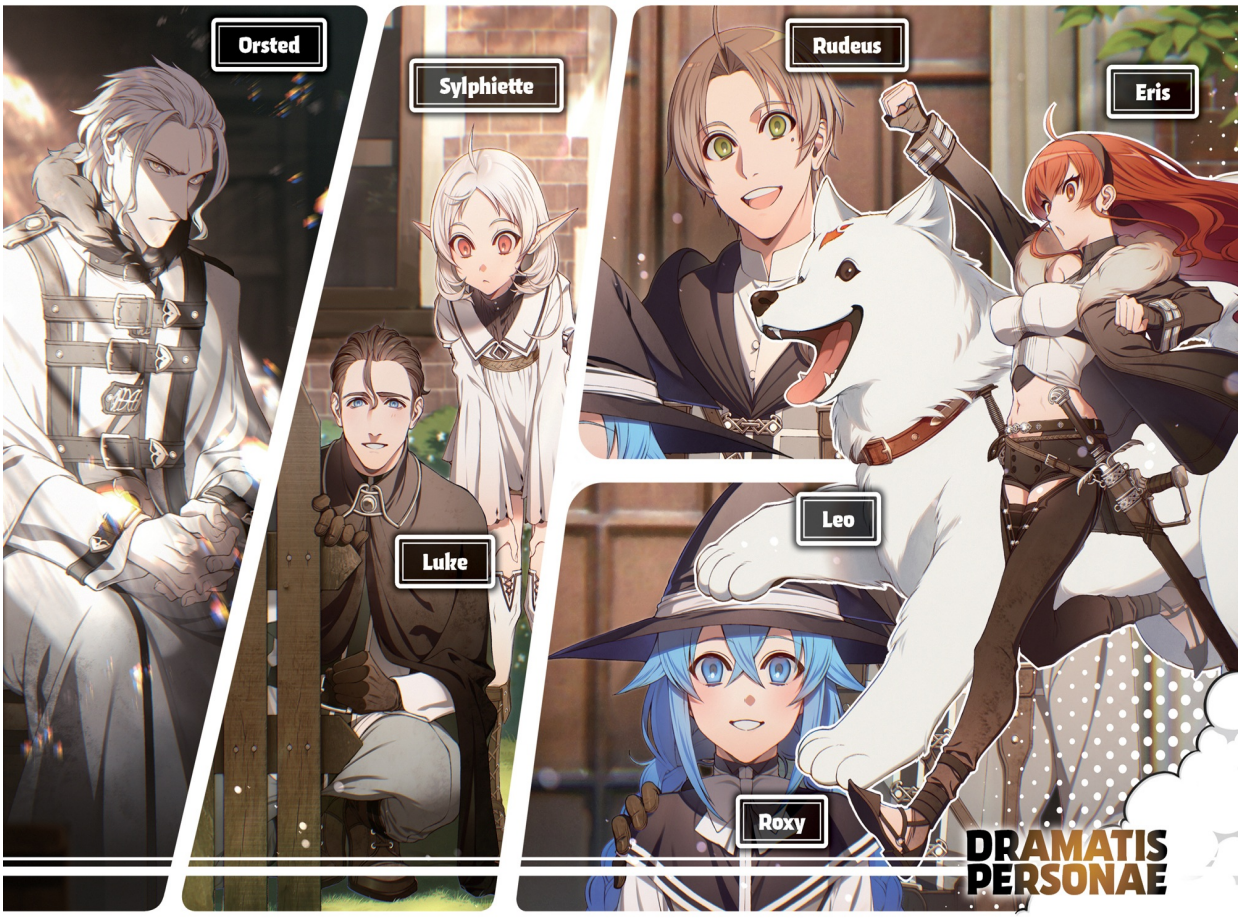

Mushoku Tensei
jobless reincarnation
NOVEL
16
Written by
Rifujin na
Magonote
Illustrated by
Shirotaka

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ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka


Orsted
Sylphiette
Luke
Rudeus
Eris
Leo
Roxy
DRAMATIS PERSONAE


AWOOOO!
"All right, come on out!

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

16

WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI ~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 16

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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TRANSLATION: Paul Cuneo
ADAPTATION: Athena Michaels
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: [TBD]
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori
PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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"Cheer, don't jeer."

—People wish for a king they can cheer for.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
The First Mission

LET ME BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE everything that's happened so far.

After discovering the Man-God had been deceiving me this entire time, I hit rock bottom. A series of events followed, culminating in a face-off between me and Orsted, which ultimately resulted in me becoming his subordinate.

That's right, I found myself an employer!

As if that weren't shocking enough, I also reunited with Eris and married her.

Ah, it's like the warm rays of spring sunlight are pouring over me! As if my life has hit its peak!

Spring was the season of new beginnings, and with my marriage to Eris, I was bursting with renewed vigor. It might be summer right now, but it was still spring in my heart of hearts!

I was floating on cloud nine as I headed in to work—my workplace being where Orsted currently resided. This time, I was alone, as a man is supposed to be when he commutes. To be fair, it was pretty normal in our household for the women to work, too, so there was nothing wrong with bringing someone along. But Orsted's curse meant they'd just feel hostile toward him, so it was best for me to make the trip by myself.

"Hm?"

As I arrived at the cottage, I spotted someone collapsed on the ground. *Who in the world would keel over here?*

"Ah?!"

Zanoba… It's Zanoba! He's dead!

He was slumped against a three-meter-tall hunk of metal, lying on his back.

“This can’t be happening…” I raced over to him and clapped my hands over his shoulders, shaking him. “Come on, this can’t be real. Zanoba, speak to me!”

There was a pulse. His pupils were moving, and…he was breathing. His body was still warm, too. Okay, yes, he was definitely still alive!

Guess I jumped to the wrong conclusion. He’s not dead. He was only sleeping.

“You had me scared to death…”

Scared enough I’d almost shouted “Jesus” at the top of my lungs. Anyway, what was he doing sleeping here? He was royalty. Shouldn’t he be in a nice soft bed or something? He was too old to be slumming it out here.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, the door to the cottage cracked open and Orsted stepped out.

“Rudeus… So you’ve arrived.”

“Oh, uh, yes. I have.”

He stared at us. “Last night, Zanoba Shirone carried that thing here.”

“What thing?”

“That armor you used earlier in battle.” He gazed at the lump of metal Zanoba was leaning against.

Upon closer inspection, I realized it was indeed my Magic Armor. I hadn’t recognized it because it was in pieces. Come to think of it, I’d mentioned that it was destroyed in battle and that I’d left it behind, as well as needing to go retrieve it soon.

“And you two happened to run into each other in the process, and you fought?” I asked.

“Indeed.”

Zanoba had probably never dreamed Orsted would be here, of all places. I should have told him earlier, but just hadn’t had the

chance. It didn't look like he had any real injuries, at least. Orsted must have gone easy on him.

"At the end of our battle, he swore he wouldn't let me get my hands on this armor. Said he had to make sure to deliver it to you. That's why he crawled the rest of the way to it. He certainly has taken a liking to you."

"Oh, Zanoba!" I immediately leaned over him and used my healing magic. Since he had no external injuries, it wasn't much good, but I wanted him to sleep peacefully, at least.

Actually, now that I think about it, Orsted just left him out here in the open after he collapsed? Maybe he's more merciless than I gave him credit for.

"Uh, so he *will* wake up eventually, right?"

"I put him to sleep using hypnosis magic passed down through the Nuka Tribe. He should awaken in a few hours."

Ah, so that's what he used on Zanoba. I wonder exactly what kind of magic that is… Very intriguing. Could this hypnosis magic also allow the user to manipulate a person's actions? Like, if I used it on Sylphie and commanded her to lift up her skirt, would she do it?

I don't need hypnosis magic for that, though. She'd do it if I asked.

In fact, if that was what I wanted, I needed to get her a skirt. A miniskirt would be best. One of those frilly, fairy-like ones would suit her best, surely.

Besides, if hypnosis magic was that powerful, Orsted would probably be using it a lot more. Putting someone to sleep was probably the extent of its usefulness.

"Come inside. Let's resume our discussion from yesterday," said Orsted as he disappeared back into the cottage.

I slipped off my jacket and draped it over Zanoba. Then, I used my magic to conjure an earthen roof to protect him before following after Orsted. Once I was finished here, I would collect Zanoba and take him back to Ginger.

***

“Allow me to cut to the chase,” said Orsted as we settled in our seats. He took my diary from his pocket and slapped it down on the table between us. “Quite a fascinating read. I have some interest in this magic regarding time travel that your future self spoke of, but since we lack the information to duplicate it ourselves, we’ll leave that aside for now.”

“All right.”

“There were a number of things that caught my interest, but before we discuss the contents of this journal, I would like to know what you and the Man-God have spoken about in the past. Tell me everything. Spare no details.”

“Yes, of course.”

I recounted everything I could remember. Our first encounter happened immediately after the Displacement Incident. After that, I saw him again in Rikarisu City, then in Wind Port, East Port, and then right after Orsted nearly killed me. Following that, I saw him again when I enrolled in the Magic Academy, then right before I went to Begaritt, then immediately before my future self came to visit and again immediately after. We also met while I was preparing to face off with Orsted. Ten times in total.

I gave Orsted as much detail as I could remember from each conversation, including what the Man-God commanded me to do and how his instructions played out.

After the Displacement Incident, he’d told me to rely on Ruijerd. I became an adventurer as a result. In Rikarisu City, he instructed me to take on a request to search for someone’s lost pet. That led me to becoming acquainted with Jalil and Vizquel and ended with us being driven from the city. In Wind Port, he told me to carry some food and traverse the back alleys. That was how I found the Great Empress of the Demon World and received one of her Demon Eyes.

In East Port, he showed me a premonition and ordered me to go to Shirone. There, I met Zanoba and saved Aisha and Lilia. He gave me no real advice following the incident where Orsted nearly killed me. However, he told me to enroll in the academy and look into the Displacement Incident. Thanks to that, I was reunited with Sylphie and the two of us got married.

The Man-God had warned me not to go to Begaritt. I ignored him, which led to Paul's death and Zenith becoming a mostly empty husk, but at least it wasn't all negative—I did get married to Roxy as a result. Though the Man-God claimed that Paul would have lived if I hadn't gone.

The Man-God spoke with me again, prior to my future self coming to visit, and told me to check on my basement. The moment I got out of my chair to follow his advice, my future self appeared and told me everything that was about to happen. And, as he warned, there was indeed a rat down there.

After I dealt with all that, the Man-God reappeared, displeased. That was when he told me to kill Orsted. With no other option to protect my family, I obeyed and began to prepare for our battle. It was during that process that he visited again to give me all sorts of advice. It was thanks to him that we'd managed to finish the Magic Armor this quickly.

Orsted listened quietly as I spoke. He didn't even bother grunting or nodding, nor did he voice any questions. He stayed completely silent until I was finished.

"That's all," I said. "Did you get anything from all of that?"

"Yes. I now understand exactly how he was using you."

Oh, seriously? Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised—this is Orsted I'm talking to.

"He used you to change the course of history," said Orsted.

"History, you say?"

"Yes. Ordinarily, the hand of fate is so strong that certain things should be immutable, but he found a way to circumvent that, using

you.”

“Because my own fate is so strong?”

“Precisely.”

Wow. So my destiny is so powerful it can change the course of history?

“But, Sir Orsted, surely you could do the same thing if you wanted to?”

“I could.” He nodded, slapping the top of the journal. “But I fail to see his goal in altering history this much.”

“Isn’t it to avoid being killed?” I asked.

“Don’t take his words at face value.”

“Ah, right.”

Guess there is a possibility he was lying about all that.

“At any rate, there is one thing I do know for certain,” said Orsted.

“What’s that?”

“Whatever lies at the end of this altered course of history is something that stands to benefit him.”

“Makes sense.”

After a brief pause, Orsted continued. “In order to direct the future toward a course more beneficial to me, you will alter its current trajectory.”

He wants me to “alter” it, not “correct” it, huh? Guess that makes sense. Strictly speaking, it’s not history yet, since it technically hasn’t happened. History is whatever you make it, being in the past.

“You’re being awfully roundabout,” I said.

“I am already laying plans for a hundred years into the future. Everything that has happened so far— and that will happen from here—is all groundwork. But thanks to you and Nanahoshi, much of it has gone off track.”

A hundred years into the future? Well, I guess he's been setting things up for a while, so he can't really change his plans now.

"Just to clarify, the two of us can't just go wherever the Man-God is and kick his butt, I guess?"

Orsted shook his head. "Until we have collected the hidden treasures, we won't be able to reach the place he's in."

"And I'm guessing we can't just gather them up real quick?"

"Four are easy to obtain, but Laplace holds the final piece. He won't revive for another eighty years. I will be the one gathering these treasures. You had best not act on your own, understood?"

Act on my own? I had no idea where these treasures were located to begin with. My diary did mention that they were held by the Five Dragon Generals, but I only knew the whereabouts of one, Perugius.

Wait a sec. Chaos—the Maniacal Dragon King—is dead, right? Isn't that a bit of a problem?

"I heard that Lord Chaos has passed away. How are you going to deal with that?"

"I have already acquired the treasure he held."

Oh, okay. So he's already dealt with that.

"But hold up," I said. "What if the Man-God has already foreseen that I'll try to change the future?"

"Hm?"

"I mean, what if I'll just be digging our graves by taking action? Or mine, at the very least?"

"No. In addition to his powers of foresight, I believe it's also highly likely he has a special trait that makes all the living creatures of this world trust him unconditionally. That has left him ill-equipped to deal with irregularities."

Huh, I never realized. I guess you could say the Man-God has a curse of his own.

Hold on. Saying people trusted him unconditionally was a stretch. *I* never trusted him, for one.

But then again, Orsted's curse doesn't work on me. Maybe that means the Man-God's curse doesn't, either. It did feel like he had a hard time trying to deal with me and my constant skepticism. Although I did *end up trusting him in the end…*

Perhaps his curse wasn't entirely ineffective after all. And who knows—my resistance to Orsted's curse might wear off eventually and I'd start fearing him too.

No, there's no guarantee Orsted's information is reliable. His assumptions about the nature of the Man-God's curse might not be entirely correct.

As soon as I started contemplating that possibility, I started doubting everything. *Best just to drop this whole thing,* I decided.

"I'm not good at the whole *'*guessing what my opponent has planned' thing," I said. "Do you really think we can win this?"

"I do," he said confidently. "Our enemy isn't invincible. I am only one step away from ending him."

It sounded like he was reassuring himself instead of me. Either way, he was intent on winning. He was determined to claim victory in the end, even if we were the underdogs along the way. That part, I did find promising.

"So, we will change the course of the near future," said Orsted.

"The near future?"

"Yes." He paused before continuing, "We will make Second Princess Arielle Anemoi Asura the king of the Asura Kingdom."

"Okay."

So we were going to throw our weight behind her then? Awesome. I'd actually been thinking about how I wanted to help her out. If this was my first mission, it was a welcome one.

I made a good call taking a job at this company!

"Depending on the circumstances, I can use her as a puppet."

I blinked. “Uh…?”

A puppet? Well, that certainly sounded a bit ominous. Rather than backing her, it seemed like we’d be pulling her strings. Yep, definitely more than a bit ominous.

Guess the company I signed up for is actually super shady.

“I have to wonder if someone like Princess Arielle would really be so easily manipulated,” I murmured.

“I say *puppet*, but I won’t do something as extreme as manipulating her. As long as we can establish ties to Asura Kingdom in the future, that will be enough.”

“All right then.”



He was probably thinking a hundred years into the future. Each small step we took would add up, altering the course of history in the process. As a result, the world would be very different in another century. For instance, we could persuade the princess to focus more on magical research or strengthening the military. We could even lay the groundwork necessary to erode the entire kingdom, if we wanted.

“Uh, are you sure it’s okay to do that?” I asked, disturbed by my last thought.

“Of course. The history as I know it had Arielle as king to begin with.”

“Oh? I would love to hear more about this history, if you don’t mind.”

“Very well.” He nodded. “Originally, Arielle Anemoi Asura was to become king. Her course was protected by a strong destiny, as if it were predetermined.”

“A bit difficult for me to believe that, seeing the way she is now,” I said.

“I am sure that’s true.”

Ariel’s position had only worsened lately. From where I was standing, it seemed very likely that she would completely strike out with Perugius. That was why Sylphie was constantly busy running here, there, and everywhere. They were trying their best, but it was an uphill battle.

“In order for her to become king, Ariel requires the backing of three people,” Orsted explained. “The first among them is the guardian mage Derrick Redbat.”

As I recalled, that was the name of the man who’d served as Arielle’s bodyguard before Sylphie. I was pretty sure he’d passed away during the Displacement Incident.

“Derrick was highly intelligent, and ambitious, too. Even without the Displacement Incident, Ariel was destined to someday meet

Perugius. And it was Derrick who convinced Perugius to join her side."

So basically, if Derrick were alive, she wouldn't be in the terrible position she is now.

"Derrick continued to counsel her after that, eventually leading to him taking up the position of prime minister."

Prime minister, huh? Well now, that is *a pretty important position.*

I shook my head. "And you're saying the Displacement Incident claimed the life of someone so pivotal?"

"Indeed. He was supposed to be protected by his own strong destiny…but he died."

Which meant that one's destiny wasn't absolute. I supposedly had fate on my side protecting me from death as well, but if Derrick's bloody end was any indication, I'd better not let it go to my head.

"So what you're trying to say is, we have to find someone to replace him, right?" I asked.

"No. If we are to make her our puppet, a prime minister would only get in our way. We don't need that."

"Are you sure she'll be able to run the country without one?"

"Coming to the Magic City of Sharia helped her grow and change as a person. It won't be an issue."

If you say so.

I was afraid it'd come back to bite us in the butt if we played too fast and loose. At least he wasn't telling me to take over and become prime minister. I was no brainiac like Derrick.

"The other key person is Eris Boreas Greyrat."

"Eris?" My eyes widened. What did she have to do with any of this? Sure, she was part of the Asuran nobility, but she had no connection to Arielle as far as I knew.

"Originally, the Asuran guard selected her for her skill with the sword. She joined their ranks, which was how she met Luke. The

two were supposed to marry."

Something twinged in my chest.

"I can't really picture the two of them marrying," I mumbled.

"It was love at first sight for him."

"Seriously?"

What was Luke supposed to be? The descendant of some hero or something? Although I could totally see him falling for Eris. She had a beautiful face and huge breasts. I couldn't fault anyone for being deceived by her appearance.

Orsted continued, "No matter how many times she punched him, he continued to pursue her, and that softened her heart. After the two married, they were extremely affectionate with one another."

An affectionate couple, huh? Hm… Well, it is true that once you wiggle your way into her heart, she does start to show her cuter side. But this whole conversation makes me feel like I got cuckolded somehow. That does it. When I get back home, I'll have to sneak up on Eris from behind and grope her. I'm sure she'll punch me for it, but that's a price I'm willing to pay. If it means getting to touch her chest, I'm fine with being her punching bag.

"Well, it's a tale I am sure you find no humor in," said Orsted.

"To be honest, no, I don't."

"Very well, I'll keep my summary brief then."

I couldn't care less how history might have played out differently. In this timeline, Luke and Eris weren't together.

I'm the only one our fair lady deigns to bestow her affection on! Lady Eris belongs to me and me alone!

"The Eris Boreas Greyrat I knew was a skilled swordsman—though less so than her current self—but she still eventually reached the rank of Saint. Despite her beautiful appearance and impressive status, her fiery personality earned her the epithet Red Lion."

Red Lion, huh? A long time ago, people had likened her to a wild ape. A lion was a huge step up in comparison. Currently, she

was known as the Mad Dog.

Guess she's still a beast in the end.

"Eris and Luke worked together to shield Ariel from assassination numerous times, protecting her on her path to kinghood."

"In other words, Sylphie's assumed the role that was originally supposed to be Eris's."

"Correct."

"What happened to Sylphie in this alternate timeline?" While I knew it likely had nothing to do with the main topic, I couldn't help asking.

"Sylphiette became Roxy Migurdia's apprentice and later went on to become an adventurer. People tended to hate her for her green hair, but in the end, she conquered several notable labyrinths and made a name for herself as one of the world's foremost dungeon explorers."

"Wow."

Impressive, Sylphie! I would expect no less from my wife. I'd have to give her ear a good tonguing once I got home.

"And? Who did she end up hooking up with?"

"I am not having this conversation with you simply to satisfy *your* curiosity," Orsted grumbled.

Oops. Sorry about that. My shoulders slumped.

Orsted sighed before continuing, clearly exasperated. "As far as I know, neither Sylphiette nor Roxy Migurdia married anyone. They lived out the entirety of their lives as single women."

"Interesting. Thank you for telling me."

Huh, so that's how things went. Roxy and Sylphie never got with anyone else. Guess that means the two of them really do belong to me and me alone. That really warms my heart. Especially after hearing about how Eris married Luke. Guess this is what they

mean when they talk about a guy being possessive. Those two girls are mine! I won't let anyone else have them.

"Would you like to hear about the rest of your family as well?"

"No, let's return to the topic," I said.

As much as I wanted to ask, the timeline he spoke of was one in which I never existed. Knowing what happened there would change nothing about the present. It was better to stick to necessary information. I'd heard enough to sate my curiosity.

"Okay, so since Sylphie has taken over Eris's position, there's no problem there, right?"

"Indeed. The fact that Ariel is still alive is proof of that. Although having Eris by her side also meant that Ariel had the support of Philip Boreas Greyrat and Sauros Boreas Greyrat."

They were also casualties of the Displacement Incident. Their absence made our situation even more dire.

"Okay, but you said there were three people. Who is the last one?"

"Tristina Purplehorse."

Tristina Purpa-what? That certainly wasn't a name I'd heard before.

"She is the daughter of high-ranking nobility—the house of Purplehorse. She was kidnapped when she was eight. High Minister Darius Silva Ganius has been keeping her as his sex slave."

That name rang a bell. If I remembered right, he was enjoying increased support and momentum in the kingdom right now. I was pretty sure he was throwing his weight behind the first prince. But an eight-year-old sex slave, huh? What a creep.

"Tristina was going to be secretly disposed of, but fortunately, Ariel happened to save her. Even with his status, Darius could not escape reproach for having confined a daughter of the Purplehorse house for years. He lost his position as a result of the scandal, which also marked the downfall of First Prince Grabel."

So the first prince's name is Grabel. Okay, got it!

"Okay," I said. "So where is this Tristina person in *this* timeline?"

"Missing."

"And you're sure she's not dead?"

"I am not. Darius has a habit of immediately scouring everything around him whenever an incident occurs. That includes disposing of slaves, so there's a high probability she's already dead."

"In that case, I guess we're better off assuming she's no longer among us."

"Well, the one who trains and oversees these slaves for Darius typically sells off any that are marked for disposal in order to profit from them. Assuming the same happened to Tristina, she is likely still a slave, just with a new master. Or perhaps, if she's still young enough, she's learned enough skills to become a thief on the streets." Orsted patted my journal on the table. "This female thief named 'Triss' who was mentioned in your journal comes to mind."

Triss… That's right, there was a female thief who helped my future self sneak into Asura Kingdom. There weren't very many details about her, though.

"Yeah," I said, "but the name 'Triss' isn't exactly rare in Asura." Asurans seemed to have a preoccupation with names that had 'ris' in them, whether it was Eris or Triss.

"True, but as far as I know, there were no female thieves named Triss in that area. Plus, Tristina has a number of unique features that match up with the woman described in your diary."

Ah, that makes sense.

Since Orsted knew what the timeline was originally supposed to be, he naturally took note when someone out of place appeared in my journal, and with a similar name to boot. Perhaps they really were the same person. But would someone named Tristina really shorten her name to Triss? I was getting Spirited Away vibes from this.

“Okay, so you’re saying that as long as we get our hands on her, we can take down the high minister.”

“Yes, because she’s a living witness to his crimes.”

In other words, if we were going to have any success in making Ariel king, we needed to find this Triss person.

“Why doesn’t she just go back home?” I asked.

“The kidnapping was a cover story. In truth, her family sold her off.”

“So even though her family purposefully sold her, you still think the news that she was kept as a sex slave would make Darius lose his position?”

“I do. As far as the public knows, she really was kidnapped. Besides, the truth is merely a pretense for taking Darius down.”

I get it.

Darius had a number of enemies, and they didn’t care about the details of his scandal. All they wanted was an excuse to get rid of him. As long as they could tell the public that he’d forcefully abducted a high-ranking aristocrat’s daughter, that would be enough to strip him of his status.

“Ugh, this country is a huge pain in the butt,” I groused.

“Agreed. However, it is precisely because such devious people reside there that Asura holds the most power in the world. It would be that way even if the land they lived on wasn’t so plentiful.”

That made sense. In my estimation, those who quarreled among themselves like that tended to develop better negotiation skills, which benefited them when the need for diplomacy arose. But maybe my views were a bit biased.

“Regardless,” he continued, “we’ll be able to remove High Minister Darius so long as we have Tristina. With him gone, we won’t have any trouble with the rest of the opposition.”

“Is he really that powerful of a figure?”

Orsted nodded. “He is. It’s no exaggeration to say that the current king could not hold onto his throne without Darius.”

Wow, he’s that important? Guess he’s like a kingmaker—someone who gathers up gold and lays down all the groundwork.

“If Ariel somehow fails to have him removed from his current office, then it will be up to you to kill him.”

“What?” I gaped. “You want me to do it?”

“Yes. You have a strong destiny of your own. It should be a simple matter for you to dispose of him.”

Did my destiny really have anything to do with being able to kill someone or not? Come to think of it, the Man-God did say something about how I might be able to kill Orsted where others would have failed.

After a long pause, I finally said, “All right. I understand.”

I didn’t like the idea of killing someone, but if it meant protecting the lives of my family, I would certainly do my best. My target was an evil minister, anyway. Surely I could do away with someone like that. If my opponent was that insidious—basically like a Zaku Gundam—then he wasn’t even human to begin with.

“But from everything I’ve heard, isn’t there supposed to be a second prince and his group of followers? You sure we don’t have to deal with them?”

“You refer to Second Prince Halfaust? He never had a chance of becoming king. He doesn’t have it in him, and moreover, there are few who honestly think him capable of sitting on the throne.”

Aha, so Halfaust is the name of the second prince. I have no idea what he looks like or what kind of person he is, but I assume he has to be at least somewhat capable to be considered a candidate for the throne. Seems better to be safe than sorry—you never know what might happen.

“There is nothing to worry about,” Orsted assured me. “Even if we fail, there is always next time.”

“Next? As in our next move?”

“Ah… Yes, that’s exactly what I meant.”

“And what will happen to Ariel if we fail?”

“She will die, I’m sure.”

