
Mushoku Tensei
jobless reincarnation
Written by
Rifujin na
Magonote
Illustrated by
Shirotaka
NOVEL
12

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Shirotaka


Geese
Elinalise
Lilia
Talhand
Paul
Rudeus
Roxy
DRAMATIS PERSONAE


“Oh,
thank God.”

Mushoku Tensei

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Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI ~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 12

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

First published in Japan in 2016 by
KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-260-8
Printed in Canada
First Printing: August 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

VOLUME 12: ADOLESCENCE – LABYRINTH ARC

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"It's inescapable; a time will come when reality is so harsh, you'll want to avert your eyes from it."

—With my father gone and
my mother ill, what can I do?

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
Arrival

THE LABYRINTH CITY of Rapan was one of a kind.

Rapan sat in the midst of a vast desert, trapped within a peculiar, enormous white cage. An inquisitive person who approached would find this cage was actually constructed of bones —those of some long-dead behemoth. The ribs alone were large enough to encase the entire city.

At one point, the city had been nothing more than a small oasis. The remains of the behemoth had transformed it, and it was now surrounded by a shocking number of labyrinths, making it an alluring destination for countless adventurers. Thanks to these adventurers streaming in from all over the world, looking to get rich quick, the city had become a stage where both happy endings and tragedies were acted out.

This city, wrapped in a whirlwind of chaos, is currently one of the largest and most prominent of the Begaritt Continent.

—Excerpt from *Wandering the World*
by Adventurer and Author Bloody Kant

***

I had a dim recollection of the information contained in *Wandering the World*. Rapan was a large, earth-colored city, nestled in the midst of its characteristic twelve white pillars, with buildings made of mud and materials obtained from regional beasts. I'd seen a lot of cities with the same aesthetic on the Demon Continent.

That said, this place was unexpectedly verdant, perhaps thanks to the oasis by the bone pillars. Even from afar, I could see a line of what looked like palm trees. The atmosphere was unique, too.

There was something like a crude smell in the air, not unlike the crowded slave markets.

“Surprised? Those pillars are actually a behemoth’s ribs.”

We were still walking along as I surveyed the area when Galban called out to me boastfully. Thanks to the current formation of our group, I’d been talking to him a lot lately. The man loved to brag. His stories were always incredible and self-flattering, with questionable veracity, but easy to enjoy if you suspended disbelief.

“When the great hero, second-generation North God Kalman, visited this land, he and his companions defeated a behemoth that was rampaging through the desert. They feasted on some of its meat and left the rest of its remains to rot, leaving what you see now—bones that refuse to decay, standing testament to the passage of time.”

“Wow.”

So this land had some connection to the North God Kalman, huh? I knew some of the tales about him, but I’d never heard anything about him slaying a behemoth before. I had seen one behemoth myself as we traveled, but it had been way too large to even consider taking on. You’d have to be insane to even try. I wondered how he’d managed it. Well, the North God *had* apparently bested an immortal Demon King and an enormous dragon, so maybe he just made a hobby of defeating monsters with colossal amounts of HP.

“Ants were among the numerous monsters that feasted on the fallen behemoth’s flesh, and they are the cause of the city’s numerous labyrinths. When monsters devour other monsters that are stronger than they are, they give birth to powerful offspring in turn. Those mutant ants dug countless nests, and the nests all turned into labyrinths.”

“Oh, I see.”

When the behemoth died, bugs swarmed to it. Then they began to reproduce and create nests. Over the course of many

years, those insects began to die, the nests began to mutate, and thus the labyrinths were born.

So that's how it happened, I thought.

The bit about eating strong monsters and giving birth to powerful offspring, though… That had to be a folktale, no more believable than the tales of how eating a mermaid's flesh would give you immortality. If it were true, then the people of the Demon Continent, who consumed monster meat on a daily basis, should have been much stronger than they were. Monsters might be a special exception to the rule, but I didn't buy it.

Wait. Actually, could this explain the higher rate of strong people, such as Badigadi and Kishirika, being born there? Monsters themselves were just mutated versions of normal animals. It would make a certain amount of sense if people could also give birth to such mutants…

Oh, crap. I'd eaten quite a bit of monster meat myself. What would I going to do if my child with Sylphie was born and suddenly declared, "I am the Emperor of the Demon World!"? I might find sudden kinship with the birds who hatched their eggs only to find a cuckoo's offspring hidden amongst them.

"Adventurers and merchants from all over the world gather here," Galban continued to monologue.

Magic items were churned out in droves. Magical implements and armor flew off the shelves. No matter how many magical crystals —otherwise known as magic stones—or magically imbued crystals you had, there were never enough. As long as your stock was of a certain quality, you could be assured it would all sell at high prices. This was a land where merchants' dreams came true.

Granted, making it here required knowledge of how to traverse the desert, among other things. Only a select few could make a habit of it. The rest would surely find more profitable, safer trade if they went to the Central Continent.

Then again, a fish in a small pond knew nothing of the ocean. Galban seemed quite drunk on his own narcissism, so I wasn't about

to spoil his fun. The economy only worked thanks to merchants like him.

We bid farewell to Galban after arriving in Rapan. His group was apparently going to put up their tent at the edge of the city. Our time together had been short, but I'd learned a lot from his group, and they had taken care of us.

"Thank you for everything."

"Same here. If you ever need anything again, just say the word."

It was a quick parting. I kept my farewells minimal, giving just a bow to Balibadom and Carmelita. Things had been a bit strained by the end, but I hoped there was no ill will between us.

Now we needed to search for Geese. Or Paul. I certainly hoped they were here, since we'd rushed all this way. There was still some time before the sun set, and ordinarily, we'd move to find an inn first, but perhaps we should prioritize looking for those two instead.

"How are we going to go about this?" I asked.

"Excellent question," said Elinalise. "This city is big enough that it must have an Adventurers' Guild, so let's go there first."

"Got it."

I would have preferred to drop our luggage off first, but oh well, this worked. I did want to stay at the same inn as Geese and Paul if possible, anyway.

When we inquired about the location of the guild, we were pointed to the center of the city, the usual location for such things. The people navigating the streets were primarily merchants. Most wore the same garb as Galban: a turban; simple, flowing fabric that wrapped around their entire body; and full beards. They walked the streets, pulling camels along with them, spreading their wares out for

sale by the roadside. Many were so thoroughly swathed that none of their skin was visible.

Among those erecting eaves of cloth was one individual in particular who wore an outfit straight out of *Aladdin*. Their shop was a general store, selling lamps made of metal and pots with curious patterns drawn on them. It was all very Arabian in flavor. I bet if you played a flute, a red snake would poke its head out of a vase to take a look.

As we approached the Adventurers' Guild, I saw a number of people dressed in familiar adventurer's garb. There had to be a lot of people in this area who were originally from the Central Continent. They all had battle-worn faces; probably S-rank adventurers who specialized in labyrinth diving. Most wore pretty light clothing. It was dangerous to go out into the blinding sunlight without ample coverage to protect your skin, but it was probably fine as long as they didn't venture out for extended periods.

The building for the Adventurers' Guild was carved out of an enormous boulder, most likely through magic. I could tell immediately because it resembled something I could have made myself, though the complexity of its construction surpassed my capabilities. There was an exquisite relief carved into the entrance, and the interior, once you stepped inside, was well-ventilated enough to feel refreshingly cool.

The vibe within the guild was about the same as the rest of the city, but being the kind of city it was, there were no newbie adventurers to be seen. Everyone looked powerful. The ones who particularly caught my eye had scarred face and bodies. They all seemed to have checkered pasts. Not me, though. I'd led a sheltered life—no checks, no stripes, no spots.

"Okay, let's start asking around about Paul and Geese," Elinalise said.

"Sounds good," I agreed. "I'm sure we'll find something if we ask."

“Geese should already have an information network here, so I’m sure he’ll hear of it if we go poking around using his name… Oh, it looks like that won’t be necessary.” I followed Elinalise’s gaze to discover a monkey-faced man in a corner of the guild. He was deep in conversation with a sword-wielding beastman.

“Come on, I’m askin’ you,” Geese pleaded. “You owe her one too; I know it.”

“You’re asking the impossible.”

“Can’t you just bend this once? This is a race against time.”

“It’s already been a month, hasn’t it? She’s dead.”

“No,” Geese shook his head. “There’s no way. Even if she is, we gotta at least go in and check; find her remains. Come on, I’m beggin’ you. I’ve seen your skill myself; that’s why I’m here. I’ll even pay you double, if that’s what you want.”

He had a desperate look on his face. I never knew the little weasel could make that kind of face.

“Sorry, but try someone else. I’m not eager to die.”

Geese tried for a while to persuade the man, but at last the beastman shook his head and Geese clicked his tongue loud enough we could hear it from where we were standing. “Tch, you damn coward! Can’t believe you bother to call yourself an adventurer with that attitude!”

“Yeah, yeah, say whatever you like.” The man strode out the door without so much as a backward glance.

It was rare to see Geese curse at someone. No—truthfully, I didn’t know that much about him. The Geese I’d encountered in the past had been more light-hearted, though, and I said as much. “He looks like he’s really backed into a corner.”

“Oh my, that’s how he usually is, though,” Elinalise said.

“Really? I kind of had a different impression of him.”

“He must’ve been trying to look more mature in front of you. Hey, Geese!”

Geese twisted his head around, searching. His eyes went wide when he spotted us and shuffled our way. “Oh, hey! If it ain’t Elinalise!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said.

Geese gave an empty laugh. “Not at all, you’re actually here way faster than I thought.” He broke out into a smile as he clapped her on the shoulder. “Actually, just how the hell did you get here this fast, hm? It’s only been six months since I sent that letter. Ahh, you must not’ve read it, eh? Probably missed you as you were travelin’.”

“We’ll talk about that later. What’s going on with Zenith?” Elinalise asked.

His face clouded over. “Not great. I sent that letter to you because I figured it’d be a drawn-out affair. Though, to be honest… Well, we can talk about that later, too.”

Apparently, things weren’t going well, but we’d anticipated as much. My overly optimistic hope that they would have solved everything by the time we got here had been quickly proven false.

“For the moment,” I cut in, “could you please guide us to where my father is?”

Geese’s eyes flew open when he looked at me. Then he started scratching at his upper lip. “Oh, hey…that’s you, ain’t it, boss? You sure got bigger.”

“And you sure don’t seem to have changed, Mister Geese.”

“Yuck, enough. That gives me the creeps. Just call me ‘newbie’ like you used to.”

Ahh, this exchange sure brought back memories.

“My my, you two sure seem to be close,” Elinalise commented in amusement.

Hearing that, Geese grinned. “Well, we did share a cell together, eh, boss?”

“Indeed,” I said, “it sure brings back memories.”

Ah, nostalgia—the time I spent completely naked in that cell in the Doldia Tribe's village. It was after I crossed the sea from the Demon Continent to the Millis Continent, been caught up in a kidnapping incident, and dragged back to their village. Among the Doldia, those facing serious crimes were stripped of their clothes and tossed into a cell. I was given the same treatment on the basis that I had kidnapped the Sacred Beast and tried to commit sexual acts with it. Those were false allegations, of course. Who the hell would try to commit sexual acts with a puppy? Anyway, it was there that I met Geese. His crime was a minor one, brought about by his own greed. He'd been quite the generous thief.

"Ah, that's enough of that though. I'll take you to where Paul is," Geese said, giving another empty smile as we left the Adventurers' Guild behind us.

Paul was staying at an inn in the corner of the city. The building was constructed of mud and stone and was aimed at B-rank adventurers, at least by Demon Continent standards. It was neither lavish nor dilapidated.

Once we arrived at the entrance, Geese said to us, "Listen good, Paul's in quite the state right now. So Elinalise, I know you've got a lot you wanna say, but just save it this time."

"I can't make any promises," she replied, shaking her head.

Geese forced a smile and shrugged his shoulders, leaving it at that. Still, this was Elinalise we were talking. She wasn't going to suddenly turn hostile and aggressive. "You too, Boss. Don't start a fight like you did last time, got it? I'm sure you have a lot you wanna say, but just…try not to blame him too much, 'kay?"

It had to be pretty bad for Geese to go on such a long preamble. Besides, I had already seen Paul when he was at his weakest and running from his problems. I just had to mentally prepare myself for something similar.

Though his appearance might suggest otherwise, Paul wasn't the most mentally durable. If something bad happened, he'd sink into

depression immediately. I wouldn't go so far as to call him an emotional wreck, but he didn't have the resilience to handle massive setbacks. I figured he'd bounce back to being as self-assured as he had been when we lived in Buena Village once we found Zenith, but who knew?

This was an essential step. I needed to be open-minded enough that people would call me the Buddha Rudeus.

"'Kay, let's go in," Geese said, and we entered.

There was no door, only a curtain that sectioned off the inside from the outside. The first floor of the inn was basically like all the others I'd seen, with tables for people to eat at. The materials used to construct said tables was different, as was their layout, but other than that, it was the same.

I recognized Paul at a glance. His upper half was flopped over the top of a table.

"Ah…!" Someone gasped quietly.

It was Lilia, standing just beside Paul. Even on this continent, she was still wearing her maid uniform. Her normally tidy hair had grown frayed, and her face was haggard with exhaustion. Still, she brightened when our eyes met. She bowed toward me and immediately nudged Paul's back.

The woman who sat directly in front of Paul stood up. She looked at my face and retreated several steps, then suddenly lowered her head. Her body was cloaked in a robe. Which one was she again—Vierra or Shierra? I was pretty sure she was Shierra. I'd met her in Millishion—she was an accountant, right?

Her face was heavy with exhaustion. All of theirs were.

I took her seat, planting myself directly across from Paul.

"Master, Lord Rudeus has come," Lilia announced.

"Hm…?" Coaxed by her prodding, Paul slowly lifted his head. He had dark circles beneath his eyes. His entire body had gone gaunt and emaciated. He looked terrible, but there was no scruffy

stubble around his jaw and his hair was fairly well-kept. He was no longer steeped in the stench of alcohol, either.

Still, I could tell he was at his wits' end. I was glad we'd come. Seeing the condition he was in told me it had been the right decision.

"Rudy…?"

"Father. It's been a while."

He stared at me, eyes dazed and unfocused. Almost as if he wasn't entirely awake. No, maybe he *had* been sleeping. Dozing in and out of unconsciousness as he lay slumped across the table.

It had been so long since we last saw each other. Last time, he'd yelled and rebuked me. Even though he'd felt cornered at the time, I'd still returned his strong words in kind, and it had turned into a fight.

Not today. Today I was the Buddha Rudeus.

"Huh? That's weird, I can see Rudy. Ha ha, what's up, Rudy? It's been so long. You look like you're doing well. How are Norn and Aisha?" he asked, his face dark and overcast.

Honestly, his reaction wasn't what I'd expected. I thought he would be just as he had been before—drunk and running from his troubles. Sporting a flask in one hand, yelling at me.

"Uh, I took them in. They're living in the Magic City of Sharia right now. They're doing fine. I've left them in the care of some trustworthy people, just in case."

"Okay, yeah, that figures. Just as reliable as ever, Rudy. Ah, how are you, by the way? Doing good?"

"Oh, yes… I guess I am."

He smiled, flippant and carefree. A smile unbefitting of the circumstances, as if he'd lost all heart. "Okay, well, that's good. That's the most important thing."

There was no life in his eyes. Perhaps his spirit had given out and he'd become nothing more than an empty husk. I gave Geese a nervous look, but he merely nodded back grimly.

Seriously? This was what Paul had become?

“Rudy…” Paul took to his feet and tottered around the edge of the table toward me. Then he pulled me into a tight hug. “I’m…a hopeless bastard.”

I just silently returned the embrace.

Maybe he *was* hopeless. Maybe he would never return to the way he was. I could hardly believe it, not when he had a grandchild on the way. But everything would be fine now that I was here. I would do something to fix this. It was the whole reason I’d come.

“I can’t save your mother. I can’t even keep the promises I made. I’ve completely failed you as a father too. I really am a hopeless bastard.”

“Please don’t worry. I’m here now. Things are going to be okay.”

“Urgh… Rudy, you really have gotten big, haven’t you?” He squeezed my shoulders tight. It hurt a little bit, but I wouldn’t complain.

“I did indeed. I’m going to have a child soon as well. So just leave the rest to me and take some time to relax.”



“Huh? A child?!” A strangled cry escaped Paul’s throat and light came flooding back to his eyes. “Wh-whaaa?!” He looked entirely bewildered as he patted his hands against my face. “Wait, are you actually the real thing?”

“I am indeed.”

“So this isn’t a dream?”

“I’m dreamy enough for it to seem like one, right?” I joked.

“Yeah, it’s definitely you.” He blinked several times, then looked around.

Lilia’s eyes met his. “Good morning, Master.”

“Oh, it’s you, Lilia. How long did I sleep?”

“Since Lord Talhand left to go shopping, so about an hour.”

“Okay, guess I was still only half-awake.” He shook his head and stretched his body.

Ah-ha, so he was just half-asleep, I thought. He wasn’t a husk after all. Good. I was too young to be stuck looking after my old man.

Paul retook his seat and turned toward me. Then, as if we were redoing the whole reunion, he asked, “Rudy, why are you here?”

“I already told you. I came to help.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

I shook my head. I’d anticipated that question. We’d had a similar communication mix-up before and it had turned into a fight, but this time, things would be all right. I had seen his letter, and Norn and Aisha were in my care. “Everything is fine. Norn and Aisha, as well. They’re being looked after,” I said, repeating what I’d already said a moment ago.

“O-oh, okay.” Paul looked confused. He reached out to pat my body again, almost as if he were checking to confirm that I really was here. “No, but… I mean, didn’t you get here way too fast?”

“We took a somewhat unique method of transport. I’m sure I’ll have to explain when it’s time to go home.”

“Unique, huh? Well, knowing you, I guess it’s possible.” Paul looked dumbfounded as he dropped his shoulders, mouth still agape.

“Well, just to clear everything up, why don’t you tell me what happened after Geese sent that letter?”

“Uh, no, hold up. I’m kind of confused.”

“All right then. Why don’t you drink some water and try to calm down?” I used my earth magic to conjure a cup, water magic to fill it, then passed it over to Paul.

He took it readily and gulped the liquid down. Once he was finished, he let out a big sigh. “Sorry, I was just a bit shocked. I knew Geese had gone off on his own and sent that letter. I just figured it’d be a while before you came.”

“We hurried as fast as we could,” I said.

Paul forced a smile. “Hurried is an understatement.”

A month and a half. From Paul’s perspective, just over six months had passed since they’d sent their letter. That was considered fast? I supposed it was. Ordinarily, it would have taken us another year to get here. Paul had probably figured they had another ten months to wait.

He suddenly put a hand to his chin, clearly racking his brain. He looked nervous as he asked, his voice slow and purposeful, “So, you did just say something about having a kid?”

Oh yeah, I had. It wasn’t something I intended to keep from him, but perhaps he was angry with me, thinking, *Why are you having such a good time while I’m over here struggling?*

I constructed my response carefully. “Well, the truth is, I got married while I was attending the University of Magic.”

“Married?” Paul’s brows furrowed. “With who? Ah, maybe Eris?”

“No, Sylphie,” I corrected. “We met up again at the university.”

“Sylphie? You mean the one from Buena Village? So, she was alive, huh?”

“Yes, though she also had a tough time of her own.”

Paul stroked his chin, still looking surprised. I’d sent several letters to him, but apparently he hadn’t received them after all. “Could you tell me what led up to this marriage, exactly?”

“Uh, sure. Yeah. I should probably go ahead and do that.”

I decided to explain what had happened after I sent the first letter. How I’d enrolled at the university, and everything from there on, leading up to my marriage. I chose my words carefully as I went. Honestly, I had nothing but good memories of my time at school. It had certainly had its low points, but it wouldn’t be exaggerating to say I’d had the time of my life there, either. I’d made friends, found my wife, and had plenty of fun.

I tried to keep my recounting of events as objective as possible, but I couldn’t hide it. There was no denying I’d had a good time there.

“I see. So…a child. My grandchild…”

I was prepared for him to scold me. After all, the fact that I was having a kid meant I’d been doing the act that led to its creation, at a time when Paul was working desperately to try to save Zenith. It’d be only natural if he was upset. Enjoyment was supposed to be shared, and Paul was living a life of abstinence.

Just as I was thinking that, Paul’s head drooped. “I’m sorry. You’re about to become a father, and yet you had to come here because I’m so worthless.”

An apology. From Paul, no less!

“No, actually, I’m the one who feels bad. We haven’t even found Mother yet, and I’m just moving on with my life.”

“No, I can’t blame you at all for that. After all, I slept with Lilia once, too.”

Well, they were husband and wife, after all, so I didn't really see the harm in it.

"I meant to wait until we'd saved Zenith. I really am pathetic." Paul lowered his eyes, looking as if he might cry again. He was so fragile. Like porcelain.

Lilia suddenly cut in, "We were attacked by a succubus. We had no choice."

"Even so, you… Ahh, fuck." Paul cradled his head in his hands as the memories came flooding back.

A succubus, huh? In that case, it really wasn't his fault. I'd encountered them myself, and there really was no resisting them. They exposed the darkest corners of your heart…though their attacks *could* be nullified by detoxification magic. Paul had a healer in his party who should've been able to do that.

I turned my head toward Shierra, who panicked the moment she felt my eyes on her. "I-I am terribly sorry. It's just… I was so terrified of the captain. I couldn't do anything."

"Rudy, please don't blame her. I'm the one at fault."

When Paul was aroused, he probably went right at whatever women were around him. It had to have been frightening to see a man like him overcome with lust—especially considering that Paul was the main damage dealer of their party. Detoxification magic couldn't be performed unless you physically touched a person. It wasn't surprising they'd been unable to pin him down long enough to use it. Lilia must have stepped forward to use her body to resolve the matter.

"Yeah, I ran into succubi along the way here. I get how terrifying they are. There wasn't anything you could've done against it."

"But Talhand was completely unaffected. I was the only one who couldn't resist," Paul despaired.

Come to think of it, their party did have another man in it. Talhand was completely resistant? Just how did that work? Hard to

believe any man could walk away unscathed. Perhaps the succubus' wiles didn't work on dwarves?

As I considered the possibilities, Paul fixed his gaze on me.

"What is it?" I asked.

Paul scratched at his upper lip. "Nothing, it's just… You sound more confident and assertive than you used to."

"Huh?"

I hadn't noticed until he pointed it out to me. Come to think of it, when had I started speaking so freely in front of people? I'd intended to keep my casual speech separate from my usual habits of address, but apparently, I'd gotten used to it while talking to Zanoba and the others.

"Oh, yes, my apologies. I will be more prudent in the future."

"Nah, it's okay. You sound more like a man when you talk that way, anyway." Paul laughed. Tears began to well up in the corners of his eyes. One fell, then another, with more soon to follow. They came unbidden, refusing to stop. "Rudy…you really have grown so much."

Hearing him say that brought me to tears as well. We were family, and yet, we didn't even know how much the other had changed.

"I'm sorry for being such a terrible father."

Silently, I wrapped my arms around him. I didn't even have to stretch; I was easily able to reach around his shoulders. At some point, without my even realizing it, the two of us had become the same height.

And just like that, we both cried together.

After a little while, we pulled away. Our reunion was over. Now we had to switch gears. There was still one issue remaining.

"Hmph." Elinalise planted herself in a nearby chair, looking completely unamused. Paul slowly turned toward her, and their gazes met. Paul's eyes narrowed. Elinalise's brows knitted.

This was bad.

“Um, Father, Miss Elinalise came all the way from the Magic City of Sharia to help out, knowing our family was in trouble. She came even though she didn’t want to see you.”

“…”

Paul gradually took to his feet. Then he gingerly walked toward Elinalise. She watched, hands balled into fists, and stood as well.

“She’s worried about us as well. I know there must have been a lot that happened in the past, but out of consideration for me, could you please let that all be water under the bridge now?”

Elinalise glared down at Paul, a solid head taller than him. The air was thick with tension. “Volatile” was the word that came to mind.

Perhaps they’d end up punching each other. No, maybe they’d try to kill each other! Crap, was their relationship really *that* bad?

“Geese…” I looked to him for help, but the jerk just gave a helpless shrug and an infuriating grin.

That man really is worthless, I thought.

“Elinalise?”

“Yes, what is it?”

Paul peered back at me, then at Lilia and Shierra. There seemed to be some meaning behind his gaze, but I couldn’t figure it out.

Suddenly, he dropped to his knees. Then he pressed his forehead against the ground. He was groveling!

“I’m sorry for what happened back then!”

Elinalise refused to look at him. She just turned her head to the side, flared her lips in a pout and said, completely unamused, “Well, I was partially at fault back then, too.”

That was completely unexpected. I’d honestly figured she’d start throwing curses at him.

Paul continued prostrating himself. “I’ve caused you a lot of trouble since the Displacement Incident happened. I’m real sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. I had someone I wanted to look for, too, so it was convenient.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, Paul.”

That was the end of it. Just like that. They both had a hint of a smile on their faces. It looked like the problem that existed between the two of them—whatever it was—had just disappeared. Effortlessly so, even though Elinalise had previously gone on at length about how she couldn’t forgive him.

“Phew…” Paul let out a long breath, lifted himself off the ground, and dusted off his knees. Then he looked up at Elinalise, who gently returned his gaze.

“Age hasn’t been kind,” she said.

“It has to you,” he nodded back. “You’re as beautiful as ever.”

“Oh, my. I’ll tell Zenith you said that.”

“That means I’ll get to see her being jealous again.”

“Something to look forward to, I’m sure.”

The two of them laughed. It was nice to see them like that. They painted quite the picture together: a gorgeous elf and an exhausted, middle-aged swordsman.

I had no idea what had rocked their friendship. Perhaps it was just Elinalise being obstinate, and the matter had actually been very trivial. Or maybe it was something that had required time to heal. Regardless, friendship was a beautiful thing.

“Still, it’s impressive you were able to endure the journey here. It’s a long way from the Northern Territories to here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed.

“What happened with your curse, then?” Paul asked without missing a beat. “Don’t tell me you and Rudeus did it together?”

“Certainly not. I made it this far thanks to Cliff’s magical implement.”

Paul tilted his head. “Cliff? Who’s that?”

“My husband.”

“Your what?!” Paul’s eyes went wide. Then his voice grew loud with surprise. “So you have a husband? The man must have some strange tastes, then! What kind of a joke is this? Are you *sur*e this man really agreed to marry you? Hey, Rudy, do you know this guy? This ‘Cliff’?” He laughed as he glanced over to me.

I kept a straight face as I nodded, mostly because Elinalise looked ready to kill. “Father, you’ve gone a bit too far. Yes, I do think Cliff has some odd tastes, but he’s a very respectable man.” Cliff had trouble reading the room sometimes, but he was honest, and unashamed about proclaiming his love. He was an amazing individual.

“Seriously? Well, he *must* be pretty incredible for you to say that.” Paul was shocked by what he heard. He looked awkward as he dipped his head. “Okay, that was my bad then. Be sure to introduce me when we get back.”

“Yes, you should be sorry,” Elinalise huffed. “He’s a far more amazing man than you.”

Paul forced a smile and bowed his head once more. “All that aside… Rudeus, Elinalise, thank you both for coming.”

“We’re just getting started,” she quipped.

“Of course I came,” I said. “We’re family.” Now then, it was about time for us to get to the heart of the matter. “Father, please explain what’s going on.”

Paul began by explaining the details of how he got here, though I already knew the gist of it. Roxy and Talhand met up with him in Millishion, then collected what information they could and crossed the sea to the Begaritt Continent. Thanks to their party’s numbers, they were able to make their way to Rapan. It was there that they reunited with Geese and figured out where Zenith was located.

“According to Geese’s information, your mother is about a day north of here, captured in a labyrinth.”

That was vague. By “captured,” did he mean someone was holding her there? Or was it the labyrinth *itself* keeping her? Did labyrinths that captured people even exist?

“For six whole years?” I asked in disbelief.

Paul shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“And she’s still alive?”

“I don’t know. There was a party that went in there a few years ago, and apparently one of the members said they saw someone resembling Zenith. Also, we haven’t heard from them since they went in again.”

So they’d gone dark. That wasn’t reassuring. Was it just wishful thinking to hope that she was still trapped in there?

Then again, according to what Roxy had said, Zenith had still been alive when Kishirika saw her. Based on Geese’s information, news from the aforementioned party had stopped coming before Roxy conferred with Kishirika. That was two years ago. Geese’s information had been acquired four years ago. In other words, Zenith had gone two years without contact with anyone, and was still alive when Kishirika saw her. That meant there was a high likelihood she was still alive even now.

Apparently, they were betting on that sliver of hope in continuing the search for her. Even if she hadn’t survived, it was still important to confirm her death. Of course, I hoped she was still alive. When I heard she could be dead, my heart had sunk.

I guess I’d already figured it was too late. It had been six years, after all.

Suddenly Geese cut in. “All we have is secondhand information, so we don’t know. Maybe she is dead. Maybe she’s bein’ possessed by some kinda monster. All we got is she was seen in the labyrinth.”

Paul added, “This labyrinth is a very old and difficult one. In this past year, we’ve gone diving into it numerous times, but it’s been rough. We have four labyrinth diving pros in our party, but we didn’t even get halfway in. Pretty sad, really.”

Four of them… Paul, Geese, Talhand and Roxy? They had three others as well, but none of them were professionals. Come to think of it, where were the other three members?

“Hm, got company?”

Just then, light came pouring in from the entrance. Someone had stepped inside.

“Oho! Looks like I missed a touching reunion, eh?”

It was a small man. Granted, his height was the only thing small about him; he had about as much girth as he had height. You could tell he was a dwarf at a glance. He had a long, flowing beard, and a large burlap sack in his hand. This had to be Talhand.

A woman stood behind him, dressed like a warrior and carrying a similar sack of her own. She wasn’t wearing the bikini armor that she had before, but I remembered her face. Vierra, right? She gave me a bow, then hurried over to Shierra’s side.

The man’s stout body swayed as he approached. He surveyed me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. “You Paul’s boy?”

“Um, yes. Pleasure to meet you. I’m Rudeus.”

“Talhand. You look as intelligent as I heard. Mm-hm.” He plunked his bag down on top of the table.

“Rudeus, you better stay away from him. He steals what men hold dear,” Elinalise warned.

What men hold dear? What did that mean? Their pride?

“Aha, I thought it smelled a bit too much like women in here.” Talhand looked over at Elinalise, with an expression on his face that seemed to say he’d only just realized she was here. “What’s this, eh? So you tagged along too?”

“Oh my, are you saying I shouldn’t have?”

“’Course I am. Just you bein’ here stirs up trouble.” He reached into his bag and produced a glass bottle filled with amber liquid. He popped the cork off and gulped it right down. “Pwah! Now this here’s a drink that’ll hit you in the gut real good.”

The stench of alcohol came wafting through the air. A pretty strong drink, if that was any indication. The dwarves did love their liquor, after all.

“Have a go.” Talhand thrust the bottle toward Elinalise. She took it wordlessly and chugged. She didn’t drink as much as he did, but I could still see her pale white throat move as she swallowed twice and then burped.

“Quite the crude alcohol.”

“Goes perfect with someone as crude as you.” He shoved the cork back in and returned the bottle to his bag.

What was with their exchange just now? Was that supposed to be a dwarven-style greeting? No one else was commenting on it. What on earth…?

“Well, now that everyone’s here, let’s pick up where we left off, okay?” Paul’s voice brought me back to my senses. Talhand had made quite the impact with his entrance, so I completely forgot we were in the middle of a conversation.

Wait—did he say everyone?

“Hold on a moment,” I interjected. “What about Master Roxy?”

Paul’s face grew dark when I asked. And it wasn’t just him, either. Everyone else wore the same look, save for Elinalise. The long-eared beauty seemed to realize what that meant, and her eyes went wide. “What? It can’t be…”

The moment I heard her say that, a single word popped up into the back of my mind. The worst one imaginable.

Death.

“A month ago, Roxy got caught by one of the traps in the labyrinth.”

I could feel my heart pound. I didn't want to hear this. Not that blue-haired little girl. It couldn't be. I didn't want to hear them say it. I mean, she was a competent adventurer, one who'd traipsed into a labyrinth on her own before. She couldn't use voiceless magic, but she'd successfully shortened her incantations. She was a King-tier water magician. My savior.

I didn't want to hear any more. Even so, I asked reluctantly, "S-she's not dead…is she?"

At some point, Elinalise had risen from her seat and moved behind me, placing her hands on both my shoulders.

"No," Paul said. "She stepped on a teleportation circle and disappeared. We haven't confirmed her death. It's highly likely she's still alive out there in the labyrinth."

That was enough, at least for the moment. I felt the tension leave me. But my face soon stiffened again at Geese's ensuing protest.

"Come on, Paul. It just isn't possible. I get that it's Roxy we're talkin' about, but that isn't the kinda place a magician can survive on their own. Sure, *maybe* she's still alive, but the chances of that are —"

Talhand interrupted, "No, Roxy's not your average magician. There's a good chance she's still kickin'."

"You say that, but we've been lookin' all month and haven't found her!" Geese exclaimed. "We've gone in five times, and nothin'!"

"Geese," Paul said tersely. "How long are you going to keep this up?!"

Paul, Geese, and Talhand began arguing amongst themselves. Geese—who I'd remembered as being so easygoing—was pissed off and squabbling. It seemed he really did feel like he was at his wits' end.

So Roxy had stepped on a teleportation trap. She did tend to be careless sometimes, so I guess I could see it. Still, if they hadn't

confirmed her death, then I wanted to believe she was alive. It didn't seem possible to me that someone like Roxy Migurdia could die so easily.

At least, I wanted to believe that she couldn't. So that was the belief I was going to hold onto.

Ugh. I was even more shocked by this news than when I'd heard that Zenith might be dead.

"Sorry I interrupted the conversation. Let's get back to where we were. What kind of place is this labyrinth?" I asked.

The three of them exchanged glances. It was as if they were conferring to see who would be the one to relay the information. Paul finally opened his mouth. "A teleportation labyrinth."

The moment he said those words, it was as if I could hear a book rustling inside my bags. As if the book had heard someone call its name. The one titled *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth*.

Chapter 2:
Confirming the Situation

ROXY WAS in trouble.

The moment I heard that, I felt the immediate need to go rushing off to find her. She was lost in a teleportation labyrinth, but fortunately, I had *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth* at my side. A strategic guide. I had also researched teleportation circles myself, and as long as we had time to observe one of the circles, we could surely use this book to guide us through.

But first, I had to be clear on where things currently stood. That was important.

It might be a race against time for both Roxy and Zenith. If we were even five minutes late, it could be the difference between life or death for them. Even so—or rather, *precisely* for that reason—we couldn't be hasty. We had to confirm the situation, carefully prepare, and then save them without fail.

If we were too hasty, we might overlook something important and make a mistake, rendering all our efforts in vain. That would cost us not only five minutes, but maybe even a day, perhaps two or three. We had to be cautious. There was no room for mistakes here.

A mistake, I was sure, would leave me with regrets. Whatever the circumstances, if my errors led to us being unable to save Roxy or Zenith, I would be left with overwhelming regrets.

"Father, I have a notebook with me by an adventurer who went deep into the Teleportation Labyrinth." I started by revealing the book's existence.

An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth was once shown to me by Master Fitz. It had detailed information about the shape of teleportation circles, which were considered taboo. The only reason it had avoided censorship at the university was either because it had simply been lucky enough to go unnoticed, or

because it was an adventurer's tale. The fact that it hadn't been taken off the shelves meant it was possible the book was pure fiction.

The Teleportation Labyrinth was one into which no one had ventured. The author might just have used the concept to spin this fictional tale, but that seemed unlikely to me. After all, the teleportation circles described in this book bore a striking resemblance to the real thing. I'd researched the circles myself, and this book had the most accurate and precise information about them that I'd found when cross-referencing it with other such books. I was certain of it.

Still, it could be referencing a *different* teleportation labyrinth. I couldn't rule out the possibility of there being another labyrinth in this world that was littered with teleportation traps. A guidebook of the same name had no value unless its contents matched the situation.

"If the labyrinth written about in here matches the one we're about to enter, then this could really help us navigate our way."

When I said that, Paul's eyes widened. "Hold on, Rudy…why do you even have a book like that?"

"I thought it might be useful, so I took it from the university library and brought it along."

"I see…"

For now, I'd decided to leave out the part about the teleportation circles by which we'd traveled. At the moment, we needed to confirm whether the labyrinth in the book matched the one we were about to head into.

"I'd like to go over the contents of the book. If it seems like it might be helpful, let's make use of it." Paul took it in his hands and, after a long, hard look at the front cover, immediately passed it over to Geese.

The latter held it and turned to me. "I'll go ahead and read it then, 'kay?"

"Please do."

Why Geese? I wondered. Everyone acted like this was natural, though, so I chose not to ask. This must just be Geese's role in Paul's party. He was capable of doing anything, so that was just what he did. I felt like I'd heard him say as much before. He was probably also in charge of mapping their labyrinth diving and organizing the information at their disposal.

"Father, while Geese is reading that, I'd like you to tell me about the labyrinth." I stood directly in front of Paul, prepared to direct questions his way for the purpose of confirming what was written in the book.

"Sure, go ahead."

My questions pertained to the types and names of monsters, the number of floors to the deepest level, the status of the interior, and the shape of the circles. Paul readily answered.

Let's start with the monsters. There were five types in the labyrinth, but Paul had only made it to the third floor, so there were some beasts he hadn't seen yet.

Death Road Tarantula: An enormous, venomous spider. Even though it was a tarantula, it still shot out thread. Its poison could be treated with Beginner-tier Detoxification magic. A B-rank monster.

Iron Crawler: A tank-like caterpillar. Heavy and tough. B-rank.

Mud Skull: A human-shaped monster covered in mud. It had a skull buried within its center that was its weak spot. A-rank. It looked pretty ridiculous, but it was intelligent and could use magic to sling mud at you.

Armored Warrior: A rusty suit of armor with four arms, each carrying a razor-sharp blade in hand. A-rank.

Devouring Devil: A beast with long arms and legs, as well as knife-like claws and fangs. A-rank.

How many floors to the bottom level? Unknown. Rumor had it that it was either six or seven floors, but no one had actually delved

those depths far enough to look upon its guardian yet. As for the state of each of those floors, that was difficult to describe, too, but the book had some accounts.

The first floor was where spiders created their numerous webs. The second floor was occupied by a vast number of spiders and caterpillars. On the third floor, Mud Skulls took command over the aforementioned monsters. Once you got to the fourth floor, the spiders and caterpillars were virtually absent, leaving Mud Skulls and Armored Warriors. On the fifth floor, the Mud Skulls vanished and it was only Armored Warriors and Devouring Devils. After the sixth floor, there were only Devouring Devils.

There was nothing in the book about floors after the sixth.

The first three floors were part of an ant nest: complex, winding pathways with rooms connected at the end. Apparently, the teleportation circles were always located in the back of these rooms. According to the book, the labyrinth transformed into a stone ruin around the fourth floor, but Paul and his group hadn't made it that far yet. But there *was* information about the beasts and first three floors to be found, courtesy of the trial and error of numerous adventurers.

Finally, the shape of the teleportation circles. Carved into the ground were complex, bizarre shapes emitting a pale light. Hearing them described in detail, they sounded just like the ones I'd seen several times for myself.

Most of what Paul said fell in line with what I'd read in the book and seen for myself.

"This is amazin', haha! Leave it to you, Boss. You brought us somethin' incredible!" About the time Paul concluded his explanation, Geese clapped the book closed and raised his voice in excitement. Apparently, he was done flipping through it. He sure was a quick reader. Or perhaps he'd just skimmed the highlights.

"Hey, Geese. Is it really that amazing?" Paul asked in surprise, seeing how elated his party member was.

"Yeah, it's unbelievable, Paul. If everything written in here is true, we basically have a map of the place down to the sixth floor."

Still gripped with enthusiasm, Geese passed the book over to Talhand. He left the dwarf to read over it and, unable to hide his excitement, began explaining the contents of the tome to Paul. “All the things we didn’t understand are written in that book. Which circles to hop on, which circles to stay away from, which ones will lead us where, and what we’ll be faced with when we use them!”

Clearly, he was convinced this book was the real deal.

Paul’s face turned grim as he fixed Geese with a glare. “I see. Then can you tell what’s happening to Roxy and Zenith based on what’s written in that book?”

