
NOVEL
15
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Mushoku
Tensei
jobless reincarnation

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Mushoku Tensei
jobless reincarnation
15
WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na Magonote
ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka


Orsted
Eris
Ghislaine
Zanoba
Cliff
Rudeus
Sylphiette
DRAMATIS PERSONAE


“Sorry
I’m late,
Rudeus!”

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

15

WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

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"We all suffer our defeats, but life goes on."

—There's no shame in losing.
Or groveling, for that matter.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
The Diary (Part 1)

IT WAS THE MORNING AFTER my encounter with the man who claimed to be my future self, and I hadn't slept a wink. My mind wasn't working too well at this point, of course—but I needed to decide what to do.

My future self had given me a few pieces of advice: "Consult Nanahoshi," "Write Eris a letter," and "Doubt the Man-God without opposing him."

I'd written the letter to Eris last night. But I wasn't going to send it until I'd talked things over with Sylphie and Roxy. Depending on how that conversation went, I might need to revise it significantly.

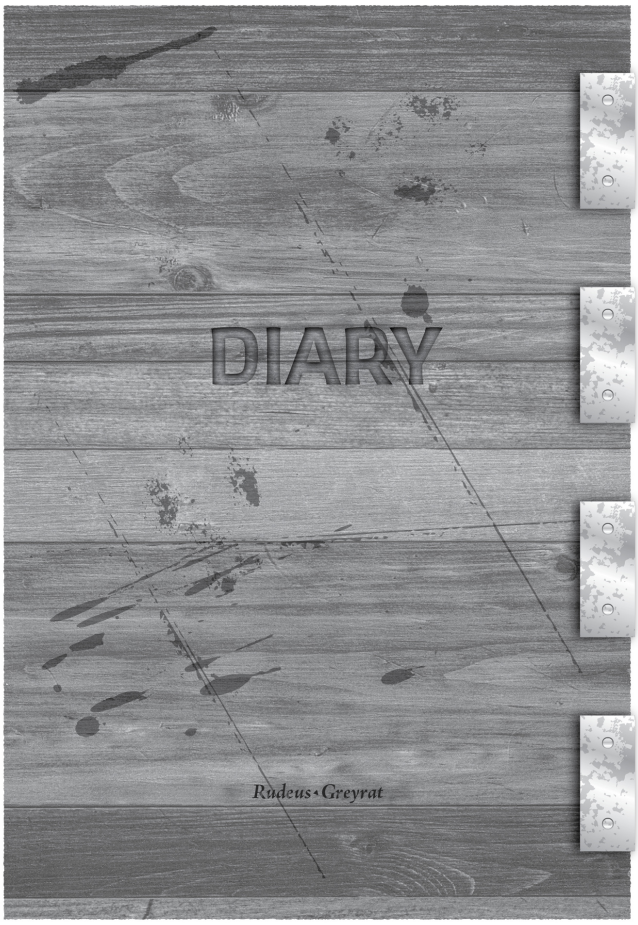
The thing about the Man-God sounded fine to me. The next time he popped into my dreams, I'd let him know exactly where things stood between us.

As for talking to Nanahoshi… I was tempted to go see her right away, but how was I supposed to explain the situation? The whole thing was insane. Then again, Nanahoshi had been summoned here from a parallel world. My story might sound nuts, but she probably wouldn't just laugh it off.

First things first, though. I needed to review the diary—the one my future self had brought back with him. I had no idea what that book contained, and honestly, I was scared to find out. But I couldn't just shove it in a drawer and forget about it. It was the only record of what that desperate old man had seen and done.

The diary was weathered and worn. Its cover was scarred, and the first pages were yellowed with age. Still, the words were at least comprehensible.

Bracing myself, I began to read.


DIARY
Rudeus · Greyrat

I've decided to start keeping a diary.

It's been an eventful couple of weeks, you know?

I met Perugius and got a few hints about Zenith's condition. And I'll be learning more about Summoning magic and Teleportation soon. There's a lot I need to deal with, so I figure I'll try writing stuff down to help keep track of it all.

Aisha was pretty down this morning. She found some "weird mouse" dead, I guess. Maybe she's not a fan of rodents.

Apparently, someone found a cat with Petrification Syndrome in the neighborhood. Scary stuff. I'll have to remind my family to wash their hands and rinse their mouths carefully.

We just found out Elinalise is pregnant! Cliff looked incredibly nervous, but Elinalise had a big smile on her face. We threw them a celebration, of course. You've got to appreciate the good times while they're here.

In the beginning, at least, it read like a relatively mundane journal. One entry described studying Summoning magic with Perugius. Another mentioned wandering around the floating fortress with Zanoba, looking at all the works of art. There were also plenty of side notes like "I found a new way to make Roxy squeal last night!" or "Lucie looks like an angel when she's asleep. I bet she'll be a beauty when she grows up." It was the diary of someone who was clearly enjoying his life.

The first few entries were dated, but he'd quickly stopped bothering. That made it impossible to tell exactly how much time had passed. Judging from the old man's story, though, I was probably about two weeks into the future at this point.

And that was where things took a sharp turn for the worse.

Roxy collapsed today.

She hadn't been feeling well for a while, but now she's developed a fever. I'll have to tell the University she won't be coming into work for a while. I've tried everything up to and including Advanced Detoxification magic, but it had no effect whatsoever. I'm worried it might be something serious. I'll ask Cliff to take a look at her as soon as possible.

The tips of Roxy's toes are turning into some kind of purple crystal. I called Cliff over right away to take a look with his Eye of Identification. Apparently, she's got something called Petrification Syndrome. It's a horrible disease that can only be cured with a God-tier Detoxification spell.

We're going to use the teleportation circles to visit Millis and get the incantation for the spell we need. Cliff and Zanoba are coming along with me. Sylphie wanted to go as well, but I asked her to hold down the fort here.

Well, we've made it to Millishion. Apparently, the church keeps the God-tier incantations stored deep inside the cathedral here. Cliff knows where they are, but the place is off-limits to everyone under the rank of archbishop. We're planning to break in during the night. Once we get the incantation copied down, we can just sneak back out again.

We managed the break-in part just fine. But we didn't count on the incantation being a book as thick as a dictionary. It was impossible to copy the entire thing on the spot. We had to steal it. And then they spotted us on our way out. We're on the run right now.

We walked into an ambush at the teleportation circle. The circle itself was damaged as we fought. It's no longer usable. Cliff was poisoned during the fight. He's unconscious, and it looks serious.

…I killed a human being for the first time. I can still hear the crunch. Makes me sick to my stomach.

Damn it. Damn it!

We're making our way to another teleportation circle.

Cliff's still unconscious, and it seems like they've circulated our names and descriptions all around the country. We're wanted criminals now.

I've made an enemy of the Millis Church for life.

Cliff died today.

I don't want to write anything for a while.

We managed to make it to another teleportation circle somehow. This nightmare's almost over.

We were too late.

I can't write anything today.

I think I need to write down what happened yesterday.

We ran into Eris and Ghislaine at the entrance to the city. Eris started yapping at me, but I told her I had two wives, and a family, and no time to babysit her anymore. She wandered off, looking stunned.

Ghislaine shot me a look of contempt before she left. Really pissed me off.

When I made it back to the house, I found everyone looking miserable. Roxy was dead. Half her body had turned to crystal by the end. The whole trip to Millis ended up being pointless.

I told Elinalise about Cliff's death. She slapped me in the face and ran off crying.

I can't stand this. It's too much.

We held a funeral for Roxy.

I can barely get myself out of bed right now. All I do is cry.

I don't give a shit about anything.

Seems like Elinalise left town without telling anybody. Not sure a pregnant woman should be wandering around on her own, but that's her business, I guess.

Sylphie keeps trying to cheer me up. It's not working.

Roxy's never coming back.

She was so sweet. So earnest. She was the one who brought me out of that house. She was the one who comforted me when Paul died. She was my compass for all these years.

And now she's gone.

I've been doing nothing but getting drunk lately. When I'm sober, I remember Roxy. And then I start sobbing.

Sylphie keeps saying I can't go on like this, but what does she know? I've lost the woman who taught me everything.

Lilia started nagging me when I drink in the house, so I'm getting drunk in taverns instead.

Sometimes Eris shows up to harass me when I'm drinking. She usually yells a bunch of insults, then takes a swing at me. What is that woman's problem? And why doesn't Ghislaine stop her?

Norn isn't speaking to me these days, either. She just looks at me like I'm a piece of trash.

Nobody understands how I feel.

Lately, Sylphie's been coming on to me aggressively. Keeps asking me to sleep with her and try to forget about Roxy. She was so persistent I ended up yelling at her.

Why would she say something so thoughtless? Why would she think it would work?

It's not just that, I guess. If I slept with Sylphie right now, I'd probably be really rough with her. I'd treat her as a stand-in for Roxy. And I'd take out all my pain and anger on her. That can't be the right thing to do.

I screwed up.

Some prostitute started flirting with me in the tavern. I was drunk as hell and ended up taking her to a room upstairs. She was great in bed, of course. A real pro. But I guess all the women I've slept with so far now didn't have that much experience, really…

Okay, that's not the important part.

When I staggered into the house smelling like another woman, Sylphie burst into tears. She asked me "Am I not good enough for you?" and then locked herself in her room before I could say anything.

Lilia gave me a real talking-to, and even Aisha scowled at me. I can still hear Sylphie sobbing in her room. She won't answer when I knock.

I had it all wrong. She was willing to endure anything. She wanted me to throw my pain at her.

Tomorrow, I'm going to apologize.

Sylphie still won't speak to me. What am I supposed to do?

God, if only Elinalise was here…

Sylphie's disappeared.

When I woke up this morning, I found her room empty. Well, almost empty—she left behind the clothes and other gifts I bought her over the years.

Lilia ordered me to track her down right away. But I don't know if I even have the right. Sylphie has every reason in the world to divorce me.

As I was sitting around trying to decide what to do, Zenith walked up and slapped me in the face. She didn't say anything, just slapped me over and over again. I guess she was telling me to get my act together.

I decided to chase Sylphie down.

From what I found out by asking around town, it sounds like she left for the Kingdom of Asura with Ariel and her allies. There are still a few months until Ariel's graduation. Why rush back now? I didn't get a satisfactory answer, but I'm guessing something happened in Asura. I'll have to move quickly myself.

I ran into Eris again.

Crazy girl started blathering about how she was going to give me "one last chance" or something. And when I inevitably brushed her off, she started punching me. I was getting pretty sick of her crap, so I knocked her away with magic. Then she drew her sword and came after me, so I ran for it.

What is her problem, anyway? She dumped me years ago!

Walked into a blizzard. Have to wait for it to die down.

Did Sylphie already make it past this area? I'm feeling more anxious by the day.

Today I made it to the Kingdom of Asura, but they stopped me at the border. Since I'm an enemy of the Millis Church, I'm apparently considered a wanted criminal in Asura as well. I had to make a run for it before they arrested me. I'll need to find some way to sneak across the border.

Managed to make a deal with a local thieves' guild. It's a good thing organized crime is so pervasive around here.

Apparently, I'm something of a celebrity to the robbers of the world. I saw envy in the way they looked at me. Word got around about my theft of that incantation from the Holy Country, I guess.

I explained the situation, and they agreed to have a bandit named Triss accompany me across the border. She's a pretty voluptuous woman. I'm worried Sylphie might get the wrong idea if she sees us together.

I made it inside the Kingdom of Asura.

The guild had me disguise myself with a mask and hood. As of today, my name is Ludo Ronouma. Conveniently enough, I'm suffering from a curse that will petrify me if anyone sees my face. This 'Ronouma' character is supposed to be a magician from Basherant who's come to Asura for work, travelling with his cousin Triss as a guide.

The guild really put some thought into all of this. I've got to hand it to them.

From what we're hearing in the taverns, the king of Asura's on his deathbed. Rumor also has it that the royal princes are fighting it out for the right to succeed him. That would explain why Ariel rushed back here ahead of schedule.

We'll reach the capital soon.

Unfortunately, the only news we're hearing about Ariel seems pretty dubious. People seem to think she's gathering her forces to launch some kind of coup d'état. Nobody thinks she has any chance of pulling it off, though.

Ariel's not stupid enough to start a fight she can't win. It's just a rumor.

We made it to Ars today. Triss spotted Eris in a tavern while gathering information. Did the girl follow me all this way?

No, that can't be it. Asura was her homeland, right? We probably just ended up in the same city by coincidence.

Ariel's gone underground, from the sound of things. And of course, Luke and Sylphie went with her. I'm not sure where to start looking for them.

We can't find them.

Triss seems to think they already left the capital, but who knows where they headed?

The only thing that comes to mind is…well, maybe Ariel's joining forces with Luke's family or something. Tomorrow morning, I'll suggest we head for the region ruled by the Notos Greyrats.

We've made our way to the Milbotts Region, where Pilemon Notos Greyrat rules. On our way here, we heard a rumor that Ariel's hiding out under the Notos family's protection at the moment.

Now I have to figure out how I get to Sylphie. I feel like it might involve more breaking and entering.

For some reason, Eris was waiting for me when I tried to break into the Notos estate. She beat me up pretty good.

After they locked me in the basement, that Pilemon guy showed up and verbally abused me for a while. The man's face looks a lot like Paul's, but that's where the resemblance ends.

He seemed to be under the impression that I'd come to seize control of the Notos family. After announcing that he'd execute me tomorrow and send my head to the Millis Church, he stalked out of the room.

I managed to escape easily enough… but Ariel was nowhere to be found.

They've launched a coup in the capital. That rumor about Ariel fleeing to Milbotts was a load of crap. They were lurking somewhere in Ars, waiting for their moment to strike.

I don't know if I'll make it back in time.

We're about a day from the capital now. People are saying that the coup ended in failure.

Ariel had recklessly attempted to simultaneously murder the first and second princes. But they were protected by two powerful swordmasters, the Water God and a North Emperor, who'd been brought to the capital as royal guests. The assassination ended in failure. Ariel's forces were wiped out, and she herself had been captured. They're saying she's going to be executed soon.

Her forces were "wiped out," though?

Wiped out…completely?

What about Sylphie…?

…I can't take this anymore.

Why is this happening? Where did everything go so wrong?

I'm going to write about what happened a few days ago.

The bodies of Ariel's "co-conspirators" were on display in the royal palace's execution grounds. Luke was among them. And so was Sylphie.

One of her arms had been cut off, and there was a huge laceration across her face. A small crowd of people were throwing stones at the corpses. They were throwing stones at Sylphie, and calling her a traitor to the kingdom. Whenever they hit the bodies, the crows that were pecking at their flesh flapped noisily into the air.

I couldn't control myself. I burned their bodies with magic. And then I burned everyone who tried to stop me, too.

The hell with this country. They all deserve to burn.

I rose to my feet quickly. My heart pounded in my chest, and my head was spinning. Reading that had been incredibly painful. I didn't want to continue.

Did I really *have* to read this thing? Was there really no other choice?

"Hurp…"

A wave of nausea washed over me.

This was just some sick story that old man had made up, right? That had to be it. I didn't want to believe a future like this was possible. It was too horrible to even consider…

"…"

No. I needed to read the whole thing. There was information in this book—valuable, crucial information.

When I looked down at it again, however, I couldn't bring myself to turn the page. The thought of continuing made me sick. What new horrors would be waiting for me in the next entry? I was literally queasy with dread.

"Okay, I… I need a break…"

Leaving the room on unsteady legs, I headed for the bathroom. And then I vomited into the toilet.

Tears ran down my face. In some sense, *I'd* written that diary—and I could feel, with awful clarity, exactly what I'd felt as my world collapsed around me. I could feel my grief when Roxy died. I could feel my panic and hopelessness when Sylphie left me. And I could feel my devastating pain when I found Sylphie's corpse.

"Bleeegh…"

I shoved my face into the toilet bowl and puked until there was nothing left to puke.

My stomach was completely empty now, but I had no appetite. I probably wasn't going to manage to eat anything today.

After rinsing out my mouth with water, I left the bathroom. Sylphie was standing in the hall waiting for me with a worried look on her face. "R-Rudy? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She was wearing her casual, everyday clothes. Her silver hair was loose around her shoulders. I found myself picturing her dead—her face scarred, her arm missing. Cold and lifeless. Hung out for the crows.

"Whoa! What is it?"

Without a word, I'd thrown my arms around her. Her body was as soft and warm as ever.

"Are you still thinking about that battle with Atofe?"

"…Yeah."

"Really? Aw… There, there," Sylphie murmured, stretching to pat me gently on the back. "You know, Rudy, I'm always available if

you need a little comforting. I know you're not half as strong as you look."

I'm always available if you need a little comforting. My future self had ignored those words, and it had cost him dearly.

"Yeah… Sorry, Sylphie…"

"Oh, it's okay."

"You know, when I'm…really hurting, I might mess things up… I might say stupid, mean things, instead of crying on your shoulder…"

"Huh? What's this, all of a sudden?"

"But please, don't just disappear on me…"

"Uhm… well, if that does happen, I think I'd get upset. I might say some harsh things too, so maybe we'd have a fight… but we can always make up, right?"

"Yeah. Of course. Of course we can…"

Sylphie's so nice. How could I have ever betrayed a sweet little thing like her?

"Uhm, Rudy? Are you groping my backside?"

"…You want me to stop?"

"I mean, I guess it's no big deal, but… Wah!"

Now that I'd received her permission, I picked Sylphie up in my arms and headed for the bedroom. I wasn't planning to do anything too sexual. I just needed some private cuddling at the moment, honestly. It kind of felt like I'd…just gotten back something I'd lost forever, you know? Although I hadn't really lost her yet, so…yeah. It wasn't easy to explain, even to myself.

Reading that diary had put me in a sad and sentimental mood, I guess. Couldn't hurt to avail myself of a little Sylphie therapy.

When Roxy came home from work, I couldn't help following her around the house. When she settled down on the couch, I sat myself right next to her and started playing with the ends of her braids.

“What’s the matter, Rudy?”

It seemed my constant fidgeting had gotten to be too much for her.

“Uhm, well… I was hoping we could talk for a while.”

“Hm? We talk all the time, Rudy. Oh… is there something serious we need to discuss?”

“No, no. I just wanted a little, er, intimate time, you know?”

“Uhhh… all right then. But we’re not doing anything too physical tonight.”

“Sure. Yeah. I just want to, well, cuddle a little. If that’s okay with you.”

“That’s fine with me, Rudy.”

With that, Roxy sat back down on my lap and leaned back against me. Cupping one hand around her shoulder, I stared down at her face, now only inches from mine.

That was when I realized that I had no idea what I wanted to talk *about*.



“Uhm, so… how was your day?”

“Oh, it wasn’t too eventful, really. Some mischievous student did send the principal’s wig flying at one point, though.”

“Ooh. Too bad I missed that.”

“Let’s see, what else…”

Roxy had spent her whole day at work, and was clearly a bit worn out. Still, she took the time to humor me. We chatted about trivial things for a while, chuckling at each other’s jokes. I did end up groping her butt a little, which earned me a slap on the hand. But when I protested that I was just trying to *cuddle*, Roxy sighed and allowed me to continue.

Afterward, we headed into the bath together, where I washed her back and massaged her shoulders. Basically, I doted on her like a son buttering up his mother.

“You seem a little needy today, Rudy. Did something bad happen?”

“No, not at all. I was just thinking about how very glad I am to have you safe and sound, that’s all.”

“Is that so? Well, I did have a close scrape back in the Teleportation Labyrinth, I suppose. Feel free to confirm my ‘soundness’ to your heart’s content.”

The two of us were in the bathtub now. Once again, Roxy was seated on my lap. As I gently rubbed her slender shoulders, I dropped a question of my own as casually as I could.

“How are you feeling, Roxy? You’re not under the weather or anything, right?”

I’d prevented her from catching Petrification Syndrome by eliminating that rodent. I was quite confident of that. But I wasn’t *one hundred percent* sure yet. There was a chance my future self had drawn the wrong conclusions, after all.

“What? I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I don’t know… I just really want you to live a nice long life, I guess.”

“Given the lifespan of my race, I’m quite likely to outlive you. I expect you to take good care of *your* health, mister.”

“You got it.”

When I spoke those words, Roxy’s face lit up with a big smile. From the looks of things, she really was just fine.

Sylphie and Roxy were still alive. Things weren’t going to turn out the way they did in that diary. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

With that comforting thought fixed firmly in my mind, I finally felt ready to face the rest of those awful pages. It wouldn’t be easy. But it had to be done.

Chapter 2:
The Diary (Part 2)

THE NEXT MORNING, I reopened the diary, ready to pick up where I'd left off. However, it seemed like my future self hadn't written anything for some time after Sylphie's death. When I turned the page, I found the paper was noticeably different.

It seemed like a year or two had passed, at least. Maybe more—the entries were vague enough that it could have been a decade. I had no way of knowing what happened in that undocumented period, but when the entries did resume, I was surprised by how stupid and juvenile they seemed. There was a lot of talk about women I spotted in the street and the size of their butts. One entry recounted my seduction of a waitress at a newly opened tavern; others described my visits to various brothels, complete with reviews of their quality. The language got ugly at times. It was the diary of a scumbag, in all honesty. In one entry, I even took the time to rank all the women I'd ever slept with.

It was hard to believe it was me writing these things. Was this what I'd become without Roxy and Sylphie around?

In any case, I evidently spent years indulging in this lifestyle. It wasn't clear where these events happened, but I recognized the names of a few taverns here and there. It seemed like I was still living in the city of Sharia.

Some names were conspicuous by their absence, though. I never mentioned Aisha, Norn, Lilia, Zenith, or Lucie. Every once in a while, there was a reference to Zanoba or Julie, but some of those entries made me queasy. My future self apparently had his eye on Julie by this point. The girl had been my faithful pupil since she was a kid, and now I was looking to take advantage of her.

I didn't *want* to believe I was capable of sinking so low.

That said, I had to admit it wasn't totally implausible. In the face of crushing despair, I could imagine abandoning myself to the pursuit of meaningless pleasure… especially since I had the looks and money to make that lifestyle easy.

Eris popped up somewhat frequently in these entries, although my future self was clearly doing his best to avoid her. She was living in Sharia as well, and whenever we ran into each other, she would beat me up with a furious scowl on her face.

"I'd like to catch that girl and teach her a lesson," I'd written in one entry, "but I don't want her swearing revenge on me or something. Probably best to just keep my distance." Pretty pathetic stuff.

Reading between the lines, though, I got the sense that my feelings toward Eris were more conflicted than I let on. Was there still a part of me that wanted to patch up our relationship somehow? After what happened to Sylphie and Roxy, maybe I'd just lost the ability to pursue an actual romance. It was hard to say for sure. But at the very least, the bitter words I had written didn't fit cleanly with some of the actions I was describing.

On another note… there were some disquieting events mixed in with all the debauchery. Zanoba and I had a price on our heads, courtesy of the Millis Church, and I sometimes had to fend off an assassin or bounty hunter. This didn't seem much of a problem, though. I was taking them down with ease so far.

I turned the page after one such entry and found another sudden transition in the contents of the diary. It seemed like I'd skipped forward for a second time. Once again, there was no summary of the missing years. Now the paper type changed with every page, and I still wasn't dating my entries clearly.

Norn's picture book and the Ruijerd figurines are both selling very well. I've also convinced the University to officially integrate my silent spellcasting techniques into the curriculum.

It seems the Holy Country sent a demand via the Kingdom of Asura that Ranoa hand me over, but as long as the Magic Nations consider me useful, I can't see that happening. Thanks to the Red Wyrm Mountains, it's no easy thing to invade a country on the Central Continent. They put the aggressor at an inherent disadvantage.

Also, Asura doesn't seem to be aware that I'm the one who burned a decent section of their capital to the ground. I knew they were scum, but I suppose they're imbeciles as well.

Zanoba's very close to completing his automaton now. It took longer than I expected, but we're almost there. I can't feel the excitement I did back when we started, though.

Why am I even doing this? What's the point?

The first automaton's complete.

Zanoba made her in Sylphie's image. She has her own will, and acts on her own initiative.

However, she does anything I tell her to without question. She's obedient and meek, but has a bit of a jealous side. She really is the spitting image of the woman I used to know… in almost every way.

But this isn't what I wanted. This isn't what I need…

I destroyed the Sylphie automaton.

I expected Zanoba to be furious, but he apologized instead. That just made me feel guiltier. I owe that man more than I can ever repay. At the very least, he's earned my loyalty until the day I die.

We made a new automaton that isn't based off of Sylphie or Roxy.

Zanoba gave it the name Forty. Apparently, it's his fortieth "masterpiece," according to him.

We're mass-producing Forty's "sisters" now, and the Magic Nations will be buying them from us. It's nice having countries as your main customers. They've got deep pockets.

I don't know how useful the "dolls" would be in a military capacity, but Zanoba and I refined their design a great deal over the years. I'm guessing they're stronger than your average knight or adventurer, at least.

Now that we've reached our goal, it feels like I've run out of things to do. I'll have to decide what my next research project will be. For the first time in a while, I'm actually feeling a little motivated.

Hmm…so we completed Zanoba's automated doll project eventually, huh?

These entries gave no hints about how we accomplished it, unfortunately. I'd probably kept my research notes separate from this diary. That was kind of a pity. A little advice from the future might have sped up our progress immensely…

It wasn't that big a deal, though. Zanoba was enjoying his research very much, and they say the journey's as important as the destination, right?

I turned the page, and was startled by another sudden shift in the tone of the diary.

This one sheet of paper was badly wrinkled. I had clearly been crying on the page as I wrote these words.

The Man-God showed up in my dreams. I can still feel his hand resting on my shoulder.

I hate him. I hate him so much.

I have to get more powerful, and fast.

I need to kill that bastard. It's my new purpose in life. Until the day he dies, Roxy and her child will never rest in peace.

Neither will I, for that matter.

Come to think of it, I wonder how Lilia and the others are doing. I haven't seen them since they left the house.

I wonder how Lucie's turned out. I bet she's a beauty, just like her mom. I hope she's doing well with her studies. I hope she's getting enough to eat.

…I wish like hell I hadn't fallen apart like that after Sylphie died.

Aisha did come back to look after me eventually, but… I can't imagine the others have forgiven me. Sending off a letter now wouldn't do any good.

I've got so many regrets.

How do I get stronger?

Do I work on my magic? Maybe track down someone who can cast Kingly or Imperial spells?

I don't think so. Based on what I've seen so far, spells past the Saintly level seem to just get bigger in scale. They're not especially useful in combat.

There are some exceptions, like that Electric spell I came up with. But on the whole, my offensive capabilities are already adequate.

The main issue is that I'm a glass cannon with mediocre mobility. I can't amplify my physical capabilities with Aura, and that leaves me at a major disadvantage in both durability and speed.

How do I compensate for those shortcomings?

I found some information on the Fighting God in a book.

Legend has it that he wore a golden suit of armor that vastly enhanced his strength, speed, and endurance. When I discussed this with Zanoba, he came up with an intriguing idea: what if we made a Zaliff Prosthesis that covered my entire body?

I don't know why I didn't think of this before. I can't envelop myself in Aura, true. But when I feed mana to my artificial hand, I can enhance its strength dramatically. If I use my Earth magic to create the sturdiest possible shell, and then rework it into a full-body suit of armor…

Yeah. I think this might work.

With help from Zanoba, I've completed my personal suit of armor.

The thing stands more than two meters tall, and it's bulky to boot. It takes a lot of mana to control, too. In effect, I'm the only one capable of using this, and even I wouldn't be able to power it for that many days in a row. It's kind of an oversized hunk of junk, in all honesty.

If only Cliff was still alive. Maybe we could have made something more efficient… But there's no point dwelling on that now, I guess.

In any case, I took a cue from some old video game and named it "the Magic Armor."

From this point, the diary turned to focus on my efforts to grow stronger.

By nestling inside the Magic Armor—essentially an oversized version of the Zaliff Prosthesis—I could enhance my speed, power, and physical defense to match even the world's most powerful warriors. I could only maintain that level of performance for half a

day at a time, but even at 30% output I was capable of defeating most opponents I encountered.

We'd clearly hit on something special. But we presumably weren't the first to come up with the idea, given the stories about the Fighting God.

I was already itching to get started on my own version. But were Zanoba and I even capable of designing the Magic Armor at this stage in our research?

Well…maybe we're ready, maybe we aren't. I'm still going to make it happen.

On a less positive note, it seemed my family had moved out of my house not long after Sylphie's death. That explained why I'd barely referenced them in the earlier entries.

I could see Norn getting fed up with my womanizing quickly enough, but I'd somehow managed to get even Lilia to give up on me. Just how badly had I mistreated them?

Then again… I didn't know the specifics. Maybe I'd moved them out for their own safety. I did have those assassins from Millis coming after me and all…

Yeah, sure. Let's go with that.

All of a sudden, I found myself wanting to score brownie points with my family.

Fortunately, today happened to be one of Norn's regularly scheduled nights at home. That seemed like an excellent reason to take them out for a meal. A little quality time couldn't hurt, right?

"Brother deaaar!" came a voice from behind me. "Lunch is ready! Come down and eat with us!"

I rose from my chair and opened the door to find Aisha standing just outside in her usual maid outfit. There was a bit of sauce on her face; she'd probably been doing a little taste-testing in the kitchen.

"You've got something on your face, kid," I said, taking out a handkerchief to wipe it off for her.

“Mmph! Heehee, thanks.”

Aisha grinned cheerfully at me as I pulled my hand away.

This kid had been devoted enough to take care of me by herself even when I turned into a no-good piece of trash. The old man hadn’t mentioned her, but she was effectively the only family he had for years. It must have meant a lot to have her around.

“Hey, Aisha… is there anything you’ve been wanting lately?”

“Huh? Why are you asking?”

“I was thinking I might buy you a present one of these days. Just a little thank you for all the hard work, you know?”

“What?! Awww, you *shouldn’t*! I’d feel bad for Norn! Hmm, but I guess I *did* see a really cute hair clip in the store the other day… Wink, wink.”

You’re not actually supposed to say the ‘wink, wink’ part out loud, you know. Who did she learn this kind of shamelessness from, anyway? Me? Probably me.

“All right. I’ll take you out to buy it sometime soon. We’ll just have to keep it a secret from Norn.”

Aisha let out an odd little yelp as jumped back and threw her hands up in an exaggerated display of shock. “Are you actually *serious*, brother dear?! What are you playing at here…? Gasp! Could it be you’re craving some loving?! Should I be awaiting your arrival in my bedroom tonight, m’lord? Tee-hee!”

“Okay, enough fooling around. Let’s go eat before the food gets cold, huh?”

“Yessir!”

Together, the two of us headed down to the dining room. Roxy and Norn weren’t around at the moment, but we had a family meal with everyone else in the house. To me, at least, the food tasted noticeably better than usual.

When I shared that thought with Lilia, I managed to get a little smile out of her.

After lunch, I returned to the diary.

With his Magic Armor complete, my future self began to travel the world, searching for a way to reach the Man-God. I met many different people in the course of these journeys, but was frequently distressed by how little information I could find about my enemy.

Eventually, I hit on the theory that people who'd been alive for a very long time were more likely to know something about the Man-God, and focused my attention on locating the oldest people in the world. At the same time, I continued to train relentlessly as a mage and develop new spells, gradually growing more powerful than before. In time, I mastered Gravity-Manipulation magic, a variety of Electric spells, and even a kind of magic that manipulated the human voice. I also reached the Saint tier in Healing.

At some point I came to the conclusion that magic itself was "all-powerful," and could be used to accomplish *anything* as long as you "got the knack of it." Naturally, there was no explanation of what the heck that was supposed to mean. This was also the section of the diary where I'd recorded my theories about Roxy catching Petrification Syndrome from that mouse, and the Man-God's potential responsibility for Sylphie's death.

At a glance, it seemed like I was making progress on many fronts. But as more time passed without *any* new information about the Man-God, my future self began to grow increasingly bitter and hateful.

At this point in my life, I'd become a genuinely horrible person. I provoked fights everywhere I went, crushing opponents much weaker than me just so I could sneer at them. I acted on impulse and instinct, even sexually assaulting random women. This sure as hell wasn't the kind of man I wanted to become.

Eris made frequent appearances in these entries as well. She kept popping up along my route as I travelled around the world. Eris was as powerful as ever, and repeatedly defeated me in battle. There was no clear mention of this in the text, but she might have been trying to show me the error of my ways.

My future self, however, began to think she might be an agent of the Man-God. She was ‘interfering’ with my progress, after all. Therefore, she was clearly under his control, and acting to protect his interests. Over time, I grew to hate her for it.

I was amazed how easily I’d convinced myself of this, despite lacking any evidence whatsoever to support the theory. It was probably just what I’d wanted to believe.

Eventually, Eris stopped beating me so easily, and then stopped beating me at all. Maybe I had grown stronger, or maybe she’d passed her peak physical years. I couldn’t tell from the text.

Finally, things came to a climax.

I made Eris cry. It’s been a long time since I saw her blubber like that.

Maybe I took things too far. She might not be connected to the Man-God after all.

No, that doesn’t make any sense. The woman’s been following me around and getting in my way ever since Sylphie died. What else could explain that? She clammed up repeatedly during the interrogation, too.

She knows something. She has to.

Eris escaped today.

I found her handcuffs with bite marks on them. Are that woman’s teeth made of steel?!

Damn it all…

I have an audience with Atofe tomorrow. It’s hard to imagine that musclehead will give me anything useful, but like most of the immortal demons, she’s been around for ages. There’s a decent chance she knows about the Man-God.

I'll get it out of her, even if I have to beat her to a pulp.

Eris is dead.

Ghislaine blamed me for everything. None of this makes any damn sense.

I'm going to try to summarize what happened yesterday.

My audience with Atofe turned into a battle. I was up against her and her entire personal guard.

I was confident I could handle the Demon King, but Moore threw me off completely. I knew the man was a powerful mage, and I still let him catch me off guard. I was too focused on Atofe herself.

They had me on the ropes when Eris jumped in out of nowhere. She took an attack meant for me, and died to save my life.

Ghislaine told me why afterward. She explained everything, going back to the day Eris showed up in Sharia.

Eris just wanted to be with me. I had it all wrong all this time. She never stopped loving me. Ever.

That was the reason she followed me around. It was the only reason.

I still can't believe it.

There wasn't much detail in these entries, but it all matched up with what the old man had told me.

…Maybe I really did need to marry Eris too. Reading all this made me want to see her end up happy. It was going to take some real courage to take the first step, though. I had vaguely broached the subject with Sylphie, but still…

Well, the *real* first step had to be talking it over in detail. Sending the letter would come after that.

I decided to push this topic from my mind until Roxy came home tonight, and returned my attention to the diary.

After Eris' death, there was a stretch of entries that said nothing particularly useful. I'd written only brief descriptions of travelling to certain places, meeting certain people, and fighting others. Among those I battled, I noticed some truly fearsome opponents: a Water Emperor here, a North Emperor there. But my victories didn't seem to bring me any pleasure, as I hadn't even bothered to record any details. Most of the entries were nothing more than a sentence or two, along the lines of: "I killed X today. He didn't know anything about the Man-God either."

After a fair number of entries like this, there seemed to be another skip forward in time.

The first longer entry in a while was of a very different nature from those that had preceded it.

Zanoba's gone.

A unit of Temple Knights had infiltrated the Kingdom of Ranoa without anyone noticing. By the time I rushed back, it was too late. They'd burned the mansion to the ground.

I found Zanoba's charred body in front of the door to the basement. Ginger, Julie, and Aisha were lying inside it, their bodies cut to pieces.

The Temple Knights were still in Ranoa, so I tracked them down and killed them all. But murdering them was meaningless, of course.

Zanoba did so much for me. He tried so hard to help me, and to protect my family. But I wasn't there for him when he needed me.

What's the point of having all this power, anyway?

I'm useless.

Everyone's dead now, I guess.

I'm the only one still standing. The others are all gone. I couldn't protect any of them.

It's all the Man-God's fault.

I have to kill that bastard, if it's the last thing I do…

Well… that was a downer.

Losing both Zanoba and Aisha in such a horrible way must have been crushing.

That said, I was slightly curious why my future self hadn't tried to locate the rest of my family. Maybe I'd decided that I had no right to call myself Lucie's father. Or maybe Lilia and the others had died as well, and those events just weren't recorded in this diary. Norn's name hadn't come up in a very long time, which wasn't exactly reassuring…

Okay, let's stop speculating.

If it wasn't in the diary, it hadn't happened. That was how I needed to approach this.

In any case… it didn't seem like Zanoba's death was necessarily the Man-God's doing, but my future self was blaming everything on him. At this point in my life, I'd clearly developed a single-minded obsession with taking revenge. I threw myself into the search for the Man-God even more intensely than before, viciously butchering anyone who stood in my way.

And finally, I found a lead.

My heart is pounding as I write this.

I'm currently in a remote corner of the Begaritt Continent. This was said to be an uninhabited, unexplored region, but I discovered

an ancient ruin here, a remnant of the ancient Dragonfolk civilization. And on its walls, I found murals lined with writing. This is what I read on one of them:

This world is divided into six—the world of dragons, the world of men, the world of demons, the world of beasts, the ocean world, and the sky world.

These six worlds are arrayed like the faces of a great cube. The inside of this cube is a place known as the barren world. Passing through it is the only way to travel from one face of the cube to another; but this is only possible by means of a very specific method.

Unfortunately, the mural had crumbled away after this section. But the very last legible sentence read as follows:

"The Man-God stands at the center of the barren world."

I've finally found what I was looking for.

I'm planning to stay here for some time to thoroughly analyze everything written on these walls.

The murals contain a historical record of the Dragonfolk's attempts to find a way to the barren world's center.

Summoning and Teleportation magic were apparently developed as offshoots of their research into spells for travelling through the barren world to reach others. I may need to focus my research in that direction.

I've found everything there is to find in these ruins.

It seems the ancient Dragonfolk attempted to create something that would allow them to reach the center of the barren world, but I don't know what that something was. The section of the walls describing it have crumbled into dust. Still, their method was clearly something quite similar to Summoning or Teleportation magic.

Unfortunately, I don't have the knowledge I need to recreate the kind of spell that was described.

Perugius might, however. I don't know of anyone more familiar with Summoning spells. Perhaps he can point me in the right direction.

Perugius knew nothing.

He doesn't even know who or what the Man-God is, for that matter. The only thing he does know is that Laplace flew into a furious rage at the mere mention of him.

I'm back to square one yet again. Laplace clearly knew of the Man-God, but he's no longer among the living…

I suppose there's Orsted. Maybe he knows something.

I can't find so much as a rumor about Orsted's whereabouts. I don't think I'll ever track the man down, no matter how hard I try.

Maybe I'm better off focusing on my research on Teleportation magic. After decades of constant battle, I can't move as nimbly as I used to. I may not have much time left to waste.

No… it's too early to throw in the towel. I should try to find more Dragonfolk ruins while I'm still capable of travelling.

Huh. So this world was sort of like a hollow cube, with the Man-God at its center. That was a little disturbing. It did explain why teleportation always felt more like getting sucked under the ground—you were being pulled into the barren world, and travelling through it to your destination.

Of course, that didn't mean you could just dig down through the ground to reach the Man-God. The connection between the worlds probably wasn't that literal.

The diary seemed to jump forward in time again after this entry. My future self really hadn't been too consistent with this thing.

I discovered a second Dragonfolk ruin high in the mountains of the Demon Continent. I wish I understood why they built these things in such dangerous, well-hidden places. This whole area's swarming with powerful monsters.

Hmm. I suppose Perugius' floating fortress might also qualify as a ruin, in some sense of the word. Maybe this is number three, then.

In any case, I plan to start exploring it tomorrow.

My efforts were rewarded. I found a complete version of the mural I studied some years ago, including the section describing their method for reaching the center of the barren world.

The ancient Dragonfolk created five sacred treasures. Using all five sends you to the barren world, instead of merely passing through it.

I've finally found a way to reach the Man-God. Finally.

But I'm over sixty now, and my body's in terrible condition. I don't know if I'll make it in time.

I paid Perugius another visit. This time, he had information for me.

The five sacred treasures created by the ancient Dragonfolk are held by their five generals. All of them are necessary to open the door to the barren world by means of the Dragon God's secret art. However, one of these generals is already dead, and their treasure is lost. The whereabouts of their successor are also unknown.

Perugius believes that the missing general will appear within a few decades. Something about the way he worded this struck me as odd, but I can't remember exactly why. Lately, it's getting harder to pry open the cabinet of my memories.

Is Perugius still hiding something from me? It's an infuriating thought. But he's the only person left whom I can reminisce about the better days with. I don't want to kill him.

He did say that Orsted might know something about the secret art…but nobody has the slightest idea where Orsted is.

In any case, if it's going to be decades before the last Dragon General appears, there's no hope left for me. I'm sure I won't live that long. My body's already on the verge of breaking down. I can feel death creeping up on me.

What am I supposed to do, damn it? I'm running out of time…

I can't get my hands on all five of the Dragon Generals' treasures.

I don't think I'm capable of creating my own imitations, or reproducing the secret art itself. There's just not enough to go on; I wouldn't know where to start.

In other words, I can't make it to the barren world.

I'm so sick and tired of this.

How long do I have to keep struggling forward alone? Who am I even doing this for? Even my hatred for the Man-God is starting to dull.

I'm just…so damn tired.

The fire and determination of the earlier entries was giving way to resignation and bitterness. There weren't many pages left. These entries were probably from about fifty years in the future, then.

My future self had spent decades struggling constantly with precious few successes, and never reached his goal. After a certain point, anyone would have grown too exhausted to think straight. The person I was today would probably have given up much earlier.

I usually keep my research notes separate from this diary, but I'm going to add an entry here about my latest theory.

During my research into Teleportation magic, I arrived at an interesting thesis. Specifically: by combining it with the magic described on the ancient murals, and tweaking with the execution, it might be possible to travel back in time.

However, if my theory is correct, it could require an enormous amount of mana to travel even a few seconds backward. How much would you need to jump back years, then?

I'm going to try travelling to the past.

I still have this old diary on my hands. Using it as a focal point, I just might be able to jump back to the day I started writing it—the day the Man-God tricked me into releasing that mouse and killing Roxy.

I don't know if it's going to work.

I don't know what will happen to me if it does work, either. I'm familiar with the concept of time paradoxes, after all.

I wish I were more confident this will work.

It's hard to even say if I'll jump back in time as I am now, or just revert to my younger self. Assuming it's the former, though, I need to go over what I'm going to say. At the very least, I need to cover the Petrification Syndrome incident, Eris, and the Man-God.

I'm not sure I'll be able to explain it all. I'm not sure my younger self will even believe me.

And if I revert instead… I don't know how I'll be able to interact with Sylphie and Roxy.

I do want to see them again, of course. I want to tell them how sorry I am. But the thought of overwriting the mind of a happy young man with mine is… honestly, kind of sickening.

Perhaps I should take more time to experiment first. But given the potential risks of a time paradox, I'm hesitant to do so. Say I were to hop back several days in time. What if I leave my memories behind in the process? I'd be trapping myself in an endless, meaningless loop, dooming myself to live in this miserable world for all eternity.

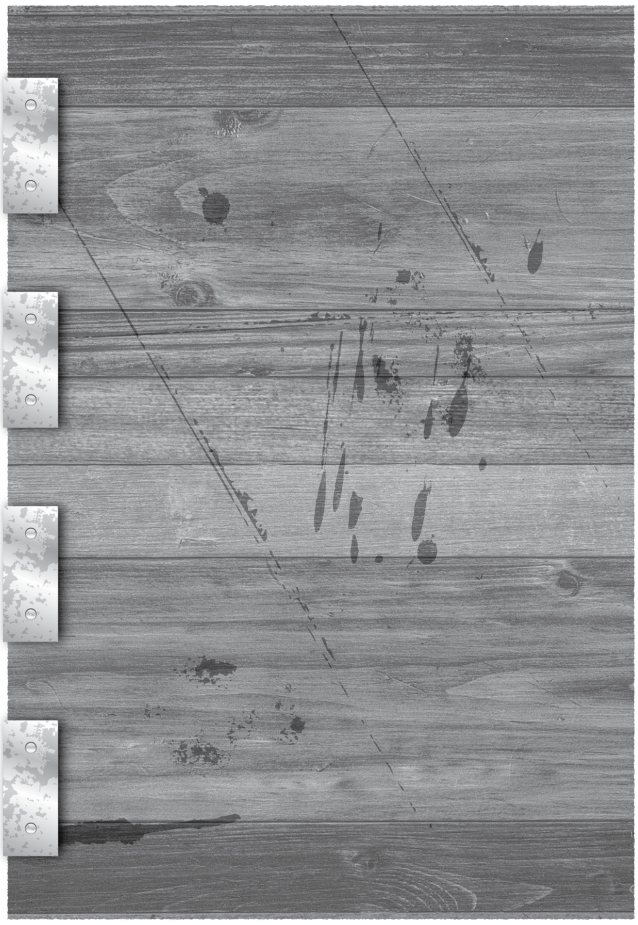
At least I'd get to see Roxy and Sylphie again the other way…

All right. Enough of this. I'm going to stop overthinking things.

It's not like I have anything left to lose, anyway. I accomplished nothing with my life. I'm a waste of oxygen. Maybe I'll screw this up and ruin everything again, but so what? Why should I give a damn?