Perhaps two thousand years of life had desensitized him to failure. A plan that many years in the making would have its share of pitfalls. You couldn’t always get what you wanted, and if he was playing the long game, a whole century in advance, then it was probably inconsequential to him if there were a couple of missteps along the way.

But still…

“Let’s not take chances. Speaking that flippantly will only bring a smile to the Man-God’s face.”

Orsted’s cheeks colored with rage, which terrified me.

I hastily continued. “There may be other failures awaiting us if we don’t commit ourselves now. Those failures add up. They might affect whether you’re ultimately victorious or not.”

I didn’t mind that he was more focused on winning than the path to getting there, but if Ariel died, there was a good chance Sylphie might get caught up in it too. I had also promised to introduce Ghislaine to Ariel. If those close to me suffered, I would too. And I certainly didn’t want to suffer.

“Instead, we should plan each step carefully. Let’s keep our guard up and make sure we’re victorious every time we face off against him.”

“That goes without saying.” Orsted still scowled menacingly, but he nodded in agreement.

“Now,” I said, “with that out of the way, our first order of business will be to put Princess Ariel on the throne. You’ll issue your orders, and I’ll carry them out. Does that sound good?”

“Yes.”

It was like I’d earned myself a sponsor. Like I now had Sir Orsted of the renowned Dragon God Society backing me! The only

downside was the work he forced on me, which was kind of a pain.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s come up with a plan to deal with the Second Prince Halfaust then!”

“I can handle that myself. I need only overthrow the main nobles supporting him. Since he has no desire for the throne to begin with, that will be more than enough to dissuade him from fighting for it.”

A realization hit me as I listened to Orsted. From his point of view, it probably didn’t matter who became king. Even if Halfaust did somehow take the throne, he could simply have me infiltrate his inner circle.

“In about a month, word should arrive that the current king has fallen ill. There is something we need to do before then,” said Orsted.

“What’s that?” I asked.

His expression was grim, making it clear he wouldn’t permit mistakes. *Well, that’s terrifying.* He probably always looked like that when he was being serious, but that didn’t make it any less intimidating. If looks could kill, I’d be on the floor right now.

“We need to bring Perugius Dola over to Arielle’s side. His support will be critical if she is to take the throne.”

Despite how much anxiety his words caused, I sort of saw that coming. Derrick Redbat had been destined to persuade Perugius to join Ariel, but he wasn’t here. Perugius, however, was still a necessary asset. I would have to take on Derrick’s role and find some way to win him over.

“So basically, I’ll need to spend the next month getting closer to Ariel and Luke while also trying to talk Perugius into joining her. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“All right then.”

At least we’d made a concrete plan to address our current conundrum. We were going to change the present in hope of altering

the course of the future a hundred years from now. To that end, we needed to make Ariel king.

This should be good enough for our first strategy meeting.

As I thought that, Orsted said, “Take this.” He pulled something from his pocket—a scroll—and handed it to me. I unfurled it to discover that a magic circle had been drawn on it.

“What’s this?”

“A Guardian Beast summoning circle,” he said.

“Ooh!”

This was the very same thing he’d mentioned to me yesterday! I was impressed he’d kept his promise so soon after he’d made it. I figured it would take a while, since he would probably prioritize reading my journal first.

“Pour your mana into it and picture something in your mind that will protect your family. It can even be a word. That should be enough to beckon forth that which you require.”

“Will a picture that vague really be enough?” I asked.

“Your mana pool is enormous. You will gain a better partner this way than if you tried to specifically summon something.”

I wasn’t entirely convinced, but if he said so, it was worth giving it a shot.

“I just hope I don’t wind up summoning anything weird. You know, like a childlike girl whose title starts with Demon and ends with Empress.”

“What you call forth depends entirely on you. That said, Kishirika Kishirisu possesses an enormous amount of power. A summoning circle this small would not be able to bring her to you.”

So the size is the only problem? Does that mean if we made a bigger summoning circle, I could *theoretically call her here?*

Not that I actually wanted to do so. She was too obnoxious. “At any rate,” I said, “I will be sure to summon this Guardian Beast tomorrow.”

“Very well.”

My heart was pounding with excitement. What kind of creature might I summon? A badass one, I hoped. With it standing beside me, I would look twice as awesome as I did now, enough to make Sylphie and Roxy fall for me all over again.

Oh, that’s right. There’s one more important matter I forgot to ask him about.

“That’s right. Supposedly, one of my descendants is going to help you in the future. Does that mean I should have a bunch of kids just to be on the safe side? Or does that pose the potential danger of one of them later giving birth to Laplace?”

He stared at me silently before finally saying, “None of your children will give birth to Laplace. Do as you like.”

“Understood. I will do just that, then.”

That means I’m free to pump out the babies! Surely Orsted would be pleased to have a large number of companions as well.

“In that case, allow me to excuse myself. I need to see how this summoning circle you gave me works out.”

“All right.”

“I’ll see you again in a few days. If anything happens in the meantime, please be sure to send a letter to my house again.” As I started to get up, I remembered one more thing. “By the way, milord, did you already go visit Nanahoshi?”

“No, not yet.”

“I know it’s not really my place to say this, but if you’re bothered by her helping me to lay a trap for you, I hope you’ll have it in your heart to forgive her. I basically blackmailed her into complying.”

He said nothing, his lips a thin, narrow line. I didn’t want them to have a falling out because of me.

“Nanahoshi was always against me fighting you,” I continued. “She said you had done a lot for her.”

Orsted kept silent.

“In fact, it seems she still feels guilty about agreeing to help me. If you can find it within you to forgive her, I hope you may arrange to meet her and give her the chance to apologize, at least.”

“Very well. I will do as you suggest. Nanahoshi is…for all her faults, a useful woman.”

That’s right! She definitely is. Very useful!

“Ah, there is one other thing,” said Orsted. “While I am able to contact you at my leisure, it would be inconvenient if there was an emergency and you had no way to contact me. Take this with you.” He slipped a ring out of his breast pocket and set it on the table.

I had seen something like this before, and very recently at that. In fact, this was a ring Nanahoshi had once possessed—the very one she’d used to lure Orsted into my trap.

“Should the need arise, use this to call for me.”

When in use, the ring would emit a magical power that allowed it to act like a lodestone, leading its partner ring to its location. If it were a magical implement, we might be able to turn it into something like a radar, but alas, it was incredibly difficult to replicate the effect of magic items. There were nearly no such duplicates in existence.

Orsted returning this to me spoke to his confidence that he could put me down should I launch another secret attack on him. Or maybe it was proof that he trusted me not to try it again.

I choose to believe the latter.

Orsted surely had no desire to unleash his real power a second or third time, thereby depleting his precious mana once again. If he was trusting me with this, it was up to me not to disappoint him.

“All right. We’ll meet again later.” I pocketed the ring and set off for home. Of course, I didn’t forget to collect Zanoba as I left.

Chapter 2:
Guardian Beast

WE HAD A MONTH until Asura Kingdom sent word that its king had fallen ill. In that time, I had to work with Ariel to convince Perugius to join her side. To that end, I needed to pump Sylphie for all the details I could. But she probably had her guard up thanks to Orsted's curse, so I might not be able to persuade her to bring me into Ariel's plans. I was torn about whether to trust her and tell her the whole truth, or to give up fighting Orsted's curse and avoid mentioning him altogether.

But first, I had another objective to complete. Namely, the very reason why I'd agreed to work under Orsted to begin with—so I could protect my family. Now that I was his little errand boy, I'd be away from home more often. I needed someone—or something—to take my place.

Thus, my first order of business was summoning this Guardian Beast.

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It was still morning when I gathered all the members of my household in the garden. That included Aisha, Lilia, and Zenith, who normally spent all their time inside, as well as Eris, who had newly joined the family. Roxy and Norn were present too, as were Dillo and Byt. Sylphie carried Lucie, who had just recently learned to stand while holding onto something.

"In a moment, I will be summoning the Guardian Beast that will serve our family. Feel free to clap."

"Yay!"

Applause rang from the crowd. The audience's fervor was hitting its peak. Tonight's concert would be legendary!

Hold up, Dillo and Byt. Why aren't the two of you clapping? This just won't do. What? They're pets so they can't clap? Well, I suppose it can't be helped.

"As for exactly *what* I will be summoning, I am afraid I don't know for sure. However, we can expect something particularly powerful. And this creature, whatever it is, will keep our family safe and secure."

"Are you sure this will be okay? That this thing won't eat us all while you're gone?" Sylphie asked, worried.

That's a terrifying thought.

That said, I did recall reading a story like that a long time ago. Something about someone calling forth a beast they couldn't control and it killing everyone.

"I get you're worried, but this was made by the meticulous hand of the Dragon God."

"Which is precisely *why* I'm worried."

Logically speaking, Orsted would never use such a roundabout way to get rid of us, but Sylphie probably wasn't thinking straight thanks to his curse.

But wait, could this be his way of putting a leash on me in case I betray him? Like, if I turn my back on him, will he threaten me? "With a snap of my fingers, that beast residing at your house will devour your entire family."

That really didn't seem likely.

"In any case, I'm going to summon it now. If it seems dangerous, we'll get rid of it together, and then I can give Orsted an earful."

"Sounds good to me!" Eris declared in excitement. She pulled a sword from its scabbard with a majestic clang. She had two at her hip. On the right was Eminence, a magic blade the Sword God had gifted her. On her left was one she had grown attached to and used for a long time.

Isn't it cumbersome, carrying both at the same time?

“When that happens, all of us will be able to fight Orsted together!” she declared.

We’re not going to fight. We’re just going to file a complaint, like a normal dissatisfied customer. If we tried to take him down, we’d be the ones kicking the bucket instead.

That said, she looked awfully happy. She wasn’t just looking for an excuse to pick a fight with him, was she?

“We won’t be fighting Orsted,” I said. “But we’ll have plenty of chances to fight together in the future. I hope you’ll save your strength until then.”

Her face sank, as if the idea bored her. It was fine if she wanted to fight other people, but Orsted was off limits. Never in my life did I want to fight another battle that hopeless if I could help it. I’d pee myself if I had to do it a second time.

“Still, are you really sure this magic circle is safe? Perhaps it might be a good idea to have someone like Lord Perugius look at it first?” said Roxy. Apparently, she was also leery of something Orsted had made.

That curse on him really is powerful.

As absurd as the whole curse nonsense seemed, the intensity of their reactions made its existence impossible to deny. That made my decision an easy one, though I did decide to take a second look at the scroll before I used it. I wouldn’t go so far as to have Perugius check it, but it couldn’t hurt to examine it once more myself.

“Hm.”

It seemed like a normal summoning circle. The part that restricted the conditions of the summoning had some symbols I wasn’t familiar with, but there was nothing too suspicious, as far as I could tell. Perhaps I could have Nanahoshi take a look? No, that would be rude. Orsted only made this for me because I didn’t know how to do it myself. What good did it do to be this distrustful?

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I said.

“Well, if you say so. I believe you. But wait just a second while I get my staff.” Roxy, it seemed, was not entirely convinced. She said she trusted me, but still disappeared inside the house to retrieve her weapon in case things got ugly.

“I have no idea why everyone seems so on guard, but…you’re sure this isn’t dangerous, Big Brother?” Norn furrowed her brow.

Aisha clapped a hand on Norn’s shoulder. “Don’t be stupid. If it were that dangerous, he wouldn’t activate it with us around.”

Her trust felt like a dagger to the heart. Honestly, I *hadn’t* confirmed if this summoning circle was safe. Could I really just use it like this? Perhaps I should wait until I could get Perugius to check it, just to be sure?

But if I did, Aisha’s affectionate gaze would turn to disappointment. And she’d only be suspicious of Orsted, after that.

“Should the worst come to pass, I will act as a shield for everyone. Please, do what you need,” said Lilia.

Well, that sounds ominous.

I didn’t think it would come to that, but everyone else was so jumpy that I was on edge. Were we really going to be okay?

No! I need to have faith in Orsted. He said he trusted me.

“All right then,” I said. “I’m going to use it.”

Everyone nodded.

I set the scroll down on a table I’d erected using my earth magic.

“Here goes.”

I steeled myself and placed my hands on the circle.
I concentrated, letting the magic flow through my veins and gather in my fingertips. From there, I poured it into the circle.

I kept pumping more and more of my mana in. This creature was supposed to be something that could protect my family. Even if I drained myself dry, it still wouldn’t be enough in my eyes. I’d gladly take every last bit of Orsted’s mana too, if I could. Using more mana

didn’t necessarily guarantee a strong Guardian Beast, but I would still give this everything I had.

Orsted also said it was important to imagine what I wanted.

Something to protect my family…

That was awfully vague.

I needed something incredibly powerful. Powerful enough that a normal opponent wouldn’t stand a chance. Something that was incredibly loyal and would never oppose me. And since they were supposed to be protecting my family, preferably not something crude and indecent. I definitely didn’t want some tentacle monster covered in mucus. That wouldn’t be good for my little sisters or Lucie. This Guardian Beast was going to be Lucie’s knight, so I needed something respectable.

That’s right. A creature of high moral character, who is loyal and strong. Okay, order up, let’s go!

“Come on out, Guardian Beast!”

The circle began emitting a bright light, not a pure white but a mix of blue, red, yellow, and green. It was a whole rainbow. But I felt as if the summoning had caught on something—as if there was something stopping it.

What could it be?

I ignored it and continued pouring in more mana. Whatever had been blocking the spell snapped.

“Aaaah!”

A voice groaned, though I couldn’t tell where the sound came from. Was it the Guardian Beast that would now be protecting my family? It sounded rather ominous, as if the creature was in pain. I simply increased my mana output, yanking whatever it was through the summoning circle.

“Aaaaah!” A voice rang out as the mana flow I’d been feeding into the circle was abruptly cut off.

The light faded, and from within it appeared…

“Khh…”

A man in a yellow mask and white uniform, a large dagger hanging by his side. He was perched atop the earthen platform I had created, down on one knee with his arms wrapped around himself.

“How can this be… How could my contract with Lord Perugius be destroyed like this…?”

He remained in that pose as he lifted his head and looked around. The mask obscured his eyes, but I could swear he was staring straight at me.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” the masked man demanded.

No, it was wrong to call him that. I knew exactly who this was.

Arumanfi the Bright.

The way he’s posed reminds me of a fallen angel. Not that I’m trying to make light *of him, I swear. I’d never be able to hold a candle to his* brightness*. He’s way more* lit *than I am. Just kidd—*

“I asked you, Rudeus Greyrat, what your intention is here?!” He leapt from the table and tried to seize me by the collar, only to freeze midway through, his entire body trembling.

Eris immediately moved into battle stance, but I held a hand up to stay her.

Bad girl. Go to your pen, Eris.

Seriously, what was going on? I had summoned the bright and noble Arumanfi, of all people. Was that even possible? Although—despite his human form, he was actually a spirit. Perhaps this wasn’t so surprising, after all. Not that that explained everything. Was this all a ploy by Orsted? Was he trying to provoke Perugius, to get him to kill me instead?

Oh, come on, if you’re going to go that far, then just do the job yourself.

“Uh, no, you see… This just kinda happened… I was activating a magic circle that Sir Orsted gave me, and it sort of…summoned you here by accident.”

“Orsted’s magic circle, you say? What precisely were you trying to summon?”

“A Guardian Beast to watch over my family.”

Arumanfi snatched up the scroll with the magic circle. He studied it before gaping. “These are some bothersome stipulations he’s placed on the summoned entity…”

“Um, what conditions are they?”

“The one this circle summons must be absolutely obedient to you, and they are to defend your family against any calamities that might befall them in perpetuity. In other words, they are to serve for eternity.”

Wow. So this magic circle was basically a slave contract?

Well, the good news is that Orsted didn’t lie to me. Looks like he’s trustworthy after all!

“Anything else?” I asked.

“The summoner will be the one who determines precisely what is called forth.”

So basically, I could decide what Guardian Beast I received. Great.

“Then I’d like to make an exchange.”

“An exchange?”

“Yes, I didn’t mean to summon you, Mister Arumanfi. So I’d like to trade you out for someone else.”

“Then hurry up and dissolve your contract with me. I am Lord Perugius’s proud servant, not yours.”

“Uh, yeah. Right.”

Honestly, it wasn’t a terrible idea having Arumanfi to protect our family. He moved at the speed of light, so if anything unforeseen happened, he’d be the perfect person to relay a message to me.

Yeah, but Perugius values him too much. If I took him away, it might cause discord between us.

I furrowed my brow. “Um, so how do I go about doing that, exactly?”

“Order me to return to Lord Perugius’s side immediately. Dotbath of Destruction will be able to sever the contract.”

“All right.”

“Order me. Now.”

Due to the absolute obedience clause, he needed a direct order from me to leave.

“Okay, then by the power of this summoning circle, I command you to go to Lord Perugius and request advice from him as to how best to call forth a good Guardian Beast.”

Arumanfi kept the magic circle in his hands as he disappeared in a flash of light.

“Sorry everyone, looks like I screwed up,” I said as I glanced back at my family.

They were all staring at me, slack-jawed.

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Arumanfi returned after a while. He delivered a message from Perugius before, hissing about how he’d let this transgression slide but it had better never happen again. Arumanfi was extremely proud of his status as Perugius’s servant, after all. I did feel genuinely guilty about stealing that from him, however temporarily.

The circle that Orsted had drawn me apparently lost its power when the contract was annulled, so Perugius made me a new one. It was hard to believe he’d show me such kindness after I so rudely swiped one of his servants. He really was as magnanimous as Sylvaril claimed.

The truly terrifying part of the whole ordeal was the level of power Orsted’s circle had commanded. Or maybe it was my own

magic that was to blame? Perhaps both. Each was merely a spark on its own, but combined, they made a raging flame.

Since the previous summoning hadn't depleted much of my mana, I decided to collect myself and try again immediately. According to Perugius, it was better not to imagine vague concepts like majestic, omniscient, or omnipotent, but rather, an animal.

If that was all, I wish Orsted had simply said so. But knowing him, he'd probably have told me to keep Arumanfi, as crazy as that idea sounded.

"Okay, let's try this again."

I surveyed the area before putting my hands on the magic circle once more. This time, I was going to keep a concrete image in my mind. I wanted a strong, proud animal.

A lion!

I had no idea if they existed here as I knew them, but the word existed in the language, so surely there was something similar. I wanted the king of beasts—the strongest creature this world had to offer. Although, if I wanted something loyal, I might be better served by a canine, rather than a feline.

Nah, that doesn't matter. The magic circle requires absolute obedience, so I just need to focus on something that's strong. I want the most noble beast that exists in this world.

I focused all the magic I had in every corner of my body into my right hand. For a few moments, I squeezed my eyes shut, but as the last drops of mana left my body and poured into the circle, I snapped them open again.

Come on! Bring home the bacon!

I sucked in a breath as the magic circle emitted a dazzling light. It was the same colorful rainbow I had seen earlier, but this time, I didn't experience the sensation of the spell snagging on something. My mana flowed smoothly into the circle, and whatever was on the other end heeded my call. In fact, it felt as though a hand

was being extended toward me, and all I had to do was take it and pull. I was confident that I would be successful this time.

“All right, come on out!” I hollered.

A faint howl echoed through the air.

“Awoooo!”

It grew louder and louder, ringing in my ears.

Is there something I should be saying right now as I’m summoning this thing? I guess it doesn’t matter…

As I debated that, the light disappeared. What stood before me was a white lion, over two meters tall. I assumed it was female since it had no mane. The way its snout extended, however, reminded me more of a dog than a cat.

Wait, this is no lion. It’s a dog. And judging by how short its legs are, it’s a pup at that.

In fact, upon closer inspection, I realized its fur wasn’t white, but silver. It looked like a baby Shiba Inu, but far more massive.

Hmm… Did I botch it again?

“It’s adorable!” Aisha exclaimed.

“But do you really think this thing can protect us?” Norn frowned.

“Well,” said Sylphie, “for a pup, it does look confident.”

Roxy nodded. “At the very least, it looks too innocent for anyone to suspect it’s a Guardian Beast.”

The two of them seemed approving enough.

“It does look intelligent,” Lilia commented. She had a perfect poker face so it was hard to tell what she was thinking, but she wasn’t knitting her brows or frowning at least.

Zenith was expressionless as ever. I had no idea what Byt thought of our newest addition, but Dillo was already on his back, expressing submission toward our Guardian Beast.

Not too bad as far as first impressions went.

Although, I'm pretty sure I've seen this pup before.

"Hold on," said Eris. "Isn't this the Sacred Beast that was so attached to you back in Doldia Village, Rudeus?"

That's right! I just remembered. Uh, what were the words in Beast God Tongue again…

I cleared my throat and said, "Are you perhaps the Sacred Beast from Doldia?"

"Woof." The great dog bobbed its head in response before licking my face.

Ugh, it stinks. Dammit, what does this thing take me for? A piece of meat?

At least I finally knew exactly what I had summoned.

"I see."

The Sacred Beast, huh? The same one the Doldia tribe treasured so much that they locked it away deep within their village…

Crap. If they found out that I summoned it to serve as my personal guardian, they would be absolutely livid, wouldn't they? If they put me on their wanted list, it would only cause more problems. I already had enough on my plate.

Guess I gotta exchange this one too…

Although annulling the contract would cause more trouble for either Perugius or Orsted. And there was no guarantee I'd get anything better on the third try.

Hmm…

I spoke in Beast God Tongue. "O Sacred Beast, if I might humbly ask, do you possess the power to protect my family from any calamity that might befall them?"

"Woof!"

He seemed to be saying, "Leave everything to me!" He seemed motivated enough, but on the other hand, he *had* gotten himself kidnapped before. Could I really rely on him to protect them?

Orsted assured me that the Man-God probably wouldn't come after my family much anymore, so maybe I didn't have anything to worry about, but…

"Arf?"

As I was lost in thought, the Sacred Beast leaped from the summoning table and pressed its body against me, licking at my face again.

Ahh, he's so soft… They definitely have to be using some kinda conditioner on him. And if he's our Guardian Beast, that means I'll be able to enjoy his fluffy fur every single day.

"Yep, I've gotta be mistaken. This definitely isn't the Sacred Beast."



Nope. This was not the holy creature the beastfolk looked up to with such reverence. Definitely not. There was no way their protector god would show up here of all places. It had to be a look-alike.

That's right. This thing is a…a lion, that's it!

It was clearly a lion cub I had called here from one of an infinite number of alternate worlds. At least, that was the explanation I decided upon in my mind. It was good enough for me. Although that excuse probably wouldn't hold water when it came to protecting me from the wrath of the Doldia.

Well, if things started going sideways, I could always ask Lord Perugius for a favor and swap this lion cub for something else. Until then, we'd have a trial period of sorts.

"All right. From today forth, your name is Leo!" I proclaimed, thrusting my hand into the air.

The Sacred Beast promptly licked my fingers before snorting in response. Then, suddenly, he lifted his head as if he had noticed something. His gaze turned toward Roxy. Leo trotted over to her before promptly shoving his face up her skirt.

"Ack! Hey! What are you doing?!" Roxy cried, bonking him with her staff.

Our perverted canine merely sniffed and licked at her leg before wrapping his enormous body around her.

"Um, Rudy… What am I supposed to do about this?" Nervously, she peered over at me.

I had no idea what was going on exactly, but it was clear that our new family member was attached to Roxy.

"Leo, now that I have summoned you here, you're my servant," I said in Beast God Tongue. "Your duty is to protect my family. Understood?"

"Woof!" he barked back cheerfully.

I had no idea how useful a pup would be for watching over everyone, but since this was what I had summoned, it was going to

be our Guardian Beast henceforth.

Surely, he'll prove his worth.

"Leo, allow me to explain a bit about what your employment here entails. I know you're used to getting your way and having people spoil you, but that won't fly here. You're going to have to wear a collar and live in a dog house like a normal canine. If anyone suspicious appears, you bark at them, bite them, and render them powerless. If they're too strong, you have my permission to kill them. You'll have three meals a day here, and you're free to take naps whenever you want. If you so desire, we'll even take you for walks when you want. If you find these conditions acceptable, please bark once."

"Woof!"

Great, that's the kind of answer I like to hear. And one more thing…

"It goes without saying that if you dare do anything to hurt my family…"

"Arf…" His throat rumbled, as if he were offended by the mere idea.

"Great. Then our contract is sealed. Now let's shake on it." I held out my hand and he promptly offered up his paw.

And with that, our family had a new pet.

Chapter 3:
Opening Move

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since I summoned our Guardian Beast. I had his name engraved on a leather collar which we looped around his neck, and we built a large doghouse for him. His job was, essentially, to be our security guard.

When I woke in the morning, he'd be waiting at the front entrance as Eris and I came out to train in the yard. He would continue to stand at the entrance like a sentry until it was time to go for a walk.

Once we returned home, he would come into the house and watch over everyone. Leo periodically made rounds of the house to ensure nothing was amiss. If it was, he did his utmost to remedy it. If Lucie was crying, he would comfort her. If Aisha went out shopping, he would accompany her. When asked, he would even walk with Norn to school.

It was really as though we had our own home security system.

Leo was incredibly intelligent, heeded whatever my family told him, and was perfectly toilet-trained. As for tricks, he knew *wait*, *down*, *paw*, and *beg*, and even more complicated things such as spinning three times and barking, plus somersaulting like a cat.

He was also really submissive toward my family. When Aisha or Norn nervously reached up to pet him, he would wag his tail so hard it was like a helicopter rotor. He was particularly fond of Roxy and acted like a loyal knight around her. His attitude toward her was markedly different from his interactions with everyone else. When Roxy woke up, he would circle around her while wagging his tail and try to shove his head between her legs. The first time he did that, I scolded him, saying, "I'm the only one who gets to lick her there." He acted dejected and gave up, but the very next day, he was back at it.

Roxy normally commuted to work on Dillo's back, but I noticed Leo barking at him, as if trying to tell him something. I had no way of deciphering his words or knowing if Dillo was heeding them, but the armadillo seemed to flinch nervously away from Leo. I also spotted Leo hovering at the bottom of the stairs when Roxy climbed them, staring up at her as if worried she might slip and fall. His overprotectiveness almost made me feel like a pathetic husband for not fussing over her as much.

I wondered why he was so focused on Roxy and Roxy alone, but maybe it was because he was a dog. Perhaps he could sniff out which of our family members was the most impressive.

Come to think of it, Linia and Pursena seemed to have the same ability.

Despite acting as the perfect servant with Roxy, Leo and Eris weren't the most compatible. Or rather, Leo seemed put off by Eris. She, on the other hand, absolutely adored animals. She loved nothing more than burying her face in their soft fur and giving them a squeeze. Perhaps she had cornered him and done just that without me knowing. The Mad Sword King's power was no joke. I had experienced it myself. When she embraced someone with all her strength, it was like being crushed to death by a bear. Your life flashed before your eyes.

