dragon's Palace, but mentioning the name of that even more difficult dungeon would cause even more problems, so I didn't correct Jessica. "You guys are going through the hard-difficulty dungeon Vistelta's Gate, right? If that's the case, we should head to around floor 150 of the Labyrinth," I suggested instead.

I'd already completed Vistelta's Gate and knew how difficult it was. Guney's Great Labyrinth was one of the more difficult of the hard dungeons. If they were only in Vistelta's Gate, they'd struggle with the lower floors of the Labyrinth.

"Come on, we've got you, Arius, the SSS-rank adventurer. We should be fine at the lowest stage, right? You know, so long as you're as strong as an SSS-rank adventurer," jeered Allen.

"Allen! If you're going to keep picking a fight with—"

"Jessica, let him say what he wants," I interrupted.

"But…" She looked apologetic, even though it wasn't her fault.

"I believe that if someone wants to pick a fight with me, I'm obliged to give it to them," I returned.

"You're pretty funny, aren't you!" yelled Allen, already in a stance primed to unsheathe his sword at any moment.

"You're not seriously dumb enough to draw your weapon in the middle of the Guild, are you? I don't mind taking you on, but we're heading to a dungeon anyway. I'm sure you don't mind having our match there."

Obviously, no one would support Allen then. His whole party gave him accusatory looks, and he backed down.

“Tsk, fine, whatever.”

“And about going to the lowest floor. I don’t mind taking you if you sign an official statement saying you’re fine with dying. I’ll only ask you and Jake to write one; I’ll take responsibility for the other four and protect them.”

“Perfect! Hey Mike, give me a pen and parchment! Jake, you’re writing a statement, too!”

“But… Ugh, fine,” Mike groaned.

This world used regular paper and even printing presses, but contracts and spell scrolls were created with the traditional pen and parchment.

“Stop, Allen. This could all be water under the bridge if you apologize,” pleaded Jessica.

“Be quiet. A man can’t back down at this point!”

What she said just fanned the flames more.

In the end, we agreed to head to level 200, the bottom of Guney’s Great Labyrinth, directly using Teleport. The Silver Wing had teleportation magic, but only Jessica, an all-rounder, and Mike could use it. Initially, Mike didn’t want to burn his MP before entering the dungeon, so I planned to take them all. However, Allen refused to accept my help, which forced Jessica and Mike to teleport in the end.

Mike had the right idea, and I felt like I was being forced to take part in a conversation I couldn’t care less about.

The monsters’ levels in the Labyrinth quickly jumped once you got past floor 50. Floor 50 showed an average level of 300, floor 180 was 400, and the final floor was 500. Jessica’s party members had levels ranging from the late 200s to 300s. Taking on the final stage at their level was nothing more than foolhardy.

And level wasn’t the only problem. Powerful opponents known as Named Demon Lords spawned on the final floor of the Labyrinth. They had wicked special abilities that made them more powerful foes than other monsters of the same level—and loads of the same Named Demon Lord spawned at the same time.

“First, don’t ever step outside of my Impenetrable Defense. I can’t guarantee you’ll live if you do,” I cautioned. I cast the

combined-element tier-ten spell Impenetrable Defense when we arrived at the teleportation point on the 200th floor.

“Yeah, that’s fine, but…Arius, I know there’s a lot I could say here, but, uh, why aren’t you wearing armor? And even those nasty-looking swords… They look like cursed weapons,” mentioned Jessica.

At the moment, I was dressed in a shirt and pants and holding two swords that gleamed with an evil light and, yeah, they had a super powerful curse on them. All the other gaudy accessories I was wearing had debuff effects, too.

“Don’t worry about my equipment. I’ve been fighting with this style for training.”

My current goal was to complete an extreme dungeon on my own. For that, I curbed my offense and defense while in a hard dungeon, aiming to make it like fighting monsters in an extreme dungeon.

Even if I curbed my strength, just holding back would make me develop bad habits. Instead, I used cursed weapons and debuff items to reduce my offensive power and stats and didn’t wear armor to modify my defense.

Well, my build was still overkill for Guney’s Great Labyrinth since I’d put it together for the Dragon’s Palace.

“Cut the crap, Arius!” Allen yelled angrily. “There’s no way you’re debuffing yourself on the final floor of Guney’s Great Labyrinth! It’s a bluff, obviously!”

He was making a fuss, but I ignored him. I moved my Impenetrable Defense and Jessica’s party with it, throwing them into the burial chamber.

The first monsters to spawn were twelve Beelzebubs.

But here’s my question: If they’re monsters with unique names, how can multiple spawn simultaneously?

Anyway, I killed four of them before they could even attack. The party couldn’t even see what I did since I moved so fast, but I wasn’t planning to slow down for them.

I narrowly dodged the wave of mana the remaining eight Beelzebubs unleashed and instantly killed them.

“Y-you got to be kidding…” stammered Allen, turning obedient after I showed him my true strength.

I mean, it's not my true strength since I had all the debuffs from my equipment.

"All right, Allen, Jake. If you still doubt how strong I am, would you like to try fighting these on your own?" I called out.

I was of the opinion that I was obliged to accept a fight if someone picked one with me—and I wasn't planning on showing mercy to those people.

Well, it might be different if I was dealing with a girl.

"…Yeah," Allen began with renewed confidence. "If you can kill them instantly like that, then I can take them *easy*."

"Allen, come on!" protested Jake. "Arius, I can see how strong you are now. Let him off the hook!"

"Jake, you coward!"

Their alliance was breaking down. I grabbed them by the collars and dragged them out of the Impenetrable Defense. "All right, I won't step in at all. Give it your best, you two."

"H-hey, Arius! W-wait!"

"Jake, get ready!" barked Allen.

"Arius, please! They're going to—" Jessica tried to leap forward to help them, but I grabbed her arm. "Arius! I know they messed up, so I won't ask you to spare them, but…those jerks are still my party members!"

Jessica could still be childish in some ways. For better or for worse, she was always straight with you; it was why I didn't hate her.

"I know," I replied. "And I'm not planning on killing them. I'm just seeing if they have the courage to open the door to the next burial chamber. If they don't open it, I'll pummel them. If they do, I'll show them hell."

"Which means…you really won't kill them?"

The door to the next burial chamber was right in front of them. If they opened it, it would spawn a group of over level 500 foes that could kill them in the blink of an eye. If they opened it, they would die without a doubt. If they didn't open it, they'd have to accept they were cowards.

"You're screwed up, Arius, but it'll be a good lesson for Allen and Jake." Marcia grinned.

"You're screwed up, too. But I'm aware I am, so it's not a problem," I added.

“Oh, I’m aware, too. Hey, want to bet on whether they’ll open the door? I bet one gold they do it.”

“I’m not taking that bet. There’s no way they have the guts to open it.”

We knew they could hear us. They’d absolutely open it if we worked them up.

“Sh-shut it! Of course, I’ve got the guts!”

“A-Allen! Stop!”

“Lay off it, Jake! Like I could back down now!”

Yep. The idiot settled it.

He opened the door, and beyond it spawned ten angel-like demons with black wings: the Fallen Angel Lucifer.

Seriously. If ten spawn at a time, it’s not a unique name at all, is it?

The Lucifers were instantly on top of Allen and Jake, mercilessly slashing with their massive, black greatswords.

But I did promise Jessica I wouldn’t kill them. I cast a second Impenetrable Defense at the last possible second.

“Oh no, looks like I went and did something I shouldn’t’ve,” I wondered out loud. “Should I drop my spell?”

The black greatswords were approaching right before their eyes, emitting overwhelming mana. Allen’s eyes were wide with terror, and he couldn’t say anything. And Jake had wet himself.

But I was a messed-up person. I wasn’t about to let them off with just that. “Make your decision in the next ten seconds. Either you fight the Lucifers on your own, or you apologize to me. I don’t care which one you choose. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five—”

“W-wait! Arius, I’m sorry!”

Oh, come on, breaking under this little pressure?

I instantly obliterated the ten Lucifers.

“Arius… You are the one person I’d never want to end up enemies with,” muttered Jessica. She was staring at me, but it was fine.

“It’s just the kind of person I am,” I responded.

“I know. And…I can’t say I hate it.” Her face turned red for some reason.

Jessica. What about all that just happened could possibly make you blush?

***

ONCE we finished the mess with Allen and Jake, we went to floor 150, as I originally suggested. In the meantime, Sarah had used Cleanse to clean Jake's clothes.

Jessica and her party were all level 280 to a little over 300. Marcia was the highest level at 312, and Jake was the lowest at 285.

They went against floor 150 monsters, which were around level 300, and came in large groups. It was the appropriate level of difficulty for them. Or really, it was the level where they'd have a rough time if they didn't give it their all.

"I'll control the numbers. You guys handle what's left over," I ordered.

Whenever we entered a burial chamber, I'd assess the monsters and eliminate all but the number their party could handle. I initially didn't count Allen among the party's resources because he'd lost heart when he learned how much stronger I was. Maybe he knew this wasn't the time for that because he recovered surprisingly quickly.

Eh, he might be human garbage, but he was still an S-rank adventurer. Once he recovered, he took fighting the monsters seriously. He fought with a greatsword using a style heavy on offense, but he would never have gotten to S rank if he used just force. Allen paid attention to defense, equipping himself in full plate and supplementing with skills.

After fighting the fifth wave of monsters, I sat beside Allen as Sarah healed him.

"I'm just thinking out loud to myself, but Allen seems to think too much of himself; he's misreading his enemies' strength. If he can't evaluate the difference in strength between him and his opponents, he'll never make it through Guney's Great Labyrinth."

The Silver Wing showed they could successfully move through hard dungeons because they were in the process of doing Vistelta's Gate, even if it was one of the easier hard-difficulty dungeons. But the monsters that appeared on the lower floors of Guney's Great Labyrinth were heavy hitters—making a mistake when judging their power could end up in a total party wipe.

“I think too much of myself…? Yeah, that might be the case. I had no chance against the monsters on the final stage and still couldn’t see how much stronger you were…”

I was surprised how readily he accepted it. Maybe the regular Allen was an honest guy who just went weird and stood up to me to show off to Jessica. If he were a total idiot, he never would have been in Jessica’s party in the first place.

“More out loud thoughts I’m having: Allen needs to choose between throwing in the towel or continuing to struggle to close that power gap. That’s the difference between people who get stronger and people who don’t,” I pondered.

If he didn’t know how, he could ask someone who did know. If his pride wouldn’t let him defer to others like that, then that was it.

“I…I want to get stronger, no matter what it takes. I know I can’t ask for anything after all that’s happened, but Arius—no! Sir! Please teach me how to fight!”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t be asking. It’s kind of like, way to insist on what’s best for you and no one else.” I didn’t need to look out for him, and he was aggressive with me initially.

“You’re right… All I ever do is demand whatever’s best for me…”

“Well, I promised Jessica I’d adventure with her for this weekend. I can’t help it if you happen to see how I fight. And I need to teach Jessica’s party how to work with her.”

“Sir! You’ll really—”

“Man, Arius, you just cannot be straight about things, can you? But, Jessica likes—”

“M-Marcia! I told you not to blab!” interrupted Jessica.

In actuality, I was just doing what I thought was necessary. Marcia shouldn’t be jumping to conclusions.

We spent those two days tackling the 150th floor of Guney’s Great Labyrinth. It took that long because I was pointing out every single flaw I saw in the party. I mean, the Silver Wing was already getting passing marks just by surviving floor 150, but there were several problems if they were going to keep going further in.

First, their level of skills and magic was too low, and the precision when they used them was sloppy. And, if I had to say it,

their teamwork wasn't great—they couldn't anticipate their companions' moves at all.

I could handle these basics since Grey and Selena's training had been intense.

In the end, I taught Jessica and everyone else since they needed to coordinate better. Naturally, I picked on Allen's flaws the most since he was soft in all different sorts of ways. I also reevaluated what I thought of Jake; he didn't seem motivated to go higher, so I didn't think he would grow much more.

"Arius, sir, I am very sorry about before! And I am grateful for your forgiveness. Thank you for everything!"

It was Sunday night, and I was having dinner with the Silver Wing in the Adventurers Guild as a sort of wrap-up. Even the other adventurers were surprised by Allen's change in attitude. It wasn't even just because some of them saw Allen and me get into it Saturday morning—he'd always been full of himself.

At the moment, the Silver Wing was the only S-rank party to make Carnell their base of operations, and all the A-rank adventurers were older than Allen. That was why Allen got uppity since he'd made S rank in his early twenties. Gale did mention that.

"Allen, just talk normally with me," I asked. "It feels weird when you sound like that."

"No can do. I owe you a debt for showing me how much of an idiot I was. I would have put Jessica and the others in danger if I'd kept being that dumb."

"Well, that is true. If you don't want your companions to die, then keep that fire you got in you now."

"Yes, sir."

"This sudden change of Allen's makes me uncomfortable too," noted Marcia. "Hey, Master. Get me a refill of ale, and keep that food coming!" She was happy to do things her way, as always.

"Marcia, you think you pulled it off this time, but things won't turn out how you want them to," I cautioned.

"What? What are you on about? I don't understand."

She played dumb, but I knew she was scheming something. Because of her, I joined their party, and probably so I would teach Allen and the others. She also riled Allen up to pick a fight, even when she knew he would lose, to push Jessica and me together.

“Arius, I’m really grateful too. You, um…taught me so much. Thank you. I knew you… Uh, never mind,” muttered Jessica. I could feel her looking at me the whole time.