“Well…no,” Geese replied, looking as if he just had cold water dumped on him.

“Don’t get too carried away. We can’t make any more mistakes,” Paul warned in a low voice.

Right. We had to be careful. It would be heartbreaking if we blindly believed in that book, only for it to lead us to our doom.

“I get what you’re tryin’ to say, Paul. But with this book and a dependable vanguard and rear guard, we’ll be fine. Let’s rejoice a little in the moment, yeah?” Geese said, peering around at those present.

Paul followed his gaze, and eventually his eyes landed on me. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry about that.” A small, calm smile appeared on his face.

No matter how cornered you might feel, it was important to maintain your composure. Paul had to understand that.

“All right, then. If you’re done reading, let’s decide on our formation.” Paul’s voice sounded more energetic, as if he’d gathered his spirits. The atmosphere in the room relaxed.

Only five members would be diving into the labyrinth: Paul, Elinalise, Geese, Talhand, and me. That meant Vierra and Shierra were being swapped out for Elinalise and myself. The labyrinth was narrow, so even if we went in in large numbers, we’d just get in each

other's way. Elinalise was an upgrade on Vierra and I was an upgrade on Shierra. We'd only be stealing their roles from them if they joined.

Elinalise was the tank, Paul was a secondary attacker, I was offense and healing, and Talhand could be either off-tank or secondary attacker. The four of us were in charge of battle. Talhand's role was a bit vague, but he was a magician capable of Intermediate-tier earth magic as well as an all-purpose fighter. Thus, he was placed in a position where he could do either. Unwieldy as he looked, he was quite dexterous. Then again, all dwarves were.

"We'll be lookin' after one another." Talhand's position would be either in front or behind me, so he gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder. For some reason, it made a chill run down my spine.

"Rudy will generally be in charge of all magic," Paul announced. "We'll also be looking to you to heal us after each battle. Can you do that?"

"No problem."

Offense and healing. It was my first time in a labyrinth and I still had my work cut out for me. That said, it was pretty much the same as when I worked as an adventurer. Surely I could handle it.

And then there was Geese. Though not very useful in battle, he could skillfully pull off a bunch of other intricate tasks, like checking the map, confirming the direction we were headed, managing food supplies, selecting what materials to take from enemies and how to extract them, as well as deciding when to fall back. He was both in command and also the errand boy. Our manager, you might say. Labyrinth diving wasn't just about battle, so a role like his was essential, too.

That left three people—Vierra, Shierra and Lilia—who would act as support by waiting in the city or at the entrance to the labyrinth. You could say they were just house-sitting (or inn-sitting), but apparently that was an important job, too. From what I was told, large clans also assigned someone to house-sit when they went off labyrinth diving.

I would leave the majority of the preparations to the pros: Talhand and Elinalise. I was still an amateur when it came to this. I could make use of knowledge from my former life to think up various strategies, but I'd leave that aside from the moment. First, I'd follow what the pros did. Then, if I thought up something we needed, I could suggest it. Anything I said would ultimately just be a suggestion. I had no idea if the knowledge I'd gained from playing roguelike RPGs in my previous life could be applied here.

"Our first objective will be to get to the third floor," Paul said, now that we'd decided on our formation. "Once there, we'll track down Roxy."

We had no idea if she was still alive. If she was, then we had to recover her and withdraw. Depending on her condition, we could also just have her join our group as we headed deeper into the labyrinth. The six of us could explore the yet-untrodden fourth floor and beyond, plumbing the entirety of the labyrinth down to its deepest depths as we searched for wherever Zenith might be.

I had no idea how many days this would take. It was going to be a long and complicated search.

***

Paul, Lilia, and I slept in the same room that night. Geese had arranged it out of consideration for us, saying family should have time to be alone together. That said, most of the time I'd spent with Lilia was not as family. Until Aisha was born, she'd just been the maid, and that was really all I could still see her as. Paul regarded her as his wife, but ultimately only as the second wife. Zenith still came first on Paul's list of priorities, with Lilia coming second, and Norn after that. That meant Aisha was fourth, and I guessed I was last.

"This is our first time sharing sleeping quarters, isn't it, Lord Rudeus?"

“Yes, it is.” The way Lilia so respectfully conducted herself suggested she only saw Paul as her employer. Thanks to her influence, I found myself also speaking a bit stiffly.

“If the master’s snoring disturbs you, please feel free to shove him,” she joked, keeping things surprisingly light-hearted.

“Yes, all right…” I was unable to offer her the same. I had no idea what I should say. How had I talked to Lilia in the past? I seemed to recall our interactions back in Buena Village being rather businesslike.

Paul had been watching me for a while now without saying a word. I wondered why. He sure had an odd expression on his face. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a cheesy grin, but he certainly looked relaxed.

“If I might ask a question, Lord Rudeus,” Lilia spoke up.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Is Aisha performing acceptably?”

It was thanks to her question that I finally realized the answer to my own. *That’s right, family. We are a family, after all. So we can just talk about that*.

“Yes. She’s working really hard.”

“She hasn’t caused you any trouble, has she?”

“Not at all,” I assured her. “She’s a big help. She’s been doing all the household chores for us.”

“Truly? I just hope she’s not making any selfish demands.”

“Personally, it’d be easier for me if she were a little more demanding.”

Lilia smiled quietly when I said that, looking relieved. “What of Mistress Norn and Aisha? They aren’t fighting, are they?”

“Well…things are a bit strained between the two of them, but there’ve been no major confrontations as of yet. In fact, their little tiffs are quite endearing.”

“I’ve always told her to show deference for Mistress Norn. I have no idea why their relationship has devolved so,” she said, sighing.

“It’s not something you can control,” I assured. “Besides, Aisha is still a child. Don’t you think the most important thing as a parent is to love them both equally?”

“Perhaps you’re right. Aisha is my child, but she’s the master’s daughter as well, so…”

“Blood doesn’t have anything to do with it. We’re family,” I insisted.

“Thank you.”

Paul didn’t insert himself into the conversation. He just watched our interaction with the same deeply emotional expression he’d been wearing since before we started.

“What’s with that look?” I asked, glancing at him. “You’ve been grinning this whole time.”

“Ahh, y’know, it’s just nice to watch.” Paul scratched at the back of his head, cheeks colored red with embarrassment.

“What is?”

“Seeing the little boy I remember all grown up, talking to Lilia like this.” In other words, seeing his adult son interact with his wife. Lilia wasn’t my mother, but to Paul, we were both family. Maybe it was deeply moving for him. Perhaps I’d understand how he felt when my own child grew up. “Oh yeah, Rudy, you said you got married.”

“Yes, about six months ago.”

“My little boy… Hard to believe. You were still only this big when I last saw you.” Paul motioned with his hand.

“Yeah, I did grow a lot taller in these last couple of years.” Seemingly out of nowhere, my height had sprung up to be about the same as Paul’s. He was still a bit taller, but I probably still had some growing to do. I figured I’d catch up to him eventually.

“When we get home, we’ll have to do a big celebration,” said Paul.

“Indeed. And don’t forget, this will be your first grandchild,” I reminded him. “You’ll be a grandpa.”

“Oh, knock it off. I’m not that old yet,” he said, not looking half as displeased as his words might suggest. Then, suddenly, he smirked. “That’s right, you’re having a kid. Which means you’ve done ‘it,’ haven’t you?”

“My lord, I’m not sure such crude questions are really appropriate,” Lilia objected as Paul wore his cheesy old man grin.

“Aw, come on. I always wanted to have these kinda talks with him before.”

“Even so—” she began.

“What, aren’t you curious too?” Paul challenged.

Lilia frowned. “That’s an unfair question to ask.”

“Well, so who was your first partner? I guess it was Sylphie after all? Or was it Eris? I seem to remember you saying the two of you split up, but was there really nothing between you when it happened?”

Apparently, he wanted to engage in some locker room talk. Part of me wondered if that was really appropriate, given the circumstances, but I could also understand where he was coming from. He was probably in high spirits himself, since it was the first time we’d seen each other in a while. It was just that he hadn’t wanted to reveal that side of himself in front of everyone else. I was pretty happy to be reunited with him, too.

Starting tomorrow, we’d be entering the labyrinth. We’d no longer have the opportunity for these kinds of things. At least for tonight, we could cut loose and swap sex stories.

“I feel pretty confident when it comes to sex,” said Paul. “You can ask me anything. I might not look it now, but I played around quite a bit when I was younger.”

It looked like I had no other choice. Guess I'd just have to go along with him. I *had* always kind of wanted someone I could have open conversations with on the subject. "All right then, there's a few questions I'd like to ask," I began.

"Honestly, Lord Rudeus," Lilia cut in, exasperated, "I can't believe you're going along with this."

Paul said, "She talks like that, but she's pretty aggressive in bed."

"My lord!" Lilia protested.

"Oh yeah, you did mention she'd been the one to approach you before," I said, recalling. "Why don't you explain that in a little more detail?"

"Lord Rudeus! Would the both of you please stop? My goodness." Lilia glanced between the two of us before she spoke, sighing as she did so. Still, she did have a smile on her face.

We continued talking after that, well into the night.



By midnight, we'd turned off the lights and settled into our beds. I wondered if Paul and Lilia were already asleep. I could hear their rhythmic sounds of their breathing as they lay nearby. Apparently, they weren't waiting for me to fall asleep so they could get it on. Paul did say he was going to restrict himself until Zenith was found, so maybe he really was keeping to his word.

I couldn't sleep, perhaps because I was a bit turned on from our talk. I'd never dreamed a day would come when I could actually experience swapping sex stories. Life sure was unpredictable.

Anyway, enough of that. Time to focus on what was currently happening. Perhaps I really was dancing in the palm of the Man-God's hand. It sure felt like I was. Now that I stopped to think about it, the whole reason I'd gotten a hold of that book was because I went to the university. If he hadn't told me to go there and research the Displacement Incident, I'd have never found that book, and we would have to face the Teleportation Labyrinth without its assistance.

The Man-God's words always seemed to belie a deeper meaning, and this was no exception. He said I'd regret going to Rapan, and that I should hook up with Linia or Pursena. It felt like he'd purposefully said things he knew would stir me up. If he hadn't said that to me, or if he'd told me to go to the Begaritt Continent instead, there was a good chance I would have chosen to stay. I was rebellious with the Man-God, and if I put things in perspective, Sylphie was just as important to me. Of course, I wouldn't have just blown off my responsibilities. I would have sent Ruijerd, Badigadi, or even Soldat in my stead.

Perhaps the Man-God had taken all that into account before he acted. He had, after all, sent me to that school to gather all the things necessary for rescuing Zenith. Just who was he, anyway? And what was it that he wanted me to do? Could it really be that he really did just enjoy watching me?

As usual, I had no clue what was going through his head. But it was no mistake that he was an ally.

I wondered if he would reappear in my dreams again tonight. His timing was always far too impeccable. If things went well this

time, I'd have to give him some kind of offering. I had no idea about his preferences though, so I couldn't be sure if he'd like it.

As I mulled over all those things, I finally fell asleep.

The Man-God did not appear in my dreams that night.

Chapter 3:
Entering the Labyrinth

AT FIRST GLANCE, the Teleportation Labyrinth was nothing more than a cave. There was nothing special about it on the outside, save for the cobwebs that coated the walls, courtesy of the spiders residing in the area. But that was about it. Other than that, it just looked like a hole in the side of a cliff. If you saw a photograph of it, it likely wouldn't pique your interest at all.

Seeing it in person, however, was another matter. Something about it just gave me the sense that there was a labyrinth hidden within. It had an unsettling air to it, and yet it was precisely that unsettling air which provoked my curiosity. I wondered if all labyrinths had a similar vibe to them.

"Okay, Rudy, we're going to do this just like we discussed. Got it?"

"Gotcha," I said.

Paul clapped me on the shoulder and nodded.

We took up formation just as we had discussed the previous day, and stepped inside. It was my first time in a labyrinth, and I didn't feel much excitement. Just the weight of knowing that we couldn't afford to fail.

"Stay safe, my lord," bid Lilia.

"Please be careful, everyone."

Lilia, Vierra and Shierra would return to the city on horseback. When large clans entered a labyrinth to conquer it, their supporting members would make camp and wait outside. Fortunately, Rapan was only a day—or half-day, with some haste—away. There was no need for them to make camp in front of the cave.

"Well, let's be off."

It was dark inside, but not entirely so. The interior had a dim glow to it. Such poor visibility wasn't ideal. It could be fatal.

"I'm going to brighten things up," I said.

"Go for it," Paul replied.

As soon as we entered, I used the spirit scroll that Nanahoshi had given me. A bright ball of light leaped forth, circling around the top of my head. Geese also activated the same scroll for himself. He was acting as a scout for us, so he needed his own source of light.

These scrolls could be used by anyone. Of course, they would last the longest if someone with an enormous mana pool, such as myself, used them, but apparently they didn't cost much mana in the first place. Geese and Paul were delighted when I showed them the scrolls, saying, "Now we don't have to carry around torches anymore."

It seemed having one hand occupied by a torch really was inconvenient. The light from these spirits was brighter than a torch, and even someone without much mana could sustain one for a while. If these scrolls got popular, torches might disappear from the market completely.

"Paul, your kid sure brings some handy stuff along, eh?" said Talhand.

"Well, I am proud to call him my son for a reason." Paul puffed up his chest, which earned him an exasperated sigh from the dwarf.

"But you sure ain't a parent for him to be proud of."

"Aw, leave it. I'm already feeling down enough about it." Paul spoke with a half-sigh, his shoulders sagging.

"Come on, let's just go on in." At Geese's encouragement, we stepped further into the cave.

On the first floor, we were navigating what looked to be an ant nest. Silken webs were strung up across the walls and ceilings, and further within was a magic circle emanating a pale light. The spirit

proceeded beyond that point, illuminating the area like a fluorescent lamp.

“You said to be careful because some of the magic circles don’t light up, correct?”

“That’s right, Rudy,” said Paul. “Make sure to follow Geese’s footprints precisely.”

Geese was a full ten steps ahead of us. He was wearing a special pair of boots. Cross-shaped steel plates were mounted on the soles, leaving cross-shaped tracks wherever he walked. This wasn’t a magic item, though, but a product of adventurers’ wisdom. It was a convenient piece of equipment that kept the wearer from slipping, while also leaving a mark in their wake.

It was easy to discover the teleportation circles on the first floor. The main monster on this floor was the Death Road Tarantula, but there was a much smaller, less mature variety of arachnid skittering about on the ground. These were the Death Road Tarantula’s primary prey. The sight would have made someone with arachnophobia faint dead away. It was in the midst of these swarms that you would spot completely empty spaces, ones that were circular or square in shape. These were the traps. If you were to put your foot in that empty space to avoid the crunch of spiders beneath your feet, you would immediately be teleported somewhere.

Thus, we had no choice but to squish the little spiders where we trod. It wasn’t pleasant, but what else could we do?

As for the B-rank beasts, the Death Road Tarantulas, they didn’t appear in our passageway. Occasionally, one or two would pop out, but once Geese spotted them, Paul would immediately dispatch them. There was no need for me to do anything at the moment.

“Hah, well, this much is a cakewalk.” Paul had a sword in either hand and was walking briskly ahead. Of those two swords, one was the blade he’d wielded all the time at home—his partner. Though it didn’t appear to be a particularly powerful weapon, he was able to slice those Death Road Tarantulas cleanly in two. That was less

because of the blade's sharpness and more because of Paul's skill, I was sure.

The sword in his left hand had a shape I'd never seen before: a kind of short blade, but neither short enough to be called a shortsword nor long enough to be called a longsword. The handguard wrapped around the wielder's entire hand, with a slightly curved, double-sided blade. There was a hole in the middle of the blade, likely to prevent things from sticking to it.

That said, he wasn't using this weapon very much. Paul generally fought with only his right hand. I wondered what the purpose of his left-hand sword was. Or was he just a nerd in his final form?

"Like taking candy from a baby!" Not that it was relevant at all, but whenever he defeated something, Paul would glance over at me.

How annoying. He probably wanted to show off how cool he was.

Okay, okay, I get it, Dad; you look cool, but please don't let your guard down.

"Paul! Keep your head forward!" And yep, there it was—Elinalise was letting him have it.

"C'mon, it's fine," Paul said, "we've done the first floor dozens of times before. I'm not going to screw up that easily."

"Letting your guard down like that can cost you your life," she warned.

"Yeah, yeah, I know already."

"Besides," Elinalise continued, "you've been going too far ahead this whole time. *I* am the one in front, am I not?!"

"It's the first floor. Not like it'll make that big of a difference."

And so, their bickering began. I could hear Talhand behind me, expelling a sigh as he said, "Blegh, there they go again."

"Myself aside, this is Rudeus' first time in a labyrinth, and as an adult, you should be setting a good example!"

Paul argued back, “That’s why I was looking for an opportunity to strike up conversation with him, to help loosen up his nerves.”

“What nonsense,” she scoffed. “You seem as giddy now as you were when Zenith first joined our party.”

“Not much I can say when you put it like that. What’s up with you, anyway? You’ve turned into a real nag.”

“Why, of course I have,” replied Elinalise haughtily. “You’re basically like a son to me. So I’ll scold you as needed!”

Paul chuckled at that. “What are you on about, calling me a son? Did you spend so much time with Rudeus that you developed a soft spot for me, too? C’mon, enough with that. You calling yourself my mom gives me the creeps.”

“Oh my, has Rudeus really not told you?” she asked, mockingly.

“Told me what?”

“Sylphie is my granddaughter. Since Rudeus married her, that also makes him my grandchild. In that case, as parents of my grandchild, you and Zenith are basically like children to me.”

Paul froze. Slowly, he turned himself around and marched back toward me. With our formation broken, everyone else stopped as well.

“Hey, what is she talking about, Rudy? Why’s Elinalise making these insane claims about Sylphie being her grandkid?”

Oh, yeah. I hadn’t told him yet, had I?

“Turns out, Laws was Elinalise’s son,” I explained.

“Laws was?” Paul looked skeptical. “He never said a word about any of that to me.”

“Well, there was a lot that happened in the past, so it seems like he wanted to keep Miss Elinalise’s identity under wraps,” I said.

“Ahh, I see,” said Paul. “I can kinda understand that.”

“More importantly, we should keep going.” I added, “And take care not to let your guard down.”

“Y-yeah.” Paul sounded like it had sunk in this time. He returned to the vanguard, muttering as he went. “Seriously? So Elinalise is tied to our family now? I can’t believe this…”

The news had come as quite a shock to him, it seemed.

The first floor was a breeze. They must have traversed this path numerous times, just as Paul said. We continued down the passageway, taking occasional breaks, until we emerged into a room teeming with Death Road Tarantulas. Dispensing with swarms like this was my duty as a mage.

But before we entered the spacious room, Talhand offered me a few warnings. “Listen up: No fire magic.”

“Why is that?”

“Fire fills a closed room with poison,” the dwarf explained. “Gotta be especially careful ’bout that as we go deeper in.”

“What about Detoxification magic?” I asked.

“Don’t work.”

He was probably referring to carbon monoxide poisoning. If you used fire in an enclosed space, it would burn up the oxygen until you eventually lost consciousness. Just because the fire was created by magic didn’t change that fact.

“Also, don’t go hittin’ the ceiling with your attacks. You can guess why, yeah?”

“Because it might destroy the entire cave?”

He nodded. “There you go. That’s also why you don’t go usin’ water magic. Use ice as much as you can.”

“Got it.”

If you used vast volumes of water, it would loosen the dirt. Still, a bit shouldn’t hurt. I could also use earth magic, though if I wasn’t careful, I might end up using the dirt of the labyrinth rather than conjuring my own. If that disrupted the internal structure of the cave, it might trigger a collapse. Using the type of magic that was recommended to me was the safest option here. So, ice it was.

Thus, I decided to use the Advanced-tier water magic Blizzard Storm, a spell that brought lances of ice crashing down. That's what I used to mop up the mobs in the back of the room one by one, careful not to hit Paul and the others.

"Oho, you really are Roxy's apprentice. You even use the same magic," I could hear Talhand muttering behind me. Apparently, Roxy also utilized the same spell. That made me kind of happy to hear. "And no incantations, either. I can see why she's so proud of you."

The words made my ego swell with pride as we wiped out the last of the spiders and moved on.

We broke past the spiders' nests and hopped onto the teleportation circle located further in. It took us to the back of a passageway, heading to a separate nest of spiders. We had already repeated this process five times since entering this place. Each time, we carefully cross-referenced the circles with what was written in the book. The others had already mapped out where each teleportation circle led on the first floor, but checking helped verify the book's accuracy. We compared the circles' shape, color, and characteristics, and once we were satisfied that everything matched the book, we continued in further.

It took about an hour to arrive at each magic circle. Since we'd already done that five times, that meant approximately five hours had passed. The last area on the first floor was a web-covered room, deep within which were two circles lined up together. Their color was a bit more intense than that of the others we'd seen, and they were bigger, too. The darker blue one led to the next floor, but it had a twin circle with the same shape right beside it.

To the uninitiated, either one looked like it could be the real deal. Yet there was a rock with a circle inscribed on it placed immediately before one of the circles. This was something Geese had left behind as a signal that it was the correct one. Once we referenced the book and confirmed everything was on point, we hopped onto it.

From there, we were on to the second floor.

On the second floor, the skittering floor spiders disappeared and the tarantula nests were severely reduced. You could actually see the floor now. Instead of spiders, we now had an enormous steel caterpillar—the Iron Crawler—slithering around. It was a meter tall and two meters long, giving it a rather short and stout appearance. The closest thing I could compare it to were the Ohmu from *Nausicaä*. Just as their exterior suggested, the creatures were tough and sturdy, but contrary to their appearance, they were actually rather fast. Their speed reminded me less of a caterpillar and more of a centipede.

To add to that, they were buddies with the spiders, the latter of which would sling webs from the rear while using the crawlers as a shield. Once you were caught up in those webs, the heavy, one-ton crawler would trample you.

Iron Crawlers were so tough that even Paul couldn't defeat them in a single strike. That was where I came in. I could release two types of magic at the same time to strike the Death Road Tarantulas in the rear with my Blizzard Storm, then defeat the Iron Crawlers one by one with my Stone Cannon as Paul and Elinalise kept them preoccupied. Apparently, the Crawlers were tough enough to repel a normal Stone Cannon, but I didn't experience any problems in that regard, as my cannons went right through them. Though, being bugs, if I didn't hit them right and kill them on impact, they would start writhing in pain and thrashing about.

"Nothin' for me to do, eh?" While I worked diligently, Talhand grumbled about being bored. He was on standby next to me, just in case. To make sure his services weren't required, we were all—Geese included—conducting ourselves as prudently as possible. Thus, as of now, there was nothing for Talhand to do.

That was a good thing. As we progressed deeper in, it was comforting to know that we still had more firepower in reserve if it became needed.

The Death Road Tarantulas were spitting their webs at us. I thought tarantulas didn't create spiderwebs, but these guys were

clearly different. Their webs came straight for me at times, but I was able to avoid them all with my demon eye. Even if one did strike me, it would be neither painful nor an inconvenience, since I could just use fire magic to burn my way out.

"Gah, dammit!" grumbled Paul.

Elinalise seemed to agree. "Ugh, these things are so sticky."

Having said that, the vanguard couldn't dodge every single one, so the two of them were covered in webs.

"Here, take this. But don't go wastin' it, you hear?" said Geese. I could burn my own way out, but he had brought along a liquid to dissolve the webs, which the others were diluting with water and using. He told me it was a unique medicine, popular across the Begaritt Continent, and caused no bodily harm. While it didn't cause harm, Elinalise huffed about how it irritated her skin. Almost like detergent.

Maybe I should take some home with me to try washing dishes with, I thought.

"Okay, let's take a quick break here." Geese called out to us after we finished fighting, and we plopped ourselves down where we stood. Talhand and Elinalise immediately stood to take watch.

Paul immediately removed his armor and belt, then proceeded to start scrubbing off the beast blood splattered over them. He was trying to speed through his equipment check in the short time allotted for our break. Seeing how practiced his hands were reminded me that he was a pro in this field.

"What is it? You better hurry up too, Rudy."

"Oh, yes."

After receiving a stern rebuke, I turned my attention to my own equipment. There wasn't much for me to inspect, considering I was firing my magic at range.

That aside, Paul was being awfully quiet. On the first floor, he'd come up to me when we took breaks, asking "So what do you think?"

and stuff like that. I guess it was to be expected, since this was the second floor, but he'd turned serious. The "cool" dad.

"Tch, this damn stuff won't come off." Paul started cursing as he tried desperately to scrub away at the bodily fluids—or whatever that gunk was—glued to his armor.

"Why don't you try that medicine that Mister Geese was just using?" I said.

"That's for getting the webs off, isn't it?" Even so, he applied some to his cloth and resumed his furious scrubbing. When he did, the armor came out sparkling white, just like in those bleach commercials! Okay, not *white* white—it was armor, after all— but at least it was clean now. "Oh, it came off! Thanks!"

"Not at all."

So it *was* detergent. It might make Sylphie really happy if I bought a bunch before I returned. I wouldn't mind putting it to use around the house, if possible.

Paul re-equipped his armor as soon as he finished cleaning it. He then drew his sword and strode over toward Elinalise. I debated switching off with Talhand myself, but Geese's voice stopped me.

"Boss, don't worry about lookout."

"Are you sure?"

"It's fine," he said. "That old man hasn't done any work anyways. 'Sides, there's somethin' comin' up here I'd like to get your opinion on anyways."

"Is it really okay for me to stand in for my father on that?"

"'Course. You're much smarter than him, anyhow," said Geese with disinterest, plucking the book and two maps from his bag.

He spread the maps out side by side. One was beautifully drawn, while the other was still only partially complete.

"We'll be at the third floor soon. This, right here—this is where Roxy got separated from us. If we're lucky, she should still be around that area, if the book is anythin' to go off of."

“All right.”

According to the book, teleportation traps only sent people to areas on the same floor. Even though it was called a random warp, it wouldn’t suddenly transport you right in front of the boss on the final floor. Roxy had warped on the third floor. We had no idea if the circle she had stepped on was a randomized teleportation circle or one with a fixed destination, but if she was still alive, there was a good chance she was on the third floor. If luck favored her, she could have even made it to the second or first floor.

However, she’d already traversed those floors numerous times. Considering Roxy’s strength, if she’d been able to make it to the second floor on her own, then she would have already left the labyrinth. It was difficult to imagine she would head further into the fourth floor.

Geese asked, “There’s no magic that can help find her, is there?”

“No, there’s not.” I tried thinking of some way I could utilize the spells at my disposal to try to find her, but nothing came to mind in the moment.

“Boss, just use your intuition for this. Where do you think Roxy would be?”

“My intuition, huh?” I stroked my chin.

“We can’t afford to cover this entire labyrinth with a fine-tooth comb,” said Geese. “So if we’re gonna look for her, we’re gonna need intuition.”

“All right, then how about this area?” For the sake of it, I randomly selected one of the empty areas on the unfinished map.

“East of where she teleported, huh? ’Kay, then let’s start the search there.”

He was just as casual in his response. I did feel like heading dead east was the most efficient way to go. After all, there was no one in our group with the analytical capabilities to pinpoint her

location. We would have to search the areas they hadn't already investigated, regardless.

"Frankly, with Roxy gone from the mix, we couldn't even break through to the second floor. This is all thanks to you, Boss. Those Iron Crawlers are nasty beasts."

"I bet."

The monsters in this labyrinth were resistant to Talhand's preferred school of magic. Paul was the group's primary damage dealer, but if he got wrapped up in webs, he couldn't completely cover their front. Vierra wasn't very reliable, either, and she couldn't cover for other people as well as Elinalise could. In order to get through here, you needed someone who could use ice or fire magic. It was no wonder they'd been stuck without Roxy. In fact, it was a miracle they'd been able to make it back out without her.

"I thought we could make do somehow, but there aren't many magicians in this area, and not a one with the grit to challenge the Teleportation Labyrinth." Geese had tried to find a solution on his own, apparently. Now that I thought about it, he had been attempting to recruit someone when we first saw him in the guild. It didn't look like it had gone well.

"It seems we've put you through a lot of trouble, Mister Geese."

"Eh, don't worry about it. Also, I told you to call me 'newbie,' didn't I? You give me the creeps talkin' all polite like that."

"Got it, newbie. I'll introduce you to a nice girl monkey after this is over and you can have her pluck the fleas off your back."

"Ooh, not bad, since I can't even go to the adult districts here." He paused. "Hey, wait! Who you callin' a monkey?!"

There was a lot I wanted to discuss with Geese, but I would leave things there for now.

After that, Geese and I confirmed which route we'd be taking next. The map he'd created was easy to understand. Compared to the perfectly mapped-out first floor, there were several missing sections on this map on the second floor. Roxy and Zenith wouldn't

happen to be in any of those sections, would they? Continuing on without checking them made me a bit uneasy, but we had to get to the third floor. The best place to search wasn't the closest, but rather, the place Roxy was most likely to be.

"Geese, where are we right now?" Elinalise suddenly inserted herself into the conversation.

Geese answered by pointing to a spot on the map. "We're around here right now."

"Then we'll be moving beyond the second floor soon."

"Yeah, but we'll still have those spiders and worms comin' out."

"Monsters that change formation partway through. This certainly is an unpleasant labyrinth," she said.

"You can say that again," Geese agreed.

Elinalise ran a hand over her hair. Her usual proud curls were looking somewhat unkempt. "By the way, Geese, why do you call Rudeus 'Boss'?"

"Heh heh. We got to know each other in a Doldia jail."

"A Doldia jail?" she asked. "You mean the one that Ghislaine talked about before? How in the world did that happen?"

"I'll tell you more about it when we get home." Geese grinned, leaving it there.

Thinking about the Doldia cell brought back memories. I'd experienced true freedom back then. I couldn't walk around naked like that anymore, though. Well, okay, except for in bed.

I clearly wasn't too nervous if I could afford to have thoughts like those.

And so, our group arrived at the third floor. It had probably been about ten hours since we first entered. We were moving quite swiftly.

"I thought it would take us several days to delve this far."

“It would if we didn’t have a map,” Paul said in response to my casual remark. It made sense that going in blind was very different from following a map.

There were no more small spiders on the floor. Occasionally, we’d discover a web strung up on the wall, but there was little sign of life. Instead, I could feel something unsettling in the air, radiating from deep within the cave.

The real thing started here. First, we had to find Roxy.

“…”

Just then, her familiar scent came wafting through the air. No, it wasn’t my imagination. This really was her smell—her presence that I felt. I wouldn’t mistake this. I could feel my heart race.

She was here. I was certain.

Chapter 4:
Her Emotional Perspective

Roxy

I HEARD A SMALL SOUND and my eyes snapped open. Everything around me was dark and narrow. Yes, that's right—this place was narrow. After being warped numerous times, it was here that I'd arrived, in a space no larger than a cradle. It had only enough room for a single human, or perhaps two, to lie down. The ceiling was low, too, barely taller than my head.

As long as I was within this small, cramped area, no monsters could come teleporting in. I sat at the edge of the space and leaned back against the wall, gazing at what lay before me.

A magic circle, emitting a pale light. A teleportation circle. If I put just one foot on it, it would send me off somewhere. Most likely to a monster's den. To a place clamoring with dozens of monsters. To my *death*.

Just one month ago, I'd stumbled. I could make the excuse that it wasn't my fault; I was evading an attack directed my way, taking a step back, when I tripped over a rock. I lost my balance and my foot found a magic circle. Despite the fact that I had gone over where the traps were before we headed into battle, I had still so easily stepped right onto one.

The place I was teleported to teemed with monsters. There were twenty—no, thirty—of them. I was a magician, and a pretty good one, if I said so myself. I couldn't cast without incantations, but I could shorten them, thereby casting magic faster than most other mages. Facing enemies in vast numbers wasn't new to me. Even as I was surrounded, I didn't panic. I thought only about eradicating my enemy, and soon did just that.

But no matter how many I defeated, they just kept coming. Monster after monster, as far as the eye could see.

The beasts of this labyrinth knew exactly where the teleportation circles led. This was their lair, after all. The trap were laid so the beasts could feast on unsuspecting adventurers. I was prepared to die.

I defeated them all, but still, my mana wasn't endless. Eventually, I would run out. I knew it would be over at that point. Even as my mana dwindled to twenty percent, the wave of enemies never ceased. The bodies were piling up, but still more beasts pressed in.

I was completely cornered. Help wasn't coming. Perhaps they'd abandoned me. If I were in their position, I wouldn't bother saving a klutz like me, either. It didn't matter how much mana you had; if you were fool enough to step on a trap, then you were just dead weight.

No, I was sure they weren't the type to abandon me. Perhaps when I activated the trap, they'd also gotten caught in it and we'd all randomly warped to different places. Or maybe they were lacking in combat strength with my absence, and had had to temporarily withdraw.

Regardless, help wasn't coming.

Even as I felt the tears threatening to well up, I still desperately fought. Even as I felt my mana begin to dwindle.

It was then that I spied a light: six magic circles contained in a spacious room. Monsters were appearing from all but one of the circles. Perhaps that was because there were no monsters at the other end.

I had to choose, or die. I used the remainder of my mana to vanquish the horde, then hopped up onto the circle, which brought me to where I currently sat.

Somehow, I'd managed to survive. My luck had held.

I could make as much water as I needed with magic, and I had food packed in my backpack. I could recover my mana here and then find a way to escape. That thought in mind, I spent the rest of my day there.

The next day, I stepped onto the only magic circle in the room. The place it whisked me off to was a passageway I was unfamiliar with. Apparently, it had been one of the random warps.

I could sense no one in the vicinity. I mapped the area on my own and forged onward, intent on escaping this labyrinth. I'd considered waiting for help, but there was a possibility that Paul and the others had been wiped out as well. Random teleportation traps were just that deadly.

I wove through the tunnels, discovering other teleportation circles. I left a symbol on the ground nearby for myself and hopped on. Once again, I was flown off to some unfamiliar passage. I repeated this process numerous times; the Teleportation Labyrinth was designed to make it impossible to get anywhere without doing do. I was careful not to step on any traps, watching out for circles that might be hidden beneath rocks as I continued forward.

I had no idea if I was making progress or just going back the way I'd come. It was impossible to get your bearings in this labyrinth; it was no use relying on your sense of direction here. I was anxious, but even so, I had to press on. My food supply wouldn't hold out forever, nor would my mind. So I defeated monsters, ate their meat, and continued.

And yet, after teleporting countless times, I was once again sent into a den of monsters. I fought fiercely, and found yet another circle from which no beasts appeared.

That was how I made it back to this cramped little space. Had many times had I repeated the cycle at this point? Five times, ten times? The circle before me would always send me somewhere different when I stepped on it, but in the end, I always wound up back here. My heart and mind were at their limit. My body was, unsurprisingly, exhausted. According to my internal clock, about a month had passed.

One month and no progress. I was just going in circles.

The fighting wasn't easy, either. I was hit countless times, and felt myself growing faint from blood loss. At some point, the beasts had begun trying to block off the circle so I could no longer escape.

Despite their appearances, these monsters were quite intelligent. It would take everything I had to break through.

My joints hurt. I was out of food. The monsters were tough and tasted awful. Their flesh was so toxic that you had to use detoxification magic just to eat it, and I could feel it eroding my stamina. The only thing I had left in abundance was mana.

I felt completely cornered. I had no idea what would happen next. If there were more enemies next time, or if they coordinated their attacks better, they would tear me limb from limb and devour me once I used the last of my mana. Even if I were lucky enough to break past them, I would just find myself right back here.

Those thoughts alone kept me from stepping onto the circle again. The beasts had likely noticed my presence. They knew I was here, in this cramped space. They also knew that if I used the circle in front of me, I'd wind up right back at their den. I was sure they were waiting for that. They were waiting anxiously for me to make a fatal mistake in my exhaustion.

I could feel it. There would be no next time.

For the first time, I became conscious of death.

My corpse would never be found. The beasts would leave nothing of me *to* find. I would die, and no proof of my existence would remain.

It was terrifying. *I* was terrified. Before I realized it, I was grinding my teeth together. Driven by the impulse to scream, I gripped my staff tight.

I had seen death countless times before. As an adventurer, I'd watched people die right before my eyes. I had seen monsters split brawny warriors in two as easily as if they were cutting through butter. I had seen wise magicians squashed like rotten tomatoes. Skilled thieves and swift swordsmen had been felled before me.

When I witnessed their deaths, I knew in the back of my mind that it would be my turn someday. And yet, I simultaneously believed I'd able to make it through. But now, faced with the very real prospect of death, I was terrified.

I still hadn't accomplished anything. There was still so much I wanted to do. I had a dream. That's right, a dream. I wanted to become a teacher. I loved teaching people. I had no talent for it, but I enjoyed it. That was why, once this was over and we'd safely rescued Zenith, I planned on taking the teacher exam at the University of Magic to become a professor.

My master, the one I'd had a falling-out with before I left, was at the University of Magic. We might wind up bickering again, but I had a feeling we'd get along better now. He loved being the center of attention; I wouldn't be surprised if he'd been promoted to vice-principal while I was gone.

I wanted a taste of normal happiness. If I became a professor, I could even get married. I could fall in love with a man, marry him, and share passionate nights together. As a demon, I had the stumpy little body of a child, but even so, I had to have a chance.

"Hah."

A self-deprecating chuckle slipped from my lips. I couldn't believe I was allowing myself to indulge such fantasies, even under these circumstances.

I was going to die. None of my dreams were going to come true. My death would be a miserable one. There was no one to save me now. I'd never heard of anyone in my predicament being saved before.

I don't want to die, I thought.

I stepped onto the circle, because I really did want to live.

My instincts were correct. I was teleported to an unfamiliar passage, where I left symbols to mark previously undiscovered circles. I went through numerous other circles, then, as if it were predetermined, found myself right back in a monster's den.

I knew at a glance that it was impossible. The beasts had heaped the bodies of their dead brethren to block my escape route, and it seemed the space on the other end of the circle was too

cramped for the monsters—or their corpses—to teleport. I had no choice but to clear the way if I was going to use it to escape.

“While facing this horde?” I asked myself.

They were arrayed in an impeccable formation, branched out around the mountain of corpses that blocked my escape, protecting it. The Iron Crawler directly in front of me moved as if it were dedicated to defense, while the tarantulas behind it began spitting their webs to stall my movements. Still further back was a large, mud-covered human shape—a Mud Skull—which was hurling stones my way.

They’re almost like an army, I thought to myself as I began weaving my magic together. “Envelop me in the earth’s magnificent armor. Earth Fortress!”

I crafted a shield from the earth around me. It wrapped around me, covering my body up to my head in a dome-like shape. I cut off the spell before it consumed my body completely. As long as it rose up to my collar, it would be enough to stop the Iron Crawler from charging.

“Scatter the falling droplets, blanket the world in water. Water Cascade!”

Countless spheres of liquid formed around me, transforming into bullets that shot through the air. It was an extremely weak spell, fit only to temporarily stop them moving. Knowing that, I immediately began the next incantation.

“Blue Goddess sweeping down from the heavens, wield thy staff and cover this world in frost! Icicle Field!”

The droplets of water that had previously rained down on the creatures’ faces now crackled as they froze over. This was Frost Nova, a combination of the spells Water Cascade and Icicle Field, and it froze the entire front line of the enemy in place. From there, I continued pelting them with my magic.

“King of Frost, supreme ruler of the arctic lands, sovereign wrapped in all white whose frigid cold robs all heat. Freeze thy enemy, oh glacial king who governs death! Blizzard!”

I finished my shortened incantation. I generally used this spell to unleash frozen lances around me, but now they fanned out radially, soaring over those I'd frozen solid and skewering the beasts lying in wait behind them. I wasn't actually going to defeat the front line; they were frozen statues that would act as a wall between me and the rest of their ilk while I pounded the ones behind them with my advanced magic.

These were the same tactics I used when I traversed that labyrinth near Shirone. They guaranteed victory. However, as soon as the ones in the rear died off, more monsters came pouring through the magic circles in the room, stepping right past their fallen comrades. The place was brimming with beasts again in the blink of an eye.

My heart was brimming, too. With despair. "I suppose it really *is* hopeless."

If I didn't move those corpses, I wasn't going to make it out of here. But there were too many for just me to handle.

"Grr!"

The Mud Skull was launching boulders at me from a distance. It had already shattered part of my Earth Fortress, and the sluggish Iron Crawler was bearing down.

A chill ran up my spine. I could feel a cold sweat coming on.