I didn't mind her hugging me like that, but I could understand why Leo might keep a wide berth. He only approached her when it was time to go for a walk, whereupon the two of them would check the house's perimeter before setting off.

I had a feeling this had to do with her stamina. A walk for him wasn't a stroll around the block; I suspected he was circling the entire city on his little outings. To accomplish that so quickly required impressive speed, and the only person in our household who could match such a pace was Eris. Sylphie might be able to keep up if she tried, but just barely. In any case, Leo typically chose Eris as his partner when going for walks. Maybe he considered her a fellow security guard.

Incidentally, Leo's territory encompassed a two-kilometer radius around our house. He wouldn't let so much as a stray cat into his territory. From the look of things, he was making good on his mission to protect our family. This whole Guardian Beast business had given me more peace of mind than I expected.

A dog was definitely a good pick.

The only issue was that said dog also happened to be the protector god of the beastfolk tribe. When Ghislaine came over to check in on Eris, she was gobsmacked to find Leo here.

"I can't understand him when he speaks," she said. "But it seems to me that he came here of his own volition, in which case the Doldia Tribe should have no complaints."

So I should be fine.

It was time for me to move on to the next step of the plan. And, just on time, Luke showed up at our house.

I had gone out on a short errand that only took about twenty minutes. When I got home, Luke was standing at our front gate.

I immediately hid in the shadows to keep an eye on him, remembering what Orsted had told me about the Man-God being able to manipulate people. I also recalled the entry in my diary which mentioned Luke being used by the Man-God to bring Sylphie down. My future self was admittedly a bit paranoid, so his word might not be the most reliable, but if the Man-God *did* want to take down Sylphie or Ariel, Luke would prove an effective puppet. Sylphie did rely on him, after all, regardless of what she said about him.

In other words, Luke had the highest probability of being chosen as one of the Man-God's apostles. If we were going to war with him, it would be paramount to locate his followers and suss out their motives. With that in mind, I kept a close eye on him as I darted from shadow to shadow until I was close enough to hear his voice.

"I never knew someone as amazing as you had come to this city! You're wonderful—adorable. Your eyes are so beautiful and full

of determination, and your hair is soft as silk. You're like an angel—no, like a goddess of beauty come to grace this world with your presence! It took but a single glance for my heart to be stolen!"

His words made my head ache.

What a bunch of overused cliches.

Even I would never say something so sappy and exaggerated. But maybe such things were perfectly normal in this world? If I said something like that to Sylphie, she'd probably go red as a tomato. I could just imagine her smiling shyly and saying, "You don't need to work so hard to butter me up. I'm already all yours, Rudy. Ehehe."

"Oh, pardon my manners," said Luke. "I haven't even introduced myself. I am Luke Notos Greyrat, and the second son of my household. The Notos Greyrats preside over one of the four major regions of Asura Kingdom."

If he really was one of the Man-God's flunkies, it made sense that he'd lay it on thick when flirting with a girl, especially if it was at the Man-God's command. It would be weird for him to go to such lengths if not. Luke had no shortage of women flocking to him. Based on what Sylphie had told me, he saw girls as little more than disposable sex toys.

More importantly, who in the heck was he trying to talk up right now? I couldn't get a good look from where I was hiding. If he was likening his target to an angel, the first person that came to mind was Sylphie, but he wouldn't dare talk to her like that. The word *goddess* immediately brought Roxy to mind—since that was precisely what she was to me—but it couldn't be her, either. So then…Aisha maybe? No, she was more like a little devil than an angel.

"If I might be so bold, would you honor me with your name? Of course, I understand if you don't wish to tell me your last name. But I beseech you, o beautiful one, to at least share your first name as consolation, that I might engrave it into my heart."

At least I'd be able to hear the name of the target of his affections soon. Who was he trying to win over? Once I knew the answer, I could figure out who the Man-God was aiming for. Of

course, this assumed that Luke really was one of the Man-God's apostles. I couldn't discount the possibility that he'd just fallen in love with one of my family members at first sight.

Although if it's the latter, I am little better than a peeping tom.

"Ah, I see you refuse to share your name with me. Then at the very least, I beg of you to give me the honor of kissing your hand. That alone will be enough to console me." He bent forward, stretching a hand toward the other person.

His head jerked momentarily. Then his entire body froze.

What happened?

Clearly something was up. Had the Man-God attacked him? Or was he being controlled right this very minute?

As I contemplated such questions, Luke suddenly sank to his knees and collapsed. He didn't even twitch. He'd completely lost consciousness. What on earth had happened?

Wait, I'm pretty sure I've witnessed this before. The jerking, the collapsing, and the losing of consciousness… Oh, god, it makes my own head pound.

"Hmph."

After Luke slumped over, a woman stepped out of our gate and stared down at him. She slammed her foot into his unconscious head.

Eris. Eris is the one who knocked him out.

"What's your problem? Appearing out of nowhere and babbling like a lunatic!" She wrinkled her nose, kicking him again to shove him off the walkway. Then she marched back into the house as if nothing had happened.

I slipped from the shadows and went over to Luke. He was still out cold, the whites of his eyes showing. She'd KO-ed him real good. I had to question his morals for daring to hit on one of my wives…but come to think of it, though I had reported to Ariel and Luke when I

made it home, I hadn't yet told them about my marriage. In fact, this was his first time meeting Eris.

Still, I was shocked he'd tried to make a pass at her like that. Maybe the original timeline where the two of them got together had some influence over him. Or perhaps it was proof that he really was in league with the Man-God. It was difficult to be sure, either way.

I pursed my lips. For the moment at least, it was best not to leave him lying outside. I decided to drag him into the house with me. I could begin the interrogation once he regained consciousness.

"I'm home," I said, as I hauled Luke inside.

Eris was there to greet me, though she was silent at first. Her face lit up when she saw me, but the moment she spotted Luke, she knitted her brows and crossed her arms.

"You know this guy?" she asked.

"Yeah. Well, I guess you could say he's Sylphie's colleague, to be more precise."

"O-oh… Well, sorry. I punched him."

Oh? She's being awfully meek.

I shook my head. "It's fine. I bet it was his own fault for saying something inappropriate."

"It was," she agreed.

"Well, then he has only himself to blame."

He got his just desserts for trying to lay his grimy hands on my Eris. All the same, I was going to lay him down somewhere so he could rest.

Hm, he'd be in the way if I put him in the living room. Maybe I should just throw him in one of the empty rooms on the first floor.

"Hey, Rudeus," Eris called after me.

"Yes?"

"Do you also want to kiss my hand?"

I glanced at her hand. It was covered in calluses from her training, rather rough and rugged for a woman's hand. Still, it suited her, and I liked her hands just the way they were.

"I'd rather kiss your lips than your hand."

That earned me a swift punch to the gut. She didn't pack much power behind it, but her aim was so accurate that she caught me right in the liver.

"That's off limits until night time," Eris huffed, her face going bright red as she stomped toward the living room.

Ah, okay. So I'm free to claim them at night, then. Looking forward to it.

That aside… What should I do now? Personally, I wanted to consult Sylphie quickly so I could convey my wish to aid Ariel. That way, the lot of us could work together to persuade Perugius to join her side. Alas, I had no idea what had motivated Luke to travel here. If he'd come to cause problems on behalf of the Man-God, I certainly couldn't let that fly.

I guess I'll wait 'til Luke wakes up.

***

While Luke remained unconscious, I went to check in on Sylphie and the others. I would be heartbroken if something awful were to happen to the rest of my family members while I was preoccupied with Luke. Though that was probably unlikely, given that Eris was here.

Leo was at the top of the stairwell on the second floor, sitting obediently with an alert expression. I passed him and checked several of the rooms. Roxy's room was littered with clothes but otherwise unoccupied. Considering Dillo was absent as well, it was probably safe to bet she'd already left for the academy.

Sylphie and Aisha were cooking in the kitchen. I beat a hasty retreat, not wanting to interrupt them. I found Zenith tucked in her

bed, asleep, with Lilia reading a book at her side. Nothing amiss there.

I found Eris playing with Lucie in the living room. Lucie had grabbed Eris's hands and climbed on top of the sofa, while Eris nervously supported her and looked on. It was a heartwarming sight, but I could only savor it for a few moments. I then returned to the empty room where I'd left Luke.

He had already regained consciousness by the time I got back. "I had a dream about a red-haired angel. She was beautiful and sweet, but she was also so strong. My ideal woman. But when I tried to kiss her hand, I woke up." He was sitting up, his eyes vacant as he mumbled incomprehensibly to himself.

He's probably got some brain damage from Eris's punch. Wait, that can't be it. He was saying that angel crap before she smacked him.

"Please calm down, Master Luke. There is no red-haired angel."

"Oh, it's you, Rudeus…" He glanced at me absently. "Wait, what are you doing here? Huh? Where am… I'm in your house? Just a moment ago, I was at the front gate, and this angel… What's going on?"

His memories were all muddled. At least it didn't seem like he'd met the Man-God during his brief lapse of consciousness.

"Aah!" Luke glanced behind me and screamed.

I looked back and Eris was there. She'd shoved the door open and was staring in.

"Hmph!" She took one glance at Luke, huffed, and marched back toward the living room. Apparently, she had been at least a little worried about him.

My fragile maiden's heart was pounding with worry. *Don't tell me she's already started developing some feelings for him? That can't be, right?*

“Ah, wait! Your name—please at least give me your name! If you could also give me your address and tell me your favorite flower, I would be forever grateful! Oh, and I’d be delighted if you could tell me what kind of man you like!”

“Please calm yourself,” I said. “This is her address. She lives here.”

I managed to restrain Luke from following her out of the room, but he grabbed me by the shoulders and brought his face close.

“Rudeus, if she lives here, that must mean you’re related, right?! Tell me, who is she?!”

“Her name is Eris Greyrat. The two of us just got married.”

“What… You married…?” Luke froze. “So that means…she’s your woman?”

“Yes, that is what that means.”

Given our relationship dynamic, it was probably more apt to say I was her man, but the meaning was the same.

“Oh…” His voice trailed off.

Instinctively, I said, “I’m sorry.”

Luke shook his head. “Why would you apologize? The early bird gets the worm, as they say.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

After hearing about this alternate timeline from Orsted, I couldn’t help but feel guilty. Luke and Eris were originally supposed to be a pair. The situation felt like receiving a package only to find out it had your neighbor’s address on it.

Even so, that didn’t change our past together. I was the one who’d been her tutor and traveled the Demon Continent with her. We’d shared our first sexual experience together.

Luke sighed.

“It’s not all that rare for good women to fall for a single man. Or for good men to fall for a single woman.”

For whatever reason, he kept going.

“Men often keep a number of women for themselves, but the opposite is practically unheard of. That was merely the way God made us humans. After all, a man can give their seed to multiple women, but a woman can only have one man’s child at a time. It does seem there are demon women who can have multiple men’s babies at once, but the same cannot be said for our race.”

He was sure coming at this from a biased male perspective. Of course, I was one to talk. But—and not to defend myself here—I also thought it was perfectly reasonable for it to go both ways. You know, one woman and multiple men. A reverse harem.

“Good women tend to gather around the man who holds the most power,” Luke went on. “You have power, money, status, and prestige. I can understand why that angel—Miss Eris—chose to be with you. So…”

He paused and shook his head.

“No, that’s not it. I didn’t come all the way here to have this conversation with you.” Luke let out another large sigh. “I came here because I have something to ask of you.”

“Oh?” I took a seat.

The timing was far too convenient. It was reasonable to think he was the Man-God’s lackey, trying to change the course of history. I couldn’t shake that suspicion, but I would hear him out either way. I assumed he would try to find some way to lead me toward my own destruction or otherwise try to impede Ariel’s ascension to the throne.

“Would you lend us…that is, would you lend Princess Ariel your aid?”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

What the heck is going on? He’s asking for my aid? Shouldn’t he be asking for the opposite?

No, I had made it perfectly clear that I would assist her if needed. He wasn’t approaching me with such a request out of the

blue.

“Of course. I would be more than happy to, but why are you asking this when I’ve already said I would help?”

“Your skills with magic and ability to befriend people with difficult personalities is astounding. On top of that, you demonstrated your fighting capabilities by returning home alive from a battle with the Dragon God. He even took you on as his subordinate. Truly, such feats are impressive beyond words.”

Okay, it makes me a little uneasy when you go out of your way to compliment me like that.

“However, we feared involving you would disrupt Sylphie’s happiness.” Luke lifted his head. “That is why we never explicitly requested your assistance until now. We couldn’t. Neither Princess Ariel nor I wish to involve Sylphie in this power struggle any more than we already have.”

He’d said as much earlier, when the two of us dueled.

“But…” Luke dropped his gaze.

He was good looking enough that such a pose made him look more like a tortured hero. No wonder most women fell for him so easily.

“In the past six years, we have exerted our influence with the Magic Nations to enlist a number of nobles and craftspeople to our side. Among them are some nobles who were born in Asura, and even some with a great deal of political sway there. But it hasn’t been enough to ensure us a decisive victory. After all, these people are still outsiders in the kingdom’s eyes.”

“Mhm,” I said.

“However, Lord Perugius could turn the tides for us. He has enormous sway in the kingdom, in addition to his force of charisma and impressive martial power. If we had him on our side, it would greatly further Princess Ariel’s path to the throne. It doesn’t guarantee victory, of course, but at the same time, I don’t think we

can succeed without his aid. Princess Ariel needs someone of impressive repute to back her."

Luke was being entirely serious. Or at least I didn't detect any deception or ulterior motives. He sincerely believed Perugius was necessary for Ariel to claim kingship. Orsted, likewise, had a high opinion of Perugius.

He shook his head, adding, "But despite that, Her Highness has nearly given up on trying to persuade him to join us."

"Well, given how it's been going, I can't really blame her," I said. When I last saw them both, Perugius had about as much interest in her as he had in the ground he walked on. Which was to say: none.

"Of course, meeting him was pure chance to begin with," said Luke. "Princess Ariel says we'll make do without him. I agreed with her. If we spend a couple more years strengthening our weaknesses, we'll probably be able to claim victory over her opponents."

Those were intriguing words. According to Orsted, there were little more than twenty days left before the news hit that the kingdom's ruler had fallen ill. If Luke had been in contact with the Man-God, he wouldn't be speaking as if they had several years to go, considering the latter would have alerted him of what was to come.

"Realistically, though, it would be difficult. Without Lord Perugius's aid, we would suffer great losses even if we did win. And other issues might crop up after she secured the crown."

Based on what he was saying, Ariel was attempting to trigger internal conflict in the kingdom. She needed to take the lead in this power struggle, outwitting her opponents and beating them at their own game so she could be the last one standing. She was aiming for the ultimate position of power in the most powerful country in the world. That throne could not be claimed on words alone. They would need to fight for it.

But the fighting would continue even after the goal was achieved. If there was still resistance to her rule—if there were still

those who claimed she wasn't worthy—Ariel could lose everything after having expended all her political capital on becoming king.

Perugius, however, could act as a deterrent to such opposition. As one of the three heroes who killed the Demon God, he still held sway in the kingdom. Not every noble would bend the knee with him present, but it would certainly shut a lot of them up if the Armored Dragon King Perugius announced his support for Ariel's rule. Thus, Luke was desperate to have his backing.

"And…in order to make absolutely certain we can achieve victory, I would like your assistance," said Luke.

"You do realize I don't know a thing about politics, right? It's perfectly possible I'll be of no help whatsoever."

"You're a far greater person than you seem to realize. You'll be plenty helpful simply by being yourself."

I scratched my head. "I'm not that great."

"Great or not, you're a reliable fighter, and you have connections. You're acquainted with Lord Perugius, the Dragon God, a demon king, the grandson of the Millis pope, the entire Doldia tribe, and Silent Sevenstar. Your contacts alone are impressive—and we're not even asking you to use those contacts. It's the fact that you're so well-connected that proves you possess something special. I wish only that you might share a bit of that with Princess Ariel."

I kept silent.

Perhaps I'd suspected an ulterior motive behind Luke's compliments because I hadn't spoken with him much. Still, I wondered… Was he really the Man-God's puppet or not? Orsted had already ordered me to assist Ariel, so I would have helped whether or not Luke requested it. However, the fact that he beat me to the punch made me question if he was doing it of his own volition.

Maybe I should try some trick questions and see what he says.

"Who ordered you to come see me?" I asked.

“Ordered me? If you mean Her Highness, she made no such request.”

“Which means someone else advised you to come to me?”

Luke shook his head. “I decided to come here on my own.”

“And does the name Man-God ring any bells?”

“Man-God? I remember hearing that name when we were visiting Lord Perugius. Who exactly is that?”

Well, if he *was* in league with the Man-God, he wouldn’t show his hand that easily. The Man-God never told me to keep our association hush-hush, but there was nothing to say he wouldn’t forbid anyone else from speaking about him.

Luke eyed me, baffled by my question, but after a few moments, he scratched the back of his head and said, “I guess it does sound as if I’m contradicting myself. We do wish for Sylphie’s happiness, and it is possible we might rob her of that by involving her in our conflict with the kingdom. If they label us as insurgents, even the Magic Nations won’t be able to shield us.”

That part scared me as well. There was no telling what might happen if we made an enemy of Asura. According to my journal from the future, Sylphie had died as a result, and the Holy Kingdom of Millis had managed to kill Zanoba. Sure, I could fight decently enough. If I unleashed my magic at its maximum potential, I could even wipe out an enormous number of enemies at once. I would even be fearsome in close combat once we had my Magic Armor repaired. Orsted had admitted he couldn’t hold back when facing me in that armor.

That being said, it was naive to expect to win every battle you fought head-on. Not even an idiot would fight a pro wrestler bare-handed. To defeat someone like that, you might stab them in the back, poison them, or use money to pressure them into submission. If you couldn’t beat someone with power alone, you just had to use some other means.

My future self had fortified his defenses by forging a strong relationship with the kingdom of Asura. Enough that they didn’t come

after him, at least. Better yet, they even valued him enough to refuse the Holy Kingdom's request to hand him over.

How would things go this time? With Leo in our house, would the other countries hold back, not wanting to strain their relationship with the beast tribe? How good of a protector would he prove to be? Orsted had assured me I would be fine as long as I had my Guardian Beast. According to him, Leo would be perfectly capable of keeping my family safe, since he had his own strong destiny.

But can that little pup really guard my family all by himself?

"However," said Luke, "since you have the Dragon God backing you, I think it won't taint all Sylphie's joy if we get her involved now."

I wasn't so sure about that. There were places where Orsted's influence had no power. The people of this world might have heard of the Seven Great Powers, but they didn't seem to realize how strong they were, or how far beyond human their abilities were.

"Having the Dragon God's support doesn't mean my life wouldn't be at risk," I said.

"That's true," Luke admitted. He sucked in a breath and stared directly into my eyes. "But that's precisely why we only need your support on the surface right now. I want to make Princess Ariel king, no matter what it takes." He glared at me, eyes gleaming.

I met his gaze without flinching, surprised at how strong it was. His determination reminded me of Ruijerd's, as if he was willing to throw everything away to accomplish his goal.

"And why is that?" I asked.

After a long pause, Luke answered, "It was the last request of a deceased friend."

I immediately knew he was referring to Derrick Redbat.

"Please, won't you lend Princess Ariel your strength?"

I assumed that he wasn't promising me anything in return because he'd come of his own accord rather than at Ariel's behest. Rather than offering a deal, he was asking for a favor.

I stroked my chin. In hindsight, I was still myself even when the Man-God was pulling the strings. He did give me advice, but I was the one desperately racking my brains to interpret his words and figure out how best to proceed. Perhaps the same was true of Luke. Maybe he was trying his best to search for a way forward. If that was the case, I wanted to help him.

There was just one problem. My opponent was neither Ariel nor the Asura Kingdom. It was the Man-God. If there was any possibility that aligning myself with Ariel had something to do with the Man-God's plan, I needed to consult Orsted first.

"Would you permit me to seek the counsel of those around me before I give you an answer?" I asked.

Luke smiled, despite looking like he wanted to cry. Apparently, he thought this was my way of turning him down. He got to his feet, and after a long pause, said, "All right. Sorry to bother you."

"Not at all. I will give you my official answer in a couple of days. I promise."

His shoulders slumped as he shuffled out of the room. I followed him, intending to see him out. We made our way through the hall and toward the front door. Leo was standing at the top of the stairwell as he had been earlier, peering down at us. He let out a low growl, as if to let Luke know he wouldn't get past him to the second floor.

Does this mean Luke really is suspicious? Though I have no idea if Leo can sniff out the Man-God's puppets with his nose alone.

"Oh…" Eris peeked out of the living room, having heard the growling.

Luke immediately put a hand to his chest and bowed. "Missus, I realize I was ignorant of your identity before, but I still apologize for my rude behavior. I do hope we will meet again someday."

Eris reached down to grab her skirt for a curtsey, only to belatedly realize she was wearing pants. She scowled, feeling awkward, and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'll be sure to entertain you properly next time."

“I appreciate you saying that. Well, if you will excuse me.”

Before he had a chance to leave, someone yawned from above us.

“Eris, please don’t shout like that. Everyone is still sleeping,” Sylphie said as she made her way down the stairs. She must have gone up there after I checked on her earlier in the kitchen. Her eyes were still heavy with sleep. Apparently, she’d gone back to bed. When her gaze landed on Luke and me, she said, “Oh, welcome back, Rudy…hm? Luke, you’re here? How come? Did something happen to Her Highness?”

“I…had an errand to run and decided to swing by.”

“Huh. Well, take your time, then. I can get you some tea,” Sylphie offered.

“No, I should be leaving.”

“All right. Well, I’ll be heading back in a few, so take care of the princess for me until then.”

“Will do.” Luke smiled forlornly as he left. Sylphie and I followed him to the gate and saw him off. His receding figure reminded me of a lonely salaryman, completely exhausted as he made his way home from work.

“What’s going on with him?” Sylphie wondered.

I didn’t respond, but I couldn’t help feeling like something had been set into motion. No matter how I decided to act on this, I couldn’t do a half-assed job. With that in mind, it was time to report to Orsted.

Chapter 4:
Mind Made Up

I USED THE RING Orsted gave me to contact him. about an hour later, I received a letter telling me to meet him outside my cottage, off to the side. Apparently, he'd still been nearby when I reached out. He could have just come to see me instead of sending a letter…

In any case, I did as he commanded and set out to meet him at the agreed upon location. I arrived to find him with his arms crossed, looking as if he'd nodded off. He had obviously been waiting for me. I felt a bit guilty for not hurrying here sooner.

"Sorry I made you wait so long," I said.

"No. I arrived only moments ago."

We sounded like a couple who had just started dating. Anyway. I filled him in on the events since we'd last met, starting with our new Guardian Beast, Leo. He saw no issue with that. In fact, he was shocked that such an important animal had heeded my summons. He guaranteed me that my family's security was assured with a Sacred Beast guarding them. Apparently, Leo was more of a bigshot than I realized.

It really got my attention when he mumbled to himself, "Perhaps Roxy's child is special after all." I grinned when I heard that.

I also suggested having Cliff try to remove his curse. Orsted seemed willing to give it a shot. Under this arrangement, Cliff would come to the cottage every few days to work on developing a magical implement that could combat his curse. Since we had no idea when we would see the fruits of Cliff's labors, I told Orsted that I would keep up the guise that he was holding my family hostage in the meantime. He kept a poker face through my explanation, then merely nodded. "All right."

When I admitted that I hadn't yet reached out to Ariel, he reprimanded me. I could have told him that I was worried about Eris and Leo or that I was waiting for a good opportunity to introduce Ghislaine to Ariel, since it would be perfect for getting close to her, but those would simply be excuses. I had taken the month's leeway we had for granted. I could admit I'd been negligent.

Orsted had gone to meet with Perugius while I was taking my sweet time. He requested that Perugius support Ariel's bid for the crown, but had been refused. Perugius stubbornly insisted that he would not change his stance until he was certain she was fit for the position.

You have some serious balls, Lord Perugius. You seemed pretty terrified of Orsted, but you still rebuffed him in no uncertain terms. Gotta admire you for that.

That aside, I told Orsted about Luke's visit. I also mentioned that his plea for help could be on the Man-God's behalf and brought up how worried I was about helping Ariel out. Finally, I asked him if he had any intention of changing his original plan.

Undaunted, Orsted said, "No. We will make Ariel king."

He dismissed the possibility that the Man-God wanted this outcome. Ariel being on the throne was of paramount importance to him. When I asked how we should deal with Luke, Orsted didn't have an immediate answer.

After several minutes of contemplation, he finally mumbled, "Perhaps we should kill him…"

I gaped. Those were terrifying words to just say casually.

"You're going to kill him?"

Orsted was silent, but the look on his face was terrifying.

Wait, no. That's just how he always looks.

He dropped his gaze to the table and stared—or glared, as far as I was concerned—at one specific spot.

Yep, I changed my mind. He's definitely making a scary face.

“There’s no telling what one of the Man-God’s apostles might do. Killing him would be the best way to eradicate any uncertainty,” said Orsted.

“I…guess so…”

Kill Luke? I should have already steeled myself to do whatever was necessary, but I couldn’t stop my stomach from knotting in anxiety. Luke was working so hard to help Ariel, and we were going to kill him? Despite everything I had achieved and done, I had never killed anyone before. Sure, a bunch of bandits got caught in my spell back when we were in Begaritt and some of them probably died, but I hadn’t looked them in the eyes as I did it.

So my first kill was going to be Luke? This was going to be my introduction to murder? The thought made my blood run cold. At the same time, part of me felt like I had no other choice. If he was going to be an enemy and pose a threat to my family and I, it was best to get rid of him. I couldn’t let my emotions get in the way. It might come back later to bite me in the butt.

But can I really justify taking someone’s life simply because I “had no other choice”?

I wasn’t trying to preach morality here, but the idea didn’t sit right with me. I was clearly more opposed to the idea of killing than I even realized, considering how much I recoiled at the thought.

“We’re not sure that he’s one of the Man-God’s apostles yet, right?” I said, my voice straining with empty hope.

Orsted shook his head. “No. Given the timing of Luke’s actions, there can be no doubt that he is.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Their attempts to negotiate with Perugius have not completely fallen through yet, and news about the king falling sick has yet to reach them. Yet Luke chose this particular moment to seek you out. It’s clearly the Man-God’s doing.” Orsted spat the last words with disgust.

He really does despise the Man-God with every fiber of his being.

“In that case, why would he ask me to help Ariel?” I asked. “Shouldn’t he be doing the opposite? If he doesn’t want Ariel to be king, then he should be trying to keep me away from her.”

“He likely seeks to control someone from Asura Kingdom in order to lead us into a trap. Right now, the Man-God cannot see you directly, which is why he’s using Luke. It’s his way of keeping an eye on you. Think of it like someone putting their ear to a wall to hear what’s happening on the other side.”

“So Luke is monitoring me?”