Compared to the students in the Academy, Jessica was closer in age to me since I died at twenty-five in my past life, but she was still childish in some ways.

I’d assumed she just thought of me as a rival. But the way she acted… I mean, with how obvious it was, even I noticed. If she really just admired me like she did Selena and Grey, then I could let that be—even if it would be embarrassing. But if she thought of me like *that*, then… Well, I had no interest in romance. If it did come to that, I’d just have to give her a clear no.

***

“DON’T *convince yourself you know what sort of people they are. If you don’t think about why someone might do something, you’ll never be able to understand them*."

In that moment…what were those feelings? My heart still feels fuzzy when I think back.

But let’s forget about that for now. I think he was right. I’d decided everyone was just characters in Love Academy; I never tried to imagine what they were thinking.

Even if my memories of my past life are hazy, even if I was reincarnated into the world of Love Academy, that’s got nothing to do with anyone else. Everyone is living their real lives in this world.

From now on, I’ll treat each and every person like an individual human, not as a character of Love Academy. And I’ll stop acting as Milia.

I’m not grateful toward Arius or anything. We just met; he knows nothing about me. It’s so frustrating that he’d say something like that, as if he could see into me.

The following day after the incident with Sophia and the other girls, Sophia came, as promised, to my classroom to apologize. She even brought the noble girls who held me down. Sophia walked up to my desk and bowed her head with no concern for all the people watching.

“Miss Milia, we are so very sorry for what we did yesterday. Our actions disgrace us as human beings. We will accept any

punishment you feel is fitting," said Sophia.

The noble girls with her also bowed their heads, looking sorry.

Yesterday's incident was the talk of the Academy. There were no students who hadn't heard about it. Yet the Academy didn't punish them, and that was because they were nobles and I was a commoner. However, Sophia wasn't happy with how it concluded. I could sense she honestly was prepared to accept punishment.

No daughter of a duke had ever bowed to a commoner before, so students were watching out of sheer curiosity. I didn't like that Sophia was being made out to be the only bad person, that she was the only one being put on display.

"Just wait a second, Lady Sophia," I spoke up. "I am happy you came to apologize, but this is the classroom. Could we talk after class, just the two of us?"

I didn't think Sophia would accept it if I told her I forgave her, so I decided the two of us should talk instead. Students trying to eavesdrop hung around forever, so I invited her to my dorm room instead, despite my tiny commoner room probably resembling a doghouse to a noble like Sophia. If it did, she didn't show it at all.

"Miss Milia, if it means gaining your forgiveness, I will take any punishment… Actually, I know you can never forgive me. Still… please. Punish me as you see fit," she began.

I didn't think she was lying. She honestly and truly wanted me to punish her. It wasn't even like she hurt me herself or ordered the girls to, but she still truly believed she was responsible. She really, really was a good person.

"Lady Sophia, you've apologized over and over. And you scolded the other noble girls. That's enough for me."

"But…that can't possibly be enough to make up for it."

"If that's how you feel, how about you be my friend?"

"Uh… Why?" She was taken aback. It was like she'd never imagined I'd say that.

"I want to be your friend. If we're friends, then we don't have to be all formal and deal with punishments and things, right? Although we might not suit each other well, what with you being a noble and me being a commoner."

"That's not true at all! But…I hurt you. How could someone like that become your friend?"

“Some friendships are born out of fights. Besides, now that I’ve talked to you, I know you’re sincere and honest, and I love that about you.”

They were my honest feelings. I was, of course, grateful that she helped me, but I really wanted to be her friend because I liked how open she was.

“I… Thank you, Miss Milia. If someone like me is good enough, then I would be happy to.”

“Lady Sophia—actually, I should just call you Sophia now, right? Don’t talk about yourself like that. You’re my friend, I love you, I won’t have you putting yourself down.”

“Could you perhaps…not say you love me quite so much? I-It’s making me blush.”

And it was. Her face was bright red.



“Hee hee, Sophia, you’re too cute! Also, just call me Milia, all right?”

“All right, Milia. And if it pleases you to be friends…”

“Yep, it pleases me!”

And that was how Sophia and I became friends. I saw her not as a character of Love Academy but as a person. Thinking about it, it was such a basic thing, but I’d forgotten it.

Once I started looking at the people around me, I could act more naturally as well. The next day, after class let out, I saw a girl from my class carrying a heavy-looking stack of printouts.

“Emma, let me help you with those. It’ll be faster with the two of us,” I offered.

“Thank you, Milia.”

This was another scene in Love Academy. The teacher asked Emma and some other students to carry the papers to the teachers’ office, but the nobles in the group forced Emma to carry them all and left. Zeke, the Second Prince of Ronaudia, saw the protagonist Milia helping, which made him like her more.

But I didn’t care about any of that. I did it just because I wanted to help Emma.

“Here, give me those. I’ll carry them,” came a voice.

“P-Prince Zeke.”

Zeke appeared just as in the game, and Emma’s eyes became heart symbols. In the game, Milia declines his help, but he insists and takes them from her. The scene was supposed to send hearts racing because he was cool for being so assertive.

“Thank you, Prince Zeke. You know, you have some pretty good characteristics, don’t you?” I observed, accepting his help and passing him the papers. The real me liked to be straight up and compliment people for their kind actions.

I then took half of Emma’s papers, and the three of us walked to the teachers’ office.

“I don’t think you needed to add the ‘pretty’ before good,” complained Zeke. “You’re disrespectful.”

“I know. But you’re pretty bad, too. Anyone ever tell you you’re a *tsundere*?”

“What in the world does *tsundere* mean?”

“It means you put on a front, but you’re actually a kind person.”

“Wh-what are you saying?! You really are disrespectful.”

His cheeks turned red. I might have been having a bit of fun. Life at the Academy was enjoyable if I stopped thinking about scenes and characters.

And it was Arius who made me realize it…

But I swear, I *didn’t* want to thank him. Every time I remember his face, those ice-blue eyes that seem to look through you, and that arrogant smile…my heart goes all fuzzy.

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“MASTER Arius, please accept this!”

The moment I arrived at school, someone called out to me. A girl with flaxen hair and blushing cheeks was holding an envelope out to me. Did it contain a letter challenging me to a duel?

I’m joking. Seriously, what the heck was with this clichéd turn of events?

“Have we met somewhere?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m in the same class as Prince Vern. I saw you shatter his sword during sword practice. You’re so cool! Eek, oh, I said it out loud!”

I personally would not call that “having met somewhere.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know you at all. Besides, I’m not interested in romance.” I bluntly refused her. It would be worse to leave her with some hope.

This was the fifth time a girl at the Academy tried confessing her love to me. This wasn’t even the worst instance; with one, she’d just seen my face.

As always, I set myself in normal mode for this week, but I could still feel more eyes on me than usual. There were more looks of curiosity in particular. Last week in sword practice, I shattered Vern’s sword, and then there was the incident with Sophia and Milia. I did a lot to stand out, and people talked about me.

“You’re really popular, Arius. I saw another girl try to give you a love letter this morning. She was pretty cute, too,” observed Noelle when I arrived at the library, her eyes glued to me.

“Was she? Well, I’m not interested in someone who approaches me just because I stood out a bit.”

It wasn't that I wanted to avoid standing out at all. It would be annoying if people learned that the SSS-rank adventurer Arius was Arius Gilberto. However, the adventurer Arius still went into dungeons while I was at the Academy. People thought of the two of us as different people, so it wouldn't be a problem if I stood out at the Academy a bit.

"I see. So, you don't decide on looks alone. That's a bit of a relief…"

I didn't catch the second half of what Noelle said, but she did seem happy for some reason.

In terms of Sophia's entourage, there was definitely a change in their attitude. The table in the back of the cafeteria was still left open for them; perhaps that was a consideration on the Academy's part, but if other students happened to sit there because it was free, Sophia's group wouldn't complain for she would lead them in asking the students there if they minded sharing the table.

None of them continued to gang up on commoner students behind Sophia's back because Sophia had publicly announced they'd be removed from the faction if they did.

Moreover, every morning and after classes let out, Sophia and her group cleaned the Academy. Sophia proposed it as some small punishment for the wrongs they committed. There was the daughter of a *duke* leading other nobles in *cleaning*. It became a hot topic, and the other noble girls begrudgingly complied.

"It's thanks to you, A—Master Arius, that I realized what I should truly be doing. It is difficult to unite everyone, but this too is one of my duties as a member of House Victorino," she told me once when I found her cleaning. As always, she seemed resistant to the idea of saying my name without an honorific.

"I didn't do anything. You changed yourself."

"That's not… Fine. We'll leave it at that."

Then, Thursday came around. We were halfway through the week, and our class was on magic application that day. Unlike our magic technology and magic theory classes, this lesson was about using magic. Which meant I couldn't work on my own thing reading books like normal since it wasn't at a desk.

In the first week of magic application class, they had each student show what spells they could use. The second week was

sparring with the teachers. Based on that, they divided the entire year of students not by assigned class but by magic proficiency level.

Most students could use spells before they even entered the Academy, and being able to use magic was one of the minimum requirements for graduating. Noble families applied money to the problem, hiring private tutors to teach their children magic. Commoners with a talent for magic were the ones who got into the Academy, so they could obviously cast spells.

But there was a huge difference in ability, even if everyone could use magic. We couldn't have a decent class if they didn't divide us by proficiency.

In the game, this class was an event where the protagonist Milia could interact with love interests in other classes since all the love interests in Love Academy were high-specced. Most of the main characters were in the highest group, Group A.

There was First Prince Eric; his twin, Second Prince Zeke; Vern, the Third Prince of the Granbride Empire; son of Cardinal Patelier Marth Patelier; and me, the son of the Chief Minister.

I had met Zeke and Marth a couple of times since I did go to social events until I turned seven when I became an adventurer. In the game, Zeke looked exactly like Eric, other than he seemed a bit rough around the edges and had a dark aura about him. He was the same in real life, even as a kid. Eventually, he became rebellious after being compared to his excellent-in-every-way brother.

Marth had brightly colored hair and androgynous facial features. He was a sort of feminine boy; he even looked like a girl as a child. Even though he appeared mild-mannered, he had a dark heart in the game. This world's Marth also had a dark heart, ever since he was a kid.

Sophia and Milia were also in Group A, like in the game. Sophia, the villainess in the game, would make some move against Milia. Milia would stand confidently up to her, making the love interests fall for her more.

But Sophia wasn't the villainess. She looked like she was enjoying a chat with Milia. Apparently, the two ended up friendly with each other when I wasn't looking.

Sophia had stopped glaring at me every time she saw me, but now Milia was. I could guess why. It was likely because I butted in and said something after her altercation with Sophia's entourage. She just felt off to me, like she was acting as herself. It bothered me that she seemed to be making assumptions about the people she interacted with.

She was very different now, even talking normally to Zeke. She seemed like, I don't know, a perfectly normal student. Everything about her felt different from the Milia of the game, but I wasn't about to make a big deal out of that.

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"RIGHT, I'm going to have you all face off against each other. No weapons, but all spells are open for use, even attack spells. My Special Barrier absorbs damage and converts it into points, so you don't have to worry about hurting your partner. Whoever gets 100 points first wins."

Our magic application class took place inside a magic circle drawn on the ground, but Special Barrier wasn't impervious. It canceled out damage using mana, meaning there was a limit to the amount of damage it could absorb.

How do I know this, you ask? Well, Special Barrier was a spell, and I could use it like I could use any other spell.

The matches kept going, and all the main characters of Love Academy took win after win. It was the obvious result, considering they were designed to have higher abilities than the regular students. True to the plot, Eric had an affinity for Wind, Zeke for Water, Vern for Fire, and Sophia for Dark. Did they give her Dark because she was the villainess?

"Shining Arrow!"

Milia, as you might expect from the protagonist of Love Academy, was skilled with Light magic. She cast the tier-two Light spell Shining Arrow, and the five bolts of light that appeared all struck their target, instantly giving her 100 points. Just like in the game, she had a talent for magic.

"Huh. You're Milia Rondo, yes? You're as incredible as the rumors say, being able to produce five Shining Arrows at once,"

stated Marth. In the game, he also approached her to talk because he was impressed by her magic.

“You’re Master Marth, right? Thank you for the compliment.”

In the game, Milia is a *tsundere* and develops an antagonistic attitude toward Marth, who also uses Light magic. The scene was supposed to be one where they come to acknowledge each other’s skill, increasing their affection for each other in the process, but I didn’t get any sense of that happening now with this Milia. Maybe she wasn’t interested in him because she just brushed him aside and glowered at me for some reason.

“I suppose I’ll have to give my match everything I have, as well,” Marth added. “Please don’t be too hard on me, Arius.”

“Sure, Marth. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Today, we matched to spar, and it was our first time speaking since we started at the Academy. However, he didn’t seem different from when he was a child; he was rotten inside, just like in the game.

“It has. I don’t think I’ve seen you since we were children since you don’t show yourself at social events. I did hear that you overpowered Prince Vern in sword class. I wonder how your magic compares. I’ve grown quite a lot in that regard and don’t intend to lose. Holy Spear!”

A spear of white light created by the tier-three Light spell shot straight toward me, but it disappeared right before it struck. I had dispelled it. Dispel was a tier-three spell with no element. You could use it to undo spells up to tier ten if you increased the precision of your mana, making it a useful spell.

“Impossible… Did you Dispel my cast?” asked Marth.

“I did, and you could see that. Not bad. Now it’s my turn.”