"Take up thy burnt blade and pierce through thy enemy! Flame Slice!" A fiery sword flew through the air, scorching the worm's carapace. The creature writhed in pain before death took it.

Iron Crawlers were vulnerable to fire. Using fire magic in a cave could wind up signing your own death warrant, but even so, I had no choice.

"Envelop me in the earth's magnificent armor. Earth Fortress!"

Once again, I created a wall of earth. My mana was dwindling, and I began to panic. What should I do? How was I supposed to make it out of here?

Think, I told myself.

I racked my brain, even as I continued to launch magic and blast away my enemies. But nothing came to mind. Was I trapped? Was this the end? Was I really going to die here? My body went on autopilot, vanquishing my enemies for me as I entertained those thoughts.

“Ah!” My feet stumbled. My mind was fuzzy. I could feel my mana drying up. I had only a few more spells left within me before I fainted. “No…”

I tightened my grip on my staff.

I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.

I felt my entire life flash before me.

My first memory was of the disappointed looks on my parents’ faces when they realized I was the only person in our quiet village who couldn’t mentally converse with anyone else. They taught me how to speak because they pitied me.

As for magic… I started learning magic after a traveling magician came through our village and left a deep impression on me. Equipped with Basic-tier water magic, I set out from my village, going on to meet the three boys who would form my first party. We became adventurers and traveled together for several years, until one of us died and the party disbanded.

I set out for the Central Continent, where I met numerous people, and discovered and enrolled in the University of Magic. It was my first time taking formal classes in anything, and it had a lasting impact. I earned good grades, was talented, and accomplished a great deal, earning the jealousy of those around me. At the dorm, my friend and I would lounge in bed, talking about all manner of things.

I met my master after several years there. He was the one who taught me Saint-level water magic. I learned it so easily that I let it go to my head. My master groused at me, which pissed me off, so I graduated and left without saying a word to him.

After that, I set out for the capital of the Asura Kingdom, certain someone as exceptional as myself could find work there. I was

wrong. Unable to find a job, I moved to the countryside, but found no work there, either. I was at a loss for what to do when I found a recruitment ad for a home tutor.

That was how I met Paul and his family—including Rudy. Watching Paul's many sexual encounters titillated me; Rudy's talent shocked me. I was jealous, but also felt a growing sense of respect for him since, unlike me, he didn't let it go to his head. Before I departed, I taught him Saint-tier water magic.

I began delving into a labyrinth near the Shirone Kingdom next. The Shirone Kingdom hired me to teach magic to Prince Pax once I was done, a task that reminded me yet again of how amazing Rudeus was, as well as how little talent I had as a teacher. Then Rudy's letter came, and I worked tirelessly to craft a textbook on the Demon God tongue for him. When my job eventually grew too disgusting to bear, I left the Shirone Kingdom.

It was then that I learned about the Displacement Incident. I met Elinalise and Talhand, two people so unrestrained in their behavior that it came as a shock to me. We set out together for the Demon Continent, where I reunited with my parents and confirmed that they really did love me. Then I ran into Kishirika. And then, after that…

All those memories ran through my mind in an instant. An Iron Crawler was bearing down on me. Thanks to my fire magic, the room had heated up, and the effects of the Frost Nova were wearing off.

I can't do this. I don't want to die. I don't want to! No! I screamed in my head.

"No, nooo!!" I swung my staff around futilely. Webs came flying at me, wrapping around it. In moments, it was ripped from my hand. "I don't want to die, please, someone, anyone, help me…!"

I inched backward, but there was just a wall behind me. The Iron Crawler was coming. No, not one—*many*.

There was nothing left for me to do. I was going to be eaten alive, wasn't I? No, anything but that.

"Someone, please…"

Oh. The Iron Crawler was already…

I snapped my eyes shut in the face of the impinging crawler.

I guess I won't be able to see my mother and father anymore.

That was the last thought I had.

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I waited for a bit, but the end never came. Maybe I'd just died instantly. Maybe it was already over. No, that couldn't be… But I couldn't even hear anything. Was this the afterlife?

Timidly, I peeled my eyes open. An unimaginable vista spread out before me.

It was a world of ice. The Death Road Tarantulas, the Iron Crawlers, and the Mud Skull had all turned into pure white statues. The latter of the three was at the back of the horde. I heard a crack as its body began to crumble. The human skull, its vital core, hit the ground and splintered. Even the inside of it was frozen solid.

The gulf in power between this spell and mine was vast. My own Frost Nova could only freeze the surface of things. But this… this had most likely killed everything in the area.

"…Huh?" Confused, I reached out to retrieve my staff. "Eek!" An icy cold sensation shot up my fingers and I dropped it on reflex. It clattered to the ground, echoing amidst the silence.

I heard a voice, perhaps reacting to the sound.

"Oh, thank God!"

A young man came walking toward me, weaving around the ice statues. The moment I saw him, my heart started pounding. I could feel the blood rush to my face, warming my cheeks. This man…was my ideal type.

He was tall, with soft hair and gentle features. He was draped in a gray robe and held a staff, but looked well-built for a magician.

There was a clear look of relief on his face as he approached, gazing down at me.

“Eh? Huh?”

He embraced me with those well-built, warm, strong arms. His scent—a familiar one, one that smelled of sweat—filled my nose. He partially knelt and nuzzled his face into my neck, seemingly overcome with emotion as he inhaled deeply.

That was when I realized something. I hadn’t bathed at all in the past month. “Ah!” As soon as I realized, I shoved him away.

“Huh?” He looked surprised.

Crap. I’d done something terrible! After he’d gone to the trouble of saving me! But I didn’t want him to think I was stinky.

Oh, wait, maybe now wasn’t the time to be worrying about that… Um, was it? I couldn’t really think straight. “M-my apologies,” I said. “It just kind of stinks…”

“I-I stink? I’m sorry.” Shocked, he sniffed at his sleeve.

“No, not you! My body. I’ve been in here a month.”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.” He looked relieved. “It really doesn’t bother me, though.”

“Well, it *does* bother me.” Oh, forget it. That didn’t matter right now. First, I needed to thank him. “Thank you so much for saving me.”

“Not at all. It was only natural.”

Natural? I didn’t see how he had any obligation to face that kind of horde to save me.

Oh yeah, his name! I had to ask his name. “Ahem. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said. “My name is Roxy Migurdia. If you don’t mind, may I know your name as well?”

His entire body went stiff when I asked that. Had I said something weird?

“M-make my acquaintance…?”

Confused, I said, “Huh? Oh, have we met somewhere before? If so, I must apologize, I’m afraid I don’t remember.”

Come to think of it, I did get the feeling I’d seen him somewhere before. But where? He *did* kind of resemble Paul, but surely I wouldn’t forget someone like this.

“You don’t…remember…” His face went pale. Had I made him angry? I *did* feel like we’d met somewhere before. His face was familiar, as if I’d seen him long ago… “Don’t…remember…”

He shook his head a bit and staggered backward. Suddenly, he slapped a hand over his mouth and then—

“Bleeegh!”

He threw up.

Soon after that, I discovered the young man was Rudy—Rudeus Greyrat, all grown up. Paul and the others, who caught up a few moments later, took me into their care. With that, I had narrowly escaped death.

Chapter 5:
The Indomitable Magician

ROXY WAS JUST AS I remembered her from so many years ago. She looked and behaved the same, although being trapped in the labyrinth for the past month had weakened her considerably. Her cheeks were gaunt and there were circles under her eyes. Her braids had fallen loose and her entire body was covered in dirt, making her look like a street urchin. Despite all that, she hadn't lost her spirit at all.

After seeing her condition, Geese made the immediate call for us to withdraw. A prudent decision. Talhand carried Roxy on his back and we headed for the surface. I, of course, suggested I would carry Her Holiness, but we wouldn't make it through the second floor without my offensive abilities, so I had to give up on the idea. I did inwardly debate whether it was acceptable to let such an uncouth brute carry Roxy, but no one else protested—Roxy included.

"I'm sorry, Mister Talhand, for causing such trouble," she said.

"Don't worry 'bout it. I gotta help out sometimes, too."

"I don't stink, do I? I figure it must be pretty bad for Rudy to have thrown up like that."

"Ha ha!" The dwarf guffawed. "If I couldn't handle this much, I couldn't call myself an adventurer!"

I listened from behind as we walked. The two of them had traveled together for a long time, I was told. Judging by the way they talked, I could tell they trusted each other deeply. A twinge of jealousy stirred within me. Spurred on by that jealousy, I spoke up.

"Teacher, you know it wasn't because I thought you were stinky that I threw up." Roxy glanced back at me before quickly averting her eyes.

"Th-then why did you throw up?" she asked.

“I was caught between happiness at finally seeing you again and despair that you didn’t remember me, and my stomach just knotted up.”

“It’s not like I forgot you. I just couldn’t make the connection between the adorable Rudy from a long time ago and the current you,” she mumbled in response before going silent.

“…”

It was a short conversation, but hearing her voice for the first time in a long while filled me with such joy that I could have flown right up to heaven.

Our inn-sitting group rejoiced upon Roxy’s return, likely because this was the first happy news they’d had since they began searching the labyrinth. Granted, we’d only filled in the hole they’d dug themselves, but I wasn’t going to say that. Regardless of the circumstances, this was a happy occasion.

Lilia immediately coaxed Roxy off to the bath. Hoping that there might be something I could do for her in the meanwhile, I hovered outside her room, but then Vierra shooed me away. She said it was rude to approach a girl’s room while she was bathing. Of course, I didn’t have any ulterior motives. I just wanted to do whatever I could for her.

I mean it. *Really*.

Okay, yes, I did have a previous offense. But this time was completely innocent!

I thought about defending my case, but decided to drop it. This was fine. It was me, after all. If I suddenly glanced to my side and saw her clothes sitting there, there was no guarantee that my hand wouldn’t slip and pocket the small white fabric nestled on top. I couldn’t give my perverted side the opportunity. Right now, my feelings were still innocent. So really, it was fine.

We were going to rest for a few days to give Roxy time to recover her strength. That said, she was an adventurer. She had no

major injuries, was still strong enough to walk unaided, and swore that with good food and a soft bed to sleep soundly in, she'd be back to normal before long. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

But I couldn't get over the fact that I'd screwed up and behaved shamefully in front of her. I hoped she wasn't disillusioned with me. The barfing had been disrespectful, but I was just so shocked. I never stopped thinking about her the entire time we'd been apart. To think she might have forgotten me…it was overwhelming.

Come to think of it, Sylphie had said she was stunned, too, when I acted like we were meeting for the first time. I wondered if she'd felt the same way back then. I'd have to apologize to her when I made it back home.

Roxy slept an entire day. I couldn't really fault her for it, given that she'd spent a month in a monster-infested labyrinth. I wanted to be the first to bid her good morning when she woke, so I loitered in front of her door, but Lilia shooed me off. I glanced back and was able to get a glimpse of her face as she slept peacefully. I decided to leave it at that, hoping she'd recover soon.

On the second day, Roxy jumped out of bed. It was right at the lunch hour. She marched over to our table as we were eating, moving as stiff as a robot.

"Good morning, Teacher."

"Yes. Good morning, Rudy—I mean, Mister Rudeus."

There were four of us, including myself, at the table. The others were Elinalise, Paul, and Talhand. Geese and the remaining three were currently out shopping. Our group composition was such that the labyrinth party spent their entire time resting while they were in the city, and the waiting party ran errands in the meantime. Geese was part of the labyrinth party, but for some reason, he was taking command of the waiting party. He sure was a hard worker. Maybe he should quit being an adventurer and become an administrator instead.

"Everyone…"

All those present turned their eyes toward Roxy.

Meekly, she swept her gaze over each of us, then bowed her head. “I’m sorry for causing you all trouble, but I really am okay now.”

People’s reactions varied. There was one who wrapped an arm around her shoulder and said, “You needn’t worry about that.” Another who nodded and said, “No problem.” Another who took a gulp of alcohol before shoving a bottle in her direction. And finally, there was me, who was overwhelmed with emotion at her return.

“Well, if you want to thank someone, thank Rudy. If he hadn’t started babbling, ‘Father, I can sense God nearby,’ and run forward, punching through walls, we wouldn’t have found you.”

Paul made me sound like a complete nutcase when it put it like that, but I’d somehow known exactly where Roxy was as we wound our way through the third floor. I also had a feeling she was in trouble. Knowing that the situation called for expediency, I made a beeline for the sound of her voice without regard for the potential danger of the tunnels collapsing. Whenever I hit a wall, I smashed right through it without hesitation.

I had no idea how I knew she was in trouble. I just did. It was my bond with Roxy, drawing us together; I was sure of it. Yeah. There was a slight chance that the Man-God had intervened, but I would disregard that. There was only one god I believed in.

Wait, did that mean God had guided me there? In that case, there was nothing strange about it at all!

As I was preoccupied with such thoughts, Roxy turned toward me and bowed her head again. “Um, Mister Rudeus, what I mean to say is, uh…thank you.”

Why did I feel like Roxy was being cold and distant? No, I knew this sensation. I’d learned about it in school.

It was my name. The way she’d called my name. She was calling me “Mister,” as if I were some kind of stranger.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I only did what anyone would have. More importantly, please just call me Rudy.”

Roxy looked down and mumbled, “B-but doesn’t it sound like I’m being overly familiar if I call you that?”

“What? But we *are* close. If I’m going to have my own teacher call me ‘Mister Rudeus,’ then I may as well make my father do the same.”

“Hey now, why the hell would I do that?”

I ignored Paul’s protest. “I’d like you to call me ‘Rudy,’ just as affectionately as you once did. No matter how many years pass… I will always revere you, Roxy Migurdia, as my teacher.”

Roxy blinked several times. For some reason her cheeks were red. Did she have a fever or something? She suddenly slapped her cheeks. “Yes. You’re right… Rudy.”

“There, that’s perfect.”

She gave a self-deprecating smile as she looked at me. Her cheeks were still a bit rosy. “All that aside, you really have gotten big.”

“I am a human, after all,” I reminded her. “You don’t seem to have changed, though.”

“Yes, still as small as ever.”

“I don’t think you’re as small as you think you are.”

“Oh really?”

This was bringing back so many memories. If I closed my eyes, I could recall them all: the first day she taught me magic, the day I obtained my object of worship, the day she taught me Saint-tier magic, the day we said goodbye, and the days we spent exchanging letters. Every memory was precious to me.

“Anyway, that was some spectacular magic,” Roxy said. “It seems you kept up quite well with your training in my absence. Was that Emperor-tier water magic?”

“Which spell are you referring to?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I hadn’t used anything Emperor-tier.

“The magic you used when you saved me. That power, that speed, and the range. It was incredible magic. That was the Emperor-tier magic I’ve heard about, Absolute Zero, right?”

Nope. That was just a simple Frost Nova. We had been traversing the second floor when Talhand told me about the magic Roxy had been using, and how effective it was. I’d simply mimicked it.

But now Roxy had a look on her face that seemed to say *Well? I’m right, aren’t I?* I hesitated on whether to correct her or not. She was a water magic specialist. It might shame her to discover she’d misinterpreted my spell. Perhaps a little white lie was appropriate here?

Granted, I’d be exposed immediately. Maybe the wisest course of action was to say yes and then relay the truth afterward, in secret. But what if I did that and she reacted negatively? My Stone Cannon apparently had the same level of power as an Emperor-tier spell, but it was magic of a much lower level.

Hmm, how should I answer?

“Nah, that was a Frost Nova. It just had more power behind it than the one you use.” As I hesitated, Talhand took the opportunity to respond in my place. How unwarranted. I’d better follow up with something or else—

“Oh, so that’s it. My apologies.”

“Honestly, Roxy, you haven’t changed at all. Though I do agree with you, it wouldn’t strike me as strange in the least for Rudeus to use Emperor-tier magic.” Elinalise jumped in without a moment’s delay to back Roxy up. “After all, he *is* considered the most powerful magician at the University of Magic.”

Though that last comment was unnecessary.

Everyone’s eyes gathered on me. Okay, this was my chance!

“My current abilities are all thanks to my teacher’s guidance,” I said confidently.

Roxy's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Rudy, I keep hearing you've been claiming that, but do you honestly think that's true?"

"Of course I do."

Roxy's teachings were my foundation. "Go outside and talk to people," "Try to get along with others without prejudice," and "Always give it your best." Those words had taken root deep within me. It was thanks to them that I'd been able to establish the relationship I had with Ruijerd, for instance.

Sure, there were times when I couldn't live up to those teachings, but that was another matter. Humans weren't capable of living up to their full potential at every given moment. What mattered wasn't whether you always successfully lived up to your ideals, but whether you made them the key to how you approached the world.

"You improved on your own. Completely without my teaching." Roxy gave a self-deprecating smile. "You've grown into an incredible man. The complete opposite of a klutz like me, who got herself trapped in a labyrinth."

She slumped forward onto the table with a thud. I could see the spot on her scalp where the hair swirled out from, which was kind of cute.

"The master is incredible, and so is the student. What could be better?" Paul said.

Well put. That was exactly right. I wasn't particularly special, but Roxy was certainly an amazing person. So what if she lost to her pupil in a few narrow categories? That was no indicator of her value as a person.

"If you hadn't been with us, we wouldn't be here. Have a little confidence." Paul's words seemed to rally Roxy's spirits. She sat up and nodded.

Geese returned after that and we proceeded with our meeting. We sat huddled together, the waiting party included.

"I said we'd wait and see about Roxy's condition, but I'm thinkin' we'll dive back in there in three days," Geese announced.

“Isn’t that a bit hasty?” Paul asked.

Though it might not seem like it, labyrinth diving really wore a person down. Especially one like the Teleportation Labyrinth, which was riddled with traps, forcing you to constantly watch where you stepped even as you were embroiled in battle. It was exhausting enough for someone like me in the rear, but the vanguard bore an even heavier burden.

“It’s best for Roxy to get back in as quickly as possible.”

“Hm? Ah, yeah, I get what you mean. You’re right.” Paul nodded, but I couldn’t quite agree. Wouldn’t it be difficult for her to have to re-enter the place where she’d nearly lost her life before?

“Don’t you think a little bit more rest is necessary for her?” I asked.

“Mm? Ah. You may not know this, Boss,” Geese explained, “but when you nearly die in a labyrinth, you gotta go back in quick or you’ll get a curse on ya and never be able to enter again.”

“A curse? Such a thing exists?” I asked, doubtful.

“Yep. No clue why, but when you try to enter a labyrinth after that, your heart is just so filled with fear you can’t do anythin’.”

Ah, I’d read about something like this in a manga once. A type of panic disorder, otherwise known as PD. I’d also heard that an effective treatment for it was to immediately retry whatever you had failed at. Apparently, the same held true in this world.

“Plus, you’re a beginner, Boss. Goin’ at a slow pace and divin’ in repeatedly will be good experience for ya.”

“I see. You do have a point.”

After that exchange, the others began jumping in.

“I can give you some pointers on doubling as a healing and offensive magician,” said Roxy.

“We shouldn’t repeat Rudy’s method of punching through walls to navigate. The risk of cave-in is too high,” said Paul.

“If you want, I can go in front of ya,” said Talhand.

“I’ve been thinking… How about Paul and I switch positions?” Elinalise suggested.

Geese kept us organized as we shared our thoughts on the previous venture, as well how we should approach the next. Everyone sounded deadly serious. I’d thought they might be a bit more jovial about it, but apparently not. Though weakened, they were still an S-rank party.

There was little input for me to give at this meeting, except for answering when I was asked what I thought of my first labyrinth. They were pros. I was an amateur. No matter how good I was with magic, I couldn’t forget those two things. Our last trip had gone well, but that didn’t mean this one would, too.

“For the moment, we’ll focus on mappin’ out the rest of the third floor. Dependin’ on how things go, we can at least go deep enough to find the circle for the fourth floor,” Geese said. “How’s that?”

“Agreed,” we said in unison.

Generally, once a party discovered the stairs to the next floor, they would decide whether to go deeper or temporarily return to the surface. If they opted for the latter, they would take a straight path down to resume from the point they left off when they returned. The same went for us; we’d gone straight down to the third floor last time. If you weren’t quick, there was a possibility the number of traps would increase. Speed was crucial.

“Oh yeah, the book says the fourth floor is completely different from what we’ve seen so far,” Geese said. “Some kind of ruins or somethin’.”

“In that case, there might be two bottom levels,” Paul said.

“Hmm. Well, let’s save thinkin’ ’bout the fourth floor for next time. For now, we’re focusin’ on the third floor.”

“Gotcha.”

There were instances of long-existing labyrinths combining with others, forming a single labyrinth with two centers—two hearts

with magically imbued crystals. These types were said to change in structure partway through. The Teleportation Labyrinth had that kind of layout, but that didn't necessarily mean it had two centers. It was a possibility, nothing more.

In fact, according to the book, the Teleportation Labyrinth had only one magic crystal. However, there was still the possibility that it had originally been an ordinary labyrinth which later merged with these old ruins to take its current form. Speaking of ruins, there were also the ones containing the teleportation circles we'd used to get here.

"What's this book you're talking about?" Roxy asked, suspicious.

"Rudy brought it with him. It's got notes from a guy who traveled almost to the very depths of the Teleportation Labyrinth. You should read it, too." Geese passed the book in question over to her.

"Oh, I didn't realize such a thing existed. Understood. I'll go over it carefully tomorrow."

So Roxy planned to spend tomorrow reading. In that case, I would stay at the inn. I wanted to talk to her some more, though I wasn't sure what about. If she was going to read the book, maybe we could discuss its contents? She could ask me questions, and I'd do my best to answer them.

Yeah, that sounds good. Great. Absolutely perfect!

"Now then, 'bout our formation," Geese started. "Let's shake things up a bit. Talhand?"

As I was preoccupied with my thoughts, the conversation moved to the next topic. Talhand cleared his throat. As the man most often all the way in back, who thus observed the most, he was in charge of deciding our formation. "Hmph, leave it to me."

But he reeked of alcohol. He *always* reeked of alcohol. Geese also showered himself in liquor at night, but Talhand was tipping tankards back through the noon hours. At least he did go completely sober the moment we began our dive into a labyrinth. He had an impressive ability to switch his drinking on and off.

“It’ll be ’bout the same as before.” There was a paper on the table with two lines drawn on it, along with small stones of different colors. Talhand placed the blue stone down first. “First, just like before, Roxy will take up the rear.”

“Understood.” Roxy nodded.

Then he put a gray stone beside the previous one. “Rudeus will act as Roxy’s support. She’s the type to slip up when somethin’ unexpected happens, but Rudeus’ got that Eye of Foresight. He’s also pretty calm for his age, so maybe he can stop somethin’ before it goes wrong.”

“All right.”

He made it sound as if Roxy was lacking in composure. I wanted to protest, but it *was* true that she’d slipped and stepped on a teleportation trap. I’d just be stirring up trouble if I tried. Although, if you thought about it, the Eye of Foresight could only predict things I could see. That meant I’d have a good excuse to keep my eyes on Roxy the entire time we were in the labyrinth.

Put that way, it didn’t sound so bad. I was just happy to be able to look at her.

“Let’s try switchin’ out Elinalise and Paul. Paul, you go in front. Elinalise, you go behind him,” Talhand said as he moved the red stone representing Paul forward and the yellow one representing Elinalise back. They were still basically side by side. This was likely just a change in roles. Before, Elinalise had been the tank while Paul had been the support, but this time it would be the opposite. Paul would be our main tank and Elinalise would be supporting him.

“Geese, you’ll be where you were before.” He placed the brown stone far in front of the rest of the pack. Finally, he put his own stone in the middle. “Doubt we’ll need it, but there’ll be more monsters on the third floor. I’ll act as a shield for those in back.”

SCOUT: Geese

VANGUARD: Paul, Elinalise

MIDDLE: Talhand

REAR: Rudeus, Roxy

That was our new formation. Excluding Geese, we looked like a five-dotted mah-jongg tile.

“Any opinions on this?” the dwarf asked.

I immediately raised my hand. “Should I take this to mean that my role basically won’t change?”

“Yeah. You can talk to Roxy ’bout the details of your teamwork.”

Upon hearing that, I glanced at Roxy. She returned my gaze, looking nervous as she gulped.

“All right then. I look forward to working with you, Teacher.”

“Yes, and I as well. I’ll do my best not to hold you back.”

Just the opposite. I was the one more likely to be holding her back.

I wish she’d be more confident.

True, I might beat her when it came to mana capacity and spell usage, but the strength of a person’s stats wasn’t the sum of their worth. It was only with experience that one gained true power, and I felt like Roxy was ahead of me in that regard. She’d spent a whole month trapped and fighting in the Teleportation Labyrinth. And just days after being rescued, she was recovered enough to go right back in as if nothing had ever happened.

If that were me—if I were to experience something so horrific—I’d probably swear to myself to never enter that labyrinth again. As the Japanese proverb stated, a wise man stays away from danger. You could call me a chicken if you wanted; I knew I was a coward.

“Okay then, we’re all done with that. Next is the waiting party.” After that, Geese promptly gave his orders to the waiting party. He handed Vierra a list of supplies to purchase, then consulted Shierra about Roxy’s condition. He also advised her to prepare whatever

medical supplies she deemed necessary in preparation for Zenith's rescue. Finally, he entrusted Lilia with overseeing those tasks.

If Geese was the leader of the labyrinth party, then Lilia was the leader of the waiting party. And Paul was the overall leader of our group. He oversaw all final decision-making and kept track of everyone.

"Okay then, everyone, let's prepare for three days from now. Dismissed." At Paul's order, the meeting ended.

The next day, I spent my time ambling about on the first floor of the inn, staying in Roxy's vicinity as she read. I wanted her to consult me if there was anything she didn't understand. Me, specifically—not anyone else.

"Um, Rudy?"

"Yes?! What is it, Teacher?!"

"You shuffling about like that is distracting," she said with a forced smile.

"My apologies." I hung my head and decided to leave.

So that's it. I'm distracting her. That makes sense. I'm just getting in the way of her reading.

I couldn't cause her trouble. That wasn't my intention—I just wanted to be of assistance. But if I was a distraction, then it couldn't be helped. Maybe I should just go elsewhere. Yeah, maybe I would go to some deserted tavern somewhere. It was good to drink alone occasionally.

Yeah, that's what I'll do.

"Rudy," a voice called out to me from behind. "If you have enough time to shuffle about, there's some things in this book I'm not clear on that I'd like you to—"

"Okay!" I immediately plopped down next to her. I think I broke a record for the fastest sit. If I were a dog and had a tail, it would've

been whipping through the air like a propeller right now. “Where is it? Please feel free to ask me anything.”

Ahh, Roxy sure was tiny, though I was sure that was partly because *I’d* grown so much. If I put her on my lap, I could easily wrap my arms around her. Though I was sure she’d be pissed at me if I tried.

As I looked over at her, Roxy glanced up at me from the side.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She quickly shifted her gaze back to the book. “No, it’s nothing. It’s this part right here…”

In the intervening years, my height had exceeded hers. Perhaps she felt discouraged by that. She did seem to be self-conscious about how short she was.

Such were my thoughts as we spent the day together, reading.

I was content.



Chapter 6:
Easy as Pie

WITH ROXY now in our midst, we resumed our exploration of the labyrinth. We moved just as planned, making a beeline for the third floor. There were three types of enemies there: Mud Skulls now in addition to Death Road Tarantulas and Iron Crawlers.

The Mud Skull was an A-rank monster. It resembled a headless giant made of mud, about two and a half meters in height, with a girth that spoke to its durable nature. The creature had a skull buried in its chest area, which also happened to be its weak point, much like Jamila from *Ultraman* or Sachiel from *Evangelion*. It moved slowly, but it could shrug off any blows dealt to the mud-covered parts of its body, and if it sensed it was in danger, it could hide the skull inside its body. The Mud Skull's method of attack was to sling mud and use a spell similar to Stone Cannon.

Those, however, were not the reasons why it was considered A-rank. Though it looked like a simple golem, the Mud Skull was quite intelligent, and capable of issuing commands to lesser monsters like Death Road Tarantulas and Iron Crawlers. It would attack in formation with Iron Crawlers in the vanguard, Death Road Tarantulas in the middle, and itself at the rear. In other words, it was a monster general.

On the second floor, the Iron Crawlers would rush up front while the Death Road Tarantulas tried to pin us down by slinging webs at us. Now we had the Mud Skull overseeing them, dishing out Stone Cannons as well. That had to be a tough dynamic for Paul—who already found himself in close fights on the second floor—to counter. Combat took everything they had. There was no way they could look for Zenith, too.

That wouldn't be an issue with Roxy and me in the group. The Death Road Tarantula stationed in the middle posed little trouble, so I just had to take the lead in attacking the Mud Skull in the rear while

Roxy faced the Iron Crawler up front. Anything that remained was left to Paul and the others.

Being made of mud, the Mud Skulls were vulnerable to water magic. An abundance of it would wash them away. Fire worked as well; if I baked their mud dry, they couldn't move anymore. But my Stone Cannon was all I needed. I used my Eye of Foresight to snipe them, dealing critical hits to the skulls in their chests. One shot, one kill. I was an expert sniper, just a slow one, like the FPS types that couldn't move their spawn point.

"Phew…" Once the enemy was completely wiped out, Roxy breathed a sigh. I could see part of her face peeking out from beneath the rim of her hat. She must have used a significant amount of mana. She looked exhausted.

Suddenly she returned my gaze, glancing up at me sideways. When our eyes met, she quickly averted hers.

"I'm about out of mana," she said. "I would like to rest."

We returned to the main passageway and took a break there. I still had plenty of mana left myself. In fact, I hadn't even burned through half my supply. I was basically just using Stone Cannon, after all, while Roxy was the one freezing our enemies with Frost Nova. It was no surprise she'd run out faster.

"I'm sorry for having such a small mana pool," she said.

"No, I think you have more than enough."

She used magic with exceptional precision, slinging spells in a narrow area without any missed shots. Occasionally her Water Cascade would splash Paul and the others, but her accuracy with the follow-up spell Icicle Field was so on point that only the enemies froze over. Precision required an appropriate amount of mana as well. Despite all that, she'd kept on fighting for quite a while. By no means did she have a small mana pool. Hers was most likely the same size as Sylphie's, if not larger.

"I'd like to find the magic circle leadin' to the fourth floor here soon." Geese scratched at his chin as he checked the book against the map.

Almost two days had passed since we came down to the third floor. It had taken the author of the book five days to delve this far. We'd outpaced his party and moved through the third floor several times, mapping it all out. It was about time for us to find the next magic circle now.

"Rudy, can I borrow your back?" Roxy asked.

"Be my guest."

Once I responded, she slumped against me. She'd rest like this whenever we took a break; I assumed it was because a person's back felt more comfortable to her than the stone walls surrounding us. A side benefit for me.

"You know, I never thought I would get to dive into a labyrinth like this with you," she said.

"Me either. Say, is there anything I'm doing that I should be more cautious about?"

"Huh? You've already got the essentials down when it comes to moving as a group, so there's no advice I can offer."

"Thank you," I said.

"Using magic voicelessly with perfect precision. You really are incredible."

"Not at all." I shook my head. "I still have much to learn."

That's right—there was a lot more to learn. Seeing Roxy really made me feel that way. She didn't add on to the cards she had in her hand, but rather, increased what she could do with the ones she had. She was combining the existing items in her arsenal to overwhelm her opponent.

I was sure I'd done the same in the past, but at some point, I'd started only using Stone Cannon and Quagmire. Not the best habit, but they were enough to beat most weaker opponents. Still, petty tricks of that sort wouldn't work against the stronger enemies I pictured myself facing, but I had no one of an appropriate level to practice against. I was aiming high, but there was nothing tangible in front of me to aim for. Thus, I wasn't improving.

“Rudy?” Roxy suddenly called out to me.

“Yes, what is it?”

“If we’re able to safely rescue your mother and we both have the opportunity, how about going into a labyrinth sometime, just the two of us?”

I blinked. “Just the two of us?”

“Yes. We’re a bit pressed for time right now, but labyrinth diving can be quite fun. So how about forming a party with just the two of us and trying out a simpler labyrinth together?”

A labyrinth, huh? To be frank, if it weren’t for Geese, I would’ve probably stepped right into a trap by now. Still, if anyone could venture into a labyrinth alone, it would be Roxy. She had a track record for clumsiness, but if I went along with her, we might be able to get through it.

“That sounds great,” I agreed. “When we get back, why don’t we give it a try?”

“It’s a promise.”

“Yeah, a promise.”

I could see Roxy clenching her hand into a fist from the corner of my eye.

“…Ah, I’m starting to feel a bit sleepy. I’m going to get a little rest,” she said.

“Sure. Sleep well.”

After a few moments, I could feel her slump against my back.

I’d accepted her proposal in the heat of the moment, but venturing into a labyrinth consumed multiple days at a time. I wasn’t actually sure I’d have the opportunity to do that, since I would need to help with childrearing.

Oh well. It wasn’t as if we had to decide right way. If I had the extra time, then we could do it. Perhaps once our child was a bit bigger and Sylphie and I had more free time. I’d likely be over twenty years old at that point, but that wouldn’t be a problem.

I was just happy that she'd even invited me to join her party. It felt like she was acknowledging my skills. I had to be careful not to reveal my flaws in front of her.

As I considered these things, I drifted off to sleep.

After we discovered the circle leading to the fourth floor, we finished thoroughly mapping out the third. There was no sign of Zenith whatsoever, so we decided to move on.

The walls on the fourth floor were made of a familiar type of stone. It resembled the ruins we'd accessed to teleport here from the Northern Territories. Perhaps they were similar structures, except this one had turned into a labyrinth.

"Geese, what'll it be?" Paul asked.

"Hm? Well, we seem to be doin' fine."

"Great. Then let's scope out the fourth level a bit before we return to the surface," Paul said coolly, looking in my direction as I surveyed our surroundings.

Back when Paul was down in the dumps, he'd looked like a complete lost cause, but he seemed pretty suave when he was at work. It wouldn't surprise me if this was the side Zenith had fallen for. If the same blood really did run through my veins, then maybe Sylphie wasn't just flattering me when she paid the same kind of compliments.

"Teacher, do I look handsome when I'm serious?" I asked abruptly. It might've sounded a bit narcissistic.

Roxy's eyes peered up from beneath the rim of her hat. "Huh? Oh, uh, um… Well, sure, you're handsome?" She fumbled with her words, then quickly averted her eyes again.

Okay. That reaction said all I needed to know. She expressed her feelings loud and clear. That was clearly an uncomfortable question. How rude of me. It seemed I'd gotten a bit carried away.

If Roxy turned super cutesy on me and asked, "Hey, Rudy, on a scale of 1-10, how cute am I?" I'd happily raise up glow sticks in

either hand and readily say, “A 100!” I’d be in the front row, make no mistake.

There was more to a man than just his face—there was his heart, too. He needed a heart of red-hot flaming steel. One that could knock out anyone with a single punch.

“Rudy—enemies.”

I looked up to find two four-armed monsters in armor approaching. Armored Warriors. Incidentally, these monsters were considered undead. Earth and Divine magic worked best against them. Stone Cannon, provided it was big enough, could smash most of them into pieces in a single hit.

“I’ll start off with Stone Cannon,” I said.

“Wait, Rudy, you can’t.” Roxy stopped me just as I was lifting my staff. “I’ve heard that the Armored Warrior uses the Water God Style. If you’re careless with your magic, they’ll counter it right back at us.”

The Water God Style was something I hadn’t really encountered much, but it was a sword style based around deflecting and countering attacks. It was also effective against magic, for some reason. I wasn’t sure how, but one of their abilities allowed them to counter offensive magic with the flash of a sword. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be too worried, but these guys had four arms, *and* they weren’t human. They might well be capable of engaging four people at once and still managing to counter every single attack.

“All right then, what should we do?”

“Let’s cover the others and trip them up,” Roxy proposed. “It’s our first time against this opponent. We have to be cautious.”

“Roger that. Father, I’ll use Quagmire. Please watch your feet!”

“Got it!”

These armored-type monsters had a lot of power and their sword skills were fearsome, but they were sluggish. The steel on their bodies was heavy enough that they sank easily into the mud. They might fall right through the floor if I made my spell too deep. I

didn’t think there was much risk for collapse, but it was still probably best to keep environment-altering effects to a minimum. Up to the knees was enough.

“Quagmire!”

Their feet sank as they tried to advance, the mud swallowing them up to their thighs. Then our two frontline members set to work.

“Paul, I’ll take the left,” said Elinalise.

“Gotcha…” Paul paused. “Wait, you’re always taking the left.”

“The wall gets in the way otherwise and makes it difficult to swing.”

“So you’re only thinking about yourself—whoa, that was close!” Paul handled them with ease. He deflected an incoming attack with his right-hand sword and soon severed one of the monster’s arms with the shortsword in his left. Their armor looked sturdy enough, but apparently that didn’t matter. Swordsmen of the Sword God Style were beasts. That, or maybe his shortsword was just that sharp.

Elinalise, on the other hand, seemed a bit overwhelmed. She never took much damage from her opponent, but she lacked the offense to land a killing blow.

“Let’s back them up,” Roxy broke in. “Rudy, let’s release our magic at the same time, in Miss Elinalise’s direction.”

“Got it.”

I lifted my staff, conjuring a Stone Cannon. Now that they couldn’t move, there was no way for them to evade. I had no idea how fast my attack would have to be to keep them from deflecting it, and I would never know unless I tried.

“Mister Talhand!”

“I hear ya!” He lifted his shield and waddled up in front of us. If a counter did come flying back at us, he would be there to soak it up. As long as he didn’t die instantly, I could use my Advanced-tier magic to heal him. I just hoped any attacks would miss his vital organs.

“Stone Cannon!”

“Majestic blade of ice, I summon thee to strike my enemy down! Icicle Blade!”

Though our casting times were different, we released our magic at the same time. One was a round cannon ball and the other was a sword of ice, almost like the Ultra Slash attack from *Ultraman*.

Our armor-clad opponent attempted to deflect the attacks. Two of its sword-wielding arms moved, switching its stance to defense. This gave the perfect opening for Elinalise to shield bash it, throwing it off balance. My cannon ripped right through one of its arms, severing it, while the frozen blade embedded itself deep inside the armor’s chest. At the exact same time, Paul finished his fight as well.

“Should come as no great surprise, but these A-rank monsters don’t go down easily,” he commented, though our total battle time had lasted only a minute. We hadn’t taken them down with a single blow, but it hadn’t been a tough fight. Just what you’d expect from a man who had achieved Advanced tier in all three schools of swordsmanship. Ability-wise, he likely he had it in him to reach Saint tier.

No—if anything, Paul might already be as strong as any Saint-tier swordsman. People’s strength couldn’t be measured by rank alone.

“Father, have you gotten stronger than you were before?”

Oh crap. I just said something that would boost his ego. Now he might start tooting his own horn.

“Hm? Nah, not at all. I’m weaker now than I used to be.” But Paul didn’t even so much as smile. He merely glanced my way before looking forward. “Come on, let’s get going. And don’t let your guard down.”

Paul’s words served as a sobering reminder. He was right. We were in a labyrinth right now. I had to pull myself together.

My father sure was acting cool today. Norn would probably be delighted if I told her how suave he looked in action.

“What’s this?” Elinalise suddenly spoke up as she peered into Paul’s face. She put a hand over her mouth and smirked. “What’s that grin for, Paul? It’s creepy.”

“C’mon, you don’t have to make those kinda comments,” he grumbled back.

“Are you that happy that Rudeus complimented you? Oh, don’t worry, I understand. Heh heh heh…”

“Enough already, shut it.”

Nope, I take it back. Paul’s still the same old Paul.

We disposed of several more Armored Warriors after that, then began our journey back to the surface. The route up took approximately five hours on foot. This search was going to take us a while. I wondered if Zenith could really hold out in the meantime…

No, we couldn’t rush. We had to prevent any further accidents like the one with Roxy.

Things were going smoothly right now. I was nervous, but not *too* nervous. I didn’t feel emotionally overwhelmed.

We were in a good place right now. Keeping up this pace would benefit us the most.

As soon as we reached the city, we all gathered for a meeting.

There were several items we would need for our next venture in, so we set about picking those up. I also drew up some more spirit scrolls, since we were running low. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that this was the Labyrinth City of Rapan, magic circle dye and parchment were readily available. Creating extras proved easy. All I had to do was draw one to use as reference, and Shierra would do the rest. Apparently, she was quite skilled at it, having previously worked drawing scrolls for the Millis Church. She promised she could have fifty copies done within the day. Now *that* was promising.