“It’s possible that’s not all he’s doing,” said Orsted. “There’s a chance he might try something at some point. It’s a safer bet to get rid of him.”

It was possible that I might give away Orsted’s aim through my actions or words. Little wonder, then, why the Man-God decided to have someone surveil me. It would be impossible to keep Luke entirely out of the loop as I assisted Ariel with her goal.

“Let’s assume for a moment that we did kill Luke,” I said. “Are you sure this won’t negatively impact Her Highness or anyone else?”

Orsted narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

I started analyzing the possible repercussions of murdering Luke based off what Orsted had told me before.

“You mentioned some guy—Derrick Redbat, I think was his name—was originally supposed to become prime minister, but he’s no longer with us. With his absence, it’s highly likely Ariel is completely dependent upon Luke for moral support.”

Ariel certainly did rely on him. Although she had other retainers like Sylphie, Luke played the biggest role among her immediate supporters. It wasn’t affection or romance, but something similar to the bond I shared with Cliff and Zanoba. No matter what happened, I was confident they would never betray me. Ariel likely felt the same way about Luke.

“The Man-God may have considered that we’d discover his connection with Luke. Perhaps his entire aim is to goad us into killing him,” I said.

There was no telling what might happen to Ariel if Luke died. Humans were weak. No matter how tough they seemed on the outside, they were fragile enough to fall apart under the right conditions. I had some personal experience with this. I’d completely lost my way—lost sight of myself—when Paul died.

Of course, if all we wanted was a puppet, perhaps we would be better off without Luke.

I studied Orsted’s expression as I conducted my internal debate. The man finally nodded in agreement, his face no less terrifying than it had been before. “That’s perfectly possible. The Ariel that I knew valued Luke greatly. Without him, she may not succeed on the path towards kingship.”

Clearly, he also didn’t want a lifeless doll on the throne.

“So I think we should leave Luke to his own devices for the moment,” I said.

Yeah, okay, that was partly because I didn’t want to kill him. But Luke was also one of Sylphie’s best friends, as well as my cousin. The two of us weren’t very close, but we had enough of a connection that I didn’t want him dead. On top of that, I also had a personal aversion to killing in the first place.

Perhaps having sensed that, Orsted quietly replied, “All right. We’ll do as you advise, then.”

“Thank you.”

I’d dodged a bullet there, but we might still have to kill Luke in the end. If it came down to that, Sylphie might resent me for it. It might even lead to a divorce. That thought made my stomach knot up. Even so, I had to steel myself, just in case I had to cross that bridge eventually.

Anyway, that takes care of the business with Luke.

While I was on the subject, there were some other questions on my mind too. “You mentioned before that the Man-God can’t control a bunch of people at once, right?” I asked. “About how many can he control at once, then?”

Orsted had briefly mentioned in passing that the Man-God couldn’t control a whole crowd at once, but that meant he *could* control more than one, right?

“I cannot give you a precise number, but it’s most likely around three people.”

Only three, huh? Less than I expected.

“And what are the odds that he can control more than that?” I asked.

“Not impossible, but when he attempted to kill me, he only employed three people to do so. None of the others came directly after me. We are probably safe to assume it’s just three.”

“Which three were these?”

“The Sword God, the North God, and a Demon King.”

And apparently, Orsted had turned the tables on all of them.

A Demon King in addition to two of the Seven Great Powers, huh? If even that kind of firepower wasn’t enough to get rid of Orsted, it’s no wonder the Man-God gave up on that route.

If he sicced those kinds of people on me, I probably wouldn’t stand a chance. Although if he could have, he probably already would have. I suspected he was instead slowly altering people’s destinies over long periods, as he did with me.

He’d probably be a big fan of Rube Goldberg machine videos.

“I wonder why he can only take control of three…” I muttered.

“Because that’s the limit of his foresight abilities.”

“You mean he can only look into three people’s futures at any time, and any more than that is impossible?”

“Correct.”

I wondered if that meant he might be able to control four people, assuming he didn't look into their futures.

Nah, someone who can cheat and look into the future would never gamble by giving up that specific power. It was reasonable to assume he would only control three people and no more.

"So if Luke is one of those three, that means he's got two others under his control," I surmised.

"There's no evidence at all that he is controlling three people right now."

I shrugged. "You may be right, but I think there's a good chance that he's got at least one person under his thumb in the Asura Kingdom."

"Why do you think that?" asked Orsted.

"If the Man-God truly doesn't want Ariel to take the throne, then it makes sense for him to control someone who opposes her and someone working alongside her. Perfect for collecting and disseminating information, right?"

"The Man-God doesn't need to go that far to… No, I suppose there is some value in reporting your movements to the opposition." Despite his initial dismissal, Orsted managed to talk himself into agreeing with me.

But now that I thought about it, the Man-God could see into people's hearts. Perhaps he didn't need to gather information. Although Ariel's future prospects were obscured from his view thanks to my presence, having someone who could keep an eye on us was more than enough for him.

"It's perfectly possible he's involved in something else entirely," I acknowledged. "Like, maybe he's waiting to attack my family when I leave the house or something."

"With the Sacred Beast serving as your family's guardian, the Man-God cannot readily go after them. That creature has enough power that you needn't worry about that."

I stared at him. "More than Arumanfi?"

Orsted snorted. “Perugius’s spirits don’t even begin to compare.”

It was hard to believe what he was saying when Leo had yet to prove himself, but this was *the* Dragon God speaking. Surely, I could trust what he was saying. Honestly, I had no way of knowing either way.

“I digress,” said Orsted. “You are likely right about the Man-God having a puppet in the kingdom.”

I nodded. “Then the key to victory will be sniffing this person out, I assume?”

“Indeed. I know nothing of his third apostle, assuming he even has one. It could be that this person is operating separately and is unrelated to the Asuran throne. Keep your guard up.”

In order to achieve victory against the Man-God, we had to identify his three puppets, defeat them, *and* accomplish our own objectives in the process. We would probably have to repeat this process again and again. Our current goal was getting Ariel on the throne. Although it wasn’t confirmed, Luke was most likely one of his lackeys. The identities of the other two remained a mystery.

“Is there anyone you know with absolute certainty is not on his side?”

I asked this knowing I was asking for the impossible. It didn’t really matter who the Man-God’s puppets were; our objectives wouldn’t change. Still, if he assumed control over Zanoba or Cliff and Orsted tasked me with killing them, I wouldn’t know what to do. I’d be devastated.

“Your family is safe from his influence. In addition to the bracelet you wear, they are also under the Guardian Beast’s protection.”

“And what about Cliff and Zanoba?”

After a pause, he said, “They could be possible targets. Be careful around them.”

Seriously? That was not the answer I wanted to hear.

“Is there anything we can do to make sure they don’t fall into his grasp?” I asked.

Orsted shook his head. “No. If you find it necessary, you could warn them against heeding the words of someone who calls themselves the Man-God. Though I doubt it would do you any good.”

No good, huh? Well, that puts me in a pickle.

It was a problem of chance. The Man-God didn’t attach himself to anyone and everyone. All I could do was pray—to a different god—that Zanoba and Cliff wouldn’t become one of his targets.

“For the moment,” I said, changing the subject, “I should work on getting Perugius’s support to help Ariel on the path to kingship, right? That plan hasn’t changed?”

“Correct. Though you should remain wary of the Man-God’s apostle. If he starts proposing something, inform me immediately.”

“Very well.”

At least our plan of attack remained the same for the moment.

“In any case, it seems like Ariel has worked herself into quite the corner.” I stroked my chin. “From what I can tell, she has nothing with which to sway Perugius’ opinion.”

“Hm.” Orsted merely grunted.

“The last time I was with the two of them, I believe he asked her what the necessary element for being a king is, and she wasn’t able to answer adequately.”

“Ah, yes. How very like Perugius to ask such a question.”

“Do you…happen to know the answer?” I asked.

Orsted glared at me.

Eep! You don’t have to give me the evil eye. I get it. This is a hurdle she needs to overcome if she wants to be king, right?

“I have no idea,” he said. “However, the only person Perugius ever supported for the throne was Gaunis Freean Asura. If you research him, you should be able to find a clue to lead you in the right direction.”

Wait, so you don't know either? Well, I guess you gave me a hint at least.

"All right. Then I shall be off to see it done." It was the trump card I would use to get in contact with Ariel.

Before I left, Orsted lent me one of his magical items. I say *lend* because he called it a gift, but I thought of it as equipment for work. It was a robe, and conveniently gray, even though I had no part in its creation. It was a little darker than the one I had been wearing.

"That robe was worn by the great sage Titiana a millennium ago," said Orsted. "It's made from a Death Adder Rat's skin, woven with magically imbued thread. It has high magic resistance and is stab-proof. It likely became a magical item after being left in a labyrinth for an extended period, where it developed the ability to reduce the wearer's weight by half, meaning one can move like the wind if needed. Since you cannot use Battle Aura, it should prove useful."

If his words were to be believed, it was quite the incredible item.

"So…" I licked my lips. "What kind of price would something like this fetch?"

"I took this from the Dragonfolk's Repository in the past few days since we last met. It would net you a decent amount if you sold it, but I am giving it to you so that you can protect yourself. Wear it."

Oof. He read me like a book.

I wondered what the Dragonfolk's Repository was. Did they have a bunch of items like this stored in there? They probably did. I could just picture it—boots that could open any treasure chest they kicked, a trumpet that could uncover hidden rooms…

At any rate, this robe would increase my combat proficiency. It was certainly a huge step down from my Magic Armor, but I could bridge that gap with my own knowledge and courage.

Wait, but I have neither of those things. Oh, well, guess I'll just have to try my best anyway.

That night, I summoned Sylphie to my room. If I was going to help Ariel, I needed to speak with my wife first. Sylphie must have sensed it was a serious matter because when she showed up, she was in her normal clothes rather than pajamas. That was fine with me, considering the topic I was about to broach.

"Well, Rudy, what is it you wanted to talk about?" Sylphie asked, her expression guarded.

I could hardly blame her for being wary. The last few times I formally called her here, it had been to relay what she must have thought was crazy talk.

"Sylphie, I am going to be direct," I said.

"All right."

"I have been ordered to help Princess Ariel on her path to becoming king."

She scowled suspiciously, then her face lit up, but almost as quickly she was back to furrowing her brow again. "Ordered?" she echoed.

"That's right."

"Which means you're not doing it of your own free will?"

"Orsted's the one calling the shots."

Her demeanor changed completely. I had waffled back and forth between telling her the truth about Orsted's involvement, but I had so much guilt about things I had done to her in the past. This time, at least, I wanted to trust her and speak the truth. This was one of her close friends we were talking about here.

Sylphie gaped at me for a moment before snapping her jaw shut and narrowing her eyes. "And what is his motive for making Princess Ariel king? Does he stand to benefit from that somehow?"

“It will give him connections to Asura Kingdom through me. It doesn’t seem like he wants something right now, but he may ask for assistance in the future.”

“But he’s the Dragon God. The same one who beat you senseless even when you used your Magic Armor. I realize Asura Kingdom is regarded as the most powerful country in the world, but I still can’t see why someone like him would want to foster such relations with them.”

“There are some matters that can only be resolved by political influence and not force alone,” I reasoned. “It’s only natural that Orsted would want that at his disposal, so he can make use of it when he needs it.”

This was merely groundwork. It was hard to explain, but making Ariel king now would allow him to reap the benefits in another hundred years. Orsted had an overall picture of how the future was supposed to play out. I had no idea how he would eventually make use of Ariel or if he would even utilize her at all. What I did know, based on what I’d read in my future self’s journal, was that Ariel becoming king would inconvenience the Man-God. Thus, we would place her on the throne. Sure, part of this was to get under the Man-God’s skin, but it was also a basic tenet of war not to let your opponent have their way.

The whole plan meant far more to Orsted than me. In fact, it meant almost nothing to me. As far as I was concerned, the minuses outweighed the pluses. If I helped Ariel assume the throne, everyone would label me as one of her supporters, and that meant getting pulled into the sticky, corrupt mess that was aristocratic politics. Personally, getting a foot in the kingdom’s door wasn’t worth getting wrapped up in that.

No, my desire to help Ariel was purely personal. She had been there for me a lot, and it was time to repay her for that. Perhaps it was better not to think of pros and cons but instead look at it in simpler terms. Ariel would be overjoyed if she became king. Sylphie would be overjoyed if her close friend managed to achieve her goal. And if we managed to stop the Man-God from having his way,

Orsted would be satisfied. I stood to benefit too; Sylphie's love for me would deepen, and Orsted would be convinced of my usefulness.

Yeah, that's the best way to think of it.

"Well, Orsted's future demands aside, at this point, I think Princess Ariel only stands to benefit," I said.

"Hmm…" Sylphie put a hand to her chin. "Well, yes, I guess you're right. There are many unsavory characters in Asura Kingdom, and if we think of it as pitting villains against villains, it's not a bad move."

Yikes. Sylphie wasn't pulling any punches. I wondered what she really thought of Orsted. I could admit he looked like a bad guy, but did he look even more menacing and untrustworthy than I thought? Did he seem like the type of person who might kill someone upon first meeting them?

Okay, I can't really argue that last one.

"Princess Ariel should be the one to decide if we should accept his aid or not," she said, narrowing her eyes. "Personally, I want a guarantee that he won't betray us."

"A guarantee?"

"Yes. Why do you seem so sure he won't stab us in the back?"

I actually wasn't. In fact, he did seem to be hiding something from me. But he seemed more trustworthy than the Man-God, at least. If I summoned him, he came immediately.

"It's not that I think he won't," I said, "but I do think he's sincere in his dealings with me. As long as I don't work against him and continue to make myself useful, I don't think he'll be our enemy."

"If you say so…" She pursed her lips, not fully convinced. "All right, I'll drop the matter of whether Orsted can be trusted or not, at least for now."

"Are you sure?"

"Continuing our debate won't do any good, will it? And it seems like you trust him."

I shrugged. “Yeah, true.”

“We’d just have an endless verbal tug-of-war if we kept at it.” Sylphie took a deep breath, straightened her back, and fixed her gaze on me again. “More importantly, I think we should discuss what your plans are. How do you—or rather, how does Orsted intend to make her king?”

Sylphie was being unusually serious. Right now she wasn’t here as my wife, but as Ariel’s bodyguard. It was a side of her I rarely caught a glimpse of. Her expression, coupled with her natural boyish nature, made her look like a distinguished nobleman.

“For now, we intend to persuade Lord Perugius to back her.”

“But if it’s between a Dragon King and a Dragon God, wouldn’t the latter—that is, Orsted—be higher ranking? Yet he still wants to convince Perugius to help us?”

I nodded. “Lord Perugius has greater political influence in Asura Kingdom, and his words hold more weight with the people there. In contrast, Orsted has absolutely no authority in Asura.” I was only repeating what the man himself had told me.

“But Lord Perugius doesn’t seem likely to bend easily. No matter what Princess Ariel says, he won’t give her the time of day. Luke and I have tried to convince him on her behalf, but to no avail.”

“Yeah, things do look pretty rough.”

Perugius had even refused to honor Orsted’s request to help her. I thought he would have heeded any order, given how much he seemed to fear the Dragon King, but he clearly had his own opinions about the situation.

“But,” Sylphie continued, “Zanoba seems to have gotten on his good side. He even seems to have taken a liking to you as well, Rudy. I wonder what the difference is.”

“If I had to guess, I would say it’s because the two of us aren’t trying to become kings,” I said.

“Does trying to take a crown offend him somehow?”

A bit simplistic, but not far off from Perugius's personal view of kings.

Sylphie sighed. "I wonder if he never had any intention of aiding her to begin with."

"No, if that were the case, he would have refused her outright. He seems to be testing her."

"Really? Hm…" Sylphie crossed her arms and tilted her head.

"At any rate, I'd appreciate it if you'd allow me to talk to Princess Ariel directly in the next few days. Do you mind?"

"Sure. I'll set things up for you. I'll let Luke know as well. The two of us will be present for your conversation. That's all right, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Fine with me. Although, I would like to keep Orsted's involvement a secret and frame it as me helping because you and Luke convinced me to do so. Can you do that?"

"Why would we hide the truth about Orsted? Since you're his subordinate now, it might give Princess Ariel peace of mind to know you're doing this under orders."

In other words, she'd feel relieved to hear she had the Dragon God's support. However, I didn't want the Man-God's apostle—Luke, that is—to have any more information than was absolutely necessary. Even though we had yet to confirm whether he was a puppet or not.

"The Man-God's eyes and ears could be anywhere. I'd like to keep Orsted's objectives and orders discreet."

Sylphie paused before asking, "Orsted is fighting this Man-God person, right? Is he really that evil?"

"Evil or not, he tried to kill Roxy, tried to go after you, and tried to kill me off by pitting me against Orsted. He's our enemy."

"What? He tried to go after me?" She jerked her head around, surveying our surroundings. "Is he still after me?"

"I couldn't say, but I doubt he's given up."

“In that case, I’ll keep my guard up,” Sylphie said.

“Especially at night.”

Sylphie giggled. “The only person in this town who would try to go after me at night is you, Rudy.”

Hahaha, well, she’s got me there. Maybe I should do just that tonight.

In any case, at least we managed to work out a plan for me to meet Ariel.

“So, Rudy…”

I thought the conversation was over, but Sylphie continued. “If you’re going to help Her Highness, that means you’ll be going to Asura Kingdom as well, right?”

“Yes, I’m sure I will. I can’t very well convince Perugius to help and then send her off and rinse my hands of the matter.”

Plus, I would need to defeat whatever apostle the Man-God had lying in wait in the kingdom. I also needed to hunt down this Tristina person. Which meant I didn’t even need to consult Orsted about whether I needed to go or not. Clearly, I would have to.

“I want you to take me along as well,” said Sylphie.

“…What?”

“I know you probably want me to stay here and look after Lucie. I also know that Princess Ariel and Luke want me to continue living here in Sharia. But, honestly, I want to help out. I have been with them for so long now.” She reached over and took my hand, her soft fingers curling tightly around mine. “Please, Rudy. I want you to take me with you.”

I squeezed her hand. Frankly, I wanted her to stay. That was probably my own selfishness talking, but I wanted her to be where it was safe, where she could look after Lucie. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not one of those guys who think a woman’s lot in life is to stand silently behind her man. It was just… I couldn’t explain it, but I didn’t want Sylphie to be in danger.

Still, Sylphie had spent years with Ariel and Luke. They'd been companions since the Displacement Incident. They were to her what Ruijerd was to me, and if Ruijerd ever found himself in a tight spot, I would drop everything to rush to his aid. I owed him that much after how much he had done for me. Sure, I would hesitate if I had to weigh helping him against protecting the lives of my family, but he was still one of my top priorities. I was sure Sylphie felt the same about Ariel and the others. Family was still important to her, and she knew she had to help raise Lucie. Even so, if her friends needed help, she wanted to do everything in her power to be there for them. That was only natural.

"All right," I said. "Lend me your assistance then, Sylphie."

"Okay!" Sylphie's face lit up, her mouth widening into a grin.

It was then that I recalled what the Man-God had said to me—that Sylphie was destined to die in Asura Kingdom. I hated considering the possibility, but would this end up shortening her lifespan? Was I overthinking this? The course of history had been altered. Things might not go down the way they did in my future self's diary. Still, I had to say it.

"Sylphie."

"Yes?"

"The Man-God won't get directly involved, but he will use other people to get in our way."

"You mean like how he used you to fight Orsted?" she asked.

"Exactly."

Sylphie frowned. "Then we should be wary of anyone that might be under his control."

"Right. But…well, it could be someone close to you."

"Someone close to me?" She blinked. "Like who?"

"Like Luke."

Her face hardened. "Rudy, that's out of the question. If Orsted is working to make Princess Ariel king, then the Man-God will try to

undermine that, right? Which means he'll be trying to stop her, so there's no way he would go after Luke. Luke would never, ever turn on Princess Ariel."

"The Man-God might find a way to sweet-talk him into it. He has a way of corrupting people."

Sylphie glared at me. I sensed murderous hostility in her gaze. This was probably the first time I'd ever seen her look at me that way.

"If Luke loses sight of myself and tries to hurt Her Highness…" Her voice trailed off. "Then I will kill him."

She said it with such resolve that it sent a chill through me. This was the first time I had ever thought of her as terrifying.

"Neither Luke nor I ever want to betray Her Highness," Sylphie continued. "I am sure he'd rather die than be deceived by someone and stab her in the back. I would too."

I could understand how she felt. If I ever did anything that hurt Ruijerd, even Eris might turn on me. It was the same thing here.

"I see. Sorry for bringing that up out of the blue," I said.

Sylphie shook her head. "No, there's no need for you to apologize. I appreciate you warning me." She smiled quietly.

Seeing that expression on her face helped me finally steel myself. If a time ever came when Luke needed to die, I couldn't let it be by Sylphie's hands. I would need to be the one to do the deed.

Chapter 5:
Working Together

WHEN I ARRIVED at the floating fortress, Ariel was out in the garden having a tea party. Sylvaril was serving, but Perugius was nowhere in sight. Instead, Nanahoshi was the one sitting across from Her Highness.

She must not feel very worried about her situation if she can have a tea party, I thought, but just as quickly, I realized I was mistaken. Ariel wore the exhausted face of an overworked salaryman.

Huh, matches perfectly with the exhaustion I saw on Luke's face.

Ariel put effort into pasting an elegant smile on her face, but she couldn't hide the circles under her eyes. She must be feeling cornered. The way she eyed Nanahoshi screamed, "Come on, ask me what's wrong. Ask me!"

Nanahoshi ignored her completely. In fact, she seemed uncomfortable just sitting there. She wouldn't outright refuse an invitation to have tea, but at the same time, it was clear she didn't want to be dragged into the messy situation between Ariel and Perugius.

If ever there was a poster girl for the lazy protagonist archetype, it'd be Nanahoshi.

The only reason she didn't flee the scene was because Ariel had offered her assistance when she was on death's door. Even if Ariel only lent us the use of her magical implement, that still qualified as help.

"Oh, Rudeus." Nanahoshi's expression relaxed the moment she spotted me. "Mind coming over here and sitting for a few?"

I sat myself between the two girls. Sylvaril took the opportunity to pour me a cup of tea. The cup clattered as she slammed it down before me, which was unusually violent for someone as refined as her. I glanced up at her, and I could feel the coldness emanating from behind her mask. Perhaps she was angry about my mistaken summoning of Arumanfi.

Sorry about that…

"Okay, Rudeus, please go ahead," Sylphie mumbled as she took up position behind Ariel. Ariel looked a bit more relaxed thanks to her presence.

I looked around and noticed Luke in the background. I had spoken with him prior to our arrival. I'd told him that I would cooperate with the princess and he was absolutely overjoyed, showering Sylphie with compliments for managing to persuade me.

"Well, Lord Rudeus," said Ariel. "It's been quite a while. I would congratulate you on becoming Dragon God Orsted's subordinate, but I must ask…are you sure that was the right choice?" Her words lacked their usual vigor. She was being vague. Perhaps Sylphie had already badmouthed Orsted to her.

"Thank you. Being in the employ of someone powerful provides a certain peace of mind. That goes for anyone, not just me," I replied.

"You are quite powerful yourself. I suppose people of like power tend to be drawn to one another. Someone like that wouldn't even give me the time of day."

Oh, boy. She's really selling herself short. Looks like things are headed in a pretty grim direction.

"Hey," Nanahoshi whispered, poking me in the side. "Orsted came to see me yesterday."

"Yeah? And?"

"I apologized to him, and he forgave me. Told me he hoped to continue our relationship."

"Good to hear," I said.

It was a short conversation, but Nanahoshi looked like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. People often remarked that if saying sorry were all it took to solve matters, police wouldn't need to exist, but I would argue most things could be solved by a sincere apology. Personally, I wouldn't be willing to forgive someone who had tricked me, led me into a trap, and nearly got me killed… But that just demonstrated how generous Orsted was.

"I also happened to see Lord Orsted," said Ariel, voice as pleasant as a bell. There was something strangely charismatic about her voice that made you want to heed what she said. She was gorgeous as well. Her blonde hair was more radiant than anyone else's that I'd ever seen. She was the embodiment of beauty itself. I was surrounded by plenty of attractive men and women, but if you had to score them objectively, Ariel would come out on top. She was no ordinary beauty; she was like a piece of fine art. Like she'd walked out of a painting. Granted, right now she lacked her usual energy, but that only gave her the ephemeral luster of an exhausted widow.

"He's a terrifying man," Ariel continued. "I only glimpsed him from afar, but that was enough for all my hair to stand on end, screaming that he was dangerous."

Ah, so she's already seen him.

Probably not a good idea to tell her I was operating under his orders, then, but perhaps it didn't matter. She already knew I was his subordinate.

Ariel went on. "That was yesterday. He went home after enjoying some tea with Lady Nanahoshi. He seemed to be in a foul mood the entire time, but when Lady Sylvaril spilled some tea on him, he didn't get upset with her at all."

Sylvaril spilled tea on Orsted? She couldn't have done that on purpose, right? No, she must have been so terrified that her hand slipped.

"The atmosphere seemed incredibly tense, yet Lady Nanahoshi had such a warm smile on her face, one that I'd never

seen before. Despite Lord Orsted's appearance and demeanor, he must be quite magnanimous and open-minded."

…Wait, seriously? I'm surprised to hear her say that. Maybe the curse isn't as effective on her as everyone else. That works in our favor, at least. Or could this be the Man-God's doing?

Indeed, he stood to benefit the most from controlling her actions. Instead of using Luke to lead her along, why not pull her strings directly since she was in charge of the whole gig? Orsted had never hinted at such a possibility, though. Maybe he had a good reason for believing the Man-God wouldn't touch her.

"Apparently he's only so hated by everyone because of a curse he bears," I told her.

"Oh, truly? In that case, perhaps I should have said hello to him. He was intimidating enough from afar that it made my legs tremble. If I heard his voice up close, I might wet myself." She chuckled.

Uh, wet herself…?

"Although, it does feel quite good to relieve yourself in front of people…"

"Pardon?"

"Lady Ariel!" Sylphie scolded.

I'm pretty sure she just talked about enjoying water sports, but I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Asura's upper crust seemed to be full of perverts. There was something incredibly immoral about hearing a girl so classically picturesque talk about golden showers.

"Rudy! Wipe that depraved grin off your face! You're in front of the princess," Sylphie cried.

"Yes, ma'am." I put a hand over my mouth. Did my face betray my thoughts so easily? Sure, I was a pervert, but I was really only interested in seeing the girls I liked doing erotic things. Like Sylphie, for example. Not that I was going to ask her to pee in front of me. I didn't want her to hate me.

“Ugh.” Nanahoshi wrinkled her nose, clearly disgusted, but I decided to ignore her.