I cast Ice Bullet, the tier-one combined-elemental spell. A pebble-sized chunk of ice shot forward faster than the speed of sound as it spiraled like a drill, punching through a wall of air.

“Ah!”

My spell was for use in combat and specialized for finishing off my enemy. It would’ve been impossible to dodge at this distance and so powerful that the Special Barrier wouldn’t completely defend against it.

Which was why I dispelled it myself right before it hit Marth. Numbers appeared above his head, showing 100 points. I did that

damage just from the shockwave.

"I…I thought I was going to die. Why did you Dispel it in the end? You can't mean it was so powerful, the Special Barrier wouldn't have blocked it?"

It seemed he'd picked up on my plan. He was observant.

"Arius, I'm not sure what to say. It was a very…'you' way of winning," Eric noted with a smile.

"Never expected less from you, Arius, my good friend. Next time, I'm your opponent!" called Vern.

Eric's entourage, including Ragnus, wasn't in Group A, meaning no one was there to say anything annoying.

"It's always the same with you, isn't it, Ar—Master Arius? Just how exceptional are you?"

The lack of an entourage was true for Sophia as well. Maybe it was because the other noble girls weren't present that she could casually join the conversation with me. She did seem somewhat conscious of Eric's opinion as his fiancée. He didn't seem to care about it all that much, so she was doing the bare minimum sort of thing.

"Now that I think of it, have you spoken to Zeke since you've returned to the country?" Eric questioned.

"No. There hasn't been any opportunity for us to interact."

"This is the perfect opportunity then. Zeke, come here, won't you? You can bring Miss Milia as well." Eric gestured, and the two stopped their conversation to come over.

"What is it?" asked Zeke.

"You must remember Arius, Chief Minister Darius's son? I've just heard you two haven't spoken despite attending the same academy. I was thinking we should all have lunch as a group."

"So, this is Arius Gilberto…" Zeke said, looking up at me suspiciously. I'd always been tall for my age, even eight years ago. I was now over six feet tall.

"Hey, Eric, I should be speaking formally with Prince Zeke, right?" I checked.

Before Eric could answer, Zeke interrupted, "Don't be ridiculous, Arius. It's stupid to speak as equals with my brother but not me. You don't have to use my title, either."

"All right, then. If you insist. Nice to see you after all this time, Zeke."

“You too, Arius.”

Zeke might put on an edgy front, but he also seemed to be a good guy.

No one introduced Vern to Zeke, meaning they must have already met. That wasn’t exactly surprising. They would’ve at least met before, so long as Vern wasn’t avoiding his social obligations like me.

Eric invited us all to lunch, just like in the game. It was an event where Milia could grow closer to all the other love interests, but Sophia wasn’t invited in the game as she’d already become the villainess.

“Would you look at that? Seems everyone is present.” It was then that Marth came over with a smile. “I heard talk of everyone having lunch together. Would it be all right if I joined?”



Marth was a sort of rival to Eric in the game, and he barged in when Eric invited Milia to lunch. Now, he was saying he wanted to join, and unlike in the game, he didn't seem to have interacted that much with Milia.

If his goal wasn't her, then what was it?

Well, I had done my research and knew what was happening with him. I had no interest in the world of Love Academy, but that didn't mean I knew nothing about the power struggles here. As the chief minister's son, these things could impact me, so I was proactive in my search for information.

"Of course it is. You're more than welcome to join, Master Marth. I'm interested in hearing recent news from you," expressed Eric, implying he also had information on Marth. Obviously, of course, because of how much Eric liked scheming.

Besides, this was a good chance to talk with Eric and Sophia without their followers. Might as well accept the invitation this once.

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IN terms of political influence, the members of this lunch gathering were quite the big names. There was the First Prince Eric and Second Prince Zeke of Ronaudia; the Third Imperial Prince Vern of the Granbride Empire; and Marth, son of Cardinal Luis Patelier, a man with enough influence to rival royalty. Then there was Sophia, daughter of Duke Victorino, one of the Three Great Dukes of Ronaudia. And, while I hate to say it about myself, there was me, the chief minister's son.

"What incredible food this is, Your Highness. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by what the royal chefs can do," voiced Marth.

"Thank you. I'm happy you're enjoying it," Eric returned.

As the head of the kingdom, the king was in a position of rivalry with the head of the church, whose influence extended beyond the country's borders. Politically, they were at odds. Eric and Marth's conversation seemed harmless, but they were gauging each other.

Well, Eric seemed like his usual self. Marth, on the other hand, seemed a little different compared to in magic class.

“It really is wonderful,” conveyed Milia. “This is my first time eating such luxurious food.”

“Thank you. I’ll make sure to let the chef know you enjoyed it.”

Was Milia unaware of the tension between them? Or did she just not care? It wasn’t just Sophia and Zeke she chatted to easily; it was everyone. She wasn’t timid or getting awkwardly excited—she just seemed natural. Maybe that was what allowed the pleasant atmosphere to remain as lunch progressed.

And you know…the Academy lately was in no way the world of an otome game like I imagined it would be. Well, all the surrounding students were as love-brained as usual, but the protagonist and love interests weren’t lost in romance.

Unlike me, who did nothing but go to dungeons, these people also spent time with each other outside of class. Maybe it was because Milia wasn’t in romance mode that the scenes didn’t activate?

Nevertheless, this was a real world, not a game. Relationships change as the situation changes, and I felt more comfortable that way.

“Even Milia has good table manners here,” remarked Zeke.

“Your Highness, are you possibly making a joke on my behalf because I’m a commoner?”

“Uh, no, that’s not what I meant, I just…”

“Why don’t you just drop the bad boy act already? I know you’re actually a good person.”

“You fall to pieces in front of Miss Milia, don’t you, Zeke?” Eric alleged. “I agree it’d be better if you learned to be more upfront.”

“Not you too. I’m not as good as you think I am!”

“That’s not true. You’re even proud of Prince Eric for being such a good brother,” countered Milia.

“Milia! What are you saying?!”

“That is surprising,” chimed in Sophia. “Milia, I absolutely want to hear more about this.”

“I’d heard rumors of discord between Prince Eric and Prince Zeke. Now I’m curious,” Vern also claimed.

“Hey, cut it out…” Zeke stated meekly. Because of Milia, he’d turned into an easy target for teasing.

Marth was wholly forgotten as Zeke became the central topic of conversation. He was smiling, but it didn’t reach his eyes at all.

Milia, you weren’t doing that on purpose, were you?

After finishing lunch, dessert was brought out along with an after-meal drink. Milia’s eyes shone at the sight of the tart piled high with fresh fruit and cream. Girls did like their sweets.

“Master Arius, you’re the only one who always looks uninterested in any of this,” she complained, glaring at me.

“You don’t have to use a title with me, Milia. It feels weird having a classmate from the same year speaking formally to me. More importantly, you seem to have changed. You’re much livelier than the last time we met.”

Something felt off when she encountered Sophia’s group of noble girls, like she was acting out herself. I felt discomfort, as if she was making assumptions about the people she was dealing with. She was completely different now, just enjoying herself like a normal person.

“It’s not… I don’t think it has anything to do with you!” she uttered, looking glum, blushing for some reason. I never said anything about doing something, though.

“Everyone, I have a suggestion,” Marth stated out of nowhere, and everyone’s eyes turned to him. It looked like he was finally making his move. “We are all in Group A for magic application class, yet there is still quite a variation in our skill levels. But this group, we all began our time here at the Academy at the same time, and I’d like to build stronger relationships with you. As a thank you for this lunch, I’d like to invite everyone to a meal later. Why don’t we all go enjoy ourselves?”

It was a perfectly average invitation, but it wasn’t like Marth actually wanted to be friends with the people here, considering present company, other than Milia.

“Master Marth, I appreciate the invitation, but perhaps another time,” Eric declined with a mild tone. “Besides, I imagine it isn’t everyone currently present that you’re interested in inviting, yes?” He wasn’t so stupid that he would miss what Marth was truly up to.

“What do you mean, Your Highness? I just want to be friends with everyone.” Marth feigned confusion, and Eric smiled dryly.

“Then I’ll put it plainly. Other than Miss Milia, you’re hoping to make all of us political allies? I’m aware the faction against your father is growing in power.”

“What…? Well, I suppose it makes the conversation easier if you’ve already figured that out.” Marth’s attitude immediately changed. There was now a powerful smile on his androgynous features. “As you say, Your Highness, I need you all as allies. This is not a one-sided request. I promise to work with you when you find yourselves against rivals.”

There were others in line to the throne besides Eric and Zeke, and it wasn’t like their enemies would disappear once one of them became king. All the others had political enemies as well. It wasn’t a bad deal to build an allied relationship with Marth now if he was going to become cardinal in the future and take control of the Church.

“There would indeed be merit to what you propose if you became cardinal and managed to maintain control of the Church’s power, but I wonder if you won’t stumble in your hurry,” stated Eric. He was angry, which wasn’t something that happened often, as he directly pointed out how the new faction growing in the Church might end up winning. “And I can’t say I approve of bringing up this conversation where it leaves Milia out, despite the fact that I invited her before you.”

Well, Eric was a step or two ahead of Marth when it came to this sort of thing. He didn’t need Marth to tell him to act; he’d probably already started. It wasn’t Marth he was looking to make deals with—it was the current power, Marth’s father.

Eric’s flippant treatment of Marth made him grind his teeth and glare at the prince.

“Your Highness, I seem to be just getting in the way. Should I leave?” asked Milia without showing timidness.

“No, there’s no need for you to worry about this. Right, Master Marth?” answered Eric.

Milia, you really were doing it on purpose, weren’t you?

If Marth disagreed now, everyone would see him as someone selfish.

After that, it was like Marth had turned as invisible as air, and lunch came to a close.

Chapter 6: Arius’s Day-to-Day

THINGS were even less like the world of an otome game because of what happened with Marth. Not that what happened was a bad thing. It was a good experience for me to see noble society and power struggles, and it wasn’t like I had any interest in romance anyway. I preferred it this way.

After class, I returned to my dorm room and changed out of my uniform as I sent a Message to someone I knew. Once I received the reply, I activated Perception Block and cast Invisibility.

Perception Block was a skill that involved manipulating mana. By tuning your mana to the world around you, you could make it harder for people to perceive you. At higher levels, the skill completely prevented people from noticing anything; however, people higher than you could see through it.

Invisibility was a tier-four Light spell that made you and all your equipment invisible. Casting a spell or attacking made the spell drop, of course.

I left the Academy grounds and traveled down the capital’s main roads before turning onto backstreets. After passing through several alleys beyond that, I came to a run-down area with almost no foot traffic. There were no real slums in the capital, but this place had that sort of vibe.

I’d been here several times before and picked my way around into a building that looked about to collapse at any moment. Inside was a group of rough-and-tumble-looking men with weapons.

I dropped Perception Block and Invisibility, and the men leaped into fighting stances.

“Hey, calm down,” I voiced. “I’m just here to see Beck.”

“Arius? That you? Could you try not scaring us all shitless every time you come?”

“I have no choice. I can’t be seen coming here. He’s in the back, yeah?”

The men and I knew each other. They used to attack without asking questions in the beginning but started behaving once I beat them to a pulp a few times.

“Yeah, Boss is in, but it’s not a good time,” replied one.

“Same as always,” I stated. “It’s fine. I sent a Message before I came.”

I ignored the men trying to stop me and went in the back, through a hallway, and knocked on the door at the end. “Beck, it’s me, Arius.”

I waited for a while because I heard movement inside, then the door opened, and out rushed a completely naked woman with a sheet wrapped around her.

“Arius. Exactly on time as always,” came a voice from inside.

On the bed was a shirtless man sat smoking a cigarette. He was a handsome man in his late twenties with grown-out, dark-brown, curly hair. Thorn-like black tattoos curled around his bare upper half. He was unquestionably attractive but a totally different type of person from Love Academy’s love interests. He had a sort of adult sex appeal to him.

Beck Norton was my information broker in the capital. That name was, of course, an alias.

“If you know that, Beck, then maybe you should finish up sooner. You sent me a Message saying it was fine for me to come,” I retorted.

“And so, it’s fine. This is for work, too, but your job gets higher priority.” He placed two stacks of paper on the bed. “I’ve looked into what you asked me to. That one’s your regular report on the Church’s influence and the nobles.”

Beck might seem like a simple philanderer, but he was incredible at getting information. He was nothing to sniff at regarding combat ability, either, and was probably around the same as an S-rank adventurer. Oftentimes, Beck used women and force to ensure he got whatever information he needed. He wasn’t squeamish about his methods but was the exact opposite of a muscle-headed maniac. When the time came to take someone out, Beck did it with cool detachment.

He lived in a different world from me, in a different way than the love-brained people of Love Academy did, but there were two of his philosophies I could get behind.

The first was that information was worth more than gold. He, like me, believed information gathering was the basis of your foundation. Second, no methods were off the table for achieving your goal. He believed in accomplishing his task, no matter what.

Beck was a nasty character but more useful than anyone else could be, so long as you handled him the right way.

I skimmed the reports and decided I was satisfied, then handed him the pouch of gold containing his compensation. It wasn't a small amount, but his information was accurate. He could investigate pretty much anything in the capital.

We met through another adventurer. Incidentally, that adventurer has passed on from this world.

"Arius, I get the impression you've a knack for my line of work. If you want, I could teach you all my tricks." His eyes gleamed seductively, like a beast who'd caught sight of prey.

"No thanks. I'm not interested in that kind of thing. Even with men."

Beck swung both ways and had his sights set on me. I knew for a fact because he told me explicitly. It shouldn't be a problem, so long as I was careful.