And if I succeed…

Well, maybe I can give the Man-God a taste of his own medicine.



Once I finished reading the final entry, I closed the diary.

The back cover was scarred and battered—just like the front. Now that I'd read the whole thing, I could see the meaning in those scratches. They were testaments to the long, painful years I'd spent carrying this thing around.

My future self must have jumped back in time immediately after writing that final entry, only to realize that he'd run out of mana in the process.

I couldn't begin to understand the principles behind using Teleportation magic to travel back in time. That said, I wasn't sure why he'd come back in one great leap. Based on what he'd written in the diary, it might have been safer to hop back in multiple steps to avoid this mana issue. Was he just too old and tired to realize the benefits of that approach?

No… it probably hadn't even occurred to him that he might not have enough mana for this. The man must have had absolute confidence in his ability to cast *any* spell.

In any case, this diary simply didn't hold all the details I needed on his research. There was no guarantee that the conclusions he'd drawn were entirely correct, either. He could have misinterpreted those ancient murals, for one thing.

Come to think of it, I had seen an old mural in the underground levels of Perugius' fortress. Was that the sort of thing we were talking about there? That one didn't seem to have anything to do with Summoning magic…but from the sound of things, there were many others of its kind hidden away all across the world.

Anyway. For now, I had answers to my most important questions. Now I needed to take action before I ended up going down the same road.

"Hello, everyone," called a voice from the entrance hall. "I'm home."

Roxy was back from work. Perfect timing.

First things first, then. Tonight, I needed to have a serious discussion with my two wives. They needed to know about Eris…and the fact that we were all in danger.

Chapter 3:
Resolve

Sylphiette

RUDY HAD BEEN ACTING strangely lately. He spent entire days holed up in his study, and then came out looking pale and anxious.

What exactly was he doing in there? I was getting worried, but he wouldn't give me a straight answer when I asked about it. My last attempt had ended with him dodging the question and pulling me into bed with him. I was sure he had *something* on his mind, though… and it was really starting to bother me.

I went to Roxy to ask for advice, and found out she felt the same way: "So you noticed as well, Sylphie? I'm afraid Rudy tends to keep things bottled up inside. Let's try to be ready in case he needs our support."

I decided that if things dragged on like this much longer, we might need to press him for some answers. But then, just after dinner, Rudy finally broke his silence.

"Uh, Sylphie, Roxy? Could I trouble the two of you to come by my room this evening?"

His tone was a little awkward, but that wasn't too unusual. It was just the way he tended to speak when he wanted to sleep with both of us at once. I never really understood why he felt so hesitant about these things. It wasn't like he had anything to feel guilty about.

In any case, Roxy and I made our usual preparations that evening. We took a bath together and washed each other carefully, then put on the perfume we reserved for these special occasions. I changed into a set of underwear I'd bought recently and picked out a nightgown to go with it. Rudy seemed to prefer soft ones with

sleeves over the skimpier kinds, so I went with something relatively modest.

I looked down at myself and considered undoing two of the front buttons to expose a little more skin. I wasn't exactly busty, so it probably wouldn't be that alluring…but I did want to earn as much of his attention as I possibly could.

What if he thinks I'm desperate, though? No, this is Rudy we're talking about…it's fine, right? It'll be fine.

Just the other day, I'd noticed him looking down my shirt when I left a few buttons undone. I think he was trying to be subtle about it, but it was really obvious. He seemed to be enjoying himself, though, so I pretended not to notice. He carried me off to bed a little later.

Roxy was wearing her usual one-piece nightgown. She didn't seem to have anything on underneath it, though. She was pretty aggressive in her own right.

Anyway, the two of us were now primed and ready. We took a few deep breaths and then headed to Rudy's bedroom.

Rudy was sitting quietly in his chair, waiting for us. Roxy and I sat down on the bed next to each other. I sat on the right, and Roxy on the left. We'd never decided our places beforehand, but it was a bit of a habit by now.

Rudy would usually wriggle his way in between us with a leering grin…but today, he looked a little different. There was a serious expression on his face, and he wasn't moving from his chair.

After a long moment, he cleared his throat and turned to Roxy. "Uh, Roxy?"

"Yes?"

"How's Norn acquitting herself at school?"

Acquitting herself? Really? What a weird choice of words. Roxy seemed a little amused as well.

"…Why ask me? Didn't Norn tell you herself just the other day?"

“Well, I was hoping to get some candid impressions from you. As an educator.”

How long was he going to keep talking like this? It was getting harder not to laugh…

“Uh… All right then. Her academic performance is average, and she’s making fairly slow progress with the sword. I’m impressed by her efforts with the student council, though. She seems to be earning some recognition for her disciplinary work in particular. The University has quite a few rowdy students, but everyone listens when she scolds them. I’m sure it has something to do with the fact that you’re her brother, but she’s also earned a great deal of affection from some of the older students. Either way, no one ever tries to pick a fight with her, and she seems to have lots of friends. I don’t think you have anything to be worried about.”

“Hmm, I see. Thank you very much.”

She wasn’t exaggerating, either. Norn really was doing her best out there. From what the student council members told me, she was probably the hardest worker they had. Sometimes I wished I could be more of a ‘big sister’ to her.

“And how about you, Roxy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Has anything been bothering you lately? I don’t know… maybe you’ve been getting peckish a lot? Grabbing lots of snacks from the kitchen?”

“Uh, no. You’ve actually been pushing so much food on me lately that I’m a little worried I might put on weight.”

“How are things going at school, then?”

“…Oh, well enough. I suppose there are a few students who make fun of me for being so short, or refuse to pay attention to my lectures. But that’s fairly rare.”

“What? They’re ignoring *your* classes?! What a bunch of hopeless ingrates! How about I teach them a remedial lesson in

manners, Roxy? I'll make sure they grovel at your feet next time they see you!"

"Huh?! N-No, I don't think that's necessary. This just comes with the territory when you're a new teacher, really. But thank you for the offer anyway."

Roxy bowed her head to Rudy, looking somewhat exasperated…but also somewhat bashful. I noticed she was playing with the ends of her braids. I understood how she felt. It made me a little envious sometimes, seeing just how deeply Rudy respected her.

"Anyway," Roxy continued, "I guess there is one other thing that's been on my mind…"

"And what's that, if you don't mind my asking?"

Roxy paused, then shook her head. "I'd prefer to be sure about this one before I tell you anything in particular."

"…I look forward to hearing all about it, then."

Ooh. I think I know what this is about.

Come to think of it, Roxy had mentioned feeling a bit odd lately. Maybe I'd have to arrange for a little celebration? Or was that too premature at this stage? We didn't know for sure yet, after all.

"All right then. Sylphie?"

"Yes, Rudy?"

As the conversation turned to me, I tilted my head to one side and tried to look as charming as possible.

Rudy's line of sight drifted down from my face toward my upper body. My strategy was a success, from the look of things.

"How, uhm… how's Lucie been doing lately, you think?"

"Well, you're keeping an eye on her yourself, aren't you? She's a happy, healthy baby."

"You haven't overheard her muttering 'In the heavens above and this earth below, I alone am uniquely honored' or anything, have you?"

“What the heck are you talking about? Uhm… I think she might be crawling around on her own before too long.”

“Hmm.”

Thanks to Lilia’s help, things really were going smoothly with Lucie. Princess Ariel seemed to feel that children were best raised by maids and attendants, rather than their mothers. But Grandma Elinalise told me I should try to give my child as much personal, loving care as I could. I tended to agree with Elinalise, and Rudy seemed to want us both to be involved in raising Lucie, so I’d been putting in lots of time and effort.

“Have *you* noticed anything strange lately, Sylphie?” Rudy asked. “Anything on your mind?”

“Not really. I guess I’m wondering why my husband’s hiding things from me, butthat’s about it.”

The words just came out on their own. I hadn’t intended to be that harsh on him, but…

“Uh… right,” said Rudy, averting his gaze nervously. “Sorry about that.”

So there *was* something going on, then. Was he ever going to clue us in?

After a moment, Rudy looked back to me. This time, his gaze was steady and determined. Whenever he got this look in his eyes, you knew it was Rudy at his best.

“Actually, this is exactly the reason I asked the two of you to stop by tonight.”

At these words, I sat up straighter and buttoned up my nightgown. Roxy straightened up as well, although her expression was a little uncertain.

“The problem is, I’m not sure how to explain… I guess I’ll start at the beginning. A few days ago, I met a certain individual.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“Right. He was…something like a Blessed Child, I guess. One with the power to predict the future.”

Rudy went on to describe his conversation with this person. The details were alarming, to say the least. Basically, there was someone out there who wanted to harm him—and his family. Terrible things might happen to us if this mysterious enemy had their way. And in order to keep us safe, Rudy might have to do some things that seemed very strange from time to time.

To be honest, I wanted to think he was taking this too seriously. But I could tell that Rudy was convinced it was completely true. I could tell he was keeping some of the details to himself—there were probably parts of this story he thought it was better for us not to know. That didn’t feel great, of course. Still, I could understand why he wanted to be very cautious about this situation.

“Okay then,” I said. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“I’m sure there will be. To be honest, though, I’d rather not put the two of you in too much danger.”

There he goes again…

This had been coming up a lot with Rudy lately. I felt like it had started right after his father’s death. It was nice to know he cared so much about us, but he could get a little over-protective sometimes. I wasn’t a helpless child anymore. I could pull my own weight these days…

“Doesn’t that mean you’d be putting yourself in danger without us around to help?”

“Can’t say for sure yet, but it’s pretty likely, yeah.”

“Well, I don’t like the sound of *that*…”

That battle with Atofe had been bad enough. Rudy was a powerful mage, but he never *wanted* to fight anyone. And yet, he was always flying off on some mission or other and nearly getting himself killed… Was I supposed to just sit around, waiting to cheer him up when he limped back home? That was starting to get old. I

wanted to go with him at the very least. I might be able to help out somehow.

Then again, the last thing I wanted was to be a liability… Hmm.

“All right,” came a quiet voice from beside me. “I understand.”

Roxy had spoken up for the first time in a while. Fiddling with her hair, she looked Rudy in the eyes and smiled.

“While you’re out and about,” she continued, “I’ll keep Norn and Aisha safe.”

Her voice was clear and confident. She seemed to have genuinely accepted this as her role to play.

“Are you really okay with that, Roxy?” I asked. I couldn’t help thinking there was a part of her that wanted to tag along as well. But Roxy just nodded.

“I know Rudy would rather put himself at risk than see his family in danger.”

“Sure, but…”

Come to think of it, Roxy had been there with Rudy when his father died. It was hard for me to picture just how devastated he’d been by that tragedy, but from the sound of things, he’d sunk into a very deep depression. At the very least, it was enough of a shock that he ended up breaking his promise to me…

Ugh. Cut it out, Sylphie. You’re just being sulky now. Rudy had come back to me in the end. That was what really mattered, right?

“That said, Sylphie… I don’t intend to just sit around and watch while Rudy puts his life at risk for us.”

What was that supposed to mean? Hadn’t she just promised to stay at home?

“We can keep a careful eye on him,” Roxy continued. “And if we decide he really needs our help, we’ll follow him whether he wants us to or not.”

Oh… yeah, that actually makes a lot of sense…

We didn't need Rudy's permission to help him. We could make up our own minds. As long as things turned out all right in the end, he wouldn't have any reason to complain.

"…Yeah, I guess you're right. Okay."

Rudy listened to all of this with a little half-smile on his face. I'd half expected him to try and tell us off, but instead he just listened—with something like trust in his eyes.

"You go off and do what you want, Rudy," Roxy continued, smiling back at him. "Don't worry about things back here—we'll keep everyone safe and sound."

"All right then," he finally replied. "It's good to know I'll have you two watching my back if things get ugly."

There was some genuine relief behind his smile. And maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought his eyes were shining slightly. I had to admit, I was impressed with how smoothly Roxy had handled this. There was a reason Rudy respected her so much.

In any case, the most important thing was that he could approach this challenge with a clear mind. And if he got himself into trouble, I could always go help him out. I'd be the good, loyal wife most of the time—but when things got ugly, I'd ride to the rescue. Yeah. *That* was the kind of relationship I wanted.

"Uhm, moving on, then. There was… one other thing, actually."

I'd been getting a little pumped up there, but the conversation wasn't over yet. For some reason, Rudy's voice sounded awfully meek all of a sudden. His body language looked a little different, too. He'd been choosing his words carefully this entire time, but now it sounded like he was reluctant to say anything at all.

"…I'm not sure how to put this, to be honest."

"Is it an awkward problem?" Roxy said gently, trying to ease him forward.

Rudy nodded in response. "Very awkward. It's not an easy thing to tell you two."

"…"

Well, now he had me anxious. Could this have something to do with how haggard he'd looked lately? Hopefully he hadn't caught some kind of disease that magic couldn't cure.

"I think, uh, there's a *chance* we might… add one more person to the family."

"…"

Hmph. Is he talking about a woman? Yeah, that has to be it.

Well, I didn't really have any grounds to complain. He'd dropped a few hints about this earlier, and I hadn't objected or discouraged him.

That didn't mean I was ready to give my approval to just anyone, though. My feelings about this weren't quite that simple.

"Who is it? Nanahoshi?" I tried to keep my voice neutral as possible. I felt like I'd succeeded. I didn't sound angry, at least.

If it was Nanahoshi, though, that felt a little…wrong to me. I didn't think she really *loved* Rudy in the way we did. Her feelings were something more like gratitude. She probably wouldn't refuse him if he pushed her for a relationship, but that didn't mean she'd welcome it…

"No, it's not Nanahoshi."

Well, that was a bit of a relief.

For some reason, though, Rudy was looking even more guilty than before. "It's a woman named Eris."

"Eris…?"

Who was that again? I'd heard the name before, but it wasn't someone I knew from the University.

"Isn't that the girl you were tutoring during your stay in the Fittoa Region, Rudy?" Roxy prompted.

It was enough to jog my memory. "…Wasn't she the person who caused your condition?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess she was."

Had Rudy already forgotten how depressed he was back when he arrived at the University? I hadn't picked up on it at the time, but after seeing the way he was transformed by our marriage, I realized that he'd been suffering from a serious lack of self-confidence. That 'condition' was no laughing matter for him. It was hard for me to fully understand his feelings, but I knew he'd been suffering. It had been a bit of a shock for me as well when I found out.

"Do you still love her, even after what she did to you?"

"Not as much as I love you two," Rudy replied, looking me straight in the eyes. "That's one thing I can say for sure."

I felt myself blushing. Rudy could be such a lady-killer when he wanted to. It was hard to suppress the urge to squeal a little. I almost wanted to go brag to Linia and Pursena about that line. It was a shame they weren't around anymore…

Gah. Stop it, Sylphie! Focus! We're talking about this Eris person. Don't let him distract you!

"Okay, so… is she the one who wants to make up with you? Even though she dumped you?"

"Well, that's the thing. I might have been wrong about her dumping me. It sounds like her feelings never really changed at all."

"…Maybe so, but she still broke your heart, right?"

"Yeah, that's true."

In theory, I didn't have any real objection to Rudy taking on a third wife. I'd come to terms with our arrangement by now. It wasn't like I didn't *want* to have him all to myself, of course… but Rudy wasn't a member of the Millis Church, and I knew I wasn't strong enough to support him all by myself. As long as it was someone who loved him, and whom he loved, I wasn't going to object. I'd made up my mind about that some time ago.

But we were talking about someone who'd hurt him deeply in the past. That made things a lot more complicated.

"You know, Rudy, I still remember how sad and desperate you were."

“Yeah. Back then, I couldn’t have forgiven Eris. Just the idea of seeing her again probably would have terrified me.”

So why were things different now? Maybe it had something to do with that Blessed Child he’d run into the other day. They might have made some prediction involving her.

That didn’t feel like a good enough reason to me, though. I mean, if someone had told me “You’re going to marry a man named Rudeus and have five children with him,” it would probably have been pretty exciting. But I wouldn’t have run out and married the first guy named Rudeus I could find. Did it really make sense for Rudy to marry this woman if he wasn’t even sure that he loved her?

“If you’re firmly opposed to the idea, I won’t marry her. But at the very least, I think I need to see her and talk things through.”

Rudy paused and frowned, as if something had just occurred to him. “You know, the thing is… Eris has been training in a place called the Sword Sanctum for years now. And it sounds like she was doing it for me.”

“…”

“Wouldn’t it be kind of harsh to just shoot her down when she finally comes back to rejoin me?”

“Well, yeah, I guess it would be…”

I could kind of imagine how painful it would be to have the rug pulled out from under you like that after years of hard work. I’d put in a lot of effort myself back in Buena Village, trying to catch up with Rudy.

“I’m not really saying I’m *opposed* or anything…”

What if the Displacement Incident had never happened, and Rudy had never bothered returning to Buena Village? What if I’d tracked him down, only to find him married to another woman? That would have been one heck of a shock.

“It’s just… I don’t know. I’ve never even met this person…”

That was the heart of the issue, really. I didn’t know Eris at all. Until this moment, I’d always thought of her as a cruel person who’d

mistreated Rudy. It sounded like that was a misunderstanding, though. She hadn't *meant* to hurt him, right?

"Could I interject?" said Roxy, interrupting my circular train of thought. "It seems to me that we should all defer our decision on this until *after* we've actually met Eris."

"You think?"

"Yes. For one thing, I get the impression you're not entirely sure of your own feelings yet, Rudy. Once you see her again, I'm sure it'll be much easier to make up your mind."

How did Roxy herself feel about all this? The last time we discussed Rudy taking another wife, she'd sounded accepting of the idea. But it was hard to tell what she was thinking right now.

"And in any case," she continued, "Sylphie already asked as much of you."

I blinked in confusion. I wasn't sure what she was talking about anymore.

"You don't remember, Sylphie? I think your exact words were *Just make sure you bring her to meet me first*."

Oh! Right. Yeah, I did say that, didn't I?

"Bring Eris here and introduce her to us, Rudy. We'll talk things through and get to know each other. But if it just doesn't seem like it's going to work out… I'll have to oppose the idea as well."

The more I thought about it, the more it sounded like the most reasonable idea. We weren't committing to anything yet, but we could stay open to the idea. Roxy sure did have a good head on her shoulders. Watching her in action made me feel a little inadequate as a wife.

"Of course, I imagine we'll have to discuss this idea with a number of other people as well… but for what it's worth, Rudy, you have my support and my trust."

"Thank you, Roxy. That means a lot."

“All I ask is that you *try* not to forget about me completely, no matter how many girls you end up marrying.”

“Rest assured, I couldn’t forget about you if I tried.”

“I’ll take that as a promise, then?”

“Absolutely.”

She was clever and thoughtful, and Rudy trusted her completely. It made me kind of jealous sometimes…

No, no. That was the wrong way to think about it. I’d just have to do my best to follow in her footsteps.

I can be a grown-up too! Just you watch! Hmph.

“Does that sound okay, Sylphie?” Rudy said hesitantly, turning to face me. “I’m sorry about all this.”

“It’s all right. Sorry for being so difficult today. It wasn’t really fair of me, after all those things I said last time.”

Rudy and I ended up apologizing to each other for some reason. I could hear Roxy chuckling softly.

It was nice, this arrangement we’d arrived at. I felt totally comfortable in this room. It was something I couldn’t get anywhere else, even with Princess Ariel and Luke.

But now we might be adding someone else into the equation. That made me a little anxious.

This girl wasn’t going to steal Rudy away from us, was she?

Rudeus

AFTER OUR CONVERSATION, the three of us slept side by side in my bed.

I wasn’t quite callous enough to try and start a threesome after a discussion that heavy. Also, Eris’ face kept popping into my

thoughts, which wasn't great for my emotional state. I'd thought I was over all that, but the more I thought about her, the more I could feel that old anxiety and self-doubt bubbling up from deep inside my gut.

Just as Roxy had pointed out, I wasn't too sure how I felt about Eris at this point. And everything I knew about her feelings had come secondhand.

One way or the other, I had to settle things between us.

To be honest, though, the idea of seeing her again was scary. There was definitely going to be some punching involved. From the sound of things, Eris had gotten unbelievably strong in the last few years. There was no telling how she might react if I walked up to her with Sylphie and Roxy at my side. The diary hadn't mentioned her attacking Sylphie or anything, but… There was no guarantee those entries were totally accurate, and I'd obviously left a lot of details out. Also, a few poorly chosen words could easily take things in a dangerous direction.

I had good reason to be worried. It was hard to guess how things would turn out when I saw Eris again.

With everything on my mind, it took a while before I managed to get to sleep.

That night, the Man-God paid me a visit.

***

I found myself in a familiar pure-white space. As always, I'd reverted to the man I was in my previous life.

According to my future self, this was the barren world—a sort of four-dimensional space, sitting at the center of a cube composed of six other worlds. When you used Teleportation magic, you travelled *through* this plane of reality. But based on the old man's research, there was no easy way to travel *into* it.

Here I was, though, standing at its center. What did that mean, exactly? Given the change in my appearance… maybe this was a kind of summoning that only affected your mind, or your soul?

"…"

The Man-God was here, as always, with his usual…

Wait, no. He's not smirking for once.

In fact, his body language suggested he was in a distinctly bad mood. Although it was hard to tell for sure, what with all the blurriness.

"Well, this is no fun at all."

Yeah, okay. That sounded like irritation.

"Had to go and ruin everything…"

The tone of his voice was low and hostile. His usual carefree attitude had disappeared completely.

"Jumping back in time to warn yourself? Come on, that's just not *fair.* And everything was going so well, too."

Okay, I get it. You're not happy. Does that mean the old man was telling me the truth? Have you been playing me for a fool all this time? Did you kill Roxy and Sylphie? I guess this means his plan worked. Did he just give you a taste of your own medicine?

"Questions, questions, questions. Always with the questions. Who knows? Who cares? It does seem like your future self was laboring under quite a few misconceptions, just so you know."

Well, he's messing with me again, but it doesn't sound like his heart's really in it. I need to try and stay calm. I need to keep this conversation going.

"Ooh, he needs to keep the conversation going! Will you stop pretending to be some kind of tactician? Haven't you realized you're a moron yet?"

Oh, shut up. I might be a moron, but I'm still going to try my best. On that note, mind telling me something? Why would you do this to me? Why would you try to harm my family?

“Hmm, why would I do that? Maybe I just wanted to kill them so I could watch you freak out about it? Whatever.”

Wow. He’s really half-assing it today. It’s almost like he’s sulking—like he set up some big elaborate trap in a video game, but then somebody messed it all up by wandering off in the wrong direction, and now he doesn’t even want to play anymore…

“Yeah, more or less. You messed it *all* up, you stupid, thoughtless jerk.”

…Can you just tell me what’s going on here? I don’t care what your ultimate goal is. I’m really not interested in getting in your way. My future self told me I can’t kill you, anyway. He told me to suck up to you, not to defy you, and I’m fine with that, personally. I mean, things were fine between us up until now… even if you were just setting me up to betray me, you still helped me out plenty of times. You can use me if you want to. It’s not like I have any reason to disobey you. All I’m asking is that you don’t go after my family.

“Well, aren’t you accommodating.”

I mean, whatever you did to that old man, you haven’t managed to harm me yet. As far as I know, at least. You did try to kill Roxy and her baby, but she came out of it unscathed. Since she’s okay, I think I can pretend that never happened. I can still control my emotions. I want to find some way to coexist with you before things cross the point of no return.

“Hmmm…”

The Man-God paused for a moment, apparently considering something that had just occurred to him.

“What if I told you that my goal is world peace? Would you believe that?”

World peace, huh? Sounds great. I’m on board. Love and peace is my personal motto. Nothing better than a tranquil day spent rolling around in bed, am I right?

“Let’s put the sex thing aside for now.”

Sure thing.

“You remember that Dragon God guy? Your old buddy Orsted? Well, *his* ultimate goal is to destroy the world.”

Wait, really? I wasn’t getting that vibe from him, honestly.

“He’s been skulking around in the shadows for a long time, making all sorts of evil plans. Here’s the thing: if I die, this world will break apart into a million pieces and fade away completely. So Orsted’s looking for a way to murder me.”

You sure you didn’t do something horrible and piss him off? I don’t know, maybe get his family killed for no apparent reason?

“Don’t you remember what I told you earlier? I can’t do anything to Orsted. As far as I know, he has no reason to hate me.”

Well, okay then. Go on.

“Orsted is very powerful, but he’s also alone. His curse keeps it that way. And as long as he’s isolated, he’ll never be able to harm me.”

Why don’t you just ignore him, then?

“That was the plan… until you appeared.”

What do I have to do with anything?

“Well, *you’re* not the problem, exactly. But it seems like you and your descendants are immune to the effects of Orsted’s curse. At some point in the future, those descendants are going to join forces with him, and together they’re going to kill me.”

Oh, I get it… so that’s why you went after Roxy when she got pregnant? The old man thought you manipulated Luke into dragging Sylphie off to die, too… But he didn’t say anything about you targeting Lucie. I guess it’s my second or third kid who’s going to be the problem, huh?

Wait. Couldn’t you have just killed me years ago or something? Why would you let things come this far?

“Well, when I first noticed you during the Displacement Incident, I did try a few things just to see what would happen. I’m

afraid you've got a very strong destiny, though. It never worked out the way I wanted it to."

A strong destiny? What does that even mean?

"Hmm, how can I explain? I can see a number of broad routes the future might follow branching out ahead of me, and I can tamper with the course of events to some degree. But when I try to manipulate events involving people with strong destinies, it rarely works out in the end. You survived that fight with Orsted, for example. And even though I tried to keep you far away from Roxy, you ended up finding her, marrying her, and having a kid."

Oh, is this that 'principle of causality' thing? Like when you travel to the past to rewrite history, but things end up working out the exact same way somehow?

"Something like that, I guess."

…Huh. Okay. So Roxy and I were destined to get married, then? That makes me kind of happy.

"Can't say I feel the same."

Sure, right. Sorry. But anyway, why did you decide to go after my kids in particular? I mean, these descendants we're talking about are a few generations later, I'm assuming. Couldn't you just deal with them before they join forces with Orsted?

"The ones directly responsible for my death will also be born with extremely strong destinies. It's not just you, by the way—Sylphie, Eris, and Roxy's are strong as well, and your kids' will also be on the stronger side. That said, women have times in their life where their destiny gets a little… vague."

Huh? Wait, do you mean—

"That's right. It's when they have a child inside them."

I had to fight down a sudden, intense urge to punch the fuzzy figure in front of me in the face. The only thing that stopped me was a gut feeling that I couldn't possibly beat him in a fight—not here, not in this form.

"Of course, I still managed to fail somehow."

…Why'd you bother murdering Sylphie, then? She wasn't pregnant at the time, and she'd already given me a daughter.

"What, are we talking about that diary now? Hard for me to comment, but I suppose I was trying to play it safe. On the other hand, maybe it was just Sylphie's destiny to die if she left you at that point."

I guess it's possible… God, that's depressing.

"You know, I really did think my plan was perfect. Once I realized your destiny was strong, I took things nice and slow. I guided you along, step by step…all so I could strike in the most efficient way, at your most vulnerable moment."

Is he trying to piss me off now? Ugh. Calm down. Don't let him get to you… Roxy and Sylphie are both fine. It's all good…

"I'm not sure why you're trying so hard to convince yourself of that. You don't think you've *won*, do you? Just so you know, your children's destinies won't be as strong as yours, your wives', or your descendants'. I'm not planning to give up, either. I really would prefer not to die."

Well, yeah, I guess you wouldn't. Isn't there some other way we could approach this, though? I'm willing to do anything to save my family. Maybe I could start a family tradition of teaching each new generation not to trust Orsted. We can tell our kids all about how wonderful the Man-God is, and how evil that nasty Dragon God is.

"Sorry, won't work. Destiny isn't that easy to derail."

Can you think a little harder, please? I have a pretty strong destiny myself, right? There has to be something I can do.

"…Oh."

What? Did you think of something?

"Well, I'm not sure if it's even possible… but there's certainly a *chance* it could work… Hmm. You did say you'd do anything at all, right?"

…Uh, yeah.

“Okay then…”

Pausing for just a moment, the Man-God grinned at me like a mischievous child.

“Go kill Orsted for me.”

***

“Rudy! That hurts… Rudy!”

When I awoke, I was squeezing Sylphie tightly in my arms. My throat was dry, and my entire body felt strangely cold.

“Oh… Sorry, Sylphie.”

I released my iron grip, leaving my poor wife coughing for air. I touched my face and found my forehead covered in sweat.

“Are you all right, Rudy?” came a quiet voice from behind me. I turned and found that Roxy had wrapped her arms around me.

“I’m sorry…”

I sat up in bed. It was still the middle of the night, from the looks of things. Had that just been a dream? No. Not *just* a dream, anyway. It was the Man-God, no doubt about it.

“Cough… What’s the matter, Rudy? Are you okay?”

Sylphie also sat up and started to wipe my sweat with her sleeve. Roxy was still holding me from behind, rubbing my back gently with one hand.

“I’m all right. I just had, uh… a weird dream, that’s all.”

Go kill Orsted for me.

There was no doubt about it—that was what he’d said. Was he serious? What was he playing at here?

Calm down. Calm down, damn it. Let’s think this through.

Orsted was an open enemy of the Man-God. There was no question about that. However, Orsted was isolated. He couldn't beat the Man-God on his own. That seemed to be an absolute certainty as well.

It was hard for me to understand why someone that powerful needed help, but that was just the way things were. At some point in the future, my descendants would end up becoming his allies. Together, they'd make their way to the Man-God and defeat him.

For that reason, the Man-God had tried to prevent them from coming into existence. That was why he killed Roxy and Sylphie. He didn't want them having children. Without my family in the picture, Orsted would never make it to the barren world, and the Man-God would be victorious by default.

But today, the Man-God realized that he couldn't eliminate my family. That had to be why he'd ordered me to kill Orsted. Both Orsted and my descendants had to be alive in order to defeat him. As long as *one or the other* was out of the picture, the Man-God would be safe.

The question was whether I could possibly defeat Orsted. From the sound of things, my destiny was very strong. But surely that applied to Orsted, too. After all, he was still alive despite waging war against the Man-God for many years.

How the hell was I supposed to kill him, anyway? He was *unbelievably* powerful. I didn't have any means to hurt him…

Or did I?

That diary contained a fairly detailed description of something my future self had used in battle—something that had amplified his power significantly.

Maybe I could make my own version of the Magic Armor.

It didn't seem impossible. And I had a feeling it would be extremely effective in combat.

My future self had also used a wide range of magic, including Gravity Manipulation, Teleportation, and Electrical attacks. He hadn't

bothered to tell me how he mastered those spells, though… It was hard to imagine I could figure out the weirder ones any time soon.

That said… in my first fight with Orsted, I'd managed to deal a small amount of damage to him with a Stone Cannon. And my Electric spell had done a number on Atofe. In other words, I had ways of hurting him. As long as I could stay alive long enough to use them, I might have some chance of winning.

…Damn it. This is Orsted we're talking about! Why am I even taking this seriously?!

"Rudy, please… tell me if there's something wrong. Don't keep it bottled up inside…"

Sylphie looked like she was about to cry. I pulled her head against my chest with my right hand. I reached back to grab Roxy's hand with my left.

I have to keep them safe, that's why. Stupid question, really.

"It looks like I'm going to have to kill someone."

"…What?!"

"Rudy… what are you talking about?"

Without responding to Roxy's question, I pulled away and got out of bed. Warmth gave way to the chill of the night air.

"Sorry."

With that, I walked out of the room.

My steps were unsteady. My head was swimming.

I was headed for my study. I wanted to look back through that diary right away—to get some sense, however vague, of the way that old man had fought his battles.

I was going to kill Orsted. It was the only way to protect my family. I'd do it, one way or another. Even if it cost me my own life.

"…Oh."

As I entered the study, my eyes found the letter I'd been planning to mail out tomorrow, if all went well.

“…”

I scratched out a few new lines at the very bottom of it.

…Maybe I wouldn’t get to see Eris again after all.

Chapter 4:
Nanahoshi's Hypothesis

"DOUBT THE MAN-GOD without opposing him."

Those were the words my future self said.

To be sure, a lot of what the Man-God said had struck me as dubious—especially the part about Orsted wanting to destroy the world, or the world falling apart if he died. I had no way of knowing where the truth ended and the lies began. Safe to say, he hadn't been completely honest with me.

Still, I couldn't let myself assume that the parts I *wanted* to be false were lies. If I jumped to the wrong conclusions, it might come back to bite me somewhere down the line. If nothing else, I had a feeling the Man-God's irritation had been real. It seemed like my future self's intervention had taken him completely by surprise.

That said… it had also brought him dangerously close to classifying me as an *enemy.* At this point, I didn't have much of a choice but to do what he told me. Opposing the Man-God just wasn't an option here. He could launch all sorts of attacks at me from complete safety. Under those circumstances, there was no way I could protect everyone I cared about.

Better to become his pawn, then.

I couldn't stand the guy, and I didn't trust his promises in the slightest. But he was targeting us for a clear reason, and there was a chance he'd leave us alone once he was no longer in danger.

The Man-God had ordered me to kill Orsted. Putting the specific details aside, I found his story about my descendants joining forces with the Dragon God to kill him relatively plausible. His goal would be achieved as long as Orsted *or* I died. This was our one way out.

I had to protect my family. The Man-God was the one who wanted them dead, but I had no way of getting at him. He could just sit in his big white void, sending an endless stream of danger our way.

Orsted, on the other hand, existed somewhere in this world. It was hard to imagine I could kill him, of course; in all honesty, I didn't even want to try. But from what the Man-God said, there was at least a chance it might work.

One way or the other, I didn't want to see anyone die because I'd made the wrong choice here.

The day after my encounter with the Man-God, I dropped by the Adventurers' Guild with Sylphie and mailed my letter to Eris.

With that taken care of, the two of us headed straight to Perugius' floating fortress. We went our separate ways at the entrance, and I made my way to Nanahoshi's room.

After being told to kill Orsted, I'd taken some time to think about who I might turn to for advice and assistance. She was the first person who'd popped into my head.

That probably had something to do with my future self's words: "Consult Nanahoshi." But I also had the feeling she might know where to find the man.

Of course, I'd need to discuss the situation with Sylphie and Roxy eventually… but I wanted to think carefully about how I'd explain it to them. I needed them to understand that none of this was their burden to bear.

I wasn't sure how I was going to manage that, honestly.

"Hey there."

"Oh? Well, you're back earlier than I expected."

It had been a few days since our last conversation, but Nanahoshi still hadn't recuperated fully. She was still bedridden for now, but there was a bit more color in her cheeks than before.

“Here you go, Nanahoshi,” I said, placing a basket of assorted fruit on her table. “Just a little get-well gift.”

“Thanks. Those look good.”

At this time of year, fresh fruit didn’t come cheap at the local market, but I was about to ask for her help. It wouldn’t hurt to mind my manners, no matter how businesslike our relationship might be.

“…You look rather serious today, I must say. Did something happen?” Nanahoshi was studying me with anxiety in her eyes.

Was it that obvious? Well, probably. I was willing to bet my face was even paler than hers right now. “I’ll cut to the chase. I want to call in that favor you owe me.”

“Okay. What do you need from me?”

“Let me tell you what happened first. Just so you know, it’s a pretty crazy story. But I promise you, it’s the truth.”

“All right.”

Slowly, carefully, I told her about the visit from my future self. I went through what he’d told me and summarized what I’d seen in the diary about the future. Then I moved on to my visit from the Man-God, his obvious irritation, and his claim that my descendants would join forces with Orsted to kill him. Finally, I told her that he’d ordered me to kill Orsted.

I told her everything, in other words. I hadn’t left anything out.

“…”

When it was over, Nanahoshi sat silently for a moment, holding her fingers to her forehead.

“Sorry, I need a minute to process all of this… Time travel? Really?”

“Yeah. He said he’d come from the future.”

“Is there any hard evidence of that?”

“There were comments in Japanese all over the diary. Also, he knew my name from my previous life.”

“What was it, incidentally?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Ah. Suit yourself… In any case, are you *sure* this man was telling the truth?”

“…About what?”

“His identity, for one thing. Even if he was a time traveler, maybe he was just impersonating you.”

“His diary was identical to the one I’d just created, and the first entry was exactly what I’d been planning to write down for that day.”

“That doesn’t prove anything. He might have copied out the real diary while you were asleep.”

She wasn’t wrong, but this wasn’t going to get us anywhere. “…For what it’s worth, I think he was exactly who he claimed to be.”

“I see. Of course, it’s possible that the Man-God chose someone you’d find believable for the role.”

“So… what? You think the diary was all made up too? And he was just pretending to be upset in that dream?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’m just wondering if you really think the Man-God is trustworthy.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re planning to follow his orders, though.”

“What choice do I have, Nanahoshi?”

Nanahoshi sighed quietly. And then, with something like resignation in her eyes, she took the conversation down a slightly different track.

“To be honest, Rudeus, I’ve heard a bit about the Man-God from Orsted himself.”

“…Really?”

“Yes. It was just after he nearly killed you.”

“Oh. Right…”

“I didn’t get any details, but he said that he was going to kill the Man-God, no matter what it took. He also mentioned that it wasn’t possible right now…”

So Orsted really was after the Man-God, and he knew he wasn’t capable of killing him just yet. Was he waiting for my descendants to be born? Or maybe for the fifth and final Dragon General to appear? Either way, the Man-God wanted to stop him before it was too late. It all seemed consistent enough.

The more I thought about this, the more plausible the Man-God’s words seemed. Could he really have come up with lies this convincing on the fly? Despite his irritation? It was possible he’d planned it all out beforehand and simply faked his anger. But I just couldn’t see myself figuring out which of his claims were false.

Did it really *matter* what his real goals were, though? Not right now. Not to me.

“In any case,” Nanahoshi continued, “why are you coming to me with this? Aren’t there other people you should have turned to first? It’s not like I can do anything to help you…”

“…My future self told me to consult you.”

“I see… What did he have to say about me, exactly?”

I found myself at a loss for words. Should I really answer this question? Tell her she might fail at the last moment, and give in to despair? The diary hadn’t contained any specifics, and my future self had been vague at best…

Maybe it was better to be honest, though. If she knew there was a good chance of her research failing, she could brace herself for that outcome in advance, and look for ways to avoid it.

“He said you’re… probably going to fail at the very last stage of your research.”

Nanahoshi’s eyes widened in surprise. After a moment, she pressed her lips together tightly and shook her head. “That’s not what I was asking. I wanted to know if he explained *why* you should consult me.”

“Uh, well… I guess you died at some point, so he couldn’t ask you… but he thought you might know where to find Orsted. He also said you spend a lot more time thinking through stuff, so you might be able to come up with another plan…”

“Stuff? Like what?”

“I don’t know… the Man-God’s real goals, probably?”

Then again, I’d sort of established that already. The thing about world peace was probably a load of crap, but I could believe that he was attempting to prevent his own death. Of course, there was a possibility that was just another intricate lie.

“…Would you mind letting me have a look at this diary of yours?”

“Sure.”

I handed over the battered old book. Nanahoshi flipped through the first few pages and grimaced. “This is going to take a while to get through. Your handwriting’s terrible, for one thing…”

“Yeah. It took me two days to read the whole thing.”

“All right. Can you loan it to me for one day, then?”

“You think you can finish it that fast?”

“I’m a quick reader. I’ll get through it by this evening.”

I was tempted to just point her to the more important parts, but there was a chance she’d pick up on something crucial in the less relevant entries. It was probably better to be patient.

“Okay then. I’m going to go get a little rest. I haven’t been getting much sleep lately.”

“All right. Come back later tonight, or whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Nanahoshi.”

I rose and left Nanahoshi’s room. As soon I stepped outside, I could feel a weight being lifted off my shoulders. I was experiencing some genuine relief.

That seemed a little odd. Did I trust Nanahoshi that deeply?

No, it wasn't that, exactly. She was just the one person I could talk to about *everything*—even the things I couldn't tell Sylphie or Roxy. I didn't care about her so deeply that I felt the need to hide painful, ugly truths from her. Maybe that was what allowed me to turn to her for help with problems like this.

I was a pretty cold person sometimes, wasn't I?

"…"

I glanced out the hallway window and noticed Ariel, Zanoba, Cliff, Sylphie, and Perugius discussing something or other out in the courtyard. Luke was standing a respectful distance behind them. Sylphie had positioned herself in front of Ariel and was talking directly to Perugius with her head held high. It was hard to believe she'd ever been that shy, bullied little kid back in Buena Village.

Still…according to my future self, Ariel was going to fail to gain Perugius' support before returning home to Asura, where she'd be defeated. Sylphie would accompany her… and all of them would die. I probably needed to lend them a hand. I'd accepted that possibility back when I married Sylphie.

First things first, though. My top priority at the moment was dealing with the Man-God.

I turned from the window and headed back to the room I'd been given, hoping to get a few hours of sleep.

When I woke up, Sylphie was lying by my side. Her face was always adorable when she was asleep, and it was only inches away from mine. It got my blood pumping right away.

I didn't remember going to bed with her. She must have slipped in at some point after I was already asleep. Maybe she'd tried to wake me up. Maybe she'd wanted to ask for my advice about dealing with Perugius. I felt a little guilty I hadn't been available.

I gently lifted her arm off my waist, patted her on the head, and then got out of the bed.

"Mmm… Rudy… gimme a kiss…"

This girl said some cute things in her sleep sometimes. Normally, it would have put me in the mood for a little evening tumble. But I was too preoccupied with less enjoyable thoughts at the moment. I fixed my bedhead with my hands and left the room as quietly as I could.

The windows in the hallway revealed a sky full of stars. I'd slept into the night. As I walked along the hall, I idly wondered if the presence of those stars meant this universe looked something like my old one on the cosmic scale.

"Might I ask where you're going at this hour?"

"Gah!"

A masked man surprised me as I turned a corner. "…Uh, hello there, Arumanfi."

"It's quite late, as I'm sure you know. Let me repeat myself—where are you headed at this hour?"

"I was going to see Nanahoshi. Is she still awake?"

"I imagine so. She requested a pen and paper not long ago."

"Ah. Good. Thanks…"

I continued on my way, my heart beating a little faster than usual. Did spirits never sleep, or what? They weren't human, so maybe they didn't need to. Must be nice having your security guards active twenty-four hours a day.

Uh, that reminds me… They listen in on every conversation that happens in this castle, right…?

That presumably meant that Perugius already knew about everything I'd discussed with Nanahoshi this afternoon. Since he hadn't dropped by to discuss it with me, I had to assume he was deliberately staying out of this for now.

But he wasn't the only one monitoring me, either. The Man-God had to be watching as well.

Feeling increasingly unnerved, I made my way through the quiet halls to Nanahoshi's room. Light was filtering from the edges of

her door; she was still awake, then. Just to be polite, I knocked before entering.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s Rudeus.”

“You’re coming by this late? Your wife might get the wrong idea, you know.”

“Want me to come back tomorrow instead?”

“No, I don’t mind. Come on in.”

I opened the door and stepped inside. Nanahoshi was still lying in bed, but there were sheets of paper scattered all around.

“Wow. Bit of a mess in here.”

“Well, I’m in the middle of trying to piece some things together.”

“Did you figure anything out?” I asked, picking up a random piece of paper as I sat down in the chair at her bedside.

“I’m not positive. But based on this diary and what you told me earlier, I’ve managed to come up with a hypothesis.”

“Oh? What kind of a hypothesis?”

“For many years now, I’ve been asking myself *why* I was brought here—to this universe, this place, and this specific time.”

Did that have anything to do with the topic at hand? I didn’t see the connection. But it couldn’t hurt to hear her out.

“At first, I assumed it wasn’t just me. I thought my friend must have been brought here as well.”

“…”

Should I be asking *why* she assumed that?

I already had an idea, though. It involved my very last memories from my previous life. In my attempt to save three high schoolers who were about to be run over by a truck, I’d pulled one of them to safety, losing my life in the process. Nanahoshi and her other friend hadn’t been hit, but she was still transported to this

world. I could understand why she'd thought her friend might be here as well. They were standing very close to each other in that moment.

"But no matter how thoroughly I searched this world, I couldn't find him anywhere."

"Isn't it possible he died immediately upon arrival?"

"I did consider that. But why would he have died when I survived?"

Was that why she'd tagged along with Orsted's travels? Was she hoping to find her friend? There was probably more to it than that. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Nothing happened to me, either."

"Are you *certain* about that?"

"Hm…?"

Now she'd lost me. I didn't remember being in any danger as a kid. In Buena Village, I had Paul and Zenith taking care of me, and things were generally peaceful.

"Listen. When you told me that your future self had arrived in the past without all of his internal organs, it occurred to me that I might have come here from the future as well."

"Wait, what? So you think this is the same universe we were in before, and this is just the distant past?"

"No, I'm not saying anything like that. I'm sorry, I'm not sure how to explain this… Hmm. You remember that the cause of the Displacement Incident has yet to be established, yes?"

"Didn't that happen as a side effect of your arrival here?"

"Right. But theoretically speaking, merely teleporting someone into a field shouldn't have caused a disaster like that."

True enough, but she'd been brought here from a different world. That probably had something to do with it, right? "I don't know, Nanahoshi. When my future self traveled back here, it didn't have any side effects like that."

"Yes it did."

"What? Seriously?"