“Ahem.” Ariel cleared her throat. “At any rate, Lord Rudeus, it made perfect sense to me when I heard you were working under Lord Orsted.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Because I believe it would take someone as powerful as him to be able to control someone like you.”

Really? I don’t think it takes much to control me. All Sylphie had to do when we were in bed at night was say, “Hey, Rudy, I have a favor to ask,” and I’d wag my tail like a dog, ready to do whatever. To be clear, I was *not* expecting that kind of stuff from Ariel. All I needed from her was cold, hard cash. After all, I was the type of man who worked for two things: money and women.

Anyway, it was about time we stopped beating around the bush. I was here to talk about cooperation, not chat about Orsted.

“When you say *someone powerful*, don’t you also mean someone like yourself, Princess Ariel?” I asked, playing coy.

Ariel put a hand over her mouth and narrowed her eyes. “Oh? I didn’t realize you flattered people like that.”

It wasn’t meant as flattery. Even though I had become desensitized to such titles as of late, Ariel was still the princess of Asura Kingdom. In the terms of my previous life, she was somewhat similar to the crown prince of England in status. One might catch a glimpse of her at official ceremonies, but speaking directly to her was out of the question, let alone being able to sit with her at a table like this. That was how important she was.

Her status aside, Ariel had been hard at work increasing her influence. Almost every person in a key position in Sharia had some connection with her. There were the principal and vice principal of the academy, the top brass of the Magicians’ Guild, the head of the magical implement workshop, the top administrator of a company, and the branch leader of the local Adventurers’ Guild. Those were the connections I personally knew about. One could invoke her

name and expect favorable treatment just about anywhere you went. It was no exaggeration to say her influence could be felt at the top levels of Sharia's key industries.

In short, she didn't lack for connections. She had plenty of power.

"I did entertain the idea of having you as my subordinate," said Ariel.

"You did, did you?"

"I gave up on that idea quickly. For a number of reasons, but chiefly because your power is too much for me to handle." She glanced to the side. Beyond the stunning garden was an expanse of white clouds and open sky, extending into the far distance. She stared off in that direction as she mumbled to herself, *"You hold power beyond yourself. It will be the end of you."*

For a moment, I thought she was talking to me, but I was mistaken.

Ariel turned her attention back toward me and explained, "When I was younger, I saw a play in the palace. That was a quote from the Great Demon Empress Kishirika Kishirisu."

I was pretty sure she'd never said that. It was probably a line someone else had come up with. The little girl I'd met would never be capable of saying a line that clever.

"When the Golden Knight Aldebaran defeated her, Kishirika cursed him with those words as she lay dying," said Ariel.

"Huh."

"Aldebaran became king of the humans after that, but everyone feared him. In the end, his retainers betrayed him and killed him."

This play she'd seen certainly did show the darker side of human nature, but it was quite different from the history I knew.

"That play is always performed when one of the royal family celebrates an important milestone in their life."

These milestones were one's fifth, tenth, and fifteenth birthdays. In Asura Kingdom, these occasions were always celebrated with grand parties. The royal family apparently staged a play as well.

"It deviates from history," Ariel acknowledged, "but I'm told it highlights the frame of mind a royal should have."

So it's not historically accurate, as I suspected. That wasn't surprising. It was completely different from the history I knew. The Golden Knight Aldebaran and Kishirika Kirisu had struck each other down in battle. Wait, no, perhaps I was thinking of the showdown between Demonic Dragon King Laplace and the Fighting God.

Oh, well, it's not that important.

"What frame of mind is that?" I asked.

"The key tenets of what makes a king: fighting, winning, and ruling over one's subjects."

I furrowed my brow.

"However, if that's truly all there is to it, why did Aldebaran's people betray and kill him? Was the king who had this play written trying to curse the generation that came after him? When I was younger, I couldn't help having these doubts. It was only when I turned fifteen that I suddenly realized. 'You hold power beyond yourself. It will be the end of you.' These words perfectly summed up the core message."

She paused, and glanced off into the distance again as she continued, "Too much power will lead one down the path of destruction. Thus, one should only wield as much power as they can control. If one wants to become king, they must be able to master everything they have at their disposal. Even now, I still believe that to be true."

Ariel hung her head, her long lashes casting shadows over her cheeks. "I'm perfectly aware that you and Lord Perugius are both more than I can handle." She wore her usual soft smile, but it looked like she was on the verge of tears. "I'm going to ask Lord Perugius

for his help one more time, but if he refuses me, I think I will give up on trying to convince him."

"You're going to give up?" I asked.

"Yes. It goes without saying that I do not intend to give up on becoming king, but I will cease my efforts to gain his support. While his power may be beyond me, the Asuran throne is not."

I said nothing, but I nearly felt like sighing. She was far too caught up on whether someone was "beyond her" or not.

"Princess Ariel," I said.

"Yes, what is it, Lord Rudeus?"

"What part of me do you think is so powerful?"

Arielle had said I was powerful and special. I had always dreamed of being seen in such a light, but as things stood, I definitely didn't think of myself as extraordinary. That wasn't even a biased view, in my opinion. I had not yet reached a level that could be called impressive.

"Oh, if I were to name all your incredible qualities, the list would go on and on. I suppose the biggest one would be your impressive mana pool."

"My mana pool, huh?"

Well, it was true that my mana pool dwarfed most people's. Having the Laplace Aspect had blessed me with an impressive one. Perhaps so much so that an ordinary person would never become my equal through effort alone. I could also admit that it had proved beneficial more than once in the past. Still, an expansive mana pool wasn't the solution for everything. All the problems I faced required other solutions.

"Perhaps if my mana pool could solve every problem I'm facing, I would agree that I'm a powerful person," I said.

"What problems are those?"

"Hard to give a concrete example since these problems are a daily occurrence. Right now, I spend every day worrying how I'm

ever going to explain what's going on to my family."

I was terrified of the Man-God and scared of Orsted as well. I'd glossed over the details and fed lies to my family, having no better idea of how to explain things to them. Yet Ariel said I was powerful? Don't make me laugh.

"I can't speak for Lord Perugius," I said, "but I'm not powerful, at least. I am simply the husband of your close friend who happens to have a bigger mana pool than most people, and a lot of odd acquaintances. But I'm just your average magician, really. One who is constantly worried over something." Those were my honest feelings, no matter how embarrassingly clichéd it sounded.

I reached across the table and took Ariel's hand in mine. Her skin was so soft, and her fingers were so dainty I almost feared they might break in my grip. Sylphie pouted in her corner, but she would have to deal with it for the moment.

"Princess Ariel, I did not come here today for a simple chat."

"You came to talk me up instead?" Ariel kept a gentle smile on her face, not at all flustered that I had suddenly grabbed her hand. I sensed some exhaustion behind it, but it was an otherwise flawless poker face.

"If that was all it took to sway your heart, that might actually be somewhat appealing… But actually, Luke and Sylphie were the ones who asked me to come here."

In an unusual display of alarm, Ariel's head jerked around as she glanced back at the two of them. Sylphie stood firm, while Luke quickly bowed his head.

"They begged me to help you."

Her dainty fingers squeezed around mine like a steel vice, exhibiting far more strength than I thought possible, enough to make me wince.

"The two of them said that…?" she mumbled.

"I didn't come here to look condescendingly down upon you, scoffing about how you need my help. In fact, it's just the opposite." I

wondered how she would have reacted to me suddenly grabbing her hand and saying all this if she were her normal, confident self. “Won’t you please let me work alongside you?”

A tear fell from Ariel’s eyes. It was beautiful. Yet strangely, I found it surprising that she would cry.

Why is that? I wondered.

Ariel quickly wiped her tears with her free hand. She forced a smile and said, “This is the first time I’ve ever heard a pick-up line that managed to shake me to my core.” It was clear she wasn’t joking around; she’d schooled her expression, her cheeks weren’t blushing, and she wasn’t crying anymore either. She looked every bit the dignified princess.

“I admit, I would be grateful for the assistance,” Arielle said, nodding. “However…” She lowered her chin and studied me closely, trying to suss out my intentions. “You are Lord Orsted’s subordinate now, yes? Will he really allow you to do such a thing?”

“I have already spoken with him about it,” I assured her.

“Which means that you’re acting on his orders then, yes?”

His curse didn’t seem completely effective on her, so maybe it wouldn’t hurt to answer honestly. But I decided to stick with the plan and keep his aim a secret.

“No, not at all.” I shook my head. “I was the one who said I wanted to help you, and he told me I was free to do as I wished.”

After a brief pause, Ariel said, “All right. Very well. Be sure to convey my gratitude to him then.”

Sylphie pursed her lips, unhappy at how I’d handled things, but this was how it had to be.

“In that case, I look forward to having your support,” said Ariel.

“And I look forward to working with you.” We readjusted our grip on each other’s hands and shook on it.

Now that we have that settled, time to move on to the details.

“If we’re going to make you king, we could enlist Lord Orsted’s help in the matter…but frankly, he doesn’t hold much sway in Asura Kingdom. I don’t think he would be much help to you,” I said, prefacing my main point. “As such, I think Lord Perugius’s help will be crucial.”

“Agreed,” Ariel said solemnly, sitting up straighter in her chair.

Perhaps I was only imagining it, but Sylphie and Luke looked more serious now than they had a few minutes ago.

Orsted had also mentioned that convincing Perugius to support Ariel was paramount, which only further reinforced how much authority Perugius held in Asura. The problem was how to go about persuading him.

Perugius posed a question to us before, which was…

“What is the most important quality a king must have? If you can bring me that answer yourself, then I will give you my support,” I said, reciting what I remembered of our previous conversation with Perugius.

Ariel’s eyes twitched. She had racked her brain over and over for the answer to that question.

“I wonder what kind of response he really wants,” I said.

Previously, Ariel had answered, “They’re wise, listen to their cabinet ministers, and don’t forget their position in society,” but Perugius dismissed that as incorrect. He then turned the question to me, and I answered, “I think I’d prefer a ruler who can put themselves in the shoes of the common folk, rather than someone who relies on their own abilities.” Perugius had called that response “preferable”, but that suggested it wasn’t the correct answer either.

If Orsted was to be believed, Derrick Redbat must have found the correct answer to this challenge when it was posed to him. Orsted had also suggested the answer likely had something to do with Gaunis Freean Asura. Of course, since history had been changed, there was no guarantee that Derrick had answered the same question as the one we now faced, but it was worth investigating.

“If memory serves, King Gaunis was a close friend of Lord Perugius’s, right?” I asked.

Ariel nodded. “Yes, the story of their friendship is famous. Lord Perugius also seems very nostalgic when he comes up in conversation.”

“In that case, whatever this quality is, King Gaunis must have possessed it. Correct?”

“Perhaps.”

“You can look into him, can’t you? There should be some records about him.”

I thought my suggestion was foolproof, but for whatever reason, Ariel and her two bodyguards looked less than enthused.

“I hate to break this to you…” said Ariel.

“What? Did I say something weird?”

“No, but we’ve already looked into King Gaunis. We found nothing of note in the archives on this floating fortress, nor in Ranoa’s library.”

Ah, so they’d already tried that route. That made sense. Perugius’s relationship with Gaunis was known far and wide. It would be stranger if they hadn’t followed that lead.

“If we could check the national library in Asura, there might be something he published that might give us better insight, but…”

True, the best place to find information on an Asuran king would be in the kingdom’s library. But for obvious reasons, we’d find it difficult to pay a visit to the place right now.

“Well, that *is* troubling,” I said. “In that case…”

Perhaps it would be better to ask about Derrick instead. How would I make such an inquiry, though? They would all find it strange that I even knew about him to begin with.

“Um, before we discuss this any further…” Ariel glanced briefly at Sylvaril. “Are you sure this is all right? Lord Perugius can hear everything we’re saying.”

I tilted my head. “And? I suspect he finds the whole thing entertaining.”

“I worry that he may not permit us to discuss this matter as a group,” Ariel explained.

Ah, that’s what she means. Ariel thought he might want her to think on it and come up with an answer on her own. I, on the other hand, wasn’t so sure that was his aim.

I glanced at Sylvaril. She fluttered her wings gently before saying, “It matters not to Lord Perugius how you arrive at your answer. If it is the correct one, he will lend you his support.” The words were left unspoken, but her tone said it all: *That should be a given. He is, after all, a very magnanimous person.*

“Do you mean to say that I should have consulted others from the very beginning?” Ariel asked.

Sylvaril nodded. “In fact, Lord Perugius was deeply puzzled as to why you were trying to solve it on your own to begin with.”

Ariel smiled bitterly. “I backed myself into a corner by overthinking it, I see.” She muttered to herself, then stood up, her spirits renewed. She lifted her arms, catching her blonde hair on the way up. It fell back across her shoulders as she stretched, hands clasped in the air. She then cracked her neck and clapped her cheeks.

Not the kind of behavior you’d expect from a princess.

Sometimes people could limit themselves by overthinking. They were often burdened by the belief that things had to be a certain way and that there were no alternatives. Those preconceptions and biases often led people away from the correct path. It was only when a person realized they were mistaken, when they realized there were several ways of accomplishing the same thing, that their field of view expanded and let them feel freer than they’d ever been. I had experienced something similar when Roxy dragged me outside for the first time.

“All right!” Ariel declared. “Sylphie, Luke, take your seats.”

“As you command!”

“All right.”

The two happily settled at the table, which only made Nanahoshi feel even more awkward.

“Now then, let’s begin our meeting,” Ariel said, exuding the same confidence I had seen from her when I first met her.

Should I start clapping? No, I’d better not.

Instead I raised my hand and said, “Before we begin, I would like to make sure we are all on the same page. Do you mind?”

“Same page?” Ariel echoed.

“What I mean to say is, I don’t really know much about you, Your Highness.”

“I suppose not… Well, what is it you wish to know?” Her cheeks flushed, and Sylphie stared meaningfully at me.

Oh, come on. I’m not asking for her vital stats here. I’m trying to have a serious conversation.

“First, if you wouldn’t mind sharing, I would like to hear why you want to become king.”

I knew she wanted to become king, but I had only picked up bits and pieces about her motivations. She mentioned something about how many people had died for her. I assumed Derrick was probably one of them.

“I am fairly certain I already told you what my motivations are,” said Ariel.

“What? You did?”

“Yes, when you and Sylphie got married.”

“Is that right…” I scratched my head. “Well, I’d like you to remind me regardless.”

“I told you that I wouldn’t be able to face the people who believed in me and died for me if I didn’t become king.”

I nodded. “I see. So you’re doing it for the people who sacrificed their lives for you… Could you tell me more about these individuals?”

She smiled and tilted her head. “Is that somehow relevant to our current problem?”

Ah, I know a look of rejection when I see one. She doesn’t want to talk about it.

“I don’t know if it has any relevance or not,” I confessed. “But from where I’m standing, it seems like Lord Perugius is testing you. In that case, maybe if we dig through your history and motivations, we might find clues that will lead us to the answer we seek.”

“I see what you mean.”

I was just throwing that out as an excuse, but it actually made some sense. Frankly, I had no idea what made a true king, or whatever Perugius wanted to call it. I knew squat about kings, aside from what I’d read in a novel long ago. I remembered a line that went something like: “A king lives for his people. No, it’s more than that—he exists to guide the people.” My ignorance on the topic meant that racking my brain over the question wouldn’t be very productive.

“Very well, then. I should warn you that there were many who died. We lost an especially great number when we fled Asura. Thirteen, to be precise. The four knights were Alasdair, Callum, Dominic, and Cedric. The three mages were Kevin, Johan, and Babette. My six retainers were Marcellin, Bernadette, Edwina, Florence, and Corinne. I doubt I will ever forget their names as long as I live. Our journey was brutal. We fought together and overcame so many obstacles. Every single one of them desperately desired that I become king and died trying to make that happen.”

Wait, what? Derrick isn’t even among the names she listed. That’s odd…

Orsted had mentioned that Derrick had died, but Ariel hadn’t even brought him up. Maybe he wasn’t that important to her? Perhaps he would have learned a clue from the thirteen she just mentioned, had he been alive.

“Tell me more about each one of them,” I said.

“Very well. It will take quite some time to do so. Are you all right with that?”

I nodded. “I don’t mind. Every single one of them must have been important, so I would hate to skip any of them.”

As soon as I said that, the atmosphere became less tense. Ariel grinned as Luke gaped in surprise. For whatever reason, Sylphie appeared to be smiling proudly. Nanahoshi was the only one who seemed uncomfortable.

“All right, in that case…”

Ariel slowly began opening up about the thirteen people she had lost. She filled me in on where they were born, how they were raised, and how she came to meet them all. She also went into their likes and dislikes, their personalities, what they were most proud of, what conversations they had, what made them laugh, what made them angry, and what made them cry. She spared no details. Even told me about who got along with who, who liked who, and who hated who. Finally, she explained how each of them died. Each person had their own share of drama, but they were all real people who had lived and died.

The conversation told me all I needed to know about each of the thirteen. Sylphie and Luke also chimed in here and there with their own recollections of the deceased. All three had a wealth of information they could share about the group they lost, so well did they remember them. I suspected the two other girls that served Ariel, who weren’t currently present, could do the same.

My future self said Sylphie left to join Ariel because she’d become disenchanted with him, but I personally wondered if she wouldn’t have left regardless. The bonds shared by their group were so strong I couldn’t discount that possibility. I was honestly a little jealous. They gave their lives for Ariel, died protecting her. The weight of that was something I knew all too well. And I thought it was a good thing that Sylphie knew it, too.

“That is all,” said Ariel once she was finished.

“Hm, interesting…”

Sadly, nothing she’d said seemed related to what it took to be a “true king.” In a way, the bonds she had with them seemed evidence enough to me that she was fit for the role. King Arthur’s round table also had thirteen seats, after all.

Okay, sure, if you include the survivors, it doesn’t actually come out to thirteen, but still.

“Oh, goodness, I did forget someone else who was very important,” said Ariel.

This is what I was waiting for. It’s gotta be…

“Derrick Redbat.”

See, I knew it! This was what I was waiting for.

I kept quiet, waiting for her to go on, but Ariel merely drew her brows together as her face scrunched.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s just… To tell you the truth, I suddenly realized that I didn’t really know him that well.”

Ugh, great. So he kicked the bucket before he got close with her.

That was a problem. She might have had more to say about him if—as in the original timeline—the two had fought side-by-side and built trust as they both put their lives on the line. But alas, she didn’t. If the two had built no memories together, then she wouldn’t know what kind of person he was, and I wouldn’t be able to use that information to figure out how he managed to sway Perugius.

“Do you remember anything about him at all?” I asked. “Doesn’t matter if it seems insignificant. You said he was someone important, so there had to be something, right?”

My only option was to push her for answers.

“Let’s see… He was a very serious and professional person.”

Ariel continued adding some details, but he sounded pretty… well, normal to me. Just your average, smarty-pants magician. He

was a nitpicking busybody, the type that always sighed in exasperation at his friends' antics. When Ariel went off and did things on her own, he looked at her with a judgmental eye and called her out on it. The picture she painted of him reminded me of Cliff. Or perhaps he was more like Vice Principal Jenius. At any rate, he was basically the equivalent of a nosy grandparent always fussing over Ariel's future.

"At the time, my behavior was not befitting one worthy of sitting upon the throne. I lived an indolent lifestyle. I didn't even dream about becoming king… That was when the Displacement Incident happened. A beast suddenly appeared, and Derrick died protecting me. His last wish was that I become king. That was why I started down this path."

"…I see."

Nothing she described told me about his frame of mind or what he was striving for, which was unfortunate because she had told me more than enough about the thirteen that died on her journey here. This conversation hadn't yielded any hints either.

There has to be something, I thought. *Some way to draw out the information I need…*

As I was humming to myself, contemplating a solution, someone suddenly spoke up.

"Come to think of it, he never doubted that Princess Ariel would be the next king. He took every opportunity he could to suggest that she should take the throne," Luke said. He struck a sultry pose, putting his hand to his chin as he recalled what he knew. "Perhaps he knew the answer—knew what makes one a true king. That would explain why he was so confident that she would become king, because he knew she possessed that quality."

Good job, Luke!

It made sense when I thought about it: Luke, like Ariel, had been close with Derrick.

But I have to be careful about what he says. It's possible he's only sharing this based on advice he received from the Man-God.

It was best to assume that anything Luke suggested might be dangerous, even if the man himself meant no harm.

“Interesting. That certainly is possible,” Ariel said. She nodded, as though the words Derrick had said to her finally made sense with this added context.

“Unfortunately, he’s no longer with us,” Luke reminded her.

Everyone went quiet. We had no way of knowing what Derrick was thinking. As the silence stretched, the atmosphere grew heavier. Perhaps we had spent too much time dwelling on those lost to us.

“W-well, at any rate, let’s keep thinking on it and see if we can come up with other clues,” I said.

My words did nothing to alleviate the gloomy air that had settled over the table. In the end, we came up with no constructive options that day.

Chapter 6:
Orsted's Suggestion

"…AND THAT'S how it went."

After my meeting with Ariel, I immediately took off to meet Orsted and relay what had been discussed. If Luke was the Man-God's messenger, I was Orsted's. I would brief him on every little detail. In essence, I was an informant. Rudeus the Tattletale, you might say.

"Hm, so they already looked into information on Gaunis…" Orsted muttered.

"What should we do next?" I asked, despite half-expecting him to glare at me and tell me to think for myself sometimes.

Just to be clear, I wasn't the type who sought the approval of others for every little thing I did, all right? I intended to be as independent as I could, but I had

only become Orsted's subordinate recently. I wasn't yet sure what needed to be reported to him and what could be handled on my own. While I was figuring out that boundary, I was largely deferring to him for most matters on our current mission. I didn't want him snapping at me for doing things without getting his input first.

Also, I was asking for his opinion, not seeking a concrete answer. He didn't have to spell out everything for me; he just needed to point me in the right direction. In this way, I would slowly learn how he wanted to handle matters. Plus, I did have a suggestion handy if he told me to think for myself: Orsted and I could use teleportation circles to infiltrate the Asuran library, where we could swipe the necessary materials. That was what I had planned if he had no other suggestions.

"You should head to the Library Labyrinth in that case."

His answer caught me off guard. I tilted my head. “Library Labyrinth?” *What the heck is that?*

Orsted saw the confusion on my face. “A labyrinth where copies of books from all over the world are stored,” he explained

I never knew something like that existed…

“How are those books copied?” I asked.

“A certain bookworm Demon King uses the power of their demon eye to copy them.”

Considering that the first people that came to my mind when he said Demon King were Badigadi and Atofe, I imagined this person was similar—someone with an obnoxious laugh and eight arms, each one holding a volume of manga. Part of me wondered why anyone would do that with the library, but when Orsted said it was a demon king… Somehow, that was all the explanation I needed.

“Well, it does sound like it must be pretty useful,” I admitted.

If the library had every book from all over the world, that meant it had contained a huge amount of intel. Sure, there was information out there that never made it into books, but a vast majority of it did. It was like Wikipedia but for magic. You could probably find information on just about anything you wanted in there.

“Not quite,” said Orsted. “The place isn’t organized at all.”

“Oh, okay…”

Having a wealth of information meant little if you couldn’t systematically search for what you were looking for. Dictionaries only worked because they were ordered alphabetically, allowing you quickly find the definition for whatever word you needed. This library, on the other hand, had a vast number of books all randomly scattered about. It was hard to guess how many hours, days, or even weeks it might take to locate a specific volume.

“In that case,” I said, “wouldn’t it be difficult for us to find the information we seek?”

“The vast majority of literature about Gaunis Freean Asura is grouped together by publication date. It would be difficult to gather

everything ever written about him, but you would still find more in there than you would in Asura's national library."

Huh. So apparently this demon king hadn't copied the books at random but in order of when they were written, oldest to newest. If that was the case, it wouldn't be impossible to locate what we needed, especially in the case of Gaunis. He was a great king and war hero. There had to be a ton of books about him.

"Okay, so where is this place?" I asked.

"The Demon Continent. The Hyleth Region, deep in the Wraith Forest."

"And I assume we're going to get there by…"

"Using teleportation circles," he finished for me.

Travel sure had become convenient lately, thanks to these teleportation circles. It made me nostalgic for the time I spent with Ruijerd and Eris, traveling from the Demon Continent all the way to the Central Continent.

"Very well. I'll suggest that to Ariel and the others," I said.

It would be a little unnatural for me to suggest such an obscure location out of the blue, though. Maybe it would be better to say I'd prodded Orsted for information and that was how I knew about the place. I could already picture the opposition to my mention of his name, but that would give me an opportunity to flex my persuasive prowess. Orsted had likely recruited me expecting I would be useful that way.

Just as I turned on my heel to leave, he called after me. "Rudeus."

"Yes?"

"If you cannot find your answer even after you have combed through various materials on Gaunis, try this." He handed me a picture that I could only assume was the cover of a book. It was beautifully drawn. I wondered if he'd done it himself.

"And this is?" I asked.

“You’ll understand once you read it. Of course, if the books you find on Gaunis provide the answer you seek, then you needn’t bother with it.”

His words, while vague, seemed to contain some hidden meaning. For the moment, I pocketed the picture he’d handed me and left.

It was late night by the time I made my way back to the floating fortress. There was no curfew there, so Arumanfi led me inside as usual. He warned me that Perugius had already retired for the evening, so I should keep quiet as I traversed the halls.

That means Ariel is probably asleep too.

Perhaps I should have gone home instead of rushing back here, but it was too late to regret my decision. I could spend the night here and speak with Ariel about the Library Labyrinth first thing in the morning.

With that in mind, I started toward the guest quarters, only to notice something moving in the corner of my vision.

Crap, a roach? Even at this altitude? Guess not even Perugius’s spirits can protect against an infestation. Makes sense, considering the rats I saw in the basement.

But then realized that this thing, whatever it was, stood outside the nearby window. Silver light poured in through the glass, and a beautiful garden spread out beyond it. The moon didn’t provide much light, but I squinted and noticed sitting at the table outside.

Who would be out there at this hour?

Maybe Sylvaril was putting in some overtime. Whatever the case, I decided to head out there and find out.

“Huh.”

A beautiful sight greeted me when I stepped out of the building. Bathed in the moonlight, the grass glimmered faintly, guiding my path forward. It led to a patch of flowers that were unremarkable during the daytime, but took on the moon’s glow at night and shone

like a mirage. I could see why Sylvaril bragged about this garden at every opportunity.

A girl sat at the table where Perugius and Arielle often enjoyed their tea. Since she didn't wear a mask, there was only one person it could be.

Well, okay, Nanahoshi hasn't actually been wearing her mask much recently, so I guess there's still technically two *possibilities.*

Nonetheless, the person sat there was a peerless beauty, known locally for her unmatched allure. It was Ariel, in other words. She was spacing out—or more accurately, she seemed almost immobile—as she stared out at the fantastical garden.

"Princess Ariel?" I said.