Geese purchased some chemicals that were supposed to be effective on armored monsters. He informed us that this stuff, if aimed right, would coil around the creatures' joints and slow their movement. When I suggested sprinkling oil on the ground to make them slip since they were so heavy, he laughed, saying Paul would be the one landing on his ass. I responded with a thoughtful "I suppose you're right," and Geese merely cackled.

Paul and Elinalise went weapon browsing. Apparently, they were trying to hunt down a bargain sword for Elinalise. The one she was using currently—her estoc—was a magic item. When swung, it unleashed a slicing swathe of vacuum, which wasn't best suited to battle against the Armored Warriors, who were a tough opponent to beat regardless. I could understand why she wanted a different weapon.

The shortsword Paul wielded in his left hand was a magic item he purchased in Rapan. It had a Steel-Cutting ability, which meant that the tougher his opponent was to slice through, the sharper his sword became. This was a rather rare ability, so much so that the people in the market hadn't been able to identify it. They had treated it like a dull butter knife that couldn't even saw through dried meat, and practically sold it for pennies.

Paul claimed, "It was my keen eyesight that helped me to identify this sword's true power." But I knew better. I'd read *The Legend of Perugius* back in Buena Village, and there was a warrior in it whose weapon carried that very same skill. Though unable to slice through dried meat, it was capable of cutting a clump of steel clean in two. Paul must've known what it was the moment he heard that line about it not even being able to saw through dried meat.

Anyway, it made sense now why his attacks against the Armored Warriors were so effective. Even though he wielded it in his weaker hand, it would still pack a punch as long as he landed a clean hit.

Elinalise purchased a single gladius, one that apparently had the ability to emit a shockwave when thrust forward. It didn't do that much damage, but it did allow its wielder to gain some distance from

their opponent by sending the latter flying backward. That made it quite useful, so it cost a pretty penny, but Elinalise just produced a round, magically imbued crystal from her pocket and made the purchase. How many of those things did she have on hand?

That night, I went out drinking with Roxy and Talhand, the latter of whom invited me by saying, “You’re an adult now, so you can go drinkin’, right?” There was no way I could chug alcohol in front of Roxy, though, so I was just tagging along.

This was supposed to be a meeting between three magicians, but at some point “Professor” Talhand began lecturing us on “What makes a man a *real* man…” Men were supposed to have muscles. Superb muscles meant a superb spirit. It wasn’t a conversation for magicians, but it was still meaningful. He was absolutely right. Men *should* be brawny and strong.

Roxy drowsily sat through it. She clearly couldn’t have been less interested—not that I could blame her.

The following day, Lilia bid us farewell as we dove back down into the labyrinth.

Our journey to the fourth floor was a smooth one. This was partly because of our elaborate preparations and gear change, but we were also lucky. It was basically a straight shot all the way down here. Timewise, it only took three hours. We had almost no run-ins with monsters, either.

Once there, we continued to map out the fourth level rather than proceed onward, but to no one’s surprise, Zenith was nowhere to be found.

Since our supplies were still in good stock, we proceeded down to begin our conquest of the fifth floor. On this level, the Armored Warriors were joined by Devouring Devils.

The Devouring Devil was a demon with a giant mouth and razor-sharp fangs. It also had long limbs and pointed claws that allowed it to scale the ceiling, not unlike an alien from a certain movie franchise. It was a formidable opponent. The fact that it could

come skittering across the ceiling or walls meant that our formation was useless. It would pass right over Elinalise and Paul as they engaged an Armored Warrior and make a beeline for us. Watching it sent a chill down my spine.

Having said all that, the Devouring Devil itself wasn't all that strong. It was quick, with powerful-looking attacks, but it had low defenses and didn't put up much of a fight. I was a bit surprised when it first made its appearance, but after batting it off the wall, Elinalise dove in with her new weapon and the fight ended without incident.

Though the Devouring Devil was A-rank, we grew accustomed to its unusual movement patterns. It was the Armored Warrior, with its exceptional strength, that proved to be the more difficult opponent. It was annoying to have to keep looking upward to spot the Devils, though. If your attention was drawn to the ceiling, you wouldn't spot the traps laid down by your feet. And if you carelessly stepped on such a trap, you could be warped off to God-knows-where.

"All right, time for our secret weapon," said Geese.

Fortunately, we had our guidebook. There was an innovative countermeasure for these pests recorded in the pages of *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth*.

The roots of the Talfro tree were sold for consumption, but if you burned them like incense, the Devils would descend from the ceiling—they hated the smell of it. Not just that, they would also try to escape as far from the smoke as they could. This made it incredibly easy to battle them. In fact, with this method, they weren't even B-rank—they were closer to C-rank! The author of this book sure had done their research.

Just like that, we cleared the fifth floor in no time flat. Unable to locate the circle leading to the next floor, we were forced to wander about a bit, but our objective wasn't to explore the place. We were here to find Zenith. Everything was fine. In fact, this was going swimmingly for us.

Finally, we arrived at the sixth floor.

“Well, Geese?”

“We can keep goin’.” Geese gave a short reply to Paul’s ambiguous question.

We’d hardly used any of our supplies, so we were well prepared. Plus, we were on a roll.

“’Kay, no turning back. Let’s keep going, then.”

“Yep.”

There was no need to return as we had supplies and were ready. Our search would continue.

Chapter 7:
The Magic Circles on the Sixth Floor

THE SIXTH FLOOR WAS COVERED in Devouring Devils.

Armored Warriors disappeared entirely, leaving only the pesky ceiling crawlers. The fights went smoothly thanks to the incense, but there was still far too many of them. So many, in fact, that you had to ask yourself, *Just why are the things so numerous here?*

The reason became clear as we encroached upon the deepest parts of the sixth floor.

There, in the room leading to the next magic circle, was a nest. A swarm of the beasts crowded within, and countless eggs sat at the edges of the area. They were dark, oblong shapes coated in liquid—not unlike the cockroaches from my world. It sent a chill down my spine just looking at them.

Perhaps there was a queen somewhere and she was using Zenith to help birth her eggs. The thought drifted into my head, but there was no indication that the Devouring Devils had any such habits. They did swarm together, but they didn't seem to have anything resembling a queen. Just like cockroaches.

Anyways, just where were all these pests coming from, and what was their purpose? How were there so many when there wasn't an equivalent food source to support them all?

"Teacher, what do beasts like this eat?" I asked of Roxy.

"Good question. There are many theories out there, but I've often heard that they feed on mana."

"Mana?"

Forests and caves had a high concentration of mana, in addition to being full of monsters. Come to think of it, Nanahoshi did mention that such magical energy could be found in all manner of

things throughout this world. Mana, however, could not be seen with the naked eye, so how could this theory be confirmed?

Wait—there was the Eye of Magical Power, suggesting it was true.

Still, if they really did feed on mana, then wouldn't it also make sense for them to just gobble up my spells? The fact that they couldn't must mean there were two types of magical power: the kind that could be consumed and the kind that couldn't.

Now that I thought about it, Paul had told me a long time ago that monsters were attracted to the magically imbued crystal at the heart of a labyrinth. Were the crystals really that enticing to monsters? The ones here weren't even trying to delve deeper. All they'd done was create a nest and start inhabiting the place.

Ah well, pondering the mystery would get me nowhere for now. There were other monsters, like the Armored Warrior, that clearly didn't consume anything to survive. I'd leave the questions of monster ecology to the experts.

"Well, no matter what they consume, it doesn't change the fact that they attack humans on sight. Let's destroy these eggs as we find them, or they'll be a thorn in our side when we next return," Roxy said as she coolly made short work of their eggs. She used a shortsword, rather than magic, to impale them one by one. Her expression was the very definition of indifference. I liked that side of her, too.

At any rate, so monsters produced eggs, huh? I wondered if Armored Warriors had offspring as well. I pictured a mini version of them as big as a felt doll, carrying a toy sword and waddling around. I imagined their armored mommy and armored daddy watching over them happily. Then, suddenly, footsteps—an intruder. The armored mommy and daddy instruct their son to hide as they step out onto the battlefield. Paul appears before them, his face like that of a demon. He brutally murders the parents with a shortsword that is especially efficient at ripping through their armor—not unlike pesticide against insects. The child witnesses this and learns that

humans are the enemy. He grows up and morphs into a beast that attacks humans on sight.

Yeah, okay, that was a ridiculous thought.

“Rudy, what are you spacing out for?” Roxy called over to me. “Please help out.”

“Oh, right.”

I did as requested, and began smashing the eggs.

The other three rooms linked to this one were also stuffed full of the things. There were no sign of any of them being close to hatching, but if one did, the larva would try to cling to whatever human it saw.

Our cleanup ended pretty uneventfully after that, without a single newly hatched larva popping out to try and cling to Roxy’s crotch.

***

Finally, we arrived at the depths of the labyrinth, the very place written about in the last pages of our book. It was a spacious, square room constructed of stone. There were three magic circles near one of the walls facing away from the entrance of the room.

If that were all, the place wouldn’t have seemed special. But the room was absolutely empty except for the circles. The room before it had had a virtual swarm of Devouring Devils, and more than a hundred of their eggs to boot. Yet the only thing in here were these circles, almost as if this were holy ground where neither eggs nor the creepy-crawlies that birthed them dared enter. Only one word could sufficiently describe this phenomenon: abnormal.

“It’s the guardian,” said Elinalise.

Paul agreed. “It does give off that vibe.”

“Keeps your wits about you,” Roxy warned.

All three of them held their weapons close as they spoke. Perhaps it was common for the room just before the boss' lair to have an unsettling vibe to it.

"Well, which one's it gonna be?" Geese held our guidebook in one hand and investigated each circle. Everyone else stood by the entrance, waiting.

"I'll help out." I offered to join him, as someone who'd assisted in the creation of summoning circles before.

"Yeah, that'd be great," said Geese.

For some reason Roxy scuttled along behind me. Her presence would be reassuring, at least.

"How does it look?" I asked.

"Just like the book says."

One by one, I checked each the circles before us against what was transcribed in the book. The book, by the way, said the following:

There were three magic circles. We knew immediately that two of these were random teleportation circles, so we used a stone to mark the one we thought was correct, and hopped on. However, this was a trap. I was transported to an unfamiliar space, finding myself trapped between tightly packed black, slimy bodies. That's right—a Devouring Devils' nest. The moment they saw me…

I'll spare you the battle scene that followed.

I immediately spotted the stone they'd used as a sign. It was a beautifully polished, fist-sized rock. The number six was carved into its surface. We hadn't seen anything like this on the previous floors.

"Makes you feel kind of emotional seeing it, doesn't it?"

Geese frowned. "Think so? I say it's just bad luck. Listen here, Boss, things like this—items left behind by a dead party—they're bad luck."

"A jinx?"

"Yeah, that's right. A jinx."

“Okay,” I said, “but it’s not like their *whole* party was wiped out.”

As we talked, I continued to inspect the circle in front of us. It perfectly resembled the two-way circles we’d used to travel back and forth numerous times up until now, and yet this one was different. If stepped on, this one would randomly teleport you. Or perhaps you didn’t even have to step on it—maybe, once activated, it would warp anything located within the room.

This meant one of the other two had to be the correct option. Yet both of them very clearly had the characteristics of a random teleportation circle.

“Rudy, can you tell which one is the right one?” Roxy asked.

I shook my head. “Nope, I’m clueless. Nanahoshi might know if she were here.”

“Nanahoshi? Who is that?”

“A girl studying teleportation—or rather, summoning—at the university. She knows a lot about magic circles, so she might be able to weigh in.”

“C-could she be…your lover?”

“Nanahoshi? No way.” I laughed her question off. As I did, I thought to myself, *If only Nanahoshi were here. Or Sylphie, or even Cliff.* The first two would’ve been impossible, but maybe I should’ve brought Cliff, after all. Maybe I should go back and fetch him? But it would take three months to travel both ways. Maybe as long as four months. Cliff wasn’t accustomed to being on the road.

Nah. Even if I did fetch him, he might say, “I don’t know, either.”

“Actually,” I said. “I did some research into teleportation at the university, but I’m embarrassed to say I can’t make heads nor tails of this.”

“You researched teleportation?” Roxy asked, surprised.

“Yeah.”

“I see. I should have expected as much from you, Rudy. Not everyone can think to pin a problem down at its source rather than

searching blindly for answers."

She seemed to have misunderstood. I'd just followed the Man-God's advice. Not that I could really share that with Roxy, since my motives for doing so were impure. Some things were better left unsaid.

"Well, it's an obvious conclusion to come to, as a pupil of the great teacher Roxy."

"You can praise me if you like, but you won't get anything for it."

We finished our examination of the circles.

"Well, Boss, figure anything out?" Geese asked.

"Nope, nothing."

My knowledge of magic circles came primarily from the book, anyway. If the correct answer wasn't in its pages, then it was outside my area of expertise. I'd done some additional research into teleportation, of course, but this was still beyond me.

There was one thing I knew: The three circles before us were abnormal. I'd helped Nanahoshi with enough magical circles in the past that I could tell. A change to the smallest, most intricate parts of a circle would alter its effects. That was why I could confidently say none of these were normal circles.

"If what the book says is true, one of these two is the correct circle," I said.

"…What you mean is that you don't know, either?" Geese clarified.

"Exactly."

We returned to the entrance to the room, sitting down within in the circular formation that Paul and the others had taken as they rested. There, we reported the details of our search as accurately as we could.

Paul clicked his tongue, "Tch, two choices, huh?"

Elinalise mumbled, "Oh my, two options…"

And Talhand groused, “Dammit, two, eh?”

None of them looked pleased by the news.

“Two options are really gonna really screw us. It’d be better if we had three.” As he gazed up at the ceiling, Geese reminded me of a certain anime character in the Italian mafia who wears a strange hat on his head. It sounded like they had some ill memories associated with choosing between two options, which didn’t come as a surprise to me.

“Is this a jinx, too?” I asked.

“Yeah, it is. When we’ve only got two choices, we gotta let Ghislaine choose. Or whatever we do, it’ll end in failure,” Geese explained. Paul and the others nodded in agreement.

Ghislaine, huh? That name brought back memories. As a beastfolk, she certainly did have a good enough sense of smell to sniff out the correct answer.

“Ghislaine… If only she were here right now,” said Paul wistfully.

Elinalise added, “She was only ever useful in times like this.”

“She never listened to instructions during battle and ran in headfirst, almost like she didn’t understand a word anyone said. She couldn’t read, write, or do arithmetic, and she’d get enraged any time you talked about somethin’ she didn’t understand. But at least when we only had two options, she was weirdly able to pick the right one,” said Talhand.

Wow, they were sure saying cruel some things about her. Poor Ghislaine. I hoped they’d stop at that. She was, after all, one of the teachers I respected.

“Please give her a break,” I pleaded. “She can now read, write, and do arithmetic.”

Ghislaine had worked hard. She still tripped up when it came to addition that required carrying numbers, but she’d busted her butt to learn division.

“Hmph, I heard about that from Paul before, but I won’t be fooled,” said the dwarf. “There’s no way that pup can function like a normal person.”

“I heard the very same, but to be honest, I can’t believe it either,” Elinalise agreed.

The two of them certainly were skeptical. Not that I didn’t get it—Ghislaine certainly had been a bonehead.

This felt strange, though. All of Paul’s former party members were gathered here—all except Ghislaine. The very same woman who’d been the only member of the group to maintain contact with Paul after their fallout. The only one who knew Buena Village, out of all of those gathered here.

Yes, strange indeed.

“Forget that, what’re we gonna do?” Geese asked, returning to the original point of our conversation. There were two circles. Which were we going to proceed through?

“Rudy, even you weren’t able to tell, eh?” Paul asked.

I shook my head. “Unfortunately, no. I even studied these in school before I came. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“So that’s how it is…” Paul folded his arms over his chest, closed his eyes, and began thinking. After not even a minute, he lifted his head. “Let’s just take a majority vote and see where that puts us. Those in favor of taking the circle to the right, raise your right hand. Those in favor of the left, raise your left.”

Each person raised their hand at his command. Paul, Elinalise and Roxy all voted to go to the right, while Geese, Talhand, and I voted to go to the left. We were split right down the middle.

“Tch, we can’t even decide,” spat Paul.

“Um, Father,” I said, “I do have to say I’m not too sure about deciding on something like this with a majority vote.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyone else got any brilliant ideas?”

When Paul asked, Elinalise lifted her hand. “What about sending a person into each one of them at the same time?”

“You proposing we sacrifice someone?”

“Either you or I could burn incense and slice our way through the Devouring Devils if we had to,” she said confidently.

One person would enter each of the two circles at the same time, and the person who was correct would come back to us. Then we would immediately go in search of the other person and the problem would (possibly) be solved.

“I oppose that,” I said.

Elinalise said, surprised, “Oh, Rudeus? Why is that?”

“First, there’s no guarantee that either one of those is the right answer.”

Both circles seemed randomized, to all appearances. They might both be traps, meaning all *three* of the circles were traps. It was possible the correct circles were located in a different room. Admittedly, that seemed unlikely—the book said they’d searched each room on every floor before moving on to the next. If I were to trust the author, then this was our final destination.

But the position of the circles and their shapes… All of it felt deliberate. Deceptive.

Something felt off.

Why would anyone even make a trap that had a fifty-fifty chance of success? Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of it being a trap? Besides, if whoever had created this had gone to the trouble of preparing a fake two-way circle, was the solution really as simple as one of the one-way circles being correct? If that was all there was to it, why even bother having three circles to begin with?

Maybe we’d missed a hint somewhere? No, this wasn’t an escape-room game. A labyrinth wasn’t obligated to dish out hints for us.

“Well, Rudeus, do you have a suggestion then?” she asked.

“No,” I admitted. “But could I ask for you to wait a little longer before coming to a decision?”

It weighed on me. It felt like there was something I was forgetting. And until I could recall what it was, simply stepping onto one of those circles based on the assumption that it was a fifty-fifty chance was too dangerous. The moment one person did, it was possible the entire room might be randomly teleported.

One could only traverse the Teleportation Labyrinth by warping through magic circles. Perhaps there were rooms we couldn’t reach without stepping onto a randomized circle.

“I want to think about this a little longer,” I pleaded.

“Okay, Rudy. We’ll leave it to you.” Paul nodded before anyone else could respond.

I sat in front of the circles and began to think.

My starting premise was this: All three of these circles were dummies. Based off that, three possibilities sprang to mind.

First, it was possible this wasn’t the end point of the labyrinth.

According to the book, this labyrinth had one internal rule of its own, and that rule was that the main route through the maze was composed solely of two-way circles. Following that logic, this *had* to be the final destination.

However, the area that Roxy had wandered into before was a section of the labyrinth inaccessible through two-way circles alone. To get back to the main path, you had to find your way through over thirty one-way circles in the area. In short, the real end of this labyrinth might be located beyond a one-way circle, though I did think the chances of that were slim.

Second possibility: Unbeknownst to the author, one of the other party members had triggered a trap right before they entered the portal. The author assumed that they were stepping on the two-way portal, but what actually happened was that someone else

triggered a random warp, teleporting everyone in the room off to a random location. Thus, the two-way portal actually *was* the correct one.

Nah, that couldn't be it. If such a trap were present, surely Geese would have noticed it.

Third: The two-way circle was actually a double circle.

Portals came in a lot of different shapes. Perhaps there existed one that was donut-shaped. If so, the correct portal might be surrounded by one such donut-shaped portal that was actually a teleportation trap. That was possible, right?

In other words, as long as we stepped on the very center rather than the perimeter, we could reach the next floor.

Idiot, I chastised myself. *Who do you think you are, some kind of ace detective?*

The most probable of these three possibilities had to be the first one.

The author had generally only ever stepped on two-way circles. Even after he discovered the three different types on the first floor, he never stepped on a single random or one-way circle as he made his way down through the third and fourth floors. That had been enough to get him this far.

Perhaps, from this point onward, you had to proceed by one-way circles to make it to the end. But if that were the case, then maybe the path leading forward didn't start here. Maybe we were just simply at a dead end—in which case, the path leading forward might start somewhere we'd already passed up. For example, there could be a one-way circle on the fourth floor that actually led to the final point of the dungeon.

Dammit. Things had gotten so complicated.

Besides, the way the author had divided up the "floors" was arbitrary to begin with. He'd done it entirely on the basis of what monsters were around and what the area looked like. The unique

“rule” about the main route through the labyrinth only consisting of two-way portals might’ve been complete coincidence.

Was our best option to just brute force our way through, trying out each option one by one? Start on this floor and go through each one-way circle, defeating whatever monsters we encountered, trying to find a different route? That seemed like the correct choice.

Just look at the atmosphere of this room, *though*. The veteran members of my party had entered and immediately sensed that the boss—or rather, guardian—must be close. I was sure this place had to be special. That this *had* to be the last room in this labyrinth.

No—maybe that was just one of the labyrinth’s traps. Hmm…

“There’s just no end to the possibilities,” I muttered to myself as I stood up. It was time for a bathroom break. “Father?”

“What is it?” Paul looked up.

“I’m going to go relieve myself.”

“Taking a piss, eh? I’ll go, too.”

“‘A piss’!” I blurted out in shock. “You can’t use such inappropriate language in front of ladies—”

“Who cares about manners in a place like this?”

Come on now, we’re in front of Roxy. I can’t slip up here!

Well, okay, she probably wouldn’t think much of me going to the bathroom, but still.

Paul accompanied me out of the room and back to the area where the Devouring Devils’ corpses and smashed eggs remained. There, we took turns standing watch while the other took care of their business.

“You’re really struggling with this one,” Paul remarked as I emptied my bladder.

“Yeah. It occurred to me that maybe this place isn’t the final room of this floor. That maybe there’s another route. One that we have to take in order to get to the boss.”

“Nah, that can’t be.” He shook his head. “That room is definitely the right place.”

“You’re saying that based on what exactly?”

“Nothing.”

In other words, intuition. Still, it was a veteran’s intuition. Not something I could take lightly. Intuition of this sort might seem like baseless conjecture, but it was actually an unconscious inference based on experience.

“Well, no need to get ahead of yourself,” Paul said. “We’ll wait. If there’s something you’re not sure about or something you want to discuss with us, feel free. Don’t try to solve it all by yourself, yeah?”

“Understood.” I stowed my buddy back in my pants and traded positions with Paul. Now that I was standing guard duty, I took a glance around.

“Oh, there’s also one other thing that I wanted to talk to you about, Rudy.”

“Yes? What is it?”

A brief silence. “Ah, nah. Not the time for it right now. I’ll tell you about it when we get back to the inn.”

“What is it? Please don’t do that. It’ll make me nervous if you don’t tell me. That’s the sort of thing we call a ‘death flag,’ you know.”

“What the hell is that? Anyhow, if I say it right now, it’ll only mess with the group’s morale.”

I tilted my head as I heard his voice filter in from behind. It would mess with our morale? What on earth did he want to talk about, then? Was it anxiety over Zenith? Or something else that might make things awkward between us?

“A reprimand of some sort?” I guessed finally.

“Basically, yeah. Something like that.”

“True, it could really screw things up if I got all depressed and couldn’t stay focused in battle. You can be as angry as you want with me when this is done.”

“Ah, well, it’s not like I’m angry. Just figure I’d give you a chance to prep a bit.”

Once we got back to the inn, huh? I hoped we would be able to rescue Zenith before then.

“I hope Mother’s safe,” I said.

“…Yeah, me too.”

With just those few words, the air in the room turned oppressive.

This wasn’t good. Paul had to be feeling hopeless that we’d come this far and still hadn’t found her. It was best to keep those kinds of thoughts to myself.

I listened to the long, drawn-out trickle of Paul relieving himself as I surveyed the area.

There was one big room and three smaller ones that had been covered in eggs. Then there was the one further in with the magic circles. All the smaller rooms were connected to the larger one.

Something was bothering me.

“This room is pretty long, isn’t it?”

“Hm?” Paul grunted back. “Guess so. Why?”

It was oblong in shape, though wide enough and so jam-packed with corpses that it almost looked square at first glance. Closer inspection revealed that its length exceeded its width. It was actually rectangular. At each end of this long stretch was an attached room, though their sizes all differed.

I’d seen this before. Recently.

And something was missing.

“…Ah!”

It suddenly came to me. That’s right—this looked exactly like the ruins of the teleportation circles we used to get here.

“Okay! Let’s go on back then… Uh, Rudy? What’re you doing?” Paul eyed me suspiciously.

I gave him a sidelong glance as I hurried back to the other members.

Geese was sitting with his butt planted on the floor—not unlike the Great Buddha statue—when I called out to him, “Mister Geese, could I have your assistance?”

“Hm? You find somethin’?”

“Just hurry up and come along.” I dragged him with me to the center of the room. “Please search around here and see if you can find a hidden staircase.”

“Huh…? Wait—I guess it could be possible. We haven’t seen anything but teleportation traps up ’til now, but it could be there’s a hidden room or somethin’.”

Geese, having convinced himself without any input from me, got down on his hands and knees and began searching the floor. He put his ear to the floor, face tense. Then he withdrew his shortsword and began rapping the pommel against the ground.

“Hey… It’s here. It’s here!” he exclaimed. “Boss, there’s a cave under here!”

“Can you open it up?”

“Give me a sec.” Geese started fiddling with the floor. He moved down toward the wall, his hands grazing across the surface as he went. Then he retreated back to me. “No good. I can’t open it. Probably the type you gotta pry open.”

“There won’t be any problems if we break it, will there?”

“Nah. There’s no traps. Okay, Boss, let’s do it. Aim one right here,” Geese said as he carved an X into the ground.

I unleashed my Stone Cannon at the appropriate area. The earthen bullet was deflected with a resounding clang, leaving the floor below it indented.

Did I hold back too much?

“A little stronger than that,” Geese said. “You can do it, right?”

“Yes.”

I increased the potency and aimed another shot. This time a much louder bang went echoing through the halls as the floor collapsed, leaving a hole in its wake.

“Okay, just leave the rest to me!” Geese was immediately back down on his hands and knees, clearing away the rubble.

Now that there was a hole in the floor, the rest was easy. It took no time at all for him to widen the cavity, transforming it into a square-shaped opening. Beneath it, stairs cascaded downward into the darkness.

“Amazin’! Leave it to you, Boss. Can’t believe you figured it out.”

“Well, I’ve seen this kind of layout once before,” I admitted.

The ruins around the teleportation circle we’d used to get here had three empty rooms within it, and one more with a staircase. I suspected the fourth room had once looked just as simple as the rest. Perhaps the stairs that led down to the teleportation circle had once been hidden, just like these were. Back when the ruins were still in use, each room must have been furnished, making it impossible to spot the hidden staircase with a simple glance. Perhaps the reason it was so visible now was because the covering had weakened over the years, or someone had destroyed it.

“Okay, everyone, Boss found us a set of hidden stairs!”

At the sound of Geese’s voice, the other members got to their feet. They wandered over and examined the stairs, gasping in astonishment.

“Gahaha! Knew ya could do it!” Talhand guffawed, slapping a hand on my back.

“Ouch.”

“That’s my son!” Paul declared loudly, following the dwarf’s example with a slap of his own.

“Ouch,” I said again.

“This does make sense. I seem to recall the ruins of the teleportation circle looking similar.” Elinalise clapped me too.

“Urgh…”

“Don’t get too in a tizzy. There might be traps. Boss, pass me three of your scrolls. And here ya go!” Geese punctuated his words with a smack of his own.

“…”

When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Roxy with her tiny hand lifted in the air. Our eyes met, hers peering up from below, and her hand came to a gentle stop against my back, barely brushing against me.

“There,” she said. “You did a good job.” Her expression was tinged with disappointment, as if she couldn’t quite stomach the success of her pupil. Every single one of my deeds was directly linked to her, so I didn’t see the need for her to feel vexed.

That’s it, I decided. *If word of this moment gets out, I’ll brag that it was actually Roxy who gave me the hint!*

“All righty, let’s get goin’. Keep on your toes, everyone,” said Geese.

“Yeah!” Everyone nodded together.

At the foot of those stairs was a teleportation circle—a two-way type. One that was a deep, blood red.

Chapter 8:
The Guardian of the Teleportation Labyrinth

UP UNTIL THIS POINT, all the teleportation circles had emitted a pale light, but this one was red. A color that signaled danger. The words “red zone” came to mind.

“It’s here, beyond this point,” Paul muttered.

That was surely his intuition talking. But what was the “it” he was referring to? Zenith’s prison? Or the guardian? Regardless, I felt strangely confident myself—confident that the final part of this labyrinth lay before us now.

“What’ll it be, Paul? We still have supplies, but we can turn back for now if ya want,” said Geese.

We’d had an easy time on the sixth floor. The Devouring Devils had been little more than trash mobs thanks to the Talfro root. We hadn’t really used any of our supplies; we were still fully stocked. We could go on. Plus, we’d had plenty of time to rest in the previous room.

“No, let’s keep going. Everyone, check your gear.”

“Got it.”

Upon hearing Paul’s decision, we all plopped down on the floor and began examining our equipment.

“Come on, Rudy, you too.”

At Roxy’s prompting, I took a seat myself. I extracted everything I was carrying from my bag, lining them up on the ground to take stock of what we had. Not that I was carrying too much. All I had were a couple of spirit scrolls.

“Do you want a couple of my scrolls?” Roxy had hidden a few in her bag just in case the need arose. They had Advanced-tier magic in them. She could dish out spells fairly quickly, thanks to her shortened incantations, but Advanced-tier magic required some

lengthy chanting. There was bound to be a time when reciting the words would take too long. These were her hidden trump cards.

“That might be a good idea. Can I have a few of your healing ones, then?”

“Certainly.”

I could use voiceless magic, so I had no need for Advanced-tier scrolls. Healing magic, however, was another matter. It would be good to have these just in case my throat or lungs got crushed like before.

Roxy passed them over to me and I folded them up and tucked them into my robe. If I didn’t end up using them, I could just return them later. Actually, I’d like to take one home and have Nanahoshi or Cliff recreate it for me.

Wait, making copies without permission was forbidden, wasn’t it? Though I didn’t figure I’d get caught if it was just for personal use.

“I have no idea what kind of guardian we’ll face, but we have plenty of firepower. I’ll work as hard as I can to support you so you don’t have to use any of those scrolls,” said Roxy.

“Please do. I can be a bit of a coward at times, so please help me out if I need it.”

“Of course. You can count on me.” Roxy knocked a fist against her tiny chest. It was reassuring to hear her say that.

“Rudeus, Roxy.” Suddenly Elinalise tossed something at us.

After I caught the flying object in my hand, I realized it was a marble-sized rock. One of the numerous magically imbued crystals that Elinalise carried on her person.

“If you run out of mana, use those,” she said.

I glanced over at her. “Are you sure?”

“I’m just lending them to you. If you don’t use them, hand them back later.”

“Oh, sure. Got it.”

It wasn't uncommon for a magician to run out of mana when exploring a labyrinth. Ordinarily, the group would withdraw in such a situation. That was why they defeated all the enemies they encountered—so they could retreat, recharge, and press forward once more.

When it came to fighting a guardian, on the other hand, I'd heard there were times when you couldn't run. Apparently, you might even find yourself locked in an arena-type area, unable to leave until you defeated the creature.

The red circle before us looked like a two-way circle. Perhaps it was actually one-way. If so, then we would need some way to recover our mana once we stepped through.

"Okay, is everyone ready?"

We rallied to our feet at the sound of Paul's voice. I glanced at everyone's faces, noticing their expressions pulled tight. I needed to put my game face on too.

"Rudy." Paul turned toward me.

"What is it?"

"I feel bad for saying this to you at a time like this, but—"

There it was. A death flag.

"Then please don't say it," I cut him off.

"Uh, okay." Paul looked disheartened. Perhaps that had damaged his morale a bit. But I couldn't have him say anything important before our final battle. Anything he had to say, he could say it once we returned home.

"Okay, let's go then!"

We exchanged glances with each other and hopped onto the circle all at the same time.

The area we warped into was vast. It looked like the reception hall of a palace, modeled in an oblong shape the size of a baseball field. There were thick pillars at the corners of the room, and the

ceiling was so high you had to bend your neck backward to see it. The floor below our feet was covered in tiles, each of which was engraved with its own complex pattern, forming a relief. If I had to pick a single word to describe the place, “majestic” would do it.

“Whoa…!”

There was a monster located within the depths of this ashen palace-like structure. An enormous one, approximately twice the size of a red wyrm. Even from afar, I could glimpse the twinkle of its emerald green scales, as well as its short, stout body, and the numerous heads that grew out of it.

“A hydra? Seriously? Never seen one of them before,” Geese muttered, his words jolting my memory.

That’s right, this kind of creature was called a hydra. It was an enormous dragon with nine heads.

“There she is!”

That, however, was not what Paul’s eyes—or even my eyes—landed on.

There, just beyond the hydra, inside the room it was protecting, was a single magically imbued crystal. One of magnificent size, green in color, with spikes that fanned outward. I had never seen one this big before. It was completely unlike the marble-sized ones that Elinalise carried with her.

Not that it mattered. No, the size was irrelevant. More important was what was trapped within it: my mother.

There she was, encased in that crystal.

“Zenith!” Paul shrieked.

I was utterly confused. Why? How had this happened? How was she trapped inside that crystal? Before I could express my doubts, Paul already had a sword in each hand and was charging forward.

The hydra gently lifted its sickle-shaped necks.

“You damn moron! Don’t rush in there!” Geese barked.

“Tch…!” Elinalise clicked her tongue and sprinted after him. Talhand went waddling behind her.

She couldn’t catch up to him.

“I’ll cover you!” Roxy shouted.

I finally returned to my senses and outstretched my staff toward the hydra. First, we had to defeat our opponent.

I’m going to take down this monster in one hit!

I charged my Stone Cannon with the same potency that had sent even a Demon King sprawling.

“Silent fist of the frost giant, Ice Smash!” Roxy recited an Intermediate-tier incantation and leaped into battle. A block of solid ice went plunging toward the creature, buzzing right past Paul before —

Piiiing!

A jarring sound—like nails on glass—split through the air.

Roxy’s eyes went round as she gasped. “What?!”

The hydra was completely unscathed.

Was it resistant to ice? The possibility crossed my mind for a split second, but Paul was already about to arrive at the creature’s location.

“Stone Cannon!” I released my charged shot. The perfectly polished earthen bullet whistled through the air. It passed right above Paul’s head, just as he was a few steps short of the enormous serpent.

Piiiing!

Again, that earsplitting noise.

“Was it deflected?!” I choked out in disbelief.

The creature couldn’t have evaded it. My cannon *had* to have hit. The shot was dead-on, I knew it was—I was certain.

But there was the hydra, towering on high as if it hadn’t noticed a thing. Not a single scratch on it.

“Gruuuoaaah!” Paul’s battle cry was so fierce that it reached even my ears.

The hydra moved its head like a snake, lashing out at Paul as he edged close. He was sharp and precise as he evaded, moving only as much as required. In the next moment, the serpent’s heads were dancing in the air. Paul’s left-hand sword had pierced through. His speed was astonishing.

Then, for a moment, Paul’s body blurred. He was so fast that even my Eye of Foresight couldn’t track his movements. Blood came bursting from one of the hydra’s other necks. Again, his left-hand sword had sliced its flesh—though his blade lacked the necessary length to fully behead the creature.

He flipped his body, taking advantage of centrifugal force to cut through once more. One of the serpent’s wilting necks came crashing to the floor.

“Shaaaah!”

In an instant, it had lost two of them.

Unfortunately, hydras had *many* heads. So the others came whipping through the air, surrounding Paul in all directions. He retreated a step to try to gain some distance, but the length of his stride wasn’t enough to escape from the hydra’s range.

“Paul!” Elinalise finally caught up with him. She braced her shield and thrust forward with her weapon. An invisible shockwave rippled through the air.

Piiing!

There it was again. That sound.

The hydra continued its pursuit of Paul, as if it hadn’t noticed her attack at all.

“Rapid muddy currents, gush forth! Flash Flood!” Roxy’s incantation conjured water right in front of Paul, sweeping him to safety and out of the hydra’s range.

As he spun around, somersaulting through the water, Elinalise immediately stepped forward to cover him. Behind them, Talhand

skidded to a stop and began his own incantation.

Although a bit irregular, our formation did now have its usual vanguard, middle, and rear guard. Still, what were the rest of us supposed to do? Paul's attacks were making contact, but my Stone Cannon had been deflected. Roxy's magic as well. Should I try fire next? Or wind? There was no guarantee that Paul and the others might not get caught in the blast, though.

What was I supposed to do?

"Earth Pillar!" Talhand finally completed his incantation. He was using earth magic.

A boulder appeared above the hydra and came plummeting down toward it.

Piiing!

Once again, the same sound.

Just before impact, the enormous rock shattered into dust and disappeared. And there was that sound again—that piercing, high-pitched sound that nullified magic when it reverberated through the air.

"Does magic not work against this thing?!" Talhand howled.

Crap, what were we supposed to do? Keep trying? Or should we retreat for now?

What was *I* supposed to do?

Roxy suddenly raised her voice from beside me, distressed. "Rudy, look! It's healing!"

I glanced up in time to see one of the stumps, where Paul had sliced off its head, beginning to expand, meat and muscle knitting back together. The other neck soon followed.

It was regenerating.

This meant that just cutting off its necks wouldn't be enough to cause substantial damage to it.

"Let's retreat!" Roxy shouted, but her voice didn't reach Paul.

Paul was whooping out fierce battle cries as he single-mindedly slashed his sword at the hydra. His style was so reckless that it was putting Elinalise, who was acting as his support, in danger.

“Geese!” Talhand cried.

Geese dashed forth, darting past Talhand and sprinting up behind Paul. He gripped something in his hand and flung it at the hydra.

Pa-pang!

An explosion rippled. Dense smoke rolled out, the hydra at its center. A smoke bomb?

Geese yelled out something as he looped his arms beneath Paul’s, pinning him from behind. However, Geese alone wasn’t enough to hold Paul down. In seconds, the latter was close to shaking him off until Elinalise bonked Paul over the head with her shield.

“Ah…!”

Geese relinquished his hold, spoke a few words that I couldn’t catch, and Paul began hustling back toward us.

“Rudeus!” Elinalise called, and my body moved.

I focused all the mana that I could into my hand, conjuring up a dense white mist in the empty space between Paul and the hydra. A smokescreen. Through it, we could hear the rumble of the creature’s approach, but fortunately, it wasn’t all that fast. Paul and the others were able to make their way back to us.

“Rudy, let’s retreat. Back to the magic circle!” said Roxy.

“Yes, Teacher!”

I led the way and hopped onto the teleportation circle.

***

Everyone made it out safely to the other side—Roxy, Talhand, and Geese, as well as Paul, who was huffing and puffing. Then, finally, an injured Elinalise appeared from behind him. Blood was trickling from a wound she'd sustained on her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Just a scratch."

A sizable chunk had been taken right out of her. Strange, given that I didn't recall her taking any hits.

She explained, "Its scale cut me." Apparently, its outer shell was razor sharp.

Basic-tier healing magic was sufficient to close the wound without even so much as a scratch left behind. The same injury would've required dozens of stitches in my previous world. The magic of this world sure was convenient.

"Thank you," said Elinalise.

Now came the issue of how to deal with the source of her injury—the hydra.

Paul plopped himself down in front of the magic circle. He fixed his gaze on it, murderous intent oozing from his body like a poison mist.

I called to him, "Father?"

"That was Zenith. I'm sure of it," he said. His eyes hadn't even registered Elinalise's injury. Although, she was our tank, so you could say getting injured was just a part of her job. Even so…

"Please, calm down a bit," I urged.

"Yeah, that was my bad. I'm fine now." Paul's voice was low. He was calm, but he wasn't cool-headed. The words "calm before the storm" came to mind.

Not much I could do. He was right—that *was* Zenith. Even from afar, I could instantly tell it was her. I was sure Paul wouldn't be mistaken about something like this, either. The person trapped within that magically imbued crystal was certainly Zenith.

But why in the world was she encased in there?

No, the reason didn't matter. There were many potential explanations. Maybe when the Displacement Incident happened, she was warped inside the crystal. It was rare for such a thing to occur, but rare just meant unlikely, not impossible.

But wait, hadn't Geese told us she'd been found by adventurers? The word he'd used was "captured." Hold on. Did that mean Geese had known what kind of condition she was in…?

No, impossible. That couldn't be.