“Half of the man’s internal organs were missing, if you’ll recall.”

“Uh, yeah… but… wait a second…”

Was she saying that his organs had ‘disappeared’ for the same reason all those people did during the Displacement Incident?

“Travelling fifty years back in time exhausted your future self’s supply of mana.”

“Well, not completely. He was still able to use a few spells.”

“But he grew weaker every time he did so, right? He was an incredibly powerful mage, but he didn’t even bother trying to heal his wounds.”

Nanahoshi tapped at the cover of the battered diary to emphasize her point.

“Now let’s suppose that I was brought here from a hundred years in the future. Presumably, that would require at least two times more mana than you possess.”

For some reason, she sounded very convinced of this. I had a feeling she might know a bit more than she was telling me.

“Travelling back fifty years in time cost you part of your body. Where did those organs go, exactly? Were they just left behind in the future? Well, let’s consider jumping back a hundred years. Surely you wouldn’t get off with losing a few organs in that case. Would your entire body get left behind instead?”

“Uh…”

“That doesn’t seem right, does it? I’d imagine you would end up somewhere else. The same place those organs disappeared to, that is.”

“…And where’s that supposed to be?”

“I have no idea, I’m afraid. But I think this is all part of a balancing process of sorts. After all, the ‘mana’ of this world obeys the law of conservation of energy.”

Does it? Huh. That’s news to me…

“I don’t have the evidence to back this up…but I imagine many people *disappeared* in the Displacement Incident. Thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands.”

“…”

“Now tell me something. In the immediate aftermath of that incident, did you notice anything wrong with you? Perhaps you were very low on mana for no apparent reason?”

In the aftermath of that incident, Eris and I had met Ruijerd, and we’d ended up in the city of Rikarisu, working as adventurers. I didn’t remember anything strange happening… No, wait. Hadn’t I felt strangely sluggish in those first few days, as we made our way to Rikarisu? I’d gotten worn out really easily, too. That *was* similar to the way it feels when you’re running out of mana…

“One second, Nanahoshi. If you’re right about this, why did some people disappear but not others?”

“Based on what the Man-God told you, I’d speculate it had something to do with the… strength of their destinies, or what have you. The laws of causality might have protected some people more strongly than others.”

“What, now you’re just speculating?”

“This entire theory is completely speculative. I did say it was just a hypothesis, remember?”

My destiny was strong, and that went for the women in my life as well. That was why Sylphie and Eris had come out of the incident safe and sound. Maybe it ran in the family, too—that would explain why my parents and sisters had survived.

…Or maybe I was just slapping a convenient reason on a bunch of random events.

“Okay, so what’s the bottom line here? That you came here from the future?”

“That’s not the point. It’s more that… Argh. How am I supposed to explain this?”

Nanahoshi was practically tearing her hair out in frustration at this point. She seemed to be having a really hard time putting her ideas into words. “I’m guessing that, at some point in the future, something established a… chain of causality leading to the Man-God’s downfall.”

“A chain of causality…?”

“Right. And in order to prevent that future from being realized, the Man-God began to meddle with your life.”

“Hm…”

“Think back for a moment, please. When was it that you first encountered him?”

The first dream had occurred right after the Displacement Incident. But at the time, the Man-God said that he’d been keeping his eye on me for a while beforehand.

…Hold on. Yesterday, he’d claimed he only discovered me *during* that disaster. It was so hard to pick the truth out of all his lies…

“Did you remember seeing anything odd in the period before the Displacement Incident?”

Before the incident? Uh… actually, maybe so. I’d seen that strange red gem floating in the sky outside Sauros’ sex tower back in Fittoa…

“Looks like something came to mind. Do you know when this oddity first came into existence?”

How was I supposed to know that?

No, wait… didn’t Sauros say something about this at the time?

Come on, come on… you can do this… you’ve got a good memory in this body, right? He said… “I found it three years ago.” Yeah, that sounds right…

“I guess it was back when I was five years old or so.”

“Did anything happen to you at that age? Did you meet anyone important?”

“Well, I guess that was when I got to know Sylphie. But that’s the only thing that comes to mind…”

Suddenly, a few pieces of the puzzle snapped together.

At the age of five, I met Sylphie, and we grew close. As a direct result of that, Paul sent me off to Fittoa, where I met Eris. On my tenth birthday, Eris and I were very nearly intimate. And the *next day,* the Displacement Incident had occurred. Immediately after that, the Man-God got in touch with me.

Was that the exact point when a future where he died came to be?

“Originally, you weren’t *meant* to exist in this world. Correct?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you think you were reincarnated in it, then?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“I think it happened for a reason, personally.”

“Uh… what reason?”

“Someone sent us here, Rudeus. Both of us. They sent us to this era as a means to change the future.”

“Who is this *someone* supposed to be?”

“Someone from the future, who wanted very much to see the Man-God die.”

This was starting to make my head hurt. Was she implying we were all puppets, dancing on the strings of someone who wasn’t even *born* yet?

“I can’t make any sense of this, Nanahoshi. What are you getting at here?”

“I think that you and I are necessary parts of a world in which the Man-God one day dies.”

Well, that cleared up exactly nothing…

“It’s possible that these descendants of yours summoned me here in order to create some tool or weapon they needed to destroy

the Man-God. And until I play my part by doing so, I can't return to my old world. Anything I try will fail."

"How does that make any sense?"

"I was brought here *because* I have to make that tool someday. Essentially, I'm a walking time paradox."

All right. Let's see if I can sort out what she's saying here.

The Man-God was going to die at the hands of Orsted and my descendants, who would join forces in the future. For that to happen, I needed to have children.

From the moment I met Sylphie as a child, the two of us were destined to get married and have a baby. The same probably went for Roxy, judging from the Man-God's focus on her. Maybe it even applied to Eris, since the Displacement Incident had occurred right after we'd nearly done some naughty things.

In the future where my family was wiped out, the Man-God was victorious. But it wasn't enough for my descendants to join up with Orsted, either. They probably needed something else—something Nanahoshi would one day create. And that was why she'd been summoned here, ten years after I had.

In other words, we hadn't just been summoned, but sent back in time as well.

Maybe someone had done this intentionally. Maybe it was some strange byproduct of the principles of causality. We had no way of knowing from our end. But if Nanahoshi's hypothesis was correct, we'd reached this world as the result of actions taken by someone in the future.

Did that mean those events had happened *before* we came here? Had the future come before the past? Did the chicken come before the egg? Well, whatever.

"All right. I think I understand your hypothesis."

"That's good to hear. Sorry I'm so clumsy at explaining these things."

It was an interesting theory, to be sure. But it wasn't a very reassuring one. "Basically, it means the Man-God was probably telling the truth. My descendants really will team up with Orsted to kill him someday."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Okay then. Let's get back to the main topic."

"What main topic?"

"How I go about killing Orsted."

"Oh…" Nanahoshi frowned and fell silent.

"Even if your theory's accurate, the Man-God is trying to avoid that future, and he's succeeded at least once. There might be 'destiny' at work here, but the future can still change."

"I just don't think it's a good idea, Rudeus. You'd be better off talking to Orsted and trying to find some—"

"Stop, Nanahoshi. The Man-God might be listening in on this conversation right now, for all I know."

Biting her lip, Nanahoshi glanced at the ceiling.

Sorry, wrong direction. The barren world's below us.

"This destiny thing is an abstract concept. I can't see it, and I can't count on it. My destiny might be strong, but that didn't protect my father or my mother. I'm not saying the Man-God will do anything to me right away, but he can see the future. If he realizes I'm going to betray him, I might come back home to find Aisha dead. Or he could set up some tragedy to happen a few years down the line."

"…But the Man-God can't manipulate everyone, right?"

"I'm not so sure about that. Who knows exactly what he's capable of? I wouldn't be surprised if he's been playing down his powers."

"I suppose you're right."

"And anyway, it's not like Orsted has a chance to beat him right now. Assuming the Man-God isn't lying, he needs my descendants to help him out, or else he's going to fail."

“Yes, that’s true. Assuming the Man-God isn’t lying.”

“I have to protect my family. The Man-God is the one who’s trying to kill them, but I have no way to fight him. At least Orsted’s somewhere on this planet. I don’t know *where*, but there’s at least a chance to find him.”

“There’s no guarantee the Man-God will keep his word, you know?”

“Orsted is the Dragon God. Based on my diary, he’s probably the only one who knows about the secret art to reach the barren world. If I kill him, that knowledge will be lost. The Man-God won’t have any reason to come after my family.”

“You know, even if Orsted dies, there’s a chance your descendants will find a way there on their own…”

“So what the hell am I supposed to do, then?!”

My words came out more loudly than I’d expected. I hadn’t meant to yell at her. Nanahoshi flinched, but pressed on with her argument regardless.

“Talk to Orsted, like I said. He might be able to help you out of this.”

“You think I didn’t consider this already?! Look, if I joined forces with Orsted, I’d be making a permanent enemy of the Man-God. You know what happens if I try to fight him on my own? Well, look at that diary! I don’t stand a chance. This time I’d have Orsted on my side, but what does that change? He can’t win either! The only reason he had a chance is because of me showing up and throwing things out of whack, right? That’s the whole reason the Man-God is coming after me! Orsted’s fighting a losing battle right now—you think he’s going to have the time and energy to help protect my entire family? Is he *that* powerful? You want me to make an enemy of the Man-God before I even know—”

“But… But Orsted is more trustworthy than the Man-God.”

“How can I know that for sure? Sounds like he might be trying to destroy the world. I mean, I’m not saying I believe that

completely… but, look, the Man-God was deceiving me. He pretended to be helping me out for years and years. What if Orsted did the same to you?"

"Well, I… can't deny it's possible, at least."

I paused to study Nanahoshi's face. There was a hint of fear in her eyes.

"I don't trust the Man-God," I said quietly. "but I can't trust Orsted either."

I knew how powerless I really was. I could believe what my future self had told me—that I didn't stand a chance against the Man-God. I could imagine, in vivid detail, following in that old man's footsteps. I could see myself losing everything I cared about, and dying a miserable death.

It was hard for me to be optimistic about fighting Orsted, either. The only outcome I could picture was an ugly, brutal defeat. But the Man-God did say my destiny was strong. Maybe he'd seen a future in which I *could* win this fight, somehow.

That was my last ray of hope.

"Listen, Nanahoshi. My future self told me to consult you. I'm guessing that means you know some way of getting in touch with Orsted."

"…Well, yes."

"Help me out. Please. I need to kill him."

"But… I… He's done a lot for me…"

Nanahoshi's eyes darted away from mine. She was clearly flustered. Orsted was the first person she met after her arrival in this world. He'd probably saved her life many times over, just like Ruijerd had saved me when I was stranded in the Demon Continent. It would be hard to betray someone you owed that much. I probably couldn't have done it either. I wouldn't betray Ruijerd, even if it cost me my life.

I understood what she was feeling. And normally, I might have given up—for the sake of maintaining a good relationship with her, if

nothing else. But I wasn't going to back down this time. It just wasn't an option.

"Listen to me for a minute, Nanahoshi Shizuka."

"…"

"Before I came to this world, I was a complete waste of oxygen. I don't know what you think of me as I am today… but in my previous life, I was someone you would have despised. And for good reason."

"…"

"But you know what? I was reincarnated here, and I made a fresh start. I screwed up plenty of times, and it cost me dearly sometimes, but I learned from those experiences. And now I have a family that means the world to me."

"…"

"I just want to keep them safe."

I got out of my seat. Sitting in a chair was no way to plead with someone. There was a proper way to do this sort of thing.

I went down on my hands and knees. I pressed my forehead to the ground and made myself as small as possible.

"Please. I'm begging you. Help me."

The floating fortress' floors were cold and hard.

"For all I know, the Man-God could have a change of heart tomorrow. I don't want to waste any time. I don't want to come home one day and find my family lying dead on the ground…"

"What are you doing?! Stop it!"

"I don't want to lose *any* of them. Please."

Nanahoshi got out of bed. She grabbed my shoulder and forcibly pulled my head off the ground. "Okay… okay, I'll help you. Just… stop doing that…"

There was exhaustion and sadness on her face. I felt a small stab of guilt. At the same time, though, a part of me was dancing

with joy.

Sometimes I kind of hate myself.

“Thank you. Really.”

Maybe I was making a huge mistake here.

But honestly, what choice did I have?

Chapter 5:
A Letter from Afar

THE SWORD SANCTUM, in the far west of the Northern Territories, was a place where the air rang with fervent battle cries and the sound of wooden swords. Most of the people you passed on the street wore martial arts uniforms or something similar, and carried practice swords and hand towels. Sometimes you might see a visitor in the dress of a swordsman, but those who chose to stay for an extended period usually adopted clothes designed specifically for training.

At the very back of this little town was a vast, snowy field that led to a great training hall. Today, a woman in swordsman's clothes stood in that field, near the entrance to that hall. Her light shirt and black pants were clearly chosen with mobility in mind. Over these, she wore the traditional overcoat granted to Sword Saints of the Sword God Style. There were two swords at her waist; even at a distance, the longer of the two was distinguishable as the work of a true master.

From the quality of her weapon alone, it was clear she was a highly-ranked student of the Sword God Style—one of the few who had reached the rank of Sword King, in fact. Her intimidating appearance, combined with her long, brilliant red hair, was reminiscent of a lion. Nine out of ten people who saw her in the street would have immediately stepped out of her way on instinct.

She was the Berserker Sword King, and her name was Eris Greyrat.

At the moment, however, she was looking down at her imposing outfit with a slightly anxious expression.

"Hey, Nina… are you sure I look all right?"

"Yes, yes. You're fine. You look *very* impressive, I promise."

Standing in front of this red-maned lion was a young woman in a martial arts uniform, who wore her dark blue hair tied back neatly. Her name was Nina Falion, and from the tone of her voice, she was starting to get a little exasperated with her rival.

“Really, Eris, the outfit’s perfect. You’re the very picture of a Sword King.”

“But Rudeus used to say he liked my frilly clothes better.”

“Oh, for crying out loud…”

Nina let out a long-suffering sigh, then continued the conversation as best she could.

“Eris, how exactly do you expect me to know what your boyfriend wants to see you wearing?”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t…”

“Would you please stop looking at me with pity in your eyes? You know, Gino and I… Ugh, never mind about that!”

With a firm shake of her head, Nina jabbed a finger into the air.

“Look, it’s not like you’re going to find dressy clothes like that around here, anyway. You do remember where we are, right? If you really want some frilly outfit, you’ll just have to buy one in the city.”

“Yeah, true enough,” said Eris with a little nod.

From all appearances, the matter was now settled. But this was the *fifth time today* they’d basically had this exact conversation.

“Anyway, I don’t know why you’re obsessing about your outfit right now. No matter how fast you go, it’ll be a good month on the road before you reach Sharia.”

“…”

“I’d worry less about the clothes and more about making sure you’re clean and presentable when you see him. Make sure you take a bath, comb your hair, and put on a little perfume… Uh, you do know men don’t like stinky women, yes?”

“Rudeus does. He never seemed to mind when I got all sweaty.”

“Well, I suppose he’d have to be understanding, if he found *you* attractive…”

“Actually, I even caught him sniffing my sweaty old underwear a couple times. He seemed to be enjoying it.”

“What?! The man’s a pervert!”

Eris scowled slightly at this remark. “Rudeus isn’t a pervert. He’s just a little…naughty.”

“He was getting off on your body odor, Eris! That’s the definition of a pervert!”

“…”

Eris brought her nose to her armpit and took a few experimental sniffs. Her clothes were new, and she’d taken a bath in preparation for her journey. All she could smell was the faint scent of soap.

“He’s not a pervert.”

“…Well, if you say so. Sorry, I suppose I went a bit too far.”

The two of them fell silent for a while. Now and then, their hair stirred as a cold wind blew across the quiet, snowy field.

“Ghislaine’s sure taking her time,” muttered Eris.

“I suppose the students might be squabbling about who gets to come along.”

Eris nodded vaguely. “Yeah, maybe.”

“…You know, Eris, I *have* heard a few rumors about your boyfriend now and then.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“They say Rudeus Greyrat can make his own eyes pop out.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised!”

“Also, he supposedly likes girls with flat chests.”

Nina glanced over at Eris as she spoke these words. Eris looked down at herself, as well. It was rare to hear the word

‘voluptuous’ applied to a swordswoman, but in her case, the glove fit.

“…That won’t be a problem.”

Her voice sounded confident enough, but Eris’ face looked a little paler than before.

“Let’s see, what else? They say he conquered a legendary labyrinth, destroyed an immortal Demon King, and put up a good fight against one of the Seven Great Powers.”

“No kidding? Well, that’s Rudeus for you! I’d expect no less.”

Just like that, the color was back in her cheeks. She even looked a little flushed. It made her happy to know that Rudeus had been working hard to grow stronger, just like she had.

“The man is monstrously strong, I’ll give him that. Normally I wouldn’t have believed a word of all this.”

Eris puffed up with pride and let out a little snort of pleasure. “I know! He’s amazing!”

“However, there are also some… less pleasant rumors out there.”

“Like what?”

“Like he’s a notorious playboy who struts around with a different woman every other day.”

At these words, Eris’ smile suddenly stiffened.

“Oh, and it sounds like abuses his strength to get anything he wants…”

“…”

“Look, Eris, this is just a possibility.” Nina paused, then continued in a very quiet voice. “But maybe he’s forgotten all about you?”

As soon as these words left her lips, Nina’s left hand shot up to block her face. And a split-second later, Eris’ fist slammed into her palm.

“…”

While she'd managed to stop the punch, the fury of Eris' gaze was too much for Nina to withstand. She averted her eyes awkwardly.

"It's just a rumor."

Eris pulled her fist back and folded her arms. She widened her stance and threw out her chest, twisted her mouth into a frown, and sulkily turned her head.

"…"

"Oh, look. Ghislaine's finally here."

Four horses were approaching slowly from the direction Eris had glanced in. A Beastfolk woman was leading them. This was the Sword King Ghislaine Dedoldia. While she had to be nearly forty years of age by now, her body was as lean and muscular as ever.

Ghislaine led two of the horses by the reins. Just a little behind was a young and beautiful woman who led the other two. While she wore plain travelers' clothing, her long silky hair and shapely face were more than enough to entrance all who saw her. This was the Water King Isolde Cluel. The Water God herself, Reida Lia, was perched atop one of the horses she was leading.

"Sorry for the wait." Ghislaine handed Eris the reins to a horse laden with luggage. "Were you two fighting again?"

"It was Nina's fault," replied Eris, pouting sullenly. Nina just shrugged her shoulders.

"I see," Ghislaine murmured, an amused smile flashing across her face.

"Not much of a sendoff," came a voice from above. "Gall didn't even bother getting out of bed?"

The old woman on the horse, easily the most formidable person in this imposing group, was looking backwards at the hall with a grumpy expression.

"I wouldn't read anything into it, Master Reida. The Sword God is something of a lightweight, I'm afraid."

“What, you think he’s got a hangover from last night? Good grief. The man should know his limits at his age… You know, Nina, this might be a golden opportunity. Why don’t you go challenge him to a duel?”

Nina smiled awkwardly at the old woman’s teasing. “I think I’ll have to refrain. I intend to become the Sword God in a somewhat more sportsmanlike fashion.”

“Aw, you’re such an earnest little thing. Don’t worry, dear, you’ll surpass that old sourpuss in no time. Just keep doing what you’re doing! But for what it’s worth, you might want to keep an eye on the folks below you on the ladder instead.”

“The ladder? Well, in any case, I’ll do my utmost to make good use of everything you’ve taught me.” Nina bowed her head respectfully to Reida, then turned to face Isolde. “Might I ask where you two are off to next? You’ll be traveling with Eris partway, correct?”

“That’s right,” Isolde replied. “We’re returning to the Kingdom of Asura. I’ve been invited to serve as an instructor of swordsmanship at the royal palace.”

“Ah, I see. It’s going to get a bit lonely around here without you…”

Isolde smiled gently at Nina’s words. “Do make sure to pay me a visit if you happen to stop by the kingdom. I’ll show you around the capital.”

“No thanks,” Nina said, scratching her nose bashfully. “If a country girl like me stumbled into Asura, I’m sure all your fancy city folk would just point and laugh.”

Eris snorted disdainfully. “Hmph. If anyone laughs at us, we can just cut them in half.”

Alarming as these words were, they did remind Nina exactly who the three of them were, and she chuckled softly. Laughing at a Sword Saint, let alone a Sword King or a Water King, generally wasn’t the best of ideas. You’d either have to be a truly formidable combatant in your own right, or a complete and utter fool.

“All right then, Eris. Shall we be on our way?”

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

Isolde smiled at Eris’ energetic reply, and hopped onto her horse. Eris followed suit, mounting hers so roughly that it shook itself in displeasure. She slapped it on the neck and it quickly settled down again.

“Be well, everyone,” called Nina, surprised to find that there were tears in her eyes. Her thoughts were drifting through the years since Eris’ arrival here. Their first meeting had been a truly horrible one. Nina had been humiliated, and Eris subjected her to many more embarrassments in quick succession. But the frustration of those failures had driven Nina to improve. And when Isolde arrived, her gentle words and tactful advice had been of great help as well. If it weren’t for them, Nina would no doubt have still been stagnating in the middle of the pack of Sword Emperors. She might never have risen into the realm of the Sword Kings. In other words, she owed them—

“Heya, folks! Got a delivery for ya! Mind signing for me?”

Nina’s melodramatic musings were abruptly interrupted by a cheerful, carefree voice. Trying to contain her irritation, she turned in its direction.

A somewhat dopey-looking man in a thick winter coat was standing in the snow nearby, puffing white clouds of vapor with every breath. It appeared he had absolutely no idea who any of them were. Rather than waiting for them to respond, he reached into his bag and retrieved an envelope.

“Oh, good grief. Who is it from?”

“Err… Well, looks like it’s addressed to Miss Eris Boreas Greyrat.”

Eris frowned suspiciously at this. But at the man’s next words, her eyes shot wide open.

“It’s from a Mr. Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Rudeus?!”

Eris instantly leapt from her horse and snatched the envelope from the man's hands. Just as she was about to rip it open, however, he hurriedly grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Hey, wait a second there. I need you to sign, or they won't pay me for the delivery…"

"Fine! Where do I sign?"

"Ah, right. Hold on just a moment, please…"

The man reached into his bag and pulled out a pen and some sort of form, which he handed to Eris. She paused for a few seconds, clearly attempting to remember the letters of her name, then scribbled it in a barely comprehensible scrawl.

The man studied these characters for a long moment, and eventually managed to identify the letters *Eris.*

"Okay then. Thank you kindly… Boy, I wish every job paid this well…"

He tucked the receipt back into his bag and headed back up the path in high spirits. Eris barely spared a glance in his direction as she got to work on the envelope. She was about to tear the thing open with her hands—but then she saw the words 'Miss Eris Boreas Greyrat' on the front of it, in what was clearly Rudeus' handwriting.

Heh. He must have been in a real hurry! I haven't used the name Boreas in years… Oh, wait. Maybe he doesn't know that?

She flipped the envelope around and studied the name written on its back: "Rudeus Greyrat." His handwriting hadn't changed at all. The letters were carefully shaped, but always looked a little off somehow. A long time ago, she'd spent hours every day staring at this handwriting as Rudeus tried to teach her how to read. The memory made her smile.

In order to preserve the envelope as best she could, Eris decided to open it at the top with her fingernails. Her first attempt had no effect. Neither did her second. After her third try, she reached for one of the swords at her waist. Tossing the letter into the air, she drew her blade.

“Hah!”

Somehow, instead of slicing the envelope in half, her sword cut a tiny sliver from its very top. Eris caught both pieces as they fell back down, tossed aside the smaller one, and finally pulled the letter out. With an eager look on her face, she began to read it. And then she continued to read it. As she did so, her excited expression quickly gave way to one of profound irritation.

“Uhh, Eris?” Nina asked gingerly. “What does it say?”

Eris didn’t reply. She was still glaring fiercely down at the piece of paper in her hands.

“Eris? Are you listening?”

“Oh, shut up! I don’t recognize some of these words, all right? It’s just taking me a little while to read it!”

“Ah. I see…”

“You do it, Nina!”

“What? Uh, I can’t read myself, you know?”

“Seriously?! That’s gonna come back to bite you some day!”

“Why are *you* lecturing me about this? You can’t read it either!”

As the two of them began to squabble, Isolde hopped down from her horse with a sigh. “Calm down, you two. I’ll read it instead.”

“Oh, okay,” said Eris, handing the letter over. “Thanks.”

Isolde began to read it slowly and carefully. At first, her expression was neutral, but as time passed, it began to grow stormier and stormier. And once she was finished, she cried out in a voice full of anger.

“What is the *matter* with this man?!”

“Huh?” said Eris nervously. “What? What does it say?”

“Oh, Eris… You were training so hard all these years for *him?* You poor, poor thing. Saint Millis, take pity on this girl…”

Isolde folded her hands and looked beseechingly to the heavens for a moment, then looked over at Eris with eyes full of

sympathy.

“Eris, you really ought to forget all about this man. Why don’t you come along with me to Asura instead? It would be *such* a waste to give yourself to a scoundrel like this.”

“Look, will you just tell me what the letter says?!” hissed Eris, reaching for the swords at her waist. “Do you *want* me to chop you in half?!”

“Very well then. Here it is.”

Clearing her throat, Isolde began to read the letter in a voice that rang with righteous outrage.

“*Dear Miss Eris—*

It’s been quite some time, hasn’t it? This is Rudeus Greyrat.

Somehow, it seems five years have passed since we went our separate ways.

Do you still remember me? I certainly hope so. I know I haven’t forgotten you, or the time we spent in each other’s company.

During our first night together, I swore to myself that I would stay with you forever. I fully intended to stand at your side for the rest of my days, supporting you through anything life sent your way.

But when I woke up in the morning, I found myself alone in bed. You were already gone.

Devastated by your disappearance, I sank into a deep depression. The next three years of my life were bitter, lonely ones. Nothing I did felt meaningful. I felt as if I was wandering through a heavy fog.

Of course, I don’t blame you for any of this now. But I hope you can at least understand how miserable I was at the time. As for the reason I’m writing you this letter, well… let’s just say a certain someone recently mentioned you to me.

Up until now, I was convinced that you’d abandoned me to travel the world on your own. But this individual claimed I had

misunderstood your feelings completely—that you'd never stopped caring for me, or thinking of me.

I have two wives now.

Both of them pulled me out of my despair in moments when it might have crushed me. While I may have misinterpreted your actions, that didn't make my pain any less real. And they were there for me when I needed them most.

However, if it's true that your heart remains unchanged—if you truly want to be reunited with me, and spend your life with me—I'm prepared to accept your feelings. I have no intention of leaving my two existing wives, so you would become my third.

I understand you might find this proposal unacceptable, or perhaps even infuriating. If so, you have every right to punch me to your heart's content. I'd appreciate it if you let me off with two or three good swings, though.

Of course, my hope is that it won't come to that. Even if you're not willing to join my family, I hope we can at least become good friends.

Sincerely,

Rudeus Greyrat."

"…"

Eris wasn't saying anything. She wasn't moving, either. From all appearances, she'd been turned to stone.

Isolde took one look at her and promptly resumed her earlier tirade. "Well, there you have it. Isn't he *awful*? Having two wives is bad enough, and now he's casually offering to make you number *three!* The man clearly has no respect for women whatsoever!"

"I don't know," said Nina, peering at the letter with a thoughtful frown. "It sounded like he was trying pretty hard to be considerate…"

"Considerate?! It's the first letter he wrote her in years, and he didn't even bother to say *I love you!* He seems to think he'd be doing

her a *favor* by marrying her! No, I'm sorry. I don't like this Rudeus Greyrat one bit!"

"Look, he thought Eris had dumped him, right? And he spent three whole years moping about it, too! Isn't it partially her fault for wandering off like that?"

"Oh, please! He probably made all that up to make her feel guilty. He just wants her because she's a master swordsman with a nice body!"

"Uhhh… I don't know about that. Would you really risk keeping Eris around just to have a sexy bodyguard…?"

Nina was pondering the matter seriously. Isolde was squawking mad. And Eris was staring up at the sky, her arms still folded, her eyes no longer seeing anything at all. The sky above was blue, but her mind was a pure white void.

"Hm? Oh, there's one more piece of paper in here…"

It was at this point that Isolde realized she hadn't read the entire letter yet. Retrieving the final sheet of paper, she began to read.

"Let's see… Ahem."

"P.S.

As I write these words, I'm preparing to fight the Dragon God Orsted to the death. I have no idea if I can win. It's possible I won't even be alive by the time this letter reaches you. But if I do make it back alive, let's talk things out."

By the time she finished reading out these words, Isolde's face had visibly stiffened. That went for Nina as well. Her expression was one of fear and awe. The mere idea of challenging the Dragon God himself to a duel had turned her spine to ice.

But on Eris' face, and hers alone, there was a grin. Her eyes were alive again—burning with passion and determination.

"All right!" she cried, leaping back up onto her horse. "We've gotta hurry if we're gonna make it there in time! Let's move, Ghislaine!"

Just like that, she kicked her steed into motion. It sprinted forward across the plain, kicking up snow as it went; Ghislaine hurried her own horse after it. They barreled past the courier who'd delivered the letter, sending him flying to one side, and disappeared into the distance in a matter of seconds.

Nina and Isolde just stood there staring after them, too stunned to even blink.



Chapter 6:
Preparations

A MONTH HAD PASSED since my conversation with the Man-God. I'd spent every day of it working on my preparations for the coming battle with Orsted.

Killing him would not be easy, to say the least. He was the single strongest person in the world. Which meant, of course, that he was far more powerful even than formidable figures like Atofe, Perugius, and Ruijerd. And I couldn't defeat any of those three. I had a less-than-zero chance against Orsted in a fair fight.

With that in mind, I'd worked out three general priorities.

One: I needed to create the Magic Armor.

Two: I wanted to secure some allies.

Three: I had to find a strategy that might work.

First and foremost, there was the Magic Armor project.

Based on what I'd read in that diary, once I had it, I could wield physical power comparable to that of the Seven Great Powers. My future self had grown dramatically stronger after creating it. It seemed outright essential.

The first thing I'd done was buy a small cabin on the outskirts of the city of Sharia. I'd initially hoped to build the thing in Perugius' floating fortress, but he'd denied me permission. (I'll explain why later.)

I'd turned to Cliff and Zanoba for assistance with the project. The two of them immediately agreed to help without pressing me for a detailed explanation. I wanted Cliff to create a control system based on that of the Zaliff Prosthesis, and Zanoba to design the armored shell and its propulsion mechanisms. When I explained the general concept of the Magic Armor, their eyes lit up with excitement. It didn't take long for them to understand what I had in mind.

Powered suits weren't really a thing here, but I guess boys will be boys anywhere you go.

Once Cliff and Zanoba were on board, I asked Sylphie and Roxy for their help as well. Roxy acted as the project's general overseer and supervisor. I could conceivably have filled that role myself, but I was the only person capable of creating and modifying the ultra-hard plates of rock that would serve as the thing's actual armor. It was a job that took a lot of time and a lot of mana. I didn't have time to worry about too much else.

Sylphie was capable of silently casting Earth magic. Also, her research into the Displacement Incident had left her unusually knowledgeable about magic circles. The girl was pretty damn smart and talented in general, for that matter. Since she could handle almost any task, I wanted her as a general assistant to Roxy, running around to help out wherever she was most needed.

When I'd asked her for her help, she said "Of course! I'm on it!" with a big grin on her face. It felt like the first time in a while I'd seen her look that happy, actually. She'd probably been keeping some less than happy thoughts to herself recently. That made me feel more than a little guilty.

Once the Magic Armor project got rolling, I started to spend some time on item two: finding allies.

My initial plan had been to face Orsted alone, but I knew how powerless I was compared to him. I didn't have my future self's long years of combat experience, or his knowledge of magic.

Unfortunately, I didn't track down anyone who seemed capable of evening the odds. Badigadi was nowhere to be found, and neither was Ruijerd. Perugius, unsurprisingly, turned me down flat. His reasons for doing so weren't exactly comforting, either—

"There are three people in this world you should never try to fight: The Technique God, the Fighting God, and the Dragon God. Even among those three, Orsted is particularly powerful and particularly ruthless. Your determination to protect your family is admirable, and I would love to ask him a few questions about the

Man-God…but I shall be staying out of this. I'd rather not die before Laplace returns, you see."

I'd gone in optimistic about my chances of coaxing him into helping, but it just didn't work out that way. At least he wasn't actively trying to stop me, either. I'd have to take that as a win.

Apart from Perugius, I simply could not locate anyone who seemed capable of standing against Orsted. Zanoba was incredibly strong and highly resistant to physical damage, so I briefly considered bringing him along…but Atofe had been capable of damaging him with her attacks, despite his "blessing." I had to assume the same went for Orsted. The last thing I wanted was to get Zanoba killed. He was my best friend.

Of course, I didn't want to see Cliff or Elinalise die either. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to drag anyone else into this fight. I did consider Eris momentarily. It was hard to guess exactly when she'd get here. Based on that diary, though, she was probably even more powerful than I'd be with the Magic Armor complete. Was there any chance she'd join me in the fight against Orsted?

It wasn't even a fair question, really. Before I started dragging her into my battles, the two of us needed to sort out our past and where things stood between us. I had no right to expect her help until that happened.

With my search for allies at something of an impasse, I redirected my attention to the third item on my list—crafting my strategy for the battle. I needed to run through this fight carefully beforehand.

I would be fighting on my own. And I absolutely had to kill my opponent. Given those two premises, I actually had a large number of options available to me.

If there were no allies nearby, and I kept my distance from my enemy, I could easily make use of powerful spells with a wide area of effect. The bigger the spell, the more difficult it would be for him to evade. Something like Lightning, which concentrated all its power

into a smaller area, might be more effective at dealing damage, but I had a feeling that Orsted would simply dodge it.

All things considered, barraging him with wide area attacks from a great distance seemed like the smartest approach. The damage would add up eventually. And if I stayed far enough away that he couldn't perceive me, he wouldn't be able to interrupt me with Disturb Magic.

There was also a chance that I could catch him unawares and smash through his defenses when his guard was down. Setting up a trap might not be a bad idea. I could lure him to a deserted area, where he'd find something that would catch his attention…something that would explode the moment he picked it up. I could use that as my signal to fire magic at him from a distance.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the right approach. The question was: how would I go about luring him to this location? Maybe I could take Nanahoshi as a "hostage", or send him a message from the Man-God. Both seemed like they might work.

That said, I wasn't optimistic enough to think that my initial long-range attacks would be enough to take him down. There was a *chance* it might work, but I needed to assume otherwise. Once he found his way to me, it would come down to a close-range fight in my Magic Armor. I wasn't sure how well my mind could keep up with an ultra-high-speed battle…but there was no point worrying about that until I'd actually taken the Magic Armor for a spin.

As I thought all this over, I found myself remembering my childhood in this world. For a while, I spent a lot of time working on a plan to beat Paul in a fight. I'd been hoping to surpass him while he was still in his prime. In the end, though, I never defeated him even once.

Still, the tactics I'd worked out back then were deeply rooted in my mind. I knew how to use my magic in coordination with the movements of my body. I knew how to move in three dimensions. No matter how overwhelming my opponent might be, my basic approach wasn't going to change. I needed to keep him at a distance, blasting

him with attacks while he tried to catch me. I needed to keep the pressure up, and force him to make disadvantageous decisions.

That was how I fought when I was at my best.

Of course, Orsted had Disturb Magic and his Wyrmgates. There were no doubt other tricks up his sleeve, as well. It felt safe to say that this would never go according to plan. The trap and the ambush were a good start. What else did I need to beat him? It was crucial for me to really think this through. I had to consider every possibility, then focus on the more promising ideas.

In all honesty, I knew my mind wasn't functioning too well right now. I was impatient, and scared, and increasingly obsessed with my task. It would probably have been wiser to take things more slowly, and try out some of my ideas on an experimental basis.

The single *best* plan would probably have involved cornering Orsted slowly and methodically, over a period of ten years or so. But if I were that lackadaisical about this, the Man-God might change his mind, and I might come home to find I'd lost someone I loved. More than anything else, I was terrified of that.

And one night, as my preparations were proceeding, he came to me again.

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I found myself in a white space. Presumably, I was at the center of the barren world.

"Hey there! Looks like things are coming along nicely, huh?"

Yeah. I'll fight Orsted, just like you asked me to.

"Now, now, I didn't ask you to *fight* him. I just asked you to kill him!"

You sure look like you're in a good mood today. Are you that happy to have me dancing on your strings?

“C’mon, this is exciting stuff! Even I don’t know what’s gonna happen next!”

Glad you’re enjoying yourself. I wasn’t expecting to see you again so soon, though. Does this mean you just made up that stuff about wavelengths aligning or whatever?

“Oh, yeah. Total nonsense.”

You could at least pretend to feel a little shame… So I’m guessing the part about ‘I can only appear to certain people’ was a lie too?

“Yep, pure fiction. But hey, it must have been a nice ego boost to hear you were *the chosen one*, right?”

Tch… Well, whatever. Within the next few days, I’ll tell Sylphie and Roxy that I’m planning to fight Orsted. If he does ends up killing me, my kids will grow up knowing he’s the man who murdered their father. That should be plenty of reason for them to hate him, so—

“Sorry. That’s not going to be enough to knock destiny off track. You need to kill him, or I’ll erase your descendants—no matter how long it takes.”

Ugh. Do you have to phrase it like that? Well, whatever. In any case, it’s going to take me a while to complete the Magic Armor. We’re breaking new ground here, and Cliff’s struggling with some of the theories involved. I’m trying to push things along as fast as I can, but I think it’ll be another six months or so…

“Cliff should already be capable of designing magic circles to strengthen the rocks. You should focus solely on making the joints and the external shell, since that needs to be as tough as possible. Also, when you’re designing the magic circles for the torso, make sure you use the Alistair Method rather than the Wind System. That should help you past the tough parts.”

Uh… no kidding?

“Tell Zanoba you want the thing to be a bit more on the bulky side, as well. You’ll burn more mana that way, but it’ll let you layer more magic circles underneath the main ones. Design the circles on

the lower layer to repair the more important ones if they get damaged. That should allow you to keep moving, even if the thing's half-destroyed."

Huh? Wait. I didn't know you were an expert on this stuff.

"Well, I am the Man-God, you know. I'm familiar enough with the Fighting God's armor to give you a few pointers."

You know, that reminds me… Don't the people of the world call you the God of Men instead? Is there any significance to that?

"The God of Men is something like a nickname of mine, I suppose. It just caught on for some reason, I guess! Man-God is my proper name."

Why do I feel like you're lying to me yet again? Not that I really care that much about your name…More importantly, do you think I can win? Let's say I build the Magic Armor, set a trap, and launch a sneak attack. Do I have a chance?

"Ooh, good question… I mean, you've got as much mana as Laplace to work with, right? If you go all-out, I bet you'll put up a good fight."

That's not super reassuring. Mind being less vague? I wouldn't mind if you dropped me a few more hints on strategy…

"All right then. Get yourself some magical implements—the kind that fire off an offensive spell when you feed them mana. Shouldn't be too hard to find those in Sharia, right? They're designed to only consume a little bit of juice, so ordinary folks can use them, but it's easy enough to modify them so they use more mana…just like that Zaliff Prosthesis of yours. Make yourself a few *really* high-powered ones, the sort only you could use. You'll get some new attacks for your arsenal, and a way to work around Disturb Magic."

Oh. Wow. Gotta say, you're giving me some really detailed advice for a change.

"Well, you're throwing yourself into this more enthusiastically than I expected. Why wouldn't I help out? I really *do* want Orsted dead, you know."

…Can't shake the feeling there's something more to this. For all I know, if I design the Magic Armor according to your instructions, it'll explode the moment I try to activate it.

"…Whose life would you like to bet on that intriguing theory? Go on, pick: Aisha, Norn, Lilia, or Zenith?"

Tch…

"Like I've told you, I can't see Orsted's future. That means I can't see the outcome of your battle, either. I don't know what's going to happen to you."

Okay. And that means you don't know for sure that I'm going to lose. Correct?

"Exactly."

By the way… if you can't see Orsted's future, how do you know that he's going to join forces with my descendants in the future?

"I can't see the man himself, but I can certainly see my *own* future. It involves your descendants, some man I don't recognize, and Orsted surrounding me."

You can see anything you're going to experience personally, huh? So what happens after they show up? They just beat you to a pulp or what?

"Yep. They kill me rather brutally. I don't put up much of a fight."

Hmm… Look, why is Orsted after you, anyway? You sure you didn't do anything unspeakably cruel to him?

"Oh, who knows. I don't recall doing anything to the man himself, at the very least."

Either you don't want to tell me, or you genuinely don't know. I guess it doesn't matter which. It's not like I can trust anything you tell me, anyway. You lie constantly.

"Now that's a little harsh. The only *malicious* lie I ever told you was that little fib about the basement, you know?"

All your advice up until then was just laying the groundwork for that moment, right?

"Yeah, true! But you know, if you hadn't gone and gotten Roxy pregnant, I wouldn't have *needed* to do that."

Why the hell couldn't you have just told me not to have a kid with her, then?! Why did you have to make this so complicated?!

"It wouldn't have worked. No matter what I said, you would have knocked her up. That's just the way it had to be, I guess. No matter how many times I tweaked and prodded at the future, it just didn't want to change…"

Maybe so, but you could have at least— Agh. Never mind. Sorry for yelling at you. In the end, I did marry Roxy, and I did get her pregnant. Now that I think about it, some of the things I did to end up here felt a little strange to me. Out of character, even. I guess that's how this destiny thing works. And I get why you want to change it.

I'll do what you want, Man-God. I'll follow your orders. I'll kill Orsted. But before I do that, there's something I need to say to you.

"What's that?"

Once Orsted is dead, I want you to leave me alone for the rest of my life. Don't meddle with my family, either. Please. I want you to promise me that.

"What's this? Hmm. And here I thought you didn't trust my promises anymore."

I don't. Of course I don't… but I have to believe you're not lying about this one thing. If you're not going to let me off the hook no matter what, maybe I'll just join up with Orsted and start working against you.

"Oh, go right ahead. I can't kill you, sure, and I can't kill him either. But you don't want to see what I *can* do. You'll find out exactly what it means to make an enemy out of me."

You might be bluffing right now. Maybe threatening me is the best you've got. I mean, you had to manipulate me for years before you could get me to make one little mistake… For all I know, you

might be talking tough because you're terrified to have me as an enemy.

"Please. You've got a very strong destiny, so I was just trying to nip things in the bud as subtly as possible… Oh, forget it. It's not like you're going to believe anything I say, right? Go ahead, underestimate me all you want. Bye now! You might live to regret this."

Uh… no. Sorry. I take it back. Give me a minute here. Look, all I want is a little reassurance. You say you're going to kill my family if I lose to Orsted. But even if I win, it feels very possible that you'll turn around and kill them anyway. That's not great for my motivation, you know? I need to know there's some point in me doing this.

"…Sigh. I suppose you're right. Here goes, then: In the name of the Man-God, I swear to honor my promise. Once you defeat Orsted, I won't have anything to worry about. That means I won't need to bother you ever again. I won't speak to, harass, or attempt to harm you, your wives, your mother, your sisters, your descendants, or your pets."

You really mean that, right? I'm going to hold you to it.

"Sure. If you'd like, I'm even willing to offer a little helpful advice if your family ever finds itself in a crisis."

…I've had enough of your advice for one lifetime, thanks.

"Oh yeah? Well then, good luck with Orsted."

With those final words echoing in my ears, I felt myself sink into unconsciousness.

***

Another month flew by.

The construction of the Magic Armor was coming along smoothly. Following the Man-God's recommendation, we'd made it larger than I originally intended. The thing stood a good three meters

tall…about half the size of an Aura Battler, come to think of it. The Magic Armor described in my future self's diary had been more like an ordinary bulky suit of armor. This version would be significantly bigger. Increasing its size had led us to several discoveries: not only was it was easier to design this way, but we could also increase its durability.

The Man-God's advice had been completely legitimate, in other words.

When I passed along his other suggestions to Cliff, his eyes lit up with understanding, and he immediately threw himself into his work with redoubled vigor. In no time at all, he resolved the thorniest problems he'd been struggling with. I'd expected the project to take at least half a year, but our progress was accelerated significantly.

At this rate, we'd be done in another month or so. The entire job would be over a mere three months after we'd begun. Under any other circumstances, I might have been full of gratitude toward the Man-God.

It was ironic, in a way. My future self had created the Magic Armor in order to kill him, but now he'd helped us create it… When I thought about it that way, I couldn't help wondering if he really was up to something devious here. But Cliff and Zanoba were the ones actually making the thing. I trusted them completely.

I'd also hunted down the magical implements the Man-God had mentioned. Roxy had helped me out with this.

We'd found what we were looking for quickly enough. The implements in question were small wands, activated by the word "Fire," which launched Beginner-tier offensive spells at your target. They were a fairly popular, affordable product, and weren't particularly powerful. You'd sometimes find Thieves who lacked other ranged attacks carrying them.

In sum, the Man-God said that if we modified these so they could withstand my mana output, it would be possible to make them fire off the sort of Stone Cannon spells I frequently used in battle.