"Our relationship is best when it's simply a financial one. I'll keep paying you an appropriate amount for your information, and you keep doing what you do." I took the reports and left.

After parting ways with Beck, I went to fight in the Dragon's Palace like usual, then had dinner in the Guild in Carnell. On top of seeing Jessica and Marcia there every day, Allen also started coming during the same time.

Couldn't exactly do anything about it since he just started appearing. It wasn't like it was mature to tell him to go away because he was annoying me.

"Let me pay for food, at least," he offered.

"I'm not going to sponge off you," I remarked. "I'm not Marcia."

"Ouch, that's horrible, Arius," Marcia said.

"It's not even true that Marcia sponges off you."

The other members of the Silver Wing were at a different table, watching us from a short distance off. I'd also been talking to them quite a bit lately, even if not as much as I spoke to Jessica and the other two.

“By the way, Arius, we’ve started on Guney’s Great Labyrinth for real now. I was wondering if you had any advice,” Jessica requested. She was really close.

“Like I said before, the monsters get rapidly stronger past floor 150. Keep an eye on your enemies’ strength, and if you think they’re stronger, don’t hesitate to get out of there.”

The members of the Silver Wing were over level 300. Guney’s Great Labyrinth was one of the hardest of the hard-difficulty dungeons and would pose a challenge to them. If I were them, I would do several more runs through other hard dungeons before tackling Guney’s.

“You’re right,” Jessica remarked. “We’re not as strong as you.”

“It’s not a matter of strength. Gauging your opponent’s strength is a combat basic. You’ll get taken down if you judge incorrectly.”

I was using cursed weapons and magic items with debuff effects on my runs through the Dragon’s Palace, but that was only because I’d gauged the strength of the monsters there. If anything were to happen, I had a skill that let me instantly change my equipment. Without that, even I wouldn’t take on that risk.

By this point, I was pretty used to fighting solo. I was thinking of having my first go at an extreme dungeon on my own, and my training had neared its end.

“By the way, what’s your level, Arius? I’m *super* curious.”

“Marcia! Don’t! Asking an adventurer’s level is like asking them to reveal their entire hand,” protested Jessica.

Level was just a general indicator. Depending on their skills, spells, and how they increased their stats, there could be a vast difference between two people of the same level.

“If you want to know, then just improve your Evaluate skill,” I stated.

Evaluate lets you see the level and stats of someone lower than you. If you increased the skill, its effects got buffed, and you could even see the level of someone higher than you—but there was a limit.

“There’s no way I could Evaluate someone as high as you, Arius. And it looks like you’re using Conceal Ability. I can’t even estimate your level,” stated Marcia.

Conceal Ability was the opposing skill to Evaluate. It applied a debuff to Evaluate.

“Well, I can use Conceal Ability, but I don’t normally. I don’t generally feel the need to,” I noted. Not that I planned on giving away information, but I also didn’t think about going that far to hide it.

“Hmmm. Since I can’t Evaluate you, you’ve got to be over level 500 at least. You’re SSS rank and can instakill the monsters on the final floor of the Great Labyrinth, meaning you’re probably a bit higher than that… Maybe, over 700?”

“Again, I’m not going to tell you. Figure it out yourself.” With that, I left her to her own devices as I chowed down on the massive plate of food that had just come. Yep, I really preferred that kind of hearty fare.

“Hey, Arius…” began Jessica a little sadly. “I remember our promise, of course, but…you wouldn’t be willing to join our party again, would you?”

I had spent two days with them a while back, but I wasn’t that unoccupied to do it again. “Sorry, Jessica. I won’t be able to for a while, but I could probably join you in the Great Labyrinth for an hour here and there to give you some critique.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I’ve completed the Great Labyrinth. I can go to any floor since I know all the teleportation points. If you send me a Message and tell me roughly where you are, I could join you for about an hour.”

After all, I started things with them, and teaching people required you to sort the theory out in your head. It was a good opportunity for me to look objectively at myself.

“I can’t do it that often, of course, and seriously, no more than an hour,” I pressed.

“Are you sure? Thank you!” She broke into a full-faced grin. Marcia was grinning next to her, too, in an annoying way.

“I’ll send you a Message when I have time. That all right?”

“Of course, that’s great.”

I couldn’t do it that week. I planned on trying my first extreme dungeon that weekend and had other plans on Sunday; I had a family dinner then.

“I actually have a question for you guys,” I continued. “Have you ever been in a dungeon with someone who’s a complete beginner?”

“Yeah, when I just became an adventurer,” replied Jessica.

“Not what I mean. I’m talking about, now that you’re strong, having to look out for a newbie.”

“No, I’ve definitely never done that. We’d be taking on different dungeons at that point.”

Yeah, that was true. It was suicide for an F-rank adventurer to jump right into a medium-difficulty dungeon, for example. I’d gone into easy dungeons before even becoming an adventurer, but I was an exception.

“If you’re asking about it, I assume it’s because you’re going to have to do it,” pondered Jessica. “Marcia, have you ever done something like that?”

“I’ve worked as a guard for beginners plenty of times, but I’d bow out of going into a dungeon with newbies.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t even want to think about taking on a dungeon while having to protect someone that’s just dragging me down,” concurred Allen. “Kind of a different story from going into a dungeon to teach them, like you do, Arius. Still, don’t think I’ve ever taught a complete beginner.”

Everything he said was spot on. I didn’t think they’d have a good answer to this problem, and it wasn’t that the problem was actually happening. It was just a possibility, and I wanted some insurance in case it did.

The students of the Academy were going into a dungeon for the first time as a group of multiple classes soon. As part of the class, we were only going to an easy dungeon, which was not that big a deal.

Thing was, I heard something from my father. I asked Beck to look further into it and found that some people were making suspicious moves.

There was still time before then. Eric probably already noticed, too. Guess I should just keep an eye on these people and decide what to do from there.

***

AS planned, I started on an extreme-difficulty dungeon on Saturday.

Far to the north in the wilderness, located in a spot surrounded by steep mountains, was a massive building that looked as if giants built it. Inside was a hall with pillars over thirty feet in diameter and a gigantic magic circle inscribed on the floor. When I stepped foot within, I was transported to the first extreme-difficulty dungeon: the Citadel of Ancient Gods.

It was a space with not a single wall. A place so vast you couldn't see the end of the room despite the magic light emitted by the ceiling.

And right now, I was in serious mode.

This time, I ran two jet-black swords, matching armor that felt like it weighed nothing, and several magic items that automatically cast support spells. On top of that, I cast every buff spell I had.

I got a ping on my Scan. A horde of massive angel-like monsters in full plate came from afar. Supreme Angels were more powerful than the final boss of the Dragon's Palace, and now 1,000 were coming at me at once.

The first time I fought them with Grey and Selena, I couldn't help thinking how ridiculous this was. Now, though…

"Nothing beats a fight so fierce you can't risk losing your focus for one second!"

The entire space was filled with enemies. I knew where each was and what they were doing using Scan. I moved faster than the speed of sound and used Short Teleport as I reduced their numbers. That was my actual speed. Before, I was using super cursed equipment and debuff magic items, more than halving my stats.

Short Teleport was a tier-five spell limited to distances of about a mile and was more suited for combat because it could be cast quickly, unlike Teleport.

I'd already completed the Citadel of Ancient Gods with Grey and Selena, but that was with the three of us—now I was on my own. Being alone didn't just mean I had to kill three times as many monsters—it meant I had nobody to watch my back. I was being attacked from all directions at once.

There was nowhere to run to and nowhere to hide. The fight didn't end until I killed them all. And once I did, even more

powerful foes were waiting for me on the next floor.

Also, there were no teleportation points in extreme dungeons you could use as a shortcut due to the Teleport Jam spell in place between floors, making Teleport and Short Teleport useless. The only way to finish the dungeon was to clear each level in one run.

There were also no points where you could teleport back to the surface except on the final floor. If you turned back while in the dungeon, you'd have to travel all the way back up and fight all the monsters that respawned.

It was complete masochism.

Finishing this dungeon won't be easy, but I wondered how strong I would be once I finished the Citadel of the Ancient Gods solo—assuming I didn't die in the process.

For two days over the weekend, I spent a long time having my go at the Citadel.

***

SUNDAY evening, I returned home for the first time in a long time. My last visit was before I moved into the Academy dorms for a quick chat.

"Welcome, Master Arius! We've been waiting for you," welcomed a smiling, pretty little girl with silver hair and ice-blue eyes.

"It's welcome *home*, Alicia. It's his home, too," chided a boy like an adult. He had the same hair and eye color.

"It's good to see you two," I replied.

Sirius and Alicia were my brother and sister. They were twins, now nine years old. I only saw them once a year on their birthdays, so it was hard to really think of myself as their older brother.

They started referring to me as "Master" when they were five and made their debut in society. The other nobles must have influenced them because I didn't ask them to do that.

"It's been too long, Arius. You should come back more often, especially considering you're in the capital now," greeted my father with an easy-going smile. He was thirty-five then but looked essentially the same as when I was a child.

“Darius, Arius won’t like you if you pester him. He’s old enough to be finding a wife now. I’m sure he’s busy with things,” my mother chided with a wide smile.

My parents were like Selena and Gray—completely unaged. They could still pass for people in their twenties.

“Mother, I’m not interested in that sort of thing,” I stated.

“Not interested? That could be an issue on its own. Is that really the case? I hear rumors about everything you get up to at the Academy. Don’t take my information network lightly.” She winked. Looked like she went and jumped to some conclusion.

“Anyway, Mother, I’m hungry. Could we eat soon?”

“Trying to change the subject? Well fine. I’ll just ask all about it while we eat.”

Not that she would get the kind of stories she was hoping for.

My mother made dinner herself that night. She was busy with her work at the Royal Intelligence Ministry and Royal Ministry of Magic, so she couldn’t cook every day, but she’d always cooked for us like this when the whole family was together.

“Your cooking really is good, Mother,” I complimented.

“Aw, thank you. There’s plenty left, so eat up.”

Of course, I wasn’t going to hold back as I tackled the dishes in front of me. Alicia and Sirius grew wide-eyed at my eating gusto. They always had the same reaction when I came back for family dinners on their birthdays. It was true that I ate more and more every year.

“Arius, is it just me, or have you put on muscle since the last time I saw you?” asked my father.

“Maybe. I haven’t noticed.”

At over six feet, I was taller than him. But in the end, even after going into dungeons every day and never skipping my strength training, I never changed from the slim-athletic build, which might have to do with being a Love Academy character.

“Will I be like you if I eat as much as you do?” questioned Sirius.

“That depends on how hard you work. I only got this beefy because it’s good for battle.”

“That’s what’s important. I want to be strong like you.”

Unfortunately, he hadn’t been training his mana manipulation since he was a baby like I had. He was still Darius and Rhea’s child,

meaning he was set with high specs.

"I want to be strong like you, too," chimed in Alicia, her rivalry on show. It was cute.

"Both of you are training with swords and magic, right? I don't recommend you try to imitate me."

Darius and Rhea had hired private tutors for the twins. Of course, they weren't in the same class as Grey and Selena, but they were apparently retired A-rank adventurers.

"Why not, Master Arius?" Alicia pressed. "You're my hero. No one else could be an SSS-rank adventurer before they even go to the Academy!"

I had told the two of them the truth about me. Even if they did let something slip, no one would take something children said seriously.

"It's just, doing nothing but fighting is fine for me because I like it, but I've got no time to enjoy anything else," I reasoned.

I didn't think of myself as a musclehead, but I couldn't deny that I loved going through the Citadel of Ancient Gods on my own. No normal person would find it fun to fight every day in battles that could go either way and take time off your lifespan.

"But…you're going to the Academy, aren't you? You're making sure you study, right?" she continued.

"Generally, but I'm not going out to have fun after class, and I'm not doing any extracurricular activities."

It was probably best not to tell them I worked on my own things all the time during class, right? Then again, I was pretty sure Darius and Rhea had found out.

After we finished eating, I spent a while longer with Sirius and Alicia, and they went to sleep at nine o'clock. They kept insisting they weren't tired, which Rhea chided them for.

"You'll come back to visit again, won't you?" pleaded Alicia.

"You have to; I want to talk to you more," Sirius added.

"I'll come visit again soon."

"Promise!" they chimed. "You have to!"

They really were cute. But I needed to be getting back.

"You're not going to stay the night?" asked Darius.

"No. I have training in the morning." I hadn't missed my morning training once since I was a child. I could stay here for the night, but I didn't want to throw off my routine if I could avoid it.

“Arius, you really have focused your entire life on fighting, haven’t you? You mentioned earlier you don’t have fun after class or participate in extracurriculars. I assume you’re still going to dungeons as well?”

“Yeah. I spend the entire weekend in dungeons.” It wasn’t something that needed hiding. It wasn’t like I wasn’t going to class; I did work on my own thing while there.

Darius smiled weakly like he could see what I was thinking. “Arius, I think you may interpret this the wrong way, but sometimes I think we made a mistake hiring Selena and Grey to be your tutors. They are good people, they really are; there are no better teachers than them. But when I look at you, I feel like I see them.”

Rhea, Darius, Grey, and Selena all used to adventure together. They completed the extreme-difficulty dungeon Citadel of Ancient Gods, an accomplishment that allowed them to attempt SSS rank. Darius and Rhea didn’t try, however. They retired while they were still SS rank.