It wouldn't do any good to interrogate him about the framing of his information here. I could press him for questions later, after this was over. That wasn't the problem right now.

"…I wonder if she's still alive in there," I ventured, voicing my concern.

"What's that?!" Paul leaped to his feet and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. "It doesn't matter whether she's alive or not!"

"You're right." He had a point. That was inappropriate of me to say.

Zenith's chances of survival had been abysmal to begin with. I'd even considered the possibility we might not find a body at all—maybe nothing more than a memento, something that she'd left behind. We could at least hold onto that in our grief, if she really were dead.

You could say that finding her this way, with her body in one piece, was far better than we could've hoped.

"Enough with the fighting!" Geese snapped.



But Paul just leaned his face in toward me, as if to intimidate me. “Rudy. She’s there. Zenith is there—your mother! How can you be so calm?”

“You would prefer I panic? How would me losing my composure solve anything?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” he barked back.

I knew what he meant. True, maybe I was being a bit *too* cool-headed right now. My attitude certainly wasn’t appropriate for a child who’d found their mother after she’d been missing for six years.

But, well, I hadn’t had much contact with Zenith since I was a child. I didn’t really have a strong sense of her being my mother. If anything, she was more like a person that just happened to have lived with us. After all, I’d left their house when I was seven years old and hadn’t seen her for almost ten years.

So maybe it wasn’t entirely my fault that I was having a lukewarm reaction.

“For now, let’s just get on the same page about our current predicament,” I said.

“Huh?!”

I ignored Paul’s bluster and began speaking matter-of-factly, “Our magic didn’t work on that guardian. It has incredible regenerative abilities and its offensive strength is so overwhelming that it broke past Miss Elinalise’s defenses just by brushing up against her. Then there’s my mother, who’s trapped inside a crystal. Frankly speaking, we don’t know if she’s alive or not.”

“Piss off! I already know all that! I’m saying that’s not the attitude to have when we’ve finally found her!” Paul said.

Geese cut in again, “I told you, knock it off! You can squabble when we get back to the inn!” This time he forcibly peeled Paul off me.

Paul spat under his breath as he plunked down onto the floor, “Dammit, enough of this.”

He already understood the situation; he didn't need me to go spell it out for him. It was just my attitude that he couldn't stand. Even I could agree that I was being too unemotional, but I couldn't help it. What did he want me to do?

Elinalise clapped her hands together. "All right, enough with the fighting. Now let's discuss!"

Both Paul and I took our sweet time joining them in their circle on the floor. Roxy looked a bit flustered as she glanced between the two of us. It seemed I'd worried her.

"I'm fine," I assured her.

"Are you sure…?"

It wasn't the first time something like this had happened between us. Once things were finished, Paul would come to his senses. I was sure I'd feel something too, once Zenith was safe and I could hear her voice again.

That's right. That had to be true. Things had just gotten a little off kilter this time; that was all.

"Ahem." Roxy cleared her throat. "Um, as for Zenith being crystallized, I think there's something we can do about that," she said, sounding a bit more cheerful than usual.

"Really?!" Paul looked relieved.

"Yes. I've heard occasional tales of powerful magic items encased in magic crystal. Once we defeat the guardian, the crystal will liquify and we'll be able to get her out. Or at least, so the stories say."

That wasn't something I'd ever heard before. Still, this was Roxy. I was sure she wouldn't make things up.

"Yes, I know what you're talking about," Elinalise joined in. "I know of one other person who was once like Zenith is now, and they're still alive."

"…"

That one had to be a lie. Elinalise was the kind to smoothly spin a tale in these kinds of situations. I couldn't blame her if she was doing it to try ease the tension, but the precedent didn't mean that Zenith would be fine.

Not that I needed to say so. Everyone already knew that.

"Our problem is that guardian," she continued, the first to get the ball rolling on the real issue. "Honestly, I've never seen a monster of that variety before."

Geese followed up with, "No kiddin'. I can tell by lookin' that it's a hydra, but I've never heard of one with green scales before."

"Not just that, the thing can regenerate itself too." Talhand had a troubled look on his face, hands folded in front of him.

A hydra was a type of dragon. A lone wolf with multiple heads, its strength unmatched. As far as I knew, they were supposed to inhabit some parts of the Demon Continent. There were three currently confirmed varieties, split up by the color of their scales: white, gray, and gold. There was no such thing as a hydra with green scales.

"That's most likely a Manatite Hydra," said Roxy. "I've read about it in a book. It's an infernal dragon whose entire body is covered in magic stone scales that absorb mana. It was spotted during the second Great Human-Demon War, and according to the book, they were annihilated when the continent was split. I was sure it was nothing more than a fairy tale, but…it seems it does exist."

Mana absorption… Did that mean all magic was useless against it?

Just to be sure, I asked, "Are you saying that we won't be able to damage it at all?"

"If what I've read is true, you should be able to hit it with your spells as long as you launch them at point-blank range," Roxy replied.

"Point-blank range…"

That thing was huge. Not to mention that it would carve you up like a cheese grater if its body made contact with yours. Was she telling me to put my hand directly up against that thing to try to cast my spells? I could lose all my fingers.

“Still gonna revive itself even if you damage it,” grumbled Talhand. “What’re we supposed to do about that?”

Elinalise agreed. “Its ability to regenerate certainly is a nuisance.”

“But the damn thing can’t be invincible,” the dwarf insisted.

The hydra could regenerate, which wasn’t surprising at all to me. As far as I was concerned, that was common knowledge.

“We clipped its heads off and it healed ’em right back to normal. How are we supposed to defeat somethin’ like that?”

Roxy hummed ponderously along.

I, however, couldn’t bring myself to consider it *that* invincible an adversary, even though I knew it could restore itself. Why, you ask? Because of my knowledge from my previous life.

“I’ve heard that if you burn the stump where its head was cut off, it won’t be able to regenerate.” I recounted the mythical tale of Hercules. He had fought a hydra. According to the stories, he used a torch to cauterize the open wounds after beheading it, preventing it from recovering.

Honestly, it was just a myth—a story. It didn’t have much credibility.

It didn’t matter to my party members, though. Their reaction was positive.

“So that’s it. Just burn the open wounds!”

“We haven’t brought any torches along, but it won’t be able to reflect magic if we strike it where it’s injured,” Elinalise joined in.

“Guess it’s worth a shot.”

I had no idea how similar the hydra of this world was to the one of my previous world. The hydra in the myths was said to have one

immortal head, but perhaps, however unlikely it seemed, we could defeat this one by simply burning all of its heads. I didn't want to be too optimistic, but it was a living creature. Living things could be killed.

"Okay, then let's give it a try." Geese agreed and with that, our strategy was set.

My proposal didn't guarantee success, but then, there was no such thing as guaranteed success.

Frankly, I felt like our best course of action was returning to the city. While it was true that we'd hardly used any of our supplies, we had a tough enemy before us. Perhaps it would behoove us to prepare for fighting this boss. We could even hire people specifically for fighting a hydra. I wasn't sure how many swordsmen out there could slice clean through a hydra's neck, but with the number of adventurers in Rapan, I was sure we could find at least one.

"…"

But I knew Paul wouldn't allow it. In his current state, if I suggested we turn back now, he might insist on challenging the beast by himself. Plus, even if we did go back, I couldn't foresee us being lucky enough to find items specific to defeating a hydra or mercenaries for hire.

We had a countermeasure. We had the necessary number of people. Thus, we had to proceed to battle.

"Hey, Paul. You fine with all this?" Geese asked.

"…Yeah."

"That's not much of an answer. You listenin'? You're the only one that can chop that thing's heads off."

It was possible Elinalise and Talhand could damage the creature's scales, but they couldn't cut through them. Paul had to do the chopping, and as the only one who could use voiceless magic, I had to be the one to cauterize the open wound. Role division was necessary here.

Depending on the situation, I might even have to close the distance and do it from melee range. Although I would be targeting the stub of its remaining neck, there was a high chance that the scales surrounding it would nullify my magic. If that happened, the others would have to act as a decoy to divert attacks that came at me. Roxy would heal them if they took any damage.

That was how we split up our roles. That was how it had to be.

Of course, attacks would still inevitably come my way. I was in a very precarious position.

“Phew…” Paul expelled a breath and glanced around at all of us. “Elinalise, Talhand, Geese, and Roxy…” As he called their names, they all turned to look at him. “You’ve all helped me out up ’til now. Years have passed since the Displacement Incident. You crossed the Demon Continent for me, searched out Rudy in the Northern Territories for me, went to lengths I couldn’t even begin to dream of.”

All four watched him quietly, in a way that seemed to say *Hurry up and spit it out already.*

“But now that’s over. We’ll either save her…or, assuming she’s not alive, at least all of my family will be accounted for. This is the end. Please lend me your strength this one last time.”

All four chuckled and nodded.

“It’s not your style to act so humble,” said Elinalise. “But I understand. I’ll give this all I have.”

“Hmph, there’s not an idiot here who’d say no after comin’ this far,” said Talhand.

Geese joined in. “You sure have calmed down over the years. Well, not like I’ll be much help, but I’ll still do what I can.”

“Let’s win this,” said Roxy with a raised fist. “We’ll be rewarded for our efforts once we claim victory.”

Moved by their words, Paul seemed to choke back tears, sniffling. But he didn’t let us see him cry. Instead, he turned to me.

“Rudy,” he stammered, but I could see the resolve in his eyes, “You…you really are a reliable son.”

“You can flatter me after we defeat the hydra.”

“It’s not flattery. I really do mean it,” Paul said, letting out a self-deprecating laugh. “I can’t be as calm as you. I can’t come up with ideas, either. I’m just an idiot who runs in there headfirst without thinking.” He kept going, his lips wrenching as if he were grinding his teeth together. “…I’m a terrible father. Can’t even set a good example for my son.”

His voice was thick with conviction. He was staring hard at me, eyes so focused it felt like he was glaring daggers into me.

Determination—that was the word. Paul was full of determination.

“With that in mind, I’m gonna say this to you. I know this isn’t something a parent should say, but I’m going to say it anyway.”

“All right,” I said, matching his gaze. I could already guess what he wanted to say, more or less.

“Save your mother, even if it kills you,” he said.

This was a father talking to his son.

Even if it kills you.

That certainly wasn’t something a parent should say. At the very least, it would have been better if he’d said, “I’ll save her even if it kills *me*.”

Still, I didn’t think he was a cruel father for saying it. This was his conviction—his trust in me. Paul intended what he said—he would save her even if it cost him his life. And he thought of me as an equal. He believed in me. He saw me as an adult. That was why he said what he did.

All that remained was for me to respond.

We were going to save Zenith. To that end, Paul and I would share the same determination.

“…Yeah!” I gave a sharp nod, and Paul bobbed his head in return. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought he looked happy.

“Okay, let’s get going then!” he said, rousing everyone to their feet.

Our rematch with the hydra was about to begin.

Chapter 9:
Mortal Combat

THE HYDRA MADE for an imposing figure, waiting for us in that spacious room. Behind it was a magically imbued crystal. There wasn't a shadow of a doubt in my mind that it was indeed Zenith who was sealed within.

"Okay, let's do this!" Paul dashed ahead. He crouched low to the ground like a dog, moving like the wind—at a speed that left the rest of us in the dust. Except this time, Elinalise stuck right behind him. Behind her was the slow-legged Talhand. We matched his pace as we advanced.

Geese was on standby behind us. He would be useless in this fight, considering he had no way to deal damage. Still, he remained. His duty was to escape and tell the others what had happened if our party failed and was wiped out.

"Raaaah!"

Paul reached the hydra. In the same instant, three of its heads moved to strike. The beast was quick for its size, agile and nimble enough that each of its heads looked like wild snakes as they moved.

But then Paul blurred, and in that instant, he sliced right through one of the creature's necks.

Okay, this is it!

"Fireball!" I lifted my staff and poured all the mana I could within, packing the flames with heat before launching them at the hydra.

But it was futile.

The closer the fireball drew to its target, the more it shrank in size. It evaporated the instant it hit. The only thing it left behind was that unpleasant screech, like nails on glass—*Piiing.*

“Guess I’ll have to get up close and launch it directly,” I sighed. I’d have to slam my fire magic into it at melee range to cauterize the stumps of its necks.

“Just like we planned,” said Roxy. “Rudy, can you do it?”

“I’ve got this. It’s not like magic is the only thing I’ve been practicing,” I assured, even as my heart hammered.

I wasn’t good in melee. All my memories of close combat were tainted with defeat, starting with Paul, then Ghislaine, then Eris, and finally Ruijerd. Never had I been able to beat any of them at close range. Sure, I’d won battles before—against Linia, Pursena, and Luke. There were others whom I’d bested with the help of my Eye of Foresight, too. But could any of them have beaten a hydra?

No. I didn’t see how they could, not when Paul and Elinalise were both struggling. It was illogical to think I could win against it, either.

But I wasn’t fighting alone this time. I had a team. Paul, Elinalise, and Roxy were all with me. I didn’t know the extent of Talhand’s power, but if he was at all comparable to the others, he would prove useful as well.

I moved as swift as I could, coming up just behind Paul.

“Rudy, you stay right behind me!” I heard him shout back at me.

To his right was Elinalise, and to his left, Talhand. Behind us, Roxy. This was precisely the Imperial Cross formation.

“Shaaaah!”

All at once, three of its heads came snapping toward us. The hydra didn’t move more than four of them at a time. Perhaps that was the extent of its ability to attack? Or maybe it was simply that any more heads than that would get in each other’s way?

I wasn’t sure, but this was good news for us.

“Hah!”

“Mmph!”

“Graah!”

Elinalise parried one head while Talhand deflected another. Paul cut off the third, which dropped to the ground, writhing.

“Go!”

“Yeah!”

Paul bellowed the command at me, and I approached the wriggling stump, launching my magic at it. The flames licked upward, illuminating the area as it scorched the opened wound. The meat on its neck sizzled, turning a charred black.

“How’s that?” I inched back to observe my work, but it was too early to tell.

Before I could confirm anything, other heads came whirring at us. Paul blocked one, and Elinalise deflected the other with her shield. In the corner of my vision, I caught a spray of blood coming from Talhand.

“Guh!”

“Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment—Healing!” Roxy ran to the dwarf’s aid the moment he took the blow, and healed his wounds.

They were all working to shield me from injury. It was left up to me to check whether my flames had been effective or not.

How was the wound on its neck? Would the carbonized stump regenerate?

“…Okay!”

It hadn’t. The wound was just as Paul had left it. The meat and flesh wouldn’t knit back together as it had before.

“It’s effective!” I announced.

“Hell yeah!” Paul whooped before cutting off the next one.

I burned that one, too. The heat from it was incredible, choking the air around me. Even Paul had sweat dripping down his brow. But if I didn’t put the necessary firepower behind these attacks, I wouldn’t

be able to cauterize the wounds. If left half-toasted, the creature would regenerate. As long as we kept up at this pace—

“Ah…! Cover me!” I called out.

My Eye of Foresight predicted the hydra’s movement. *Two of the heads that hadn’t previously moved will come straight my way.*

I could evade the one, but the other head would predict that motion and aim accordingly.

“Leave it to me!” Elinalise called out. As I dodged the first, she flew in beside me. She knocked one head away while planting herself uncomfortably between me and the monster, shoving her shield out in front with a screech of grinding metal in order to protect me.

A drop of blood splattered against my cheek.

“Roxy!” I called, “Healing!”

“Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment—Healing!” She immediately leaped into action with her restoration magic.

Then the two moved back to their original positions, as if nothing had ever happened.

“Rudy, I’m going for the third!” Paul hollered back at me.

“Got it!”

A pillar of red liquid sprayed through the air as another head came crashing before me.

Burn! My job was to burn—to burn its flesh, to do nothing more than burn. Anything else, I could leave to the others. Right now, I just had to concentrate on what was before me. Paul cut, I burned. Elinalise and Talhand would make absolutely certain I was protected, and Roxy would heal them if she needed to.

We burned the fourth head.

We can do this!

Suddenly, the hydra’s movements changed. The remaining five heads moved simultaneously, going after Talhand.

“Gah!”

“Talhand!”

He evaded the first one. Since he couldn’t do the same for the second, he dropped to the ground and rolled, trying to escape it instead. As soon as he did, its scales clipped him and his heavy armor went flying, clattering as tumbled across the ground. His butt was planted firmly on the ground by the time he blocked the third with his axe. As for the fourth, he couldn’t even defend himself. It snapped at his feet.

In seconds, Talhand was suspended in mid-air.

“Gwoooh!”

The fifth swooped in, jaws bared, threatening to snap his torso in two as he dangled helplessly. Then—

“Hyaah!”

A low *boom!* resounded as a head hit the floor. The tragic, fleshy stump of a dwarf’s neck…was nowhere to be found.

It was the hydra’s head that had been lost. Paul had sawed it off.

“Sorry ’bout that, and thanks for the help!” Talhand said.

“I’ll burn it now!”

“Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment—Healing!”

Talhand’s voice, then mine, and Roxy’s, respectively. All three of them could be heard simultaneously, all taking different actions.

I burned two of its stumps at the same time. There were only three left.

“Hm?”

It was then that the hydra’s movements changed once more. The creature was beginning to stagger back, as if frightened by us.

“We can do this! I’m going to press the attack, Rudy!” Paul leaped forward, but my legs were frozen.

Wait…

Wasn’t this a trap?

I had a feeling we shouldn’t attack when we had no idea what our enemy might be scheming. That ill premonition drifted through my head within seconds. And in the next instant…

“What?”

It was one of the hydra’s heads. Unbelievable—it was chomping off the burned stumps of its own flesh!

“What the hell?!”

And as we watched, meat and bone knitted back together.

“Shit!”

The cauterized wounds couldn’t heal, but they would go right back to normal if the hydra managed to chomp them back open.

“Don’t give it a chance to regenerate!”

“Yaaaah!” Elinalise let out a fierce cry and swept toward it. She closed the distance, then thrust her gladius at one of the heads that was beginning to heal.

“I lay before thee a cradle of ice as thou desire, now relinquish thy glacial currents, Ice Smash!” Elinalise chanted, slamming her magic into the regrowing stump at point-blank range. The scales had yet to grow back, so the block of ice burst right through the soft meat. Handfuls of blood went splattering like pomegranates as the head—or what remained of the neck, anyways—writhed in pain.

“Roxy!”

“Let this smoldering flame burn bright with your blessing, Flamethrower!” Roxy, who had caught up to Elinalise at some point, unleashed a roaring blaze. While the scales were able to absorb the force of her spell to some degree, she still managed to sear the flesh, smoke hissing from the wound.

“We did it!”

Paul moved to pursue, but the hydra didn’t retreat. It lifted its enormous body, stretching its heads—all three of them—just short of the ceiling, and glowered down at us.

Was it really frightened? No, it didn't seem like it. What was this? It felt familiar. Dangerous.

"Something's coming, watch out!" Paul warned.

"Yeah!" My body moved on instinct—no, experience. I'd seen a dragon rear up like that before—going back on its haunches, drawing in air. "It's going to breathe something! Everyone come over to me, please!"

"Got it!"

Paul retreated a step, returning to where I was. Elinalise and Talhand came running, almost tumbling, to the base of my feet. Roxy leaped toward me with her arms spread, as if to grab on.

I conjured a wall of water as thick as I could.

At almost the same instant, the creature exhaled. Tremendous flames burst out of three of the hydra's mouths, plummeting down toward us, crashing into my water barrier. Enormous plumes of steam rolled out, heating the whole room.

"Ah…!"

Dragon breath was renowned for its fearsome heat. It could melt right through steel or evaporate a small bog in an instant. And just now, three of those heads had expelled that very breath. An ordinary magician alone couldn't have defended against it. If five—no, ten of them joined together to erect a water barrier, then… No, even that might not be enough.

Fortunately, my mana wasn't *ordinary*.

"Father!"

"Yeah!"

After the creature lowered its heads, Paul sprang forward.

The hydra's breath had limited uses. Whether it was creating it through some organ in its body or whether it had to store up mana, I had no idea. I just knew it couldn't fire it in rapid succession.

This had to be its trump card. Something it could unleash with three heads at the same time, with downtime between. Perhaps if

only one head had fired, then one of the others might be able to use the same ability in succession. But it hadn't done that, most likely to avoid catching its other heads in the attack.

Either way, this was our chance.

"Hyaah!" Paul swept his blade down, ripping through another neck.

I burned it instantly.

Just two more to go—a thick neck and a slender one. Was the conspicuously chunky one its main head? If so, we should leave it for last.

"Father, let's go for the thinner one first!"

"I know!" Paul rushed forth.

Elinalise and Talhand would deal with the thicker one. Things were much easier now that there was only two of them left.

"Graaaah!"

His sword danced and the head came falling. My flames immediately seared its raw flesh.

We can do this, I told myself.

There was just one left. We'd won this. After coming this far, we wouldn't give it the chance to recover. Even if its final head were immortal, we could easily deal with it now that the others were gone.

It was then, just as I was using my magic to cauterize the second to last stump, that the hydra's body trembled. I didn't know what that movement meant. I could see it with my Eye of Foresight, but I didn't understand it. The creature was too big.

"You moron!"

"Wait—!"

Before I realized what was happening, Paul had slammed me out of the way. Something enormous came crashing down right in front of my eyes.

But…it didn't have a head anymore?

No—there was no head, but it *did* still have a neck.

The hydra was slinging its headless necks around like spiked whips—all eight of them! Every one of them was coated in tough scales that could shred flesh like a cheese grater. It whipped those necks around all at once, mowing down anything in the vicinity.

“Ruuudyyyyy!” Paul screamed, driving his foot into me to kick me out of the way.

Almost simultaneously, a *thud* resounded as something smashed to the ground right where I’d been a moment ago, in the once-empty space that had existed between Paul and me.

“Wh-whoa!”

Horns jutted from the creature’s forehead. An eye glared at me—a panicked, cornered eye. One trying desperately to survive, to cling to the tiny strand of life that remained. The hydra’s eye.

“Graaaah!”

Moving on instinct, I plunged my left hand down into its eye. I could hear a squish, like a grape popping, as a fierce heat consumed my arm.

The hydra blinked from the pain, its scale-covered eyelid coming crashing down like a guillotine.

In the next instant, I launched my Stone Cannon. The top part of the hydra’s head was blown off as its eyelid clamped down. The force of the collision jerked my arm up into the air. A tear and then a vicious snap—two sounds that penetrated so deep in my ears they seemed to claw their way to my brain.

“R-Roxyyyyy!” I choked back the pain as I screamed out her name—the name of my trusted master.

“Let this smoldering flame burn bright with your blessing, Flamethrower!” Her voice, though faint, reached me.

The final head fell, charred black from the fire. Then its enormous body slowly began to collapse. A boom thundered around us as it crumpled. I could feel the life gradually drain out of it.

There would be no further regeneration. Its final head was not immortal.

“Haah… Haah…”

We beat it. We actually beat it. We won!

“We did it… Urgh!” The second I realized it was over, sharp pain came shooting up from my left hand. When I looked down, I was shocked. “Ahh…”

My left hand was gone.

The scales of the hydra’s eyelid had sliced right through skin and muscle, its ferociously strong muscles snapping my bones apart. Then, in the last moment when it had raised its head, it ripped the whole thing off. Blood was spewing from my open artery.

“My hand…my left hand…”

In its eye. My hand…it was in the monster’s eye, I realized.

I glanced over at the head. The raw power of Roxy’s fire magic had left it a clump of charcoal. The moment I saw that, I knew.

My left hand was gone.

I could search for it, but I wouldn’t find it. I would bleed out if I even tried.

Crap. I needed healing. Fast.

“Angel of miracles, bestow thy holy breath unto the pulsing heart before thee. O heavens blessed with sunlight, servants who despise crimson, swoop down into the ocean of light, the pure white of thy wings spread wide. Drive away the blood thou seest before thee! Shine Healing!”

I recited an Advanced-tier incantation. Advanced alone would not be able to restore what was lost. I knew that. I used it anyways.

Pink flesh swelled over the amputated stump, ceasing the blood flow. Disappearing along with it were the scratch on my face and the bruise from where Paul had kicked me.

“Phew… Haah…”

My breathing was erratic.

Calm down, I told myself, *calm down.*

My left hand was gone, but the hydra had been an incredibly difficult foe. I'd gotten through it with all but my left hand. Put that way, perhaps it was a small price to pay. If Paul hadn't managed to squeeze in there and save me, there was a high likelihood *I* would have died.

"You really saved me there, Father." I glanced over my shoulder, searching for him.

There was no response.

Everyone was quiet. Elinalise just stood there. Talhand was silent. Roxy pursed her lips. And behind them, Geese was pale as a sheet.

Paul gave no reply.

"…Father?"

They were all looking at something, so I followed their gaze to where Paul was, collapsed on the ground. Yes, collapsed. There, on his back.

But…he wasn't just collapsed. He was unconscious. His eyes were vacant.

And…his lower body was missing.

"…Huh?" My brain couldn't process it. "What?"

Oh, no. I knew what had happened.

That's right. I'd seen it myself. Paul had kicked me out of the way because the spot where I'd stood was exactly where the last head came slamming down. He'd had to kick me as hard as he could to be able to move me. I wasn't a child anymore, so he had to, you know, thrust his lower body forward for the kick to have power behind it. Normally that kind of kick would send a person reeling back from the recoil, but Paul was a swordsman. A skilled one, one who could wrap themselves in battle aura, one with physical strength. So when he kicked me, his body didn't move.

That meant… That meant that the place where I was at… I mean, the place…

I didn't…want to understand it.

I just…

"But…why?"

The moment I strangled out those words, Paul's eyes moved, landing on me. I met his gaze.

"…"

Paul said nothing. His mouth just softened—as if relaxed, as if expelling a sigh of relief—and blood gurgled up past his lips.

Then the light went out in his eyes.

Paul was dead.

Chapter 10:
Parents

IN THE EXACT MOMENT that the hydra breathed its last, the magically imbued crystal it had been guarding liquified, and Zenith collapsed onto the ground. She was alive. Although still unconscious, there was no mistake that she was breathing.

There were dozens of enormous magically imbued crystals in the area, and the ground was littered with the magic stones that had comprised the creature's scales. Further within were a plethora of fallen magic items, too. They would net a fine price. But not one of us was in a mood to start collecting them.

I felt light, unsteady, as if I were in a dream. If someone called out to me, I would reply, but my mind was otherwise empty. It was almost as if someone else was answering for me, using my mouth. Yet, much to my own surprise, I was able to make short work of the unfinished tasks that remained afterward.

We cremated Paul's body there in that room.

My feelings about it were complicated. Part of me wanted to take him home, to at least let Zenith see his face even though he'd passed, but in the end, I followed everyone's recommendation for his funeral.

My fire magic was enough to reduce him to bones in a matter of minutes. When Elinalise warned that burying him like that could result in him reanimating as a skeleton, I did as she proposed. I crushed the bones down, conjured a jar with my earth magic, and poured them inside.

He'd left only three personal belongings: the metal breastplate that had protected his torso, the magical sword that could deal massive damage to tough opponents, and finally, his favorite weapon that he'd kept at his side since before I was even born.

"…"

I felt strange. I couldn't put my finger on what this emotion was, but it felt like a weight crushing down on my chest.

"Let's go home."

I wasn't very useful on the way back. We beat our enemies and I was able to use my magic, but my feet were unsteady. It was as if I wasn't walking at all, but rather, floating. Had it not been for Roxy, who was pressed close beside me, I might have stepped on a teleportation trap.

No matter how many mistakes I made, no one said a word to me. Not Elinalise, not Roxy, not Talhand, and not Geese. No complaints, no consolations. Everyone was at a loss for words.

Zenith was carried the whole way on someone's back. There were some intense battles as we hiked up to the surface, but she never woke. It made me anxious, but the fact that she was still breathing meant she was alive. At least, that was what I tried to tell myself.

It took us three days to make it out of the labyrinth.

I couldn't really remember what the three who welcomed us back to the city said when we arrived, but Elinalise and Geese explained the specifics to them. Shierra collapsed in tears and Vierra sank to her knees with a look of shock. Even as I saw that, I couldn't say anything.

Not a single word.

Lilia was different. Her face was a mask, revealing nothing as she looked at me and squeezed her arms around me. Then she said, "It must've been difficult. You did well. Try to get some rest and leave everything else to me."

Feeling utterly empty, I just nodded.

I shed my robe once we returned to the inn. There was a hole in the shoulder, one I knew I needed to stitch closed. But for now, I just tossed it to the corner of the room, along with my staff and my equipment bag. I tossed it all into a pile. Then I collapsed onto my bed.

***

That night, I had a dream. In it, I was back in my old body, back to being the slow-witted, self-demeaning shut-in. But this time, the Man-God was nowhere to be found. Nor was the white room in which he always resided.

This was a memory from my previous life. Yes, a dream of what had once been. I wasn't sure exactly when it took place, but the scenery looked familiar. It was the living room of my parents' house. The two of them were there, talking about me. I couldn't hear their voices, perhaps because it was only a dream. Yet strangely, I knew it was me they were talking about. Had they been worried about me, back then?

I left that world without ever discovering the reason for their deaths. Considering they'd both gone at the same time, I assumed illness. Maybe an accident, or perhaps suicide.

I wondered what they'd thought of me just before they died. Did they consider me nothing more than a shameless shut-in? Were they vexed by how I'd turned out? Ashamed? I had no idea how they truly felt. My mother would still pop in to see me occasionally, but at some point, my father had stopped saying anything to me.

Did I even cross their mind when they died, I wondered?

What about me? When they died, I didn't even go to their funeral. What was I doing? I didn't pick their bones from the ash after cremation, like a child should have done. What the hell was I doing? Why didn't I even go to their funeral?

I'd been scared of the way people would look at me when they saw I wasn't even trying to be sad. Of the way they would look at a piece of shit like me, a shut-in. Their hostility. Their contempt. But that wasn't the whole story, of course. I wasn't an honorable human being. At the time, I didn't feel even an ounce of sadness that my parents had passed. I didn't love them enough to grieve their absence. I was less worried about losing them and more concerned

by thoughts of *Oh shit, now what am I going to do?* I couldn't even look directly at my own future.

I didn't mean to justify my behavior, of course. But I also couldn't help it. Imagine being backed into a corner, losing the last source of salvation you have. Being suddenly plunged into a vast ocean before you'd even had a chance to fill your lungs with air. Anyone placed in that situation would look for a way to escape from reality. Sure, I regretted not doing more, but I could only blame myself so much.

Still, if nothing else, shouldn't I have at least attended their funeral? I had no idea what I'd been thinking back then, but shouldn't I have at least looked at their faces after they'd passed? Shouldn't I have at least picked up their bones?

How had Paul looked after he passed? It hadn't been satisfaction written on his face, but I did see the edges of his lips curl in a smile of relief. What was it he'd tried to say there at the end?

What expression had my parents from my previous life worn on their faces when they passed?

Why didn't I look back then?

I wished I could go back now and see.

I felt awful the next day when I awoke. An intense desire to do absolutely nothing weighed down my entire body. In order to escape from the feeling, I forced myself out of bed and moved to the neighboring room where Lilia and Zenith were.

When she spotted me, Lilia stared in amazement. "Lord Rudeus, you've recovered already?"

"…Yeah, for the moment. I can't be the only one to take it easy, right?"

"I'm certain no one would complain if you were to rest a bit more."

Honestly, I *did* want to crawl back into bed as she suggested, but the sense that I had to do something—had to *move*—was even

stronger.

“Please, let me stay here.”

“All right,” she said, “I understand. Feel free to sit.”

In the end, I stayed there and the two of us watched over Zenith together. She’d been sleeping for days by now. It had taken three days to leave the labyrinth, a day to get back to town, and even now, she didn’t wake. Her outward appearance suggested nothing unusual. She merely looked like she was sleeping. And though she’d been bedridden for days, there was no sign that she was losing weight. She looked perfectly healthy.

I’d thought she might look a bit older, but that wasn’t the case. Both her cheeks and hands were warm, and if you pressed your ear close to her lips, you could hear her breathing. It was just her eyes that wouldn’t open.

Maybe she would stay like this forever. Perhaps her body would deteriorate and she would die. That thought briefly passed through my mind. I didn’t give voice to it. Unnecessary words were better left unsaid.

Lilia and I watched over her quietly. Occasionally, Vierra and Shierra would come by, chatting about this or that. Whatever the conversation was, it didn’t stay in my head.

The two of us shared meals together, though I had little sense of even being hungry. I barely swallowed anything. I tried to wash what I could down with water, but the food stuck to my throat and made me gag.

It wasn’t until early afternoon that Zenith showed any signs of change.

There, right in front of us, she let out a small groan and slowly lifted her eyes open.

“Mm…”

Those present were Lilia, Vierra, and myself. Vierra immediately burst out the door to go inform the others. Lilia and I remained, watching as Zenith tried to lift herself up. It should have

been difficult after being bedridden for days, but with a bit of assistance from Lilia, Zenith was able to lift her upper body almost entirely on her own.

“Good morning, my lady.” Lilia smiled as she greeted my mother.

Zenith regarded her with the face of someone who hadn’t completely shaken off sleep yet. “Mm…”

Her voice—it was a voice I recognized. Thinking back, it was the same one I’d heard the first moment I was born into this world. A calming one.

Relief washed over me. Paul had died, but at least the person he’d tried to rescue was now safe. Safe, and alive. His hopes had been realized.

I was sure she’d be sad when she learned of his death. She might even cry. Still, at least the three of us, Lilia included, could share that loss together.

“Mother…”

I didn’t have to tell her about it right now. I could save that until things calmed down a bit more and she understood what was going on. We could take things slowly, one step at a time. It wouldn’t be wise to force the harshness of reality on her all at once. First, we needed to rejoice that she was alive and that we’d finally been reunited. We could be sad later.

“Hm…?” Zenith tilted her head slightly.

I stilled my heart.

She had forgotten me.

I couldn’t blame her. The same had happened with Roxy. As the days and months turned into years, my face had changed. It might be a bit of a shock to her now, but I was sure we would both laugh about it in the years to come.

“My lady,” said Lilia, “this is Lord Rudeus. Ten years have passed since you last saw him.”

“…”

Zenith stared at me vacantly. Then she looked back at Lilia, her eyes like a mirror—empty, reflecting only what they saw before them.

“Hm…?”

She tilted her head again, and Lilia’s eyes went wide.

Something was wrong. Strange. She wasn’t speaking. All she did was groan. Plus, the way she moved—it was as if she’d forgotten Lilia as well. It was one thing to forget me, but could she truly not recognize Lilia? The maid had aged, admittedly, but she hadn’t changed that much. Her hair and even her clothes were the same as before.

“Ohhh… Aah…”

Her voice was clumsy, her eyes were blank, and she could form no words. All she did was stare at us.

“My lady…could it be that…?” It seemed Lilia had realized it too.

I knew what words lay unspoken, hanging at the end of her unfinished sentence, but my heart was quick to dismiss them.

Both of us tried numerous times to talk to her.

“…”

The conclusion came quickly. Zenith reacted to our voices, but produced no words of her own. Nor did she show any signs of comprehending what we said.

“Lord Rudeus… I’m afraid she’s lost it all.”

Indeed, Zenith had lost everything. Her memory, her knowledge, her intelligence—all the necessary components that formed a person.

She was a husk.

There was no way she remembered Paul. She didn’t even know Lilia or me. Who, what, when, how—she recalled none of it.

That meant she couldn't even be sad he'd died. We couldn't share that loss.

The reality of that stabbed like a knife.

"Aah…" A gasp escaped my throat.

And my heart shattered.

***

How many days passed after that? I had only a vague sense of time. I woke, slept. Woke, slept. Repeated the process countless times.

When I slept, my dreams replayed the moment of Paul's death. I saw him slash at the hydra, saw it swing its neck. Felt him shove me aside, pushing me out of the way. Then watched him move again, watched the hydra move again, but *I* couldn't move. Paul kicked me out of the way, and I watched as the hydra's head came plummeting down in front of me.

Then I jolted awake, checked to make sure it was just a dream, and huddled back into bed. I didn't have the willpower to get up. All I could do was think about Paul.

Paul was… He…

Sure, okay, he wasn't a praiseworthy human. He was terrible with women and a total show-off. He was weak in the face of adversity and looked to alcohol for an escape. He hadn't even bothered to say anything fatherly before we went into battle. By most standards, he was a complete failure as a father.

But still, I loved him.

It wasn't quite the same as the parent-and-child love Paul felt for me. To me, Paul was more like a partner in crime. Strictly speaking, I was mentally older, but he had more physical years on me. Even when it came to life experience, he was probably well

ahead of me when you considered the decades I'd spent as a shut-in.

None of that really mattered. Age was pointless. When I talked to Paul, I felt like the two of us were on an even footing. I couldn't see him as a father, and I'd probably never really thought of myself as his child.

But Paul was different. He'd seen me as his child from the very beginning. Me, who'd been a piece of shit thirty-something recluse on the inside at the time. Me, whose actions thus far had to have been bizarre from an outside perspective. Still, he regarded me as family, never turning his eyes away. There were areas where he failed as a father, but he never faltered in considering me family. Never once did he treat me like a stranger. I was always, *always* his son. Despite my abnormal abilities, he still saw me as his son. He faced me head-on.

He was a father. He always had been. Even as he carried burdens far too heavy for him, he acted as a father and continued to do things for the sake of our family. At the end, he'd even shielded me—used his body, as a father, to protect me. His son.

He'd bravely put his life on the line, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And he died.

It was strange.

I wasn't even his child, but Paul was still my father.

Paul had two real children. Not fakes like me—actual, honest-to-God, *real* children. Two sweet, genuine daughters. Norn and Aisha. If he were going to shield anyone, it should've been them.

Plus, he had two wives, right? He'd spent years desperately searching for one of them—Zenith. The other, Lilia, had been there to support him until then. Two wives and two daughters. Four people in total.

What the hell are you doing leaving them behind, huh, Paul? I thought angrily. *Weren't they important to you?*

But maybe I was just as important to him, too. Two wives, two daughters and one son. Maybe they were all equally important to him.

I'd never seen him as a father, but he'd thought of me as one of the most important people in his life.

Ah, fuck. Why, Paul? Give me a break. You said it so many times: "Rudy, I see you as an adult now. I see you as a man."

I got married, bought a house, took guardianship of my sisters—of course I felt like an adult. I came to help you, worked hard in that labyrinth. *I* saw myself as an adult. You did too, didn't you? That was why you said what you did at the end, right? "Save her, even if it kills you."

So, explain to me: Why? Why…? Why did you shield me, if I'm an adult?

What am I supposed to say to Norn and Aisha when I go home? How am I supposed to explain what happened? What am I supposed to do with Zenith, the way she is now? What am I supposed to do from here on out?

Tell me, Paul. You were supposed to decide this, weren't you?

Dammit. Why did you have to go and die? Ah, fuck.

At least if I had died, it would be him here anguishing over what to do instead. Or better yet, if neither of us had died, no one would have to suffer.

Ah, I can't do it.

Sadness bubbled up with me. I couldn't stop the tears that came flooding out.

In my life—my previous one, that is—I didn't even cry when my mother and father had died. I hadn't even felt sad. Now that Paul was dead, the tears came naturally. I was sad. I couldn't believe it. The one person who *had* to be here—was *supposed* to be here—was now gone.

Paul was a father. Paul was *my* father. I'd never thought of him as one, and yet, he was every bit a parent to me as the ones from

my previous life.

I thought and thought, cried and cried, until I was exhausted.

I don't want to do anything.

I lounged lazily about my room. There were things I needed to do, I knew, but I couldn't find the will to do them. I didn't even have the strength to leave this room. I slept, woke, sat up, adjusted my posture, and let time just slip by.

Elinalise and Lilia came to visit in the midst of this. They said something to me, but I wasn't sure what. It was almost as if they were speaking a foreign language and my brain couldn't comprehend the words. Not that it mattered. I wouldn't have been able to reply even if I did.

I had nothing to say, no words to speak to them.

If, just *maybe*, if I had been able to wield a sword a little better, then I could have chopped off the hydra's head. Maybe then, Paul wouldn't have died. The two of us could have worked on chopping while Roxy roasted the open wounds. We could have defeated it easily if we had done that, right?

If only I could wrap a battle aura around myself. If only I could move a little faster. Then Paul wouldn't have had to shield me. I could have dodged the attack all on my own.

But I couldn't, and that's why things had ended up this way.

It wasn't like I hadn't tried.