As I considered this, an interesting idea had popped into my head. While we were modifying their power, what if we also made it so they could fire a continuous stream of spells, so long as they kept receiving mana? And what if I then bundled ten or so of them together? I'd have myself a Gatling gun of sorts, capable of pumping out a constant stream of deadly projectiles.

When I mentioned the idea to Roxy, she nodded with a neutral expression on her face. "Your spells are very potent, but you can only fire one of them at a time. This might be a way around that limitation. Fortunately, I happened to meet an excellent creator of magical implements recently. Let's see if they'll take the job."

That same day, Roxy arranged a meeting with her acquaintance. I was slightly surprised when she turned out to be an elvish woman. There weren't many of her race in Sharia. Elves have pretty faces as a general rule, but hers was caked with soot, and her fingernails were black with grime. She was clearly devoted to her job.

When I explained my idea, her eyes widened with surprise. "Uh, are you sure about that? If I make this thing like you described it, every shot is going to take way too much mana. It might drain you to death if you're not careful."

I hadn't even considered the idea. Was that what the Man-God had in mind when he suggested this? Stone Cannon didn't consume much mana, but this thing would be capable of firing off tens of thousands of them in a single day…

I couldn't bring myself to worry too much about it, though. If I ran out of mana without killing Orsted, I was as good as dead either way. And I needed to push myself to the very limit if I was going to stand a chance against him.

"That won't be a problem. Please make it exactly as I described."

The elf shrugged, but took the job nonetheless. I would have my short-range weapon. Now I just had to pray it would be capable of damaging Orsted.

“Rudy…”

On our way back from the workshop, Roxy struck up a conversation.

She said: “I don’t know who or what you’re planning to fight, but will you really need a weapon like that to defeat them?”

“No, no. I’m sure I’ll be fine either way.”

I was just trying to be reassuring, of course. It didn’t work. Roxy narrowed her eyes and pouted in displeasure. “You used to be such an honest, sweet kid, Rudy. But lately all you do is lie and hide things from me.”

The words stung quite a bit. In all fairness, though, I’d done plenty of lying and deceiving even when I was a kid.

“Sorry, Roxy…”

“Oh, that’s all right. I’m hiding something from you too, after all. But you know, Rudy… I am at least discussing that matter with people I can trust. I’m not saying it has to be me, but I hope you’re confiding in *someone.* You’re not trying to face this all alone, are you?”

“Nah. Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

I had a good idea as to what Roxy’s secret was. Lately, she hadn’t been letting me do anything too… active in the bedroom. It was partially because I wasn’t asking, but I noticed she was actively steering me away from making the suggestion. Given what I’d read in the diary, she was probably starting to suspect that she was pregnant. She wasn’t getting morning sickness yet as far as I knew, but I’d noticed that her sense of taste seemed to be changing.

When was she planning to break the news? Maybe she was waiting for the second trimester… or maybe she was planning to keep quiet until I dealt with my current mission.

Either way, I couldn’t help hoping that she’d speak up before I went off to fight Orsted. That way, we could have a big party to celebrate.

It might be my last chance to throw one.

The following day, I paid a visit to Nanahoshi.

I'd half-expected to be refused entrance to the floating fortress, but they let me in surprisingly easily. Given how scared he was of Orsted, Perugius was being pretty lenient toward me.

I ended up asking Sylvaril about this, and received a prompt reply.

"I kind of thought you wouldn't let me in after last time, you know?"

"Lord Perugius always shows great compassion to those going to their deaths. He has no objection to you saying your farewells to Miss Nanahoshi."

Apparently, they were already convinced that I was going to lose. And also die. I was being allowed into the castle as an act of charity.

I wasn't complaining, though. It beat getting chased away at the door.

I found Nanahoshi looking much livelier than before. Someone had brought a number of her possessions from the University up here, so her room was a bit less barren, too. The Ruijerd figurine sitting on her windowsill was presumably a gift from Zanoba, and the small decorative cross next to it must have come from Cliff. That was thoughtful of him. It never hurts to have something to pray to when you're struggling. I never had much interest in any gods or relics in my previous life, but my opinions on the matter had… evolved a bit.

"So basically, my preparations are coming along nicely. I think it's time to talk about how we're going to lure him to me."

"…All right. But first—as I'm sure you're well aware, Orsted is extremely powerful."

"I know."

"He's also ruthless. I'm not sure how he picks his targets, but when he intends to kill someone, he doesn't hesitate."

"…"

"I spent several years travelling with him, and I never saw him break a sweat in battle. He kills giant dragons in a single—"

"Can you stop trying to scare me, Nanahoshi?"

"I'm sorry. But I do want you to reconsider this, in all honesty. It's madness, plain and simple…"

"Look—"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry."

Well, now she had me feeling even more anxious than before. Did I really have a chance of winning here?

"What I'm trying to say is: I don't recommend fighting him head-on."

"Sure. Yeah. I can't see myself beating him in a fair fight, no matter how much I enhance my strength and speed."

"If I were you, I would lure him to a specific spot, and then attack him with your magic from a distance… while remaining hidden, of course."

"Hmm. Anything else come to mind?"

"Let's see… Oh."

"What? Did you think of something?"

"I'd almost rather not say…but I did decide to help you, I suppose."

"Right…"

Nanahoshi swallowed loudly before continuing. "Poisoning him might work as well."

Poison, huh…

Detoxification magic could deal with a wide range of toxins, but there were certain diseases and poisons which no known spell could counteract. It was hard to know how effective most of them would be against a monster like Orsted, of course… but there had to be something out there that could harm him. Maybe Ariel could hook me

up with something suitable. I had a feeling that everyone in the Asuran royal family was well-versed in this kind of thing.

“Okay. So I set a trap, poison him, and then attack from a distance… Ah, right. Nanahoshi, could I use you as a hostage?”

“A hostage…? I suppose so. I’m not sure how concerned Orsted would be with my safety, though.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point… We don’t want him figuring out you’re working with me, either. No reason to put your neck on the line too…”

“O-Oh. Right. I hadn’t even thought of that.”

Hmm, yeah. Let’s not do the hostage thing.

The Man-God was using my family as hostages at the moment. I knew it was a highly effective way to manipulate someone. But it was *also* a great way to get them furious and highly motivated. That could seriously backfire on you in battle.

“Any other ideas, Nanahoshi?”

“Hmm, I don’t know… Did you read a lot of manga back in Japan? There were plenty of powerful enemies in those, right?”

“I don’t think those strategies are going to be too helpful here…”

The two of us talked it through for a while longer, managing to think up a few somewhat promising ideas. Without exception, they were sneaky, underhanded tricks. It was hard to imagine them doing much against someone as formidable as Orsted.

Then again, even the deadliest techniques are just a combination of devious little maneuvers. I had to believe I’d get *some* results from all of this.

“Well then, uhm… good luck, Rudeus.”

“Thanks.”

“Try to come back alive, will you? I don’t think I’ll ever get home without your help.”

By the time I left Nanahoshi's room, we'd worked out our plan to lure Orsted to me.

Next, I turned to Ariel for help.

When I explained that I wanted poisons no spell could neutralize, she grimaced openly. But nonetheless, she set up me with an introduction to a local underworld organization that she was on good terms with.

This group was larger and more sophisticated than your typical pack of bandits; it had grown into something more like a gang or a mafia family. Drug smuggling was their main business, but they also made and sold a variety of poisons.

When I got in touch, they directed me to a dilapidated house in a quiet corner of Sharia, where I was escorted to a specific room in the basement. The air was thick with sweet-scented smoke.

My contact, a man with one eye, was already waiting for me inside.

"Hello there, Mr. Greyrat. Nice to meet you."

I hadn't introduced myself, but the man clearly knew who I was. With a big, crude grin, he got right down to business.

"So tell me, what can I do for you today? You want to make 'em really suffer for a while, or just keel over right away? Maybe something to make the legs go numb, or swell up some magician's tongue? I've got a little potion that can drive any woman wild, too. Perfect for when things start to get a bit perfunctory!"

Based on that spiel, his inventory ranged from poisons to anesthetics and aphrodisiacs. That suited me perfectly.

"I'll take everything you've got."

"Uh, everything? Now, I'm not complaining, but that's gonna get a little pricey…"

"That's fine by me."

"Whoo. Okay then! Guess you *really* want someone dead… Oh, what about that love drug? You want that one too?"

“Well…”

A thought flitted through my mind: *What if Orsted’s immune to poisons?*

Killing him with a poison no spell could cure was a simple enough idea. Anyone could have thought of it. And Orsted was cursed to be hated by everyone he encountered. It seemed likely he had some countermeasures in place against this sort of thing. Maybe he was naturally resistant…or maybe he had some kind of miracle potion that could purge any toxins from his system.

“Yeah, I’ll take that too.”

“Heh heh heh! Sure thing. You wanna see that cool, collected beauty of yours melt into a puddle, huh?”

“My wife’s sweet as a kitten in bed, actually.”

“No kidding? This *is* Silent Fitz we’re talking about, right? Kinda hard to believe, honestly!”

I had no real reason to believe an aphrodisiac would work on Orsted if poison didn’t, but it couldn’t hurt to try. Anything that could affect him or distract him was worth a shot.

With that thought in mind, I bought everything the man had to offer.

In between all of my other preparations, I also took the time to scout out potential battlefields.

I intended to fight him on my own, with no one else around. That meant going outside the city, of course. It had to be a spot outside Sharia’s walls, where no one was likely to go, that offered opportunities to set up traps. I did some research into potential candidates at the Adventurers’ Guild; and when I found a place that sounded suitable, I headed out to study it in person.

I also had Elinalise introduce me to an adventurer acquaintance of hers, who gave me detailed lectures on laying and creating traps. The adventurer in question was apparently a former assassin, with knowledge of many different techniques for luring

people to their deaths. Many of these traps exploited weaknesses of human psychology in devilishly clever ways. I got some hands-on experience with a few examples. Even though I knew what to expect, I still ended up blundering into them. Personally, I wasn't convinced Orsted would fall for any of them, but they would still give me something of an advantage.

On a different note, Elinalise gave me some personal lessons on close-range combat. She was an expert at fighting in the front lines of a party, and even though I wouldn't say she was that strong in a one-on-one duel, she'd been alive for many years, and she had a wealth of practical experience. In her time as an adventurer, she'd faced opponents more powerful than herself on numerous occasions. And despite her relatively average physical capabilities, she'd come out alive every time. That made her knowledge valuable.

In that sense, it was a real pity I had no idea where to find Ruijerd, considering everything he'd been through… but there was no point dwelling on it, really. Perugius wouldn't be helping either. I'd just have to manage.

Over the course of these lessons and strategizing sessions, I tried my best to visualize how I would move around and fight inside the Magic Armor.

My basic method of attack would be a constant barrage of Stone Cannon spells, fired from the numerous magical implements mounted on my armor. I would probably want to be moving backward, for the most part. While keeping up a steady barrage, I could also slow Orsted down with spells like Quagmire and Deep Mist. And if he eventually slipped up, I'd be ready to take advantage.

That seemed simple enough. Simple was good.

Finally, I unsealed the basement and prayed at my altar for victory in the coming battle.

Two months had passed since I'd killed that diseased mouse. If the words of my future self could be trusted, the virus or germ that caused Petrification Syndrome would be long dead. Still, I asked

Roxy not to enter the basement for now, and required anyone who did to wash their hands and rinse their mouth immediately afterward. It was more for my own peace of mind than anything else.

Since I was already down here, I decided to poke around and see if I could find anything that might prove useful against Orsted.

The Magic Items in the basement were mostly pieces of junk. They'd also been frozen solid by my Frost Nova two months ago, but this apparently hadn't damaged them. They all seemed to function as before. We had a hat that would splash water on your head when you tried to take it off; a helmet with a gem mounted on the front that shone like a flashlight when you put it on; a little box that would belch clouds of smoke when you opened it; a shortsword with a blade that turned to rubber when you tried to stab something; a pair of shoes that would emit a foul odor every time you took a step in them… etcetera, etcetera.

I'd tossed them into storage just in case, but I didn't see how any of them could be useful, other than as props for some kind of street performance. Maybe that little box could provide a smokescreen, at least. Theoretically. It would be nice to somehow replace all of Orsted's equipment with these stupid things, but I couldn't see how I would manage that. Also, he'd probably just take them off.

I grabbed a few of them at random anyway. You never knew what might come in handy.

Before I left the basement, I turned back to my altar and said another silent prayer for victory in battle.

It's always best to ask twice for the really important stuff.

All of my preparations were coming together. And yet the lingering sense of anxiety in the back of my mind never went away completely. Not even for a moment.

Chapter 7:
Readying for Battle

TIME MARCHED ON, indifferent to my concerns; and soon enough another month had passed.

The Magic Armor Mark One was now complete.

Somehow, we'd finished the project in only three months. I'd thrown a lot of money at it near the end, hiring additional workers to cover the more monotonous tasks, which had definitely sped things up.

Just as I'd anticipated, the thing ended up standing about three meters tall. However, its entire frame was covered in thick, crude plates of armor that I created, which lent it a surprisingly squat and stout appearance. It wasn't exactly stylish, in other words.

You got in from behind. There was a hole in its back shaped for a human, which you basically just climbed into. Once you were feeding it mana, it acted as an extension of your own body, so you could manually close the rear armor over you. That section of armor also contained a special magic circle that would automatically eject you out of the back if you spoke the correct command.

We'd mounted the 'Gatling gun' on the right arm. The modified Magic Implement now automatically fired off Stone Cannon spells whenever I wanted it to. When I fed it as much mana as I could, it was capable of shooting my very deadliest Stone Cannon ten times per second. It would reduce your average monster to a bloody mist in the blink of an eye.

This was my main plan for coping with Orsted's Disturb Magic.

On the left hand, we'd mounted a Stone of Absorption. For the most part, I was planning to ward off Orsted's spells with Disturb Magic, but it was possible I wouldn't have the time if things got too hectic. This stone could dissipate magic that had already been

completely formed. It would let me deal with any spells I wasn't quick enough to stop preemptively. I had a feeling it might come in handy.

We'd also given it a shield that could serve as a melee weapon of sorts. I wasn't bad with a sword myself, but I knew I couldn't compete with Orsted on that front. I'd concluded that it would be better to focus on defense at close range. And honestly, smacking him with a giant, heavy slab of rock might do more damage anyway. The best offense was a good defense. It was the same concept as a tank, basically.

However, I'd also mounted one of Paul's old weapons at the tip of the shield. It was the magic sword I'd given to Aisha, rather than the one Norn now owned. I didn't know if its ability to ignore an enemy's defense would work on Orsted, but it was worth trying everything I could.

The end result wasn't exactly majestic.

The Magic Armor was painted in a camouflage pattern, which felt almost as out of place here as the bulky Gatling gun on its arm. The huge, clunky shield with a blade at its tip didn't have much aesthetic value either.

At the moment, the thing was lying face-down on the ground in a field on the outskirts of Sharia. It was so incredibly heavy that I'd have to get inside and feed it mana just to stand it up.

"Ooh! Now that's a fearsome suit of armor!"

"Indeed, indeed. Its sheer bulk is quite imposing."

"Uh, I don't know. I might have gone with something a little sleeker…"

"Agreed. To be perfectly honest, I think it looks absurd."

"…It's like some kind of monster, Rudy. Couldn't you have gone with a different color?"

Cliff and Zanoba nodded in satisfaction as they examined the finished product, but the women reacted much less favorably. Maybe this sort of thing just appealed more to boys.

On the other hand, Julie was studying it with a fairly satisfied expression on her face, so that clearly didn't apply across the board. If I made it back in one piece, I'd have to see what Aisha and Norn thought.

Well, whatever. We hadn't designed this thing to look cool.

"Okay, everyone," I said, turning to face the group. "I think it's time to get started with the final test run."

Sylphie, Roxy, Zanoba, Cliff, Elinalise had all come out to watch. Julie and Ginger had tagged along as well. Nanahoshi wasn't here. She'd agreed to help lure Orsted to me, but her main objective was still to return to her own world. As a precaution for her safety, we were pretending I had coerced her into cooperating with me. For that reason, she couldn't be seen with us right now. She was probably studying Summoning magic with Perugius back at the floating fortress at the moment.

Of course, there was a chance that Orsted would end up killing her regardless. But when I mentioned this to her, she'd nodded queasily and accepted that risk.

"All right. I suppose I'll look on from a safe distance, then."

With those words, Roxy headed over to the chairs we'd set up for our spectators, taking Julie with her. Her baby bump wasn't conspicuous just yet, but you could see it if you looked for it. She probably wasn't going to be able to hide it much longer. Hopefully she'd make the big announcement soon.

Then again, going off to battle with a pregnant wife waiting for you at home was a *classic* way to get yourself tragically killed…

Okay, no! Don't even think about it. The more anxious you get, the harder it becomes to focus.

I was going to win this fight. My wife was going to have her kid, and I was going to name them. And then I was going to get started on making baby number three. That was what my future looked like! Yeah!

“Okay, I’m going to climb inside it now. Sylphie, Zanoba, and Elinalise, I want all three of you to come at me at once. Cliff, you just keep your Eye of Identification active, and let me know if you notice anything.”

“Sure, Rudy.”

“Certainly, Master.”

Sylphie and Zanoba stepped forward at once. But to my surprise, Elinalise raised her hands in the air and backed away instead.

“I’m sorry, Rudeus, but I think I’ll just be spectating today. I’d rather not get injured.”

Come to think of it, that diary said Elinalise had gotten pregnant at some point. When I studied her physique carefully, I thought I could make out the beginnings of a bump. I’d been a little thoughtless inviting her to scrap with me.

“Ah, right. Wouldn’t want anything to happen to the baby. Why don’t you go sit with Roxy?”

“What?!” yelped Cliff. “The *baby?!”* Spinning around, he stared at Elinalise’s belly intensely. “Elinalise… are you pregnant?”

“Well, my curse has been inactive for some time now… so yes, I probably am.”

“Your curse is inactive?! But we’ve been, er, carrying on as usual!”

“That we have.”

“Wait, whose… It’s… It’s not *Rudeus’* baby, is it?”

“Are you *trying* to make me angry, Cliff?”

“B-but, I mean—”

“If it’s that hard to believe, why don’t you take a look yourself? Maybe that Eye of yours will tell you something.”

“O-Okay.”

Cliff pulled his eyepatch aside and stepped closer to Elinalise… and then closer still. He ended up with his face about two inches from her lower abdomen. From all appearances, he was attempting to stare right into her womb. This close-range examination didn't seem to be sufficient, though, as he reached out and began to slowly lift her up her skirt.

"Oh my. You do know we're in public, dear?"

"Could you just be quiet for a minute?" hissed Cliff intensely. "*Please?*"

"All right, all right," Elinalise replied, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

To be fair, it *did* look more than a little obscene the way he was crawling under that long skirt of hers. Maybe I could try something like this with one of my wives later… Hmm. Sylphie would definitely look good in one of those.

…This probably isn't something I should be spending my mental resources on right now.

"…It's true."

Cliff reemerged from under his wife's skirt, his face as pale as a sheet. Apparently, the Eye of Identification could serve as a pseudo-ultrasound. Maybe the word *Pregnant* had popped up in his vision or something.

"Wh-what now? What do we do?!"

"Oh, nothing in particular."

"But it's… it's not an easy process, is it? And there are all sorts of—"

"Cliff, I've been through this many times already. I'll be fine. You just let me handle things, and I'll give birth to a healthy baby."

"R-Right…"

Cliff's face wasn't getting any less pale. He seemed shellshocked at the suddenness of it all.

“In any case, that wasn’t very tactful of you, Rudeus,” Elinalise said, glancing in my direction. “Did Roxy let the cat out of the bag?”

“…No, she didn’t say anything. I just had a hunch, I guess.”

“I see. Well, hopefully you can understand why I’d rather not get involved in any brawls at the moment?”

“Of course. Sorry about that.”

Elinalise fluttering one hand in the air and walked off toward the spectator area, where she took the seat next to Roxy. The two of them immediately struck up a conversation. I had a pretty decent idea what the topic might be, considering that Roxy was rubbing a hand over her own stomach. The two of them must have gotten pregnant at almost exactly the same time.

Momentous as all this was, however, we had other things we needed to focus on at the moment.

“Okay, everyone, back to business. Let’s get this test started.”

Sylphie and Zanoba nodded, their faces turning serious.

An hour later, I called the test complete.

The Magic Armor had performed stupendously. My top speed felt something like two hundred kilometers per hour, I could jump several meters into the air with ease, and my punches hit hard enough to leave an impact crater on the ground. Sylphie struggled to land a single spell on me, and any magic that *did* hit me just bounced back. I couldn’t even feel Zanoba’s fearsome punches. In fact, he ended up breaking his hand on my armor and screaming in pain.

The project was a success. I was capable of dealing physical damage to a Blessed Child like Zanoba, which meant I would be capable of harming Orsted as well. For once, it felt like I’d managed to achieve my goal completely, without screwing up even once along the way. That felt nice.

Then again, I couldn’t really take the credit here. Zanoba and Cliff had made the project possible.

Maybe this was something like what it felt to fight under the protection of Battle Aura. This kind of power was intoxicating. I was beginning to understand why the likes of Perugius and Atofe had grown so arrogant over the years.

Had I evened the playing field enough? Did I stand a chance now?

Yeah. It could work… I can do this.

One way or another, my preparations were now complete.

***

That same evening, Roxy finally made the big announcement.

“I think it’s about time I told you, everyone. It seems I’m pregnant.”

She spoke up just before dinner. Norn happened to be at home that evening as well, so the whole family was present.

“Congratulations! How very exciting!”

Lilia was the first to react. Although she usually kept her emotions somewhat hidden, there was a big smile on her face right now, and it looked completely genuine. For a moment, I thought it might have something to do with her feelings about her own daughter’s position in the family…but it seemed more likely that Roxy had consulted her in advance. That would also explain why the meal on our dinner table looked a bit fancier than usual.

“Congratulations, Roxy.”

Sylphie’s reaction was similar. Either Roxy had gone to her for advice, or she’d had a hunch this was coming. She accepted the news easily, with a warm smile on her face.

For some reason, the sight of that smile hit me with a flash of déjà vu.

In a sense, this was similar to the day when Lilia revealed her pregnancy. There were many differences, of course. Zenith and Lilia

were here, and I hadn't exactly been cheating with Roxy. Well… it might have started out that way, but at least we'd talked things through as a family and worked something out. Sylphie had accepted Roxy. Unlike my old man, I wasn't going to get a slap in the face from my furious wife, or see my 'mistress' break down in tears. We'd skipped right to the happy ending part.

"Uhm… Rudy? Do *you* have any thoughts?"

Evidently a bit unnerved by my silence, Roxy turned to me with an apprehensive look on her face.

There was only one thing to say, of course.

"I'm incredibly happy. Thank you, Roxy."

"Huh? Uh… what are you thanking me for, exactly?"

Roxy tilted her head quizzically to one side with a confused half-smile. She didn't seem to understand my reaction, but she didn't look upset, either.

"There you go again, Rudy," said Sylphie with a chuckle. "He said the same thing to me when I told him about Lucie, you know?"

Did I? Yeah, maybe I did. Why would that be my default response, though? Hmm…

"Well… I'm glad you're pregnant with my baby, and I'm glad you felt comfortable telling me about it. It feels like proof that you've truly accepted me, I guess."

"I thought I'd proven that to you quite some time ago, but— Wah!"

I leaned forward, picked Roxy up and pulled her into my lap. I usually tried not to get too lovey-dovey with her in front of Sylphie, but today was going to be an exception.

"You've given me all sorts of gifts, taught me all sorts of things, and helped me many, many times. And now, just to top it off, you're even going to have a baby with me… I don't know what to say other than thank you. I'm so grateful that I met you, Master Roxy."

"Goodness. It's been a while since you called me that…"

Gently, I ran my hand over Roxy's belly. She was probably about three months into her pregnancy by now; I could feel a definite bump. I'd been through this once already with Sylphie, but it still felt kind of surreal.

"Listen, Rudy. You're my *husband* now, and I *wanted* to have a baby with you. If you feel the need to praise me, I think something like 'well done' or 'good work' would be more appropriate."

"Wouldn't that sound kind of arrogant?"

"Come on. Please? Can't you let me have my way every once in a while?"

"Well, okay then… W-Well done, Roxy."

"Heheh. Oh, it was nothing, really."

As she spoke these words, Roxy pressed her head against my chest and snuggled in. She sure seemed to be taking this calmly. I felt like Sylphie had been a little more nervous.

Then again, it seemed like Elinalise and Lilia both knew about Roxy's pregnancy in advance. Maybe she'd reassured herself by talking to lots of different people about her situation.

…Maybe she'd turned to them because of how busy I'd been lately.

The idea made me feel guilty. I was turning into one of those absentee dads, too busy to pay attention to his family… Although it wasn't like I was off climbing the corporate ladder or anything.

I squeezed Roxy tightly in my arms, pressed my face to the back of her head and buried my nose in her hair. Her scent was as wonderful as ever. It really put my heart at ease.

"Ugh! Rudeus!" yelped Norn, thumping her hands against the table for emphasis. "Can you try to contain yourself? I'm going to lose my appetite!"

I glanced over. Her face was as red as a tomato.

"C'mon, cut them a little slack," chided Aisha. "Roxy is always so *considerate*, you know? She deserves some affection tonight."

For some reason, she was leaning forward on the table with her chin in her hand and a smirk on her face.

“You’re just cranky because Rudeus isn’t giving you any attention lately, right?”

“Wh-what?! No!” yelped Norn. “I am *not!* Look, I mean, things are a little complicated, right? Think about how Sylphie and Lucie must feel! I just think they should keep this sort of thing behind closed doors!”

“Oh, you’re not fooling me. You know, brother dear, you really should make the time to catch up with Norn. She’s *very* popular at school lately. Just the other day, some boy stopped by the house to leave her a letter.”

“Aisha! Who said you could tell him about that?!”

Ah, so Norn had attracted her first swarm of admirers? Well, she *was* adorable, and hard-working too. The boys had good taste, I’d give them that.

Someday down the line, she’d probably get a boyfriend, get married, and leave my house for good. I wanted to be supportive, of course… but if she fell for some no-good playboy, it would be hard not to intervene. I tried to picture Norn bringing home some kid with bleached blond hair, pierced ears, and a teardrop tattoo under one eye…

Your little sister’s teachin’ me what true love really is, man. Can we, like, have your blessing?

Hmm. It didn’t seem very plausible, fortunately. But if things did turn out that way, I’d have to try and smile politely before freaking out.

“Do you have anyone you’re fond of yet, Norn?”

“A-anyone I’m… fond of?” As another blush spread slowly across her face, Norn turned away from me and pouted. “O-of course not.”

So there was someone in the picture, huh? Nothing unusual about that. She was getting to that age, after all. Whoever he was,

he was one lucky kid.

“Okay, I get the picture. If things start getting serious, you make sure to bring him over to meet the family.”

“Are you even listening to me?!”

Once she brought the boy back home, I’d have to size him up carefully in Paul’s stead. That, and dispense a few fatherly threats. The words “You’ll take my little girl away over my dead body!” *were* going to get bellowed at some point.

“Anyway, what about *you,* Aisha? You’re always babbling about how happy Rudeus will be when you show him that rice from the garden!”

“Heeey!” shouted Aisha, jumping up out of her seat. “I was gonna make a big announcement about that later! You’re horrible, Norn!”

“Hmph! Serves you right!” said Norn, turning away sulkily.


TURN

Wait, wait. Did she just say what I thought she said?

"Hold on, Aisha. You…harvested the rice from the garden?!"

"Uh… well, yeah. I think it's been a little too cold, though, so I didn't get that much. But if I get replanting now, by fall we should—"

"Replanting?! Does that mean you harvested seed rice, too?! It does, doesn't it?!"

"Y-Yeah, I did. Uh, you're…acting a little weird, Rudeus. What's the matter?"

"I'm acting *perfectly normally,* I assure you! What about next year?! Will we have another crop next year?!"

"W-Well, as long as you make more of that soil with your magic, sure… it grows a lot better in that stuff."

I gently picked Roxy up and sat her down on the floor next to me. Then I rose to my feet, moved to the side of the table, and kneeled three steps from Aisha's chair with my arms spread wide.

"Well done, Aisha!"

"Y-Yay? Uh, should I be… jumping into your arms right now, or something?"

Aisha slowly walked toward me while glancing repeatedly in Roxy's direction, then hopped gingerly into my embrace. I grabbed her from either side, hoisted her into the air, and started spinning her around.

"Woooo! It's rice, Aisha! Riiice!"

"Woooo!"

I could finally eat rice again. It was a minor thing compared to Roxy's pregnancy, but I loved rice with a passion. Nothing could compare to a big, plump mound of fluffy white goodness. Especially when you paired it with some nice, salty grilled fish. Soon enough, I could make that happy dream a *reality.*

As I spun Aisha around and around, a fresh surge of joy spread through my body. Roxy and I were going to have a baby. Lucie was going to have a little brother or sister, about two years

younger than her. The kid would be half-Migurd, of course… hopefully she wouldn't get bullied or anything. What color would her hair turn out to be?

Would Lucie be a good big sister? Hopefully they'd get along with Norn and Aisha, too…

I can't wait. What should we name— Oh, right. There's a taboo about that, isn't there…

A whole bunch of other thoughts swirled through my head in quick succession, until I couldn't even keep track of them anymore.

After Roxy's announcement, we had ourselves a modest little celebration. The food was nicer than usual, and the conversation around the table was cheerful and energetic. Norn told us stories from her time in the student council. Aisha happily reported that the people at the city market were starting to learn her name. Lucie burst into tears at all the noise, and Sylphie comforted her expertly. Lilia served the food quietly, with a gentle smile on her face. Zenith ate silently, but was clearly in a good mood. Roxy was sulking after my overreaction to Aisha's news, so I had to work hard to mollify her.

One of the courses that evening consisted of salted rice balls. Aisha had made these personally. When I asked why she'd chosen rice balls in particular, she explained that Nanahoshi had told her how to make them some time ago. I had to assume that it was the only 'recipe' she knew off the top of her head… the girl clearly hadn't spent much time in the kitchen. Then again, the only recipes *I* could come up with on the spur of the moment were for equally basic stuff like rice porridge and simple varieties of rice ball.

In any case, Aisha's first attempt at hand-made rice balls were round and on the smaller side. The first planting had been more of an experiment than anything else, so she hadn't harvested that much rice.

Still, there was enough for everyone to try one. Nobody else around the table looked particularly impressed with the flavor, but I savored mine joyfully. Aisha had worked very hard to harvest that

rice, and she'd pressed it into a ball with her own little hands. How could the result be anything but delicious? Tears streaming down my cheeks, I slowly chewed and swallowed every bite.

The experiment had been a success. That meant we could expect a larger harvest next time. Aisha was going to plant more rice than before, so the next rice balls she made would be bigger.

…There was no guarantee I'd be around to eat them, though.

"I've got something I need to tell you, everyone."

Once everyone had finished their meal, I finally spoke up, then paused to look around the table. My sisters and my mothers looked startled. My wives seemed to be bracing themselves. I took the time to look all of them in the eyes, one by one.

"Very soon, I'm going to be fighting someone. Someone who's incredibly powerful."

I'd decided in advance not to say Orsted's name explicitly.

"I'm sure you've noticed that I've been acting rather oddly for the last two months. Thank you for not pressing me to explain. I know it wasn't easy for you, and I'm sorry I can't explain in detail."

"…"

"There's a good chance I won't win this fight."

When I spoke these words, surprise and anxiety flashed across my family's faces. I pressed right ahead anyway.

"This might be my last meal at this dinner table, in other words."

"D-do you *have* to fight this person?" said Norn, clearly rattled. "Isn't there any other option?"

"…No. None that I know of, at least."

The Man-God hadn't stopped by since advising me on how to build the Magic Armor. Knowing him, however, I had to assume he'd been keeping a close eye on me all this time.

"But you said you might not win, right? What's… Why would you *do* something like that? It doesn't—"

“Norn, listen.”

Norn was the most flustered and confused person in the room. That was perfectly understandable. Aisha and Lilia still lived under the same roof as me, so they’d probably picked up on the fact that *something* was going on. Their expressions were grave, but they didn’t look especially surprised.

“If I don’t come back, I want you to go into my room and—”

“If you don’t come back?! Why would you even *say* that?!”

She did have a point. I’d worked out a nice dramatic line like something out of a story, but why bother with the doomed hero act? Might as well keep a positive attitude.

“Okay then. When I *do* come back, let’s take a bath together or something.”

“…I don’t want to. Take it by yourself.”

Haha, ouch! Classic Norn!

“Aisha.”

“Yes?”

“If I don’t make it back, I want you to take some of those rice balls you made to Nanahoshi, too.”

“Oh…”

“She’ll cry with joy, I guarantee it. Once you’ve given her some of those, she’ll do anything you ask her to.”

“…I don’t really want to win over Miss Nanahoshi,” Aisha muttered, her head drooping slightly. “I’d rather make *you* spoil me, Rudeus.”

Aw, isn’t that sweet. What a lovable kid. I’ll have to buy her a nice present if I make it back alive. I think she’s earned a nice big bag or a diamond ring by now.

“Lilia…”

“Yes, Master Rudeus?”

“Take care of my mother, please.”

“I certainly will. However…”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be waiting for your return, Master Rudeus. No matter how long it takes.”

Lilia’s voice was soft, but firm. We’d known each other for a long time now, but she’d never managed to get any less formal with me. Aisha was definitely my little sister, but it felt like Lilia didn’t really consider herself my mother.

“Hey, Mom. Did you hear all that?”

“…”

“I’ve got to go soon, but I’ll be back.”

“…”

I thought I could see a hint of sadness on Zenith’s face, but it was hard to tell with her. I had to hope that she’d manage to express her emotions more clearly someday.

“Sylphie…”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of Lucie.”

“Right. Uhm, Rudy… I…”

“…Go on. What is it?”

“It’s… it’s nothing. Sorry.”

There was *something* on the tip of Sylphie’s tongue, but I couldn’t guess exactly what it was. I loved her very much, of course. But she wasn’t easy to read, and it made me anxious sometimes.

I reached out under the table and took her hand in mine. And then, bringing my mouth to her ear, I spoke to her in a whisper.

“Uh, Sylphie?”

“Yeah?”

“This might piss you off a little, honestly…”

“Okay.”

“But if I make it back, let’s get *really* busy.”

Sylphie’s head jerked forward at this. Maybe I’d taken the wrong approach here?

“Good grief! Why are you always so naughty, Rudy?” she whispered, slapping me lightly on the shoulder.

I took the opportunity to grab her hand and pull her close.

“Ah!”

It was a sudden, relatively forceful kiss. Sylphie stiffened in surprise, but didn’t pull away. She was as cute as heck today. Not that she wasn’t cute at any given moment. Sylphie was cute by definition. I was going to come back home to her. When I told that to myself, it started to feel true.

“Come on, Rudy… everyone’s watching… Hyaah!”

Just for good measure, I took some time to lick one of her long, pointed ears, pausing to nibble on it gently. By the time I released her, there were visible bite marks on it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll come back. Just be patient, okay?”

“Okay,” murmured Sylphie, her face bright red. “I’ll try my best.”

With that, I turned to the last person at the table.

“Roxy…”

“Yes, Rudy?”

“Let’s…sleep together tonight, okay?”

“But the baby’s… Well, all right.”

She hesitated briefly at my offer, but ended up nodding in agreement.

That evening, Roxy and I took our bath and headed to my bedroom together, holding hands. Last year, this sort of thing had been enough to get me worked up and raring to go. But under these circumstances, well… there was no way I could get myself in the mood.

“All right then. As long as you’re gentle, I—”

“That’s okay, Roxy. I think we should skip that tonight.”

Roxy had already started to take off her nightgown, but I held up a hand to stop her. She paused, her hands still on her sleeve, and tilted her head quizzically.

“Come on. Have a seat.”

I gestured to the bed. Once Roxy settled on it, I took a seat in my chair, rather than joining her.

“I want to give you the details of the situation… and explain what might happen if I lose.”

“…Why just me? What about Sylphie?”

“…”

“You’re willing to trust me and Nanahoshi, but not her?”

“How do you know I’ve been talking to Nanahoshi?”

“It’s Sylphie’s theory, not mine. We’ve been talking to each other about the situation for a while now… Is there some reason you don’t want Sylphie to know all the details?”

“That’s…a good question, actually.”

Why *was* I doing this? I wasn’t sure. But for some reason, I didn’t want to tell Sylphie everything. Maybe I didn’t want to worry her?

No, that wasn’t it. But why, then? Seriously, why?

Was this that *destiny* thing at work again?

“I’m happy you’re willing to consult me, of course. But I feel quite bad for her at this point.”

“Yeah… you’re right, Roxy. I’ll go get her now.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Roxy was always right, wasn’t she? I was so lucky to have her around.

I left Roxy in my bedroom for the moment and made my way over to Sylphie's room. As my hand found the doorknob, though, I hesitated for a moment.

Now that I thought about it, I'd never looked in on Sylphie on a 'Roxy night' before. What if she was crying herself to sleep in there or something? Sylphie always said that she was okay with me falling in love with other women. She'd welcomed Roxy to the family warmly, and she'd accepted the possibility of Eris joining us as well. But it was possible that she felt very differently deep down inside.

What if she was sobbing right now?

What is she was hammering little spikes into a voodoo doll? Or biting on a lacy handkerchief, hissing "That little hussy!" to herself?

Hmm… Nah, it's gonna be fine. Surely my sweet little Sylphie isn't capable of that.

"Uhm, Sylphie? Can you come to my room for—"

"He just *chomped* on my ear, just like that! Oh, you should have heard the way he murmured *Let's get really busy!* Eee! What is he going to *do* to me? I bet it's gonna be that first night all over again… What do I do, Lucie? You might have a little brother or sister on the way soon!"

When I opened the door, I found Sylphie rolling around on her bed with her arms wrapped around a pillow, kicking her legs in girlish excitement. She'd been talking fairly softly, but once the door was open, I could hear every word clearly.

It was a little hard to believe this girl was already the mother of a child. On the other hand, it was an extremely adorable sight. I was sorely tempted to pounce on her. Fortunately, Lucie wasn't in the room, as she slept in Lilia's bedroom. But then again, this room wasn't soundproof…

Gah. Get a hold of yourself! Roxy's waiting for you, remember?

"Ah."

Our eyes had met. Sylphie stopped dead in mid-roll with her back on the bed, her butt up against the wall, and her legs stretched

up toward the ceiling. A big, creepy grin was frozen on her face.

"…"

In a gesture of compassion, I closed the door without a word. Everybody does things they wouldn't want anyone to see, right?

"Hey! No, Rudy! Wait! You've got it all wrong! Don't go!"

Moving with impressive speed, Sylphie popped up out of her bed and rushed forward, catching the door just before it shut completely.

"Well, I wasn't going anywhere. Just thought we might want to retry that from the top."

"What? You don't have to do that. Do you need something? It's Roxy's night, isn't it? Oh, maybe it's one of *those* days? Do you want me to swap in?"

The girl clearly wasn't thinking straight at the moment. She seemed to think Roxy's period had suddenly started, despite the fact that Roxy was pregnant. You didn't see her like this every day. Or very often at all, really.

Charming as it was, though, it was about time I got things back on track.

"I wanted to tell you about the person I'm going to fight, and what might happen afterward. Can you come over to my room?"

Sylphie fell silent for a few seconds, then nodded quickly with a serious expression on her face. I thought I saw a hint of happiness in her eyes as well.

I felt a little relieved myself, for whatever reason.

The explanation itself didn't take too long.

Sylphie and Roxy listened quietly as I told them that my opponent was the Dragon God Orsted, and that I'd been ordered to fight him by someone called the Man-God, who visited me in my dreams. I explained that if I died, there were a few things they had to do: first, consider Orsted an enemy, but never challenge him directly;

second, never trust any advice given by the Man-God; and third, pass down both of those instructions to future generations of our family.

I also mentioned that after my death, they should tell the rest of the family everything I'd told them—and try to think of ways to keep each other safe. I did my best to convey how serious the situation really was. The three of us had started off sitting on the bed, but as the conversation continued, I found myself lying down with Roxy and Sylphie cuddled up on either side of me.

"If I end up losing, there's a chance something horrible might happen to Roxy during her pregnancy. Or to Lucie, for that matter."

"Something horrible? Uhm, basically… you're saying this Man-God might do something to us?"

"Yeah."

"Oh… now I get it. So that's why you kept telling us to keep an eye on the house lately…"

Sylphie nodded to herself, looking like she'd just solved a puzzle. I had a feeling she was misunderstanding my motives slightly. That was convenient, in a way, but maybe I needed to say something.

"Okay, I get it," Sylphie continued. "But you know, Rudy, I *can* take care of myself! And you don't need to ask me to protect my daughter, either. I'd give my life for her in a heartbeat."

"Don't worry about me either," Roxy added. "I kept myself alive for many years, and I'm not planning to get careless now. I might be weaker than you, but please don't assume I'm helpless."

On second thought, I couldn't see a reason to say anything. They were both a little fired up, and that was all for the best.

"In any case, Orsted of the Seven Great Powers is…quite the opponent," Roxy continued. "Do you think you can win?"

"I'm not sure," I replied honestly. "I've only fought him once before."

"What happened?"

“He overwhelmed me. Easily.”

Even after all this time, remembering that first encounter with the Dragon God made my legs tremble. He’d beaten Ruijerd in an instant, easily knocked Eris out of the fight… and stabbed his hand deep into my body.

…The man was terrifying.

“…Rudy, are you sure we shouldn’t all go together?”

“Nah, I’ll do this alone. I think that gives me the best chance of winning. I’ll fire off lots of huge spells and chip away at his defenses from a distance.”

“That does make sense… but you’re trembling, you know.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey! Wha… Hands off, Rudy! Stop trying to distract me!”

In my defense, I hadn’t started touching Sylphie because I wanted to distract her. I just wanted to feel her up. If Orsted killed me, I wouldn’t get another chance to touch these. Or this right here, either. Or that. Or *this*, for that matter…

“…Gah! Come on. We’re having a serious conversation right now, right?”

“Yep.”

“You know what, Rudy? Lucie’s crawling around all over the place now. She can get anywhere she wants to.”

“Hmm…”

“Lilia said she reminds her of the way you were as a baby.”

“…”

“Also, she’s picking up *lots* of new words. At this rate, I bet she’ll be toddling around the place in less than a year.”

I hadn’t been helping out much at all with raising Lucie. I was leaving it entirely to Lilia and Sylphie. Still… I knew how incredibly cute she was, at least.

“I’m really looking forward to that, Rudy.”

“Me too.”

“If it seems like you’re going to lose, make sure you run for it, okay?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get away from him, but I’ll try.”

Was Lucie old enough to understand what was happening around her yet? If I died in this battle, she probably wouldn’t even remember the face of her own dad by the time she grew up. What would that feel like? It was hard for me to imagine, but maybe I could find a tactful way to ask Aisha…

“…Rudy.”

Roxy had spoken up from my left. I reached out to grope at her chest, as well, but she seized hold of my arm before I could.

Ooh, that’s some impressive grip strength! Ow. Sorry. I know, I know… we’re having a serious conversation.

“Uhm… I’m glad I met you, Rudy. I’m glad I married you and had a child with you. I’ve never been happier in my entire life than I am right now. To be honest, I never thought I’d find this kind of happiness.”

“Right…”

“But there’s a downside, I suppose. If you go off and get yourself killed, you’d be making me sadder than I’ve ever been before.”

“…Right.”

“Uhm, it’s a little embarrassing to even say this sort of thing, but…”

Roxy paused for a moment, inhaled deeply, and then finished her sentence.

“Please make me happy, Rudy.”

I hadn’t made the wrong decision after all. I was going to fight for Roxy, and for Sylphie.

I had to fight for these two, and then come back home to my family.

All my doubts had finally evaporated.

A few days later, with all my preparations finally complete, I set out from the Magic City of Sharia.

I was entirely alone.

Chapter 8:
Quagmire vs. Dragon God

TWO DAYS NORTH by northeast from the city of Sharia, there was an abandoned village that had been swallowed by the forest.

Some forty years ago, a magical catastrophe had caused the local woods to expand rapidly. The village had been quickly overrun, forcing its inhabitants to relocate. In the decades since, the only visitors to this place had been the monsters that roamed the forest, and the occasional adventurer who came to hunt them.

Today, however, a man was making his way toward this village —a man with silver hair and golden eyes, who wore a white leather coat. The man monitored his surroundings alertly as he approached his destination. He wasn't on horseback or riding in a carriage; he was simply walking along, striding calmly through the forest. Sometimes his sharp, intense eyes would glance down at a compass-like object in his left hand.

No monsters ventured to attack him. Many glittering eyes peered out at him from the depths of the woods, but when he drew close, even the fiercest creatures fled like frightened squirrels.

"…Is this it?"

As he reached the outskirts of the abandoned village that his compass was pointing toward, the man paused and studied it in silence for a moment.

"Why would she call me to a place like this…?"

Slowly, cautiously, he set foot into the ruined town. Its once-neat streets were covered in weeds, and its fields were now thickets. Great trees rose through the roofs of empty houses; others were so overgrown with vines that they resembled great green mounds of vegetation.