“Your mother and I became adventurers to grow strong, but we had goals for which we needed that strength. I could protect my homeland, Ronaudia, if I grew stronger, and Rhea wished to support me. That’s why we retired, and we don’t regret that decision.”

I knew Darius became the chief minister after saving the kingdom from great danger, but I didn’t know he became an adventurer to protect the country. That must have been why he immediately retired when King Albert asked him to become chief minister.

My old tutors were also in that battle that saved the kingdom, but as adventurers. Darius was recognized not only for his direct contributions to the battle as a fighter but also for bringing together the military that was on the verge of collapse.

Well, if we kids listened to what he had to say about it, it was all just bragging about how he met Rhea, our mother.

“Grey and Selena were different from us. They are special, or… should I say, unique. There’s nothing they love more than battle, and strength in and of itself is their goal.”

I guessed partway through what he was trying to get at. If I hadn’t met them, I wouldn’t be such a battle-crazed maniac and

think of tackling an extreme dungeon alone.

“They did influence me, but I chose this because I like it,” I assured him. “I’m grateful to them for showing me that world.”

How powerful could I become in close-call battles that shaved moments off my life? It wasn’t about being better than someone else. In those intense battles, I was most aware of myself growing stronger—and that was so incredibly fun.

Darius had last told me I was free to choose my own path, but I knew he really hoped I would take the position of chief minister after him. Regardless, I wanted to become as strong as possible, like Grey and Selena. I didn’t plan on becoming the chief minister.

“I did think you’d say that,” admitted Darius. He wasn’t the sort of person to force his own way of thinking onto his children. That’s why I respected him and wanted to live up to his wishes as best I could.

“On a different topic, Father, have you received any new information about you know what?”

“No. There hasn’t been any new activity in particular from them.”

There was some disquieting activity regarding the Academy. Darius had the Intelligence Ministry investigate the matter and passed the information on to me. I also used my connections to investigate, and it was clear people were making suspicious moves.

“Arius, please look out for Prince Eric and the other students if something does happen.”

I knew my father trusted me, regardless of whether I followed in his steps or not.

“I will. Besides, I imagine Eric will be able to handle it on his own.”

With that, I left.

***

DUE to scheduling restraints, I wasn’t progressing much in the Citadel of Ancient Gods. I slowly and steadily increased the speed I could get through the floors, but the time I had after classes just wasn’t enough. The weekends were better for getting further in,

but it looked like it'd be a while before I could finish the whole dungeon in two days.

Life in the Academy was the same as always, with no real change even after the event with Marth, and the magic application classes meant more opportunities to speak with the others.

"Today's the day I land a hit on you, Arius. Fireball!" shouted Vern with high energy as he cast the tier-three Fire spell. Vern was a bit of a meathead, but he was still a skilled magic user. Although, he didn't really need to shout every single time he cast a spell.

I dodged the Fireball and cast Strengthen, then landed 100 points on him with a karate chop. That was a legal move since Strengthen was still a spell.

"Damn, lost again!"

"A-Arius, you can be so ruthless. I-I didn't mean that as a bad thing. It's one good thing about you: you don't hold back to toy with your opponent," stammered Sophia. She finally dropped the honorific and slipped into a more casual tone, although she still seemed slightly uncomfortable.

"I appreciate the compliment, but I don't do it for my opponent's sake. Holding back builds bad habits," I informed her.

"Yes, let's say that's it." She giggled. Looked like she jumped to her own conclusions.

"I know I can't win against you, and it's not logical, but I just want to beat you!" Vern exclaimed.

"I understand how you feel, Your Highness," said Milia. "It's like Arius can do anything, always with that smug look on his face. I sometimes just want to clock him good."

For some reason, she was scowling at me. Lately, it seemed like she didn't hesitate to treat me however she wanted. Or maybe she was just treating me worse. On the other hand, this attitude made me feel more at ease than her last one.

"That's not how it is with me, Miss Milia," countered Vern. "I just don't want to lose to my close friend."

"Sure, of course. And I don't want to lose to this person I've had the misfortune of getting involved with."

Vern seemed to take a liking to Milia and her lack of timidity.

"And I'm saying you and I are feeling completely different things!" he exclaimed. "Arius, you, my bosom friend, understand what I mean, don't you?"

“I don’t care what you’re thinking, Vern.”

“Arius! How can you be so cold toward your good friend?”

“That’s just the kind of person he is,” Milia replied cooly.

“It’s rather boisterous over here as always,” Zeke interjected, joining in. “Milia, what was that you said earlier? Girls shouldn’t be talking about wanting to clock Arius.”

He was frowning, but she looked blandly at him and conveyed, “That’s sexist, Prince Zeke. Are you making fun of me for being a girl?”

“No, that’s not what I meant…”

“I know you said it because you’re concerned for me, but this is the kind of person I am. Just give up on it.”

Zeke could never act edgy with Milia. I actually felt a bit bad for him when his façade crumbled, but he was a good guy at heart. Maybe it was better for him to be open.

“By the way, Prince Eric, everyone, I would like to invite you all to lunch again. What do you think?” proposed Marth. Despite revealing his true nature, he hadn’t given up on inviting Eric and the rest of us to eat. Well, he did need backing. He wasn’t going to give up that easily.

“Impatient as always, Master Marth,” answered Eric. “My apologies, however. I’m busy and won’t be able to accept your invitation for now.”

Eric was one or two grades better than him and wasn’t working with Marth at all. I heard from Darius that Eric had already connected with Marth’s father, the Cardinal, and built a pleasant, mutually beneficial relationship. Marth apparently didn’t know this, which meant he needed to build his own connections if he wanted to be the next cardinal.

“I know I’m an outsider and shouldn’t be saying anything, but you always put yourself above others, Master Marth, and that means Prince Eric doesn’t have any need to combine forces with you,” Milia observed bluntly. She didn’t mind at all that Marth was glaring at her.

“You’re so direct with how you say things, Milia,” Sophia noted.

“Yeah, I know my mouth can be rude. Do you dislike that about me?”

“No. I like that you never hide anything.”

“And I love that you’d say that.”

They really did get along. They didn’t care at all about the difference in status.

Zeke smiled softly as he watched them, completely ruining his bad-boy image again.

“That reminds me. Our onsite dungeon class is finally happening this Friday. I’ll have my chance to impress my good friend with my strength. My muscles are itching to go!” Vern, as intense as always. He was a good guy. I just wished he’d dial back the intensity.

The Academy used an easy-difficulty dungeon for the students. It was also open for the country’s soldiers to train there, but not for everyday adventurers.

“You seem rather gung-ho about this, Prince Vern. I believe we should be cautious in the dungeon, since it will be our first time,” Eric communicated. His expression changed minutely when the dungeon lesson came up, not that anyone would notice if they weren’t watching him carefully—it looked like he had the information I did.

“I’m plenty used to dungeons. I went several times in the Empire,” boasted Vern.

“Even so, it’s your first time in the Academy’s dungeon. I know you’re powerful, but other students will be with us. In particular, we need to make sure the girls are safe.”

“You’re correct there. All right, you have my support!”

Eric was good at handling him. With that, Vern shouldn’t run off alone in the dungeon.

“I’d like your support as well, Arius,” mentioned Eric, warning me too.

“Of course. I plan to do what I can.”

Milia stared at the two of us as she listened to our exchange.

***

FRIDAY came along, and our onsite dungeon class began. This excursion combined all six first-year classes into one, bringing a whopping 200 people into the dungeon at once.

While it was an easy dungeon, monsters up to level 50 spawned on the lower levels. Most first-year students were below

level 5, meaning we were restricted to the beginning.

Thirty teachers were guiding us, more than the number of first-year classes, but that was because the teachers from other years joined to support us. The Academy's teachers were at a fairly high level since they were in a position that required them to teach the students sword and magic skills, ranging from the 50s to above 100. It was more than enough protection for them.

Or at least it would be in any normal situation.

"Eric, there are some teachers here I've never seen before," I noticed.

"They're in charge of other years. It's not surprising you don't recognize them all."

Liar. I memorized the names and faces of all the Academy's teachers. Information gathering is a foundation of adventuring. There were eight people I'd never seen, all of whom were above level 100. They were probably royal knights or court mages Eric brought in.

In addition to the teachers, there were people using Perception Block and Invisibility to conceal themselves. I could see them just like I could see anyone else. These people were at an even higher level than the others, probably Intelligence Ministry agents my father sent.

The enemy was already lying in wait hiding. I knew how many of them there were and how strong they were, but the government had placed far more forces on the first floor than the enemy had, so it didn't look like I would be needed to do anything.

In the morning, the lesson consisted of us moving through the dungeon as a class while the teachers killed the monsters, explaining as they did how to handle monsters that spawned. In game terms, this was essentially the tutorial.

The monsters on the first floor were pretty much just Slimes, Kobolds, Goblins, and Orcs, all below level 5. Enemies lower than level 5 presented no danger as the teachers secured our front and rear.

When the dungeon's monsters were defeated, they disappeared in a poof and left behind magic crystals and an item in rare cases. The students who had never been in a dungeon were surprised and let out cries of delight, but that only lasted briefly in the beginning.

The students who were confident in their abilities complained about a boring class where they did nothing but watch.

“Don’t be in a rush. You’ll be fighting monsters yourselves this afternoon,” placated a teacher. “Those of you who have never fought a monster, make sure you carefully watch what we do.”

After lunch, the afternoon class started with us going about in groups. The groups had about eight students and a teacher in each one. Each leading teacher was there for support while the students fought the monsters themselves. This was the real hands-on dungeon lesson.

“Eric, what’s with the lineup in our group?” I asked.

Our group was made up of Eric, Zeke, Vern, Marth, me, Sophia, Milia, and Zeke’s fiancée, Sasha Blancard. This was less of a collection of the main characters of Love Academy and more a group of everyone the enemy might target.

“I’m not sure,” responded Eric. “The Academy assigned the groups. I couldn’t say what they were thinking.”

There was no way that was true. It was obvious we were bait.

The information Darius got showed the anti-royalist nobles were making some menacing moves. They contacted someone with connections to the Academy while gathering high-level “cleaners” in the capital. These cleaners were criminals who’d fallen out of the adventuring industry, usually having their status revoked for getting involved in crime. These criminals were able to enter the capital with fake identity documents.

But the Intelligence Ministry, with Darius at its head, were no amateurs. Investigations and magic tools already confirmed the existence of these cleaners. With everything in place as it was, it was highly likely they would attack—and the most likely targets for that attack would be the people gathered here.

With all that knowledge, luring the criminals was necessary to secure irrefutable proof through control of the crime scene so that they could destroy the anti-royalist faction behind it all.

Eric was using the future leaders of the country and an imperial prince as bait, but he was doing it knowing everything that was going on. Darius was involved as well, so it wasn’t like anyone’s life was going to be at risk. He wouldn’t have let his guard down as he rationally analyzed the enemy’s strength.

“What are you two talking about? Something’s fishy here,” expressed Milia with a sharp look at me. Looked like she noticed something was up.

“It’s nothing, Miss Milia. Even if there were something wrong, Arius would handle it.”

Apparently, Eric had no intention of hiding it.

“Even without my help, plenty of skilled teachers are here right now,” I added.

We’ll just see what these guards Eric placed have got.

***

WE headed into the dungeon with our lead teacher, Oscar Bryon, who wasn’t actually a teacher at the Academy. He was one of Eric’s guards.

The other seven not-teachers assigned to the other groups casually kept their distance as they secured the perimeter around us. It was like they were serving us up on a silver platter as bait to draw out the anti-royalists.

“Come on, another Orc? Pathetic! Winning is too easy,” Vern exclaimed.

“It’s the first floor. What did you expect?” challenged Zeke. The two of them were leading the charge to defeat monsters. It was only natural they’d find it easy, considering their levels and stats.

“Then let us have a go. It’s old-fashioned to think you need to protect us girls,” Milia suggested. She had the second highest level out of everyone, after Vern and barring Eric and me, of course. She never stood out in sword class because her sword skills and STR weren’t that high, but she had decent moves. There was no way the monsters on the first floor would get the better of her.

“No, Milia, it could be dangerous for someone of your skill level,” cautioned Zeke. His stats were high, being a love interest of Love Academy, and his sword skills were better than Milia’s.

But it also looked like he didn’t realize how strong she was.

“If you’re worried, Your Highness, I will support her. Let’s fight together, Milia,” stated Sophia. She knew how strong Milia was and was likely trying to appease Zeke.

“Sure. Thank you, Sophia,” Milia answered brightly.

“Shadow Thorns!”

“Chain Slash!”

Sophia supported with Dark magic spells while Milia used one-handed sword skills to finish off Orc after Orc. Milia seemed happy to have Sophia’s backup.

“Lady Sophia… You seem close with her,” Sasha observed, looking slightly envious.

“Do you want to join us? Defeating monsters helps you let it all out,” offered Milia.

“Uh… You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. Right, Sophia?”

“Right. Feel free to join right in, Sasha.”

Milia got along quickly with Sasha as well. Maybe she had high communication skills, or perhaps she just wasn’t intimidated by anything. People opened up to her immediately, so long as they weren’t prejudiced against commoners.

By the way, Sasha’s father, Marquess Blancard, had his territory far from the capital on the country’s western edge, so I barely interacted with her at social events as a child.

We continued making steady progress through the dungeon for two hours, with the three girls playing the biggest role. Despite Zeke’s insistence on pretending to be mean, he casually hovered nearby to support them at all times. Sasha noticed this and blushed.

Guess at least *they* were playing Love Academy.

“Arius, I’m bored. Goblins and Orcs aren’t good enough opponents. Why don’t we spar?” Vern posed at one point.