Maybe we should've gone back to the city, even if it meant I had to punch his face in and drag him back. We could've come back, had a calm strategy meeting, and then maybe we could have come up with a solid plan. A smart one—not the clumsy, by-the-seat-of-your-pants plan that we'd used. If we'd done anything just a bit differently, the outcome might have changed, too.

But it was too late. Paul was dead. I'd never see him again—just like the parents of my previous life. No matter what I said now, it was already too late.

Chapter 11:
Looking Ahead

FOUR PEOPLE, men and women, gathered around a table in a certain pub. A darkness settled over them amidst the clamor of the room.

“Paul’s dead,” muttered Elinalise, the elf with lustrous blonde hair.

“Yeah, sure is,” agreed Geese, the monkey-faced demon who was eyeing the contents of the cup in his hand.

“He protected his boy. That’s how he’d have wanted to go,” Talhand, the stout dwarf with a beard, said plainly. His voice held little energy. He should’ve been drowning himself in his beloved alcohol by now, but he didn’t look the least bit drunk.

“Don’t think he’d be happy, not with Zenith like that,” Geese said.

The dwarf just silently tipped his tankard back.

It had been a shock to them all when Zenith turned out to be an empty husk. An especially cruel shock, considering they’d all known the cheerful, energetic person she’d been before the accident. Even so, they were adventurers. Death was always close at hand. They would’ve had the capacity to accept it even if she’d died.

“She’s alive, right? Who knows, maybe she can be healed,” said Talhand, though it was clear he didn’t have much hope of that.

There were stories, occasionally, of people who were crippled by a monster’s poison. Never once in those stories had such people recovered. Once the mind was gone, nothing could heal them, not even God-tier healing magic. If something went wrong with someone’s mind, there was no way to fix it.

“Even if she’s able to somehow walk and talk again, her memories won’t return,” Elinalise spat out.

“What’s that? Sure are talkin’ like you know a lot on the matter, Elinalise.” Talhand eyed her suspiciously.

“I’m just telling it like it is.” Elinalise didn’t explain any further. She had lived a long life—longer than either Talhand or Geese. She’d said she’d seen a similar case before. It was likely she *did* know something, but whatever it was, it wasn’t going to give them any hope of Zenith recovering, so Talhand didn’t press the issue.

“The real problem is the boy,” said the dwarf.

“Yeah…” agreed Geese, breathing the word out like a sigh.

Rudeus, Paul’s son, had spent almost a week now cooped up in his room.

“It’s not just that the kid’s under the weather,” Geese continued, “it goes deeper than that.”

“It’s almost like he’s a husk, too,” said Elinalise.

Rudeus didn’t even reply when they tried to talk to him. He just nodded, a vacant look in his eyes, and said, “Yeah…”

“Rudy was very attached to Mister Paul,” said the young blue-haired demon girl. Roxy Migurdia had been relatively silent until the topic turned to Rudeus.

In the back of her mind, she pictured a young Rudeus taking sword lessons from Paul. No matter how Paul beat him into the ground, Rudeus would stand back up again and continue swinging, an indignant look on his face. He’d been the embodiment of talent. To Roxy, it had looked like he was truly enjoying learning swordsmanship from his father. A blinding source of envy to her, given that she’d never shared such moments with her own parents.

“Well, I understand how the boss feels,” said Geese, “but it’s gonna be bad if things stay this way.”

“I must agree.” Elinalise punctuated her words with a nod.

Rudeus hadn't eaten since the day it happened. Even when those around him prompted him to try, he just said, "Sure," but showed no signs of following through. He did seem to be doing the minimum of at least drinking water, but he was growing more gaunt by the day. His eyes were sunken and his cheeks had grown hollow. He looked like he had the shadow of death on his face. If left to his own devices, it wouldn't be surprising if he actually joined Paul. Everyone present thought as much.

After a pause, Roxy pressed on. "I'd like to do something to try to cheer him up."

Geese's gaze traveled to Elinalise. "Didn't you always say it was important to 'get lucky' at times like these?"

"I can't help him with 'getting lucky,'" she replied instantly.

Roxy was the only one who didn't understand what they were talking about. "What is it you can't do?"

"…"

Geese and Talhand exchanged looks and pursed their lips.

Roxy furrowed her brows, suspicious. "Miss Elinalise, do you have some kind of plan?"

A pause. "No, I don't." The elf maintained her poker face.

"Well, how should I put it?" Geese scratched at his cheek while Talhand tilted his drink back in disinterest. "Hm, uh… Well, in times like these, it's best to just enjoy yourself to the fullest and try to forget."

"Enjoy yourself?" Roxy echoed back, confused.

"Men are straightforward. Give them some alcohol, a woman to bed, and they'll get that rush of joy from being alive. Bring a little bit of energy back to them. I mean, yeah, it's not going to return them to how they were, but still."

"Ah…! Oh, all right, I get it now." Roxy finally understood what he was saying. And more importantly, what he was trying to get Elinalise to do. "W-well, I guess you're right, that's just how men are!

Yeah! Yeah…” Her cheeks flushed red and her gaze floated to her lap.

Men liked to bed women when they were depressed. She felt sure she’d heard that story once before. It was true for mercenaries in particular, who liked to pay for women’s services before and after battle, in order to distract themselves from their own fear. After completing a mission where their life had been on the line, many men visited the brothels.

But when Roxy thought of Rudeus and Elinalise together, a dark cloud hung over her heart.

“Elinalise.” Geese turned toward her. “You’ve always said—for as long as I can remember—that you’re good at consolin’ men with wounded hearts.”

“I have.”

Roxy began to think. It was true that Elinalise had a talent for that type of thing. She had daily relations with an undeterminable number of men, and Roxy had heard she was incredibly skilled at what she did. Surely it was possible for a woman with that level of experience to get Rudeus back on his feet again. The thought made her gloomy, but what else could they do?

“How unusual. Normally you’d be all over someone in the kinda state Boss is in right now.”

Roxy couldn’t stand seeing Rudeus the way he was right now. Elinalise felt the same—she wanted to help him, to console him. But she also knew what would happen once they returned home if she succumbed and used his broken heart as an excuse to go to bed with him. She would be betraying Cliff, betraying Sylphie. Even Rudeus wouldn’t be able to cope with that.

So Elinalise said as much. “Even I have people that I can’t bed.”

“Why not Rudy?” Roxy’s lips hardened. She fixed the other woman with a glare. “You know how much he’s suffering.”

“Because…” Elinalise started to say, but then remembered. Roxy didn’t know yet. “Because the person he married—his wife—is my granddaughter.”

“Huh?!” The cup dropped from Roxy’s hand, its contents spilling everywhere before it rolled off the table and hit the floor with a dry *clunk*. “What? Rudy’s married?”

“Yes, he is. And his child will be born soon.”

“O-oh, so it’s true… W-well, I mean, of course it is. Rudy’s that age already…” Roxy couldn’t fully mask how shaken she was as she bent down to retrieve the fallen tankard. She brought it to her lips without thinking before she remembered she’d spilled it all, and ordered another. “Um, I’d like the strongest alcohol you have.”

Her eyes swiveled as she folded her arms over her chest. Marriage. That’s right, even Rudeus could get married. Yeah. It was normal. At least, that was what she tried to tell herself.

Then Roxy remembered how she’d acted in the labyrinth, and she gritted her teeth. She’d made advances on him, thinking he was single. Rudeus had been receptive on a level she’d never experienced before, but perhaps the only reason he hadn’t rejected her outright was because she was an acquaintance. From the sidelines, it must have looked hysterical—the most entertaining buffoonery.

Roxy wanted to scream at them, “Why didn’t anyone tell me?!” But the complaint remained lodged in her throat.

Anyway, her feelings weren’t what mattered right now.

“S-still, even if he is married, this is an emergency. Couldn’t you both be forgiven for doing it just once?” Roxy didn’t even understand the words coming out of her mouth. She just felt strongly that they had to do something to pick Rudeus back up.

“Perhaps, but I can’t be the one to do it,” Elinalise said woefully. Roxy couldn’t understand the emotion in the elf’s voice, or the frustration visible on her face.

“Sorry for the wait,” a server cut in.

“Oh, thank you.”

Conveniently, her drink arrived. Roxy knocked it back and swallowed the whole thing down. It burned, passing down her parched throat and spreading through her body like a wildfire. It probably tasted particularly delicious to her right now because her body was craving alcohol.

“Besides, Rudeus and I have already…” Elinalise paused just then, pursing her lips. “Well, even though I can’t help, Geese can drag him along to a brothel, right?”

“Not so sure about that,” said Geese, doubtful. “You really think Rudeus will cheer up havin’ sex with some girl he doesn’t know?”

“Well, what he needs right now is to be able to lean on someone he trusts,” said Elinalise.

“So, Lilia?”

She shot a glare at Geese. “This is exactly—”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” He held his hands up in surrender. “Don’t get so pissy.”

Elinalise’s feelings about the matter were complicated. She didn’t want to intrude on his marriage to Sylphie, but she *did* want to help Rudeus. If she bedded him, she could get him back on his feet. Elinalise was confident about that—this wasn’t the first or even second time she’d been in a situation like this, where she’d helped a man heal the wounds in his heart. But she also couldn’t help but think that to do so now would be a disastrous choice she could never take back.

She was conflicted.

Normally, she didn’t mind being the one to get her hands dirty. Elinalise had played that role numerous times. But her desire to not betray Cliff got in the way this time. She simply couldn’t.

“…”

Silence hung in the air. Only the quiet sounds of people downing their drinks lingered. None among their motley crew dared speak up. The air was as stale as a funeral.

“Anyway, we’ve got Zenith in the state she’s in now, too. I wanna get the boss back on his feet quick as possible so we can hightail it outta this town.”

At Geese’s words, the remaining three sighed.

“Yeah, I don’t disagree,” said Talhand gruffly.

They were exhausted as well. After all, it had been six years—six!—since the Displacement Incident. A substantial period of time by anyone’s estimate, during which they’d traveled from the Central Continent to the Demon Continent, from the Demon Continent to the Begaritt Continent, then began their venture into the Teleportation Labyrinth. It had been intense, frequently rough going, but they’d labored through it, both the good times and the bad, with the hope that they’d come out laughing together when it was over.

The Displacement Incident had been an unpleasant affair, but the time they’d spent together hadn’t been completely awful. Their broken, disconnected party had slowly come back together. Elinalise and Talhand had teamed up, while Geese hopped into action for Paul. Paul and Talhand had reconciled their differences. Paul and Elinalise had even fought side by side once more at the very end.

None of them had ever dreamed they would come back together like this again, but then there they were, with Paul at their center. All they had to do was rescue Zenith and locate Ghislaine, wherever she had wandered off to, and they could all share drinks together again. That’s what they all thought.

But now Paul was dead.

It was enough to overwhelm them with an indescribable sense of exhaustion, like everything they’d done had been for naught. It was the kind of exhaustion you felt after you’d spent hours building something, only for it to fall to pieces at the very end.

Rudeus wasn’t the only one overcome with lethargy.

“Don’t be so glum,” Talhand said. “Rudeus is Paul’s boy. Might be down in the dumps now, but he’ll pick himself back up on his own eventually, no doubt.”

Elinalise hesitated before saying, “I certainly hope you’re right.”

“…”

Both she and Geese nodded vaguely at the dwarf’s words. They knew the boy’s weakness, but he *was* already sixteen. He wasn’t a child anymore. The situation might be grim, but he was a remarkable adult at heart. Death visited everyone. It was a particularly close companion to adventurers. Everyone’s parents died eventually—everyone had to deal with this at some point in their lives. That was why, they assumed, Rudeus would also eventually be able to do the same.

“…”

Only one among them did not nod their head. It was Roxy, her thoughts preoccupied with memories from long ago.

Rudeus

I REALIZED IT WAS EVENING when I looked out the window. I was sitting on my bed, spacing out. How many days had gone by? Did it even matter?

As I thought that to myself, a knock suddenly came upon the door.

“Rudy, can I have a moment?”

When I followed the sound of the voice, I glimpsed Roxy at the entrance. Had I left the door open this entire time?

“Teacher,” I said after a long pause. It felt like ages since I’d spoken. My voice was hoarse, and I wasn’t even sure whether she’d heard me or not.

Roxy hastily made her way toward me.

Something felt different than usual. I wondered what it was… Ah, that was it! She wasn’t in her robe today. Her shirt and pants were separate pieces of thinly woven fabric. That was a rare sight.

“Pardon me,” she said stiffly, plopping down on the bed beside me. Several seconds of silence passed. Roxy spoke slowly, as if carefully choosing her words. “Want to go out somewhere with me for a bit of a change of pace?”

“…Huh?”

“Uhh,” she stammered, “there are many magical items in this city that you wouldn’t be able to see on other continents. It might be interesting to take a look at them all, don’t you think?”

“No…I’m not in the mood.”

“O-oh, you’re not?”

“Sorry.”

She was inviting me to go out. I knew it was because she wanted to cheer me up. Normally, I would’ve followed along behind her like a puppy, but I simply didn’t feel like it right now.

Silence stretched out between us.

Roxy again seemed to choose her words as she spoke. “It’s unfortunate what happened with Mister Paul and Miss Zenith.”

Unfortunate? Unfortunate… Was this really something that could be summed up in that one word? Well, this wasn’t her family, after all.

“I can still remember, in great detail, the five of us living together in Buena Village. That might have been the happiest time of my life.” Roxy spoke quietly, gripping my hand. Hers was warm.

“…”

“As an adventurer, it’s not unusual for the people close to you to die. I know that pain. I’ve experienced it before.”

“Please don’t lie to me,” I said. I’d met Roxy’s parents before. They were alive and well. She might not have seen them for a while, but surely that hadn’t changed. “Your mother and father are doing just fine, aren’t they?”

“That’s true,” she said thoughtfully. “It’s been a few years since I saw them, but they seemed well. I’m sure they still have a hundred

years ahead of them.”

“Then you don’t understand!” A wave of emotion flooded up from my chest and I batted her hand away. “Don’t throw that word around so casually!” I felt the last bit of strength drain out of me as I yelled at her.

Roxy, though taken aback, seemed to seriously weigh her next words. “The person who died was someone who formed a party with me and taught me the basics right after I became an adventurer. I wouldn’t go as far as to call him a parent, but I did think of him as an older brother.”

“…”

“He died shielding me.”

“…”

“Like you, I also anguished over his death.”

“…”

“Of course, I don’t think it’s as bad as what happened to you—losing your father and finding your mother only for her to be…sick. But it did leave me deeply depressed.”

“…”

“That’s why I think I can understand a little bit—even if it’s just a sliver—of what you’re feeling right now.”

Then you don’t understand at all.

She didn’t understand how I felt, having reincarnated, stuck between past and present. I wasn’t just saddened by Paul’s death. Nor was I simply lamenting that Zenith had become a husk.

I’d realized something.

Ever since I was reincarnated and decided to do it all over, I’d thought I was doing a good job. But in the end, I’d just been ignoring something important. I’d turned my back on the discord between me and my family in my previous life. Kept my eyes averted, even after I was reborn. And as a result, I’d made the same mistake a second time in this world.

I'd been unable to give anything back to my parents before Paul died and Zenith became a husk. I'd just done the same thing all over again; repeated the same mistake—one I couldn't take back.

My previous life of thirty-four years, my current life of sixteen years. Fifty years that I'd lived, in total, and yet I'd done it again.

In my previous life, I'd been hopeless. But when I was reincarnated in this world, I thought I'd changed. Now, I was confronted with the reality that nothing had changed. Things might look good on the surface, but in truth I'd hardly budged past square one.

Getting back on my feet seemed hopeless, honestly. Knowing that Roxy had processed a similar experience and managed to get back on hers did little to reassure me.

"I was truly happy during my days in Buena Village," she continued. "I originally came to the Asura Kingdom wanting to work there, but I couldn't find any jobs. I decided to take a temporary position in the countryside as a home tutor. But then you were overflowing with talent, and Paul and Zenith treated me so warmly. I think they were the ones who really taught me what the kindness—*true* kindness—of a family is," Roxy said as she looked at me, her eyes soft, warm. "They were like a second family."

She stood up on my bed, slipped behind me, and knelt, wrapping her arms around my head as if cradling me.

"Rudy, I think I think I can share in your sadness."

I felt something soft press against the back of my head. *Thump, thump* came the gentle pulse of her heart. A soothing sound. Why did listening to it comfort me so, I wondered? Why did it make me feel like things would be okay?



The same went for her smell. Roxy's scent was relaxing, too. Up until now, whenever I faced anything difficult, it had been strangely comforting to remember this smell and the thing she taught me. When I'd been in the grips of my ED, just thinking about Roxy had been enough to help me endure.

Why was that? The answer hung in the back of my throat but refused to come out.

"I'm your teacher," she said, "and though I'm small and inadequate, I have lived longer than you, and I'm tough. I don't mind if you lean on me."

I took hold of one of the hands threaded around my neck. It was so small and yet felt so big. Just looking at her hands brought me comfort. I wondered if that sense of relief would grow stronger if I got closer.

"I'm sure that, even when things are tough, you can lessen the burden by splitting it with someone else," Roxy said as she pulled away.

I drew her hand back out of instinct.

"Wh-whoa!" Her tiny body easily fell into my lap. Faces close, our eyes met—Roxy's looking sleepy, moist with tears. Her face was red, her lips drawn tightly shut. I put a hand on her back, guiding her close. Her heart was thundering furiously, and she felt warm.

"W-we can do it," Roxy stuttered.

Do what? I thought.

"I-I mean, I heard that a man's heart feels lighter after he takes a woman to bed."

Who the heck told her that? Ah…Elinalise? Just what was the elf telling Roxy at a time like this?

"Women feel the same. When things are tough, they want something to make them forget. I'm also devastated by Mister Paul's death, so if that's what you want to do, I don't mind if you take me to bed with you." She spoke so fast that her words jumbled together, rambling on. "That's right, I want you to help me forget. But my body

is kind of plain… If you're not interested, you could go to a brothel instead?"

I had immense respect for her just as she was. What would it be like if I did as she suggested and took her to bed?

"A-anyway, I may not look it, but I am quite experienced! I'm sure I can perform much better than whatever girl you'd find on the streets. Just think of this as a casual thing, a way to wash away all the bad, as a way to test things out, just once…"

Her incoherent explanations were lost on me, but I still found myself invested. If I found listening to the beat of her heart to be this soothing, then how much more relief might I find if our bodies were pressed together? My mind lingered on that excuse as she babbled.

"Uh, well, if you're really particular and being with someone who is skilled, maybe you could bow your head to Miss Elinalise and —ah!"

I pushed her down onto the bed—roughly, violently. Maybe I just had frustration to spare.

***

When I opened my eyes the next morning, the first thing to greet me was Roxy's sleeping face. She looked so innocent with her hair let down.

At the same time, the thought *I screwed up* ran through my mind.

"Haah…" A sigh escaped. How was I going to explain this to Sylphie? Yet another thing for me to be concerned about now.

But for some reason, my vision felt clearer, as if everything I'd anguished over had been a dream. There was still a weight, a heaviness that clung that to me, but it didn't feel like rock bottom anymore. It wasn't comparable to what I'd felt yesterday.

Why had it been so effective? Was it because I'd performed an act that was associated with bringing new life into the world? Had that eased my sadness over the loss of Paul? Maybe not. By having sex, I'd more or less pushed the problem aside for now.

"Mm…"

Suddenly Roxy's eyes fluttered open. She stared unblinkingly back at me for a few moments before rustling the covers, drawing them up over her body.

"Good morning, Rudy…" she muttered, averting her eyes. "Um, how was it?"

I couldn't lie. I'd been horribly rough with her. I'd known almost immediately that her claim about being experienced had been nothing but a bald-faced lie, but I hadn't let that bother me. For her part, Roxy had welcomed everything openly, even the pain. I was both grateful and remorseful.

Complimenting her felt wrong, given that I was in love with Sylphie. Honestly speaking, her body was a bit small, and didn't quite fit mine. Of course, I'd be lying if I said it hadn't felt good. It was true, even now, that I felt relaxed. There was no reason to lie if it would hurt her.

"It was amazing," I said finally.

Roxy's face heated gradually. "Thank you… But no, that's not what I meant. By 'how was it,' I meant how is your heart feeling? Any lighter?"

Oh, that was what she meant? Whoops. "It does."

"Then as repayment, I'd be happy if you'd put your arms around me."

"Sure." As she requested, I wrapped my arms around her. Her skin felt soft, damp because of the sweat. It was through her supple skin that I could feel her drumming pulse. A reassuring sound.

"Your arms sure are strong," she said. "Not much like a magician."

"I've been training."

Her fingers traced lightly over my chest and upper arm. The motion was so endearing it threatened to sway my love for Sylphie.

Slowly, I peeled myself away from her body and got up.

“Teacher, could I ask you something? Something strange.”

A pause and then, “What is it?”

She must have read the room. Roxy’s expression turned serious as she sat up in bed and tucked her legs beneath her. And as she sat there neatly, she was completely naked. It was so sexy and stimulating that I had to avert my eyes and shift the blanket to hide my lower half as I continued the conversation.

“This story is just fiction, something I made up,” I prefaced before I began. Then I told her the tale of a man—a make-believe one, of course.

When he was young, terrible things happened to him and he secluded himself. He lived purely on his parents’ financial support for decades. Then one day, his parents suddenly died. The man didn’t even attend their funeral—no, he did the worst thing a person could possibly do. The other members of his family saw that, beat him senseless, and drove him from his home.

Although the man had nothing, he was lucky to find himself reborn in a new world. He turned over a new leaf and began trying to mend his ways. Life was going smoothly and he thought he could be happy if things stayed that way. But then he made a terrible mistake and let someone precious to him die. It was then that the man recalled the death of his parents. Though it was late, he finally mourned their loss.

That was the story.

The more I recounted it, the more the pent-up bile festering in my heart seemed to come spilling out. Maybe all I’d wanted was for someone to hear my story. Maybe it really was as simple as that.

Roxy listened quietly. She inserted a word here and there, but for the most part she was silent.

“What do you think that man should do?” I asked after I was finished.

“…”

She remained quiet for a while. The story had come at her from out of nowhere. Maybe she was struggling to find a way to respond. I was sure she didn’t think the person in the story was *me*. She was clever—she might have guessed there was some other meaning behind it.

“If it were me,” she began, “I would go visit my parents’ graves. Even now, it’s not too late. I’d also talk to the other family members.”

“But the graves and those family members are so far away that the man can’t just easily go and see them. If he does go to see them, he may never be able to return. The man has a life of his own now. He’s got his own family in this new world and he wants to cherish them.”

“So, he can’t go back?”

“No,” I replied. “There’s a good chance that he couldn’t go back even if he wanted to.”

Roxy fell silent again. This time was briefer than the last. “In that case, there’s nothing to be done. All he can do is cherish the family he has in front of him.”

Her words were incredibly cliché. Anyone would have said the same; anyone would have thought the same. The words weren’t special in the least.

“Even Paul would have wished for you to do the same, Rudy,” said Roxy plainly, stating the obvious. Her words were trite platitudes, words I’d heard somewhere before. “Please look to the future. Everyone is waiting for you.”

And yet, hearing those words made my heart felt as though a weight had been lifted.

It wasn’t just her words that were commonplace. The death of my parents from my previous world, even Paul’s death—they were inevitable events. All I could do was face and accept them. I was

here after all, alive in this world. A world that I would continue to live in.

I felt anxious, knowing I would have to relay Paul's death and Zenith's disability to the family waiting for us in the Northern Territories. I felt anxious about what I should do from here on out. I was overwhelmed with anxiety about a future full of unknowns. But I couldn't run away. The only thing I could do was solve the problems right in front of me. I had no idea what I *should* do, but all I *could* do was solve each issue, one after the other.

This was what I'd decided to do ever since I found myself in this world, right? That I was going to live to the fullest. So, I couldn't turn my eyes away. No matter what ordeals lay ahead, I would overcome them. I *had* to overcome them, even though overcoming them wouldn't make the pain entirely disappear. It would just bring a degree of relief.

It felt like I'd broken free of the chains that had weighed me down.

"Teacher," I said.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Roxy had saved me once again. No amount of gratitude could ever repay her for that.

Chapter 12:
Let's Go Home

I DECIDED TO CONSULT with someone about Zenith. Now that I was thinking calmly about the situation, it wasn't a problem I could solve alone. I needed to get someone else's input, and besides, I had one other family member here with me.

"Teacher, I'm thinking about talking to Miss Lilia about what to do from now on."

"I think that would be a good idea."

Once we'd clothed and groomed ourselves, we popped out the door. Elinalise slunk out of her room at the exact same time, and our eyes met. Hers went wide with surprise after her gaze flitted between Roxy and me.

"Roxy, you—" she started to say.

"Rudy, I'm sorry, but I also have something I need to speak with Miss Elinalise about. Please go on and see Miss Lilia by yourself."

What was it that she had to talk to Elinalise about? I had a vague idea, but if it was what I was thinking, it was probably best I not be present.

"Understood." I left her behind and stalked back to one of the rooms further in—the one where Zenith was sleeping. Just before I entered, I cast a brief glance behind me, long enough to see Elinalise and Roxy dipping back into their shared room.

I went ahead and slipped in through the door. Zenith was sitting on the bed with Lilia perched beside her in a chair. The sight reminded me of a hospital room, and my lips pressed into a tight line. "Miss Lilia?"

"Yes, what is it, Lord Rudeus?" Lilia was tending to Zenith, face heavy with exhaustion.

Before I did anything else, I needed to consult her. “I’m sorry for forcing my mother’s care on you,” I said.

“Not at all. This is my job.”

“Oh, okay.”

A job—could she really call it that? It wasn’t like anyone was paying her for it.

“How is she doing?” I glanced over at my mother, who just stared right back. She didn’t try to talk to me or examine me. All she did was stare blankly.

“Well, while it doesn’t seem like she has any memories, her body is strangely healthy. She has some stamina, too. There doesn’t seem to be any other residual impairment. She can complete certain tasks by herself once I instruct her to, such as eating and changing.”

“Really?” That meant she wasn’t a complete invalid, then. She’d just lost her memory.

Lilia continued, “Shierra’s opinion is that it’s likely a side effect of the mana from being trapped in that crystal.”

“Will she recover?”

She hesitated. “According to what Miss Elinalise told me, there’s no hope of that.”

Elinalise said that? Was she knowledgeable about this kind of thing? I felt like it was bit too soon to give up, either way. There weren’t even any decent doctors here worth taking her to.

“The mistress treated me well. Now that the master has passed away, I will look after her.”

“I also want to do what I can.”

As soon as I said that, Lilia said curtly, “That’s not necessary.” Her words were cold, isolating.

“Huh…?” I gasped in surprise, though I felt I had no right to argue. Right after my father died, when my mother needed care the most, I’d done nothing for her. It was my own fault if Lilia was fed up with me.

But then Lilia continued, “I realize I’m being impertinent, but will you allow me to speak frankly for a moment?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“You should be focusing on yourself.”

I hesitated. “On…myself?”

“I’m sure that’s what the master would say,” she added.

I couldn’t bring myself to agree. He was—well, you know—more selfish than that.

“I’m the one who should be looking after the mistress. That’s why I’m here.”

Lilia was exhausted. She had to be. And yet, she was so strong. She’d already made her peace with Paul’s death and was moving forward. I needed to learn from her example.

“Miss Lilia, you might be upset if I ask this—”

“I won’t be,” she interrupted.

“But what is it that I should do?” I knew it was something I should figure out for myself, but still, I asked.

Lilia looked at me with surprise. I pretty much knew the answer myself, but I wanted to hear someone else say it.

“First, you should return to Mistress Norn and the others and inform them of the master’s death.”

True. I had to go home.

The next day, I gathered everyone and informed them that we were leaving the city. It was almost like I was taking up the leader’s mantle. Everyone followed. Perhaps they saw me as Paul’s replacement. If that was true, I needed to be worthy of the role.

Just to be on the safe side, I went ahead and explained to them the route we would be taking. I avoided mention of teleportation circles, merely telling them that we were using a unique

method to return. I also gave a strict warning against mentioning this method to anyone else.

“But Geese is the type to down a few drinks and spill the beans,” Elinalise said.

“Hm, well, I’ll be sure not to mention Boss’s name even if that happens, so don’t worry.”

You couldn’t seal people’s mouths shut. I wouldn’t give them the precise location. In fact, I’d prefer to blindfold them before we even entered the ruins, if possible.

Wait, yeah, that was a good idea. I’d do blindfolds. Maybe covering their eyes so they didn’t see the magic circles themselves would be an effective way of keeping the information from spreading.

“This trip is all well and good, but Boss, you really okay now?” Apparently, Geese was concerned. His monkey face was furrowed as he peered over at me.

“Do I look all right?”

His lips twitched. “You don’t really, no… But, well, you do look better than you did before.”

“Well, then I’m okay now.”

To be honest, I wasn’t okay yet at all. Thanks to Roxy, I had managed to pick myself up off the ground, at least. But I had my doubts about whether we could really make the trek back home.

I turned to Lilia. “How is my mother? We’ll be traveling through a desert for half a month. Do you think she can handle it?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll take responsibility for caring for her along the way.”

“I appreciate it.”

Lilia looked earnest as she declared her intentions. I was sure I would be able to help her with her task, too. If there was an issue with Zenith’s stamina, we could just slow our pace.

Geese said, “If you’re worried, let’s buy a wagon.”

“You do realize we’ll have to dump it at some point?” Elinalise pointed out.

“Aw, who cares? We’re drowning in cash right now.”

While I was steeped in sorrow, Geese and the others had hired some people to enter the labyrinth with them and collect the magic items located in the treasure chamber beyond the hydra’s room. The Teleportation Labyrinth was an old place, and countless adventurers had lost their lives there, so magic items abounded. They also stripped the creature of its scales—or rather, the magic stones that had been plastered across its skin. These were stones that could absorb mana. Selling all of that had netted us a colossal fortune.

“We’re carrying what we can back to Asura to sell,” he said, showing me a bag bursting at the seams with magic stones and accessories like pendants and rings.

Paul had died, and I was grieving, but Geese was preoccupied with how to make more cash. The thought alone irritated me a bit. But for the sake of our futures, if nothing else, it would be foolish not to retrieve what we could. Money was essential, and at least this way, everyone was repaid for their assistance. Geese’s judgment was correct.

Besides, considering I’d sunk into depression and done nothing, it wasn’t like I had the high ground to say anything. I was sure Geese would have obeyed, albeit reluctantly, if I’d given the order for us to go home the very next day.

“I gave your portion to Lilia,” he informed me.

The others had met and decided how to divvy up the cash without me. They allotted me a massive portion, partly because I’d received Paul’s share too, but also because Talhand had split half of his with me, saying, “Eh, I wasn’t all that helpful this time, so here.” Vierra and Shierra, also acknowledging how hard it would be for us now that Paul was gone, had each split theirs with Lilia. Lilia intended to give every bit of that money to me.

In my opinion, everyone had done the best they could, so I felt like they should take their share. But, well, I wasn’t going to look a

gift horse in the mouth. It was true that things would undoubtedly get harder from here on out.

“We also did a thorough sweep of the final area, but never did find any hint as to why Zenith ended up there.” Geese shrugged.

“Nothing, hm? Well, thank you for looking,” I said.

“Nah, it was nothin’.”

We had no idea what had caused Zenith to be trapped in that crystal. Even if we did discover the reason, there was no guarantee it would lead to her recovery. Either way, treatment would have to wait until we returned home.

“Geese, could I entrust the preparations for our departure to you and Miss Elinalise?”

“Yep,” said Geese.

“Very well,” said Elinalise.

I was sure I could trust them to carry it out.

We planned our trip down to the minute details. I knew the route, and everyone here was an experienced traveler, but I didn’t want us to lose anyone else, so I proceeded cautiously. We plotted out a route that would allow us to avoid the bandits we’d encountered on the way here. The path was a bit of a detour, but that wouldn’t be a problem.

I was concerned about Zenith, but that problem was quickly solved. Geese purchased a one-person carriage pulled by a beast that resembled an armadillo. It looked like it had been designed especially for desert travel. Geese had done well.

The “armadillo” was apparently a domesticated beast that dwelled in the eastern reaches of the Begaritt Continent. It seemed both costly and wasteful to purchase one and then just dispose of it later, but as the saying goes, you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

Still, if we were going this far, we might as well bring the beast through the teleportation circle and take it home with us. As long as we could get it past the stairs, it would be fine. Though if it died due to climate differences when we arrived on the other side… Nah, it would die for sure if we left it in the desert. We might as well take it back and sell it to someone with an affinity for such animals.

Thus, our preparations were complete and we set off.

The trip proceeded smoothly. We slid easily past the bandits. We happened upon some monsters along the way, but with our numbers, they posed no danger. We had two warriors, two magicians, one warrior mage, and one healer. There was a distinct difference in power between each person, but we were well-balanced. Although we were missing one swordsman who should've been making this journey with us…

Traveling without a left hand proved to be more inconvenient than I'd imagined. It didn't hurt, but I would often try using it without thinking, only for my arm to swipe empty air. A lot of things proved difficult without two hands. Fortunately, Roxy was there to assist each time. Ever since that night, she'd been glued to me, supporting me. She made a habit of walking to my left. Then whenever anything happened, she was right there to assist. Almost like a lover.

"…"

I was dense. I told myself I wouldn't be, but I was. But even I couldn't help but realize it at this point: Roxy had feelings for me.

"Um, Teacher?" I called out to her one night when we were both on guard duty.

There was a crackling fire before us, and she sat beside me. Everyone else was inside the shelter, sleeping. The shelter was sturdy enough, but we still maintained a two-person watch in shifts, just to be safe.

"Yes, what is it, Rudy?"

Roxy was sitting close. Right beside me, in fact, with her body pressed against mine. I could feel the softness and the warmth of her small shoulders through the fabric of her robe. Almost like we were lovers.

I mean, we had done something that lovers do. The night I'd spent with her, leaning on her, indulging in her kindness—it might have lent itself to the misunderstanding that we were lovers. Or at least, that might be what she wanted.

I wondered if she knew I was married. Perhaps she didn't. I didn't feel like she'd be this bold about her affections if she knew.

No, the problem wasn't Roxy. It was with me. What I was doing right now was cheating. I swore fidelity to Sylphie, and yet here I was, breaking that vow. Maybe it would be best for me to make things clear to her, like, "Thank you, but I'm fine now. Let's end things here because it would only be disrespectful to my wife, otherwise."

Ever since I met Roxy after first coming to this world, I'd relied upon her greatly. She'd taught me magic and language. In a way, I'd only been able to befriend Zanoba because of her. Sylphie was the one who'd cured my erectile dysfunction, but in the three years since, Roxy had been a source of mental support for me. I owed her so much.

Plus, she'd gone so far as to use her body to comfort me this time. Even though it was her first time, she'd offered herself up to help me, to pull me out of the darkness I'd sunk into. When I was at my weakest, on my knees, she'd extended her hand to me. Even now, she was keeping her true feelings to herself to lend me aid.

So how would it look—feel—to cast her aside once everything was over? Wasn't that horribly disrespectful?

No. Enough. No more self-appeasement. Talking about manners or how she'd saved me—they were all excuses. I loved Roxy. That's right, I loved her. If you asked me which I loved more between her and Sylphie, I couldn't give you an answer. My love for each of them was different but equal.

That's why I was wavering right here, in this moment. A moment where I loved Sylphie, but loved Roxy, too. But it was Sylphie to whom I'd sworn my fidelity. While I had broken that oath, a promise was still a promise, even if it was one that had been broken once before.

Yes, okay, Sylphie had said, "I don't mind if you bring a second woman home." But *I* was the one who'd dismissed those words, swearing I would only be with her. Sylphie had been so happy when I said that, beyond a shadow of a doubt. I couldn't betray her.

"Um, you see…the truth is, I'm actually married and will be having a child soon. So, I feel bad saying this, but could you stop doing things for me like you're my lover?"

Her shoulder gave a jolt. Then she muttered, "I already knew you were married. I heard from Miss Elinalise."

"Oh, you did?"

So she knew and she was still acting like this. Then that must mean… Wait, what exactly did that mean?

"It's fine, I understand. There's nothing for you to be concerned about. I was the one who took advantage of you when you were feeling weak," she continued, her tone completely flat. "Besides, I know under ordinary circumstances, you'd never get involved with someone as tiny and unappealing as me."

"Tiny and unappealing? That's nonsense," I protested.

"You don't have to comfort me, I'm perfectly aware of how I look."

True, her body might be petite. She had no curves and she was thin as a stick. In the feminine department, she would likely even lose to Sylphie. But you might also say she simply had the body of a loli, and I was the type who could appreciate that.

"Don't worry. I don't plan to barge into your life. I'm just going to be your left hand for the length of this trip. Just ignore me once it's all over and look after your wife instead," Roxy said, hesitantly peering up at me.

“All right.”

“…”

But still, she really had saved me. Doing nothing in return couldn’t be right. “Would you allow me to repay you, at the very least?”

“Repay me, you say?” Roxy looked surprised.

“Yes, if there’s something I can do, just name it. Anything.”

Her eyes wavered.

Aw, crap. Maybe I’d said the wrong thing. “Anything” wasn’t fine. Anything was exactly what she’d done to help me out.

“Um, well, then…” she started.

“Yes?”

“…Then would you hear my excuse? All you have to do is listen.”

An excuse? An excuse for what?

“Sure, all right,” I said. “Go ahead.”

Roxy was quiet for a short period after that, but finally, the words came trickling out, one after the other. “I…fell in love at first sight.”

“With who?”

“Huh?” Roxy was just as confused at my question.

“Don’t tell me you fell in love with my father?”

“No, not at all! With *you*, Rudy, when you saved me back in that labyrinth.”

When we reunited? Back then, she’d treated me like such a complete stranger that I couldn’t even keep a lid on my nausea. I’d hugged her out of nowhere, then barfed. I didn’t see anything worth falling for there. I figured her feelings had developed after that.

“You can hardly blame me,” she said. “I was on death’s door, about to abandon all hope, and this handsome, dashing young man

appeared and saved me. Anyone would've been shaken by that."

"I'm handsome?"

Roxy nodded. "The very picture of my ideal partner."

Really? Her ideal partner? I had to keep myself from grinning.

"The entire time we were exploring in that labyrinth, I was staring at your face," she said.

"Come to think of it, our eyes did meet a lot. But you always turned away immediately."

"That's because, well…" Roxy hesitated. "Come on, it's embarrassing looking someone as handsome as you right in the eye."

So she'd been embarrassed?

"I figured it was impossible," she said. "Miss Elinalise and the others were talking at the pub. 'What's Rudy going to do after what happened with Paul'—that kind of thing. Miss Elinalise and Mister Geese said you'd be fine, that you could stand back up on your own. But I recalled our time together in Buena Village."

Her words kept coming. "I remembered watching you and Mister Paul enjoy your sword training together. The two of you got along so well back then. And then I suddenly remembered something else: the first time you rode a horse. Back then, you were so terrified. Your body was so tense, and you couldn't move at all. I thought to myself, ahh, this kid is so mature and has so much talent, but he's actually really weak.

"Then I remembered all your interactions with Paul. From when you trained together in the past, to your banter in the labyrinth. And I saw you how depressed you were, how listless, and I remembered that you're much weaker than you appear. It felt like Paul meant far more to you than anyone had realized. Now that you'd lost him, I was afraid you might sink so far into depression that you couldn't get back up on your own.

"Of course, I didn't think *I'd* be the one to help you get back up. I heard you had someone you loved. I was sure that person would

have the power to put you back together again if you felt broken. But you needed them more than ever before right then, and they weren't here. I felt like *someone* had to save you. But Miss Elinalise and Mister Geese just planned to leave you be, and Miss Lilia was too busy attending to Miss Zenith. So I thought: *I'm the only one who can do this.*

"I'm sure that must sound like an excuse, but I didn't intend for it to go that far at first. I did get the feeling that you respected me, but I'm tiny and unattractive. I have no idea who your partner is, but I'm sure she must be a beauty if she's related to Miss Elinalise. I never thought there'd be a chance you'd look at me the same way, but I ignored that, thinking it would be fine as long as I did something that could help.

"But then when you suddenly grabbed me and I saw your face up close… I just, I couldn't help thinking, maybe I have a chance. Miss Elinalise and the others had just talked about how sex could cheer men up when they were down. So, I just thought, maybe even I can do this. I couldn't help it. I love you."