Soon, the man came to a halt once more. He'd reached the center of the town, where a well had once presumably been located. A conspicuous structure stood there: a tall yellow cylinder of a building, and it was the only thing in the entire town that had no trace of vegetation on it. From the condition of its stone walls and its front door, it had clearly been constructed recently.

The man looked down at the compass in his left hand and confirmed that its needle was pointing directly at this tower. He reached for its doorknob somewhat warily.

"…Nanahoshi, are you there?"

The interior of the tower was extremely plain. There were no windows or hallways. The floor was oddly slick, as if coated in some sort of oil. Someone had left a number of bulging burlap sacks and something like an incense burner up against the wall. The strange scent in the air seemed to indicate the burner was in active use.

"…What is this place?"

Glancing around the room, the man spotted another door in the wall straight across from him. Cautiously, but without hesitation, he strode up to it and reached for the doorknob. As he did so, he felt a small prick of pain. When he examined the palm of his hand, however, there wasn't so much as a speck of blood.

"Hm…? Am I imagining things?"

He stepped through the door and found himself in a room with a layout identical to the first. Given that it was sitting on a slope, it appeared that a part of this building was actually underground.

The man was growing increasingly suspicious, but nonetheless proceeded forward. Signs bearing messages such as 'Please remove your footwear here' and 'All guests, please put on this hat' were posted on the walls; naturally, he ignored their instructions, and continued more warily than before.

Some of the doors were rigged with traps so small they might have been intended for mice. Carefully avoiding these, he pressed on, passing through one room after another.

Eventually, he arrived at a very strange room. It was tall, and circular, and had no ceiling whatsoever. When looked up, he could see a slice of the sky above him. It felt as if he was standing at the bottom of a chimney.

“…What’s going on here?”

Dubious, the man furrowed his brow, but the needle of his compass was pointing toward the center of the room. A small box sat there, a single sheet of paper underneath it. He approached it warily and looked at the paper. There were two words written on it:

Man-God

He quickly snatching up the little box and flipped it open.

“Hrm?!”

Great clouds of smoke immediately burst out of it.



As he dropped it and assumed a defensive stance, the man heard a small metallic *clink*. A silver ring had fallen to the ground next to the little box, which was somehow still discharging smoke with remarkable intensity.

The ring had presumably popped out of the box when it hit the ground. For some reason, it blinked with a faint red light—and the needle of his compass pointed directly at it.

"…Nanahoshi?"

The man reached down to pick up the ring.

A split-second later, there was a great flash in the sky.

"Guh!"

The man instantly kicked at the ground, trying to jump aside. But the oil-slick floor refused to cooperate. The soles of his boots lost their grip entirely.

A huge bolt of lightning slammed down on the Dragon God Orsted.

Rudeus

FROM MY CAMPSITE above the abandoned village, I stared intently down at the spot to which I'd lured Orsted. The very instant I'd seen that smoke rising into the air, I'd fired off a Lightning at the target location with all the power I could muster.

I was confident I'd landed a hit on him. I'd practiced many times in preparation for this day, and I'd coated the floor in vegetable oil so he couldn't evade my spell at the last moment.

But of course, one hit wasn't going to be enough to bring him down. Nobody that fragile could have earned a reputation as the strongest in the world—not with monsters like Atofe around.

I jabbed my staff into the ground, fed it a surge of mana, and visualized an enormous thundercloud—a dark, turbulent supercell. This was the Saint Tier Water spell, Cumulonimbus. In an instant, the sky was covered in a great black cloud. Fierce sheets of rain began to fall, accompanied by bolts of lightning.

I pushed more power into my staff. I could feel it dragging the mana out of me from somewhere deep inside my body, and I let it do so freely.

This time, I visualized ice. I visualized stopping the movements of every molecule at the center of that town, dropping the temperature rapidly.

Frost Nova.

It was a spell I'd used many times before, but never with this much power, or on such a wide area. One after another, the drops of rain pouring down on the village froze solid. Layers upon layers of ice formed rapidly, consolidating into a single giant object. Finally, when it had reached the size of an iceberg, I stopped my spell.

I wasn't done yet. I channeled more mana into my staff and created a rock in the sky above the village. Ignoring the mana cost, I steadily expanded its size until it was too huge to evade—then launched it straight down, with all the velocity I could impart.

The rock slammed down in a fraction of a second. The ground trembled underneath my feet. An instant later a thunderous boom reached my ears, followed by fierce winds and a shockwave.

I shielded my eyes with my arm and stared down at my handiwork. The iceberg had been shattered, and two-thirds of the great rock was embedded in the earth. It seemed impossible that anything could have survived such an impact.

"…Did I get him?"

There was no movement in the village. It seemed possible that this was really over. I certainly hoped it was.

But an instant later, the great rock shattered.

"Eee!"

Somehow, I could *feel* the man's murderous rage, even at this distance.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. My legs trembled weakly, and tears formed in my eyes.

As soon as I could move, I jumped into the Magic Armor, which was standing ready at my side. Just as I'd practiced hundreds of times, I fed power to all of its individual components, took control of its limbs, and reached out to grab my staff. It took no time at all, but somehow the rage was already growing closer.

With the startup routine complete, I turned my focus to my next attack.

Mana surged out of me, through my armor, and into the staff in my right hand. I spurred the torrent on, with every intention of draining myself dry.

I was visualizing a nuclear explosion.

Pointing my staff in the direction of my enemy, I released the spell with all the ferocity I could muster.

There was a brilliant flash at the center of the village, and a wave of heat and light swept across the ground. From the corner of my eye, I saw trees incinerated in an instant, reduced to charred shadows of themselves. A powerful shock wave followed a moment later.

The Magic Armor I was wearing weighed several tons. It endured the heat and the shockwave without so much as trembling.

Once the wave of devastation had swept fully past me, I looked down toward the village. A huge mushroom cloud was rising over it. I couldn't see the ground clearly under all the smoke and dust, but I'd fed that spell enough mana to obliterate everything in its radius. It was probably the single most powerful attack I'd ever used in my life.

"…"

And yet, I couldn't stop trembling in fear.

I could still feel that *rage*, and it was far, far closer now. He was approaching me at a ferocious speed. We'd been so far apart at first,

but now he was almost on me.

I clenched my jaw to stop my teeth from rattling, squeezed my shaking hands tightly, and deposited my staff in the holder on my back. Then I mounted my Gatling gun on my right arm, and picked my shield up with my left.

“Hoo… Haa… Aah…”

When I paused to take a few deep breaths, I realized even my throat was trembling.

Forcibly suppressing the fear and anxiety rising up inside me, I pointed my Gatling gun toward the cloud of dust that was rapidly approaching my position.

“Hoo! Haa!”

I *needed* to keep the initiative. If I let him set the pace, I was done for.

Had I even dealt him any damage? Had the poisons on the door, or the aphrodisiac incense burner, or any of the other traps had any effect at all? I’d put all the power I could into those four spells I’d just hit him with. If they’d left him totally unharmed, it was hard to imagine this pseudo-Gatling gun would even scratch him. But for that matter, had my spells even landed? Surely he couldn’t have evaded them. Their area of effect had been *massive*; I’d made them as huge and as deadly as I possibly could. And I’d fired them from so far away that he couldn’t possibly have seen them coming, even with an Eye of Foresight. No matter what kind of Demon Eye he might possess, at that range it—

A human silhouette approaches.

“Fireeeee!”

Shouting out the command word, I activated the Gatling gun on my right hand. As mana flowed into it, the cannon immediately began to fire Stone Cannons at a ferocious rate of speed. So many ‘bullets’ cut through the air that the sound of their whistling built into something like a scream.

The fast-moving clumps of rock slammed into their target, blowing away the cloud of dust that surrounded him—and revealing a silver-haired man in a battered cloak, his face covered in soot.

Was he hurt? Had my spells done anything at all?

Yes. I could see blood trickling from his chin, and something like a burn on the base of his neck. The damage was minor so far, but I *could* hurt him.

“Guh!”

Our eyes had met. His sharp, hawk-like gaze was fixed on me now. He had the look of a hunter who’d finally found his prey.

He sidesteps in an attempt to escape the barrage of stones.

Keeping my Eye of Foresight fully activated, I focused on anticipating Orsted’s movements. The man was incredibly quick, so I was seeing a number of blurry, overlapping possibilities. Still, I tried to adjust my aim to cut off his attempts at retreat.

The travel time for each individual projectile to reach its target was virtually nonexistent. But somehow, Orsted evaded them as if he saw them coming, gradually approaching me in the process.

One step here. Two steps there.

Glaring at me as fiercely as a bird of prey, he was slowly but steadily closing the distance between us. Now and then, a Stone Cannon would graze him, and he’d grimace slightly, but that was about it. He seemed convinced that even a direct hit would not prove fatal; he seemed to be completely unafraid.

From all appearances**,** my attacks were nothing special to him. From all appearances, he fought the likes of me on a regular basis.

I felt very differently. His zombie-like calm and focus were terrifying to witness. I had a growing sense that none of my attacks would work on him, and it was a struggle not to give in to despair.

Still, I was holding the advantage for now.

Trying very hard to convince myself of this, I began to move in response to Orsted. When he stepped forward and to the right, I

moved backwards to the left. When he zigzagged to the left, I retreated to the right. Anywhere he tried to go, I met him with a hail of stones. As long as I could keep this up, he'd never get any closer. I had the upper hand. It was going just as I'd visualized.

In an attempt to ramp up the pressure, I used my left hand to cast a spell. My target was the ground beneath our feet, and the magic I had in mind was Quagmire.

Quickly shaping the familiar spell, I raised my hand to activate it—but in that same instant, Orsted also raised *his* left hand at me.

"Disturb Magic!"

My fully formed magic was reduced to a chaotic tangle by a sudden surge of external power. The spell began to fade into a meaningless cloud of mana.

"Kuh!"

But I forcefully reformed it, pulling the strands back into their proper place.

I was capable of this now. I'd *finally* learned how to do it. While teaching Sylphie how to use Disturb Magic, I'd also been training myself to counteract it: to complete a spell, even after it was ruined. All those hours of practice had been worth it for this one moment.

Orsted's eyes opened wide in surprise. Was this the first time he'd seen his Disturb Magic fail to—

Whoa.

The instant my Quagmire turned the ground beneath his feet to muck, Orsted used a spell of his own to overwrite it. He covered my swamp completely with an earthen plate.

And now, his right hand was pointing straight at me. I quickly answered with a Disturb Magic of my own—

Brilliant light blots out the world.

A jolt of fear ran through me. Pausing my Gatling gun barrage for an instant, I leapt to one side with all my might.

I can see the world again.

There was now a deep, sizable crater at the spot where Orsted had been aiming. I hadn't even seen the attack itself. Was it some kind of Fire spell? Or maybe something stranger, like Gravity magic?

That light I'd seen just now—was that *death?*

There was no time to think. Orsted was sprinting at me with one hand outstretched. Disturb Magic wasn't going to work; he could counteract it, just like me.

I pointed both my hands at him, channeling mana through them simultaneously. My intention was to stop Orsted's advance with the Gatling gun, while also cancelling out his magic with the Stone of Absorption. But as soon as I put this plan into action, I realized my mistake.

Orsted's spell *did* dissipate. But at the same time, my stone projectiles *also* dissolved into clouds of sand as they left my gun.

Seizing this brief window of opportunity, Orsted closed in quickly. With his right hand still outstretched toward me, he pulled his left arm back to his waist, then swung it viciously toward my heart.

"Ngh…!"

On pure instinct, I took evasive action. Using both my legs at once, I launched myself directly backward with all the force and speed I could muster.

"Guh!"

I wasn't quick enough.

Orsted's fist slammed against my breastplate. A whistling sound filled the air, and I watched him shrink into the distance at a ferocious speed. Soon the whistling gave way to crashing, crunching noises from behind me, and the world was full of dancing trees.

Ah. So this is what it feels like to get knocked into next week.

Just as this thought flashed through my mind, I slammed into a huge tree, bringing my flight to a halt. The sudden deceleration hit me like a hammer; it felt like all my internal organs had been smashed apart.

My vision began to dim, but I recovered quickly. The magic circles Cliff had carved into the inside of my armor had healed my wounds automatically.

When I looked down at my chest, however, I found that my breastplate was badly dented, and had very nearly cracked in half. The crack was gradually repairing itself, but the process was painfully slow.

Still, at least it had protected me from one blow. It was a good thing I'd taken the time to make this piece of the armor *particularly* thick and strong.

That familiar murderous rage was already bearing down on me again. Orsted was rushing straight at me, looking to deal a finishing blow. Quickly activating my Gatling gun, I fired a hail of deadly stones in his direction. He dodged them nimbly and extended his right hand at me once again.

At this rate, things were going to play out just like last time. That was a major problem. My armor had been severely damaged by a single blow—if he landed more hits on me, he'd eventually punch straight through it.

What were my options? Dueling him with magic wasn't going to work. I could cancel out his Disturb Magic, but the man clearly had some means of resisting magical damage, just like Moore. And I didn't even know what kind of spells he was throwing at me.

I was at a *disadvantage* in a ranged fight, then. That meant I'd have to try my luck at closer range. It was the only option I had left.

I had to trust the power of the Magic Armor. I had to smack him down with my raw strength.

I sprayed another barrage from my Gatling gun to keep Orsted pinned down, and charged forward, letting out a wordless battle cry.

"Raaaaaah!"

"Ngh!"

Orsted pulled his right hand back to prepare for my attack. Leading with the shield on my left arm, I powered myself straight

forward with both of my legs. My intention was to slam right into him like a battering ram.

Orsted assumes a Water God Style stance.

The instant I saw this with my Eye of Foresight, I swung my shield forward, stabbing in his direction with the blade mounted at its tip. This was a sword that did more damage to enemies with powerful defenses. Maybe it would work.

My body slammed into Orsted with a loud, metallic *clang.* It felt like I'd smashed right into a wall. But the impact sent him flying backward; and there was blood spraying from his arm. His eyes, still fixed on me, were burning with hatred and anger.

This was my chance. Whipping my Gatling gun into position, I quickly fired a barrage of stones. They slammed into him in mid-air, tearing what remained of his clothing apart—and revealing a bruised and battered body underneath. There were burns, cuts, and scrapes all over him. My stone bullets struck his exposed skin repeatedly, sending fresh spurts of blood into the air.

Finally, Orsted smashed into the ground with a mighty crash.

I *could* do this. I *could* kill him. As long as I could land direct hits, my spells could do plenty of damage. Yes, the stones had bounced off of him, but they'd torn at his skin and left him bleeding. Eventually, that would be enough to kill him. If I could just hurt him badly enough right now, before he—

"It seems I have no choice."

Somehow, I heard him speak those words. Even at a distance. Even as my stone bullets screamed through the air.

In that instant, the air went cold. My body shivered uncontrollably, as if I'd suddenly stepped onto a frigid tundra. And then my Eye of Foresight *stopped seeing Orsted*, although he was clearly visible to my other eye.

Before I could make sense of what this meant, he vanished completely.

"Eee!"

Struck by a sudden, intense jolt of terror, I wrenched my body into a rightward leap.

In that moment, there was a sharp *clang* from my left side.

When I looked over, I saw Orsted standing next to me with a katana-like sword in his hands. From all appearances, he'd just finished swinging it.

I also saw the left hand of my armor, sliced cleanly from its arm, fall to the ground with a weighty *thump.*

"Graaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Before I could even react, Orsted let out a fearsome, ear-splitting bellow. The force of the cry left my body stunned and numb. This was Vocal magic, the specialty of the Beastfolk.

For an instant, I wavered on the edge of unconsciousness. But at the very last moment, I managed to pull myself together and jump to the side.

Kicking off the ground so hard he left a crater in his wake, Orsted leapt after me in pursuit.

I turned my Gatling gun toward him. But just as I was activating it, he swung his sword for the second time, slicing it in half. Broken pieces of the magical implements fell uselessly to the ground.

I still had my right arm, at least. There was a long, deep groove on the surface of its armor, but he hadn't been close enough to cut through it entirely.

Orsted was right in front of me now, his sword still low from his strike. I immediately channeled mana into my right hand. In the same moment that I fired off my strongest version of the spell Electric, I swung my armored fist ruthlessly at his face.

But instead of striking home with a crunch, I felt my blow *slide* harmlessly away from its target.

Somehow, Orsted's sword was pressed up against my arm. And behind him, electricity was crackling loudly through the forest, igniting the undergrowth and breaking large trees apart.

He'd *redirected* both my spell and my punch.

The instant I finally understood this, his sword moved slightly.

"Gaaaagh!"

The right arm of my armor fell to the ground with my *actual* arm still inside it.

The pain was overwhelming, but I didn't even have time to grimace. Even as he followed through on his strike, Orsted was pressing the attack again.

I couldn't respond. I couldn't so much as brace myself.

His kick caught me square in the stomach. A horrible metallic squeal rang in my ears. I was lifted briefly off the ground. All the force of his attack had passed straight through the armor to my body.

"Bleeergh!"

The blow to my stomach sent gastric juices up my throat and out my mouth. My vision was blurred with tears. But as I fell heavily on my rear, I aimed the stump of my right arm at Orsted and fired a shockwave at him.

Orsted swung his sword into the air. I heard a *boom* as he did so, but that was his only reaction to my attack. By the time I figured out that he'd cut the shockwave itself apart, his foot had smashed into my face. My neck creaked ominously, and a jolt of intense pain ran from my head down to my shoulders.

"Nh…?!"

Without even realizing it, I'd fallen flat on the ground. After hurriedly rising to a sitting position, I managed to get back on my feet —only to see Orsted standing right in front of me with his sword held high.

I was going to die.

"Purge!"

On sheer reflex, I managed to scream the command word. The Magic Armor's rear panels instantly sprung off, pulling me along with them. A split-second later, Orsted cut the empty suit clean in half.

I hit the ground hard, and my body tumbled for some time before finally coming to a halt.

I couldn't see what Orsted was doing. I was out of options. It was over.

"Gack… caaagh…"

My whole body was racked with pain. The man had only kicked me a few times *through* my armor, but it felt more like I'd been pummeled with a bat for hours. My chest hurt. My stomach hurt. My right arm hurt. My neck hurt. My back hurt. It was painful just to breathe. For some reason, I could barely even *move*. I felt more exhausted than I'd ever been in my entire life.

Oh. Is this… what it feels like… when your mana runs dry?

"Aah… haah…"

Orsted's eyes had turned to me.

I flinched in fear. My armor was gone. I had to run, or he'd kill me here and now…

Wait. My right hand. Where's my right hand?

"Guhhh!"

The kick landed before I even saw him move. I tumbled backward, my body screaming in agony.

I landed face-down in the dirt. Struggling to breathe, I turned onto my back—and a foot slammed down on my chest.

"Nrrgh…"

A groan of pain forced itself out of my throat.

My body felt like it was burning up. But there was something cold pressed against my throat. Glancing over, I saw that it was Orsted's sword.

Goddammit. I'm really going to die. All that, and it still wasn't enough…

"So it's you, Rudeus Greyrat. Last I heard, you'd settled down and started a family. Why would you come for my head?"

It seemed Orsted didn't intend to kill me immediately. Maybe it was because he'd spared my life once already. Or maybe he just knew I wasn't capable of continuing the fight.

"The Man-God… said…"

"…Hmph. So you're one of his disciples after all. Die, then."

He took his foot from my chest and raised his sword.

"He said…you're trying to destroy the world, and my descendants will help you kill him one day…"

Orsted paused at this. "What?"

"The Man-God told me…he's fighting you because he wants to protect the world."

"…"

"He said that if I killed you, he wouldn't hurt my children…or my family…"

I turned onto my belly and reached towards Orsted's foot. Clinging to it, rubbing my face against it, I began to plead with him in a loud, desperate voice.

This was only thing I *could* do now.

"Please…don't destroy the world. You can kill me, I don't care. Just don't take my children… Don't take away their future! Please, this… This is the first time I've ever…been so *happy*. Please, just leave the Man-God alone. I'm begging you!"

Tears streamed down my face. I was a powerless failure, and now I'd even lost my dignity.

Pathetic. Just pathetic. What's the matter with me, damn it?

"…I can't do that, I'm afraid."

The moment I heard those words, I bit ferociously at Orsted's foot.



“Fgaaaaaah!”

At the same time, I raised the bleeding stump of my right arm off the ground, channeled all my remaining mana into it, and ordered it to *explode.*

If I had to die, at least I’d take this bastard down with me.

“Disturb Magic!”

A sharp kick sent me flying. With my focus broken, the mana I’d gathered dissipated uselessly. It was a struggle just to stay awake now. If I used *any* more mana at this point, I could tell I would instantly fall unconscious.

“You may possess a Laplace Aspect, and the massive well of mana that comes with it. But casting so many powerful spells in quick succession will still drain you dry.”

As he spoke, Orsted bent down and reached his hand toward me.

I’m gonna die. He’s gonna kill me. But if I die, he won’t die.

And if he doesn’t die…then Lucie will. And Roxy. And Sylphie. I can’t let that happen. I can’t let him beat me. I have to win!

But my body won’t move. And I’m out of mana.

Blood was pulsing steadily out of my severed arm. My thoughts were growing vague and sluggish. The world seemed to be getting dimmer.

Orsted’s hand drew closer until it was all that I could see.

Damn. Damn.

Damn it all…

I should have picked a name, at least.

***

“Hrm?!”

All of a sudden, Orsted leapt away from me.

“Mm…?”

Looking up, I found that someone else had come between us. It was a tall woman in dark pants and a stylish jacket. In her hand, she held a one-handed sword with a silvery blade. But her back was turned to me, so I couldn’t see her face.

Ah, wait. I recognize that hair…

It was wavy, it came down all the way to her waist—and it was a vibrant, fiery shade of crimson.

“Sorry I’m late, Rudeus.”

Eris Greyrat was standing in front of me.

Chapter 9:
Berserker Sword King vs. Dragon God

SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE these events, two women had appeared at the gates of the Magic City of Sharia. One was a grey-haired Beastfolk with impressive muscles. The other was a human with a magnificent mane of crimson hair. The Beastfolk woman was a head taller than her companion, but the two of them wore identical coats, and they both carried swords at their waists.

Eris Greyrat and Ghislaine Dedoldia had *finally* reached their destination, after a lengthy journey from the Sword Sanctum.

The trip had not been an easy one, to say the least. Eris had been in such a great hurry to see Rudeus again that she'd chosen a shortcut through a forest, where they'd quickly gotten lost, ultimately blundering into a nest of monsters, which took some time to slay. And when they finally made it out of the forest and reached the nearest town, a group of local thugs unwisely provoked Eris, leading to a major scuffle, which made them a host of enemies, which led to *another* major scuffle, which led to problems at the border, which they solved with violence once again. It was largely Eris' own fault, in all honesty, but they'd ended up taking quite some time to reach Sharia.

Still, both Ghislaine and Eris had spent some time as adventurers. In the course of their journey, they'd eventually gotten back into the swing of things, and after entering the Kingdom of Ranoa their progress to the city had been relatively smooth.

Once in Sharia itself, their actions were also quite efficient. It helped that plenty of people at the local Adventurers' Guild knew exactly where Rudeus Greyrat's residence was. From the sound of things, everyone in this town knew Rudeus' name. One helpful local even explained that they could pick out his house by looking for an unusual, scaly creature from Begaritt in the yard—or for its

companion, a peculiar-looking Treant supposedly cultivated on the Demon Continent.

In fact, the place did prove easy to find.

Rudeus' residence couldn't hold a candle to the massive mansion Eris had lived in as a child, of course, but it was large enough that it could easily have passed for some sort of inn. The yard was also spacious, and looked like could serve nicely as a training ground.

While she discussed her impressions with Ghislaine for a while, Eris—rather uncharacteristically—was hesitant to step through the gate itself. Instead, she stood directly in front of it with her arms folded.

For a time, everything was quiet. Ghislaine said nothing, and neither did Eris. Her chin high in the air, she simply stared up at the building before her. From all appearances, she was convinced that Rudeus would somehow sense her presence and emerge from within at any moment.

The thoughts running through her mind concerned the many rumors she'd heard regarding Rudeus in the course of their journey.

Rudeus "Quagmire" Greyrat was said to have slain a stray dragon and defeated a Demon King. As the most powerful mage in the Ranoa University of Magic, he inspired much fear and awe; but despite his arrogance and audacity, he was a friend to the weak, and there were many comical stories about his odd behavior. In other words, he was a relatively popular figure.

Those who'd seen him at work struggled to describe the extent of his powers. Hearing their praise always made Eris smile, almost as if they were complimenting *her.* But among the many rumors she'd heard so far, it was some of the 'comical' anecdotes that had really stuck with her.

For example: *The guy's crazy about his wife. You always see them shopping together on their way back from the University.*

Or: *I saw him grab his wife's butt in the market. She flipped out on him!*

Or: *He married this woman who looks like a kid, I swear.*

Or: *He has two wives already, and who knows how many he'll end up with. Not much of a pious guy, that's for sure.*

They were the rumors involving his wives, in other words. Every time she recalled these stories, Eris frowned deeply.

Soon after crossing the border into Ranoa, she'd learned their names: Sylphiette Greyrat and Roxy M. Greyrat. Eris couldn't figure out what she was supposed to say when she actually met them. She'd learned of them from Rudeus' letter, heard rumors about them on her journey, and spent plenty of time *thinking* about them… but at the end of the day, she just didn't know how to get the results she wanted.

And so, she stood like a statue in front of the gate.

Fortunately, the stalemate was eventually broken by a thoughtful young maid.

The moment Eris appeared at the gate, Aisha had asked herself *Is that Eris? It must be, right?* and set about preparing things. She wanted to be ready to show Eris perfect hospitality the moment she knocked at the door.

After nearly an *hour* of waiting, however, she finally decided to take the initiative herself.

Aisha felt that she owed a great debt to Eris personally. While she didn't respect her *quite* as deeply as her brother, it was a fact that she had played a major part in saving Aisha from her captivity in Shirone. Lilia had always taught Aisha to repay her debts twofold. So, when she'd heard about the possibility that Rudeus might take Eris as his third wife, she'd silently decided to help make it happen—assuming Eris actually loved her brother, of course.

Thanks to the little maid's helping hand, Eris finally managed to enter the house itself. Once inside, she was warmly welcomed by both Aisha and Lilia. While Aisha ran off to the University to get Sylphie and Roxy, Lilia filled her in on the current situation in more detail.

Eris' introduction to Lucie came as something of a surprise to her. But while her smile was a little awkward, she found that her feelings weren't particularly negative. She could always have a baby of her own, after all—and hers might be a boy.

Given how uncertain she'd been at first, this was a surprisingly self-assured attitude. Aisha and Lilia's friendly greeting had gone a long way toward soothing her nerves. Even when Sylphie, Roxy, and Norn arrived, the conversation stayed calm and peaceful. Rudeus' two wives were perhaps a bit unsettled at the sight of Eris' more *shapely* body, but they were far from hostile toward her.

It helped, of course, that Aisha and Lilia had already set the tone on their own initiative. But more importantly, Sylphie and Roxy had already talked the issue through on their own over the course of several private conversations.

Unsurprisingly, Norn's expression suggested she was less than overjoyed at the situation. But since the matter had essentially been settled, she didn't offer any open opposition. She knew Sylphie, Roxy, and Rudeus were all willing to accept Eris, and she was trying to be considerate of that fact. On top of that, it was obvious within minutes that Eris was passionately in love with Rudeus, and also respected him deeply. It was a little embarrassing just listening to her. And everyone likes hearing someone they're fond of complimented profusely.

This peaceful mood didn't last for long, however. Eris finally got around to asking where Rudeus was at the moment, and things took a turn for the turbulent. When she heard he'd gone off to fight Orsted, Eris snapped angrily at his wives. As far as she was concerned, it was their responsibility to accompany him into battle. "Why did you let him go *alone?!* Are you trying to get him killed?!"

"We *tried* to go with him, but he told us to stay behind! He said we'd just get in the way!" Sylphie protested tearfully.

Startled by this reaction, Eris paused for a moment—long enough to remember that she'd trained for years on end so that she could fight beside Rudeus as an equal. It occurred to her that these women had been there for him while she was absent. According to

his letter, they'd helped him many times over the years. She ended up feeling both a little jealous *and* a slight sense of superiority.

She wouldn't be a burden. She could help Rudeus against Orsted.

With these loud, confident words, she convinced Roxy, Sylphie, and Ghislaine to accompany her as she chased after Rudeus.

And so Eris arrived in the nick of time.

The group had hurried to the general area of the ambush, but ended up going a bit too far. Startled by a great explosion behind them, they'd rushed back to the sounds of combat; Eris had sprinted through the woods, searching desperately, her eyes straining to find Rudeus.

Finally, she'd spotted him on the verge of death, and leapt in to defend him.

Just like that, she was face-to-face with Orsted.

***

Eris fixed her eyes on Orsted, and raised her weapon high above her head. This was no ordinary sword. Its name was the Phoenix Dragon Sword, and it was one of the Seven Sword God Blades.

"Ghislaine! Watch my back!"

Orsted, in contrast, assumed no stance whatsoever. He simply stared at Eris with a suspicious expression on his face. No—it wasn't just her that had his attention. He was watching the fallen Rudeus as well. And the two women who'd rushed up to tend to him.

Eris, in turn, began to study Orsted carefully.

He was naked from the waist up, and bleeding from a hundred wounds. Blood trickled from his head as well, and he looked

generally lethargic. His hair was charred at the ends, and there was a large bruise near his shoulder. He'd taken significant damage.

However, there was also a long, curved sword in his right hand.

Eris had never seen Orsted's blade before, and she didn't pretend to be an expert at evaluating weapons. But she could tell that it was something very special. Her own sword was a treasure of the Sword God Style, but even its power couldn't compare to whatever was hidden in *that* thing.

The last time they'd faced each other, Orsted hadn't wielded anything of the sort. It hadn't been necessary, of course. He'd overwhelmed them all with his bare hands. Rudeus had not only hurt the Dragon God significantly, he'd forced the man to draw his sword. That fact sent a thrill through Eris' entire body.

Now it's my turn to show what I can do… But I can't get impatient. Gotta buy some time first…

With effort, Eris managed to suppress her excitement. She couldn't defeat Orsted. She'd realized that instinctively the very moment she jumped in to face him, and she'd accepted it quite easily.

As a child, the gap between them had been so massive that she hadn't even been able to perceive it accurately. It was a bit like looking up at a tower hundreds of times taller than you: all you can really tell is *that thing's really tall.* Eris had believed she could climb all the way up that tower.

But things were different now. She'd grown taller herself, and she could see Orsted's height for what it really was. Eris had grown *much* taller than she once was. But Orsted was taller still. Far taller. Looking at him was almost dizzying.

It wasn't a height that she could hope to climb.

"Eris Boreas Greyrat… is Rudeus so precious to you? What of Luke?"

"…Luke?"

“The man who was destined to become your husband.”

“That’s news to me.”

Eris dismissed Orsted’s words easily enough. She didn’t know who this *Luke* was, but the only man who was ‘precious’ to her was Rudeus. She didn’t want anyone else, and she never would.

“I suppose it would be.”

Orsted still had not assumed a stance. He was simply watching as the others healed the injured Rudeus. To all appearances, he’d completely let his guard down. But Eris knew that he was deliberately *projecting* that impression. He was leaving himself open, waiting for Eris to jump in and attack.

“…”

Her mind flashed back to her final meeting with the Sword God.

***

After showing Eris into his room, the Sword God Gall Falion laid three swords in front of her and asked a simple question.

“What’ll it be?”

Eris took the swords in her hands and examined them one by one.

A part of her wanted to say that the sword she’d received on the Demon Continent long ago was all she needed. But as she grew taller, it had started to feel a bit too small for her. She’d honestly been wanting something a bit longer. Also, she had a suspicion its blade wasn’t capable of harming Orsted.

The average Sword Saint might have objected that leaning on the power of your weapon betrayed a lack of a pride in your own skills. But Eris knew that pride wasn’t worth *shit* in a fight to the death.

“This one.”

The sword Eris had chosen was the simplest of the three. Its blade was thin and only slightly curved. There was nothing ominous or intimidating about it; in fact, its clean, polished surface was very pleasant to the eye.

“The Phoenix Dragon Sword it is.”

The weapon she’d chosen had been a gift to the first Sword God from the legendary craftsman known as the Dragon Emperor. It was a sword *made* for Sword Gods, designed to maximize the potential of their offensive Style.

“Nice choice, kid.”

“…Mind telling me why?”

“This here’s a Magic Sword. Doesn’t *look* like it has any special abilities at a glance, but there’s tiny channels of mana running all throughout the blade. They basically neutralize your opponent’s Battle Aura. The Dragon God’s Aura is *insanely* strong, so the sword won’t counteract it entirely… but it *will* soften him up a bit.”

In other words, it might be possible to pierce his defenses with this.

“I never warmed up to that one myself, but I bet you’ll use it well.”

Incidentally, the reason that he’d only shown Eris three of the Seven Sword God Blades was that the other four were in use. He carried one himself, as did the two Sword Emperors and the Sword King Ghislaine. The other two would no doubt end up in the hands of the Style’s two promising young Sword Saints, once they had progressed a bit further in their training.

“Now then, let’s get down to business. First rule of fighting Orsted…”

The Sword God paused for emphasis, staring Eris in the eyes.

“*Never* make the first move.”

Eris didn’t ask why. She knew the answer all too well herself.

“The man’s Water God Style is divine level. He’ll kill you in a single counterstroke.”

A bitter memory flashed through Eris’ mind: a memory of being knocked flying with a single strike.

“Make him come to you. That’s step one.”

***

Practitioners of the Sword God Style always sought to land the first strike. To defeat them, you needed only to wait and counter it. According to the Sword God, this simple strategy was the essence of Orsted’s peerless technique.

So Eris didn’t move. She *couldn’t* risk striking first against a master practitioner of the Water God Style. The Sword God Style was inherently aggressive, and the Water God Style defensive. That put her at a major disadvantage. The Water God Style’s counterattacks did not fail. Unless the student of the Sword God Style was *superior* to a certain degree, the Water God Style would be victorious.

Eris had learned that lesson all too well, thanks to her training with the Water King Isolde. And therefore, she wasn’t going to make the mistake of attacking first.

Naturally, just standing around wasn’t *easy* for the notoriously aggressive “Mad Dog.” But she was going to do it anyway.

“Hmm…? You’re not coming?”

As Eris stood there, simply holding her stance, Orsted narrowed his eyes in puzzlement. The Sword God Style always sought to take the initiative. It was the foundation of all their techniques. And yet, she was doing nothing whatsoever.

“All *I* need to do is wait,” Eris replied quietly. “When Rudeus recovers, we can attack you together.”

"…Well, this is a surprise. *Eris Boreas Greyrat* speaks of fighting alongside allies? Another change, it seems. I did think it *possible* she might turn out differently, if she learned to cool her head and trained under the right master… perhaps I was right."

"I'm not a Boreas anymore. It's just Eris Greyrat."

"A different woman than the Eris I know, then…"

Moving slowly and deliberately, Orsted finally assumed a stance of sorts.

His left hand still dangling loosely at his side, he raised his right arm to point the tip of his blade straight at Eris.

"Very well. I'll come to you, then."

Neither of them had done anything as yet. But the battle was now entering its second stage.

***

Again, Eris thought back to her conversation with the Sword God.

Orsted can use the Sword of Light with his bare hand for a blade. But after all your practice with Nina, I think you know how to deal with that move. Just cut through his wrist before it reaches maximum velocity.

That said, there's no telling if he'll use his right hand or his left. If he raises both of 'em, you're gonna have to guess. He might swing from above or below, too. Pick left or right, high or low—that's step two.

Those had been Gall Falion's exact words.

Eris couldn't help but grimace slightly. Orsted had already drawn his sword. He would be using the true Sword of Light, not an approximation of it with his hand. The question was if she was capable of countering it.

The answer, she decided, was *yes.* Orsted wasn't invincible. He was breathing somewhat roughly, and he was covered in wounds. Even now, blood dripped from the arm that held his sword.

Also… he was only holding out his right arm, and his sword was low, just as she'd hoped. Despite his injuries, he was still holding his weapon in a single hand.

He really thinks I'm nothing to worry about…

Normally, this fact might have thrown Eris into a rage, but this time she processed it quite calmly. It felt strange to her, considering all those angry years she'd spent demanding the world's respect and fear—but today, she was *pleased* to be underestimated.

"Sword God Style—Sword of Light."

Orsted's hand flicked through the air with fearsome speed. But simultaneously—

"Sword God Style—Reflection Blade."

Eris swung her own sword down as well.

It was a movement she had practiced thousands upon thousands of times. It was also the best way to counteract the Sword of Light. With your sword at maximum velocity, you targeted the slower-moving wrist of your opponent and cut through it before they could complete their swing.

Orsted's sword spun into the air—along with his right hand.

I got him!

For a moment, Eris believed it was over.

But before she could follow up, Orsted executed an astonishing response. Reaching upward, he caught his severed hand, pressed it to his wrist, and *instantly* reattached it. In the same moment, he took advantage of his upward movement to fire off a spinning kick.

Eris managed to dodge this bizarre attack with a half-step backward, but only because the Sword God had warned her there was a possibility he might try something of the kind.

"…!"

Orsted immediately followed up with a slicing bare hand strike, but Eris struck it down with her sword.

Neither of these hasty strikes had been a Sword of Light. As a result, Eris' attack had not injured Orsted. Her blade had struck home with a *clang*, successfully redirecting his hand, but it hadn't left a scratch on his skin.

A moment later, Orsted's sword thumped blade-first into the ground behind him.

At a glance, it appeared that the man's right hand was as good as new. And the injuries Rudeus had inflicted him had *also* been healed. In the blink of an eye, he'd restored himself completely with some incredibly powerful variety of Healing magic.

What a monster, Eris thought calmly to herself.

Her last attack may not have been a Sword of Light, but its speed and power had been considerable. Yet it had bounced right off the man. The Sword of Light was her *only* means of cutting through his Holy Dragon Aura, even with the Phoenix Dragon Sword.

"I see the Sword God's cunning in your tactics. You must have been a *highly* favored student, Eris Greyrat."

Eris had returned her sword to its position over her head. Her mind was clear, and her emotions steady.

But instead of swinging his own blade, Orsted now unleashed a different kind of attack.

"Did Gall Falion tell you stories of his exploits as you lay in his bed?"

When all was said and done, Eris respected the Sword God deeply. Over the last few years, Gall Falion had thrown himself into the task of training her, and entrusted her with his dream. Their relationship had been a purely platonic one. He was simply her master, and she was simply his student. He had trained her because their interests were aligned.

Ordinarily, Eris would have been infuriated at Orsted's crude suggestion to the contrary… especially since he'd spoken so that the other three women, and *Rudeus*, could hear. But her master had given her a clear warning: *If things start goin' well, Orsted might try to needle you. Don't you go and fall for it, you hear me?*

The Sword God had anticipated Orsted's attempt at provocation in advance. And so, it had no effect on Eris whatsoever. She had no reason to be angry. Orsted was just proving that Gall Falion had his number.

"Hmph."

"…I see. You truly *have* grown stronger."

As Eris brushed off his taunt with a snort, Orsted murmured these words in an almost melancholy tone… and slowly raised both of his hands.

At the sight of this, Eris recalled the last piece of advice the Sword God had given her.

For whatever reason, the man can't go all-out. He's a master with magic and the sword, but he'll try to settle things with just his Aura and his martial arts… especially when he's fightin' someone with a style he's real familiar with. He starts off with the kicks and punches, then goes to magic if he really has to. But when he's up against something new… For some reason, he tends to sit back and study techniques he's seeing for the first time. That just might be the chink in his armor.

Right now, Orsted wasn't going in for the kill. He seemed to be slowly toying with her, like a cat batting cruelly at an exhausted mouse.

Eris ground her teeth audibly, took her left hand from the Phoenix Dragon Sword and reached for the unmarked blade she'd received at the Migurd village.

Her right hand held the Phoenix Dragon Sword above her head. But her left was now gripping the nameless sword, still sheathed behind her waist.

It was a strange stance. All the more because the Sword God Style had no concept of *dual wielding.* Using two swords at once was a technique of the North God Style.

More importantly—while the sword Eris held above her head was a deadly magic weapon, she wasn't capable of using the Sword of Light with a single hand. And while there were techniques that involved drawing a sword directly into a strike, her reverse grip on the unmarked sword made the best of them impossible.

Her stance, in other words, was *irrational.* It made no sense at all. It wasn't the sort of blunder that a Sword King, and a master of the Sword God Style, was supposed to make. Under any circumstances.

"Hm…?"

For that very reason, Orsted stopped moving.

With his hands still poised in the air, he studied Eris carefully. His eyes were entirely focused on her—to the exclusion of Rudeus, who was currently being healed behind her.

She had his complete attention for the moment. But she couldn't just stay passive now. Unless she took some action, Orsted would step forward to attack.

Fortunately, Eris had improvised a certain move for this very moment. It was based on a technique she'd picked up from the North Emperor Auber… although she'd only seen it once. She had trained herself to execute this move with a single hand, at maximum velocity, in the very same instant that she drew her sword. It was an imperfect technique, but it was highly lethal nonetheless.

When their back's against the wall, a student of the North God Style will throw their sword.

Eris' left hand moved roughly, but with confidence.

Her fingers caught on the sword's hilt, pulling it free, and in the same motion, as her arm whipped forward, she hurled it at Orsted. The unmarked sword that had accompanied her through so many

trials and tribulations cut cleanly through the air, its point aimed straight at her foe.

The momentum of the throw carried Eris' left hand upward—to the sword she still held aloft. As swiftly as she possibly could, she grabbed the Phoenix Dragon Sword. And without a moment's hesitation, she swung it down with both hands, executing a flawless Sword of Light.

"…!"

Her fearsome attack flew right past the airborne sword, slicing toward the top of Orsted's head along the shortest possible trajectory, at the greatest possible speed.

There was a sharp *clang.*

"…Tch."

Holding her sword in its follow-through position, Eris clicked her tongue in irritation.

Orsted had caught its blade between his hands. And the unnamed sword had struck his body solidly, only to deflect off his Holy Dragon Aura and fly back behind her.

"You've exceeded my expectations. But I suppose it's over now."

"Nope!"

Her blade still frozen in Orsted's hands, Eris shouted her reply as she turned toward where the unmarked sword had fallen.

Rudeus was standing there. The others had finished healing him.

"We're just getting started!"

It took Eris an instant to process what her eyes were seeing. It *was* Rudeus, of course. And he *was* standing. But there were dark circles under his eyes, and his light brown hair had gone white. His legs were trembling weakly, his face was deathly pale, and his lips were purple. Roxy and Sylphie were supporting him on either side.

"…"

“Getting started… with what, exactly?”

Rudeus was in no condition to fight, to say the least. His mana was exhausted, his strength was gone, and even his willpower had failed him. He was battered and bruised both physically and emotionally.

“…You’ll see soon enough.”

The sight of him was enough to steel Eris’ resolve.

Three times, she inhaled deeply and exhaled. As air flooded into her lungs, she gripped her sword more tightly, conscious of every bead of sweat on her palms. Clenching her back teeth tightly for an instant, she licked at her lips. Finally, she tensed her stomach muscles—and roared as loudly as she could.

“You three, get Rudeus out of here! Right now!”

Eris’ voice thundered through the air.

“I’ll hold Orsted here, even if it kills me!”

She meant that quite literally.

Sylphie felt the strength of Eris’ determination. She’d sensed the same thing from her companions on the desperate journey to Ranoa with Princess Ariel. Eris was prepared to die.

“W-Wait! I’ll fight too!”

Sylphie’s legs were trembling, but she shouted the words nonetheless.

Orsted was terrifying beyond measure. This was their first meeting, but she *knew* that to stand against him would mean death.

Still, the choice wasn’t a difficult one. Not with Rudeus’ life on the line. If anything, she was full of regret that she’d ever let the man she loved go off alone to fight a monster such as this. The words *Are you trying to get him killed?!* still rang in her ears.

That had never been her intention. She'd seen Rudeus regain his usual energy and focus, despite his fears, and she'd assumed it would all work out fine. After all, he was an incredibly powerful mage, and he *always* made it back to her in the end. Also, the Magic Armor had seemed overwhelming. She'd convinced herself that nothing, and no one, could defeat that thing.

It was only her confidence in Rudeus that had held her back.

Eris stared silently into Sylphie's eyes for just a moment, and then nodded. "All right. You take the back line! Ghislaine, get Rudeus and Roxy out of here!"

"Eris! My job is to protect *you!*"

Now it was the Beastfolk Sword King's turn to protest.

Ghislaine had watched Eris fight her way through life. She'd watched her train with single-minded focus. And for that reason, she'd stood back and watched this battle unfold, without interfering or objecting. She'd seen that as her way of repaying Eris' deceased grandfather, Sauros, to whom she'd owed so much.

"What, you're not going to listen to me?! I'm telling you to protect the people I care about!"

"…I won't do it! I could never face Lord Sauros or Philip if I let you die here!"

But now the girl was planning to take a path that ended in certain death, and Ghislaine couldn't allow that. Her refusal was reflexive rather than reasoned. She wasn't very good at thinking, and avoided it when possible.

"Stop it! We *all* need to run!"