"Huh?" Her shoulders jumped as she jerked around to face me. "Oh, it's you, Lord Rudeus…"

"What are you doing out here at this hour?"

Exhaustion crept onto her face as she averted her gaze. "I couldn't sleep, so I sneaked out here."

"Without alerting Sylphie or Luke?"

"Yes, my apologies. I simply wanted to enjoy the night air a bit by myself."

I wasn't judging her for it, but at the same time, she did have people out for her life. She knew that better than anyone. Maybe that was what compelled her to apologize.

"Well," I said, "everyone has moments like that."

"Even a king?" Ariel asked.

"A king is still a human being. So of course."

She went silent.

I had heard that kings weren't ever supposed to show weakness, but that merely meant they couldn't expose it, not that they didn't experience it. Everyone had moments of vulnerability where they needed to gather their thoughts.

“So what were you thinking about?” I took a seat by her at the table. Probably she didn’t want to be disturbed, but I had something I wanted to talk to her about anyway. While it could wait until tomorrow, it seemed better to tell her as soon as I could.

“I was contemplating whether I’m really fit to be king or not,” she replied.

Definitely not the words I was hoping to hear.

“Well, you seem like you’d make a splendid king to me,” I said.

“Royalty are good at putting on a facade to fool other people. It’s merely an illusion.”

“Ah, so it’s something inside that’s eating you up then?”

She went quiet for a moment before saying, “Ultimately, I’m only going down this path because I couldn’t face anyone otherwise. Maybe I was never cut out to be king. Maybe I would have been better off accepting an arranged marriage to whatever noble was deemed best for me and bantering with Luke as an equal, as I once used to.” Her voice grew quieter and quieter. I had never seen such fragility from her before.

“W-well…” I stammered.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap! She is so down in the dumps that she’s headed in an awful direction. If she seriously starts thinking about giving up her bid for the throne, I’m in hot water.

Especially since Orsted was already laying plans to help make her king. Those unique circumstances aside, I still had a fairly high opinion of Ariel. She may have been driven out of Asura after losing the political game, but she hadn’t given up. She was fighting tooth and nail to strengthen her position and create a solid foundation to pursue her goals. It had taken her five or six years to get this far; personally, I would have quit halfway through. No, I’d have thrown up my hands in defeat the moment I was driven out of the country—just like I did when I thought Eris had rejected me.

I didn’t want Ariel to give up now. I knew that even if she broke on the inside, she would probably put on a brave front and head for

Asura Kingdom anyway. But how was she supposed to win if she didn't have ambition behind it? Who would want to support a person who had no life in their eyes? The Ariel my future self wrote about must have been like that. She failed to win Perugius's support and left for Asura anyway, only to be betrayed and killed.

That was all speculation, of course, but when push came to shove, her mental state might be the deciding factor. Not that willpower was the be-all and end-all, but when a person was pushed to their breaking point, their mentality could make the difference between victory and defeat.

"Princess Ariel…"

I said her name even though I had no real words to offer her. I wasn't planning to be king, and I hadn't known many kings before either, nor could I empathize with what she had been through. All I had seen was the mask she showed to the outside world. Whatever I said would slide off her like water off a duck's back.

"Lord Orsted has an idea of where we might find a plethora of books on Gaunis Freean Asura," I blurted out.

"Huh?"

"Before you decide whether you're really fit for the throne or not, why don't you try looking through those materials and see what you find?"

Ariel's eyes widened. She stared at me and muttered, "Lord Orsted…?" She gulped. "And where would we find these books?"

"In a place called the Library Labyrinth…"

"Let's go." Ariel decided before I could finish my sentence. Not even a second's hesitation there.

"You sure wasted no time debating whether to go or not."

She had started turning away, but her gaze snapped immediately back to me. There was power there—passion. "I may be feeling weak right now…but I haven't given up yet."

"Good to know."

She looked fragile as glass at the moment, but she was still a woman with her eyes on the crown. If she didn't have guts, she wouldn't have made it this far.

"All right then. Let's head there," I said, nodding with as much determination as she'd just shown me.

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Three days later, I found myself in a building on the outskirts of Sharia. It was a different cabin from the one where Orsted had taken up residence, and inside was a teleportation circle emitting a dazzling, pale light.

"So this is the teleportation circle we'll be taking," Ariel remarked from beside me.

After we had spoken, she immediately left to rouse Sylphie and Luke and begin preparations to depart. I hurried back to Orsted so I could update him. He then cleaned up the basement of this building and put the necessary teleportation circle in place. This one was an inert type that required my mana to work, like the type Perugius often made use of.

"It's not the first time I've seen one," said the princess, "but I admit, I am a little nervous at the idea of stepping upon it." She eyed it curiously. Suddenly, her gaze snapped away as she gracefully scanned the area, as if she'd suddenly realized something. Finally, she turned toward me. "By the way, I notice Lord Orsted is absent."

"It's his way of showing consideration, since his curse would only be an unnecessary distraction."

"Oh, I see. I was hoping to at least introduce myself to him," said Arielle.

If Orsted showed up, the three of them would probably refuse to use the magic circle he'd created. Although his curse seemed not to affect Ariel entirely, there was no telling what effect it would have if she faced it in the flesh.

“What a pity.” Ariel frowned, disappointed. Was she just fearless, or did she enjoy coming face-to-face with terrifying things?

Either way, I couldn’t let her meet Orsted. The worst part of his curse made those who looked upon him lose all rationality. Even Sylphie and Roxy, with their sensibility and knowledge of said curse, could not bring themselves to trust Orsted. It was impossible to know what effect it might have on Ariel. She was fine at the moment, but if she was faced with him in close quarters, she would probably become so terrified that she’d keep her distance, even from me.

It would be awesome if Ariel could speak to Orsted as openly as I did, but the risk meant that keeping our distance was the better option. She still found him intimidating, but she also understood she could make use of him. In fact, when I mentioned that it was Orsted who suggested visiting the Library Labyrinth, she hopped on board without second guessing his intentions. Maybe it was only natural—a drowning man grasping at straws—but Orsted’s curse was usually so powerful that most people wouldn’t accept his help even when backed into a corner.

“But this circle is something Orsted made, right?” Sylphie asked.

“Are you sure it’s safe to use this? I don’t want to get thrown into a pit of beasts,” Luke grumbled.

Neither trusted Orsted. If Ariel were to deal with him directly, she might become just like them. I had to avoid that at all costs.

“Don’t speak like that, you two. Lord Rudeus would never lead Sylphie into danger, would he?” Ariel glanced at me.

“Of course,” I said. “I already used it once, just to be sure.”

There was nothing unusual about our destination, aside from it smelling of mold and being covered in dust. Granted, I hadn’t ventured very far, since the place was supposed to be a labyrinth.

“Then let us be on our way…or so I would like to say, but first…” Ariel stood in front of the magic circle, her gaze focused on me, or—to be more precise—on the two women behind me. “Would you like to introduce them?”

I glanced behind me, where Eris and Ghislaine stood. When I told the former I would be going to the Library Labyrinth, she lit up at the word *labyrinth* and asked to tag along. I didn't imagine she'd be of much use hunting down books. And Orsted had assured me that the place wasn't very dangerous, but you never knew on that front. It wouldn't hurt to have some extra fighting power. So, with no good reason to refuse Eris, I let her come along.

I had an ulterior motive for dragging Ghislaine along. This was the perfect opportunity to introduce her to Ariel. Although I could have waited until I grew closer to Her Highness, Ariel already thought more highly of me than expected, so I didn't think it would be a problem to speed things up. Plus, she would have a harder time trusting Ghislaine if I waited to introduce them when we were just about to set off for Asura. I thought this labyrinth adventure would be a good opportunity to test the waters.

When I brought up meeting Ariel to Ghislaine and Eris a few days ago, Ghislaine said she didn't know squat about etiquette so she wasn't sure how to go about introducing herself. Eris, likewise, was anxious about whether her wardrobe would be acceptable for meeting royalty. Ironic, given they normally never said such things.

Sylphie had stepped in to reassure them. While sighing to herself, she explained that Princess Ariel wasn't fussy about other people's manners. She also said Eris's clothes were perfectly fine. But if the two of them were concerned, she would be happy to teach them. In the ensuing three days before our departure, they had worked hard to prepare themselves.

Eris stepped forward, as if she'd been waiting this whole time for Ariel to notice them both. I put a hand out to stop her.

"What?" she snapped at me.

Hold on a second. I'll introduce you, I promise!

"Princess Ariel, this is Eris. As I am sure you are aware, she has earned herself the nickname Berserker Sword King. She is accompanying us today as my bodyguard." I glanced at her and whispered, "Okay, now it's your turn."

She started to cross her arms before catching herself and putting a hand to her chest instead, bowing her head. “The name’s Eris Greyrat.”

Her attitude wasn’t the most polite, but Ariel smiled warmly at her nonetheless. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Eris. I’m Second Princess Ariel Anemoi Asura. I have heard many rumors about you since I was younger.”

“Hmph. Nothing good, I bet.”

Ariel chuckled. “True, the ones that made it to the capital weren’t the most flattering. However, I don’t judge people based on the whispers I hear of them. It’s all hearsay, after all.”

Eris didn’t respond.

“The fact that you stand beside Lord Rudeus is proof they’re not all to be believed,” Ariel said. “The people he keeps in his company may have their quirks, but none of them are bad people.”

Pleased, Eris nodded and crossed her arms. She stood with her legs spread beneath her, as always, completely forgetting etiquette of nobility she was supposed to follow.

“That’s right,” said Eris. “Rudeus *is* amazing. Good, you understand.”

“Indeed. Having said that, while we may not be in each other’s company long, I look forward to our time together.” Ariel curtseyed gracefully.

Eris just stared down her nose at the princess and snorted, although she did dip her head slightly.

“Ahem.” Sylphie cleared her throat, scratching the back of her ear.

“Ah!” Eris gasped quietly, dropping her arms. She pulled a face as she retreated a few steps.

I forced an awkward smile as I motioned toward Ghislaine next. “And this is Black Wolf Ghislaine Dedoldia. I brought her to introduce to you in hopes she might become one of your bodyguards, Your Highness.”

Ghislaine stepped forward and took a knee. She narrowed her uncovered eye, staring the princess down. “Ghislaine,” she grunted.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance as well, Lady Ghislaine. I am Second Princess Ariel Anemoi Asura. When you were still living in the Fittoa Region, I—”

“I have one question,” Ghislaine said, interrupting. “I was told if I served under you, I’d be able to take revenge for Lord Sauros. Is that true?”

It was so rude and abrupt that I wondered why she had even bothered practicing etiquette with Sylphie for these past three days. Then again, I could see where she was coming from; this wasn’t a matter Ghislaine could compromise on.

“It is true,” Ariel answered without missing a beat.

To tell the truth, I had already laid the groundwork to make sure her demands would be met; I had told Sylphie that her aim was to avenge Sauros.

“If you accompany me to the Asuran palace, we will find out together who was really responsible—who pulled the strings to take down Lord Sauros. No, not we—*I* will be the one to find out for you. And when I do, please use that blade of yours to see justice done.”

For some reason, she shot a meaningful look at Eris when she spoke.

What’s that supposed to mean? Is she eyeing Eris? Is she actually interested in her? I mean yeah, Eris does look pretty boyish and badass, but…really?

No, that couldn’t be it. Ghislaine was the one who wanted to take revenge for Sauros, but Eris had even greater reason to want his death avenged. Ariel likely thought that Eris was after the same thing and was acting as my bodyguard in name only.

I didn’t know Eris’s thoughts on that, but if she was presented with the opportunity to take down Sauros’s killers, she would likely do it. I would too. Myself, I wouldn’t go all out to hunt them down and

murder them, but if there was a mastermind behind it all and they happened to appear in front of me, I would bring them to justice.

Sauros's death was a result of scheming to reduce the Boreas family's power, since they were one of four families that oversaw a vast stretch of kingdom land, while also weakening the first prince's influence. There were so many possible culprits that it was hard to narrow it down.

"I will," said Ghislaine to Ariel, bowing her head. Her tail flicked behind her as she turned her gaze to Sylphie. "Well, what should I do then?"

"Um, for the moment, we'll have you come along as Princess Ariel's bodyguard. Please shield her from the ashes of battle."

"Ashes?" Ghislaine's forehead wrinkled. "Are we going up against a fire breathing monster?"

"Huh? No, um… What I meant was, take down anyone who tries to attack her."

"So that's what you mean. Understood. Also, no need for fancy titles from now on. Just call me Ghislaine." Having said her piece, Ghislaine returned to her place behind me.

"Well, it was an honor to meet you both," Ariel said, curtseying before us once again. I instinctively bowed in response, which prompted a flustered Eris to follow suit. Ghislaine, on the other hand, merely bobbed her head in acknowledgment. The two were only acquaintances at this point, but surely trust would form between them the longer they worked together.

In the same vein, I needed to make sure this first job went smoothly, in order to deepen the trust between Orsted and myself.

"All right," I said. "Let's get going."

It was time to enter the Library Labyrinth.

Chapter 7:
Library Labyrinth

STEPPING OUT of the teleportation circle was like waking up from a dream. No matter how many times I experienced it, I could never get used to it. It reminded me too much of my encounters with the Man-God.

I glanced at my companions. Almost all of them wore dumbfounded looks on their faces. Even the normally solemn Eris gaped as she looked around. Ghislaine was the only one who seemed unsurprised.

Come to think of it, she's the first of the beastfolk to ever use a teleportation circle.

It was the first time I'd ever seen Ariel utterly gobsmacked. She craned her neck upwards, her mouth half-open, and her eyes were unfocused, staring off into the far distance.

Wonder if she'd get pissed at me if I stuck my finger in her mouth.

Nah. Even if she didn't get mad, Sylphie would definitely have a fit.

"Ah!" Ariel finally blinked and regained her composure. She turned her gaze toward me. "We've arrived at our destination… haven't we?"

"Yes."

We found ourselves in a room with a stone floor and walls, similar to the other Dragon Tribe ruins I had visited. All the other teleportation circles I'd used led to places like this. The only difference was that this place had a proper door, and the room was filled with the smell of ink, parchment, and mold. That assured me that we had definitely arrived at the Library Labyrinth, even if there were no books in this room.

“I was told there was no real danger here, but the place is a labyrinth, after all,” I said. “Let’s stay on our guard.”

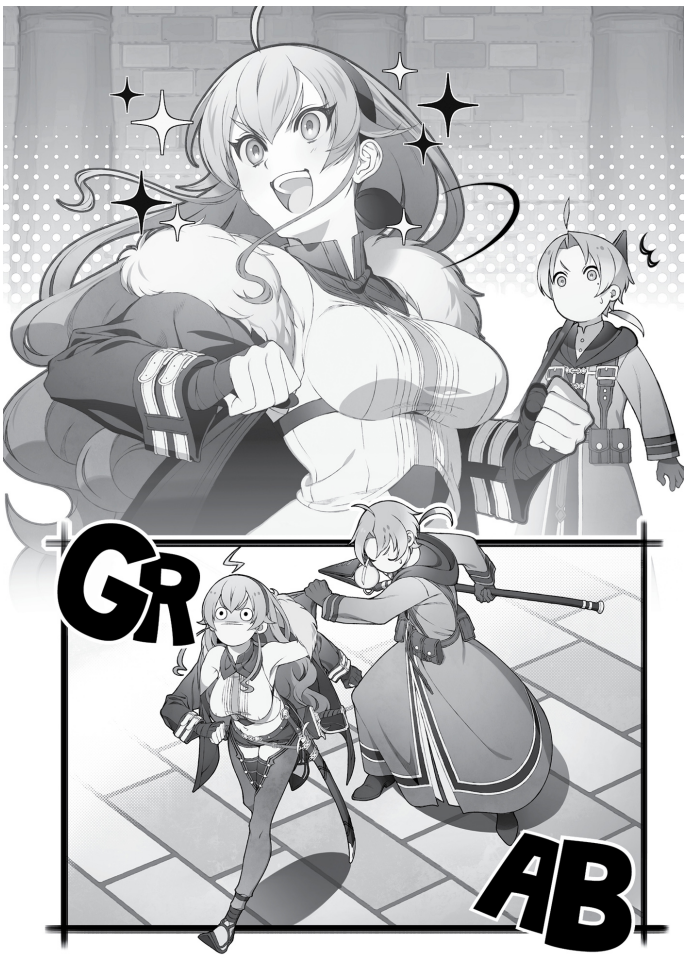
The tension returned to Sylphie and Luke’s faces. Ghislaine’s expression remained unreadable as ever, and Eris…well, Eris looked pretty pumped up.

“I’ll take the lead!” she declared, stepping toward the corridor that led deeper into the labyrinth.

“Hold up!”

“Gah?!”

I grabbed her coat to stop her advance. She snapped around and glowered at me. “What’s your problem?!”


GR
AB

“Eris, there may be traps. Let someone else take the lead. If a fight breaks out, you can take the vanguard, but for now, stay back.”

“…Fine.” She pursed her lips, pouting as she reluctantly retreated behind me.

Okay, but the problem is, who should take the lead here? The only people with any experience in a labyrinth are me and…

“Hm?” Ghislaine grunted.

Ghislaine, I guess.

Geese and a number of others had told me all I needed to know about the dire consequences of letting Ghislaine lead a group. As one of the beastfolk, she might be able to sniff out danger and avoid it, but she had a talent for tripping into every possible trap and running headlong into swarms of monsters. She was definitely not a good pick to lead us.

“Since I have an Eye of Foresight, I will take the lead,” I said. “Eris will follow right behind me. Ghislaine and Luke will protect Princess Ariel from either side and Sylphie will watch our backs. It seems like the best way to go. What do the rest of you think?”

I personally thought it was a clever formation, and everyone else seemed to agree, nodding quietly.

“I have no objections,” said Ariel. “We will leave you to take the lead, Lord Rudeus.”

With Ariel’s seal of approval, we fell in line.

I would be scouting the way ahead, but from what Orsted told me, the Library Labyrinth differed from other labyrinths in that there were almost no traps whatsoever. As long as we avoided breaking one key rule, we should be fine.

Speaking of which…I should warn the rest.

“While we’re here, I would ask that you refrain from using fire magic,” I said.

“Why?” Eris demanded.

Sylphie immediately understood my reasoning. “Because if you use fire magic in a labyrinth, you’ll deplete all the oxygen.”

Eris’ face scrunched in puzzlement, as if she didn’t understand what that last word meant. Sylphie was clearly more knowledgeable in this field, but her guess, while good, was actually off the mark.

“There is that too,” I admitted. “But it’s actually because the monsters here will get angry and attack anyone who damages, burns, or steals any of the books. I don’t expect we’ll have to do battle at all, but if we do, please be careful not to damage any of the tomes.”

“Those are some strange monsters,” Eris mumbled.

“Well, to be more specific, they’re actually familiars of the Demon King who lives deep inside this labyrinth. Anyone would be angry if someone damaged their things.”

“Makes sense.” Eris nodded. “Okay, I understand!”

Thankfully, this was one instance where she actually meant it and wasn’t simply putting on a brave front.

“I’m not just talking to you, Eris. I want you to be careful as well —Ghislaine, Luke.”

“Got it,” Ghislaine grunted.

Anxious, Luke frowned and said, “What if we have no other choice?”

“I have no idea how much this Demon King will tolerate. This is my first time here too.”

“All right…” Luke reached a hand toward the hilt of his sword, brows still drawn. He wasn’t a very skilled swordsman. By average standards, he was all right enough, but he had nowhere near the level of perfect control that Eris and Ghislaine commanded. He probably knew there was a high likelihood he’d hit a book if he started swinging his blade around.

“If what I’ve been told is anything to go by, I don’t really expect we’ll do battle,” I said.

“I trust you on that, but…on the off chance we do have to fight, maybe it would be best if I stay back.”

“In that case, we’ll leave guarding Princess Ariel to you.”

Luke nodded, at least confident that he could do that much.

“Anyway, let’s get moving.”

All that said, I cracked the door in front of us open.

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“Oh, wow…”

I gasped as I stepped out of the door. I couldn’t help it. An endless hallway stretched before me, but that wasn’t just it. Its walls, three meters tall, comprised stone bookcases that continued far into the distance. Books were packed tight on the shelves.

“I see, so this is the Library Labyrinth…”

I stepped up to one of the bookcases. The volumes were more like manuscripts, lacking a hardcover binding. In fact, some didn’t have a spine and were just sheaves of paper bound together. No, not some—that was the majority of the material on the shelves. Most of them resembled a disorganized cluster of scrap paper and memos more than a collection of organized notes. In this mess, I only spotted one volume that actually had a cover. Its title was *Ledger*, written in Demon God Tongue. Based on that, I guessed it contained accounting records for some shop somewhere in the Demon Continent.

I quietly looked to the bookshelf on the opposite wall. It was the same. What good was a bunch of scrap paper like that going to do anyone? It was a mystery to me. At least it fit with the image of a Library Labyrinth; even its contents were like a maze.

“Rudeus? What’s the matter?” Eris asked.

“Oh, no. It’s nothing.”

Trying to find the book we were looking for was going to be like searching for a needle in a haystack. I wondered if we'd really be able to locate any materials on King Gaunis.

"Come on, let's keep moving," I said.

We walked for quite a while after that. The bookshelves went on forever. At first, all we could see was a hallway that led straight ahead, but it apparently had a slight curve to it. There was a brief gap in the shelves, where the hall branched off in the shape of an H.

I decided to keep moving straight forward, leaving a sign behind to mark where we'd been before moving on. We ran into a number of monsters on our way. One was a snail big enough to block half of the corridor. Writhing tentacles grew from its shell. The mere sight sent a chill down my spine. It wasn't until I realized those tentacles were holding countless books that I felt less wary. I had no idea what the creature was called, so I decided to tentatively dub it the Cthulhu-Snail.

We also encountered a black slime creature. From a distance, I couldn't make out any other features other than that it was a slime, so I decided to call it as such for now. Both creatures were grabbing books and drawing them into their respective bodies heading down the hallway. They weren't getting to their destination any time soon, but it was clear that they had one in mind: they moved with too much purpose to be merely meandering.

There were also some knee-high, black bipedal ants. They seemed to have their own destination as well, not even sparing us a glance as they went on their way. They had no distinctive characteristics, so—for lack of anything better to call them—I decided to refer to them simply as ants.

Although the ants spotted us, they didn't appear aggressive, instead disappearing off into the labyrinth. I was so used to monsters attacking indiscriminately that it felt a bit anticlimactic. Eris and Ghislaine kept running off to slay them every time. It was a nightmare trying to stop them.

We hadn't encountered any traps yet. At first, we moved through the halls with great caution, but after an hour of nothing, it seemed silly to continue walking on eggshells. I was pleased that this meant Orsted's information was accurate. He hadn't tried to deceive us. At this rate, I was actually going to start trusting him.

Then again, I already had experience with a certain party who tried to gain my trust before stabbing me in the back.

I won't name any names, but let's just say their name starts with M and rhymes with Zod.

"Ah, it's a dead end."

It took an hour of walking to finally find one. We kept our guard up the whole time, scanning the shelves as we went, but even at that slow pace, we probably still traveled about four kilometers. The bend of the hall was gentle enough that I didn't think we'd completed a circuit around the labyrinth yet.

At any rate, this hallway didn't have anything on King Gaunis. The volumes covered a mishmash of subjects and languages, but one thing they had in common was their publication date. They were all put out around the end of the second Great Human-Demon War, which was about 300 years ago.

"Let's retrace our steps to where the path last split off," I said, turning back around.

The aforementioned area split off in the shape of an H, with two paths leading inward and two leading outward.

Guess the closest would be one of the outward-facing hallways.

"Hey, Rudy… Why don't we try going inward first?" Sylphie suggested.

"Oh? Why inward?" I asked.

"I had a peek and it looks like the hallways leading out contain older volumes, while the ones leading in appear to be more recent."

If that was true, then going inward would lead us to the years of Gaunis's reign—those following Laplace's War. "All right," I said.

“In that case, let’s retrace our steps a little further to the hallway turning inward then.”

Observant as ever, Sylphie. I should have known you’d have a keen eye for this.

We walked again for a while. As Sylphie noted, the further in we went, the more recent the books. At the same time, the bend of the hallway became far more noticeable. This also meant the corridors themselves were much shorter than they had been. We were getting closer to the center of the circle.

I wondered what we’d find in the middle. Since this was a labyrinth, maybe the master of the place? Its guardian? Orsted said the books were created by a book-loving demon, but perhaps that wasn’t all. Maybe something else lived here too. Considering my memories of the Teleportation Labyrinth, I didn’t want to fight if I didn’t have to.

Well, Laplace’s War started about 400 years ago. We shouldn’t have to go all the way to the center to find that section, I reminded myself, trying to get a handle on my anxiety.

“This place is kinda boring,” Eris grumbled sullenly.

Ah, this brings back memories.

I had seen Eris get bored before. It was better to warn her against trying anything funny simply because she wasn’t being entertained.

“Eris, I realize you’re not having fun, but if you try anything—”

“I know, I…” Eris suddenly pulled her sword from its sheath. A split second later, Ghislaine also had hers out.

“How many?!” I asked.

Having traveled with Ruijerd before, I knew this meant there were monsters nearby. Sylphie and the others were also on guard. My Eye of Foresight had yet to pick up on anything.

“The next corner…to the left…at the back,” said Eris, surprising me with how well she managed to pinpoint this foreign presence.

“Can’t say exactly how many, but there’s a lot,” added Ghislaine.

Just like her to be vague about numbers. Had she forgotten our lessons together? Even after how much hard work she put into them?

Okay, now’s not really the time for that.

“I’ll take a look,” I said, stepping forward. Moving as quietly as possible, I edged toward the H-shaped intersection and carefully peered around the corner.

There really were a *bunch* of monsters, mostly slimes and ants. The former were repeatedly coalescing before splitting off again, which made it impossible to know how many there were.

Thank goodness. Ghislaine hasn’t forgotten her numbers after all.

Still, what were these things doing?

“They’re digging through the wall…and making shelves?”

From what I could tell, the ants were carving into the rock, while the slimes collected the resulting rubble and consumed it. They then broke it down inside their bodies before reforming it and spitting it back out to make new shelves along the wall. Basically, this Library Labyrinth was a maze of hallways they’d created.

“Doesn’t look like there’s any danger,” I announced, beckoning everyone over.

They nervously approached, peeking around the corner as I had moments earlier. Once they saw what was happening, they breathed a sigh of relief.

“So they’re simply building more shelves,” Ariel remarked.

“Orsted did tell me that the monsters here are basically like familiars. I suppose that means they’re a bit different from the other beasts we’ve seen before,” I said.

With that out of the way, we quickened our pace onward.

We must have walked for another five hours after that. Each time we came to a corner leading further inward, we turned, but many led to dead ends, and some of the intersections only had hallways leading outward. This made it impossible to reach the center. Nonetheless, we were gradually beginning to find newer and newer books, so I knew we were getting closer.