“Your Highness, I’m not sure that is the best idea.” Marth stopped him, and I understood what he was thinking. “This is a practical dungeon class. We need to be prepared to support.”

We chatted as we continued onward into the dungeon when, suddenly, a glowing magic circle appeared in the air. It was a sensor-activated summoning spell.

That’s an interesting attack.

Out of the magic circle appeared five winged demons: Silver Demons. They could use tier-four area spells, their tough scales gave them high defense capabilities, and they even had magic resistance. These were very much not the enemies that should be spawning on the first floor.

“Emergency! Students, fall back!”

Oscar, the guard Eric arranged for, immediately went into action and killed the five Silver Demons in the blink of an eye.

The other seven guards gathered around. Obviously, they would react quickly, as each one was above level 100.

“What’s the big deal? Even I can easily take down some demons!” Vern protested.

“That’s not the problem here. Those demons would only be here on the first floor if someone intentionally summoned them,” explained Zeke, and the two of them moved to guard the girls.

Not bad.

Indeed, Vern was strong enough to be more than a match for a Silver Demon, but only the one.

More summoning circles appeared, bringing forth more than twenty Silver Demons.

“Leave this to us! Turner, Ziehr, Jarred, and Guyer evacuate the princes. Olga, lead the rest of the students away.”

“Understood. Everyone, this way!”

Three guards stayed to fight the monsters while four led us away. The remaining one ordered the other groups of students to stay back.

It wasn’t a bad response since it was clear we were the targets, but did they not notice we were being drawn into a trap in the direction of our retreat?

Just after one of the guards passed the front of our group, a huge magic circle appeared. It was a time-delayed trap meant to capture us all together. This wasn’t a summoning spell either; the circle looked like a dungeon’s teleportation points.

“A teleportation trap! Everyone, protect the princes with your lives!”

Usually, this sort of thing would result in the target being teleported to where the enemy lay in wait. This time, the teleportation trap didn’t activate.

“Was it…a dud?” wondered a guard.

No, I just cast Teleport Jam.

“I used Analyze on the magic circle. I know where it goes, Eric,” I told him. The tier-ten spell Analyze lets you learn the effects of a spell or item in detail. “If you want to go after them, I’ll teleport us to a point just slightly away from there.”

“Please, Arius. I wouldn’t want to let this opportunity pass us by.”

I knew he understood what he was getting us into. He knew there was a teleportation trap and practically dove right into it.

Eh, maybe it was fine. We had all the guards over level 100 and then the people from the Intelligence Ministry hiding with Perception Block and Invisibility.

“Your Highness, what is this about?” asked a guard.

“Turner, Ziehr, Jarred, Guyer, I’ll need you to stick with us until this is over,” he ordered, his eyes moving to a spot with no one in it. He was aware of both the intelligence agents and the hidden enemies.

“What are the two of you muttering about over there? You need to explain exactly what is happening to us!” demanded Milia.

“I agree with her. Your Highness, please explain!” added Sophia as the two girls glared at Eric and me. The rest of the group nodded with them, looking serious.

Only Marth wasn’t. His eyes were darting about. He had information about the attack and asked teachers with connections to the Church to defend him. Still, they could not keep up with the quickly changing situation, meaning he completely botched his handling of things.

“Sorry, everyone, explanations will have to wait until after,” I confessed. “There are still enemies lying in wait, and it’s safest with me. Don’t leave my side.” I should probably say something to Oscar since he was working on eliminating the demons. “Mr. Bryon, you noticed the five enemies hiding, right? Can you take care of them?”

Once I saw Oscar and the intelligence agents reacting, I put up Impenetrable Defense and cast Teleport. Should be fine. Using spells like this was a bit showy, but an A-rank adventurer could use them.

Our destination was the final floor of the dungeon.

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YOU could only teleport to somewhere you could see or have been before. Even if you used Evaluate to determine the target

coordinates of a teleportation trap, you wouldn't be able to teleport to that spot.

That wasn't a problem for me—I'd already gone through the whole Academy dungeon.

Doubtless, I had completed the entire Academy dungeon as preparation once I learned there was a high chance the anti-royalists would attack during our onsite dungeon class. Getting in was simple, and the dungeon was easy; it took me less than an hour.

So, yeah, I obviously had a map of the final floor in my head already.

I targeted the Teleport to put us behind the people waiting for us. It was in the burial chamber where the final boss was. The teleportation trap was meant to send us to the exact same point where the final boss appeared. And, as expected, the cleaners were waiting, surrounding that area.

There were six of them. Evaluate showed me each was over level 100, and two were over 200. If we'd gone through the trap, we would've had to fight the final boss at the same time as them. Luckily, we got behind them.

"Ah!"

The four guards, Turner, Ziehr, Jarred, and Guyer, immediately grasped the situation. Without saying a word, they went straight to attacking the cleaners from behind, but the enemy got a ping from their Scan and defended against the attack.

"Tsk! What the hell's going on? They figured us out?" shouted a man with a scar on his cheek.

"If you got time to chat, you got time to take them out! It doesn't matter if we drew them in or if they jumped in; it's all the same in the end!" yelled a girl with extravagant gold hair.

Those two were the first to act, the ones above level 200. Their coordination of sword and magic quickly broke through the four guards, and they came at us.

They understood the situation well: if they killed Eric, they won. The guards tried following them, but the other cleaners blocked their path. Their coordination with the other cleaners was solid too.

But they never had a chance.

The intelligence agents had infiltrated the final floor of the dungeon before we arrived, and my Teleport spell brought along three more agents who had been on the first floor. All the agents involved in this operation were above level 200. They could get the cleaners under control if they acted, but they didn't seem inclined to act just yet.

And they would if Eric's and Zeke's safety was in jeopardy. They weren't taking action because they already knew how strong the enemy was and were confident in their control contingencies, most likely.

"Eric, how closely did you conspire with my father on this?" I asked.

The four guards would've had a hard time handling the cleaners here, but Eric chose to leap into the teleportation trap, which meant the intelligence agents were under his command.

"Conspire? Don't make it sound so bad. All I did was request forces from the chief minister. I wanted to avoid relying on them, so I left the guards on the first floor since you're here. Perhaps I should have brought them all."

If all of Eric's guards were here, they'd be more than a match for the cleaners. Nevertheless, enemies were still on the first floor, so he left half his forces there. I had just told Oscar I was leaving the enemies on the first floor to him, too, so I guess everyone was telling me to step up.

"Why are the two of you having such a pleasant chat? We're under a full-on attack!" implored Milia.

I understood why she was feeling pressured. The scar-cheeked man and gold-haired girl persisted in their onslaught of skills and magic.

"High-Voltage Shock! Piercing Magic Bullet!" The girl's spells focused more on power than flashiness.

"Battering Ram! Whirling Smash!" The man's skills were excellent for breaking through defenses, which you used in actual combat.

They were complete pros in how they worked. They did nothing wrong.

"What the heck? This Impenetrable Defense is tough!" exclaimed the girl.

“Tsk! How can my attacks have no effect?” complained the man.

Impenetrable Defense was a barrier spell effective against all types of attacks, but it could break if you inflicted damage beyond its limits. *My* Impenetrable Defense, however, was immune to their attacks. Its defenses were too powerful, so their damage wasn’t getting through.



Even so, they laid into the barrier, and everyone other than Eric and Vern looked concerned.

“What do you intend to do, Arius?” asked Sophia, looking straight into my eyes.

I did find it kind of annoying how laid-back Vern looked.

“Fine, Sophia. Milia. I’ll just go clean up out there,” I relayed before stepping out of the Impenetrable Defense and leaving everyone inside. I raced toward the golden-haired girl and threw out a “You’re not bad” once I reached her.

“Ah!”

I hit her with a karate chop before she could react, knocking her unconscious. They were witnesses; I wasn’t going to kill them.

“You took out Lilith, the Killer of All, with one hit…? Who the hell are you?” exclaimed the man with a scar on his cheek, holding me in check with an airtight stance. His equipment looked well-used, his sword was versatile, and he clearly thought a lot about his skill combinations. He wasn’t bad in a fight.

But seriously? Lilith, the Killer of All? Could you make a nickname more edgelord than that? Made me want to hear the man’s nickname too. Well, I could get him to spit it out once we had him in custody.

The man with the scarred cheek eyed me as he focused mana into his sword. He had pretty fine control of his mana there.

“Severing Slash!”

I blocked the high-speed strike using a sword I got out of storage. It would have been easy to dodge, but the guards were in the line of strike. I used Short Teleport to jump behind the man and cut him down before he could react.

“Your Highness, are these people…actually really weak?” asked Milia agape.

“No, they’re not. I would say they’re all over level 100, putting them around an A-rank adventurer. The two Arius defeated were over 200.”

Eric. Don’t bother analyzing; it must be hard.

The four guards would probably be able to handle the rest of the cleaners even if I left them alone, but they were criminals. They would resist to the bitter end, knowing they’d be killed if they were captured. Maybe I should take them out to make sure they lived to give statements.

“H-he, he took them all out in one strike?” stammered one of the guards.

“Is he that strong…because he’s the son of Chief Minister Gilberto?” asked another.

They were buzzing with curiosity, but Eric had them under control. The agents from the Intelligence Ministry worked for my father, so it was unlikely this event would lead to people finding out I was Arius, the SSS-rank adventurer.

I imagined Eric had already figured it out, but at this point… eh. If Sophia, Milia, and Vern figured it out, I doubted they’d spread rumors about me. Zeke and Sasha were off on their own playing Love Academy. If Marth talked, I’d just have to crush him.

“Your Highness, Arius, don’t you think it’s time you explain the monsters from before and these people?” demanded Sophia.

“It definitely is. There’s no more reason to put it off, right?” added Milia, the two of them looking sternly at Eric and me as they waited for answers, prompting everyone else’s gaze.

I mean, I might have just been a bystander dragged into this, but I left everyone behind to prioritize neutralizing the cleaners. I couldn’t help it if they’d complain about that.

“Eric, I think it’s better if you explained,” I prompted.

“Yes, probably.” He had his usual refreshing smile on as he explained. “I’m sorry for dealing with all of you afterward. The people who attacked us were killers known as ‘cleaners.’ They summoned the monsters on the first floor and were hired by nobles in the anti-royalist faction. Their goal was to kill us.”

Nobles of the anti-royalist faction contacted someone at the Academy several times, and at around the same time, these cleaners snuck into the city. The contact at the Academy guided the cleaners into the dungeon, where they lay in wait.

Some nobles among the anti-royalist faction wanted to eliminate Eric and Zeke. The Royal Family would lose cohesion if it lost the first and second princes, as they were the successors for the throne, inviting others with a claim to grab the crown.

That was why they also wanted to eliminate Sophia, Sasha, and me, the chief minister’s son. This was to kill those who would support the future king and cut ties between the Royal Family and the Three Great Dukes, weakening the royals in the process.

“It was easy to imagine they’d attack during our onsite dungeon class,” continued Eric. “It was an opportunity for them to kill the five of us: royalty and those close to the royals. I had us put in the same group to prevent putting other students at risk and to make defending us smoother, even if it meant making us an easier target. I also hid guards among the teachers leading today’s class.”

Vern and Marth ended up in the same group because Eric thought there was a possibility the attackers would kill the two along with the rest and then blame the Royal Family for their deaths.

Milia was an unlikely target on her own, but I assumed Eric put her in the group because he thought there was a chance she might be taken hostage.

“I understand the situation now. But if all this is true, why didn’t you tell us in advance?” challenged Milia, not entirely satisfied. It was like she wanted to say they could have prepared for this if they’d only known.

“I feel the same as Milia, Your Highness,” coupled Sophia. “You and Arius anticipated an attack. What reason did you have, then, to also hide it?” She looked straight into Eric’s eyes. She wanted to know what he was thinking.

“I’d like to know as well, brother,” declared Zeke. “You always make decisions without consulting with anyone else. I know that’s because you’re ready to take on full responsibility, but this one time, I’d like to know your reasoning.”

He and Vern stepped toward Eric.

“I’m not sure I completely follow, but I will not forgive you, Your Highness, if you knowingly put Prince Zeke in danger!” asserted Sasha, glaring at Eric, knowing it was rude. Milia and Sophia stood shoulder to shoulder with her, backing her up.

Eric had that same old smile on as everyone waited for an answer. “I am sorry for hiding this from all of you, but the reason is simple: If I’d told you, you would have been on edge. If you looked wary, the enemy may also have been wary and decided to call off the attack. I wanted to pull this threat out by the roots.”

“Does that mean…you can’t trust us?” asked Sophia.

“Not at all. But you’re all better people than me, and your change in attitude would be obvious. That would be enough to

cause the enemy to be cautious. It is true that I used all of you as bait to lure them out, and for that, all I can do is apologize." He acknowledged his faults without attempting to pretty it up, but he didn't appear guilty or regret what he had done.

"That doesn't change the fact that Arius was the only one you trusted. He knew in advance," countered Vern.

"You misunderstand, Prince Vern. I didn't tell Arius anything. He acted independently based on information from his father, the Chief Minister."

"He's right," I confirmed. "I did notice Eric was doing something, but that doesn't mean we collaborated." Eric maneuvered me skillfully, yes, but it accomplished my goal as well, so I wasn't complaining.

"Also, I know I shouldn't say this, but I don't want to hear any complaining from you two, Zeke and Master Marth. Zeke, you are a prince of Ronaudia. You could do the exact same things I do if you put your mind to it. And Marth, you had the information about the attack, just like me, but you couldn't handle it well because you misjudged their strength."