Given her pregnancy, Roxy was aware she wouldn't be much use in combat. She'd come here *knowing* that she would only be a burden if it came to that. Her plan had been to drag Rudeus to the horses waiting outside the forest, and then flee as quickly as possible. There was a chance such strenuous movement might cause a miscarriage, but helping Rudeus escape was her first priority. In all honesty, she hadn't given much thought to what would

come after that. For now, she believed they simply had to run and regroup in safety.

Eris and Ghislaine argued; Sylphie and Roxy braced themselves to act. And as he took all of this in out of the corner of his eyes, Orsted let out a long, loud sigh.

Everyone except Rudeus went on guard. Four sets of eyes glared fiercely at Orsted. Indifferent to their gazes, the Dragon God raised his voice to a bellow.

“Rudeus Greyrat!”

Rudeus flinched visibly at the sound of his name.

“So long as you serve the Man-God, I will not allow you to escape. Even if it means killing everyone here, and all the others waiting for you in the city, I *will* hunt you down and take your life!”

Rudeus was trembling now, more obviously than before. His knees shaking uncontrollably, he stared down at the ground in front of him.

“While I place no trust in the Man-God’s words…given what he told you, I will *also* abduct your children once you’re dead!”

At these words, the trembling stopped.

The fire had flickered back into Rudeus’ eyes. Punching at his quaking legs with his left hand, he reached out with his right to grab his staff from Roxy—forgetting that he’d lost that hand not long ago. Thrown off-balance, he might have fallen to the ground if Roxy hadn’t quickly caught him. But even as he leaned against her, his eyes were glaring fiercely at Orsted. There was murder in his gaze.

“However, your imitation of the Fighting God Armor, the bountiful mana bestowed upon you by the Laplace Aspect, and your immunity to my curse may yet prove useful!”

“…?”

At these words, the rage in Rudeus’ eyes faltered slightly. And as he looked on with a dubious, wary expression, the Dragon God continued to speak.

“Betray the Man-God! Join me instead!”

Two people reacted instantly to these words.

“You’ve *got* to be joking!”

“Rudy, don’t listen to him!”

Eris and Sylphie were both convinced that Orsted was lying. They had no clear reason to believe this, but they did. Ghislaine and Roxy held their silence, but they too felt that Orsted was up to something—that some trap lay hidden in his words.

“Should you accept my offer, I will overlook this unprovoked ambush, and restore your injured arm to its original condition!”

“…”

But Rudeus was an exception.

He had noticed something about the tone of Orsted’s voice. He had realized that the man’s throat was *trembling* slightly. And that fact was nagging at him.

“I am the Dragon God. Once you are under my protection, the Man-God will not find it so easy to meddle with you!”

Doubt and temptation mingled in Rudeus’ eyes.

“Rest assured, he cannot hear what we speak of at this very moment!”

“…”

“If your allegiance to the Man-God was unwilling, I would think this a most enticing offer!”

“…”

“Choose now, Rudeus Greyrat! Will you side with the Man-God, and lose everything at my hands? Or will you join me and fight against him?! You are unaffected by my curse! This is a choice you are *capable* of making!”

Rudeus’ gaze met Orsted’s.

First, he exhaled slowly. And then, he studied the face of the Dragon God, as if searching for an answer in it. He was trying to see

what was hidden behind the man's stony expression. But of course, his eyes could tell him nothing of the kind.

The silence stretched for several seconds.

"Rudy?"

Finally, Rudeus staggered out of Roxy's arms and began to walk slowly forward. With every step, he ran the risk of falling on his face. He lurched to the side and steadied himself on Ghislaine's shoulder. When he lost his balance, he grabbed hold of Sylphie, who'd rushed up to catch him. Eventually, he made his way past Eris.

And then, he fell to his knees at Orsted's feet.

He made no move to rise. Instead, he looked up at the man before him and spoke.

"Is there really…a way to protect my family from the Man-God…?"

"There is! He possesses great knowledge of the future, but he is not all-seeing, much less all-powerful!"

"Is it… *absolutely* reliable…?"

"…Not absolutely, no. I would not pretend to know the full breadth of his powers."

Orsted made no definite promise. He didn't even offer soothing words of reassurance. Nonetheless, Rudeus looked up at him with the eyes of a man seeking salvation. There were tears in the corners of those eyes, although it was hard to say what had inspired them.

One way or the other, he had made his decision.

"…I'll serve you. Help me. Please."

And so, on this day, Rudeus Greyrat entered the service of the Dragon God.

Chapter 10:
Eris Greyrat (Part 1)

I WOKE UP EARLY and accompanied Norn for a run followed by some practice swings, made it back in time to hug Sylphie as she tended Lucie, said good morning to Lilia and Aisha in the living room, combed and braided Roxy's hair while she struggled to wake up, found Zenith in the garden quietly watching our pet Treant Byt, let her know that breakfast was ready, and then had a big meal with the entire family.

In other words, I was back to my old, peaceful routine.

Of course, it wasn't like nothing had ever happened. I really *had* tried to kill the Dragon God Orsted. I'd been utterly defeated… but somehow made it out alive.

I glanced down at my hands. They were a testament to that fact. When I squeezed them into fists, I could feel my fingertips pressing against my palm—on *both* sides.

On that day, after I bowed to Orsted and swore my loyalty, he'd made good on his promise to use his Healing magic on me. My severed right arm was regenerated in moments, along with an added bonus: the left hand that Manatite Hydra took from me some time earlier.

Orsted proceeded to cast some other spell on me, handed me a bracelet he'd been wearing on his arm, and departed with the words, "I'll be in touch once you've regained your mana."

Even now, I was wearing the bracelet in question on my left arm. I wasn't clear on its function, though. Maybe it would accelerate my mana regeneration, or somehow prevent the Man-God from spying on me.

The latter seemed plausible. Ten days had passed since the battle, but the Man-God hadn't appeared in my dreams yet. And Orsted *had* said something about protecting me from his influence.

Then again, for all I knew it was just something he gave out to anyone under his command, like some sort of official Dragon God badge.

In any case… Orsted had defeated me, and I was now his subordinate. I'd betrayed the Man-God and joined forces with his enemy. I would probably be wearing this bracelet for the rest of my life.

I had no regrets about the choice I'd made. To be honest, it felt kind of *nice* to have betrayed that faceless bastard. At the moment, I was more relieved than anxious.

There was no turning back at this point. Even if Orsted turned out to be a real piece of work himself, I couldn't double-cross him. The die had been cast. It was always possible that I was just doing exactly what the Man-God wanted, yes… but it was too late to worry about that now.

In all honesty, though, I had a gut feeling that Orsted would prove more trustworthy than the Man-God. Something about him reminded me of Ruijerd, in a way. He didn't have Ruijerd's strong sense of pride, or his affection for children. But unlike the Man-God, who just watched events passively from a distance, he seemed like the type who tried to punch his way through his problems.

One way or another, there was a big weight off my shoulders. I was breathing easier these days than I had in months. The road ahead was likely going to be a bumpy one, but it felt as if I'd made it over a steep mountain.

Incidentally, I'd spoken with Roxy and Sylphie after Orsted left. Sylphie was sobbing the entire time, and Roxy gave me a stern talking-to. They both insisted that they would have stopped me if I'd been more honest about how truly dangerous Orsted was, and expressed their fears about my new alliance with him. But I justified it as the only option I had in the short term, and they grudgingly accepted that argument.

After that, we headed straight back home, where I told my family I was fine and then went to bed immediately. Physically exhausted and completely out of mana, I ended up sleeping for an entire day.

When I finally woke, I visited all my friends and allies to let them know that I'd lost to Orsted and joined his service. Of all of them, Perugius looked the most relieved. Understandable, for sure—even with a flying fortress, you wouldn't want to make an enemy out of that guy.

Everyone looked kind of startled when they saw me, by the way. Eventually, I found out it was because my hair had gone white. According to Perugius, this was a common side effect of using up a massive quantity of mana in a short period of time. I'd never understood why Sylphie's hair had changed color after the Displacement Incident, but that probably explained it. However, I was already seeing some brown at the roots of my hair. Unlike Sylphie's, my change would likely be a temporary one. Not that I really minded either way, since we had a matching look going at the moment…

There was no telling how the Man-God might respond to my betrayal, so I'd been on edge at first. So far, though, nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and I was feeling fine. My body was recovering from its ordeal, and I could sense my supply of mana gradually refilling itself.

On that note—it seemed like Orsted knew the secret behind my unusually large mana capacity. He'd mentioned something called a Laplace Aspect, whatever that was…

Well, he'd probably tell me more at some point if it was important. I'd just have to be patient for now.

Putting all that aside… there *was* one thing about my routine daily life that had changed considerably.

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“Refill, please!”

“Sorry, Eris. There’s no more soup left.”

“Really? That wasn’t much at all!”

We had a new regular at our dinner table: a tall, red-headed woman with an appetite. By which I mean Eris Greyrat, naturally. She’d followed us back to Sharia, occupied our guest room on her own initiative, and started living with us.

Ghislaine was staying at a nearby inn, incidentally. I wasn’t clear on why. Maybe seeing Zenith in her current state was too much of a shock for her. Or maybe she was trying to give us some space. One way or another, it was only Eris who’d moved in.

Eris did wander off every now and then, but in general, she spent most of her time hanging around the house. She watched Sylphie cook, Roxy preparing for her classes, or Aisha and Lilia doing housework; sometimes she’d even stare at Zenith and Lucie for no apparent reason. When she wasn’t out and about, observing members of the family seemed to be her default activity.

It didn’t escape my notice that she usually had a small, troubled frown on her face while she observed Sylphie and Roxy in particular.

Eris had changed a lot since the last time I’d seen her. I’m not sure how to put this, but… she had a real *presence* now. She was tall for a woman, for one thing, and she carried herself with confidence.

Her style suited her, too. She wore the same kind of leather jacket as Ghislaine, flexible black pants, and a white top over a dark undershirt—it was an outfit she could fight in, but it also happed to underscore just how *fit* she was. That’s not to say that she’d turned into a mass of muscle, though. If anything, her body was lean and lithe.

To be honest, once I started looking her, it was a real challenge to stop.

It didn’t hurt that her breasts were large, her waist was thin, and her butt was curvy. But over the last five years, her once childish face had also acquired a sharp, striking beauty. In every respect, she was obviously a young woman now, rather than the girl I’d known.

Maybe that was part of why I was finding it so hard to start a conversation with her. It might have been easier to catch up with her right after the battle, but I’d missed that window of opportunity while I was going around the city telling everyone about the situation.

The more basic issue, though, was that my heart started racing every time I looked at her for too long.

I’d told myself a dozen times that I needed to talk to her. But somehow, I just couldn’t seem to find the right moment. Whenever I *started* to say something, that intense gaze would lock on to me, the pitter-pattering in my chest would kick into overdrive, and I’d find myself averting my eyes. It always took quite some time for my heart to stop pounding afterward.

What a mysterious phenomenon. Was this terror I was feeling?

Okay, yeah, just kidding. I knew exactly what was going on.

I was in love. I’d fallen hard for Eris—for the second time, I guess.

She’d sure won me over quickly, right? In my defense, though, she *had* dashed in to save me when I thought all hope was lost, held the Dragon God Orsted himself at bay, and risked her life to protect mine. Looked damn good doing it, too. All in all, I couldn’t really blame myself.

Right now, I was basically an infatuated schoolgirl. I was no longer Rudeus—I was Wooed-eus.

Given the way I felt about Eris, the next step seemed to be clear. Sylphie and Roxy had already given me their approval. There was no reason I couldn’t just ask her to marry me.

But… maybe it wasn’t quite that simple.

I’d only learned this from Aisha after returning home, but Eris had spent the last few years undergoing a harsh training regimen in

the Sword Sanctum *solely* so that she could fight Orsted at my side. Our battle against him at the Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw had left a deep impression on her, and when she'd seen me experimenting with his Disturb Magic spell afterward, she'd assumed that I was planning to defeat him someday in the future.

Personally, I thought Eris and I were pretty closely matched back then. But she decided that she wasn't strong enough to fight alongside me as an equal, and went off to train with the very best.

From *her* perspective, I had basically betrayed her. She'd gone off on a long 'overseas business trip,' and then returned to find her no-good cheater of a boyfriend shacked up with two other women.

There had been many misunderstandings involved, of course, and I'd explained all that in my letter. You never knew for sure with Eris, but I assumed she understood the situation. Still, that didn't mean she was ready to *accept* it. Considering her personality, I half expected her to charge at me with a kitchen knife one of these days. Under the circumstances, it felt a little wrong to just… ask her to marry me anyway.

Also, she was behaving kind of strangely in general. I couldn't figure out what she was thinking, to be honest. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the Eris I knew was kind of a willful, headstrong brat. She tended charge right into action without a thought for the consequences. I'd sort of been expecting something along these lines: "I love you, Rudeus! That means you get to marry me! Get in my room—we're making love all night long! You hear that, everyone? Rudeus is mine! Get those other women out of here!"

To my surprise, though, she hadn't said anything of the kind. She wasn't really… asserting herself at all, in fact. I'd never seen her this quiet and subdued.

I did have a theory that could explain all this.

Two weeks ago, Eris had risked her life to protect me from Orsted. But at that point, she was still clinging to some unrealistic fantasies about me. Up till that day, she probably believed that I'd spent the last five years rigorously training the way she had. Of course, that wasn't even close to being true. I'd put in some effort to

grow stronger, but nothing remotely comparable to what she did. Orsted had ruthlessly beaten me down, and Eris had arrived just in time to see me crawling pathetically through the dirt. Just to top things off, I'd *also* picked up two wives, and there were some less than flattering rumors about me going around in the city. It wouldn't exactly be surprising if she'd felt a little disillusioned. Maybe she wasn't saying anything because she was planning to leave soon.

The more I thought about that possibility, the more nervous I got about starting the conversation from my end. I was scared she'd reject me outright, honestly. What if she fixed those steely eyes on me and said "I don't give a damn about you anymore!" or something? The idea was just depressing. In a sense, it was probably what I deserved, but it would still feel like a punch to the gut.

Then again, if she wanted to say *that,* wouldn't she have done so sooner?

Yeah, but… Hmm. I don't know… Argggh…

One way or the other, we obviously needed to talk this through. I had to grow a spine and ask her what her plans were. Or so I kept telling myself… but I just couldn't seem to find the right moment. I couldn't bring myself to say anything, and Eris was keeping quiet too. And so, the days kept slipping by with no progress on that front whatsoever.

If at all possible, I wanted to clear things up between us before Orsted got in touch with me. But I was at a loss as to how to make that happen. It was starting to feel like the two of us were going to just… keep living separately in the same house without ever figuring this out.

As I was preoccupied with these thoughts, Roxy came over to me and asked an unexpected question.

"So, when were you planning to hold the wedding party for Eris?"

"The… wedding party?"

“Right. I mean, you held one for me, so I assume you’ll do the same for her. I’ll take the day off work for it, so I was hoping you could let me know when it’s going to happen…”

I found myself at a loss for words.

After an awkward pause, Roxy looked me in the eyes and frowned. “Don’t tell me you haven’t even *talked* to her about this yet. We discussed it at great length before she showed up, didn’t we?”

The expression on my face was probably… uncomfortable, to say the least.

Roxy was right, of course. I’d already settled the matter with my family; everyone was ready to accept Eris. Aisha had been willing from the start, but even Norn was treating her like a part of the family now. In fact, I’d noticed her and Eris chatting happily about Ruijerd a couple times now. They seemed to get along much better than you might have expected.

Nobody was against this marriage. The only thing holding it up was my cowardice.

“Rudy, you can’t put this off forever,” Roxy said, pointing a finger in the air in her best ‘stern big sister’ pose. “And you really shouldn’t keep Eris waiting any longer.”

“Waiting…?”

“Of course. She’s expecting you to say ‘Jump into my arms!’ or what have you.”

Just to emphasize the point, Roxy threw her arms wide open at me. It was extremely cute.

“Hmm. You really think *Eris* wants to hear that from me? Are you sure you’re not just thinking of *your* fantasies?”

“Wha— Come on, don’t tease me! You need to take this seriously, Rudy!”

Roxy threw her hands into the air in exasperation, puffing out her cheeks sulkily.

I'd pivoted to teasing her on reflex, but I did need to give this some thought. Was Eris really waiting patiently for me to make the first move? That didn't really seem like her style…

Then again, Roxy had never led me wrong before. *She* was the kind of God whose advice you could actually rely on. Now that I had her pushing me forward, I had no justifiable reason to hesitate. It was time for me to show a little courage. I was going to approach Eris, tell her how I felt, and see what she had to say about it. If she laughed in my face, I'd just have to get Sylphie and Roxy to cheer me up.

First things first, though. Throwing my arms open wide, I declared, "Jump into my arms, Roxy!" in my most enthusiastic tone.

"You're not even listening to me, are you…"

Roxy's voice trailed off toward the end of her sentence. She looked me in the face, then glanced furtively around, confirming that there was no one around. After a moment, she lowered her hands to shoulder level and took an adorable little hop into my arms. I could feel her slightly conspicuous belly pressing up against my stomach.

"Easy there, Princess. Wouldn't want to jostle the baby in your belly too much."

"Not to worry," Roxy murmured softly in my ear. "They need a little exercise now and then if they're going to stay in shape."

Was that really how it worked? Well, if she said so. I'd have to defer to the expert. Deciding this was a good opportunity for some intimate family bonding time, I lowered myself into a chair and deposited Roxy on my lap. But as I did so… I had the strangest feeling I was being *watched*.

"…Hm?"

There was someone lurking in the doorway, half-hidden in the crouch of a nosy housekeeper. Someone with eyes that glimmered like an angry tiger's.

It was *Eris.*

"Gyaa!"

“W-What’s the matter, Rudy?!”

As I shrieked and clutched Roxy tightly in my arms, Eris turned her eyes away from mine and disappeared into the shadows of the hallway. She hadn’t said a word, but she’d still managed to absolutely terrify me.

O-Okay, maybe I’ll talk to her tomorrow…

***

The next day, I wandered through the house in search of Eris, hoping to finally have the conversation I’d been putting off so long.

It didn’t take long for me to find her. She was out in the yard, doing practice swings. For some reason, Norn was practicing right beside her. Wasn’t she supposed to be at school? Hmm. Every once in a while, Eris paused to say something like “No, no. Do it like this.” It looked like she was trying to help my little sister with her form.

“I keep telling you, that’s not right! Why aren’t you getting it?!”

“That’s not very helpful. What exactly am I doing wrong?”

“What *exactly?* Uh…”

Eris had never been too good at putting these things into words, so I was a little skeptical Norn would get anything out of this lesson. Some people with *too much* natural talent don’t even understand all the things they’re doing instinctively, you know?

But to my surprise—

“Well, you’re not using your left hand enough. If you swing your sword using just your right arm, the blade’s going to slip off target.”

Huh? Wait, am I hearing things?

“Try to focus on the movements of your left hand… Pretend you’re *only* using that arm. That should make your swings much cleaner.”

Hold on, is this really Eris talking? Maybe she's just flapping her mouth, and Ghislaine's dubbing over her?

"Oh, right. I think I get it now!"

"Well, good. I'd hope so."

Smiling at each other, the two of them got right back to their practice swings. And Norn's looked just a little better than before.

…Well, I guess she is a Sword King now.

Ghislaine had told me once that you couldn't reach that rank on instincts or talent alone. Eris must have learned how to think logically about her technique on her way up the ladder.

In any case… Eris' swings sure were quick. I couldn't even see a blur past the very base of her blade.

Her movements were also, well… beautiful. Her blade whispered slightly when she raised it, and cut silently through the air as she brought it down. Only when it stopped, at the very bottom of her swing, could you hear a gentle *whoosh.*

It was an entrancing sight. Watching her in action made me want to sigh with admiration. Oh man, that look of total concentration on her face… the beads of sweat on her forehead… her taut, lean body… her muscles, rippling with exertion…

Oh! Oh my god. How could I have overlooked this?

Every time Eris swung her sword down, a certain springy part of her anatomy would quiver slightly. This wasn't *swaying* or *bouncing,* to be clear—they were just jiggling a little, very subtly. Probably because her swings were so efficient that her upper body wasn't moving much at all. That undershirt she was wearing seemed to offer some support, but on closer examination, I had the feeling she wasn't wearing any 'chest armor' underneath it. With every swing, my eyes were glued a little harder to this splendid phenomenon. I couldn't escape her gravitational field!

"Hm…?"

All of a sudden, Eris' breasts stopped moving… that is to say, she stopped swinging her sword.

I glanced up and found that she was looking my way. Her legs were spread to shoulder width, her chin was in the air, and there was a nasty frown on her face. All she had to do was fold her arms, and you'd have her signature intimidating pose from back in the day.

Just as this thought occurred to me, I noticed what she was holding: the very real, very sharp sword she'd used to fend off Orsted.

I chose to make a prompt tactical retreat.

You wouldn't want to start an important discussion with someone carrying a deadly weapon, right? Just wouldn't be good manners!

Two hours later, when I figured her training regimen should be over for the day, I went looking for Eris once again.

She wasn't in the yard anymore. When I checked the entrance to our bath, though, I only saw Norn's clothes folded up in the dressing area. Naturally, I didn't peep into the bath itself.

After looking all through the house, though, I couldn't find Eris anywhere. Maybe she'd changed clothes right away and gone out on some errand? Waiting for her to come back was always an option, of course… but then again, there was no reason we had to talk about this inside the house. If she was out and about, I should try to catch up with her.

With that thought in mind, I headed over the bathroom to relieve myself before I left.

Just as I was reaching for the knob, though, the door swung quickly open from the inside.

"Ah!"

"Buh!"

All of a sudden, I found myself mere inches away from a very startled-looking Eris. At point-blank range, her strong facial features were even more strikingly beautiful. Her waves of vivid red hair, slightly damp, flowed over her shoulders and down toward her bust.

Her sweat-drenched undershirt clung closely to her body, offering an excellent view of her cleavage. That deep, dark valley drew my gaze with all the force of a black hole. Like all valleys, it was flanked by a pair of hills. And what hills they were! Her sweaty shirt revealed their lovely contours perfectly, right down to the sharp little points at their summits.

It seemed that my eyes had died and gone to eyeball heaven.

“Wh-what are you looking at?”

There was an uncertain look on Eris’ face now. It was *extremely* cute. Reflexively, I reached out and touched the great mounds before me, exploring their gentle slopes and slightly harder peaks.

Ooh. Angel soft…

A split-second later, Eris’ shoulder blurred into motion, and I was knocked unconscious.

When I came to, the back of my head was resting on something slightly firm. It was harder than my usual pillow, but it had a nice warmth to it, and it felt kind of… supple. Also, someone seemed to be stroking me on the head.

I eventually realized this was a ‘lap pillow’ situation. Unfortunately, my mind was still half-asleep at this point.

“Mm… nom nom… I can’t eat another bite…”

Pretending to be *completely* asleep, I turned over to bury my face in the triangular space where my human pillow’s legs met her body. Then I took a nice, deep breath, and started groping her backside.

“Hyaaa!”

Hmm? This isn’t Sylphie’s butt. Hers is a lot smaller… almost palm-sized.

This doesn’t smell like Roxy either. She has a nice, comforting scent, but this one is a little sweaty… and for some reason, it’s

setting off alarm bells in the back of my head…

It's not half bad, though. Makes me feel a little nostalgic…

At this point, I snapped fully awake. Slowly opening my eyes, I turned to look at the woman I was lying on. From the other side of two shapely mountains, a pair of intense eyes were glaring down at me.

Eris reached down and gripped my head firmly with her hand.

Oh god, it's all over! She's going to twist my head right off my neck! Goodbye, Sylphie. Goodbye, Roxy. I'm sorry I have to leave you so soon…

To my surprise, though, Eris didn't actually murder me. Instead, she started stroking my hair with strong but gentle movements.

Making myself as small as possible, I studied her carefully. She was pouting, and her face was red, and she wouldn't look me in the eye. But she didn't actually seem that angry.

"Uhm… Miss Eris?"

"It's just *Eris*."

"Okay then… I'm sorry, Eris."

As soon as I apologized, her grip on my head grew noticeably more forceful. *Farewell, my beloved family… we'll meet again someday…*

"It's all right," Eris said after a moment. "I'm sorry too."

"Oh… Well, okay then."

"I read your letter and everything. It wasn't easy for you after I left, right?"

My head was still firmly in Eris' grip, but I managed to nod anyway. I wasn't enough of an adult to add "none of that was your fault." The two of us had badly misunderstood each other back then; I was hurt at the time, and now she was going through something similar.

"Hey, Rudeus…"

“What is it?”

“…”

Eris fell silent for a long moment. She looked uncertain about how to complete her sentence. We knew there was a lot that needed to be said, but we couldn’t seem to find the right words. The five years we’d spent apart had been *very* long ones—for both of us.

“You do, uhm… love those two, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I love them both.”

At my quick, clear reply, Eris’ grip on my head tightened slightly.

“You like them more than me, right?”

“Yeah.”

Eris’ face crumpled with sadness.

Shit. I wish I hadn’t said that. I can’t go comparing them to each other. I loved Sylphie and Roxy very much, but I’d fallen for Eris too. There was really no point denying that at this point.

“Do you… hate me now?”

“Of course not! It’s just… been a really long time since we saw each other… Sometimes I feel a little awkward around you, that’s all…”

“You know, I still like *you* a lot, Rudeus. And I want you to love me back.”

Eris’ face had gone as red as her hair.

Was I hearing things, or had she just confessed her love to me? Yeah. Surely there wasn’t any other way to interpret that…

The question was how to reply. I knew what my final answer was… but before I could deliver it, I needed to make sure that she really understood what she was getting herself into here.

“You know I have two wives already, right?”

“…”

Scowling, Eris abruptly rose to her feet. Rudely ejected from her lap, my head bounced off the wooden floor.

It seemed we were in the living room. There was no one else around. Sylphie and Norn were both at home, but maybe they were trying to give us some space at the moment.

As I crawled onto my hands and knees, Eris glared at me from above. Her arms were folded, her legs were open to shoulder width, and her chin was in the air. It was the exact same pose she'd used on me the very first time we met.

"Step outside, Rudeus! I want a duel!"

"Huh?!" I squeaked, clambering to my feet as I brushed the dust off my clothes. "A *duel?!"*

"That's right! If you win, I'll leave for good! But if *I* win…" Eris paused to point a finger straight at my face. "If I win, then you have to love me too!"

Things had taken kind of a strange turn. All I could manage was a nod.

Chapter 11:
Eris Greyrat (Part 2)

SOMEHOW, I found myself facing off against Eris just outside the city walls.

There was no crowd to witness our duel, but Ghislaine was standing nearby. Eris had dragged her into this on our way out of Sharia. Given that she'd brought a referee along, she probably wasn't planning to actually kill me, right?

"…"

Eris wasn't saying anything at all. She was just watching me with her hand on the hilt of her sword. On closer examination, I could see that it was trembling slightly… but for all I knew, that was just from excitement.

What was I supposed to do here? Should I take this fight seriously?

To be honest, I was okay with losing. It actually seemed preferable.

I'd fallen hard for Eris. Sure, I'd just told her that I liked Sylphie and Roxy more, but that was more of a reflexive response than anything else. I couldn't *actually* rank my feelings for them in a real sense. Sylphie, Roxy, and Eris were all wonderful, lovable women in their own ways. It might sound indecisive, but that was just the kind of no-good bum I was—I had an overactive sex drive and a total inability to stay loyal to a single person.

Honestly, a part of me was already drooling at the idea of hopping into bed with this new, sexy version of Eris. If she wanted me to love her, I was more than happy to oblige. It wasn't like that would be "cheating" at this point, right? I mean, I *did* love her. And there was nothing wrong with that, dammit! What could be more natural than wanting to make such an attractive woman yours?

Come at me, you Millis Church fools! I'll marry as many people as I want!

Anyway. That was all well and good, but the question was how Eris would react if I forfeited this duel. What if she took it as some sort of humiliating insult? What if she decided I was just a coward? Eris had become a master swordswoman so she could protect me from Orsted. Maybe I needed to demonstrate my strength to her, and show that I'd improved as well.

…In reality, I hadn't trained *nearly* as hard as her, but that wasn't the point.

She probably wanted me to take this seriously and put up the best fight I could. If I lost, that was fine by me; if I won, I could always ask her to marry me anyway. Maybe I could try out a line like "All right, you're mine now. Come on, we're going home."

Yeah, I liked the sound of that.

Of course, the broken pieces of my Magic Armor were still lying in that forest, and Eris was a Sword King who'd put up a solid fight against Orsted himself at melee range. I couldn't see how I was going to beat her unless we started off half a mile away from each other…

But hey, whatever. I was fine with losing too.

"Rudeus."

Just as I had reached that conclusion, though, Ghislaine called to me.

"Yes?"

I hadn't seen the woman in a while, but she hadn't changed that much, apart from getting a little further into middle age. We'd exchanged pleasantries and had a few conversations since her arrival in the city, but she hadn't gone into much detail about the situation with Eris. That wasn't so strange, since we'd never been that intimate with each other.

"Miss Eris hasn't changed much at all. You need to *show* her how you feel."

Her voice was calm but firm, just as I remembered it. And the implication of her words made me hesitate.

Was fighting Eris here *really* the right move?

I glanced over in her direction. She'd assumed her usual cross-armed stance as she waited for me to make my preparations. But as familiar as that pose itself was, Eris herself looked *very* different now. She'd grown taller, her figure had developed, and she had the bearing of a sleek but deadly predator.

Five years had passed. I'd changed in that time, of course. But Ghislaine seemed to think that Eris hadn't.

Well then. How had I dealt with Eris back when I knew her? How had I responded to her temper tantrums?

How should I respond to *this* one?

"Ready… Begin!"

Ghislaine shouted for the duel to commence, but I didn't raise my staff. Eris, too, just stood there with her arms folded.

After a little while, she drew the sword at her waist and began to walk slowly in my direction, letting the blade dangle loosely at her side. It was the same beautiful, silvery weapon she'd used against Orsted. Apparently, it was one of the famous Seven Sword God Blades, and Gall Falion himself had given it to her.

Eris came to a halt a few paces away and fixed her intense glare on me.

"…"

"…"

She raised her sword in front of me as she came to a halt. "What, aren't you going to fight?"

"You're going to leave if I win, right? Well… I'd rather lose, then."

Eris frowned and said nothing.

"I mean… I sort of missed my chance to say this earlier, but… I do love you, Eris."

Her reaction to this remark made me think of a bristling cat.

Ah, crap. Did I piss her off again? Maybe I should have taken this seriously after all?

Before I had much time to second-guess myself, Eris sharply swung her blade downwards.

"…!"

I flinched reflexively and closed my eyes, only to feel a small jolt to the top of my head. Eris had just tapped me with the hilt of her sword, that was all. And when I opened my eyes again, her face was only inches away from mine.

"I can't cook like Sylphie does."

"Yeah, I know."

"I'm not smart like Roxy."

"I know."

"I'm not cute like they are."

"You're a beautiful badass, so that doesn't really matter."

"But you prefer, uhm… more petite girls, right?"

"Okay, that's not true at all. I'm very attracted to you."

Eris returned her sword to its sheath. Slowly, nervously, she wrapped her arms around my waist, pressing her breasts against me. And then, all of a sudden, she was squeezing me *very* tightly.

The mildly sweaty smell of her body hadn't changed a bit.

I slipped my arms around her in return. Her muscles were more developed than before, but they weren't exactly bulky either. Hugging her felt good. It felt right.

"You're okay with calling this my win, then?"

"Yeah."

"You know, Rudeus… if you really *don't* want me… I'll give up on you."

Eris' voice was trembling as she spoke those words. Somehow, I got the feeling she might have lost on purpose if I'd fought her for real.

"That won't be necessary."

"You'll make me… part of your family, then?"

"Yeah. As long as you're okay with sharing me with Roxy and Sylphie sometimes…"

I paused to take a breath. The words might sound cheap coming from me, but I needed to say them anyway.

"I want you to marry me, Eris."

Her eyes widened, her eyelashes trembled, and her mouth fell open just a little. But then she caught herself, reined in her expression, and tossed her head haughtily to the side.

"H-hmph! Well, if you insist… I guess I'll *let* you!"



And with that, Eris Greyrat became my wife.

***

At the dinner table that same night, I officially announced that Eris had agreed to marry me. Unlike what happened with Roxy, I'd laid the groundwork in advance this time, so there were no explosions of rage to deal with. In fact, nobody even complained. I'd expected a snarky comment or two from Norn, if not open opposition, but she accepted the news quietly. Maybe she'd given up all hope of returning me to the straight and narrow path.

For their part, Roxy and Sylphie both offered their congratulations.

"Welcome to the family, Eris!"

"Don't worry, we can work out the ground rules a little later."

Looking about as awkward as I'd ever seen her, Eris managed to stammer out the words "Th-thank you very much for having me" in reply. Somehow that didn't seem like the right phrase to use in this situation, but whatever.

It was rare for Eris to get so nervous about anything, but I could tell that she genuinely wanted to win their approval. That seemed like a positive sign. I was really hoping the three of them would learn to get along, and avoid any ugly fights. But I didn't have any right to express that thought out loud.

After dinner, the three of them decided to take a bath together. Sylphie and Roxy would be giving Eris a lecture on the proper way to use our facilities, after which they'd have a little private bonding time in the tub. I was dying to tag along and help them wash off with my bare hands, but this time I managed to restrain myself from asking.

My three wives exited the room, leaving me, Lilia, Zenith, my little sisters… and Ghislaine Dedoldia.

"…"

The moment Eris walked out of the room, Zenith began silently punching me on the head. Lilia murmured, “Miss, I think you’ve made your point,” but there was no sign of the onslaught stopping even after some time.

Zenith was a devout member of the Millis Church. She’d tolerated me taking a second wife, but she seemed *extremely* displeased about me adding a third.

“Ow! Ow! That hurts, Mom! I’m sorry, okay? I won’t do it again!”

Once I expressed my remorse, though, Zenith pulled back her fists and returned to her chair. My little sisters, who happened to be seated right next to her, were now looking at me reproachfully.

“Isn’t that what you said when you brought Roxy home, brother dear?” Aisha said. “Your word clearly isn’t worth that much. *Sigh…* I expect you’ll be dragging another girl back with you soon enough. Oh, there’s going to be *so* much laundry to do…”

There was nothing much I could say to that. This decision had clearly lost me quite a few affection points with my sisters.

Oh well. I guess I can live with that.

Aisha did have some legitimate complaints, but her voice was totally flat. She was probably just giving me a hard time, for the most part.

“Rudeus…”

At this point, however, my *other* little sister spoke up. And voice seemed very earnest. Whatever she was going to say, I needed to take it seriously.

“Yes, Norn? What can I do for you?”

“Uhm… as a member of the Millis Church, I can’t really approve of your behavior.”

“Understandable.”

“That said, I can tell how much Miss Eris loves you, so I’m not going to object this time. You might not be that fond of her yet, but I

expect you to give her plenty of affection anyway. That's all I had to say."

"I understand. I promise to do my very best in that regard."

Norn seemed to like Eris quite a bit, actually. From what I heard, she'd been the one to ask her for those sword lessons. I felt like Norn had gotten a lot more outgoing in general over the last few years. Maybe that had something to do with her work on the student council? Either way, it was definitely a good thing.

"Master Rudeus."

Apparently, Lilia wanted to say her piece now. Her voice was a little quieter than usual.

"Yes, Lilia?"

"Now that you've added Miss Eris to the family, this house will be getting somewhat cramped. I'm willing to rent a room nearby and live there with Miss Zenith, in order to—"

"Nope. Not happening," I interrupted quickly. "Look, I *want* to take care of you two. Er, well… you're still the one looking after me, really. But you know what I mean."

"I can't say that I agree with that assessment, Master Rudeus. But I'll respect your wishes in the matter."

If I went and kicked my own mothers out of my house because I'd acquired too many wives, my old man would probably turn into some sort of vengeful spirit. A good kid takes care of his parents when they're older. Indeed, we'd run out of guest rooms now that Eris had joined the family, but that wasn't a major problem. We could figure something out if we needed to.

"Rudeus…"

Finally, it was Ghislaine's turn to address me.

"Yes, Miss Ghislaine?"

"Just Ghislaine, kid."

I studied the fearsome swordswoman for a moment. She had to be around forty by now, but her body was still muscular. It was

clear she hadn't been neglecting her training.

"I can leave the little miss in your hands now, right?"

"…Yes. I'll take good care of her, I swear."

"Oh yeah?" Ghislaine paused, then smiled a little. "You've done some growing up, I see. You've got the same look Paul had in his eyes when he decided to marry Zenith."

Was that supposed to be a compliment? Hmm. Well, I'd have to take it as one. So I took after my father these days, huh? How nice to hear. Maybe I *had* grown a little bit more mature…

Uh, hold on a second. Ghislaine only knew Paul in the old days, right? Back when he was a total scumbag?

…Could I *really* take that as a compliment?

"What are you planning to do next, Ghislaine? Any thought of settling down in the city?"

"Nah. Now that I've entrusted Miss Eris to you, my job here is done. I think I'll head back down to Asura."

"Asura? Were you planning to help out with rebuilding the Fittoa Region or something?"

Ghislaine's eyes flashed with emotion. "Not exactly. I'm going to find whoever got Lord Sauros executed, and then I'm going to kill them."

It felt like the temperature in the room had just dropped significantly. I hadn't been expecting such an… ominous answer. But I could understand where she was coming from. Until now, Ghislaine had been focused solely on taking care of Eris. Now that the "little miss" was safely deposited with me, her job was complete. The only thing she had left to do was take revenge on those who had brought down the man she'd served so loyally.

"…That means you don't know who they are yet, right? It sounds like his death was one part of a complicated web of intrigue, so I'm guessing lots of people had a hand in it."

“I’ll just cut down all of the Boreas family’s old enemies one by one. Simple enough.”

That struck me as a little *too* simple. Classic Ghislaine.

Hmm… how was I going to stop her, though? At this rate, she was going to charge into the capital of the kingdom by herself and end up getting killed.

Unfortunately, I felt like nothing I said was going to change her mind. This was Ghislaine we were talking about, after all. In that case, maybe the best thing I could do was help her find a better way to do this…

I suddenly found myself remembering something from that diary. When Ariel had launched a coup d’état in Asura, it was the Water God and a North Emperor that had defeated her.

“Ghislaine, there’s something you should know. I’ve heard from a pretty reliable source that the Kingdom of Asura currently has both the Water God and a North Emperor working for them.”

“Ah. Those two.”

“Are you already acquainted?”

“Yeah, I know them well. So does Miss Eris, for that matter. What about it?”

“Well, you might end up having to face off against them. I know how strong you are, but I don’t think you’d come out of that alive.”

“True enough. I couldn’t handle both of them alone.” With a small nod, Ghislaine looked me in the eyes and fell silent. She was waiting to hear what *else* I had to say about this.

“…For what it’s worth, I know one person who got caught up in the same mess that cost Lord Sauros his life. It’s possible she was working against the Boreas family at the time, so you might consider her an enemy. But if you join forces with her, I think you’ll get a chance to kill the people you want dead—and a legitimate justification for doing so.”

“Who is it?”

“Ariel Anemoi Asura.”

Ghislaine’s ears twitched. It sent a little jolt of nostalgia through my system. Back when I was tutoring her, she always did that when she saw a problem that she couldn’t figure out.

In any case… if she didn’t recognize the name, so much the better.

“She’s the second princess of the Kingdom of Asura.”

“Is that so?”

I paused for just a moment to ask myself if this was really a good idea. Ariel was likely to start a reckless coup attempt in Asura in the near future. Was I just sending Ghislaine to her death?

No. The future can absolutely change.

For one thing, I’d read that diary. I could offer Ariel at least a little general advice. We could turn that *reckless* coup attempt into one that would *succeed.* It was very possible the Man-God was going to be pulling the strings behind those events. And since I was Orsted’s subordinate now, my involvement might change things somewhat.

Assuming I ended up finding some way that Ariel might emerge triumphant, it would be better for all of us to have a swordswoman like Ghislaine on her side. I had every intention of helping out personally, but I’d need to consult with Orsted first.

“I think you should at least have a conversation with her and see what you think.”

“All right. If you say so, I will.”

Ghislaine accepted my advice readily enough. For the time being, at least, it seemed like I’d convinced her not to do anything too rash.

“Whoooa…”

I glanced across the table and found Norn and Aisha staring at me with their eyes open wide. “Can I help you, guys?”

“Oh, it’s nothing… Uhm, you really *were* the tutor of a Sword King, huh?”

“What, did you think I made that up?”

“I mean, not really… I just didn’t expect Miss Ghislaine to take your advice so seriously.”

Puzzled, Ghislaine and I exchanged glances. Had there been anything that strange about our conversation?

“Uhm, Rudeus?” Norn interjected. “I know this older student at the University who wants to be an adventurer, and they were just telling me the other day about how this ‘really scary Sword King’ had come to town. Even the toughest people in the city are a little intimidated by her, you know? It’s kind of impressive to see her talking to you as an equal.”

Ghislaine grinned at that. “Rudeus is a hell of a lot scarier than I’ll ever be, kid. I mean, he won the respect of the Dragon God.”

“Wow…”

Norn looked genuinely impressed by this. Maybe I’d regained a few of those affection points. Or maybe these were just *respect* points? I couldn’t see her opinion of my love life ever improving much…

Anyway, Ghislaine’s praise had won me back a little dignity, if nothing else. Lucky me!

That night, after Ghislaine went back to her inn, Eris joined Sylphie and Roxy for a private conference of some kind.

I was *extremely* curious as to what they were discussing, but presumably, I wasn’t invited for a reason. I managed to contain the urge to listen in. At a glance, the mood seemed friendly enough, and Eris was listening to the other two intently, so there probably wasn’t anything to worry about. That girl had come a long way from her wilder childhood years, after all.

I ended up tutoring Norn for a bit in my study. And once she turned in for the night, I added an entry to my diary. This was

definitely a day worth commemorating.

When my thoughts turned to our future as a family, and my new role under Orsted, I did feel a *little* anxious. But we'd made it through a big, turbulent storm together. That was something worth celebrating.

By the time I stepped out of my study, the house was completely silent. The conference must have wrapped up some time ago. Maybe the three of them were sleeping in the same room tonight? Or waiting for me in my bedroom, for that matter…

Okay, not likely.

In any case, when the place was *this* silent, it could be kind of unsettling. Come to think of it, my future self's visit had occurred on a quiet night just like this. Was I in for another dramatic surprise? Maybe some creepy little guy with his whole body hidden by a blurry mess of pixels was going to pop out of the shadows at me.

Come on, now you're just being ridiculous…

I'd made it to my bedroom now. There was no light coming from within, so it seemed I'd be on my own tonight…

Just as I was reaching for the knob, the door swung open from the inside, and I was dragged violently into the room.

"Gaaah!"

I reflexively threw out a hand at my assailant and began to channel mana through it. But they grabbed my wrist and pressed it back against the door, pinning me in place.

For a split second, I thought I was done for. But then I noticed who I was up against.

"…Oh. It's just you, Eris."

My newest wife, having changed into a casual nightgown, had apparently decided to ambush me.

"U-uhm, Rudeus…"

For some reason, her eyes were extremely bloodshot. Also, her face was flushed, and she was breathing roughly. She looked

absolutely furious. Had I already done something to piss her off? I needed to choose my words very carefully.

"W-we're man and wife now, right? Officially?"

"…Well, yeah. Oh, did you want to have a formal ceremony, maybe? We could call a bunch of people and—"

"Ugh, no, I don't even remember how to dance anymore… Look, that's not what I'm talking about. I wanna *do it*."

Hmm. Do what, exactly?

Before I could give the matter much though, Eris threw her arm around my shoulders and pulled me in for a violent kiss. Her teeth knocked against mine hard enough to send a jolt of pain through my jaw. I tried to pull back, but the door behind me made that impossible. Eris kept on grinding her forehead against mine enthusiastically.

"Puhah…"

As I finally came up for air, Eris moved her arm down to my waist and started basically dragging me across the floor. Within seconds, she'd brought me over the bed.

Wait. What the heck is even going on here? Holy crap. You're moving way too fast, miss!

"Uh, Eris? I think we should slow down a little. You know, we have to talk things through with Sylphie and Roxy first…"

"I did that already. Sylphie said tonight can be my turn."

"What about Roxy? She might want us to wait while she's pregnant…"

"She was fine with it, actually."

At some point during this exchange, Eris had thrown me onto the bed. She was holding me down on it with so much force that I couldn't have squirmed free if I tried.

"Hey… I want the first kid to be a boy, okay?"

The woman was still breathing roughly through her nose. She wasn't angry, she was *horny.* I had to admit, I hadn't expected quite

this level of enthusiasm from her. I mean, I definitely wasn't complaining. It was charming to see how much she wanted me. And my body wasn't exactly objecting to her advances either, if you know what I mean.

But, uh… wasn't I supposed to be the one doing the ravishing?

"I love you, Rudeus. You wouldn't turn me down, right?"

"Well, o-of course not. Try to calm down a little, though. Why don't we take some time to set the mood first? We can have a few drinks, catch up on the last five years, and get started once things are feeling nice and romantic…"

"Argh! Screw that! Do you know how long I've been waiting to do this again?!"