We decided to take a short break. Sylphie and Luke weren't doing too bad, but Ariel was quite exhausted. Most of our party was in excellent physical shape, but Ariel wasn't used to this much walking. She really was a princess in every essence of the word. Meanwhile, the (former) noblewoman in our party was nearly bored to tears.

"This place really is nothing but books. I thought a labyrinth would be a little more interesting than this," mumbled Eris.

If only she'd learn from Ghislaine's example.

Ghislaine looked pleased simply from the exercise we'd gotten from walking this far.

"Eris, a labyrinth isn't a fun place," I said.

"You don't think so? But it's a core part of adventuring. I always wanted to visit one, but this is lame."

"You don't say…"

I didn't have very good memories of being in a labyrinth. Paul had died in one, after all. I never wanted to experience something that traumatic, ever again. Unless there was a very compelling reason, I was content not to see another labyrinth in my life. Eris should have known what I had been through, but I couldn't really fault her for her interests.

"Halls teeming with monsters, untouched treasure just waiting to be discovered, and at the end of it all, a huge guardian monster!" Eris gushed excitedly.

"Eris," Sylphie interrupted, "let it go. Rudy lost his father in a labyrinth, you know."

“Huh?” For a moment, Eris gaped in surprise. “Oh…” Her face rapidly paled, lips pulling into a frown. She drew her brows tight and kept her eyes on the floor as she mumbled, “Sorry…”

“It’s fine. You don’t need to apologize,” I said. “I know you have looked forward to visiting a labyrinth since you were young.”

“You don’t mind?”

“I just want you to keep in mind that there are truly dangerous labyrinths out there too. Ones that can rob you of a loved one in the blink of an eye.”

“Yeah, I got it.” Eris bobbed her head.

Years ago, she would never have apologized so earnestly like that.

As we turned a corner, we found ourselves in an open area. It was a ridiculously wide, cone-shaped hollow. It had multiple levels, with stairs sandwiched between stretches of shelves. It reminded me of the staggered seats in Rome’s colosseum.

In its center was an enormous slime. Its body jiggled, dozens of arms extending from its middle like tentacles, each one holding a pen and scribbling something at a lightning speed. Only one of its appendages was different: it pointed directly upward. It had an enormous eyeball at the tip, which was glaring up at the ceiling.

The second I saw this creature, one thought ran through my mind: *Oh, crap.*

This was, without a doubt, the master of the labyrinth, and we had unwittingly stepped within striking range. I wasn’t the only one who sensed danger; those behind me were similarly speechless. Eris and Ghislaine were gawking, even as they drew their weapons.

“What the heck is that thing?” Luke blurted.

Thanks, Luke, you said what the rest of us were all thinking.

“It has to be the ruler of this place,” I said. “Orsted told me they’re a bookworm Demon King, but I wasn’t quite picturing this…”

“This one is quite different from Lord Badigadi,” said Sylphie.

Exactly. I had anticipated something more like Badigadi, but this was far more…slime-like than what I had in mind. Then again, there were multiple subspecies of demons, so it wasn’t too strange for them to have a slime Demon King.

But a slime that reads books? Okay, okay. It’s not good to judge. I am sure even slimes enjoy reading.

“If this is indeed a Demon King, then should we not greet it?” asked Ariel.

“I wonder if it can even talk…” I mumbled.

There were many types of demons. Some had no vocal cords and therefore couldn’t speak. It seemed that this slime might fall into that category. If my past experiences with Demon Kings were anything to go by, they didn’t really listen to people. Granted, Badigadi and Atofe were the only ones I had ever met, but neither of them listened to others. We couldn’t judge this slime simply by looking at it, but it’d probably be safer to keep to ourselves.

“Since it doesn’t look like it’s noticed us, let’s try to keep it that way and move quietly.”

Silence was one of the golden rules of a library, after all.

We resumed our search, being careful to stay quiet. There appeared to be smaller slimes in the area moving around as well. They seemed to be ignoring us for the moment, but there was no knowing what might happen if the larger slime spotted us. None of the familiars looked very powerful, but it was impossible to know for sure, so it was best for us to stay on guard. It could put us in a real pickle if they all came at us at once.

“Ah!” Sylphie suddenly gasped.

“What is it?” Curious as I was, I couldn’t peel my gaze away from the enormous slime at the center of the room.

“It’s here, Rudy. This area.”

What’s here?

I glanced behind me. Sylphie reached out to a shelf along the outside wall, plucking a book from the middle that was titled *King Gaunis: Rise and Reign*. It was one among many.

I had been so distracted by the giant slime that I hadn't noticed it, but apparently this was the area that housed books written in the wake of Laplace's War. It seemed like we'd passed right over the section covering the middle and end of that conflict, but then again, the people back then were probably so busy fighting that they didn't have time to pen books. But once victory was theirs and people's lives began to go back to normal, those who could recount the details of the affair had started writing it all down, and the books in this area likely belonged to such authors.

"In that case, let's backtrack the last dead end and make camp there," I proposed.

Eris nodded. "Yeah, can't say I want to sleep somewhere with that thing in sight."

"Agreed. Gives me the shivers just looking at it," said Ghislaine.

"Really?" Ariel tilted her head. "I think it looks quite intelligent."

Eris crossed her arms. "Swords don't work too well on slimes like that, do they?"

"A slime will die if you destroy its core," said Ghislaine. "But that one is so enormous your sword won't even reach its core."

Ariel's comment was bizarre, but I was more troubled by how ready Eris and Ghislaine were to go into battle. Thankfully, everyone seemed to agree that we should take our leave. I didn't want to linger near something we knew nothing about and whose movements we couldn't predict.

Still, after a long journey, we had finally made it to our destination, and that was cause for celebration at least.

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A whole week passed after we set up camp. Our group spent the whole time moving between our base and the section of books on King Gaunis. We spent each day thumbing through them. At first, we sneaked them out and retreated somewhere the giant slime couldn't see us, before we flipped through the pages and took notes. Then, we carefully returned the book to its rightful place.

After three days of this, we realized that no amount of racket seemed to draw the owner's attention, so we began doing our research right by the shelves instead. This meant that Eris and Ghislaine had nothing to do, so the two trained with their swords or left to go on walks around the area. I still wasn't sure this place was entirely safe, so I wanted them to be careful, but I couldn't expect them to sit still the whole time. By the fifth day, I gave up worrying about it. There hadn't been any problems with their activities.

Meanwhile, we had no lack of materials about King Gaunis. Which was unsurprising, given that he became the monarch of the country that won the war.

Gaunis was not simply a king in the era that followed Laplace's War, he was also once one of many princes. The literature was a bit spotty on the numbers—some stories said he had dozens of brothers, others said he was the youngest of three, especially those aimed at children. The one thing they all agreed upon was that he had two older brothers. This lined up with what Ariel seemed to know. The eldest was an impressive and fearless warrior, while the second eldest was a resourceful tactician. Gaunis, being the third son, was gifted with both intelligence and strength.

It was these three princes that decided to take a stand against Laplace's encroaching army. However, Laplace's troops were powerful. Neither the eldest's brute force nor the second eldest's raw tactics could outmatch the enemy army, and so the two of them died.

The war culminated in a decisive battle on the Central Continent's southern front, which finally resulted in the death of Asura's king—Gaunis's father. Thus, Gaunis took the throne despite his youth. He was a talented man, but his strength couldn't match that of his eldest brother, nor were his tactics equal to the second

eldest. Could someone like him could beat Laplace's army, when both of his brothers and the previous king had already fallen before him?

He could. It was, as the literature stated, because he had numerous friends: the Dragon God Urupen, the North God Kalman, and Armored Dragon King Perugius, to name a few of the numerous heroes he called comrades. Gaunis went to them and prostrated himself, pleading with them to help him find a way to take down Laplace. Seven heroes answered his call and set off on a journey to defeat Gaunis's sworn enemy.

The details matched up with what I had read long ago in *Legends of the Armored Dragon King*. These books also said more about Perugius and his companions' adventures than they did about King Gaunis.

After the heroes left on their mission, King Gaunis consolidated power in Asura Kingdom and rode out to meet Laplace's army. It was one defensive clash after the other, a battle of attrition. However, King Gaunis did manage to hold back the enemy's advance, successfully keeping Asura from falling until Perugius and the others returned. He really was the man behind the scenes.

As for what kind of person King Gaunis was…the literature tended to be pretty unreliable. Most volumes described him as an exemplary ruler, peerless in his majesty and overflowing with talent. They never illustrated exactly how he possessed these qualities, but they showered him with compliments nonetheless.

Ariel seemed satisfied with these accounts since they matched up exactly with what she'd heard, but the more I searched, the more I found strange information mixed in with the rest. According to other sources, Gaunis was a talentless alcoholic who sneaked into the city to mess around while his gifted elder brothers participated in the war effort. Apparently, he drank and got into fights almost daily.

At first, I thought someone who hated the king had written this to smear him, but these accounts gave specific examples of his behavior and the precise dates these events took place, unlike the

sources that lauded him. This made them much more believable in my eyes.

Even so, I still found myself going, “No, no, that can’t really be true,” as I read along. All that changed today, when I finally found the most credible source of all.

Dated around the final years of the Laplace War, it was a diary written by King Gaunis himself. It started before his rise to the throne, when his two older brothers were still actively participating in the war. It painted a detailed account of Gaunis Freean Asura’s daily thoughts and past experiences.

Gaunis was the black sheep of the family. His two older brothers were such geniuses that no one expected anything from him, which only pissed him off. Even if he complained about it, no one paid him any attention. That was why he sneaked out of the castle to hang out in the city all the time.

Since there was an active war going on, the city wasn’t the safest, but that also made it the perfect place for Gaunis to vent his frustrations. He would drink until he was hammered, whine about how unfair everything was, then get into fights. There were no consequences for him whaling on the backstreet thugs in the city.

If I had a word to sum up the kind of person Gaunis was at that time, it would simply be: garbage.

After reading his diary, Ariel was so shocked that she spent half a day slumped over, doing nothing. Even now she leaned against one of the shelves with her legs pulled to her chest, her expression dark as she mumbled to herself, “Is this it? Is this the kind of king that Lord Perugius is searching for?”

Luke and Sylphie were trying to help her regain her composure, but even their voices were strained from the shock at discovering what kind of person Gaunis really was.

Personally…great king or not, Gaunis was a human being first and foremost, so his behavior wasn’t all that surprising to me. If anything, it made him easier to relate to.

Though I have to admit that his behavior isn't very kingly.

In spite of that, Perugius had seen fit to support someone like Gaunis. So perhaps Gaunis being a garbage human being might actually be a hint. Thus, I continued my search, and it was then that I found a deeply intriguing book on Blessed Children.

This tome covered which Blessed Children had been discovered at the time, what powers they possessed, and what kind of people they were. None of it seemed to have anything to do with Gaunis. At least not until I came upon an article that described the "Powerless Blessed Child." The title alone made me imagine the opposite of Zanoba, who boasted inhuman strength. Powerless suggested this person was frail and wimpy.

Despite my impressions, the power described was deemed extremely dangerous, enough that the text emphasized that anyone possessing it should be killed immediately. A Powerless Blessed Child could disable other Blessed Children's powers.

I had seen this pattern pretty often in light novels with superpowers. In most cases, the person with the ability to disable the powers of others had no other abilities of their own. This often put them at a disadvantage and others looked down on them. But in these series, the majority of the central characters possessed super powers, like ninety percent of them, so the ability to nullify their abilities was game-changing. Naturally, the person possessing this rare gift was typically the main protagonist.

Blessed Children were so rare in this world, however, that there were probably only a handful of them in existence. Being able to nullify their abilities didn't seem all that potent. If anything, it seemed extremely useless to me. It would be way better to have a Sword God-style warrior on your side than someone like that.

That said, other Blessed Children tended to be authority figures in their respective countries. They could create miracles with their powers that one normally couldn't bring about through ordinary magic. For that very reason, it would be a huge disadvantage to a country if their Blessed Child's power was snuffed out. Other countries would see a Powerless Blessed Child as a nuisance, while

their own country would deem them as a worthless liability that only put them under foreign scrutiny. Thus, it was advised to kill such a child immediately.

The power described, however, did catch my interest. Powerless Blessed Children could apparently also dispel the powers of Cursed Children. They were the same, after all. The only difference between them was whether the power they had was beneficial or not, so it made sense that Powerless's abilities would be effective on them as well.

I wondered, though, if this ability to erase other Blessed Children and Cursed Children's powers could also be used to nullify other things. Like regular curses, for instance. The title *Cursed Children* lent itself to the belief that they had been marked by an actual curse, but the two things were completely unrelated.

Since this book didn't explicitly say this was the case, I assumed the Powerless's abilities couldn't cure curses, but perhaps I needed to look at the bigger picture. Blessed Children possessed all kinds of different abilities. Every single one broke the natural laws of the world. It seemed plausible that one among them could erase curses or turn back the hands of time. In other words, with the right Blessed Child's power, we might be able to return Zenith's memories to her.

That was merely a wishful observation on my part, of course, but it was worth asking Orsted about when I got home.

"Ah, I better jot this down in my diary, lest I forget," I muttered.

I closed the book I was reading and pulled out my diary. Frankly speaking, after reading my future self's journal, I had reservations about continuing this thing, but it had saved my skin. I had no intention of returning to the past, though. I was going to do everything in my power to make sure I didn't have to. That said, I might someday want to entrust my diary to someone. Like, when my time came, maybe I'd want to pass on my will. The person reading would benefit from the guidance of all the information I included.

"Let's see…I discovered Blessed Children can have a number of different powers. There are even those who can manipulate the

abilities of other Blessed or Cursed Children. Perhaps I might be able to achieve something even if that thing seems impossible using these powers… There, that's good enough, I think."

I lifted my head after I'd finished scribbling and caught a glimpse of the enormous slime in the middle of the hollow, wriggling around as it always did. It had startled me when I first encountered it, but I'd grown accustomed to the sight over the past week. It was no less terrifying than before, but it hadn't launched itself at us. It spent all its time staring up at the ceiling and copying books, which suggested it was intelligent at least.

Suddenly I glanced back at my diary. "Hold on a second, 'I might be able to achieve something even if that thing seems impossible'? Isn't that a little too vague? Maybe I should write a specific example of what I might use those powers for."

Until this point, I had never put much thought into writing anything in detail. Maybe being in this labyrinth had encouraged me to change my ways? Haha. Well, it was time to rewrite that vague portion regardless. I tore out the current page, replacing it with another which I used to rewrite my current thoughts.

You know, I feel like this would be so much easier if I had some correction fluid. But how would I go about making that? Or should I just smear white paint on the page?

"Hm?" I glanced up, noticing that one of the giant slime's many tentacles had just torn a page from the book it was writing in.

I stared silently. Something about it made me wonder…

Just to be sure, I scribbled a random sentence in my book. Immediately after, the tentacle began mimicking my movement. I then started blacking out the entire page with ink. The slime did the same thing.

Is it…copying me?

No, that wasn't right. It wasn't copying me; it was copying down what I had written.

“If it likes books, then that means it must be able to read, right?” I mumbled to myself.

The slime had no mouth or ears, so maybe it wouldn’t understand spoken words, but it did have that giant eye on the tip of one of its tentacles. That had to mean it could read, right?

“Worth a shot, I guess.”

But should I consult Ariel and the others before I try to communicate with it? Nah, that wouldn’t do me any good. Ariel is already at her wits’ end with our current situation and about ready to give up and go home. It’s worth a gamble at this point.

“Let’s see, then… ‘Good day to you, Demon King. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Rudeus Greyrat. This is an incredible library you have here.’” I recited the words as I penned them in my journal.

One of the giant slime’s tentacles immediately began racing across the page only to freeze suddenly. It was something we had yet to see it do before. It hadn’t merely copied what I’d written; its other arms had ceased moving altogether.

An eerie air settled over the cone-shaped hollow.

“Am I being too hasty?” I wondered. For a split second, I lost my nerve, but it was already too late to regret it now.

The giant slime’s eyeball, which had been glaring up at the ceiling this entire time, now turned toward me. The thing was enormous. It could clearly see me gaping at it.

The slime shrunk back for a moment. In the next second, its tentacles shot outward at an incredible speed, almost like porcupine needles blasting in all directions.

My Eye of Foresight told me: *A tentacle is headed straight toward me.*

I ducked, assuming it meant to impale me. To my surprise, the tentacle stopped right in front of me. It was clutching a single piece of paper. No, that wasn’t right—it wasn’t *clutching* anything, its body was like an adhesive so the paper was merely attached to it. At any

rate, it held the paper directly in front of me, a message scrawled on it that read: *I am Demon King Beethove Tovetha, of the Nen Tribe. Welcome to my castle, Future Author-in-the-Making.*

Oh… Ooooh! Communication successfully established! I mentally pumped my fists. *Wait, no. Hold up a second. Seriously? I just came up with the idea of talking to this thing on the fly. I never dreamed it'd go this smoothly. Uh, now what…*

I hastily scribbled my reply: *My deepest apologies for not paying my proper respects sooner. It truly is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. We came here in hopes of researching a certain subject. Would you be willing to permit our stay here in the meantime?*

Its response was succinct and simple: *Yes.*

Phew. I could finally breathe a sigh of relief after being on edge this whole time. I wiped cold sweat from my brow.

Okay, I thought. *I can actually do this. Although next time I should probably have alerted Eris before I try something. That was a little too rash.*

Still, what an interesting name. It reminded me of a certain composer who had spent their life making music. Orsted had told me this Demon King wasn't such a bad guy, and based on our brief interaction, it seemed he was right.

But now what? I thought about what I'd say after striking up a conversation with them. Maybe I could ask after some information relating to Gaunis. If they really were the master of this labyrinth, they ought to be knowledgeable about him.

Actually, we are looking for a certain book, I wrote.

Find it yourself, the slime replied instantly.

Oof, I thought. *That was cold.*

Then again, we were complete strangers who had appeared out of nowhere. I couldn't blame the slime for turning down what they must have deemed an outlandish demand. At least they weren't chasing us out altogether.

However, the slime continued, *you have managed to amuse me.*

Apparently, they weren't simply refusing me as I'd first thought. Flustered, I reached for my journal again and wrote back, *Did I say something that funny?*

The slime replied, *You came here carrying a book from the future. That was truly shocking. And now, you are currently writing a continuation to its contents as we speak. If you don't call that interesting or entertaining, then what is? As a reward for amusing me, I will grant you one wish.*

Book from the future? Ah, they must be referring to that diary my future self brought here—as in, to this timeline. I hadn't brought it to the labyrinth. And if what the slime was saying was anything to go by, it had probably already copied the contents of that diary. From the slime's perspective, my current journal was a sequel to the previous one. That was ironic. A diary from the past being the sequel to one from the future. I could see how it found such a unique book series so entertaining.

All that aside, it sure seemed like Demon Kings loved to reward good deeds by granting people's wishes. Was that a part of their culture or something?

A wish? You'll grant me anything I want? I asked.

The only thing that I, Beethove Tovetha, am capable of doing for you is searching for any book you seek, they replied.

Well, given the type of creature I was dealing with, I couldn't expect them to give me vast riches or immortality or anything like that. Now that I knew the parameters of this wish-granting, though, what book should I ask them to find? Singling out a single volume would be difficult. I'd have to know the title to be able to ask for something specific. We had already searched through most of the literature pertaining to Gaunis, but we still hadn't found the key we needed…

Wait. Maybe I should just give up on searching for something Gaunis-related and ask them to search for any book that might shine

a light on a way to cure Zenith of her condition. Given the vast knowledge contained in this library and how enormous this place is, there might be some information on a way to treat her. Then again, it's equally possible there isn't.

No, I couldn't ask about that. I hadn't come to this Library Labyrinth to search for a way to heal Zenith. My priority was Ariel. I came here to help her. Zenith still weighed on my mind, but her condition was stable right now. I couldn't let myself be distracted. If Orsted started to think I was unreliable and decided to abandon me, the Man-God might take the opportunity to massacre my entire family. I had to avoid that possibility at all costs. Zenith was important, but she couldn't be my first priority right now. I had to forget about her.

"Oh, that's right." I suddenly remembered the slip of paper I had tucked inside my pocket. It was the one Orsted had passed to me right as I was leaving. It had a book's cover drawn on it. He'd likely anticipated that we wouldn't find what we were looking for, which was why he'd handed it to me. Maybe he'd meant for me to show it to the Demon King. He did mention he could see the future or something like that.

In that case, I wrote, *I would like you to find a book with a cover that looks like this.*

Very well, replied the slime.

I handed them the piece of paper, and a split second later, they plucked a volume from one of the shelves in the room. Apparently, the volume had been right nearby all along.

The slime grabbed the book, drew it inside its body, and transferred it to the tentacle that dangled in front of me. I grabbed it, expecting it to be dripping with slime goop, but to my surprise, it was perfectly dry.

Guess I shouldn't be surprised. This slime is a bookworm, so of course they know how to handle books properly.

I glanced down at the tome. It had a red leather cover adorned with trees bearing fruit, and it was particularly thick. I thumbed

through it, giving it a cursory glance. The pages were covered in writing, squished tight from margin to margin.

Your wish has been granted, wrote Beethove. *Take your time and enjoy reading it.*

It then retracted its tentacles and resumed its copying work once more.

What if this book happened to have the same cover as the one I was looking for, but it wasn't the right one? Could I ask for an exchange? Granted, the back cover even had the same scribbles on the edge, so the chances of this being the wrong book were slim.

"Well, at any rate, guess it's time to crack this thing open." I sat myself down and flipped to the first page. I barely made it several lines down before I gasped. "This book is…" I wasn't sure yet whether it had the clues we needed or not, but I did know for certain that I had to show this to Ariel immediately.

When I made it back to our camp, Ariel was still sitting there hugging her knees to her chest. Sylphie and Luke were nowhere to be found, let alone Eris. Perhaps they'd all left to look for more materials to sift through. In their stead, Ghislaine remained at the princess's side, not unlike a guard dog.

I stepped in front of Ariel. Since she was wearing a skirt, her white underwear was in plain view, but I tried to avert my gaze. Eris and Sylphie might not be here watching, but that didn't mean I could sneak a peek. That was forbidden territory.

"Oh, Lord Rudeus," she mumbled.

"You must be exhausted, Your Highness."

"My apologies for letting you see me like this." She adjusted her posture, sitting more gracefully this time.

Farewell, blissful white underwear. Our time together was short.

Anyway, that didn't matter right now. "Princess Ariel, I found something good," I said.

"Something good? What could that be?"

“Something I think will excite you.”

“Hm… What could that be? A sensual novel penned around the time Asura Kingdom was founded?”

Would something like that really excite her? I wondered.

“Oh, pardon me,” she said. “I digress, what is it you have?”

Now that she was mentally backed into a corner, she was babbling all kinds of strange things, which was amusing. Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to leave her in this state for a bit longer. But then again, we didn’t have much time before we had to head for Asura. We didn’t have time to waste playing around like this.

“This,” I said, handing her the book I was holding.

Ariel’s eyes went wide as she glanced at the cover. “These things hanging from the trees… It’s the bat emblem.”

Oh, so those were bats and not fruits? Could’ve fooled me.

“Anyway, please go on and read it. I promise it will be more exciting for you than a sexy novel,” I said.

She furrowed her brow skeptically as she stared at the cover. Finally, she opened it to the first page. “Ah,” she gasped in realization as she made it through the first few lines.

She had discovered the same thing I did moments before; this was Derrick Redbat’s diary.

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A diary is where one records the mundane goings-on of their everyday life. It allows one to briefly sum up recent happenings, keeping things simple and to the point, while expressing the emotions one is feeling at the time. Indeed, a diary is not merely a series of events; it is a record of the writer’s feelings. The author writes about what angered them, what brought them to tears, what made them laugh, what brought them pleasure, what brought them pain, what prejudices they hold. They write about when they feel

lonely, happy, lustful, and every other emotion in between. The way these things are recorded is at once detailed and yet vague.

In Derrick's diary, he never mentioned his own name, but he wrote daily about Ariel and Luke. It was an ordinary, casual journal: one you might find anywhere in the world. And it was for this very reason that his true thoughts were contained within.

There was intense pride in his words, beyond what I would have expected. I couldn't hide my shock at how much he truly believed in Ariel at his core, more than anyone else I had ever met before. And I knew well enough how much charisma she possessed.

Ariel began combing through the book. She devoured every word, quietly and methodically. I decided to wait nearby until she finished.

As I watched her turn the pages, Sylphie, Luke, and Eris returned. They were carrying armfuls of books. They had located a veritable mountain of material regarding Gaunis on another bookshelf. When Sylphie and Eris noticed me staring at Ariel, their expressions turned sour, at least until they noticed how absorbed Ariel in the book was.

Sylphie quietly took a seat beside me, no longer pouting about my attention being focused elsewhere. "Rudy, what's going on?" she asked.

"I found an interesting book, so I'm having Princess Ariel read it," I said.

"Oh? What book is that?"

"Derrick Redbat's diary."

Luke's jaw dropped. He stared at Ariel. "Come to think of it, he did write in that thing practically every day."

"You should consider reading it afterward as well," I suggested.

"…Yeah, guess so. Though I'm sure he didn't have very nice things to say about me."

I shrugged. That was something he'd have to read to find out for himself.

“Anyway,” said Sylphie, “it’s incredible you were able to find something so specific like that.”

“Yeah, well, I sort of have a thing with diaries,” I said, opting not to share that I’d found it with intel from Orsted. It was true, anyway: I really did have a connection with diaries. There was the one I’d written, the one Gaunis had written, and now the one Derrick Redbat had written.

After a while, Ariel finally finished reading. She closed the book with a snap. Her expression was devoid of any real emotion and difficult to read, but she was obviously feeling something given her blushing cheeks and misty eyes.

“Princess Ariel?” Luke immediately went to her, taking a knee at her side.

“Oh, Luke. You should read this too.”

“…As you wish.”

Ariel handed the book to him before turning toward me. The hesitation in her eyes had vanished completely. She must have discovered something while reading that book. Something that I, as an outsider, wouldn’t have been able to catch. Whatever her epiphany was, it was probably something Derrick would have told her directly had he still been alive.

“Well, Princess, were you pleased with it?” I asked.

“Yes. You did an excellent job finding it.” The expression on her face said it all before the words even left her lips. “I now know the answer to Lord Perugius’s question.”

There was such strength in her eyes. I could only nod silently.

After that, we began our preparations to return home. Sylphie and I started returning the books we had borrowed, while Eris, Ghislaine, and Luke cleaned up our campsite. There was no drop-off where we could leave these tomes, so we had to accomplish the difficult task of putting them back exactly where we’d found them.

We scrambled back and forth, trying to put them in the right place, but apparently failed a few times. I only knew because a slime would come along and snatch the book from where we'd shelved it, rushing off to return it to its rightful place.