Roxy's tears started falling one after the other. The moment I saw them, pain shot through my chest like my heart was being gouged out.

"It was cruel," she choked out. "My feelings for you were obvious, but no one told me about you being married until way after the fact. It wasn't fair."

I wondered at whom those words were directed. *Not me*, I thought, so perhaps Elinalise? It was true that I hadn't told her about my marriage, though. There was no special reason for that—it just hadn't come up. If she was going to blame anyone, I was equally accountable.

Still, if our roles were reversed…if I'd reunited with Sylphie, she'd saved me, and I'd fallen in love with her, then proceeded to make romantic overtures only to discover she already had another partner… Well, I'd surely be shocked. No, there was no doubt about it. I definitely would be.

"Um, Teacher?"

I wanted Roxy to be rewarded for what she'd done. She should be rewarded.

"What is it?" she asked.

But what was I supposed to do? What could I do to repay her? How could I bring her fulfillment without betraying Sylphie?

"Um, at the very least, why don't we grant your wish while we're making this trip? I'll be your lover until I make it back home, and then…"

And then what? That wouldn't solve anything. I knew that much. This wouldn't help either of us. I would just be betraying Sylphie. It would only be temporary, and it was the worst possible proposal I could have come up with.

A long pause and then, "That's…an incredibly appealing idea." Roxy squeezed my arm tight. Then, lightly, she tapped her hand against my cheek. "But please stop with all that. You don't have to do anything."

"…All right."

I didn't have to do anything. If Roxy was fine with that, then I would do as she asked. I'd done everything she'd told me to do until now, and I would continue to do so.

That's what you want, right, Teacher?

***

We arrived at Bazaar in a little over a month.

Once there, we bought some souvenirs, such as glasswork, for Sylphie and the others. One such piece was a glass bottle with an interesting shape, and a red glass hair accessory with a tribal crest on it. I prayed they wouldn't break on the journey home.

After that, we bought some rice. Seed rice, that is. I wasn't confident it would grow well back home, but I wanted to try. If that failed, I could always eat it as-is.

That evening, Elinalise took the women of the group to go drinking. One of those girls-only parties, I guess. Not that any of them were young enough to be considered girls anymore. Lilia was the only one who refused, on account of having to look after Zenith. The rest, Roxy included, tagged along with Elinalise. Geese and Talhand didn't participate, of course, but they did come up with their own excuses to go out.

I stayed to help Lilia and look after Zenith. My mother could walk, eat, and go to the bathroom, but she wouldn't talk or proactively do anything herself. She was almost like a machine, carrying out the commands she was given. Occasionally she would stare in my direction—wouldn't say a word, just stare. Maybe she felt some connection to me because we were related by blood? The chances of something triggering her memory to return were…well, slim to none.

I wondered what Paul would do if he were here. Truly, I wondered. Surely, he would do a good job. Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would fail.

In the middle of the night, Roxy came to see me, absolutely hammered. Apparently, she'd told Elinalise everything, letting all her pent-up resentment spill forth. For her part, Elinalise had to feel conflicted. She'd said that Roxy was her dearest friend. She had to want to support Roxy's love life, but not at the expense of her granddaughter's marriage. I imagined that put her in a difficult spot.

Roxy beat her tiny fists against my chest, then returned to her sleeping quarters.

The next day, we arrived at the Gryphon's ledge. Normally, a carriage couldn't make the climb, but I used my magic to force it up onto the ledge.

On the first day, the armadillo cowered at the scent of the Gryphons and stopped in its tracks. I wondered if we would have to double back and leave it in Bazaar, but once we defeated the offending monster and it saw Geese wolf down the enemy's meat

right in front of it, the armadillo seemed to sense it was safe, and proceeded to merrily plod along.

According to Geese, this was a trick he learned from one of his demon friends. By defeating and eating a monster's natural predator right in front of it, you instilled the idea in its head that your own group was superior in strength to that of the predator. When I asked if the man who'd taught him this had a lizard-like face, Geese just laughed and said, "So you know him? Shoulda figured you would, Boss."

It took a whole day of travel across the ledge before we arrived at the desert. From there, it was a further three days to pierce through the sandstorm. When I used my magic to interrupt it, Roxy said, her voice tinged with jealousy, "So your earth magic is Saint-level, too. Amazing."

There was an abundance of monsters after that, so we proceeded with extreme caution, even though we had plenty of people along this time, including several veterans. Even if one or two of us were in a pinch, someone else could immediately dive in to help. We even crushed the Sand Garuda, which we'd avoided engaging with on the way in. After that came a giant lizard resembling a T-rex, which we similarly defeated.

I feared the Sandworms along the way might pose a real threat, but Geese was able to sniff them all out. Apparently, there was a trick to it. According to him, there was a thin, donut-shaped ridge in the ground where they were located. As long as you carefully scanned the terrain for that ridge, you could identify their hiding spots at once. That said, the desert wasn't exactly flat. There were plenty of occasions where I failed to correctly identify the ridges, probably partly due to my lack of experience.

Succubi attacked us too, but we dispensed with them easily, since our party was comprised mostly of women. Geese and I were both done in by their pheromones, but at least we had Detoxification magic to counter it. My true feelings did slip forth at one point, making me try to go after Roxy…but it was otherwise uneventful.

What shocked me the most was that Talhand was entirely unaffected by them. He snorted and said, “’Course it doesn’t work on me.”

I guess a sound body leads to a sound mind after all. Incredible!

We arrived at the ruins. Just as we’d planned, everyone besides Elinalise was blindfolded outside. Shierra fussed a bit about it, but Vierra persuaded her and we were able to proceed without issue. The blindfolds themselves were for little more than peace of mind, but as long as they didn’t see the circles, they wouldn’t know what had happened.

As for the wagon, we left it behind. It couldn’t make it past the entrance. Surely Zenith could make the next week on foot. Now that we’d made it this far, I didn’t even mind if the last leg of our journey took us a little longer.

The armadillo *was* able to make it through the entrance, so we brought it along with us. I had no idea if the climate back home would agree with it, but it had to be better than leaving it here for other monsters to feast on.

Geese and the others were surprised once they removed their blindfolds and discovered the scenery around them had changed completely. We went from being surrounded by a desert to being smack dab in the middle of a forest. Their shock was understandable. I warned them strictly to never talk about how we’d arrived here, even if they managed to guess how we’d done it.

That was how we left the Begaritt Continent. Just a bit further and I would be home.

Chapter 13:
Return

SNOW WAS FALLING lightly in the Northern Territories.

It had been approximately four months since I first set out. Autumn and the beastmen's mating season had long since passed, leading into a long winter season. There was snow up to my ankles, even in the middle of the forest. If we'd gotten here even a month later, the snow would've been all the way up to my chest, making it difficult to travel the rest of the way to Sharia.

"Miss Elinalise and I will lead the way," I said.

If any monsters popped up, we would defeat them all. Mana wasn't a problem. Zenith was walking without any complaints of exhaustion. The armadillo was shivering, but it would be fine as long as I warmed it with my magic occasionally.

Everything's fine, I thought to myself as we went.

One evening, Elinalise and I were on lookout together.

"Rudeus, there's something I want to talk to you about," she blurted out suddenly. I could already vaguely sense what the contents of that conversation would be. Roxy, no doubt.

I sat directly in front of her, legs folded beneath me—the perfect posture to prostrate myself before her if she started condemning me. Elinalise took a more comfortable seat on the ground.

I wondered how she'd express her anger. Would she lash out at me for disrespecting Sylphie? Or would she scold me for sleeping with Roxy?

But she did neither.

"Rudeus, you're not a follower of Millis, are you?"

“Huh…?”

I didn’t understand what she meant, but I did know that there was only one person I could call God. That hadn’t changed since I was little.

“I’m not,” I said finally.

“I didn’t think so. Sylphie isn’t either, is she?”

“No, she shouldn’t be.”

Sylphie wasn’t religious. In fact, the only devoted Millis follower I knew was Cliff. He had an amulet of the church dangling from his neck, and once a week, he attended something akin to Mass at the church. Sylphie wore no such symbols of Millis, and she didn’t go to the church. Maybe Cliff was a poor comparison—it was possible she did have faith, but I’d never heard her say as much, if so.

“My Cliff is a stout believer,” she said.

“He sure is,” I agreed immediately, having just thought of him as well.

“Did you know the Millis faith rules that a man can only have one single wife?”

“So it seems.”

Elinalise continued, “It’s an old-fashioned kind of edict, saying a man must love his wife for the rest of his life. Still, it feels pretty good to be on the receiving end of such affection.”

That sounded about right. I had no doubt it felt good to love someone with the whole of your being and be loved just the same in return. My wavering, cheating heart, on the other hand, had wandered to Roxy.

I did love her. There was no doubt about that. But I also remembered how miserable I’d been when I had ED. Sylphie had been the one who cured me and brought happiness back into my life, and so I wanted to repay her with love that would fulfill her in return. Those feelings were just as strong.

“However, Rudeus,” Elinalise started.

“Yes?”

“I’m different. I don’t think loving multiple partners at the same time is wrong.”

“I’m not surprised to hear you feel that way, but isn’t that insincere?” I asked.

Elinalise merely shook her head. “If you threw Sylphie aside, that would be one thing. But as long as you love her like you should, it’s not insincere.”

“If you have two people to love, that means the time you can afford to give each of them will be halved, right?”

“It’s not like you’re with each other all day long, right? It won’t be halved. It might be a little less than it was before, but that’s it.”

So, taking a second partner wouldn’t be a problem even if the affection I gave my first partner was reduced because of it? Humans could be oblivious to emotional upticks, but rather sensitive to even minute reductions. It would be terrible if Sylphie began to think my love for her was dwindling.

“Try to think back. After Paul married Lilia, was Zenith unhappy?”

Happy or unhappy—I felt like that wasn’t really the issue here. Though now that she mentioned it, it was true that Zenith hadn’t been particularly unhappy. Things had been the same as before. In fact, she’d grown even closer to Lilia than before, and had looked all the happier for it. Paul might have been unhappy, given that he was suddenly on the receiving end of both of his wives’ attacks, but… perhaps that was a kind of happiness in and of itself. One that would never return.

“What is it exactly that you want to say?” I asked. Remembering Paul had brought the grief bubbling back up. It might only worsen if we continued to talk about him. I just wanted to hear what Elinalise’s point was.

“Take Roxy as your wife. You love her, don’t you?”

I froze. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Yes, of course I am.”

“Miss Elinalise, is that really okay for you to say? You *are* Sylphie’s grandmother. Shouldn’t you be looking out for her happiness?”

Not that I had any right to blame her. I was the one who’d had an affair; the one who’d broken my oath to Sylphie and slept with Roxy. That fact remained unchanged, regardless of the circumstances. And yet, I found myself taking an accusatory tone.

“Yes, I can say it. No one else could say this but me,” she said haughtily as she looked at me. “I realize I shouldn’t say it like this, but before I was Sylphie’s grandmother, I was Roxy’s close friend.”

For a moment I didn’t understand what she meant. Then I realized she was talking about the order in which they’d met. Elinalise had met Roxy first, then encountered Sylphie later on.

“Honestly, I can’t stand to look at Roxy the way she is right now. She yearns to throw herself into the relationship and lean on you, but is forcing herself to hang back, just because she happened to meet you too late.”

I felt bad for Roxy when she put it like that…but I also felt bad for Sylphie when I looked at it from her perspective.

“If you part on bad terms, I have no doubt she’ll lead a miserable life. It’s possible some dirtbag will take advantage of her, treat her terribly, and then sell her off as collateral for his unpaid loans, causing her to end up bearing the child of a man she doesn’t even know.”

“Isn’t that going a bit too far?” I asked uncomfortably.

“I know of a woman who led such a life.”

She spoke so frankly I found myself wondering for a moment if she was speaking of her own personal experience.

Elinalise continued, “I want Roxy to be happy, even if that happiness comes with conditions.”

“I mean, I want the same thing.”

“Rudeus, I know you can do it. You can love Sylphie and Roxy just the same. You’re Paul’s son, after all. You should be able to do that.”

Could I really? Perhaps. No, definitely. I *did* love them both equally. I did and I could. But was that really okay? Was it okay to say as much—to be *that* self-serving?

No. These were just the whisperings of the devil. I couldn’t listen to them.

“No, Sylphie is my only—”

“I didn’t plan on saying this,” Elinalise cut in, raising her voice. Her tone grew hushed again as she continued, “But when we drank together in Bazaar, Roxy told me that her monthly visitor still hadn’t come.”

“Huh?” Monthly visitor…? Oh, wait! I knew what that was. Uh, but…did that mean…?

“Well, it’s not for certain yet,” she added.

We’d done the deed. It was possible. Plus, the night they’d gotten drunk, she *had* come and beaten on my chest (albeit weakly). Maybe that had been a sign?

Elinalise peered into my face and said, “Rudeus, if Roxy really is pregnant with your child, what will you do?”

Her question conjured an image in my head of Paul back in the day…back when Lilia was pregnant with his child. He’d looked so pitiful. I was the one who had saved him back then, when he’d been helpless. Now, I thought he was a man deserving of respect. But that didn’t mean I wanted to make the same mistakes he had.

“…I’ll do what must be done.”

“Which is?” she prompted.

“I’ll marry her.”

Marry! The moment the word left my mouth, it felt like my heart had dropped into my stomach.

I loved Sylphie, but I also wanted to marry Roxy and have her be a part of my family. I didn't want anyone else to take her. I wanted to make her mine. It was selfish of me. I'd said the same thing to Sylphie, gotten her pregnant with my child, and now I desired another woman as well. It was unforgivable. Only a piece of garbage could think the way I was thinking.

I'd said the same of Paul so many times up until now—called him a piece of garbage just the same—but I was a man, too. Now that I had two women that I loved and wanted, couldn't I do my best to have them both, just as Paul had done? Perhaps Sylphie would be disgusted with me and Roxy would abandon me. But wasn't it worth trying, even if I lost them both?

Oh, that's right. This wasn't just up to me.

"Whether Roxy and Sylphie agree to it is a different story," I said finally.

"Indeed. Well, I'll go get Roxy."

"Huh?"

Leaving me with those words, Elinalise immediately strode into one of the nearby tents.

After a few moments, Roxy came out by herself. She didn't seem the least bit sleepy. Instead, she glanced over at me with a nervous look on her face. Perhaps Elinalise had said something to her.

"What is it that you wanted to talk to me about, Rudy?" She sat in front of me, legs folded up under her. I followed her lead and sat up straighter.

What was I supposed to say? Everything was happening so fast. I hadn't come up with the words yet. No, thinking wasn't necessary. My feelings for Roxy weren't something I needed to think over before speaking.

"Um, I've been wanting to say this for a very, very long time," I began.

"Yes?"

“I love you, Teacher. I always have, since long, long ago. And I don’t *just* love you—I respect you. You seem to be self-conscious of the fact that you can’t use magic as well as me, but that doesn’t matter to me. Your teachings have helped me numerous times. They’re the only reason I was able to make it this far.”

Roxy’s face gradually heated up. Mine was probably tinged pink as well. Talking face to face like this was embarrassing.

“Well, thank you for that.”

“But, um,” I added, stammering, “uh, you see, I also have a wife.”

“Yes, I’ve heard.”

Was it really appropriate to say, “So please be my second wife”? Wasn’t that a selfish way to put it? But I couldn’t think of a better way to spin it.

What should I do?

I just had to say it. No matter how I spun it, my request remained the same. I was suggesting not splitting up with Sylphie, but instead, trying to bring Roxy into the family without seeking Sylphie’s input first. I would have to get her approval after the fact. That was exactly the kind of thing a garbage human being would do.

Still, I had to say it now. Roxy might wander off if I didn’t. She was the kind to immediately set off once the job at hand was done. If I didn’t stop her now, it might be too late.

…Enough. If I was going to regret not saying it later, then I should blurt it out now. Even if that made me a piece of shit.

“My wife’s name is Sylphiette Greyrat now, but she didn’t originally have a surname. She was just Sylphiette.”

Roxy nodded. “Yes, so I’ve heard.”

“Would you mind making your name Roxy Greyrat as well?”

She looked suspicious for a moment. But she must’ve realized what I meant in the next instant, because she clamped a hand over her mouth. Roxy regained her composure almost as quickly. “I

appreciate you saying that, truly. But are you sure you shouldn't get your wife's approval first?"

Of course. We were talking about a complete stranger becoming part of our family—I absolutely had to consult Sylphie. I'd also need to explain it to my younger sisters. Lilia, too.

"I do need her approval," I admitted.

"In that case…"

She was going to turn me down. It seemed Roxy wanted me to choose her, and only her, after all. No sooner had that thought popped into the back of my head than…

"In that case, please ask me again after you've received her approval," Roxy said with a serious look on her face, the snow sprinkling down around us.

Please ask me again. The words echoed in my mind. I felt my body heat up as I registered the fact that she hadn't rejected me.

We drew close to the Magic City of Sharia.

I talked to Lilia about Roxy as well. Her usual poker face in place, she merely said, "I see, then. Very well." It didn't sound like she judged me for it, probably because she'd been in the same position as Roxy before.

No, that wasn't it. It was because the notion of monogamous marriage only existed in Millis. Either way, it took a weight off my shoulders to have made my promise to Roxy and gained Lilia's understanding. All that remained was to get home, explain the circumstances of the trip to Sylphie, and bow my head before her as I pleaded for Roxy's inclusion into the family.

I still felt the weight of the knowledge that I would need to explain Paul and Zenith's situation to Aisha and Norn. But they would have to accept it, as I had. I was certain Norn would react with anger and blame me, but I was still going to do it. I wasn't going to run. No matter how things turned out, I would have no regrets.

"…Regrets?"

Just then, anxiety reared its ugly head.

Those were the Man-God's words. He'd said I would "regret" something.

True enough, there was Paul's death, Zenith becoming a husk, and me losing my left hand. I'd lost a lot. Yet strangely enough, I didn't feel regret. I could thank Roxy for that.

Yes, part of me thought: *If only I'd been stronger, if only I'd learned how to wield the sword better, if only I'd been strong enough to defeat that hydra.* But another part of me felt strongly that it would've been impossible either way. My aptitude for battle wasn't the best. I couldn't wrap that battle aura stuff around my body, nor did I know how to try. You had to be able to manipulate your battle aura to advance as a swordsman. Besides, the hydra had been immune to magic. Even if I had worked diligently to learn King-tier spells, they would've been useless. There might have been some other way, but the past was the past.

That was why I had no regrets. Paul's death had allowed me to reflect on my past. I'd worried people and caused them trouble, but ultimately, there was good that had come out of it all. What I felt wasn't regret—it was sadness. Just sadness. Sadness was all I carried with me from the Begaritt Continent.

But that was also why I felt anxious now. Perhaps the thing I would really regret was yet to come. For instance, maybe something had happened to the little sisters I left behind.

Remember what he said.

He'd mentioned this-and-that about Linia and Pursena. Did that mean something had happened to one of them then? Was I supposed to have enlisted their help to solve some kind of problem here?

Or—don't tell me—had something happened to my pregnant wife…?

Those were the only things that might leave me with regrets.

Despite my apprehension, we couldn't move any faster. The weather had worsened, and the snow was rapidly picking up. The others seemed unfazed, but Zenith was struggling. I used my earth magic to craft a seat I could hoist onto my back, and carried her. The armadillo looked half-frozen. Perhaps we should have left it behind after all, but it was already too late for that.

I should at least give it a name so it doesn't die without one, I decided.

Dillo. Dillo was a good name. Do your best, Dillo!

It had taken just five days to reach the ruins when we were on our way to Begaritt, but it was taking over ten on the return journey. It wasn't *that* long, compared to all my adventures so far. And yet, somehow, it felt like the longest leg of the entire trip.

***

We arrived at the Magic City of Sharia.

I immediately headed for my house, feeling my pace quicken.

"Hey, Boss, what is it? Looks like you've seen a ghost. Shouldn't you cast some of that Detoxification stuff on yourself?" Geese asked with concern.

I ignored him and just continued my hurried advance.

"Ah, so this is the center of the city, eh? Should we go ahead and get ourselves an inn for now? There's no way we can all stay at Boss' place with this many people."

There was someone talking behind me, but their words didn't reach my ears.

"Hey, Boss, you listenin'? Boss? Hey, Rudeus!"

At some point, I broke into a sprint. I left everyone behind and dashed toward my house—down the familiar streets I'd walked before, in a city I'd lived in for over a year now. Those I passed regarded me with confusion, wondering what my hurry was, but I

went as fast as I could, stumbling, completely off balance. Perhaps the lack of a left hand was impeding my ability to run smoothly.

Just as I was about to fall over, someone grabbed me and held me upright.

“What is all of this hurry for?”

It was Elinalise.

“It’s just…” I started to say, grasping for words.

She waited a moment before asking again, “What is it? You’ve been panicking for a bit now. Did something happen?”

“Oh, no, um, I just have this feeling that Sylphie is in trouble.”

“In trouble? Based on what?”

“Nothing, really.”

I brushed her off and broke into a hurried walk again. I wanted to relieve this anxiety as quickly as possible. My house was just ahead. If things were as they should be, Sylphie’s stomach should be heavy with a baby, and she should be home. Or maybe she’d already given birth? It would be a premature one, if so. If that had happened, then maybe…?

Anything but that. Anything else. I just didn’t want any more bad things to happen.

I arrived at the house. The snow had piled up, but the place didn’t look that much different from when I’d left. The number of trees and potted plants in the garden had increased slightly; a product of Aisha’s hobby, I assumed. The place looked more beautiful than it had before.

I snatched my key out of my belongings, shoved it in the hole on the door, and struggled to turn it. The metal was cold and my hand was trembling. The door wouldn’t open; the key wouldn’t turn.

“Tch.”

I reached for the door knocker. It felt like ice on my skin, but I banged it several times anyways.

“Are you sure it isn’t already open?” asked Elinalise from behind me.

As she suggested, I tried the doorknob, turned and pulled, and it came open.

Too careless, I thought as I started to step in.

My eyes immediately met those of someone at the opposite end of the room, trying to open a door.

“Oh, big brother?!”

“Aisha…is everyone safe?”

“What do you mean?” Puzzled, Aisha’s gaze flitted between me and Elinalise—now standing beside me—then behind us. When I followed and looked back, I saw Roxy struggling to catch her breath.

For the moment, I grabbed Aisha by the shoulders. She must have sensed something was off, because she glanced at her right shoulder and her eyes went wide. Visibly shocked, she looked between my face and my hand.

“Huh? What is this? What happened to your—”

“I see you’re safe. What about Sylphie?”

“Huh? Oh, um…she’s right in here?”

At her words, I realized that just behind Aisha, looking equally puzzled…was Sylphie. Her stomach had doubled or perhaps tripled in size. Even her breasts were a bit swollen. She was about seven or eight months along now, probably already producing breast milk… no, that didn’t matter right now.

“Rudy, wh-what is it?” she asked.

“Sylphie, are you all right? Nothing’s happened?”

“Huh? No, everyone has been really wonderful to me, and Aisha’s been doing her best to help out as well.”

So Sylphie was fine? Yes, I could see as much.

“What about everyone else?” I asked. “Norn? Are Linia and Zanoba and the rest safe?”

“Huh? Safe? Nothing’s happened here,” she said, still confused.

“No one’s gotten sick or injured?”

“N-no, nothing noteworthy…” Sylphie looked utterly dumbfounded, as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

Seeing that expression, I realized…there really was nothing wrong.

“Um, Big Brother?”

By the time I realized it, Aisha’s face was towering over me. Boy, she sure had grown. No, wait—I’d just sunk to the floor.

“Okay…” I breathed out.

The tension left my body.

In the end, the regret the Man-God had spoken of was the regret around Paul’s death and the deaths of my parents from my previous life. The rest of my anxiety had been needless worry.

“Haah…” As that sank in, I let out a huge sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

Sylphie gradually approached and rested her hand on my shoulder. I could feel her warmth spread through the fabric of my robe. She immediately knelt down and gently wrapped her arms around me. I slipped mine around her as well—albeit clumsily, with my left hand missing—and squeezed. Her familiar scent filled my nose.

“Welcome home, Rudy.”

There was so much I needed to tell her—about Paul, about Zenith, about Roxy. I also needed to welcome those I’d left in the plaza into my home. I’d come all the way here by myself, after all. I’d panicked a bit too much. Nothing had happened. I should’ve just taken my time with the others.

But there was something I needed to say first, before I did any of that.

“I’m home.”

I’d returned.

Chapter 14:
Report

THINGS WENT BY in a frenzy after I returned. First, Aisha ran out to fetch Norn from school. Roxy, either out of consideration or because it felt too awkward lingering here, went off to retrieve Geese and the others. Elinalise seemed anxious to rush to her beloved Cliff's side, but resisted the temptation.

As we waited for everyone to gather here, I passed the time asking Sylphie about what had happened since I left. I was sure she wanted nothing more than to hear how my adventure had gone, but she didn't complain as she recounted events during my absence.

Her pregnancy was moving along smoothly. According to the doctor, the child would most likely be born right on time. As for the others, they were apparently doing well. There'd been a small incident at the school a few days ago, but Nanahoshi had resolved it. Something must have changed in her if she was going out of her way to help the people of this world.

Neither Aisha nor Norn had gotten sick or injured; they were both doing well. Aisha's gardening hobby had taken off, and she even had new plants growing in her room. I'd have to take a look for myself when I had the opportunity. Norn was gradually becoming an idol-like figure at the school, having spawned something akin to a fan club. It made sense, given how cute she was.

Zanoba, Cliff, and Linia and Pursena popped in occasionally at the house to check in. Ariel had apparently complained that I'd said nothing to her before leaving. She was right, come to think of it. I'd need to apologize the next time I saw her.

Even so, everything I heard suggested they were all doing well. When I had the time, I would have to go inform them all that I'd returned.

Apparently, the only exception to our group of friends was Badigadi, who remained unaccounted for. Well, he was immortal, so I doubted anything bad had happened to him.

Sylphie looked adorable as always, with a finger pressed to her chin as she tried to recall the past six months.

“So nothing happened to anyone,” I remarked.

“Nope. Nothing I think would worry you, at least.”

“All right.”

Sylphie changed the subject. “Anyway, so tell me. What happened with you?”

“Oh, I’ll tell you,” I promised. “Just wait until everyone is gathered first. A lot happened.”

“…Okay. Oh, it looks like they’re back.”

In the midst of that conversation, Roxy returned, along with Geese, Talhand, Lilia, Vierra, Shierra, Elinalise, and Zenith. With Sylphie and myself included, there were ten of us. Our living area was spacious enough to accommodate them and then some.

“Oh, you must be the boss’ wife,” Geese realized. “Heh heh heh, you sure are cute. Boss, you’re a lucky one.”

“That’s my granddaughter,” Elinalise informed him.

“Yep, and if not for her slutty granny, she’d be perfect.”

“Excuse me?!”

The rest of the party ignored their two bickering companions, moving to greet Sylphie one by one. She received them humbly, returning their greetings in kind.

“A pleasure. I’m Roxy…Migurdia.”

“Roxy? As in the master that Rudy is always boasting about?” asked Sylphie.

“Yes, that one,” Roxy said, then paused a moment before continuing. “Although I’m not special enough to warrant such boasts.”

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you from Rudeus. I’m Sylphiette. It’s an honor.”

“Y-yes, for me as well…” Roxy said, seeming a bit awkward. It made sense that she would be, I guess. Not much time had passed since our conversation the other day about her joining our family. But that talk would have to wait until later.

“It has been a while, Mistress Sylphiette,” Lilia greeted her with a bow of the head.

“Yes it has, Miss Lilia!” Sylphie seemed delighted at their reunion, her lips threatening to break into a genuine smile, only to turn bitter just as quickly. “Um, there’s no need for ‘Mistress Sylphiette.’ Could you just call me Sylphie, as you did so long ago?”

“No.” Lilia shook her head. “I cannot treat you as I did before, not now that you’ve wed Lord Rudeus.”

“O-oh, all right…” Sylphie looked abashed.

Lilia had taught her everything she knew about housework. In a way, she was Sylphie’s “master,” the same way Roxy was mine. Of course Sylphie respected her.

“It’s been a while, Miss Zenith,” Sylphie said, at last turning to greet my mother. “Um…Miss Zenith?”

“…”

Zenith just stared blankly ahead even as Sylphie called out to her.

“Um…?” Troubled, Sylphie glanced back at me. The look on her face said she was worried Zenith wasn’t pleased by our marriage.

“Sylphie,” I said, “I’ll explain about my mother and father once Norn gets here.”

“Oh yes, I don’t see Mister Paul here…” she began to say, her eyes searching the room. It didn’t take long for her to infer what had happened after everyone fell silent and she glimpsed their faces. Sylphie pursed her lips and went quiet.

Silence fell as we waited for Norn to return. It was tacitly understood that we couldn't begin until she arrived.

After a bit, Aisha and Norn returned, both breathless from the run.

"B-Big Brother, welcome back from your long trip!" Norn huffed and puffed as she spoke, bowing her head. She caught a glimpse of my hand and jolted. "Is your hand okay?"

"It's fine. It's inconvenient, but it doesn't hurt," I said. Compared to what we were about to discuss, my left hand was hardly noteworthy.

"O-oh, okay." Norn was still struggling to catch her breath as she glanced about the room. "Huh?" she muttered in confusion, unable to find who she was looking for as she took a seat.

Aisha approached me and asked, "Before we proceed, would it not be appropriate to serve the guests some tea?"

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed. "This is going to take a while, so please do."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Sylphie. "I should be the one doing that. Let me help out."

"Not at all, Mistress, stay here."

Entrusted with the task, Aisha immediately set to work. She prepared enough tea for everyone, gathered their luggage in one place, and hung up their coats, wet from the snow. She offered everyone slippers to use, taking their damp shoes and setting them to dry by the fireplace.

I sat unmoving and merely watched her do all of this. It wasn't just me watching, either. Lilia was also observing her daughter closely. Come to think of it, Lilia had always been the one doing this kind of work back in Rapan. But now, in the deathly silence, she stayed put, not lifting a finger. That was a rare sight.

"Aisha." Once her daughter's work was mostly complete, Lilia called out to her.

“Yes, what is it, Mother?”

“It seems you’re attending to your duties properly and not causing trouble for your brother.”

“Yes.” Aisha nodded.

“You may be related to Lord Rudeus by blood, but it was he who saved your life. Keep that in mind as you continue to carry out your duties as his maid.”

“Yes, Mother,” Aisha replied, sounding just as formal as Lilia.

It didn’t feel right to hear a parent and child talk like that. This was their first time seeing each other in a while. I felt like they should be…well, you know, warmer toward each other. Then again, perhaps Lilia was just restraining herself. The conversation to come was going to be a painful one, after all.

“Since everyone is gathered, why don’t we start?” My heart felt heavy, but it was my duty to speak. Paul was no longer here to do it for me.

“But Father isn’t here yet,” Norn said anxiously in protest.

Would she be angry when she learned, I wondered? Before I left, she’d clung to me, crying for me to help him. I’d told her to leave everything to me. She would probably blame me when she learned he was dead.

It was fine if she did. I was the one who’d failed to grant her wish.

I glanced around at everyone and then said, “Our father is… Paul Greyrat is dead.”

“Huh…?” Norn raised her voice in confusion.

Sylphie lowered her head, the heartbreak plain on her face.

Aisha’s eyes went wide, her fists curling up tight.

“This is what he left behind,” I said, setting out his equipment piece by piece on the table. His sword, his shortsword, his armor, and his remains. Just those four things.

“W-why?!” Norn jumped to her feet and approached. “But you went! Why did he die?!”

“I’m sorry… I wasn’t strong enough.”

“But you’re…!” Norn stepped close, as if perhaps she intended to grab me by the collar. But her fury suddenly lost steam. I could see my left hand—or rather, lack thereof—reflected in her eyes. Her gaze shifted between that, Paul’s leftover belongings, and my face, and tears began to slowly well up in her eyes.

I covered my left wrist with my right hand and continued, “I’ll explain in more detail right now.”

She sniffed and muttered, “Okay…”

Aisha strode up behind her, grabbing her by the shoulder. “For now—”

“Enough, I know!” Norn smacked her hand away and stalked back to her seat.

Aisha stood idle for a moment before returning to her position behind Sylphie.

“All right, I’ll explain from the beginning…”

I summarized everything that had happened. How Elinalise and I set out for Rapan and reunited with Paul and the others there. How, based on information we had about Zenith’s whereabouts, we dove into the Teleportation Labyrinth together and started mapping it out. I told them how things went smoothly until we ran up against the guardian. How the ensuing fight had been so rough that I’d lost my hand and Paul had lost his life. That although we’d succeeded in rescuing Zenith, she’d become a husk. Geese interjected intermittently to supply additional information as I slowly worked my way through it all.

Then finally, Norn asked, “So that means you weren’t able to save Mother or Father?”

“…That’s right.”

I felt like I could see her hackles rise the moment I nodded. But she didn’t explode on me. Instead, she bit her lower lip and stared at

my left hand. “Did you do everything you could?”

“Yeah. I gave it all I had.”

“If you tried that hard and you still failed, then it wouldn’t have mattered if…” She spoke calmly, but her voice then trailed off. I could see the tears begin to fill her eyes again. “I’m sure it wouldn’t have mattered… Father is…gone… Waah…wah…waaaaah!” She began to sob, large droplets streaming down her cheeks.

Norn was crying. Loudly. In a voice that pierced me right through the heart. Everyone present wore grave expressions as they listened, and her body shook as she sobbed. And sobbed. And sobbed. And sobbed. She cried all the tears that the rest of us hadn’t, and we just listened as she did so.

“Hic…waah…”

After a while, she stopped. Her eyes were swollen and bright red, strangled noises kept escaping her throat. But she turned to me, her eyes filled with determination.

“Big Brother?”

“Yes, what is it?” I asked.

“This sword, can I…hic…can I have it…?” Norn pointed a finger toward Paul’s favorite weapon. The one he’d had with him since before I was born. The one he always kept on him, the one that had never left his side.

“Yeah, sure. You should take it. Just don’t use it recklessly.”

“Huh…?”

“Don’t mistake having that sword as a sign that you’ve suddenly gotten stronger.”

It had been on my fifth birthday that Paul handed me a sword and said the very same thing to me.

“I…understand,” Norn said, hugging it close to her chest.

She was strong. It wouldn’t be unusual for a child her age to hole up in their room and cry, but she was facing Paul’s death head-

on. Completely unlike me, who couldn't even crawl back to my feet without Roxy's help.

Truly, she was strong.

We decided to split his other mementos up amongst our family. Aisha chose his shortsword, and I chose his armor. As for his remains, we would build a proper grave for him and bury him there. At least, that was the plan until Zenith drifted forward and took his armor into her hands.

"Mother?"

"…"

I called out to her, but she didn't respond. As usual, she just stared blankly ahead, like a husk. And yet, she'd moved as if she understood what was going on here. Or was that just a coincidence? No…perhaps the core of who she was still remained.

Regardless, it meant that I was left with nothing of his. But I was satisfied with that. I'd received so much from him already.

"Well then, let's talk about Mother next." Once again, I explained Zenith's condition to them—that she had lost her memories and seemed almost completely empty inside.

"She won't get better?" Sylphie asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

I intended to have doctors and healers examine her to be sure, but I'd never heard of healing magic that could restore lost memories. Honestly, we didn't even know the root cause of her condition. We knew she'd been encased in a magically imbued crystal and lost her memories, but that was it. It might well be something akin to oxygen deficiency.

I was certain of nothing, of course. But I did think the chances of curing her condition were slim. If there was damage to her brain, then the medical technology of this world wouldn't be enough to fix her. Even Advanced-tier healing magic hadn't done anything. I'd read a manga or two where inflicting the same level of shock that

had made a person lose their memories in the first place snapped them back to normal, but we couldn't test that out on Zenith.

Besides, I wasn't sure she'd be happy even if we did cure her. Paul had died trying to save her. I was sure she'd blame herself, saying, "If only he hadn't tried to help me." Maybe she was better off not remembering.

No, that wasn't right. We *should* work to restore her memories.

"Anyway, she'll need treatment and care," I said. "I plan for her to live here with us."

If my parents in my previous life had lived, grown old, and become bedridden, would I have looked after them the same way?

Lilia had initially said she planned to rent separate living quarters so that they wouldn't impede on my life. She'd earned enough from the Teleportation Labyrinth to live on for over a decade in this town. I'd shot that idea down flat. I wouldn't allow such a thing. *Paul* wouldn't allow such a thing. It was our duty as her remaining family to look after her.

"I plan to entrust her care to Miss Lilia," I continued, "but I am sure everyone will end up having to lend a hand."

"Very well. I will do my best to help out, too," Sylphie said gladly.

No one seemed to disagree—not that I intended to let them. Paul had told me to save Zenith even if it killed me. Even now, I didn't truly know what he'd meant by that. But now that he was gone, it was up to me to protect her.

Besides, though I'd said she needed treatment, it wasn't as though she had Alzheimer's. She was just more or less an empty husk. With Lilia by her side at all times, I was sure she'd be fine, though I would need to gather the necessary supplies for her care.

"So that means Mother will be living here as well?" Aisha blurted out, voice filled with confusion and anxiety.

"Yes, Aisha. I will be in Lord Rudeus' service."

I wondered if Aisha saw Lilia as a thorn in her side? Lilia had been a strict disciplinarian when she was growing up, and I'd gotten the sense Aisha enjoyed living away from her mother. Still, I didn't feel like it was appropriate for her to express her displeasure here. If she did voice such complaints, I would have to chastise her accordingly.

"Will we be splitting the work as well?" Aisha pressed on.

"We can discuss that later," said Lilia. "I intend to make the Mistress' care my primary focus, leaving the majority of the household work to you, Aisha."

"…All right." Aisha didn't protest, but it did look like she was uncomfortable with her mother present. Her voice was stiff, her expression gloomy.

Having noticed that, Norn interjected. "Hey, Aisha." She put a hand on her sister's shoulder and whispered, "You don't have to hold back on our account, okay?"

Aisha glanced at Norn, then at Lilia, then at me. Then again at Lilia and back at me. I wasn't sure why she was looking to me for approval—or what she was looking for approval for—but I nodded nonetheless.

Aisha hopped to her feet and threw her arms around Lilia. "M-Mother…! Mother, I'm so glad you're safe!" She bawled, burying her face in Lilia's stomach.

"I'm home now, Aisha." Lilia's expression turned gentle as she stroked her daughter's head.

Ah, yes. It all made sense.

Aisha had to have felt conflicted. Lilia was her mother, after all. I was sure she'd prayed for Paul and Zenith's well-being, too, but it was Lilia's safety she'd prayed for above all others. And now that she had returned safely, it was under circumstances too grim for Aisha to express her joy sincerely.

Forgive me for doubting you, Aisha.

We talked about a variety of things after that, concluding our return announcement. The conversation had included Geese's financial report proving that we'd come out in the black, not that our newly deep pockets had done anything to brighten the cloudy expressions on everyone's faces.

"Well then, guess we oughta be off to look for an inn." As soon as we were finished, Geese took to his feet. Talhand, Vierra, and Shierra followed his lead.

I hurried to stop them. "I don't mind if you stay here with us today."

"What, Boss? Don't be stupid. We've got brains enough to know we'd just be gettin' in the way of your family here," Geese shot back.

The other three seemed to agree, moving to retrieve their luggage, pulling on their still-damp shoes and coats.

"…"

In the end, I decided to see them off at the front entrance, and as I watched the four of them recede, I called out again. "Everyone, thank you for all the assistance you provided my father all this time."

Vierra and Shierra, in particular, bowed their heads deep. They had helped Paul ever since his time in Millishion. I hadn't spoken with them very much, but they'd supported us in myriad ways as we dove in and out of the Teleportation Labyrinth. They were the heroes behind the scenes.

"No, we should be the ones apologizing for not being more helpful."

"We'd appreciate if you'd let us know where the captain's grave is once you have it finished."

Their replies were short. I wondered what Paul had been to them? They'd followed him to the Begaritt Continent even after the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad disbanded. Perhaps they'd had special feelings for him? But even if they'd loved him, it was all over now.

“What will you do now?” I asked.

“Once winter is over, we’ll return to the Asura Kingdom. There are other people from the Search and Rescue Squad to whom we are indebted.”

“I see,” I said. “Well, take care.”

“You as well, Lord Rudeus. I know you’ll have a lot on your shoulders from here on out, but take care of yourself.” They bowed their heads to me one final time before disappearing into the curtain of falling snow.