Even as she spoke those words, Eris was climbing onto the bed and positioning herself on top of me. Her powerful legs clamped mine in place, and her hands pressed mine against the bed; she leaned in, pushed her nose against my upper chest, and started sniffing loudly.

What is she, a dog? I hope I'm not too smelly tonight…

"Haah… haah… Rudeus… we're married now, right? That means you're *mine,* right?"

"Huh?! I mean, not exactly… I was hoping you could share me with the other two, actually. Let's all just get along…"

"But it's my turn tonight. So you're mine right now."

It seemed there was only one reply she'd be satisfied with.

"…Well, yes."

Eris' grip on my wrists grew noticeably stronger.

Ow. Ow! You're tearing my hands off, girl! At this rate, I'm gonna have to ask Orsted for another favor!

"Th-that means… I can do *anything* I want, right?!"

Hmm. What was she planning to do, exactly? Whatever would become of me?

Well, it was clearly going to involve sex. Was I opposed to that? Nope. So my answer had to be…

“S-sure, I guess.”

As soon as I spoke those words, Eris turned into a *beast.*

***

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of sparrows chirping.

The very first thing I did was look around for Eris, but it didn’t take long. That striking face was right there next to me. The woman looked beautiful in her sleep.

“Phew…”

With a small sigh of relief, I thought back on the events of the previous night. Eris and I had enjoyed ourselves at great length… *especially* Eris.

I think it’s safe to say my technique was superior to hers. I was in the lead early, at least. I didn’t want to let her get the best of me, so I gave it everything I had.

Sadly, things turned around in the middlegame. The woman just had more stamina than me. And much like our very first time, she’d just *kept going…*

Well, long story short, I didn’t get the win. Eris ended up enjoying herself for quite a while as I lay there limp and unresisting.

I’d never been so thoroughly dominated in my life. We’re talking one of those “I’m sorry dear, but I belong to *master* now” scenarios here. I’d lost my innocence for good…

But despite my defeat, looking at Eris sleeping next to me with that content expression on her face was filling me with warm and tender feelings. She’d been like a raging wolf last night, but now she looked borderline angelic. It put a real smirk on my face.

Maybe this was how Sylphie felt when she watched me sleeping.

“Hmm… This sure feels different, though…”

Incidentally, my head was currently resting on Eris’ arm. Up till now, I’d never been on the *receiving* end of this maneuver, so it felt weirdly refreshing. My pillow was a little on the slender side, but it was also very solid—for some reason, it made me feel like I was totally safe.

Come to think of it… five years had passed since we’d last seen each other. Eris had done a lot of growing in that time, but I still wasn’t completely clear on how *muscular* she’d gotten. The room had been too dark for me to get a great look last night, although everything I could make out was very enticing.

Squirming around a little, I reached out to touch Eris’ belly.

“Oooh, how splendid…”

On the surface, there wasn’t much in the way of clearly defined abs. In fact, she had a decent amount of fat on her. But right underneath that, there was a layer of remarkably dense muscle. When I pushed my fingers against her skin, a compact six-pack revealed itself.

My abs weren’t bad either, but this… this was really something else. How was it even possible to have a body like this without getting all bulky? It was a miracle her waist was still so slender. She must have trained all of her obliques and hip muscles in *perfect* balance with each other.

Seriously, though. What *was* it about muscles on a woman that made them so incredibly sexy? I never wanted to take my hands off these things.

However… they weren’t my only target at the moment.

I slowly moved my hand upward, in the direction of the two great mounds clearly visible beneath the blanket.

Last night, I’d spent a lot of time with my hands trapped in a vice-like grip, so I hadn’t gotten many chances to touch these… but we were married now, right? I basically had permission, right?

“Whoooa…”

Holy crap, what a solid foundation!

Eris had *pecs,* and they were just as firm and compact as her abs. Really splendid stuff. And on top of those nice, solid plates… we had our dessert.

Life's all about finding a balance between the hard things and the soft ones, if you ask me. On that note, time to get a little ecchi-sketchy touchy-feely!

Oh wow. Okay. These things are like… melons.

Sylphie and Roxy didn't have anything like these puppies. I liked theirs just fine, but the bigger kind definitely had their own special charm. And from now on, I got to feel these up *whenever* I wanted to? I really owed a few words of gratitude to God. Thank you, Roxy! Thank you, Sylphie!

My great quest was at an end. I had scaled the Eris Mountains, and a new day had dawned for all mankind!

"Hohohoh."

Suddenly, a familiar white-haired old man appeared in my mind's eye.

Why, if it isn't the Wise Old Hermit! Long time no see, buddy! Take a look at these fresh, glorious fruits! Truly, the land has blessed us with its plenty!

"Hohohoh! It seems I have nothing left to teach you, young one… May your road lead you to enlightenment!"

What?! No! Come back, Wise Old Hermit! Come back! I still have great need of your wisdom!

"…"

"Gah."

My one-man show came screeching to a halt as I made eye contact with Eris. She'd woken up at some point, and she'd been watching me. Was this the part where I got punched? I mean, I did kind of deserve it, after groping her like that…

Before I could say anything, Eris' hand whipped over and grabbed my wrist. It looked like she was, in fact, a little upset.

"Let's talk this out, honey! More chatting, less punching! How about some nice pillow talk? Remember that time when we started doing sit-ups together, back when we were kids? And I couldn't help reaching over to touch your abs? Ah, what a little rascal I was…"

"…"

Eris didn't let go of my hand. Instead, she spun to sit on top of me, tangling her limbs around mine.

That wasn't anger burning in her eyes. It was lust. Waking up to find me groping her chest must have set her off again.

I mean, understandable, right? I knew *I* would get fired up if I woke up to find someone playing with my body. I guess I'd assumed women might view that situation a lot less favorably than your average man… but maybe Eris was an exception.

Well, all right then. Come at me! This time around, I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget!

"W-wait! Gently, gentlyyy! Could you slow down a little, honey? We just spent all night— Eek!"

As I squeaked like a bashful schoolgirl, Eris began to ravish me for the second time.

***

When I finally got up for good that afternoon, I was alone in the room, and Eris was nowhere to be seen. Her side of the bed was already cold. I didn't feel anxious or abandoned, though. Just… drained. And content.

I slapped at my quivering waist, rose to my feet and walked over to the window. The sun was looking particularly yellow today; my face was probably a little yellow too.

I spotted Eris out in the yard. She was doing her usual practice swings with a big, happy smirk on her face. After all that exercise she'd put us through, I was amazed she still had the energy. That woman truly had the stamina of a horse.

I mean… I sure wasn't complaining, mind you. Sylphie and Roxy didn't have as much staying power as me, so they tended to get worn out first. This was the first time I'd really gotten squeezed dry like that. If Sylphie's style was a bit submissive, and Roxy was more of a technician, then Eris was the all-out aggressive type. Sort of like Tokugawa, Toyotomi, and Oda, respectively.

What did that make me, the secret power behind the throne? Indeed. It was only thanks to me getting beaten down by Orsted that Eris became a mighty Sword King!

Just kidding. If I got too full of myself, I might end up decapitated one of these days. Wouldn't want to make my sweet little Hideyoshi seek vengeance on my behalf.

Anyway… I really did want to have a little pillow talk the next time around. I'd honestly been looking forward to just spending a nice, lazy hour in bed with Eris this morning. I wanted to hear more about how she'd spent the last five years of her life, and the people she'd met along the way.

For the time being, I headed to the bath to clean myself off. Once that was done, I made my way into the basement and said a prayer to my altar. It felt like it was time to add a third idol to this little shrine. The god of wisdom and the god of love had just been joined by a god of war… maybe a wooden sword would be appropriate?

I pondered the matter and wandered back up to the living room, where Aisha was busy cleaning the floor. She popped right up at the sight of me. "Good morning, brother dear! You've got a letter. It doesn't say who it's from, but there's some kind of symbol on the envelope. Do you recognize it?"

When I took the letter from Aisha, I froze up on the spot.

I was *very* familiar with the crest on that envelope. It was the emblem of the Dragon God.

Chapter 12:
The Summons

“DEAR RUDEUS GREYRAT,

I hope this letter finds you recuperated, and your mana regenerated.

I want to discuss our next steps. I will be waiting for you in your cabin on the outskirts of Sharia.

Due to certain circumstances, it would be preferable for you to come alone.

—Orsted”

After reading this brief letter, I asked Aisha to make me breakfast right away.

I ate a good, solid meal, then returned to my room to get dressed. I tried to pick my very nicest clothes, double-checking with Aisha several times to make sure I looked okay.

And then, with Aqua Heartia in one hand and my diary from the future in the other, I walked out of the house.

Zenith happened to be out in the yard playing with our pet Treant Byt, so I called out, “I’ll be back soon, Mother,” as I left. She vaguely waved her hand at me in response; it almost looked like a *see you later* gesture. At her side, Byt wiggled his branches as well.

I hadn’t said a word to Sylphie or the others. I knew they’d want to come along. But the letter told me to come alone, so that was exactly what I was going to do. It’s not like I was going off to battle this time, anyway.

I couldn’t say that I completely trusted Orsted. Not yet, anyway. But his letter had showed some concern for my well-being, and its tone wasn’t unfriendly. Also, Nanahoshi seemed to think he was a

decent guy, since she'd opposed my plan to fight him on an emotional level. At the very least, he seemed more trustworthy than the Man-God. That was definitely what I *wanted* to believe.

"I'm still kind of nervous, though," I murmured to myself as I made my way down a quiet street in Sharia. Every time I passed a puddle of water in the road, I couldn't help but stop to examine my reflection and make sure I looked all right. I'd decided to work for Orsted—in other words, he was my new boss. And when the boss called you in for a meeting, you wanted to look your best.

"Wonder if I should have put on some cologne or something…"

I had taken a bath this morning, but after the night I'd spent with Eris, it was very possible there were some unfortunate smells lingering on my body. What exactly was the boss going to think if I came into his office stinking of sex? I couldn't imagine he would fire me on the spot, but it might leave a bad impression. That was the last thing I wanted right now.

Orsted… was the only person who stood a chance to find and defeat the Man-God. And supposedly, he *was* going to make it happen someday, with the help of my descendants. Sucks to be the Man-God. But he was the one who'd betrayed my confidence first, so whatever. I wasn't about to sympathize with a guy who'd kill Roxy and Sylphie to protect himself.

I was Orsted's pet dog now. I'd wag my tail for him and bare my fangs at his enemies. That was the only way I could protect my family.

"All right…"

Having reconfirmed my resolve, I headed for the outskirts of the city with quicker, more confident steps—while carefully avoiding the muddy water splashed by passing carriages.

I arrived at my cabin outside the city walls to find it *different* somehow. It's hard to explain in words, but there was… something strange about the air around it. If this were a manga, the cabin would

definitely have a menacing aura scribbled around it. It was obvious from a glance that Orsted was already waiting for me inside.

I took a few deep breaths, then knocked sharply at the door.

“It’s Rudeus Greyrat, sir! I’m here as requested!”

“Ah. That didn’t take long.”

Even though I’d *known* he was in there, I trembled a little at the sound of his voice. There was definitely a part of me that was still terrified of him. “Do I have your leave to enter?”

“Why are you asking me for permission? Aren’t you the owner of this cabin?”

“Yes, sir! Coming in, sir!”

When I opened the door and stepped into the cabin, I found Orsted seated in one of the chairs within, glaring sharply at me.

Well… maybe he wasn’t *glaring.* His face was just scary-looking by default.

I pulled the door shut behind me and walked over as crisply as I could. I stopped directly beside the chair across from Orsted, and stood at attention. He glared up at me with a slightly suspicious expression on his face.

“Hmm. I half expected you to come here with all your friends in tow… but I see there’s only two of you.”

“Yes, sir! I came alo— Wait, two of us?”

I was a little thrown off by that one. Unless Orsted’s eyes were getting so bad that he was seeing double, the comment didn’t seem to make much sense.

“Eris Greyrat!” Orsted shouted. “You may enter as well!”

An instant later, the door to the cabin swung loudly open. Eris was standing just outside. Her sword was already dangling from her hand, and there was murder in her eyes.

“Orsted!” she cried, swinging her blade up to point at him. “If you lay a finger on Rudeus, I’ll cut you down on the spot!”

The force and fury of her voice would have made a lesser man pee his pants, but Orsted was totally unfazed. “I have no intention of harming him.”

“Well, I don’t trust you!”

“I suppose you wouldn’t.”

Without another word, Eris stalked over to a corner of the cabin and folded her arms menacingly.

Still a little stunned by this dramatic entrance, I looked from Orsted to Eris and back again. Should I be making my excuses right now? Explaining that I hadn’t brought her with me? Insisting that I didn’t view him as an enemy? The problem was, I couldn’t make excuses for the sword she was holding. What was I supposed to *do* here?

As I hesitated, Orsted spoke up. “What’s the matter, Rudeus Greyrat? Have a seat. We need to talk.”

“Er, right. Pardon me.” I sat down, of course. But my mind was still on Eris and her unsheathed weapon. “Uhm, about Eris…”

“Your reaction made it clear enough. She followed you here without your knowledge, I imagine.”

“Well, yeah. I guess she did… Would you, uh, mind if I had a word with her before we got started?”

“Feel free.”

At least it seemed like he wasn’t too upset. Turning around in my chair, I quickly beckoned Eris over with my hand.

“What is it, Rudeus?”

“Eris…*why* did you follow me?”

“I saw you all dressed up. I just wanted to know where you were going.”

All dressed up? Well, hmm. I *had* picked out my best clothes and fidgeted with my hair for a while. Maybe she’d thought I was going out on a secret date or something…

“You understand that I’m working for Orsted now, right?”

"…Yeah. But it's *Orsted*, Rudeus. He's obviously planning something, right? I'm worried he might be tricking you somehow."

"That's possible, but it's too early to say for sure. For now, do you think you can keep calm and just let us talk?"

"…"

"We can fight him together if I figure out he's tricking me. I'm counting on you, Eris."

"Oh. Yeah! Got it!"

Apparently satisfied by this, Eris sheathed her sword and took a seat next to me. It was a good thing her mind worked in such simple ways.

"I'm sorry about that."

"It's all right."

"It seems that Eris has a very hard time trusting you, Sir Orsted… But I suppose that's just the curse at work."

Orsted's eyes seemed to flash at that. "Who told you about my curse in the first place?"

"The Man-God. He claimed you suffer from a number of them, actually."

I answered honestly and without hesitation. I'd prepared myself to tell Orsted everything about my conversations with his enemy.

"I see…"

Orsted raised a hand to his chin and turned his gaze upward for a moment. The ceiling of my cabin wasn't much to look at, so it seemed like he was just thinking things over.

"First things first. Allow me to fulfill my promise to you."

"Huh?"

"Why do you look so surprised? I'm not like your former master. I keep my word."

That's nice to hear, but I'm just wondering what he's talking about… did he promise me something at some point?

“I’m speaking of my method to protect your family from the Man-God.”

Oh. Ohhh! Of course. How did I forget about that?

I guess I hadn’t thought of that whole agreement as a *promise*, exactly. It felt more like a contract. You know, the kind you use to sell your soul to the devil. But then again, the provisions of a contract are basically just a bunch of promises, right? Sure.

“Are you sure? I haven’t actually done anything on your behalf yet.”

“Yes, but I imagine you wouldn’t be able to focus on any task if you’re constantly worrying about your family’s safety.”

“Well, yes. That’s true enough.”

Huh. He was actually being kind of considerate here, wasn’t he? I hadn’t expected such friendly treatment right off the bat, to be honest. I was expecting him to order me around sternly. The man had a scary face, but he seemed like a surprisingly good boss. I couldn’t understand why Eris was still glaring at him so fiercely.

“In any case, what specific method did you have in mind to protect them?”

“It’s nothing too complex. You need only summon a guardian beast with a strong destiny and order to it to keep them safe.”

“I see. Unfortunately, I don’t know how to use Summoning magic yet.”

“Very well. I’ll draw the magic circle. You can just channel the mana through it.”

“Oh. That works, then. Sorry for the bother.”

Hmm. A guardian beast with a strong destiny, huh? In other words, we’d have a guard dog protected by the laws of causality…

“Will that really be enough to keep them safe, though?”

“The Man-God has no influence over anything but humans. In addition, he can’t manipulate many individuals at any given time; as long as we are taking action, he should have his hands full trying to

stop us. Given his personality, this should be more than enough to protect your loved ones."

Oh good, now we were psychoanalyzing the guy.

That bit about him not being able to influence *many* people at the same time was interesting, though. It implied he could control at least a few simultaneously. Had he been meddling in other people's lives while he was messing with me?

"However, you mustn't let down your guard. The Man-God is devious and unpredictable. Don't leave everything to the guardian beast—make sure you're there for them as well."

To be honest, those words sounded kind of *wrong* coming out of Orsted's mouth. He just didn't look like the kind of guy who'd remind you to spend time with your family. Can't judge a book by its cover and all, but seriously…

Anyway, since he was willing to prepare this summoning for me, I'd gladly take him up on it.

Now it was time to get down to business. There were all sorts of things I wanted to ask Orsted, of course, but I needed to keep up my end of this bargain as well. It couldn't hurt to proactively ask what my orders were.

"All right then. What is it you'd like me to do for you from now on?"

"…Don't you have any other questions for me?"

Hm. Hadn't expected him to push back like that… "Sure I do. Lots of them."

"Why aren't you asking them, in that case?"

"Well, I didn't want to pester you too much, I guess."

Orsted let out a sigh and shook his head. "You are my ally now. In other words—"

"I'm your *subordinate*, Sir Orsted. I think we should keep the chain of command nice and clear."

The man had beaten the living crap out of me. And now he'd thought up ways to protect my family. Even I wasn't shameless enough to pretend that we were equals in this relationship.

"Very well, if that's what you prefer… But regardless, the two of us will be working *together* to defeat the Man-God. It's important that you learn everything you need to know."

"Okay, but what if I turned out to be the Man-God's spy or something? For all you know, I could start feeding him information every night."

"I trust you, Rudeus Greyrat," Orsted said, staring me firmly in the eyes. "You risked your life for the sake of your family, and that has earned you my respect."

Wow, you're gonna make me blush!

I mean… I guess I had been pretty desperate back then, sure. And if that was good enough to make him trust me, I certainly wasn't complaining. Might as well take him up on his offer.

What *did* I want to ask him?

A few things came to mind immediately. Why was he so obsessed with the Man-God? What was that Laplace Aspect thing he'd mentioned? Did he know anything about the Displacement Incident? And could he explain that whole "destiny" deal a bit more clearly?

Those were the big questions for the moment.

"All right then. I'll just go down the list one by one, I guess."

It seemed best to start off with his feud against the Man-God… or the nature of their relationship, really. Hmm. Then again, I probably needed to hear more about Orsted himself before I could get to that.

"Could you tell me more about yourself, Sir Orsted?"

"You want to hear my story?"

"Yeah. If you don't mind."

“What has the Man-God told you about me? It seems he mentioned my curses, at least.”

“Uhhhm…”

It had been five years since that particular encounter, so it was a challenge to recall exactly what he’d said. I concentrated intently, trying to pull the words out of my memory.

“He said you have four different curses, specifically.”

“…Go on.”

“The first curse makes everything living in this world hate or fear you. The second keeps the Man-God from seeing you. The third prevents you from going all-out. And he didn’t know what the fourth one is.”

“I see,” Orsted said with a small nod. “Let us begin with the first curse, then. From the day I was born, I have indeed been loathed by everything living in this world.”

“…I don’t particularly hate you, though.”

“Some such cases do exist. Such as yourself and Nanahoshi.”

“Okay then.”

So there were exceptions. The fact that Nanahoshi and I had come here from a different world was probably relevant here. Should I take this opportunity to reveal the truth about myself? With Eris next to me, I was a little reluctant to do so. But keeping secrets from Orsted didn’t strike me as a wise idea at this point.

“I wasn’t trying to hide this from you or anything, but… I was originally from the same world Nanahoshi came from. Maybe that has something to do with it?”

“…Is Rudeus Greyrat not your true name, then?”

“It’s a very long story, but I’m not exactly like Nanahoshi. I just sort of, uhm… woke up here in the body of a baby named Rudeus Greyrat, I guess… I’m not sure how to explain it, actually.”

“Ah. So you were reincarnated.”

I blinked in surprise. I hadn't expected that word to come out of Orsted's mouth so smoothly. Now that I thought about it, though… I felt like I'd seen a few notes in the diary about the Dragonfolk possessing some means of reincarnation. Something about how they could come back in a new body a couple decades after they died. Maybe it was an ordinary enough concept for them.

"Most likely, the reason you do not fear me is connected to your status as one reborn."

"Are there others who don't fear you?"

"Apart from a handful of exceptions, only those descended from the ancient Dragonfolk."

So Perugius, for one… although he seemed terrified of Orsted, actually. Maybe that didn't have anything to do with the curse. Sometimes you have perfectly good reasons to be scared of someone.

"As for the second curse, which keeps me from the Man-God's sight… this is no curse at all, in truth."

"What is it, then?"

Orsted paused for a moment to think, then looked me in the eyes once again. "A secret art of sorts, created by the first Dragon God as a tool to use against the Man-God. It enables me to see the flow of destiny, and ensures that certain… laws of this world do not apply to me."

"Hmm…"

"The Man-God possesses great knowledge of the future, and his eyes see far. But they are blind to those outside the world's jurisdiction."

Interesting. I had no idea what it meant to be "outside the world's jurisdiction," but being totally invisible to the Man-God sounded very enticing indeed.

"Could you explain that part about seeing the flow of destiny?"

"Hm. Let's see…"

Falling silent, Orsted assumed his contemplative pose again. I had to hope that didn't mean he was thinking up a lie on the spot.

"When I look at someone, I can see the broad outlines of their life's story."

Well, that's kind of vague… "Does that mean you have the power of foresight as well?"

"No… I don't see the future. I see *history* as it is ordained by fate."

Hmm? Now he sounded like a philosopher or something. I didn't quite get the difference between this power and actual foresight. For the moment, it seemed easiest to think of it as lower-tier version of the Man-God's ability.

"Could you use this secret art on me as well?"

"That would be unwise."

"…Why do you say that?"

I wasn't sure about seeing people's destinies, but it would be *very* nice to hide myself from the Man-God. I wanted to know the actual reason behind his refusal.

"The art has the side effect of dramatically slowing your mana regeneration rate."

"How dramatically?"

"You regenerated your supply of mana completely in ten days, yes? Under the influence of the art, that would take roughly a thousand times longer."

A thousand times longer? That would be, what… thirty *years* or so?

"As a result of this, I cannot wield magic freely. And *that* is the reason I so rarely fight with all my strength."

Aha. Basically, his mana regenerated so slowly that he couldn't use it very often. I didn't know how large his mana supply was, but assuming it took years for it to refill, he'd have to be *very* careful about conserving power.

“While I cannot use the secret art itself on you, the bracelet I gave you provides a similar effect.”

I glanced down at the bracelet on my left wrist. Apparently it *was* a Man-God jamming device of sorts. “So this doesn’t have any side effects? Maybe if we mass-produced it…”

“I would have done so already, if it were possible. And removed my curse as well.”

Right. Kind of a dumb question.

“I used a considerable amount of mana in my battle against you,” Orsted continued. “I will be unable to fight with all my strength for a while.”

“Huh? Wait, really? But you took me out instantly.”

“I was forced to resist direct hits from your magic many times, and ultimately to draw the Godblade,” said Orsted, his tone of voice distinctly bitter. “It cost me a great deal.”

Hm. From my perspective, he’d beat me into the dirt without breaking a sweat… but apparently I’d put up a better fight than I realized. *A solid effort, if I do say so myself. Hoh hoh hoh.*

“In any case, my supply of mana is quite low at the moment. Accordingly, I will need you to take action in my stead.”

“…Right. I’ll do what I can.”

So I was working off the cost of the damage I’d done, basically. That seemed fair enough.

“On another note, Sir Orsted… can I ask *why* you’re fighting against the Man-God?”

“Ah… yes, there is that…”

Orsted glanced sideways, gazing at nothing, his tone somewhat reluctant. I had noticed a lot of these thoughtful pauses in this conversation. Was the man lying to me after all? I didn’t want to think so, especially after hearing that he trusted me… but then again, it would be odd if he trusted me *completely* at this point. There was a

good chance he was feeding me some simple falsehoods for now, and reserving his final judgment until I'd proven myself reliable.

"The Man-God… caused my father's death."

"Oh?"

Revenge, huh? Definitely a classic motive. It was the same thing that had motivated my future self to try and kill the Man-God. It would be easy for me to scoff at such desires at the moment, since no one I loved had actually been taken from me yet. But that diary made it very clear that I had wound up *living* for vengeance in that timeline.

"In addition, his destruction was the dearest wish of the ancient Dragonfolk. All of the Dragon Gods have existed solely to pursue that goal."

Okay, so there was some cultural sense of duty involved as well… Wait, *all* of the Dragon Gods?

"Uhm, how many Dragon Gods have there been?"

"I am the hundredth, it seems. And the ninety-nine who came before me all devoted their lives to bringing down the Man-God."

"Wow. Okay."

"However, only a Dragon God of great strength and pure blood truly stands a chance to succeed in this task." Orsted's sharp, shining eyes fixed themselves on mine; after a moment, he continued in a calm and steady voice. "It was for that reason that my father, first of all the Dragon Gods, *reincarnated* me in the future."

Chapter 13:
Explanations

I NEEDED TO TAKE a step back and review all of this.

First of all, Orsted was a member of the ancient Dragonfolk race, brought to this era from the distant past by a special method of reincarnation.

There were two other unusual things about him: he was cursed, and he was under the influence of a “secret art.” The curse made everyone in the world despise him. The secret art caused his mana to regenerate very slowly, but hid him from the Man-God’s eyes, and also let him see the future in broad, general strokes.

Why had he come here from the past, curse and all?

It started when the Man-God murdered the very first Dragon God. All of the many Dragon Gods who’d followed lived only to pursue revenge; destroying the Man-God was a goal shared by the entire Dragonfolk race. As the son of that first Dragon God, Orsted had travelled to the future to realize that dream.

“Does that sound about right?”

“Yes. You certainly grasped all that quickly.”

“How long ago were you reincarnated, by the way?”

“Ah… it was roughly two thousand years ago, I believe.”

Two *thousand* years? He’d been living in this body for that long? Wow.

Anyway… his story was coherent enough, but something about it felt a little off somehow. Where exactly was that feeling coming from? Maybe the part about him not regenerating mana? Perugius had a summoning spell that could drain mana from his opponents, and I had to assume Orsted could use that too. Wouldn’t that solve the problem by itself?

Hmm. Nah, there had to be some reason why it wouldn't work. Maybe you couldn't store that mana permanently inside yourself.

Well, how about Orsted's intense hatred for the Man-God? The fact that the Man-God killed his father was a solid explanation on paper, but somehow his animosity felt too intense for that to be its *only* cause. I didn't get the sense that Orsted was so obsessed with his father's memory, really.

"I get the feeling that you have a strong *personal* hatred for the Man-God, Orsted. Is there some reason for that you haven't mentioned yet?"

"Who wouldn't despise that vicious piece of filth?"

"…Fair enough."

Over the course of two thousand years, the Man-God had probably done all sorts of horrific things to Orsted. Even if he couldn't talk to Orsted directly, he could still send him messages through others. Hmm… maybe Orsted's current condition had something to do with the conflict between his father and the Man-God, too?

Anyway! There were a few things I still didn't entirely understand, but I probably knew what I needed to about Orsted's background at this point. Whatever it might be, he definitely had *something* motivating him to fight the Man-God. That made him the enemy of my enemy.

There were plenty of other questions I needed to get around to as well. For example…

"During our battle earlier, you mentioned that I possess something called a Laplace Aspect. Could you explain what that is?"

"How much do you know about Laplace?"

"Well, I know he caused a great war four hundred years ago in which humankind was almost defeated. People say he had an immense amount of mana, but was incapable of using Battle Aura. Uhm… although he was very powerful, Lord Perugius eventually sealed him away with the help of two companions… Oh, and he betrayed the Superd."

I'd heard a bunch of other rumors about the man, but those felt like the most important points.

"Is that all?"

"Oh, right. I did hear he's supposedly going to be resurrected soon."

"Did you know that this 'resurrection' will be accomplished by means of the Dragonfolk's reincarnation technique?"

"Uhhhm… no, I think that's news to me… Oh, wait. The Man-God might have mentioned it, actually."

My memory was a little fuzzy on that point. Anyway, the word *reincarnation* sure was coming up a lot in this conversation…

"Hmph. A little later, I'll want to hear everything that creature discussed with you… or tried to make you believe."

"Sure."

"For now, however, let us discuss Laplace."

I could feel Eris *radiating* irritation from the seat beside me at the mere mention of that name. I understood why. The two of us were both good friends of Ruijerd's, and Laplace was his mortal enemy. That made Laplace our enemy as well.

Still, I needed to make sure I kept my cool here, no matter what Orsted said next. Getting mad was Eris' job, and calming her down was mine.

"The Demon-God Laplace, as you may know him, is in fact the pitiful shell of a man once known as the Demonic Dragon King," Orsted continued in a matter-of-fact tone.

"The… Demonic Dragon King?"

"Indeed. He was once one of the ancient Dragonfolk."

Wait, what? Wasn't he the Demon God? That means he has to be a Demon, right?

"The Demonic Dragon King Laplace was among the first generation of the Five Dragon Generals."

Okay, I'd heard of those guys before. They'd once been under the Dragon God's command, but ended up betraying him… and supposedly, their battle ended with *no one* left standing.

"Laplace escaped the destruction of the world of dragons, and wandered this one in the pursuit of a singular mission. At that time, he was known as the second Dragon God."

So the guy was a Dragon King, and a Dragon God, *and* a Demon God? That was entirely too many titles. I was starting to get a headache over here.

"The man worked feverishly to develop some means of destroying the Man-God. Calling himself the Dragon God, he gathered talented followers to him, teaching them all the arts he knew; and over many long years, he developed his techniques still further. All so that I, the strongest of the Dragonfolk, could inherit his legacy when reborn in the distant future."

Wow! The strongest ever? And so modest too!

"But in the Second Human-Demon War, Laplace faced the Fighting God, an apostle of the Man-God. And in that battle, his soul was split in two."

This was another story I'd heard at some point. At the very end of that war, the Golden Knight Aldebaran had supposedly faced off against the Great Emperor of the Demon World. Kishirika later told me it was *actually* a battle between the Dragon God and the Fighting God… so if Laplace was the Dragon God back then, that Aldebaran guy must have been the Fighting God.

Hmm. Wouldn't that mean Laplace was fighting on the side of Demonkind?

"Thus divided, Laplace lost his memories. One half of him became the Demon God, who loathed humanity beyond all reason. And the other became the Technique God, who sought the strength to destroy gods."

Oh, *now* the Demon God was finally making an appearance. Along with, uh, the Technique God. I seemed to remember *he* was the top-ranked member of the Seven Great Powers…

“Huh? Wait, so the Technique God is *also* Laplace?”

“Indeed.”

Uh, that seemed like one hell of a revelation. Was it really okay for Orsted to just tell me about all this? Gah! This was way too much information all at once. I couldn’t even process it all. Orsted was the son of the first Dragon God, but *Laplace* was the second Dragon God?

Let’s see if I can make some sense of this…

First of all, the original Dragon God sent Orsted to the future to kill the Man-God.

Laplace was one of the Five Dragon Generals at this point, but he either stayed loyal to the Dragon God, or rejoined him after realizing the Man-God was up to no good. He survived the Dragon God’s death and the destruction of his world, and fled over into this one.

Once he was here, Laplace started wandering around the world, teaching generations of Dragon Gods his secrets and honing his techniques so that Laplace could pick them up someday in the future. Then the Man-God set the Fighting God on him and put a stop to that. But Laplace got lucky… or maybe used some last-ditch technique to save himself. Although he was split in half and lost his memory, he managed to live on as two separate individuals…

That was the general idea, right? Probably? I wasn’t too confident I’d gotten all of the details right.

“Hmph!”

I looked over at Eris, who had a big, irritated frown on her face. I recognized it as her standard “I didn’t understand a single word of that!” expression. It was a bit of a relief to know I wasn’t the *most* confused person in the room.

Orsted wasn’t done talking yet, though.

“The Demon-God Laplace, stripped of his draconic essence, retained two things: the belief that his purpose was to slay all

humans, and his enormous knowledge of the magical arts. And so, he united Demonkind in order to eradicate humanity."

"The Technique-God Laplace, stripped of his magical powers, instead retained his vast trove of skills—and a vague but powerful compulsion to pass his knowledge on to others. Accordingly, he created the Seven Great Powers, and devoted himself to the refinement of their techniques."

The Technique God *created* the Seven Great Powers… yeah, I think I'd heard about this before. It did make some sense, since he was number one on the list.

Wait a second, though. Wasn't the Second Human-Demon War like… five thousand years ago or something?

"…How do you know all this, Sir Orsted? By the time you were reincarnated two thousand years ago, the Second Human-Demon War had been over for a very long time. Laplace had already lost his memories, right? Who could possibly have told you his story?"

"I discovered Laplace's personal writings in an ancient Dragonfolk ruin."

"Oh. I see…"

The man must have kept good records before he lost his memory. Too bad neither of his current selves had ever stumbled across them…

"Now then, shall we return to the matter of your abundant supply of mana?"

"Please do."

"The first Dragon God created something known as the Reincarnation Art. It is a means of sending your soul into the future and taking over the body of another being, as a form of rebirth."

"…"

The way he'd phrased that felt… a little disturbing.

"However, the body and the soul are normally all but indivisible. A foreign soul would be rejected by the body instantly, causing the

Art to fail. It was for this reason that the first Dragon God injected elements of himself into a number of individuals. The children of those people inherited these *aspects* of him, and were altered very slightly by them. His plan was to produce an ideal vessel for his soul, even if it took hundreds or thousands of years of slow and steady changes."

"…"

"The reincarnation itself occurs when a body perfectly suited to your soul is conceived. You then take the place of the soul that would otherwise have been born, and emerge a newborn infant. A number of the Dragonfolk have come to this era by means of this very technique. Perugius is among them, although he remembers nothing of his last life, as he left it while still a child."

So reincarnation… involved stealing the body of a baby, basically. Overwriting its soul.

I stared down at my hands. I'd been reincarnated myself. Did that mean I'd stolen this life from the *real* Rudeus Greyrat?

"Are you still listening to me?"

"Huh? Oh. Yes. Of course."

As I looked up, I found that Orsted was studying my face closely.

"Let us return to the story of Laplace. The Demon-God had lost his sanity at the moment of his sundering, but it seems he remembered the details of the Reincarnation Art, or perhaps found some record of it. After Perugius defeated him, but *before* his body was sealed, he released many Aspects of himself into the world—and sent his soul into the future."

"…"

"In the present day, individuals who bear these Aspects and share certain traits with him are appearing in increasing numbers. Some possess large supplies of mana and a great proficiency for magic; others are born with green hair, or even possessing Demon Eyes."

I knew someone who met a lot of those criteria. Green hair, lots of mana, and a knack for magic… that was everything except the Demon Eye. “Does that mean *Sylphie* has an Aspect?”

“Yes, Sylphiette is one of those I was referring to. Although her hair seems to have turned white now, for some reason…”

“But she’s not actually the reincarnation of Laplace, right?”

“Of course not. He could not possibly be reborn as a woman.”

It was bit of a relief to hear that. But now that I thought about it… there was a likelier candidate than Sylphie to consider.

“You think I have an Aspect too, right?”

“Almost certainly. A body capable of containing that much mana could not have come into existence otherwise.”

“…You know, I always thought I increased my mana capacity by training really hard as a kid.”

“That’s also true, of course. Your body merely had the *potential* to hold vast quantities of mana. Had you not practiced magic from a young age, you would likely have ended up with only a little more than an ordinary person, much like Sylphiette. Your enormous mana capacity is the result of your own hard work, and you have every right to take pride in it.”

Was that a compliment? Maybe I should be puffing out my chest a little…

“Uhm, just to be clear. I’m not the reincarnation of Laplace either, am I?”

“No. It will be decades before he’s reborn, I expect.”

Well, that was good to know, at least. And I was relieved to finally have a clear answer about why I had so much magic to throw around.

I felt a little guilty about the fact that I was basically borrowing Laplace’s powers, considering my friendship with Ruijerd… but hey, it’s all about how you use it, right?

To be honest, there was something else that was bothering me more.

"…"

Orsted watched me in silence for a while, then let out a small sigh. "There's no need to feel guilty. I know that you're a reincarnate yourself, but no *Rudeus Greyrat* exists within my memories."

"…Could you elaborate a little?"

"Those who inherit a Laplace Aspect often possess great magical potential even as an infant. And your body is capable of containing a particularly great amount of mana. It would be no surprise if a fragile newborn soul failed to tolerate such a host."

"Sorry, what does that mean, exactly?"

"…The child would likely have been stillborn, had you not assumed its body."

Oh.

Well… okay then. As long as I hadn't murdered the real Rudeus. I didn't want to think I'd *stolen* a life with this much happiness in it, you know? But if the alternative to my arrival was Paul and Zenith mourning their first-born child, then it was all for the best. It was time to put this depressing line of thought behind me. I was the son of Paul and Zenith—the one and only Rudeus Greyrat.

With *that* matter settled, I decided to move on to my next burning question.

"Uhm, I've heard that the Displacement Incident happened as a result of Nanahoshi being summoned. Do you think you could explain in more detail?"

"…There is a great deal about those events I don't yet understand. No such thing ever happened before."

"Well, I'm a reincarnate, and I was close to the epicenter of the disaster when it took place. I feel like there's some chance I caused it, somehow…"

"What…?"

All of a sudden, Eris reached under the table and grabbed my thigh. When I looked over, I found her staring at me and subtly shaking her head. In an attempt to reassure, I reached behind her… and began fondling her butt. Her rear, both soft *and* muscular, offered an exquisite tacti*ow ow ow oh crap my thigh! No pinchy! No pinchyyy!*

"I cannot deny the possibility, I admit. You, Nanahoshi, and the Displacement Incident are all… new additions to history."

God, I thought she was going to rip an inch of muscle right out of my leg…

I glanced at Eris' face. She was glaring at me with an expression that read "This is a serious conversation, remember?!" in big, bold letters. It was nice to see that she'd learned how to read the room a little.

In any case, it sounded like Orsted didn't know much about the Displacement Incident either. Nanahoshi had come up with some weird theories on her own, but… there was no need to get into all that right now. In fact, I felt like I'd asked enough questions for one day. My head was about ready to burst with new information as it was. If I kept this conversation going much longer, I wasn't sure I'd even be capable of understanding anything Orsted told me. Better to pick things up where I'd left off some other time.

"…I don't know how useful it will be, but I have some information from the future that I wanted to show you."

"You do?"

"Uhm… yes, I think so. Take a look at this."

I handed the diary from the future over to Orsted. He flipped it open and quickly skimmed through the first few pages; but after a few moments, he looked up from it with his brow furrowed. "It will take some time for me to read all this. The handwriting is rather poor."

"Well, that's okay…"

Was my handwriting *that* crappy? Nanahoshi had said the exact same thing. Anyway, it wasn't fair to expect great penmanship from a diary. But I'd have to take things nice and slow next time I wrote someone a letter.

"Oh, right. Before we get into that, can I ask you about something else?"

"What is it?"

I paused for a moment. Was it a good idea to even bring this up? Orsted had treated me much more nicely than I'd expected so far… but I felt like I was about to push my luck.

"You see, uh, Sir…"

"There's no need for these formalities."

"Well, Orsted… Sir… I'm going to be your subordinate from now on. Correct?"

"…Yes. So long as you accept that role."

"Right. So, uhm… this is *very* awkward, really, but…" I glanced over at Eris, then continued. "Could we discuss the terms of my employment?"

"Your… employment?"

"Right. I've got a family now, as you know… and if *possible,* well… I'd like to have some time off. To spend with them. Every now and then, at least."

Don't get me wrong. I was ready and willing to work my butt off for this guy. That said… sometimes you need a break to remind yourself what you're working *for,* right? I wanted time to look in on Lucie, tutor my little sisters, enjoy Lilia's cooking, bask in the sun with Zenith, roll around in bed with Sylphie, roll around in bed with Roxy, and roll around in bed with Eris. Was that too much to ask?

"That may depend on your performance, Rudeus Greyrat."

"Oh. Right. Sure."

Crap. Maybe it was.

Sorry, Lucie! Daddy's off to work away from home! I'll be back once we've saved the world from the Man-God, okay? Farewell for now! Make sure to eat all your veggies!

"However, I'm no Atofe. It was never my intention to tear you away from the family you risked everything to protect. And I don't have any plans of dragging you around with me for years on end… currently, at least."

"Wait, really? That's kind of a relief to hear."

Phew. From the sound of things, I was going to get some days off after all. Being separated from everyone I loved would have been… challenging, to say the least. Keeping them safe was my top priority, but I wanted to be around them, too.

"Is there anything else you want from me?"

Orsted's eyes were fixed on me in something that looked a lot like a *glare.* Could I actually say yes to that question? What if he got angry with me?

No, no. I needed to grow a spine. This was my one window of opportunity. We didn't have a contract or anything, so it was crucial to get this stuff worked out up front.

"…Uhm, are you okay with me asking for more?"

"I will do my best to meet your needs."

Ooh, that sounded promising. Hmm. Would asking for a salary be taking things a bit too far?

I mean, it wasn't that unreasonable. If you want someone to do a job *responsibly,* you pay them for it. By taking your money, they accept responsibility for their work. Anyone who works for free will do so *irresponsibly*… or so I'd read in some manga once upon a time.

Naturally, I wanted to be a responsible subordinate to Orsted. And surely taking some cash from him would be the perfect way to demonstrate this.

"Uhm, so… since I'm going to be out of the house a lot, my family's going to lose one of its breadwinners. I wasn't bringing home that much to begin with, and… well, I actually ran up quite a few

expenses, uh, preparing for our battle the other day. We still have some savings for now, but I could see them running out one of these days. If I'm not working, we'll probably have to cut back on our dinner menu a little. And we've got a bunch of growing kids to—"

"You want money, then?"

"Well, sure, if you want to be blunt about it! Heheh."

As I giggled evilly out of sheer embarrassment, Orsted reached into his coat and pulled something out, which he then dropped casually onto the table in front of me. It was a dagger… no, a shortsword… in a beautifully ornamented sheath.

"This is one of the 48 magic swords crafted from the bones of the Dragon King Kajakut by the famous Demon swordsmith Julian Harisco. Its name is Eminence, and it should sell for 100,000 Asuran gold coins or so. That ought to last you for a while."

"Wh-whoa…"

Did he just say a hundred thousand?! An Asuran gold coin's worth, what… something like a hundred thousand yen, right? So that would be… ten billion yen?! A guy could live off that kind of money for the rest of his life! Hell, you could probably build yourself a castle!

"Do you need more?"

"N-no, of course not!"

Holy crap. What was this guy going to expect me to *do* in exchange for something this valuable? Oh, right… he wanted me to fight the Man-God. I guess this made me a hired gun. But for some reason, getting paid this much to do the job made it seem a little scarier.

There was kind of a practical issue here, though. How was I going to turn this thing into cash? Who the heck was *actually* going to spend that much money on a single sword? It seemed like the sort of thing the Asuran royal family might do. Maybe I should go squeeze some wealth out of Ariel's brothers?

"It's just, w-well… I think it might be difficult to find someone who can afford to pay a fair price for this sword around here…"

“Hm… I see. You have a point. Perhaps these would be preferable, then.”

This time, Orsted took out a small leather bag. When he dropped it carelessly on the table, it clattered like pebbles in a can. I picked it up and peered inside. It was packed full of transparent stones in all sorts of vivid colors. “Are these… gems?”

“They’re magic stones. I picked out a number of small ones with particularly vivid colors. Sell them to any Magicians’ Guild, and you’ll walk away with a sizable sum.”

These were *all* colored magic stones? Weren’t those things really rare? Unlike that legendary sword, this wasn’t build-a-castle territory, but I could probably bankroll a good decade of decadent living with these.

I was starting to feel kind of nervous about accepting all of this. I couldn’t help shooting an uncertain look over in Orsted’s direction.

“Do you need more?” he asked calmly.

What?! You’re not done throwing money at me yet?!

No, no. Anything more would just be… scary at this point.

“No. This should be fine for now, thank you…”

I carefully stashed the shortsword and the magic stones away. It felt kind of *uncomfortable* just having them in my clothing… almost of like I was carrying explosives or something. Maybe I could ask Eris to take the sword, at least…

“Very well then,” Orsted said with a nod. “I’m going to get started on this diary. What do you intend to do in the meantime?”

“I could wait for you to finish.”

“I believe it will take me a full day to get through this.”

“Hmm… right. Well, I don’t know. It’s still pretty early… maybe we should just continue our conversation for now?”

“It seems that you consider this diary important, so I would prefer to read it first.”

It was hard to say how *important* it really was at this point. But I felt like it was worth having him take a look through it, at least. Orsted had the ability to see the future, but only in a vague way. By comparing his knowledge with the details in that diary, there was a chance he'd figure out something valuable.

"All right then. I guess I'll head back home for now and come by again tomorrow."

"Very well."

"…Are you planning to spend the night here, incidentally?"

"I am, yes."

"Okay. No problem."