All eyes turned to Marth at that.

"You don't understand... The Church's information network isn't as solid, and I can't mobilize the same number of forces as you..." Marth looked frustrated as he spouted his excuses, probably because this incident showed him the true difference in strength between him and Eric.

"Brother, I can't be like you..." uttered Zeke.

"It's not a matter of can or can't. This is a royal's duty. Rather than demand explanations from me, I feel you should be thinking and acting for yourself," Eric disclosed simply. What he said might sound cold, but I could feel kindness behind his words.

The others didn't seem completely satisfied, but Eric wasn't after their understanding. He answered because they asked, but he had no intention of changing his ways, no matter what anyone said.

"Anyway, we should be getting back. There's still plenty to do," he concluded.

We needed to confirm that the people we left at the beginning were able to take care of the remaining enemies in

hiding, and then we needed to get information out of the cleaners we captured.

Well, for that, I'd like to see what Eric and the people at the Intelligence Ministry could do.

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GETTING straight to the point, I underestimated Eric and the Intelligence Ministry. The six cleaners immediately talked, giving up the nobles of the anti-royalist faction who tried to have us all assassinated.

And the Intelligence Ministry didn't even torture the cleaners.

They use a non-stop series of mind-control spells like Enchant, Command, and Submission. I could just about cast the spells, but not in any useful manner since I barely had any chances to use them.

However, the Ministry had perfected the art, and the cleaners all offered confessions. The precision of your spells increased as you used them in real life, meaning the people at the Ministry used these spells regularly.

Eh, there were no laws against using mind-control spells on criminals in Ronaudia, and information gained in that method was still considered valid evidence. That's why the cleaners' confessions were evidence enough to capture the nobles and apply the same spells to them.

There were some very cautious people among the nobles of the anti-royalist faction, and the best of them managed to evade capture like a lizard sacrificing its tail to escape a predator. We did know who it was now, though. They just couldn't be arrested because we lacked the evidence.

One other question still remained: Why did they choose this moment to attack?

Typically, you would assume the Academy would be extra cautious as it was our first class in a dungeon. If they wanted to ensure they successfully assassinated us, they should have avoided this timing. Their target was Eric and Zeke, the two people who could become king in the future. There was no reason to be in such a rush to assassinate them.

But they did. Which meant they had a reason that caused them to hurry, right? Maybe it was because they determined they would succeed even if our side were extra cautious during that time.

But my father and Eric got wind of their movements, allowing them to prevent the plot without any danger.

Now, this is complete conjecture on my part, but what if information had leaked about our own defenses? Not all of it. Everything other than the hidden intelligence agents and me. If that happened, they might think they could break through our defenses by preparing enough forces to overpower ours.

In short, what if they were being played from the very beginning?

If my conjecture were on target, the question would be, who was playing them? I didn't think my father was the kind of person to use Eric and the rest of us as bait, putting us at risk. It wasn't impossible that the Intelligence Ministry acted without him, but Darius wasn't such an idiot that he'd miss what they were doing.

Which left Eric as the most likely culprit.

But it is just conjecture on my part in the end.

All I knew was that Eric had his own connections and information network. Darius had told Eric the necessary information about the assassination plot, but that didn't mean he'd told him everything. He planned to have the Ministry handle the attack.

And yet, Eric fully understood the situation, and his success here strengthened his influence within the kingdom. He even had the intelligence agents who took part in the operation under his command for a time. However, my father oversaw the organization as the chief minister, so he had the final authority.

Well, even if this was a plot of Eric's, he wasn't the sort of idiot to drown himself in scheming. Besides, Darius had an eye on things and could handle most situations.

I think that's enough talk about Eric for now.

On an entirely different topic, I attended all my classes at the Academy as a rule. I did work on my own thing while in class almost all the time, but I had never skipped class.

The problem was that attending class every day was the biggest hindrance now that I was taking on an extreme-difficulty

dungeon on my own. I couldn't finish the dungeon if I didn't have a significant chunk of time.

So, I negotiated with my father to allow me to reduce the amount I needed to attend as a reward for my assistance in the attack, but with the condition that I make sure I get the credits necessary to graduate.

It wasn't actually unusual for students to not attend class. Royals had duties to carry out even before they took the throne, and children of nobles who would become the head of the family someday had whatever business their family was involved in. That was why the Academy didn't emphasize attendance too much. Most classes were passable so long as your test grades were good, and the Academy's tests were a piece of cake for me.

My father would know all this, of course, and seemed to expect it when I said I wanted to attend classes less. Naturally, that meant he had his answer ready: I could attend class less often if I made regular appearances at events. Since starting the Academy, I hadn't attended a single function because I went straight to the dungeon after classes and on weekends.

I continued gathering info on the nobles, but Darius seemed to want me to get experience within the social circles while I was in the Academy. I did understand the value of gaining experience, but, honestly, it was just a pain. It was more important to me to gain the time I needed to really have a go at the extreme dungeon.

Which was why I accepted Darius's terms.

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"ARIUS, when was the last time I saw you? Eight years ago?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I apologize for staying away for so long."

And so, I quickly ended up at a ball Eric was hosting in the palace. But what was the point? It was just a gathering of all the same young nobles who went to the Academy. The king was there because my father decided to bring him along as a surprise since this was my fresh return to the social sphere.

Perhaps it was because he was Eric and Zeke's father, but Albert Stallion, King of Ronaudia, was a blond-haired, blue-eyed

stud of an older man. Even now, his appearance was as high-specced as always.

Usually, I would be the one to approach and greet him, but his casual demeanor that allowed him to pop into the ball of his own accord was very similar to Eric's.

"Your Majesty, perhaps we should leave the reveling to the youngsters," suggested my father.

"You're right. Apologies for crashing your party, Eric. I leave the rest in your capable hands."

Once my father and King Albert left, I was surrounded by noble girls, all of whom I didn't recognize. The majority looked like they were upperclassmen. They all wore extravagant ballgowns, perhaps meaning they were daughters of fairly high-ranking nobles. I had a rough overview of all the nobles in Ronaudia, but I hadn't gone so far as to memorize the faces of all the noble families' daughters. I had nothing to do with politics and power struggles.

"Master Arius, I've heard so much about you," twittered one.

"How incredible you are to best Prince Vern at the sword and defeat Master Marth at magic," chimed in another.

"I also heard you did the most in the fight against those scoundrels who sneaked into the dungeon. Please, would you tell us the tale of your valiant battle against the villains?" she asked, even though I fought the cleaners on the final stage of the dungeon where there were no other students.

Rumors had spread because Eric had publicly touted what I did.

"*You don't mind if I spread rumors that you defeated the cleaners, do you?*" he'd asked. "*I'd like to keep my own hand secret so we can get the one major player among the anti-royalist group who escaped us this time*."

It was true I had finished them off, so I went along with it.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not in the habit of boasting," I told the girls. "Feel free to gossip without me."

Because these rumors were making their rounds around the Academy, I was getting more ardent looks from the love-driven girls recently, which was annoying. I just brushed off these people who came looking for juicy gossip every time.

“Oh, my! You did so much, yet you don’t brag. You are amazing, Master Arius!”

“You are the epitome of a gentleman!”

Maybe it was the atmosphere of the ball, but they grew even more excited as they surrounded me instead of releasing me when I treated them coldly.

“Everyone’s interested in you, Arius,” came a voice. “Perhaps you should enjoy yourself more. It is your first ball in a long time.”

“Prince Eric!” shrieked the girls together, getting even more worked up.

It wasn’t a question about enjoying myself or not. I was in the middle of studying how to handle nobles well.

“I’m not much for chatting,” I explained. “How about you join me for a dance instead?” I suggested, holding my hand out to the first girl who spoke to me. It was a ball, after all. The court’s troupe of musicians played at a volume that didn’t prevent conversation.

“I would love to!” she said, blushing. I led us in a showy dance for one song.

It wasn’t my first time dancing. I went to events like this until I was seven, and considering my stats, dancing was easy.

Thunderous applause broke out once the song finished.

Eh, if I were going to stand out, it’d be now, I guess.

There were noble girls already waiting at the ready, demanding their turn, and I gave each of them a dance with me.

Anyway, for now, I memorized the faces and names of all the girls I partnered with. It could be a hassle if we met again and I didn’t remember them.

“Seriously, this is so tedious,” I muttered, standing on the palace balcony alone in the cool wind, having slipped out of the ballroom.

“You’re quite the popular one.”

I turned toward the sudden voice and saw Sophia looking unhappy for some reason. I mean, I did notice her approach.

“Not as popular as Eric,” I commented. “Besides, they’re not interested in me. They’re interested in the son of the chief minister.”

The future royal chief minister met their criteria, and, unlike Eric and Zeke, I wasn’t engaged already. Well, there could be some girls simply after me for my looks, and others were curious about

me because I had been standing out. Regardless, none of it had anything to do with me.

Sophia giggled at my fed-up expression. “That’s not true, Arius. You seem to have a low estimation of yourself. Everyone wants to become closer to you, specifically.” She smiled gently. “You’re a kind person who can’t stand by when people need you. It’s because of you that I’ve become more honest with myself. Thank you for that.”

“You give me too much credit. I just do what I want to.”

“Sure. Let’s say that’s what it is.” She stared straight into my eyes. “Thanks to the dungeon incident, I learned that you are powerful, but that’s no reason for you to force yourself to do things you can’t handle. Didn’t I tell you when we were children? You don’t have to force yourself to smile.”

This perfect beauty of a girl with hair the color of milky tea and eyes the color of turquoise… In Love Academy, she was the villainess, but in this world, she really was a good person.

She stood there in her red gown, gently smiling and bathed in moonlight, and I found I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. I’d never been that conscious of a girl being so close.

“Sophia…” I started but stopped. What in the world was I thinking? I had no interest in romance. Sophia stood there, unmoving, watching me, waiting for what I would say next. After a pause, I suggested, “You should probably be getting back to Eric.”

Conveniently for me, she was engaged. It may just be a political engagement, but it was still an engagement.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “Prince Eric is the host, and supporting him is one of my roles as his fiancée.”

It sounded like she guessed what I was getting at, and…the hint of sorrow in her expression was likely just a trick of my imagination.

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“I’M surprised you can dance, Arius. Actually, no, I’m not. You can do anything,” Vern told me when I returned to the ballroom. I hadn’t realized he was also taking part in the ball.

“No, I can’t do everything. There are things I’m bad at, too.”

“Such as…interacting with girls? I thought that might also be the case, but based on how you were managing earlier, I’d say you’re good at that too.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the group of girls I danced with earlier, who were smiling and waving in my direction.

He might say that about me, but he also handled the girls who approached him with natural ease. I nearly forgot because he can be a bit much, but he was a romantic interest in Love Academy and had untamed good looks. He was also the third prince of the Great Granbride Empire, meaning there was no way he *wouldn’t* be popular and good at dealing with girls.

“I’d thought there was one thing I was finally better at than you,” he claimed.

“No. I really am bad with girls.” Because it was such a pain to deal with love-brained girls.

“I think one of those guys standing by the wall might stab you if you say you’re bad with ladies. That said, I’m sure you’d just take him out before he could get you.”

Many of the students were invited to Eric’s ball, which might have been why the jealous stares I was showered in were the same as in the Academy. Maybe the boys had been hoping to see me, someone without much experience at social events, expose myself as a poor dancer. It did seem like there were even more jealous glares after I’d shown such an elaborate performance.

Apparently, Eric had invited the commoner students as well, but the majority got the hint and didn’t come. Only 20 percent of the students at the Academy were commoners anyway. I’m sure they would have just felt like lower-class attendees and wouldn’t have had fun.

That didn’t seem to affect Milia, however; her excuse was that she simply didn’t like parties.

Feeling the pangs of hunger, I went over to the buffet and piled a plate high with food, which was delicious, of course, as expected from the royal cooks. It was piping hot, kept warm with magic contraptions, and they kept bringing out new dish after dish.

“Master Arius, would you like to try some of this as well?” a girl holding a plate offered. They started gathering when I started eating.

Vern and I cleared plate after plate as we kept the girls company. I might have a massive appetite, but Vern was voracious. The girls watched, enchanted, as Vern and I plowed gallantly through the food while the boys looked on with exasperation. It was fine; we minded our manners.

“But you know…they do make a good couple,” gossiped one of the girls.

“They do. I can’t help being jealous,” agreed another.

I followed their gazes and saw Sophia and Sasha drawing close to Eric and Zeke, respectively. They were right. Sophia and Eric, the perfect beauty of a noble girl and the attractive, graceful, blond prince did make a good couple.

It wasn’t that uncommon, even among political marriages. And it was fine—they agreed to the whole thing.

During the exact moment I thought that, Vern dropped a bomb into the conversation. “You think?” he questioned. “Sophia and Arius would make a better couple, in my opinion. Don’t you agree, Arius?”

The girls exploded into an uproar at that.

“What? Does that mean Master Arius would steal Eric’s fiancée?”

“No, never! Master Arius and Lady Sophia would never!”

“But… But there was that rumor that they kissed in the cafeteria…”

Did you do that on purpose? Uh, no. Vern might be a meathead, but he wasn’t a bad person.

“Vern, could you not say things that could be taken the wrong way? Sophia and I are just acquaintances,” I corrected.

“Come on. That’s cruel, calling Sophia just an acquaintance. I’m just giving my honest opinion, my good friend.”