The Search and Rescue Squad… Oh yeah, hadn’t someone said something about Zenith’s family helping finance Paul’s activities? Zenith wasn’t exactly what you’d call safe and sound, but we should still inform them that she’d been found. I could at least pen them a letter.

As I was preoccupied with those thoughts, Geese slapped my shoulder from behind. “Well, see ya, Boss.”

“Mister Geese, Mister Talhand.” I looked at each of them.

“What? Wipe that gloomy look off your face,” Geese grumbled.

“What will you both be doing after this?”

Geese scratched his head. “We plan to head as far as Asura. We wanna exchange our Begaritt currency and sell these magic items we got.”

“You’re going to sell all of them?” I asked.

“Plan to keep a few to use ourselves, but for the most part, yeah.”

Geese still had one in hand. They’d informed me of what the items did when they appraised them, but most were nothing special—just random stuff like a shortsword that could be used in place of a match. I figured I might find a use for them eventually, so I tossed them into our basement storage area. No matter how ridiculous the effects, they would still fetch us some money if we were ever in a pinch.

The magic stones that absorbed mana were a separate matter. I wanted to research them once I had the time. If I faced a similar opponent in the future, I didn't want a repeat of the Labyrinth. I didn't want to be powerless. I might not be skilled enough to get anything out of researching the stones, but I'd rather try than just give up.

"If you want, we can take your items along with us to sell in Asura. You'll get a lot more bang for your buck there than you would here, you know?"

Asura did have a steep price for commodities, and their currency was accepted widely across the Central Continent. If you were going to sell something, Asura was the place to do it.

"And let me guess," I said knowingly, "on the way back here, you'll gamble it all away and make a run for it?"

"Ah—hey, no way, I wouldn't put my hands on your money, Boss." His eyes darted back and forth, not looking at me. Perhaps he really did plan to gamble the money away.

Ah, well. If not for Geese, we would've never made it through that labyrinth in the first place. I owed him an enormous debt. This was trivial by comparison.

"I'm kidding," I said finally.

"Well, I did plan to gamble some of it," he confessed, the edges of his lips curling up in an ornery chuckle.

"And after that?"

"Going to continue as an adventurer." Geese shrugged. "Those're the only skills we got."

"All right."

"Well, we'll be here until spring, so come drink with us when you've got the time. You said you'd introduce me to a nice female monkey, yeah? Ah, I guess since you got a wife and kid on the way, you probably don't frequent those kinda places. Heh heh."

True, we wouldn't be seeing the last of each other just yet. Even so, Geese was the kind of man who'd just up and leave on his

next adventure without a word in advance. I wanted to at least say my farewells while I had the opportunity.

“Mister Geese,” I started.

“Boss. You’re talkin’ all funny, you know? Talk to me like you always do, like, ‘Hey, Newbie!’”

Curious, I asked, “Why are you so particular about being called ‘Newbie’?”

“It’s a jinx.”

A jinx. That word alone should have been an inadequate explanation, but it hit me straight in the heart. If it was one of his jinxes, I couldn’t complain. “Well, either way, thank you both for everything you’ve done up until now.”

“I told ya, no need. Anyway, take care, Boss.”

Once I bowed my head low, Geese waved his hand and started to walk off.

“He’s right, you don’t owe us anythin’. If anyone does, it’d be Paul. What I mean is, we don’t need any thanks,” Talhand said as he shifted his burly body to follow Geese.

I watched until they disappeared.

“Men always want to show off like that,” said a voice.

I glanced over to see Elinalise standing beside me. Apparently, she’d been talking to Sylphie while I was bidding them farewell. I wondered if it was about Roxy? I’d told her I had a duty to tell Sylphie everything, but being the busybody that she was, Elinalise might have put in a few words for me. Honestly, I wasn’t anxious to have that conversation, so I was grateful for her consideration.

“Well then, I should be off to see Cliff. I don’t have much time left.” Elinalise stroked her lower abdomen as she spoke. I’d put her through a lot, too. On our way here and back, she’d slept with a total of three different strangers. This was normal for her, of course, and she’d laughed it off, but I couldn’t be so flippant.

“Miss Elinalise, you were really there for me,” I said.

She had a bitter look on her face. “…I’m sorry about Paul.”

“No, that was my—”

My mistake, my carelessness. At least, I tried to say as much, but she cut in first.

“It was my duty in that party to make sure things like that didn’t happen. Paul died because of my shortcomings.”

There was no way that was true. We’d been fighting for our lives back there; none of us could have known what lay in wait after we’d dodged the hydra’s ultimate attack and were a single head away from victory. There were only two people who could blame her: Elinalise herself and the deceased Paul.

“I can’t blame you,” I said. “Or anyone else.”

“Then don’t blame yourself, either.”

“…All right.”

“Okay, time for me to get going!” Elinalise said before dashing out into the snow. There was someone important still waiting to hear that she’d returned.

“Phew.” I let out a long sigh, my breath turning into a visible plume that rose and dissipated amidst the snow.

At last, the Displacement incident was over. At least for me. All my missing family members had been found. There were probably other victims out there still missing, but I had no obligation to search for them.

It was over. It was the conclusion of a long, frustrating, bitter journey. Now life could move on to the next stage. No looking back. I had to live on and look ahead. There was still so much I had to do in this world. So much I still *wanted* to do.

So let’s look to the future.

“Rudy, has everyone already left?” A girl’s voice called from behind. I glanced over my shoulder to see Roxy standing there. “I also wanted to talk to them a bit…”

“It seems they’re staying in the city for now, so you can see them against when you have time,” I assured.

“True.”

Roxy didn’t step out into the snow. She remained in the house, the only member of the party who’d done so. Whether she continued to stay here or left to find a room at an inn depended on how our impending discussion went.

“Well, Roxy…”

“Yes?”

“Let’s do this.”

I stepped back inside, Roxy’s petite form following along beside me.

Chapter 15:
Carnage

FIVE PEOPLE REMAINED in the living area: Sylphie, Norn, Aisha, Roxy, and myself. There was also the armadillo (Dillo, as I'd named him) sprawled out by the fireplace with a look of bliss on its face, but you could hardly count it among our number.

Lilia was helping Zenith into the bath. Before entering, she'd come to ask me if it was all right, and I'd nodded. I wanted to get through this discussion without relying on her aid.

Rather than return to her room, Norn lingered. She was having a rough time of it, still audibly sniffing. She'd been incredibly attached to Paul, and was taking the loss exceptionally hard.

"Well, there is one last thing I have to talk about."

When I said as much, the three of them returned to their seats. I exchanged looks with Roxy, who quietly wandered over beside me.

"…"

Seeing how swollen Sylphie's belly was made me hesitate, but I had a responsibility. Eventually, Roxy would be in the same state of pregnancy. If Sylphie refused to take her in, would Roxy give birth all by herself? That was the agreement we'd made, but if that really did happen, then I planned to support her however I could, financially or otherwise.

"I'd like to take Roxy as my second wife," I blurted out.

"…Huh?"

The one who voiced her confusion wasn't Sylphie, but rather Norn. Sylphie just had a blank look on her face.

"Wh-what are you talking about?!" Norn demanded.

"Let me explain everything in order."

I started by recounting what had happened on the Begaritt Continent—how Paul had died and I'd fallen into a deep depression as a result. I told them how Roxy had been the one to save me, and that I'd developed feelings for her as a result. How I deeply respected her and wanted her to become a part of our family now.

"It wasn't my intention to betray Sylphie, but in the end, I did break my promise. I'm sorry." I got down on my knees. There was a rug stretched out across the floor, but the winters in the Northern Territories were cold, so naturally the carpet was as well. I bent forward and pressed my head to the floor.

"Huh, wai—Rudy?!" I heard Sylphie's panicked voice call out from above.

"I still love Sylphie just as much as before, but it seems I may have gotten Roxy pregnant. I need to take responsibility for that." The more I spoke, the cheaper my words sounded, even though they really were my true feelings.

When I peered up, Sylphie had a troubled look on her face. Perhaps she was confused. I couldn't blame her for that. I'd told her that I loved her, sworn I'd come back no matter what. Now I'd returned in shambles—minus a family member and my left hand. She might have thought she could at least rejoice because I was safe, but here I was, saying I wanted to take another woman as my wife. In her place, I would have wailed, screamed, and lashed out.

But still, I asked for the impossible. "Sylphie, please forgive me."

"There's no way she can!" The one who shrieked back at me was Norn, not Sylphie. She stomped right over and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. "How can you say that? Do you know how she felt the entire time she was waiting for you to come home?!"

"…"

"Every day she said, 'I hope Rudy is okay,' and 'I miss Rudy,' and 'I wonder if Rudy's eating right now.' Do you know how lonely she looked—how lonely she sounded the whole time?!"

I didn't know. I didn't know at all, but I could imagine it. The expression on her face as she waited for me. How lonely she sounded. How she might sit in a chair with nothing else to do but tap her foot as she waited.

"I figured I couldn't blame you for not being able to save Father. If things were so rough you even lost your left hand, then there was nothing anyone could do. So it seemed wrong to blame you for it. But now you're telling me you had enough composure during all of that to have sex with another woman? And now you want to make her your *wife*?!"

"No! I wasn't composed at all. I was depressed! That's why Roxy put her own feelings on the line to save me!"

"Miss Sylphie would've done the same thing for you if she'd been there!" Norn snapped back.

Of course Sylphie would've saved me had she been there. She'd cured my impotence, after all. But the one who actually saved me was Roxy. Even though she had feelings for me; even though she knew I already had someone. She'd resolved to do it, even knowing she might be tossed aside afterward.

"Norn, you should understand how it feels, locking yourself in your room, feeling like you're so deep inside a hole you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. How are you supposed to cast aside the person who saved you from that?" I argued.

"I *do* know! I'm grateful to you for helping me through that, but this is a totally separate matter! Lord Millis would never permit someone taking a second wife!"

Oh, that's right. Norn was a follower of Millis. No—her religion wasn't the issue here. Maybe it was just me. Maybe I *was* doing something wrong, and trying to strong-arm my way into being in the right.

"Besides, why that tiny girl?! She's not any different from me!" Norn glared at Roxy.

Roxy returned the younger girl's gaze with her usual poker face. She was taller than Norn, but barely so, maybe even less than

centimeters' worth. In the face of my younger sister's hostile gaze, Roxy remained unfazed as she muttered, "I may be small, but I'm still an adult."

I wondered what she was going to say. Her voice trembled, an open door into her heart, but the words were such that they could be construed as impertinent.

Norn was infuriated. "If you're such an adult, don't you feel like you're being shameless?!"

"…"

"Don't you feel bad for barging into their relationship?!"

"Norn, that's going too far. I'm the one who said I wanted to bring her into our family. Roxy's done nothing wrong. She's the one who tried to back out of it," I objected with a firm voice.

Norn didn't even glance over at me, but just continued her verbal onslaught on Roxy. "You stay quiet!" she barked at me. "Besides, if she really did try to 'back out,' then why is she still here, clinging to you? She's just taking advantage of your offer!"

I honestly thought about slapping her, but—and it went without saying—I didn't have the right to do such a thing. If I slapped her, I felt like I really would be complete scum.

"…"

Roxy fell silent as Norn shouted her down. She looked as indifferent as usual, her eyes turned to the floor. Finally, she lifted her head up and bowed it toward Norn. "You're right. It is shameless of me. I apologize."

Then she stood up straight and drifted over to the edge of the room. She picked up her luggage, placed her hat on her head, and moved quickly toward the exit.

I couldn't even stop her. I knew we'd face resistance—knew not to underestimate how difficult it would be for everyone to accept this—but I'd thought I could convince them. That had been naïve. Now here we were, and Roxy had been lambasted for her part. She

probably felt like she was walking on a bed of nails, and things might keep being that painful for her if she stayed here.

No one would choose to stay with that possibility in mind. Even I would race for the door, unable to withstand it.

I couldn't let her leave here with such a bitter taste in her mouth. That wasn't how I wanted this to end. I wanted to repay her for everything she'd done, not bring her here just so she could be dragged through the mud. I brought her here so I could make her happy.

And yet, no matter how I felt, I couldn't stop her. I couldn't hold her back. Maybe I *couldn't* make her happy?

No, think! Roxy would be out the door any second now. I at least needed to stop her! Even if it meant slapping Norn, even if it meant making my little sister hate me, I—

"Wait!" a voice called out from behind. "Miss Roxy, please wait!"

It was Sylphie. She took to her feet and hurried over, grabbing Roxy by the hand. Roxy glanced back, her eyes welling up with tears.

"Why are you stopping her?!" Norn gasped. "Just let her go!"

"Norn, could you please be quiet?"

Dumbfounded, Norn squeaked, "Huh?"

"You were being far too harsh this whole time. I never expressed any objections," said Sylphie.

Norn froze, at a loss for words.

"Please, sit," Sylphie said, turning her back on Norn in favor of guiding Roxy to a place on the sofa. Roxy perched herself atop it willingly with no signs of resistance. Then Sylphie took a place beside her. "I was a little confused at first… So it seems you're the one who saved Rudy, Miss Roxy?"

Roxy tentatively nodded. "…Yes. But I did have an ulterior motive, and I don't intend to make any excuses for that."

“Yes,” agreed Sylphie. “Well, Rudy is really handsome. I wouldn’t have believed you if you’d said you *didn’t* have any ulterior motives.”

“…”

“I think if I had been in your place, I’d have done the exact same thing.” Sylphie smiled at Roxy, a gentle expression on her face. Roxy’s was stiff in contrast. Sylphie kept smiling as she continued. “To be honest, I figured it was just a matter of time.”

“Um, what was a matter of time?” Roxy asked, confused.

“Rudy bringing home another woman.”

Just a matter of time before I brought another girl? …Hm? Wait, did this mean she actually *didn’t* trust me?

“You know Rudy’s a pervert, right? I figured he’d do it with someone else if I wasn’t around. But he’s loyal, so I figured if he *did* do it with someone else, he would want to bring her into our family, just like he did with me. I didn’t think I’d be able to have him all to myself forever.”

I wanted to protest, but she’d completely hit the bullseye. I had no right to say anything.

“Honestly, I figured if he was going to bring anyone home it would be Linia, Pursena or Miss Nanahoshi.”

Roxy commented, “I’ve not heard those names, except for Miss Nanahoshi.”

“They’re his friends at school. They’re all very sexy, with huge breasts.”

Well, Nanahoshi isn’t necessarily that sexy, I protested inwardly. *Wait, that doesn’t matter right now.*

“Truthfully, what I heard of your trip sounded brutal, and there was Paul’s death as well. I completely forgot the possibility he might’ve hooked up with someone else. That’s why I was so surprised when I heard…” Sylphie paused. “But it does make sense.”

“What does?” Roxy asked.

“Ever since you got here, you’ve been staring over at him with an anxious look on your face. I wondered what that was all about. At first, I thought it was because you were nervous about him announcing Paul’s death. But this is what it was actually all about.”

“…”

Sylphie continued, “You had the eyes of a woman in love, Miss Roxy.”

The eyes of a woman in love. When Roxy heard that, her face heated up. “I’m sorry for making you witness something so unpleasant.” She lowered her head, cheeks still red as a tomato.

From a wife’s point of view, it couldn’t be pleasant to watch another woman look lovingly at her husband. I could understand Roxy thinking that way.

But Sylphie merely shook her head. “It wasn’t unpleasant.”

“But…” Roxy began to protest.

“How should I put this…?” Sylphie tilted her head in thought, and almost as quickly nodded. “You know, Rudy always talked to me about you, Miss Roxy.”

“What did he say?”

“Things like, ‘She’s the only magician I respect.’ He talked the same way about you before the Displacement Incident as well as after.”

Roxy shifted awkwardly in her seat. “I’m not sure what to say, but I feel bad you had to hear that.”

“Well, that was why I did feel a bit jealous as well,” Sylphie confessed. “He had such admiration in his eyes every time he talked about you.”

“…”

“I thought to myself, this Roxy Migurdia person is such an incredible magician, there is no way I could ever stand shoulder to shoulder with her.”

“…”

“But now that I’ve actually seen you and know you’re just a normal girl who loves Rudy, that jealousy is gone. That means you’re just the same as me,” Sylphie said as she lifted Roxy’s hat away and caressed her face.

Roxy just stared back at the other woman and let it happen.

And as she continued stroking, Sylphie said, “Norn may have expressed her opposition, but I welcome you.”

Roxy’s face colored with surprise.

I, too, felt my jaw drop in shock. I’d never dreamed Sylphie would accept it so easily.

“Sylphiette…Miss,” Roxy said haltingly.

“Just Sylphie is fine. I hope we’ll get along. Um, Rox?”

“Um, I’m actually fifty years old as of this year, so that kind of nickname sounds a bit too childish…”

“Oh, all right.” Sylphie nodded to herself. “You’re older than me, then. Sorry about that. Now that I think about it, Rudy did mention that, but seeing you, it just didn’t register.”

“Well, I am petite,” Roxy admitted.

“I’m not all that big myself.”

The two of them looked at one another, holding hands, and laughed.

“Well, Roxy, let’s support Rudy together, then.”

“Thank you, Sylphie.”



After they shared those words, they shook hands. The gesture radiated a curious sort of solidarity, and seeing it, I let out a sigh of relief. An unconscious reaction that slipped from me the moment I thought things would be okay.

Norn glanced at me and furrowed her brows. “If Miss Sylphie is accepting of it, then I have nothing more to say.” Apparently, she wasn’t quite on board yet. She frowned slightly, clearly still displeased as she glared over at us. Perhaps I had earned her contempt once again.

It was Sylphie who pacified her by saying, “Forgive him, Norn. Rudy’s not a follower of Millis.”

“But—” Norn started to protest.

“Mister Paul had two wives as well, didn’t he?”

She went quiet for a moment before saying, “True, he did.”

Sylphie continued. “Would you say the same kind of things to Miss Lilia, then?”

Norn’s eyes widened in surprise. She turned to look at Aisha, who was sitting beside her.

Aisha had been quiet the whole time, her face the picture of composure.

“Oh… I’m sorry, Aisha,” Norn said.

“It’s fine, really. I know you often say things without thinking them through.”

“Why do you have to put it like that…?”

“Look what just happened,” Aisha pointed out. “That wasn’t your place to speak. You kept going on about Miss Sylphie and her feelings, but really, you were just forcing your beliefs on everyone else.”

“What?!” Norn hopped to her feet.

I saw the fists at her side and jumped in to scold Aisha. “Aisha, you went too far.”

“But—”

I cut her off. “I understand what Norn is saying, too. If Sylphie had said the same things herself, it would’ve been understandable. I’m equally at fault for not considering how everyone would feel. We can’t blame Norn.”

“Well, I guess. If you say so.”

“…”

Norn had a conflicted look on her face, as if unsure what to say. She must have felt uncomfortable standing there, because her next words were “I’m going to bed.”

Her feet were quick as she moved to duck out of the living room. But then she stopped, as if she’d just remembered something, and looked back at me.

“Um, Big Brother…?”

“What is it?”

Was she going to say make one last scathing remark? That was my fear, but what came out of Norn’s mouth next defied my expectations.

“Would you teach me swordsmanship? When you have the time.”

“Huh…?”

It was so sudden that, for a moment, the words made no sense to me.

Swordsmanship—was she going to try using Paul’s sword? Part of me felt like a half-baked attempt at self-defense would only be self-destructive at best, but this world wasn’t like my previous one. It might probably do her some good to learn swordsmanship. Even a little power was better than none. The bigger issue was whether I would be any good as a teacher.

“Are you sure you want me to teach you?” I asked.

“I can’t approve of what you’ve done, but I don’t hate you, either.”

“…Okay.”

I’d actually been asking if she was sure she wanted me to teach her when I’d only dabbled in the art myself, but I couldn’t turn her down now that she’d indirectly admitted she still liked me.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll make time to teach you after school or something.”

“Please do.” Once she said that, Norn was off to her bedroom on the second floor.

In the end, I’d been absolutely helpless. Sylphie had rescued me with her generosity.

“Big Brother,” Aisha called to me. “You look *really* pathetic right now, you know?”

Unable to say anything in my defense, I just nodded.

After that, the three of us (Sylphie, Roxy, and I) began talking about how things would work from now on, such as the order in which we’d spend our nights together, and how we’d negotiate quality time. The discussion was frank enough that Aisha took her leave.

“Well then, Miss Roxy, I look forward to living together,” said Aisha.

“Yes, me too.”

Aisha grumbled under her breath as she went, but she was smiling even as she did so.

What was up with her? Well, whatever. Sylphie, Roxy and I had the future to discuss. Some people might be aghast we could discuss such things when Paul had just died, but that was precisely *why* I wanted a more cheerful topic of conversation.

“Please make Sylphie your main priority, Rudy. Just a little bit of your attention when you have the free time is enough for me,” said Roxy.

“Nonsense. We must be fair,” Sylphie insisted.

“But—”

“He may yet take on more wives, so let’s not be bashful.”

More? I could tell how little faith she had in my lower half from that word alone.

“Honestly, right now I just feel overwhelmed with guilt about this whole thing. I’ll just stay on the sidelines until your baby is born,” said Roxy.

“So that’s how you feel.” Sylphie nodded thoughtfully. “Well, there is only a little more than a month until the delivery. You don’t mind if I take all that time for myself?”

“I don’t. Then let’s wait until next month for me to officially become your wife, Rudy.”

“…”

I was probably an awful person for finding it a disappointment that I’d have to live the celibate life for the next month. But when I started to think about how I’d be able to have sex with both of them as much as I wanted after Sylphie gave birth… My buddy downstairs began to rise up in salute.

“…”

“…”

As those fantasies solidified in my head, both women turned their gazes toward me.

“Um, Rudy?” Sylphie called over to me. “If you absolutely can’t wait, let me know, okay? We’ll do something about it.”

“Oh, no, I’ll take care of it myself.”

No matter how much of a horn dog I was, I wasn’t going to cheat any more than I already had. I wanted her to trust that I, Rudeus Greyrat, would not falter again. The only reason I had wavered was because of the unique situation I’d been in, and because my partner was Roxy. As long as I never wound up in a depressive spiral and had a woman of Roxy’s caliber appear before me, I’d never cheat again. *Ever.*

“Oh, but you said Roxy is pregnant as well? In that case, if we wait a month, you won’t be able to have sex with her, either. What’ll we do then?” Sylphie wondered anxiously.

Roxy, looking ashamed, said, “Um, about what Rudy said regarding that…I think he was lying. I didn’t get the opportunity to say as much, but I’m not actually pregnant.”

“Huh?” I blurted out.

She wasn’t? Then what the heck was Elinalise talking about before?

“…Oh.”

She’d baited me right into a trap. That jerk. Dammit. And I’d danced right into the palm of her hand.

“What is it, Rudy?” Roxy asked.

“Nothing, but let me just clear the air and say I wasn’t lying. It was just a misunderstanding on my part.”

“Oh, all right then.” Roxy scratched at her cheeks, face red. “But I look forward to it, someday.”

“Oh, yeah. Me too,” I said. The words “Happy Family Planning” came to mind, putting a smile on my face. Ahh, I truly was looking forward to what was to come.

“Rudy’s a perv, isn’t he?” teased Sylphie.

“Yes, I certainly am,” I agreed.

“I wonder what our pervy Rudy is going to do to me?” Roxy wondered aloud.

We continued to talk and laugh together.

And that was how I came to have a second wife.

We prepared a room for Lilia and my mother after they finished their bath, then we retired for the night. Just as we’d previously discussed, I was spending the night with Sylphie. I made a pillow for

her with my arm and we nestled close, her body facing mine. But we had yet to fall asleep. We were both gazing at one another quietly.

“About our conversation before,” she began, being the first to speak. “I had something absolute tragic pictured in my mind when you said you had something to talk about and you had Roxy standing beside you.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I thought you might tell me that you couldn’t love me anymore and you wanted me to leave.”

“I would never say that!”

What kind of sleazebag would say something like that?!

“Yeah, I know.” Sylphie rustled around. I could feel something press against the stump where my left hand had once been. Sylphie’s fingers—she was stroking it. “But I was still anxious. I don’t know why. I just got the feeling you weren’t going to come back to me.”

A sense of foreboding? Well, this *had* been quite the close call. It wouldn’t have been surprising if I had died.

I glanced at Sylphie. “Did I worry you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s okay now.” I stroked her head with my right hand. Her eyes crinkled as she leaned into my touch. Her hair was a beautiful, pale color. It had grown while I was gone. “Your hair is getting longer.”

“Because you said you like long hair.”

“You’re doing it for me?”

“Yeah.”

She’d waited for me this entire time, and I’d been stupid enough to…

“I’m sorry, Sylphie, for breaking my promise to you.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. I love you the way you are.”

“But if you’d done the same to me, I would have screamed and cried like a baby and lashed out at you for betraying me. I know I would.”

She giggled. “Hee hee, but I wouldn’t do that to you. I don’t have eyes for anyone but you, Rudy.” Sylphie pressed her face close, pecking me on the cheek.

A wave of affection came bubbling up from within my chest. I would love Sylphie for the rest of my life. She must’ve been worried, must’ve wanted to wail at me, and still, she accepted everything without a single complaint.

“Sylphie,” I whispered.

“Hee hee.”

As repayment for her kiss, I gave her one of my own, planting my lips against her soft, squishy cheek.

“…”

Normally this was the prelude for our lovemaking, but we’d stop here for today. I couldn’t push her body, not when it was heavy with child.

But just then, I felt something wriggle against my lower abdomen.

“Come on, Sylphie, we can’t do that. If you start touching me down there, I’m not going to be able to hold off. I mean, I *am* interested in pregnancy sex, but…”

“No, we can’t, Rudy,” she said at the same time. “It wouldn’t be good for the baby.”

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Suddenly we both looked down. There, just beside Sylphie’s swollen belly, was a dense, mountainous lump. We folded the blanket back to discover…

“Dillo?!”

The enormous armadillo had slipped its head in from the base of the bed, just between Sylphie and myself. When had this thing gotten in here? I hadn't even noticed it enter.

"Pervy little thing, sticking its head in people's crotches," I laughed.

"Just like you, Rudy."

"No, I—" I started to protest, then thought better of it. "Ah well, I guess you can sleep with us for tonight."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

I slipped out of bed, produced a second blanket, and created a spot on the floor beside our bed for Dillo to sleep in. It sprawled out across it and closed its eyes.

The creature had the appearance of an armadillo, but it was basically like a large dog. We'd have to build it a kennel down the road. Keeping it inside was all well and good, but it'd be a pain if it started crapping in here. Wait—I guess we could always just train it to be housebroken, like a dog? Well, that was a conversation we could have later as a family.

"Shall we go to sleep?" I started to slip back into bed on Sylphie's right, but stopped and returned to her left instead, so I could hold her hand with my right one. She gave it a powerful squeeze. "Good night, Sylphie."

"Yeah. Glad you're home, Rudy."

And then I was out like a light.

Chapter 16:
Before His Grave

A FEW DAYS had passed since I took Roxy as my wife. Lately, my fear that another disaster was about to strike had gradually begun to fade. The future seemed brighter than that, though I had still had a lot of concerns about Zenith.

She had claimed one of the other large bedrooms in the house for herself. I'd advised Lilia against it, given that the previous resident of this house had been killed in there, but Zenith had taken a liking to it and refused to leave. Seeing that, Lilia brushed off my concerns, saying, "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about." It was true that if she was going to look after Zenith, a spacious room would be preferable to a cramped one.

I also took Zenith to a doctor; one of the Ranoa Kingdom's most prominent practitioners, referred to us by Ariel. Unfortunately, the man threw his hands up, saying he had no idea what kind of medical issue she had, and therefore no idea how to treat it. With the current medical technology in this world, there really was nothing they could do to restore her memories. Perhaps it was because of healing magic that the medical treatment in this world was so unbalanced.

Regardless, we took steps to draw up a rehabilitation plan formulated specifically for someone with amnesia. I didn't know if it would help, but it was better than doing nothing. If I had the opportunity, it might be a good idea to search for a magical implement that could help with recovering memories. Granted, I had no idea if such a thing even existed.

It was probably best to consider her treatment a long-term endeavor. I had no idea what her family back in the Holy Country of Millis would say about this, either. Everything remained uncertain.

Sylphie's progress was right on schedule. When I tried to grope at her swollen breasts, she got pretty angry with me. Apparently, it hurt if I grabbed too hard. The way she implored me to be gentle made me want to jump her bones. I'd bought into her temptations many times before and had my way with her, but she was pregnant this time, so I couldn't let my desires go unfiltered. I couldn't help wanting to touch her just the same, but I was cautious —gentle—as I caressed her.

Pregnancy brought changes to the body; her breasts were no longer the ones I was accustomed to fondling. And when I considered how I had been the one to bring about this change to her body, I felt indescribable joy. This was probably what people meant when they talked about a "sense of domination."

Ahh, Sylphie's all mine.

But, as you might have guessed, having no left hand sucked. I thought longingly of the days I could grope her chest with both hands. Now that I was missing one, my satisfaction was halved.

Soon her breasts would begin to produce milk. I suspected she'd be cross with me if I asked to taste test. Maybe she'd even scorn me. But it might be worth asking, even if the odds were against me. It was probably in my best interest to keep the question to myself, but *just once* couldn't hurt, right?

"You sure do love my breasts," Sylphie said.

"Yeah, I do. They're tiny, but they're the best in the world."

"Best in the world…" she muttered. "Can you really say that after you've groped Roxy's?"

"Forgive me for my sins," I said dramatically.

"Hee hee, I'm not angry!"

We engaged in playful banter, our relationship as strong as ever. If this had been my previous world (more specifically, Japan), our relationship would've probably been quite strained. But in this world, Sylphie was understanding. As long as I loved them equally, I could have two or three wives.

As for my other wife, Roxy had taken up one of the smaller rooms on the second floor. The smallest, to be exact. I suggested she pick a more spacious one, but she apparently liked cramped spaces, which I understood. I didn't mind them, either.

Roxy became a professor at the university. At the same time, I went around introducing her to everyone and announcing my return, but we'll save that story for another time.

***

Another month passed, and finally, on a day with heavy snow, Sylphie gave birth. It was a normal delivery with no real complications. Neither breech nor premature. The only issue was that the blizzard outside was so strong that the doctor we called couldn't make it in time. In my previous world, that would've been a cause for panic, but fortunately, we had Lilia.

As someone experienced in delivering babies, she was able to move swiftly, with Aisha as her assistant, never asking me for a thing. She performed each step carefully, walking Aisha through the process. Roxy and I were on the sidelines in case anything happened. If an emergency arose, healing magic would be our ace in the hole.

Although, notedly, my nerves were completely shot. Healing wasn't even in my head at that point. It was all I could do to grip Sylphie's hand in mine as her face contorted in pain.

"Seeing you like this brings back memories of when the mistress gave birth to Norn," said Lilia.

That gave me flashbacks, too. Norn had been a breech baby, with both mother and baby in danger during delivery. Paul had been useless, completely choked up. I'd managed to keep my cool and assist the delivery back then, but look at me now. I'd been much more capable in the past than I was now—not much different than how I'd been in my previous world.

“Don’t worry, Mistress Sylphie will be just fine. There’s no need to stress,” Lilia said as she worked briskly, handling everything with such practiced expertise that I was floored.

But no matter how she tried to soothe my nerves, my mind wouldn’t settle. The only thing I could do was cling to Sylphie’s hand and say, “Breathe in…and out. In…and out,” wiping the sweat from her brow as I did so.

The anguish on her face was clear, even as she giggled in the face of my panic. “Um… Rudy, you can relax a little, you know?”

Aisha snorted with a laugh of her own, which earned her a swift smack from Lilia.

Sylphie watched the two of them and giggled again.

“Ngh?!”

Just as the room seemed to relax, the first wave came.

“Mistress Sylphie, we’re ready now. Push!”

“Nnnngh…”

I watched quietly as she struggled. The only thing I could say was, “You can do this.” I felt like there was something I *should* be doing, too, but there wasn’t anything I *could* do.

Sylphie matched Lilia’s calls to push, her face clenching each time, until…

The baby was born.

She let forth a fierce cry as she was delivered safely into our world. A little girl—an adorable one with the same hair color as me. Lilia lifted her up and handed her to Sylphie, who held the newborn tight and sighed with relief.

“I’m so glad… Her hair’s not green,” she whispered.

I mussed Sylphie’s hair—hair that had once been green but was now a beautiful white.

“Yeah.”

Even if our baby had been born with green hair, I wouldn't have blamed Sylphie for it. How could I? Green was my favorite color in this world; the color of both Sylphie's hair and Ruijerd's. Even Roxy's, in the right lighting, would shine emerald. I loved green. If someone wanted to discriminate against green hair, they'd have to go through me. I'd face them, even if it meant making an enemy of the whole world.

"You did wonderful, Sylphie."

"Thanks."

While I had the resolve to love green hair, the rest of the world did not, considering it an ill omen. I thanked God for our good fortune that my daughter had the same hair color as me. Speaking of God, she was actually in the neighboring room with a staff gripped firmly in her hands, looking pale as a sheet.

"Here, Rudy. Hold her," said Sylphie.

"Okay."

I took her in my arms. Her body was warm, her voice fierce as she cried. Her head was tiny, along with her mouth and nose—her entire body overflowing with life. My heart flooded with emotion when I thought about how this little girl was mine, my baby that Sylphie had given birth to.

"…"

Tears sprung up.

Paul was gone, but now we had a baby. He'd saved my life. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be here holding my child. But in exchange, Paul would never again hold his own wife, his own daughters, or his grandchild.

Would he be bitter that he couldn't be here? Or would he laugh and boast, "This was all thanks to me"?

Either way, I had to keep living. For my child's sake, I couldn't die. I had to protect Sylphie—my family.

Sylphie and I took the first two letters of our names and altered them slightly to come up with her name: Lucy. Lucy Greyrat. Aisha laughed, calling it a cheap name, and Lilia smacked her over the head again. I was just glad she was a girl. If we'd had a boy instead, I might have named him Paul.

***

Lilia chased me out of the room after that. There was much to be done, apparently, so she told me to wait outside. I moved to the living room and planted myself on the sofa. I hadn't really moved at all, yet I was exhausted.

Roxy settled down beside me, looking weary herself, and sighed. She'd done even less than me, so hers had to be mental fatigue. "That was my first time watching a person give birth," she said. "It was amazing."

"I've…seen it a couple times now. About three, I guess. But it wears you out even more when it's your own."

Sylphie was probably even more drained. I would have to really show her my appreciation later.

"I guess that must be how I was born, too," Roxy said thoughtfully.

"Well, it's how everyone's born, isn't it?" I didn't know much about how the Migurd reproduced, but considering they looked just like humans, there couldn't be too much of a difference, right?

"…I'll be giving birth like that too eventually, won't I?"

When I glanced her way, I found Roxy peering up at me, her face burning red. I slipped off my shoes and folded my legs under me on the couch, sitting as stiffly as I could. "Yes, I hope I can ask you to do that for me."

Now that Sylphie's baby had been born, it meant that Roxy and I would be starting the baby-making process next. Honestly, I was looking forward to it, even though Sylphie's baby had only just been

delivered. I really was hopeless. Not that I hated myself for it—I couldn't, not when I considered that Paul had probably felt the same way in the past.

I can't wait, I thought with a laugh, and Roxy flushed a bright shade, wrapping her arms around her body.

"Rudy, you've got a seriously dirty look on your face."

"I was born with it."

That's right—I *was* born with it. It was something I'd had ever since I came into this world, or perhaps even before that.

"…"

Oh, that's right. Before I began that routine with Roxy, I needed to announce the birth of my baby.

The following day, I made my way alone to the outskirts of the city, where a graveyard for nobles was nestled on a low hill. This was where we'd put Paul to rest. He might fuss over being lumped in alongside other nobles, but this place had better management than the one for the general public.

I stood amidst the snow, before the Ranoa-style round grave marker. I had no idea what religion Paul had followed. I didn't think he'd believed in God. He seemed the type not to worry about religion, so even if we'd made a mistake in that regard, I was sure he'd forgive us. Perhaps it would have been more ideal to make a grave for him in the Asura Kingdom where Buena Village had once been. Paul had no connections or relations to the land here. But if we buried him too far away, we wouldn't be able to visit him.

I'd already informed Geese and the others of this location. We'd even visited once as a group. Each person had brought something along that they thought Paul would like. Alcohol, a shortsword—that kind of thing. Geese and Talhand had sat before his grave and drank themselves silly, earning the ire of the grave keeper.

I set about cleaning Paul's grave, a bottle of liquor that I'd purchased on the way crooked under my arm. I dusted off the snow that collected on his grave marker, shining the stone with a cloth I'd brought along. The road leading to the cemetery had been covered in snow, but the grave keeper kept the pathways here plowed, so it wasn't difficult to tidy up Paul's area.

I cleaned, then set the bottle in front of his grave and placed my hands together. I'd thought about buying flowers as well, but there weren't any for sale. During the winter in the Northern Territories, flowers were difficult to come by. Not that Paul was one for flowers, anyway.

"Paul… Father, my baby was born yesterday. A little girl. She's Sylphie's, so I'm sure she'll grow up to be beautiful." I sat down in front of his grave and gave him the news. "I wish you could've seen her."

If Paul had seen her, I was sure he'd have fussed and cooed until Zenith scolded him. He'd have probably taken me out drinking to celebrate, and we'd have both drunk ourselves into a stupor. Then he'd have made a move on Lilia, exasperating Zenith.

It was so in-character, I could picture it clearly—the future that would have been if Paul were still alive and my mother hadn't lost her memories.

"I've made Roxy my wife. I have two now, just like you did. I wish you'd have taught me how to mentally prepare myself for it, though."

Now that I thought about it, that was probably what Paul had been trying to talk to me about back then in the labyrinth. He knew that Roxy had feelings for me and that I had feelings for her in turn. Most likely, he'd wanted to teach me how to prepare for that.

"It's not quite the same, I don't suddenly have two daughters, but eventually Roxy will get pregnant and have my child as well. I'm sure that's still far in the future, but I hope they'll grow to be as healthy as Norn and Aisha."

I had no intention of knocking Lilia's teachings, but I wanted my children to grow up as equals—to be strong enough to withstand it when people called them half-demons.

"Apparently Sylphie thinks I'm going to take another wife after this. I don't plan anything of the sort, but they do say that what happens once can happen a third time. Maybe she's right."

I wondered if Paul had ever considered marrying Ghislaine, Elinalise, or Vierra. It seemed he did have a sexual relationship with Ghislaine, so I suspected he'd considered it at least once. Then again, Paul was a bit more open-minded than me, so perhaps he didn't think as far as marriage.

"Maybe I shouldn't overthink it either, huh?" When I directed my question at his gravestone, it felt as if I could see him grinning mischievously back at me. All I could see was his smile; I couldn't hear any words.

But it wasn't as if Paul had never thought things through. I was pretty sure he'd racked his brain for years about things. It only made sense. There were few people in the world who lived without thinking at all.

"Father, I was a terrible son—carrying memories from my previous life. I didn't love you like I should've, as my father," I said as I took to my feet. I took the bottle of alcohol in hand and gulped once. It was a strong liquor, burning like fire on the way down, and once I was done, I splashed some of it over his grave. "But now I do see myself as your son."

Maybe alcohol wasn't the best for someone like Paul, who'd screwed up by drowning himself in the stuff. But surely, today could be an exception. We were celebrating a new life in the world.

"I finally understand now. I'm still just a kid. A brat who pretended to be an adult by using his previous memories."

I took another swig, then poured some for Paul. Another swig, then a pour. Soon the bottle was completely empty.

"Now that I have a child in the world and I'm a parent, I know I have to grow up right away. And in order to do that, I'll have to make

a bunch of mistakes, grieve over them, and change—slowly, gradually. I'm sure that's how you had to do it too, so I'll do the best I can."

I popped the lid back over the bottle and set it in front of his grave.

"I'll come back again. Next time, I'll bring everyone else along, too," I said, turning to leave.

Many things had fallen into place, with a great deal of pain and a great deal of joy along the way. I'd repeated horrible mistakes along the way, but it wasn't over. No matter how much I screwed up or got things wrong, it wasn't the end. I still had a lot of life to live in this world. And that's what I was going to do: live to the fullest, so that no matter when I died, I'd have no regrets.



About the Author:
Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

"Life is a series of decisions, but no one knows which decisions are the right ones," stated the author.



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