With a respectful nod to Orsted, I stepped out of the cabin and turned toward the city of Sharia.

***

In the warm evening light, I made my way along the road back home, staying just a few paces behind Eris. Thanks to all the complicated things I'd discussed today, my head was feeling heavier than usual. The only thing my weary brain was capable of focusing on was the shapely pair of buttocks just in front of me.

Eris' butt really was amazing. I'd never seen such a perfect synthesis of muscle and fat. Somehow, it was both compact and *plump.* The girl had curves, all right. This was probably what people meant when they talked about "sex appeal."

Incidentally, Eris' pants were pretty tight around her butt, which emphasized its shape in a pleasing way. They made it very clear just how much *volume* she had in there. What exactly would you call those things, anyway? Tights? Leggings? It wasn't a style you saw much of around here… Hmm. Was that some kind of leather they were made of? No, they looked too flexible for that… maybe it was fabric instead?

I felt like touching them would be the quickest way to check. Yes, that seemed like an excellent idea. I might lose consciousness for a little while, but that was a small price to pay for solving such a profound mystery.

All right, Eris… Can you counter my new technique, the Grope of Light?!

“Rudeus…”

Eris suddenly turned around and I hurriedly looked up in order to meet her gaze.

“You’re still *Rudeus,* right?”

As always, there was a cryptic little frown on her face. From her tone, though, I knew she had to be talking about all that reincarnation business we’d discussed earlier.

“Yeah. It sounds like I’ve got that Laplace Aspect thing mixed up inside me somewhere, but I’m still the same person I was yesterday.”

“So nothing’s *really* different now, right?”

“Right. I learned a few new things about myself, that’s all. I haven’t changed a bit.”

I kept my answers simple and straightforward, with no apologies or excuses. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if Eris had been keeping up with my conversation with Orsted. The man seemed to feel that reincarnation was a perfectly ordinary, everyday phenomenon, and I’d read enough science fiction in my previous life to make sense of his explanations. But without that kind of background knowledge, it might have been almost incomprehensible.

Then again… Eris was about twenty years old now. She was past the age where you could get by without doing *any* thinking for yourself. There was a part of me that wanted her to stay clueless forever, but that was just a stupid, selfish dream.

“Hmm…” Eris nodded at my words, although it was hard to say if she really understood them. “Do you want me to keep this a secret

from Sylphie and Roxy?”

“If you don’t mind, yeah. I’d rather tell them myself, when the time’s right.”

In reply, Eris took three quick steps forward, then stopped abruptly in her tracks.

The setting sun was behind her now, silhouetting her against the evening sky; her hair shone like rubies as the light played through it. Even in the shadow, her striking facial features and intense gaze were mesmerizing.

Damn. She really is beautiful.

“All right,” she said. “You have to hold my hand, then.”

Eris held out her hand, and I took it without another word. It was as lovely to look at as the rest of her. It was also calloused, and a little on the tough side. Very different from Sylphie’s hands, or Roxy’s.

Warm and strong, that hand wrapped itself around mine. I squeezed it firmly back, and began to walk.

This was the first time in ages that I’d strolled along side by side with Eris. For some reason, it was enough to make me very happy.

And when my thoughts turned to the new chapter of my life that would begin tomorrow, my heart throbbed slightly—with excitement.

Extra Chapter:
A Wild Blade Finds Its Sheath

“NGHAH?!”

Eris’ eyes snapped open violently. She’d woken herself up with a somewhat undignified yelp.

“Mm…?”

She sat up in bed and scratched at her unkept hair, looking around in bleary confusion. She was in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. The window and the closet were both new to her as well.

However, she recognized the two swords leaning against the bed—and the clothes scattered carelessly across the floor. It was clear that she’d gone to sleep here on her own initiative last night.

“Ah, right…”

Once she’d processed all this, her memories from the previous night came back to her easily enough.

She recalled saving Rudeus’ life, and fighting Orsted to protect him.

In her years at the Sword Sanctum, she’d dreamed about battling Orsted on many occasions. On the days she pushed herself to the *very* limit in her training, and fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow, it almost always happened. The dreams changed somewhat as she grew older and stronger, but they always involved her battling the Dragon God alongside Rudeus, and she always woke up before the duel was concluded.

Yesterday, however, their battle *had* reached an end. Something that had never happened before. And the outcome was nothing like she’d imagined. It had seemed too strange to be real. She assumed it must have been another dream.

But judging from where she found herself this morning…

“I guess that really happened,” Eris murmured thoughtfully.

The day after the battle with Orsted, she woke in the Greyrat family’s house.

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Eris Greyrat was starting to feel uneasy.

For many years her dream had been to fight Orsted alongside Rudeus. It was the whole reason she’d travelled to the Sword Sanctum. She had now fulfilled that goal; things hadn’t gone exactly as she’d imagined, but she’d held her own against the Dragon God.

Of course, she *had* given some thought to what would come after this. Her plan was to live happily ever after with Rudeus. She’d never been too clear on what this would involve exactly, but it was still her intention to make it happen.

Yet despite how she felt about the matter, in the days after arriving at this house she’d found herself unable to even hold a *conversation* with Rudeus.

Eris muttered as she washed her face. “I don’t get it.”

This bathroom had a large mirror over the sink, offering her a good view of herself. She studied her face for a moment: unkempt red hair, upturned eyes, and a mouth that seemed to scowl on its own every time she closed it. She’d managed to wash the dried drool off her cheek, but it hadn’t helped matters much.

The word *cute* definitely didn’t apply to her. When she considered the meaning of that term, two faces immediately appeared in her mind’s eye. Sylphie and Roxy’s features differed, but they could both be described as adorable. They didn’t have Eris’ sharp, upturned eyes, or her mane of messy hair, and they didn’t look angry when they closed their mouths. Their figures were very different from hers as well. Their bodies weren’t that… womanly, but Rudeus seemed to prefer things that way.

Of course, Eris couldn't magically change her appearance overnight, so she'd given up on competing with them on this level. But there were *other* aspects of this problem to consider, too. Sylphie was the kind of woman who took good care of her family and her household. It wasn't just that she could handle chores or cook a decent meal—she was also thoughtful and considerate to everyone. No matter how stupidly Eris might behave, Sylphie was never going to laugh at her behind her back. And above all else, it was obvious that she loved Rudeus very much. Anyone who could recognize how amazing Rudeus was earned some bonus points in Eris' books.

As for Roxy, well… she was someone even Rudeus respected deeply. She had a bit of a clumsy side, but she seemed like a calm and clever person with a wise outlook on life. And on top of that, she had a good job at the University, which made her the biggest earner in the household. Rudeus had told Eris all about how wonderful she was on their travels together. As far as Eris was concerned, anyone Rudeus respected was someone worthy of respect.

Where did that leave Eris herself, in comparison?

She wasn't much good at housework or cooking. When it came to earning money, working as an adventurer was the only thing she knew how to do… and it was hard to say how well she'd even manage *that* without Rudeus handling all the complicated details.

Just to repeat: Eris had every intention of staying with Rudeus from now on. The specifics hadn't worked out as she expected, but those were all minor details in her mind. Of course, there was a part of her that wanted him all to herself, and she had some mixed feelings about coming on as wife number three. But she'd accepted all that some time ago. Rudeus had gone through a very difficult period because of her, for one thing, and she'd seen plenty of men with multiple wives back in Asura. There was nothing that strange about it to her.

That said, now that she'd actually met his other wives, she was starting to feel kind of inadequate.

Eris wasn't a kid anymore. She knew that life wasn't simple or easy. She still didn't have a great sense of just *how* complicated it

could get, but she was well aware that you couldn't get through it with nothing but your sword skills.

Back in the day, she'd never worried about all that other stuff. In her mind, Rudeus could take care of everything—and that meant she didn't need to bother. But after seeing Sylphie and Roxy at work, she didn't feel that way anymore. The whole reason she'd run off to the Sword Sanctum in the first place was to become Rudeus' equal. She wanted to become stronger so that she wouldn't be a burden to him anymore.

And she had achieved that goal, to be sure. But now that she was back, it turned out Rudeus already had two women *supporting* him. They both had all sorts of valuable life skills which they actively use to help him in a hundred different ways.

Maybe she didn't have the qualifications to be his wife after all. Maybe that was the reason he kept shooting her glances with a weird look on his face, instead of bringing up his marriage proposal.

It was a distressing thought, one couldn't seem to shake off.

Under ordinary circumstances, Eris might have tossed all her worries to the side and charged head-on at Rudeus. But these weren't ordinary circumstances; and her feelings of self-doubt had grown so strong that she couldn't bring herself to start the conversation.

"…All right!"

By nature, however, Eris wasn't capable of brooding at great length. And she wasn't the spoiled young lady she'd once been, who was incapable of taking action on her own. She was a master swordswoman who'd studied in the Sword Sanctum itself, earning the prestigious rank of Sword King.

During the course of rising to these heights, Eris had learned exactly what to do when she felt self-doubt. When you lacked the qualifications that you needed, it was just a matter of *obtaining* them.

***

After washing up and finishing her daily practice swings, Eris quickly rinsed her sweat off, then headed straight toward the kitchen where Sylphie, Aisha, and Lilia were already bustling around.

Only a few days had passed since the battle with Orsted, which had been a stressful and tiring experience for everyone. But with three competent cooks in the kitchen working on a fairly small number of dishes, things seemed to be going smoothly enough.

Nonetheless, Eris called out: “Let me help too! What should I do first?!”

“You just wait patiently until the food’s ready, Eris!” Aisha instantly replied.

The implicit message here was “there’s nothing for you to help with.” Aisha was a cheerful, sweet girl by nature, and she had nothing but fondness and respect for her new big sister, but she was also well aware that Eris couldn’t cook to save her life. Also, they had the situation under control as it was.

Unfortunately, Eris wasn’t much good at reading between the lines either. “I can’t just sit around forever! I’m going to be Rudeus’ wife too!”

Aisha somehow resisted the urge to sigh in exasperation and looked over at Sylphie, who was smiling awkwardly. Sylphie was the one in charge here, so the final decision rested with her.

“Uhm… do you know how to cook, Eris?” Sylphie asked, her voice gentle.

“I can help out, at least!” Eris replied, puffing out her chest confidently.

“Well, okay… Could you cut these vegetables for me, then? We’re going to use them in a stew, but they’re always a little tough for us to chop.”

Sylphie handed Eris a kitchen knife and pointed her in the right direction. Eris looked down at the freshly peeled squash-like vegetables before her, brimming with excitement.

“I just need to chop these up, right?”

“Yeah. They’re pretty tough, though. Do you think you can manage?”

“Of course. I’m *real* good with a sword.”

“Uhm, but that’s a kitchen knife…”

Eris had basically done nothing except practice with the sword for years now. But back in her adventuring days, Ruijerd had taught her how to strip the skin off a dead monster, and she’d also dressed the meat a few times. It wasn’t like she had no experience at *all* with cooking, in other words.

Unfortunately, preparations for the Greyrat family’s breakfast didn’t involve the dissection of poisonous monsters, but Eris was convinced that she could handle chopping a few vegetables easily enough.

“…Huh?”

However, the squash proved a lot tougher than Eris had anticipated, and her knife stopped short halfway through it. She was very good at hitting quickly moving targets, but this was her first time facing an immobile object on a cutting board. Maybe it was something you needed to practice.

However, Eris was a Sword King now; she knew her way around a blade. And she knew how to slice right through things, even if they were a little tough.

“Uhm, Eris? You want to cut that at more of an—”

“Hmph!”

Just as Sylphie was about to teach her the trick to this, Eris exhaled sharply, raised her knife too quickly for the eye to follow, and swung it violently back down.

Sylphie didn’t even see a blur. She just heard the *chunk* of the blade striking home, and saw the squash split in half… along with the cutting board underneath it. The cutting board Rudeus had bought her when they got married, and she’d been using ever since.

“How do you like *that?*” said Eris proudly.

Sylphie’s cheeks twitched slightly, but she managed to control herself. She’d been fond of that cutting board, yes, but it was a practical object, and it would have gotten worn out eventually in any case. They could always buy another one.

“Aaaah! That’s the cutting board Rudeus bought Sylphie as a wedding present!” Aisha cried out in Sylphie’s place. Picking up the two halves of the broken cutting board, she glared at Eris reproachfully. “Eris, you’re *terrible!*”

“Uhm…”

Slowly, anxiously, Eris looked over at Sylphie. The woman’s cheeks were still twitching, but somehow she’d managed to keep a smile on her face.

“Oh, i-it’s all right. It’s not like she did it on purpose, right?”

“…S-sorry about that.”

Eris’ apology was genuine. If someone had chopped a gift Rudeus gave *her* in half, she knew she would have flipped out on them.

“I think we’ll let someone else handle cutting the vegetables today, though.”

For the next few minutes, Sylphie made an effort to find little tasks that Eris could help out with. Unfortunately, she proved much clumsier than expected. When she tried to heat something up, she nearly caused a fire; when she washed a saucepan they were finished with, she somehow bent its handle; and when she carried food out to the table, she ended up dropping it all over the floor. Normally, she might have handled these tasks just fine, but she was a little *too* vigorous doing everything today.

When you’re trying very, very hard, it’s easy to make mistakes you wouldn’t otherwise.

Ultimately, Eris ended up with the assignment of sharpening the kitchen knives that were growing dull. While most of what she’d practiced recently concerned how to *use* her sword, she’d also

learned how to maintain it. Ruijerd had taught her the basics, and she'd had extensive practice in the Sword Sanctum as well. There were good reasons for this. For practitioners of the Sword God Style, who sought to cut down their opponents in a single strike, it was crucial to keep their sword razor-sharp.

A kitchen knife wasn't a sword, obviously, but it was still a blade. There wasn't much difference in how you maintained them. By the end of that morning, every knife in the Greyrat family's kitchen looked sharp enough to cut through steel; this accomplishment earned Eris a good amount of praise from Sylphie and the others.

Of course, she was fully conscious of the fact that this wasn't quite the kind of housework she'd been hoping to help out with.

***

Eris had screwed up big time in the kitchen. Still, she wasn't about to give up. It seemed like cooking wasn't her thing, but she could still find a way earn her keep at least. With this thought in mind, she set out for the Ranoa University of Magic, where Roxy worked as a professor. The plan was to explain the situation and see if Roxy knew of any jobs she might be suited for.

"Uhh… You want to know if there's anything you can *help out* with?"

Eris arrived just as Roxy was getting started on her lunch—distracting her from the mystery of why so much of her lunch box's contents were slightly charred today.

"Yeah! Everyone says it's a big help to have you bringing home that nice, regular salary. I'm gonna be Rudeus' wife too, so I should really earn some money myself."

"Ah, I see. Well, I can certainly do my best to help you find a job, in that case."

"Thanks, Roxy!"

"First of all, can you tell me what your skills are?"

Eris' mind immediately jumped to the things Rudeus had taught her many years ago. This place *was* a school, so it seemed like the most relevant knowledge she possessed.

"I can read, and write, and do arithmetic! Oh, and I know some basic magic too!"

Of course, Eris wasn't especially *good* at any of these things, but she still delivered her reply with confidence.

Roxy fell silent and tried to think this through.

Eris was a Sword King. Naturally, the best option was to find her a job where that title would be relevant. Although it wasn't clear if she had the ability to teach others her skills, finding her a post as an instructor of swordplay seemed like the ideal option. She didn't have the necessary qualifications to become a formal faculty member yet, but she could be hired as an assistant instructor right away. Fortunately, the University of Magic did offer its students swordplay lessons, and Roxy's recommendation would count for something here.

The University's current swordplay instructor was of the Advanced rank in his style, which made him Eris' inferior. There was a chance that taking on such a powerful assistant would be too much for his pride to tolerate… but as she considered this, Roxy recalled seeing the man talking excitedly about the arrival of two Sword Kings in Ranoa just the other day. He'd even mentioned something about how badly he wanted to meet them, and maybe even learn a thing or two under their instruction. At this very moment, the man seemed to be shooting jealous glances in her direction from the other side of the faculty room. Roxy had the feeling he might endorse this idea enthusiastically if she called him over.

However… Eris hadn't mentioned her swordsmanship in response to Roxy's question about her skills. Why was that?

Roxy was a clever woman. It didn't take long for her to arrive at an answer.

Eris was a *Sword King,* a cut above even the Sword Saints. Only the truly talented and powerful ever earned that title. Among

magicians who rose to the equivalent rank, there were many who would only take on specific pupils they deemed promising. In all likelihood, Eris was also unwilling to teach her skills to just anyone. In that case, suggesting she take a job as an *assistant swordplay instructor* would be most unwise. She might even take it as an insult.

Of course, all this was just Roxy overthinking things. But nonetheless, she opted for a different suggestion.

"All right then. How about a job as a security guard?"

"A guard? That sounds kind of dull."

"Well, most jobs *are* a bit on the dull side, I'm afraid."

"Hmm… Yeah, I guess even adventuring was a little boring sometimes. Okay then."

Within minutes, Roxy's recommendation secured Eris a trial run as a Ranoa University of Magic security guard.

Once the formalities were taken care of, Roxy led Eris out to the University of Magic's main entrance. Since Eris didn't yet have a good sense of the campus layout, guarding the front gate was the only job she could do at the moment. The idea was for her to work a shift that afternoon, after which she would be officially hired by the University.

"All right then. I have a class to teach, so I need to be going now. I'll come by to get you in the evening."

With those words, Roxy left Eris in the hands of the veteran guard at the gate and headed back toward the main school building.

The guard looked Eris over for a moment, then scratched the back of his head uncertainly. "Uh, let's see. I mean, gate duty's pretty simple, honestly. You just stop anyone who looks fishy or dangerous, ask 'em to prove their identity, and kick 'em out when necessary."

"That sounds easy!"

"Yep, it sure is. It's not like we get that many suspicious characters loitering around, you know? But hey, let me show you

how it's done anyway."

With that, the guard positioned himself next to the gate and began to keep a watchful eye on everyone who passed through it.

However, the University of Magic had a wide range of facilities and stores on campus, so it was fairly rare for students or professors to leave the grounds on their lunch break. That meant there wasn't much foot traffic apart from a handful of people who seemed to be maintenance men or vendors bringing in supplies. The guard did call out to one tough-looking customer with a big scar on his cheek, only to discover that he was a bodyguard for some noble student living in the dorms. Just as he'd said, the campus didn't seem to get too many fishy-looking visitors.

"So that's about it. The foot traffic will slow down even more by the early afternoon. Why don't you have a try for a while?"

"Got it!"

In high spirits, Eris positioned herself next to the gate, where she assumed her signature pose—arms folded, legs spread wide, and chin in the air.

Her gaze was intense. *Too* intense, in fact. Nobody could seem to look her in the face; those who passed through the gate did so staring at the ground, in an effort not to meet her eyes. There were no shady customers to be seen. Anyone who *was* considering some illicit behavior would have thought twice after one good glare from Eris.

However, among all the cowering and cringing, there was one man who didn't so much as flinch. Indifferent to Eris' presence, he strode onto the campus as if he owned the place. The expression on his face was calm and confident. There was nothing *that* unusual about his bearing, but given the quivering people around him, he stood out like a sore thumb.

And so, Eris made a snap decision: *there's something strange about that guy!*

"Hold it right there!"

The man stopped in his tracks and looked over at Eris dubiously. “Can I help you?”

His tone was polite enough, but the look on his face was saying “I’m a busy man. Can we get this over with quickly?”

Of course, this attitude only made Eris more suspicious. “There’s something *fishy* about you!”

“I’ve been passing through this gate for more than twenty years, and this is the first time I’ve heard *that*. You seem rather… fishy to me yourself. I don’t recognize your face… How long have you been working here?”

“Just started today!”

“I see. Well, I suppose I can’t blame you, then…”

The man reached into his pocket to retrieve his official University identification badge But in that moment, an unseasonably strong gust of wind happened to sweep by, and his hand jumped reflexively from his pocket toward his head.

Eris reacted instantly to this highly suspicious movement. Stepping forward in the blink of an eye, she seized his wrist firmly in her hand.

“What are you hiding up there?”

“Guh…!”

Before Eris’ very eyes, the wind… carried off the man’s hair. All of it. At once.

All that was left behind was a beautifully shiny dome.

“…”

Eris froze up. She’d recognized the man was trying to hide *something,* but she hadn’t imagined it was… this.

With the hand that Eris wasn’t grasping, the man reached into his breast pocket once again and pulled out his University badge.

“My name is Georg. I’m the *Principal* of the Ranoa University of Magic.”

As he spoke, his face was crimson with both embarrassment *and* fury.

***

To cut to the chase, Eris was fired on the spot.

Well… it wasn't *technically* a firing, since she hadn't even been hired yet. But the University formally declined to take her on as a security guard.

"*Sigh*…"

Understandably, this had left Eris feeling a little down in the dumps. She was no good at housework, and she couldn't handle working a job either. Her growing sense of her own uselessness had been painfully reinforced by today's events. It might have felt different if she'd at least managed to stumble through *something* she set her mind to, but after two straight disasters, her self-confidence was reaching new lows.

At the moment, Eris was lying on top of a shed in the corner of the Greyrat yard and staring up at the sky—much like she used to do back when she was living in the city of Roa. In her mind, she was replaying a conversation with Rudeus from many years in the past.

"What's the point of doing something I'm not even good at?!"

Rudeus' reply had been simple enough. *"The worse you are at something, the more satisfying it feels when you finally get the hang of it."*

In a sense, housework and employment weren't different from the dancing she'd struggled with back then. She'd get the hang of them eventually, as long as she kept trying despite her failures.

At the same time, something felt a little off about that plan. It probably would be satisfying to succeed, but even so… something just felt *off*.

Unfortunately, Eris couldn't seem to figure out why that was.

“Let *go* of me!”

Just then, the wind carried a voice up to her. It was one she recognized.

Eris sat up on the shed’s roof and turned in the direction the voice had come from. From the sound of things, there was an argument taking place near the front door of the Greyrat family home.

“Wonder what’s going on…”

She hopped down from her perch and headed around the house, where she spotted Rudeus’ sister Norn with a boy about her age.

The boy was richly dressed. His uniform had the same design as Norn’s, but you could tell at a glance that his was made with fine fabrics and expensive buttons.

It wasn’t just his clothing that stood out, either; he had long, wavy blond hair, neatly groomed eyebrows, and skin that clearly got a lot of care. The two guards standing at attention behind him made it obvious that he was a noble.

At the moment, he was holding Norn’s hand—apparently to prevent her from entering the house.

“Come now, Norn,” the boy said, brushing his free hand through his hair in an obnoxiously showy gesture. “If you simply come along with me, you’ll be helping out that dear brother of yours *and* your beloved Princess Ariel.”

“What are you talking about?! Princess Ariel and Rudeus aren’t even around right now!”

“So much the better! If they return to find we’ve taken helpful measures on their behalf, they’ll surely praise us for our foresight and initiative. It will be a valuable step toward winning their confidence.”

“They’d just get mad me for acting without permission, actually.”

From the looks of things, Norn wanted nothing more than to pull her hand free. But this kid was a noble, and it looked like he had some real influence; she probably didn't want to run the risk of angering him.

"Oh, they won't be *upset,* I assure you. Take a look at these two behind me. They're elite fighters we recruited from one of the best mercenary bands in all of the Northern Territories. Your brother's been spending a lot of time away from the house lately, hasn't he? Allow me to protect it in his stead."

"That's not necessary. We've got Sylphie and Roxy to look after us."

"Nothing but women, in other words?"

"Z-Zanoba and Cliff come over all the time!"

"But they're not here *now*, are they?"

In the face of the boy's relentless pressure, Norn's protests were growing briefer and less firm. At this rate, there was a good chance he might end up bullying his way into the house. Frowning, Eris strode over. "She's not interested. Take your hands off her."

The boy knitted his brow at this sudden interruption. "Pardon me? And who are you supposed to be, anyway? Do you not know who I am?"

"No."

"I'll tell you, then. I am Richard Moanarius, heir to the honorable house of Moanar—"

"I couldn't care less. Did you not hear me the first time? Take your hands *off* her."

As Eris cut off his attempt to introduce himself, the boy Richard's confident expression took a turn for the sullen. "You're a remarkably rude and ignorant woman! Look here, if I *wanted* to, I could have this little house of yours torn down in no— Hm?"

Richard stopped midsentence, realizing that his legs felt strangely cold all of a sudden. When he looked down, he found his pants lying around his ankles, leaving his underwear fully exposed.

With a little squeak, the boy hurriedly pulled his pants back up—only to discover that his belt had been sliced in half, forcing him to hold them up with his hand.

For a moment, he had no idea *what* just happened to him. Then he heard a small *clink* from the sword at Eris' waist… and he looked up to find her staring at him with cold disdain in her eyes.

"Next time, I'll cut that arm off instead."

"Eee!"

Richard was infamous for his shameless behavior, and was sometimes called deficient as a noble. But whatever his moral flaws, he possessed a perfectly functional sense of self-preservation. He *knew* that Eris wasn't making an idle threat. He instantly released Norn's hand and took a quick step backward.

"F-fine. Fine! I'll be on my way for now, then."

At those words, Eris drew her sword again. Somehow, it left its sheath without making a sound. Something about that felt *incredibly* menacing.

"Wh-what?! I already said I'm leaving for today!"

"Don't come back tomorrow, either. Or the next day."

Richard's legs began to tremble at the sheer intensity of Eris' gaze. He couldn't meet her eyes, of course; but he could *feel* them boring into him. Still, he had his pride as a noble on the line. He couldn't bring himself to just let this crude commoner make an utter fool of him.

"Do you *dare* to threaten—"

But just as he opened his mouth to speak, one of his bodyguards grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him firmly backward.

"Sorry, your lordship, but we better get out of here. I'd bet good money that girl's the Berserker Sword King people have been talking about. She's *not* bluffing about this, you understand? There's no reasoning with a woman who trained in the Sword Sanctum."

Normally, these men followed their young master around even on his most idiotic escapades, efficiently cleaning up his messes with a quiet sigh. But it was precisely their skill and competence that allowed them to realize just how dangerous Eris really was.

“Damn it! I won’t forget this!”

With this limp attempt at a parting shot, Richard started to turn away. But before he could move an inch, Eris called out to him sharply.

“I won’t forget *you* either. And if you mess with this girl again, I’ll kill you. That’s a promise, okay? I’m going to remember your face.”

Those words were the finishing blow. The knowledge that this terrifying woman was going to be keeping tabs on him left Richard’s body quivering with fear.

“Guh…”

Terrified into silence at last, the suddenly pale-faced boy spun around and strode quickly away.

Eris kept glaring after Richard and his bodyguards until they’d disappeared completely from view. Only then did she finally relax.

“Hmph.”

Of course, she hadn’t meant any of that seriously. Eris could be *somewhat* violent at times, but she didn’t actually go around murdering obnoxious brats. It had only been a bluff. Honestly, she didn’t intend to remember the boy’s name, much less his face. Remembering things was never her strong suit. Still, the force of her very genuine *hostility* had been enough to make her words seem plausible.

“Phew…”

With a little sigh, Eris turned and headed back inside the house.

Norn just watched her go, without managing so much as a “thank you.” But her hands were clasped against her chest, and admiration shone in her eyes.

***

Scaring off that boy had felt pretty good, in all honesty. But Eris was already wondering if she'd just screwed things up again. Norn had *looked* unhappy about the situation, but their discussion had sounded kind of complicated. Maybe the brat was actually important somehow. It felt like she might be in for another lecture later on.

Sure enough, just as she stepped into the house, Sylphie and Roxy stuck their heads out of the living room and beckoned her over. They'd clearly been watching that little scene unfold from a distance.

Bracing herself for a talking-to, Eris headed over to join them…

"Thank you, Eris!"

"Well done."

…and found herself blinking with surprise at their sudden words of gratitude.

"Huh?"

"We saw that! You helped out Norn, right?"

"That boy didn't listen to a word *we* had to say, but it looks like he won't be bothering her again."

There were big smiles on both of their faces, but Eris frowned uncertainly.

"…Are you sure I should have done that? He's got connections, right?"

"Hmm. Well, his *father* is contributing to Princess Ariel's cause, and he does have some influence at the University…"

This was exactly what Eris had been afraid of. Sylphie explained that Richard was the son of a powerful Ranoan noble. Not only was this noble one of Princess Ariel's main financial supporters, he made large donations to the University on a regular basis and had a considerable amount of sway with its administrators. To put

things bluntly, a decent percentage of both Sylphie and Roxy's pay was coming from money he provided.

Of course, his son Richard had nothing to do with any of these matters. Even if he ran back home and whined to his daddy for hours on end, it was unlikely there would be any consequences for Sylphie or Roxy, let alone Princess Ariel. However, Richard had convinced himself that his father's contributions entitled him to strut around like he owned the place. No matter how many times Sylphie and Roxy told him off, he'd simply ignored them.

"We were just about to go out and shoo him away when you showed up, Eris," Roxy added, her nose flaring with enthusiasm. "I was a little worried for a minute there, but my goodness! That was *satisfying* to watch!"

Sylphie chuckled a little, but then turned with a serious expression on her face. "Hey, Eris?"

"Wh-what is it?"

Sylphie reached out and took Eris' hands in hers. And then, as Eris hesitated uncertainly, she began to speak.

"Sometimes I get the feeling you think you're… not good enough the way you are. But that's definitely not true, okay? Try to have some confidence."

Eris frowned a little. This almost felt like a rejection of her efforts to improve. "Where did *that* come from?"

"Well, you've been worrying yourself sick lately, right? I think I kind of understand how you feel. Whenever I watch Rudy at work, it makes me feel like I have to learn all sorts of new things."

"…"



Startled by Sylphie's perceptiveness, Eris found herself at a loss for words. But Sylphie wasn't done yet. "You know, Eris… we're pretty good at watching Rudy's back, if you know what I mean. We keep an eye on things behind the scenes. You definitely helped us out today, but normally, we stay on top of those sorts of problems."

Sylphie paused for a moment, and her grip on Eris' hands tightened noticeably.

"But when I saw how Orsted, Rudy, and you fight… well, I realized something. When Rudy's up against something really dangerous, we're not strong enough to stand in *front* of him like you did."

She was looking Eris straight in her eyes now. The strength in them was downright intimidating, but she didn't flinch or look away. In fact, she stared right back with all the power she could muster.

"You trained for *years* so you could be strong enough to do that. I think it's something you should be really proud of."

With that, Sylphie released Eris' hands and smiled at her.

"That's all I wanted to say, really. Other than… I'm glad you're here, Eris."

***

Eris wandered down the hallway in something of a daze. How typical. After all that worrying, she'd ended up with the conclusion that she was fine the way she was.

But the more she thought about it, the more that sounded *right*. Rudeus was the magician, and she was the swordswoman. It was what she'd had in mind all along, from the day she left him for her training. It seemed natural for both of them to play the roles they were best suited for.

But Rudeus couldn't handle *everything* else on top of casting spells. He'd done some growing up, and learned a bunch of new

things, but that didn't make him superhuman. There were some things he couldn't deal with on his own. And that was where Sylphie and Roxy could step in to help.

Of course, Eris' own train of thought wasn't quite this clear or coherent… but she did find herself feeling happy and relieved. She *hadn't* screwed it all up after all. Her efforts *hadn't* been wasted. Just knowing that meant the world to her.

"Oh."

Eris' aimless movements through the house had brought her into a quiet little room. And there, she'd found a seated woman who was gazing out a window with an absentminded expression.

It was Zenith Greyrat. Eris had heard about her situation by now; she knew that a long captivity deep inside a labyrinth had left her mind shattered.

But to Eris' surprise, Zenith turned toward her, as if sensing her gaze. The woman's eyes were clearly focused on her. Eris straightened her spine reflexively. Regardless of her condition, this was Rudeus' *mother*. She had to put her best foot forward here.

With slow, cautious steps, she walked up to Zenith.

Eris definitely needed to say *something*, but she wasn't sure what it should be. She hesitated for a long moment, longing to fold her arms, but refusing to allow herself to do so.

Ugh. Now I wish I'd paid more attention to those stupid etiquette lessons…

For a moment, she flirted with the idea of leaving the room and coming back once she'd worked out what to say. But Zenith was staring up at her patiently, as if waiting for her to speak.

Buckling under the pressure, Eris finally squeaked out the first thing that came to mind.

"I'm… I'm still quite inexperienced, but… I'll do my very beft."

Beft? My very beft?!

Eris frowned irritably at her own mistake. But then she noticed Zenith's expression change as well.

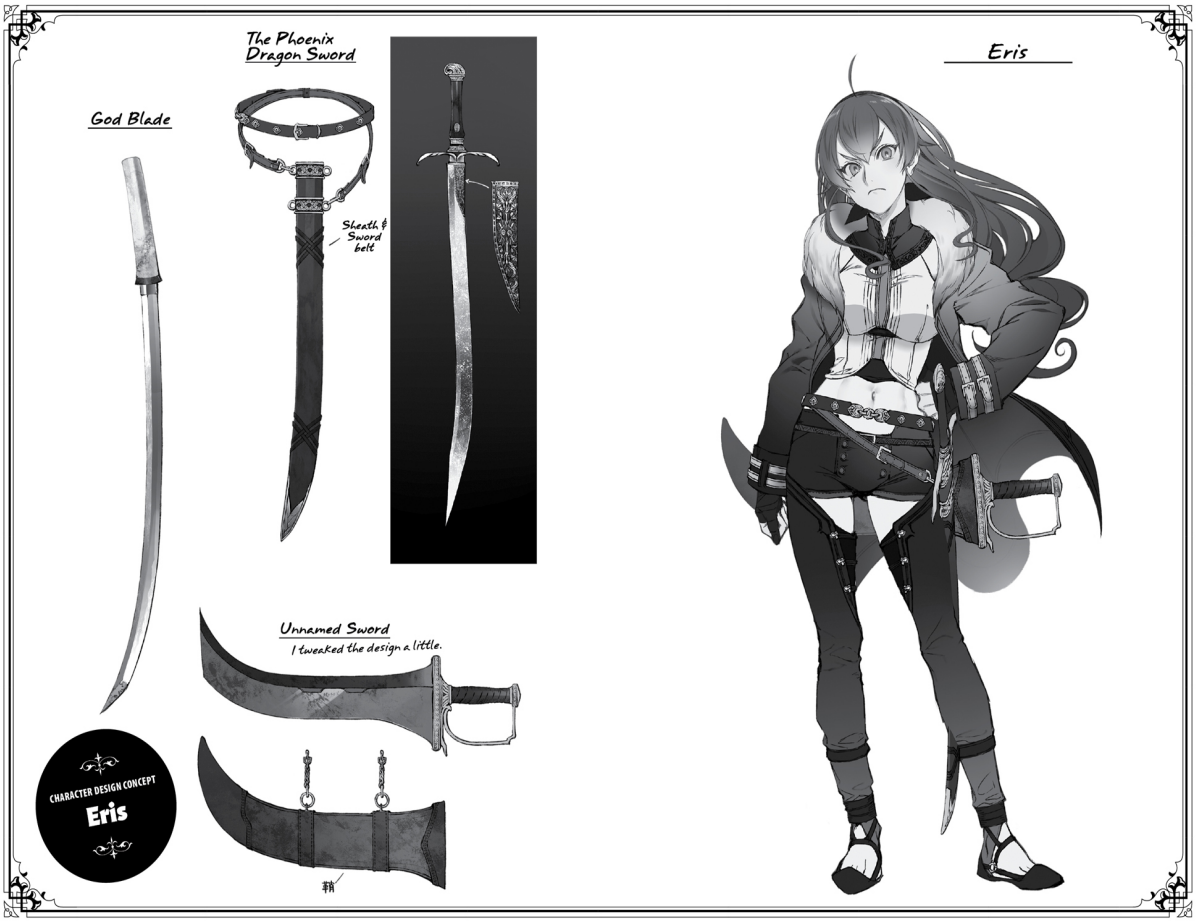
She was smiling.

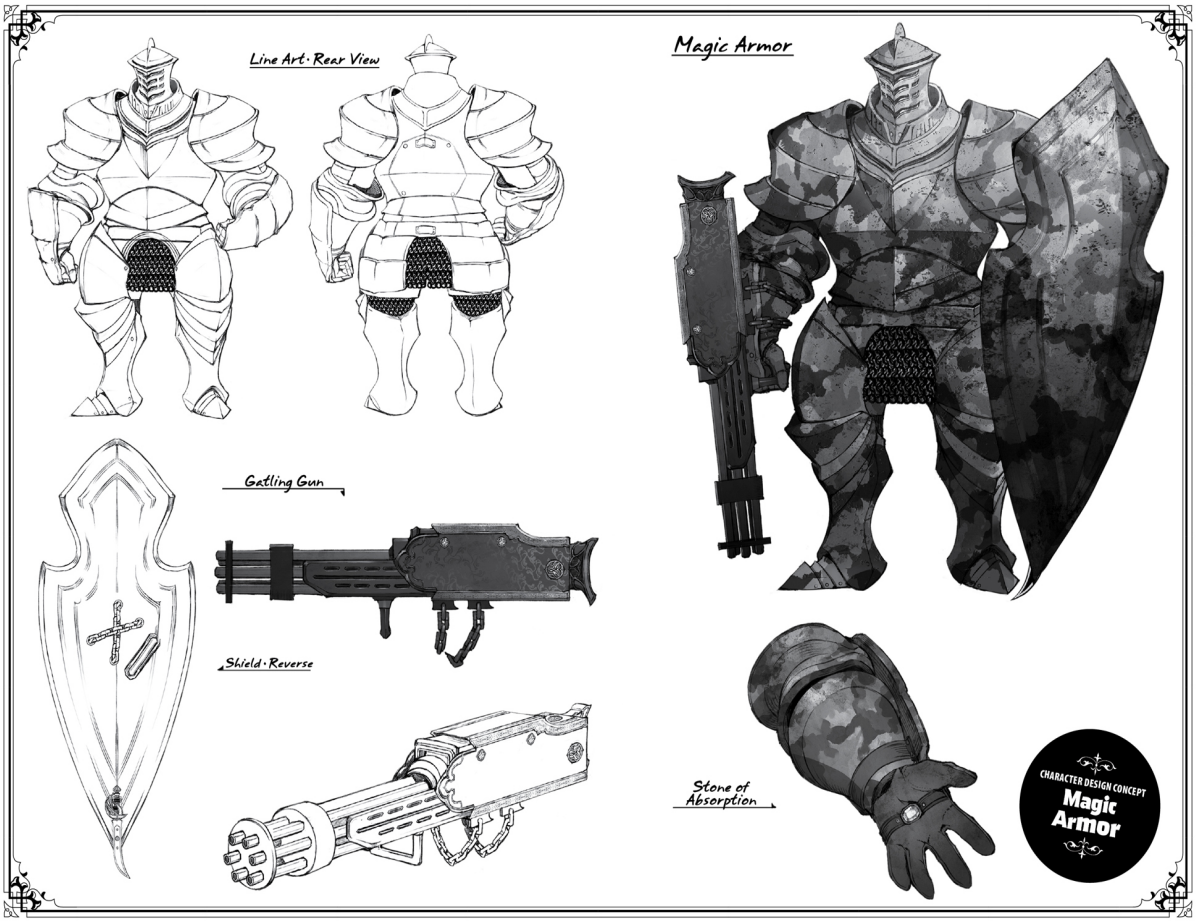
Eris had always hated it when people smirked at her mistakes, but this didn't look like a smile of amusement. If anything, it felt more like an *answer*. Zenith hadn't said a word. But for some reason, Eris thought she could hear her voice.

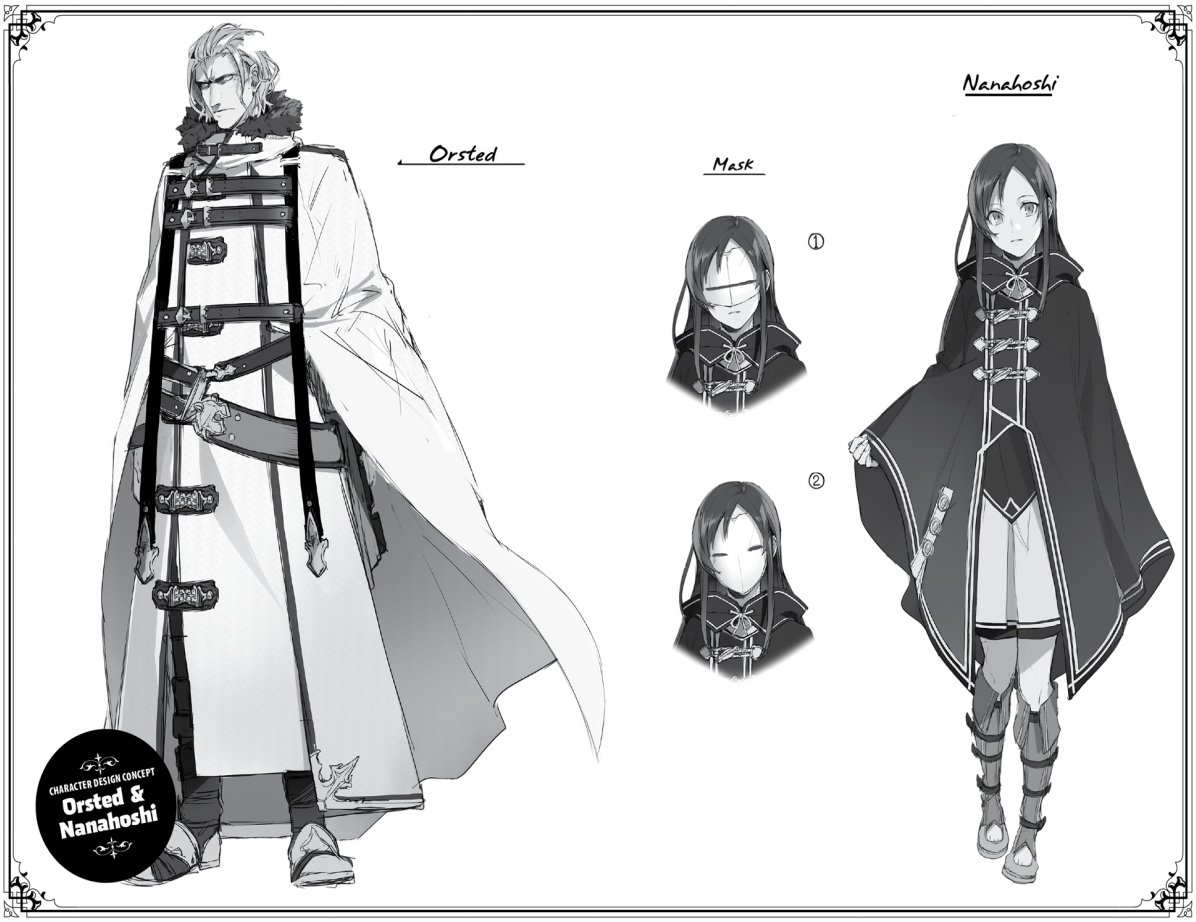
"Try saying that to Rudy instead. There's no point being all formal around me."

"…"

Without another word, Eris lowered her head to Zenith. And as she did so, she renewed her promise to herself: *I'm going to marry Rudeus, no matter what.*


The Phoenix Dragon Sword
God Blade
Sheath & Sword belt
Unnamed Sword
I tweaked the design a little.
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Eris
Eris

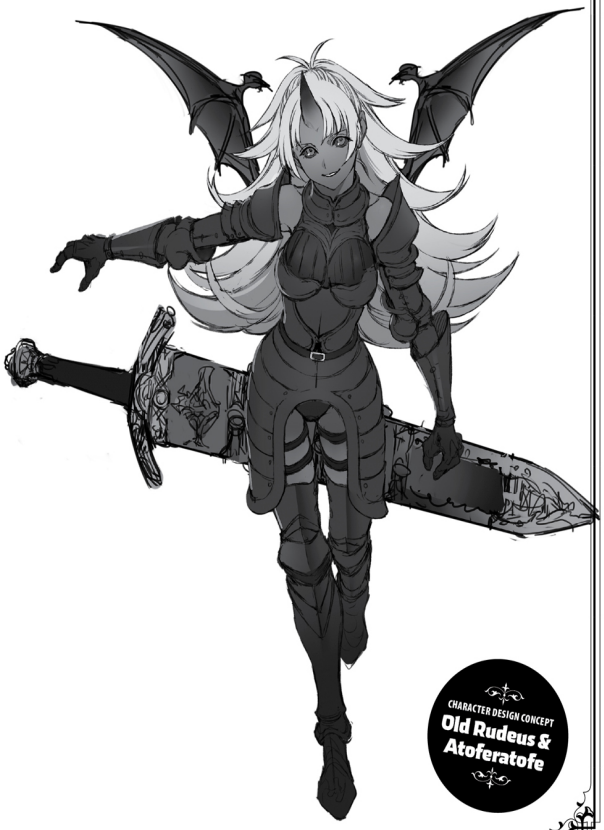

Line Art · Rear View
Magic Armor
Gatling Gun
Shield · Reverse
Stone of Absorption
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Magic Armor


Orsted
Mask
①
②
Nanahoshi
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Orsted &
Nanahoshi

Old Rudeus



Atoferatofe



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Old Rudeus & Atoferatofe

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Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and protein. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication. "You never know when your life might change completely, or what's going to change it," advised the author helpfully.



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