He was right. It was rude to Sophia to call her just an acquaintance. “Well, I guess I do think of her as a friend, but…it’s a little embarrassing calling her a friend.

Vern grinned. “Huh, that’s surprising.”

“What is?”

“You have a surprising weakness. Are you embarrassed at calling someone a friend? Aw, even you can be cute sometimes.”

Cute? What the hell was he saying?

But the girls around us smiled and whispered, “Aww, Master Arius is so cute!”

Come on. It’s not like whispering it meant I couldn’t hear you.

“Fine, Vern. I’ll be crystal clear about my feelings from now on,” I relented.

“A-Arius… We are best friends, aren’t we?” His expression stiffened.

I believe my eyes at that moment looked the same as when I saw a monster in the extreme-difficulty dungeon. “Actually, Vern, I believe we were arch-enemies, weren’t we?”

Chapter 7: Reincarnated

I'M not going to elaborate on how I got Vern to shut up after that. I didn't actually do anything to him, but let's just say he got scared all on his own.

Anyways, thanks to my negotiations with my father, I gained freedom while attending the Academy. Of course, I wasn't so free to do whatever I wanted all the time, but I could get a three-day weekend by not going to class on Monday or Friday. Having that extra day meant I could make a serious attempt at the extreme-difficulty dungeon.

"I heard you did most of the work in that dungeon."

I was in the library spending time with Noelle for the first time in a while. Even though I was going to class less, they were still boring, and I spent the time mostly reading books. I'd run out of things to read and went to the library during lunch break, where I found Noelle.

"I wasn't nearby, so I didn't actually see," she continued. "But there're incredible-sounding rumors going around that you beat the bad guys to a bloody pulp and used Teleport and other amazing spells."

"This again? Noelle, don't take all these rumors at face value. The second part is right, however. Only Eric and the others in our group saw me fight. Eric was the one who spread those rumors, so they're not entirely false, but he embellished too much."

Supposedly, I was fighting alone from the very beginning and killed the cleaners in an instant with some incredible spell. Impenetrable Defense was a tier-ten combined-elemental spell, so, yeah, it was flashy. And yes, I was the one who defeated all the cleaners. But I could sense some evil intent from Eric among the embellished statements.

"You've become the school's hero with all the rumors. I felt like…you'd gone far away. You don't come to the library as often as you used to… I missed you."

The last part she muttered so quietly I didn't catch it, but I could guess what she was trying to say based on her demeanor. It was true that I was spending a lot of time with Eric and the others when I was in the Academy, and I was going to the library less often, just because I was going to class less frequently. It had been a while since I'd seen Noelle.

Noelle was probably the only person I really knew when I first started. My school life had changed quite a lot, I guess.

"Noelle, we're friends, aren't we?" I asked. I felt uncomfortable using the word "friends," but I could say it easily to her because I knew she wouldn't laugh.

But her reaction was unexpected.

"E-eek! A-Arius, what is this all about all of a sudden?!" Her face was bright red. Maybe she was embarrassed by someone saying it right to her face.

"Sorry," I blurted quickly. "It's embarrassing, isn't it? Having someone call you a friend."

"N-no, not at all! I'm just so happy you consider me a friend!" she cried. It wasn't often she spoke so loudly. And we were in a library.

The students nearby gave us full-on glares, making her turn even redder as she huddled over.

"Calm down, Noelle," I reassured her.

"It's your fault! Anyone would shout if someone said something that amazing to them..." Again, I didn't catch the second part of that, but it seemed I was right in thinking she thought of me as a friend, too.

"Noelle, I plan on coming to the library on Wednesdays during lunch. Do you want to meet me here then?"

"Is that all right?"

"Of course, it's all right. I want to see you. You're the only person I can have such comfortable conversations with."

It wasn't that we talked about anything in particular, just whatever books we were reading, or sometimes I tutored her on things she didn't understand from class. They were the sort of things you talked about with classmates you really got along with, but I didn't have those conversations with the people who were in my classes.

“A-all right! I promise I’ll be here. Even if you don’t come, I’ll always be waiting here every week!”

“And I’ll keep my side of the promise. But there’s always the chance something might come up. You can use Message, can’t you? We should register each other.” Noelle was good at magic and was in B Class for the magic application lesson.

“Oh! Sharing contact info with you? Hey, um, have you registered other people?”

“Pretty much just my family and a few acquaintances. Now that you mention it, you’ll be the first person from the Academy I register.”

Eric and I didn’t have a relationship where we Messaged each other. Besides, I had a feeling if we did register with each other, he’d force annoying problems onto me. And the royals didn’t use Message for their communications. It was standard for them to communicate via the traditional method of letters with wax seals, partially because it left a record of their communications.

And while I was thinking about that…

“I-I’m Arius’s first…” whispered Noelle, her face so red you could boil a kettle on it.

“Noelle, are you all right? Do you have a fever or something?”

“I-I’m perfectly f-fine.”

She didn’t look perfectly fine to me.

I waited for Noelle to calm down before leaving the library. I decided it was okay not to worry about her since her fever seemed to go away. Just in case, I walked her to her classroom and got even more heated looks from the girls, perhaps because of the rumors. I also felt like there were a lot of jealous looks from the boys.

But I don’t care what other people think.

Once my class was over and I was about to leave, I found Milia waiting for me. “Arius, do you have a minute?”

I planned to go to the Citadel of Ancient Gods dungeon, but Milia didn’t give me the impression she would take no for an answer, which made me not want to try.

I followed her in silence out of the Academy grounds. She took me to an old café nestled in the back of the shopping district.

“I’ll have a milk tea, please. What about you, Arius?”

“A coffee.”

It was a small café with no other customers. There was just who I assumed was the owner, an old man with a sullen expression.

Milia remained silent even after we ordered. She finally spoke once our drinks came and the owner returned behind the counter.

“Arius, if what I’m about to say makes absolutely no sense, then say so. Agh, there’s no point prefacing it like that. You’ll probably pretend like you don’t know anyway.”

“You’re already making absolutely no sense,” I said lightly, and she glared at me.

“I’ll just get straight to the chase then: Arius, were you reincarnated here like me?”

That was straight to the chase. Not that I was shocked. I had considered the possibility Milia was reincarnated. Her words and actions were the most unlike the game compared to the others.

“Yeah. I was,” I answered.

“I knew it. You’re completely different from the Arius in the game. And what happened in the dungeon definitely made me think you were abnormally strong, but that was evident in normal classes. I’m surprised you just admitted it, though. Does that mean you’re not trying to hide it?”

“I don’t intend on going around telling people because it could turn into a mess, but I don’t mind if people figure it out. There are other reincarnated people in this world anyway, and it wasn’t like the people here hunted them like witches.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Milia couldn’t help being surprised, I guess. I was the son of the chief minister—which allowed me to get whatever information I wanted—and I had been using my connections to gather information from around the world.

On the other hand, Milia might be the protagonist of Love Academy, but she is just a normal student in the end. She could only get information a normal person could. I hadn’t heard talk about other reincarnated people in Ronaudia, so she wouldn’t have heard that others like us exist.

“I’m certain of this information since I looked into it myself,” I started. “It’s rare, but there are other people who were reincarnated into this world. I was surprised how readily they were

accepted. My parents and the people close to me already figured it out."

Not that I asked them directly about it, but Rhea and Darius knew I was reincarnated, and they still treated me like their own son. Grey and Selena noticed, too; I was sure of that. That was likely why they never treated me like a child.

"Are you trying to say there's no need to hide it then?" she asked.

"No, I'm not saying that. Some people would try to use the knowledge and power of people who were reincarnated. There's even a chance we could be treated as heretical or discriminated against, which is why it's best if people don't know. The reactions of people in the Academy and the capital could be particularly unpredictable."

The capital of Ronaudia, the Academy, and its surroundings were the only part of this world held in the cloistered universe of Love Academy.

"Only this place is the world of Love Academy," I explained. "There's a whole different world beyond the capital. Oh yes, Milia, you're from the countryside, right? Your hometown is probably outside the bounds of Love Academy, too, isn't it? You must have felt something was off when you came here."

She fell into thought as if trying to sort through my claims. I was sure she knew what I was talking about. Then she stated, "But the attack during the dungeon class didn't happen in the game. Assassination doesn't fit Love Academy's world."

She must be wondering, if the capital really was a closed box for Love Academy, then how do things outside of the plot happen?

"It's because this isn't a game—it's a real world. It's unsurprising there are people who'd interfere with Love Academy's world. I would say it's more unnatural that Academy life developed so that it's full of nothing but love-brained idiots."

There was no way authority and restrictions would do nothing when it came to a school where royalty and nobles attended. Nevertheless, I preferred dealing with that to lovesick idiots.

"Love-brained idiots?" asked Milia. "Arius, are you making fun of Love Academy? If so, you're really going to annoy me."

“Sorry, but I’ve got no interest in otome games. That’s why I’ve been thinking of nothing but getting stronger since I reincarnated as Arius.”

“Hm… Guess that’s why you’re so abnormally strong.”

“Arius’s base specs were always high, anyway. Stupidly high because he’s a love interest in the game.”

“That’s true. I guess it’s what you’d expect if Arius threw himself into training. But Arius is supposed to be a shy, quiet boy with glasses. You’re wearing glasses, at least, but you destroyed the rest of the character.”

“Same goes for you. You’re not like the protagonist of Love Academy at all.”

“And whose fault is that?!”

Come on. Coming at me with complaints all of a sudden? But I did know what she meant. “I figured with all the showing off I did in the dungeon that other reincarnated people would figure me out, if there were any. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone you were reincarnated.”

She paused. “What do you mean?”

“Once you realized I was reincarnated, you figured—based on what I said before—that I had also realized you were. That’s why you called me here, isn’t it? To make sure I stay quiet. I don’t intend to say anything, and I don’t care if you were reincarnated or not. The person in front of me right now is the Milia of this world, and I don’t hate the Milia of this world. What I’m saying is, I’m not planning on barging in and destroying your world.”

“Even if I tell everyone you were reincarnated?”

“I don’t think you’re the type of person to do that,” I responded immediately, and she stared at me again. But it was honestly what I thought. “Okay, for argument’s sake, even if you told people I was reincarnated, I wouldn’t do anything. Again, my parents and the people close to me already know. If there’s anyone who would treat me differently if they find out, then I guess our relationship wasn’t much to begin with. On top of that, I’m an adventurer; I can live anywhere in the world. It’s not a problem for me if I get chased out of the capital because people found out.”

However, it was never going to happen. Even if Milia sacrificed me to prevent others from finding out, I wouldn’t hate her for it. It

was true that I was reincarnated.

“Urgh, now you really are annoying me,” she remarked. “Looking at me like you see through everything, trusting me for no reason, not caring even if you get found out… You don’t get anything, do you?”

She pouted and turned away before continuing.

“That’s not what I wanted to ask you about. No, not even ask. Not what I wanted to *say*. I was reincarnated into this world and decided everyone was just a character, and I just played the role of Milia. What you told me…it changed me.” She spoke slowly, expressing annoyance on her face. “And during the dungeon class, it was Prince Eric who dragged us into his plan, right? It had nothing to do with you, but you still protected us until the end. And so, I…as a thank you…wanted to tell you that I was reincarnated, too. To tell you that you’re not alone… But if there’re other people who were reincarnated, then I’m just stupid for thinking all that!”

Oh. That was what she meant. And I went and said things I didn’t have to, making her say things she didn’t have to.

“It’s enough for me that you felt that way. Thank you, Milia.”

“And that’s what annoys me about you!”



She blushed. We had both admitted embarrassing things, I guess. To be honest, I still did have one concern: Milia didn’t ask about my previous life. Maybe she didn’t ask because she didn’t want to talk about her own. Could be as simple as she didn’t like prying.

I didn’t know the reason, and I didn’t plan on forcing her to say. I wasn’t going to pry into her past life either.

It was fine if she wanted to tell me when she was ready to.

Stats
Arius Gilberto (Age 15)
LVL: 1852
HP: 19353
MP: 29558
STR: 7428
DEF: 7424
INT: 8356
RES: 7886
DEX: 7425
AGI: 7428

Afterword

THANK you to everyone who picked up the first volume of *Love & Magic Academy*. I'm the author, Toyozo Okamura. It's nice to meet you!

I never imagined something I'd write would be made into a novel. Seriously. I am so grateful to Micro Magazine for approaching me about it.

I wrote the first chapter of the web version of *Love & Magic Academy* in May 2022. After that, I rewrote it several times and first started publishing it as a serial story online in October 2022. The book version was published fifteen months after I first started publishing the online version.

A big thank you to my editor, who gave me all sorts of ideas when it came to publishing the story as a book, and to Parum, the illustrator, for making character designs that left what I had in mind for them in the dust. You really outdid yourself on Sophia's and Marth's designs. Seriously, you're a god!

Love & Magic Academy is set in the world of an otome game, and our protagonist reincarnates into the world as one of the love interests, Arius, who ignores the romance elements and aims to become the strongest. In the web version, Arius saves the girls, which leads to a budding romance, but even I thought that meant the title was misleading from around the halfway point.

Despite that, I'm grateful to all the readers who continued reading the web version. I've thought it over and plan to actually have Arius completely ignore romance elements, focusing on nothing but becoming the strongest. Hope to see you in the next volume!



The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

By Makino Maebaru Illust Hachi Uehara

What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illust Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess

By Roku Kaname Illust Hazuki Futaba

She was a queen who died during a revolution. Now she's gone back in time. Her first course of action? Changing her fate by winning over the revolutionary mastermind!



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