Part of me thought we should entrust the task of organizing all these books to the Demon King's minions, but leaving behind a bunch of books without putting them back where we'd found them was obviously bad etiquette. This library admittedly had a terrible organization system, but it did contain a wealth of information. There might come a day when we needed to use this place again, so it was in our best interests to mind our manners. If I managed to stay on Demon King Beethove's good side, he might be willing to find a book for me again.

With that in mind, we managed to return all the books before finally making it back to the campsite. Everyone else had already finished packing by that point and were left twiddling their thumbs as they waited for us.

Eris was bored out of her mind, sitting with both legs stretched out in front of her. Ghislaine had hers crossed beneath her as she meditated. Ariel sat gracefully beside Luke as she waited for us to finish.

Luke was still cradling Derrick's diary in his arms, tears welling in his eyes. "I can't…believe this…" His brows were knitted, his hands trembling as he turned the pages and took in the words. "I was…such an idiot…"

"Luke," Ariel said in reprimand, "that goes for both of us."

"Your Highness…"

Ariel smiled at him, and the tears finally broke loose, streaming down his cheeks. Her face strained as she watched him.

Having read some of the diary, I already knew what Derrick thought of Luke. None of it was good, at least on the surface. He even wrote about what a rotten brat Luke was, teaching Ariel nothing but bad behavior. Yet it was clear from the way he wrote just how deep his affection for Ariel was.

Derrick could sense that, despite Luke's youth, the boy had a knack for dealing with people. If Luke started using that natural talent on men as well as women, he could climb the ranks and have followers of his own someday. Simply put, Derrick expected great things from him in the future. Even as he complained about Luke's ridiculous preoccupation with women, he also saw potential behind that veneer.

If Derrick were still alive, Ariel and Luke might not be as passionate about taking the throne as they were now. But if he could see them now, he would probably be more than happy to lend them his aid—though if he really were here, Sylphie would have no place with them. Derrick had watched them both closely and had great expectations for what they could eventually accomplish.

I glanced at Sylphie, who was standing beside me. Her face was pulled into a conflicted expression as she watched her two friends. Maybe this wasn't such a happy development where she was concerned. She had considered herself one of the founding members of their group, but this diary dispelled that notion.

I considered pulling her close and stroking her head, telling her that she still had me so there was no need to worry, but I got the feeling that wasn't what she needed right now.

While I was preoccupied with my thoughts, Sylphie mumbled, "Okay, here goes." Having plucked up her courage, she stepped toward her two friends and knelt down. "Hey, you two…"

"Sylphie…"

Ariel and Luke both wore awkward expressions as they looked at her. They hadn't done anything wrong, but I could understand why they felt guilty. They had always treated her like she'd been with them from the start.

Wonder what she plans to say to them? My stomach was knotting up in anxiety.

Sylphie's voice trembled as she said, "Um, this Derrick person… When we get back home, could I ask you to tell me more

about him? Since it seems like he had such great expectations of you both, I'd like to know about him too."

"Of course," said Luke, nodding. "In fact, I want you to know more about him. He was the first person to recognize Princess Ariel's true potential."

Ariel was silent, but the way she smiled made it clear that she agreed with everything he'd said.

Sylphie grinned, pleased at their reply.

I clapped a hand over my mouth without even realizing what I was doing. Watching them filled my heart with such emotion. I recalled Sylphie in her younger years, back when we lived in Buena Village. She was always all by herself, bullied by the other children. I was the only friend she had, and when she thought I might leave, her eyes had filled with tears.

But look at this now, I thought. That lonely little girl now has such amazing friends.

I hadn't done anything to help her along. Ariel and Luke were friends Sylphie had made on her own.

It was admittedly a little sad to realize that she no longer belonged to me and me alone, but this was a good thing. I was certain. I wouldn't have thought so in the past but this was the way things should be. Neither I, nor anyone else, should be watching over her as a protector. She needed to be an equal, both in our relationship and in her friendship with Ariel and Luke. She had managed to cultivate those relationships on her own. She was also trying her best to stand on equal footing with me, too.

That means I need to match her efforts.

When it came to friendships and equals, the first people that came to mind for me were Cliff and Zanoba.

"H-hey, Rudeus…"

I glanced to my side. Eris was standing there, bumping her elbow against mine.

What could she want? Maybe she was jealous that I'd had my eyes glued on Sylphie this entire time. Don't worry. I'm not going to leave you out. We're married now, so I'll be sure to shower you with just as much—hm?

Eris was glancing behind us, down the corridor.

What could she be looking at?

"Uhh?!" I gasped, as I finally realized what had caught her attention.

The hallway was filled with an enormous number of slimes and ants. Both were gleaming red; in the former's case, it was their core emitting light, while in the latter's case, it was their eyes. At any rate, it was clear they were pissed.

"Filed…it…"

"You…de…"

The swarm spoke in groans, though it was hard to tell how they were producing that noise. Either way, they were slowly making their approach.

Why? Why are they angry?!

We had returned the books to their proper places. I didn't know where Derrick's diary belonged, so I planned to hand that back to the Demon King and pay my respects before we left. It was the only book we still had.

"You…de…"

"Filed…it…"

You… Defiled… It…? What did we defile? A book?

"Oh!" I jerked my head around to face Luke.

He was staring at the army of monsters with his mouth agape. Realization only dawned after a moment as he glanced down at the book he was holding. His tears had soaked into the page, making the ink bleed so much that some of the words were indistinguishable.

"I-I'm terribly sorry!" Luke hastily apologized, snatching a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at the book.

“No, Luke, you can’t do that!” Sylphie cried, trying to stop him, but her warning came too late. His attempt only caused the ink to smear even more, and thanks to his tears weakening the integrity of the paper, it tore under the force of his hand.

“Graaaah!”

Behind the ants, a Cthulhu-Snail came charging at breakneck speed. The ants opened their jowls and the slimes shrunk inward on themselves. They were so enraged that they had lost their senses.

Eris reflexively jumped in front of us.

“S-sorry, we really didn’t mean to do it!” I cried out from behind her, but my plea fell on deaf ears.

The slimes lunged at us, and Eris and Ghislaine lunged forward to cut them down. In a single stroke, they managed to slice six of the slimes’ cores in half, leaving goopy puddles on the ground.

Eris glanced back at us and bellowed, “Rudeus!”

I wanted to thank the Demon King for going out of their way to accommodate us, and I wanted to apologize for defiling one of their books. I hoped, at the same time, they might be willing to hear our side of the story. Alas, these creatures had gone berserk with fury. They wouldn’t listen to reason even if we tried to talk it out.

“Let’s make a run for it!” I turned to grab our luggage.

Sylphie and the others moved swiftly, following my lead. Luke was the only one who lagged behind, still gobsmacked that his actions had triggered all of this. Fortunately, he was accustomed to hastily retreating. He grabbed what was left and drew his sword so he could protect Ariel in case anything slipped past our defenses.

“Sylphie!” I shouted.

“Right! I’ll take the lead. Everyone, follow me!”

All I had done was call her name, but that was enough for her to interpret my instructions.

So this is what they call being on the same wavelength. Maybe it was merely a coincidence, but it made me happy nonetheless.

“Ghislaine, you back Sylphie up. Luke, you stick by the princess and keep her safe. Eris and I will provide cover.”

“Provide cover? Provide cover from where?!” Eris roared.

“From the rear!”

I turned my staff toward the encroaching slimes.

Sorry, Lord Beethove, but Luke had no ill intentions.

Okay, admittedly, he was probably one of the Man-God’s apostles, so it was possible he was operating on the Man-God’s orders…

No, that’s crazy. I don’t think that was it. Well, regardless, sorry, Demon King!

“Frost Nova!”

Ice formed at the tip of my staff, triggering a cold blast that rippled outward. The monsters hit by it instantly began to freeze, but their movements didn’t stop completely. My spell had only slowed them down. Apparently, they had resisted the full effect, but delaying their advance was good enough.

“Yaaah!”

Ghislaine whipped her sword through the air, instantly slicing through the enemies blocking our path. She cut through the slimes and ants like they were butter. She would have used that momentum to continue charging forward, but a Cthulhu-Snail stopped her advance. Her attacks glanced off its shell with a clang. Its club-shaped tentacles contracted before going on the counterattack. In modern terms, it was like a tank that had suddenly whipped out a lance and started going on the offensive with it. With no other options, Ghislaine took to evading its onslaught.

“Ice Lance!” Sylphie bellowed.

The snail had managed to keep itself safe by hiding in its shell, but its underbelly was unprotected. Sylphie’s lance jutted through the earth, skewering the creature.

“Now, let’s go!”

“Right!”

Sylphie charged ahead, breaking through the enemy’s ranks with Ghislaine hot on her heels. Ariel and Luke scrambled along behind them, but an ant that had avoided my Frost Nova by skittering across the ceiling came crashing toward them.

“Hah!” Eris immediately moved to intervene. Her swing was so heavy, it severed the creature’s head from its body before leaving an impact crater on the floor.

“Stone Cannon!” Without missing a beat, I launched a spell at it. These insect-type creatures could sometimes keep moving even without a head. I wasn’t leaving anything to chance.

Finishing the enemy off was an ironclad rule of battle, but considering how graciously the Demon King had allowed us into their library, I did feel a bit guilty slaughtering their familiars like this.

“Now things are getting interesting!” Eris said.

“Interesting? It’s giving me a stomachache,” I grumbled as I hurried after Ariel and the others.

“Dammit, just how many of these creatures are there?!”

The horde’s pursuit was unrelenting. Despite how unassuming they looked on their own, these beasts held quite a lot of power. The slimes in particular were far quicker than they initially appeared—like the Metal Slimes in Dragon Quest. If we paused for even a second, those ants would be on us, and their jaws were powerful enough to chomp through the toughest bedrock. But the worst of them were the Cthulhu-Snails that came charging from the front. If Ghislaine and Eris didn’t use the full force of their blades in their attack, it would merely glance right off. Even if they managed to cut through, it wasn’t enough to instantly kill the beast; it would still swing its club-like tentacles at us.

Thankfully, the Library Labyrinth had no rooms and was instead a collection of interconnected hallways. So, as long as we kept up a solid offense in the front and back of the line, they wouldn’t

be able to completely surround us and kill us off. Sylphie and Ghislaine took point, guiding us along, while Eris and I covered the rear. I kept unleashing Frost Novas while Ghislaine cut a path ahead. Sylphie continued launching Ice Lances from the ground below, skewering every snail, and Eris cleaned up whatever was left. We slowly inched forward while making sure nothing sneaked up behind us. We had an exhausting number of enemies, but we were at least making some progress forward.

"There, ahead!" Ghislaine's sharp voice cut through the air.

I snapped around. Ahead of us was an enormous swarm of slimes all clumped together. In the blink of an eye, they morphed into a single, enormous slime that completely blocked our path.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Really? Now we have to face a King Slime?

"Haaaah! Tornado Impact!" Sylphie launched her magic at it, and Ghislaine brought her sword down upon it, but the King Slime recovered from the damage almost instantaneously and continued to block us.

"Rudy, I can't handle this thing!" said Sylphie.

"I'll take it from here!" I hurried forward, taking Sylphie's spot so she could fall back to help Eris cover our rear. It was a seamless transition. I didn't have to give her explicit instructions; she moved on her own.

Come to think of it, this is the first time the two of us have ever fought against something together, isn't it? She's got more guts than I thought.

Honestly, it wasn't my doing. She was the one picking up on my silent cues and reacting appropriately. In the split second where we brushed past one another, our eyes met. Her expression betrayed the panic she was feeling, but in that moment, her lips eased a little and her ears twitched. Perhaps the same thoughts had crossed her mind, and with them, a twinge of happiness and embarrassment.

Whoops, hold up. Now isn't the time for that.

All that aside, this slime was enormous. I wondered if the Demon King had come into existence the same way. No, that couldn't be. This thing had a huge number of cores inside it. It wasn't a single entity but a conglomeration of many.

Which meant the best way to break it down was…

"Ghislaine, I'm going to launch a powerful blast and break it into pieces. I want you to take down as many of the smaller slimes as you can," I said.

"Got it."

She wasn't spacing out or anything, but I gave her detailed instructions because I didn't want her charging in at the same time I used my magic.

"Phew…"

I took a deep breath and started concentrating mana into my right hand. I needed a spell that could blast a hole right through the giant slime. Sylphie's Tornado Impact was an advanced spell that made wind rotate rapidly, almost like a drill. It had punched a hole in the creature, but without enough force to break it into pieces. I needed something that would cause destruction, not in a single concentrated spot but across a wide area. And that had more power behind it than Sylphie could muster.

"Improved Sonic Boom!"

What I unleashed was a shapeless shockwave. As the name implied, it was similar to Sonic Boom, which was an intermediate spell, but added a punch that far exceeded the base spell in power.

An invisible explosion echoed through the halls, blasting through the slime with incredible speed. The force caused the creature to shatter into splintered pieces.

"Graaaah!" As if refusing to be outdone by the tremors that rippled through the floor and walls, Ghislaine let out a fierce roar and charged forward. In one blink of an eye, she sliced through the cores of at least a dozen of the slimes.

“Huh?!” I gasped, realizing that another enemy lay in wait behind that wall of enormous goop. No, not one. There were five Cthulhu-Snails. They had stopped their advance momentarily when the aftershock of my attack hit them, but just as quickly, they were back on the move, charging toward us. The snails managed to slip past Ghislaine and closed in on me.

“Graaaah!” Ghislaine leaped back, slamming her sword into one. She must have found a weak spot in its shell, because that was enough to stagger it. It collided with one of the nearby shelves and was buried in a mountain of books.

“Hmph!” I grunted, launching Stone Cannons at two of the others. The spells split the air with a screech, piercing straight through the creatures’ shells and leaving a goopy mess in their wake before blasting out the other side.

Sadly, that wasn’t the end. Snail guts went spraying everywhere, but even after being doused in its companion’s innards, a fourth snail continued sailing forward. Ghislaine moved to block it, standing between me and my would-be attacker.

But there’s still one left, right? That’s only four down.

By the time I thought that, it was too late. I sucked in a breath as my Eye of Foresight spotted the fifth one. It had hidden in the shadow of the fourth one and sneaked up, unnoticed. The cudgel of its tentacle filled my vision.

Too late to counterattack. I had to dodge it somehow. In a split-second decision, I jerked my upper body back.

“Eh?!”

It caught my flank. I had managed to avoid the tentacle, but the snail still rammed into me, sending me backward.

“Guh!”

I slammed into a bookshelf so hard, the air was knocked from my lungs.

Shit. They managed to break past us.

The snail that had slammed into me was now bearing down on Ariel. The princess was trying to fight back as best she could. She had a small sword, her eyes wide as she met the beast head-on. Panicked yet determined, she didn't tremble in fear. She must have faced surprise attacks like this countless times before. Even so, the snail was on a rampage, brandishing its tentacles as it barreled toward her.

I didn't think Ariel could handle it. I lifted my right hand, conjuring a Stone Cannon to launch at the snail.

It's okay. I'll make it in time, I thought.

But at that same moment, I saw something else at the edge of my vision—slimes. The appearance of the snails had distracted Ghislaine from cutting them down. Those that escaped her blade earlier slipped past the fallen snails and charged toward us. Ghislaine, meanwhile, had yet to finish off the fourth snail. Doubt hit me, but it wasn't enough to slow down my spell.

"Stone Cannon!"

It split the air, slamming into its mark precisely as intended. A pleasing, familiar boom echoed as it shattered the snail's body. In that instant, the slimes dodged Ghislaine and rushed toward Ariel.

Only a single man stood between them and the princess—Luke. He'd likely been preparing to face the snail until I killed it. His focus then shifted to the ten encroaching slimes. Two of them split off toward me as I knelt beside one of the bookshelves. Three others retraced their path to flank Ghislaine.

I focused my Eye of Foresight on the two approaching me. I calmly dealt with them while keeping my eye on Luke. His preemptive strike at the five surrounding him managed to kill one. However, the other four were already moving in sync. One launched itself at his feet, while another slammed into his stomach. Luke collapsed onto one knee, at which point the third slime wrapped itself around his sword, while the last of their number aimed an attack at his unprotected head.

"Urgh?!"

Luke took a heavy blow to the skull. Blood gushed from his forehead and sprayed out of his nose, but that wasn't enough to stop him. He pulled a short sword from its sheath on his waist and stabbed the slime wrapped around his main weapon. With it freed, he took down two others that had lunged at Ariel.

"I won't let you lay a finger on Princess Ariel!" he bellowed.

Alas, there was still one slime left—the one that had landed such a fierce blow on his head. Luke had turned his back on it to cut down the others, and it now launched itself at him, aiming for the back of his head. Despite how soft its body looked, it packed the punch of a cannonball. If it hit the wrong spot, it could shatter his skull.

Fortunately, the slime didn't hit its mark because Ariel drove her sword straight into its core. It turned into formless goop and spattered in a puddle on the floor.

"Princess Ariel," gasped Luke.

"Luke, in times like these, I have no intention of remaining a simple wallflower." She grinned.

With that, the way forward was clear.

Ghislaine cast a grim look at me.

"Onward!" I commanded, peeling myself off the floor. I bathed the party with healing magic as I scrambled to rejoin her at the front of our formation. Guilty as I felt for ruining such a touching scene, we had a flood of enemies charging at us from behind. We needed to get a move on.

After that, we continued mopping up our opponents as we rushed toward the exit. The beasts tried all manner of tactics to stop our retreat. Slimes formed walls, snails came in droves, ants scuttled across the ceiling and tried to drop down on us en masse. When enemies inevitably slipped by, Luke fiercely protected the princess as if his life depended on it. Ariel also did her part with her own magic and short sword, taking down whatever came her way.

Thanks to these diligent efforts, we reached the teleportation circle mostly unscathed. If Ariel had been a mere wallflower, or if Luke had revealed himself to be the Man-God's apostle and stabbed someone in the back, our formation would have undoubtedly crumbled.

Even so, this was still a failure. I had hoped to return here if we ever needed to research anything else, but alas, that now seemed impossible. We had killed no small number of the Demon King's minions and damaged numerous books during our retreat.

Who would have thought that someone crying on a book would piss them off this much?

The one note of hope was that these familiars moved more like puppets than actual sentient beasts. But even if they were mindless machines, we had still destroyed them. I'd be pretty thick-skinned to use their lack of sentience as an excuse to weasel forgiveness out of the Demon King. No. Even with a letter of apology, I was pretty sure he wouldn't let any of this slide.

At least there were a few upsides: whether or not Luke was one of the Man-God's apostles, he'd proved he would still protect Ariel with his life. And Ariel had found her answer to Perugius's question. We got what we came for. We cleared our objective. That was good enough for now.

Chapter 8:
The Armored Dragon King and the Second Princess

TWELVE SPIRITS were gathered in Chaos Breaker's audience chamber: Sylvaril of the Void, Arumanfi the Bright, Yuruzu of Atonement, Karowante of Insight, Scarecoat of Time, Clearnight of the Roaring Thunder, Dotbath of Destruction, Trophymus the Wave, Harkenmail of Life, Gall of the Great Earthquake, Furiasfile of Fury, and Paltempt of Darkness.

Armored King Perugius Dola, the owner of this floating fortress and master of the spirits, sat at the very back of the room. Standing before him was the second princess of the Asura Kingdom, Ariel Anemoi Asura. Even as she stood surrounded by these intimidating spirits, she didn't cower.

As soon as we left the labyrinth and made our return, Ariel flagged down Sylvaril, requesting a meeting with Perugius in his audience chamber. An hour later, he summoned Ariel to a meeting, and she had spent the intervening time fixing her attire. Sylphie and Luke did the same, changing out of their adventuring gear. The outfits they donned were as impressive as you'd expect for a princess and her two bodyguards.

As for me, I was wearing the robe that Orsted had given me. It wasn't eye-catching or ostentatious, but the Dragon God had bestowed it upon me, making it like a sort of work uniform. Surely, Perugius wouldn't mind.

Ariel silently walked down the path lined with spirits, a bold smile on her face. Unfazed by the gazes fixed upon her, she came to a stop in front of Perugius and curtseyed. Sylphie and Luke took a knee. Of course, I followed their lead this time.

"I am ever so grateful that you have taken the time to grant me an audience," said Ariel.

“Enough with the ceremony. What do you want? Based on your outfits, I assume this isn’t merely an invitation to tea,” Perugius said, as if pretending to be clueless. Surely Sylvaril had already filled him in. There was no way he didn’t know what this was about. His reception was flippant and cold, but he did agree to an audience, so maybe this back-and-forth was little more than formality.

“Lord Perugius, I have come here to seek your aid in my bid to become king of Asura Kingdom.” Ariel cut to the heart of the matter, not distracted by his little act.

“Oh? Then allow me to ask you once more.” Perugius put his elbow on his armrest, leaning his cheek against his fist as he tilted his head and said, “What is the most important thing a king must possess?”

Ariel lifted her chin. “The most important thing a king must possess is…”

I hadn’t heard her answer yet. Ariel said she knew it, but there was no guarantee it was the right answer. Of course, even if she had told me what it was, I wouldn’t have known if it was correct, either. Still, I wish she’d discussed it with me beforehand, just to be on the safe side.

No, no. Let’s have a little faith in her. She’s got this much confidence in herself, so her answer can’t be too far off the mark, surely.

“…determination,” Ariel said. “Determination to carry on the will of those that came before them.”

Her words echoed in the otherwise quiet chamber. It was so quiet aside from her voice that it was hard to believe seventeen people were present.

“Oh?” Perugius exhaled. His expression was still unreadable, giving no hint whether she’d hit the mark or missed it entirely.



Determination to carry on the will of those that came before them…

That was the answer she'd arrived at, and I could understand why. Her path to the crown began with death. Derrick was the first to fall. Thirteen of her other retainers joined him, pushing her to where she was now. I knew what kind of people they were and what future they hoped for because she'd told me. Through his words, Derrick had communicated his will for her to carry out. Even after his death Ariel tried to live up to what he saw in her. There were surely countless others who had placed their hopes in her. That was the foundation upon which she would become king.

Then there was Gaunis Freean Asura, Perugius's close friend and a man who rose to prominence during a time of war. Our arduous research had revealed that he'd once been a total scumbag. One who was sociable, with a number of close companions. Gaunis ventured into town nearly every day to guzzle booze and pick fights with adventurers and mercenaries. However, like any other human being, he surely had days where he was in good spirits. Days where he'd drink just the right amount that it'd lower his inhibitions enough to rag on the royals and nobles to any adventurer or mercenary who would listen. They would no doubt humor him while smiling awkwardly and occasionally pitch in when he needed help. Likewise, he would listen to their requests as well.

In times of war, adventurers, mercenaries, and low-ranking soldiers were considered expendable pawns. Gaunis met them at their level and listened to their final wishes—at least, that's what I'd gathered. And then he went on to become king, not because he wanted to but because he had no other choice.

There must have been nobles and knights who weren't pleased to see him ascend the throne, but not among the adventurers and mercenaries. They supported him. That was why Perugius and the others left on their journey to take down Laplace, and ultimately succeeded. They were compelled to aid someone who honored the last wishes of the nameless soldiers who fought and died on violent battlefields.

While Perugius and his party were away, Gaunis succeeded in fending off the invaders. Of course, that wasn't just through the help of adventurers and mercenaries alone. Their efforts would have failed unless they all came together to halt Laplace's relentless advance. Somewhere along the line, the nobles and knights must have caved and decided to support him. Not because he'd inherited the wills of the deceased, probably, but because he was carrying on the will of his fallen father and brothers—to protect Asura.

With this connection to Gaunis, it surely had to be the right answer…but was it really? Personally, I did think it was kind of low-hanging fruit…

After a long pause, Perugius grunted. "Hmph. Carrying out the will of the deceased, you say?" He stared down at her and chuckled. "In other words, your desire to become king is entirely contingent upon the will of other people. You think someone like that can truly be a king?" His tone was condescending and derisive, which probably meant we had given him the wrong answer.

Ariel, however, did not lose her nerve. "Yes, you are entirely right, Lord Perugius. My desire is contingent upon the will of others. I am sure that is a far cry from what the rest of the world would consider a true king. But…" She took a deep breath and, face full of determination, said, "If I can be the king those who entrusted their wills to me hope for, then I do not mind if I am not a 'true king.'"

"Oh?" Perugius scowled, looking none too pleased with her answer. "And you would ask me to aid a king as foolish as you?"

"Yes. If I am such a fool, all the more reason I should be hoping for your assistance."

"Hah!"

Oh, boy, I don't like where this is headed.

Ariel had given him a thoughtful answer. Instead of obsessing over what made a true king, she would focus on fulfilling the wishes of those who had died for her. That was the kind of leader she would be—a king of the people, whose policies reflected their wishes. Whether that was the correct answer or not, it was an admirable

goal. Alas, it seemed to be a far cry from what Perugius had hoped for.

“Do you really think your answer is enough to compel me to aid you?” Perugius asked.

Ariel shook her head. “No, I do not, my lord. However, these are my true feelings. No lies, no obfuscation—this is the king that I, Ariel Anemoi Asura, wish to become.” Her gaze fixed intensely on Perugius. “If you reject what I stand for, then I have no need of your power.”

Her words were dismissive. Even Perugius was caught by surprise, his eyes widening. A ripple of shock ran through the twelve spirits gathered. Sylphie and Luke were taken aback, and so was I. I knew we needed Perugius’s assistance for victory, so we’d be in hot water if he really did turn her down.

Perugius narrowed his eyes. “You think you can attain the throne without my assistance?”

“If my ideals are so vastly different from yours, then I think your aid would be more of a hindrance than a help.”

Perugius dropped his hand from his cheek and slowly stood up. His features were tight with fury, mouth stretched in a thin line and eyes widened. He hadn’t balled his fists, but his shoulders were squared.

Suddenly, he raised a hand. Momentarily I imagined all twelve the spirits lunging at Ariel. But that wasn’t what happened.

“Well spoken, Ariel Anemoi Asura!” Perugius’s voice boomed. “You have made your conviction clear.”

I had tightened my grip on my staff, concentrating magic at the tip, intending to defend Ariel if I had to. Perugius’s words gave me pause.

“I, Armored Dragon King Perugius Dola, hereby swear upon the name of my deceased friend Gaunis Freean Asura, that I will aid you in your quest!” His voice grew even louder. “I will prepare a

teleportation circle for you! Return to the palace as soon as you can, set everything in place, and call me when you are ready!”

“Thank you,” said Ariel.

Sylphie and Luke bowed even lower. I froze, hand still tightly gripping my staff. I was utterly confused. The way he spoke made it clear that she’d given the wrong answer. Her words had obviously displeased him—or at least that was the impression I got—and yet he had decided to help her. Did he see a spark of potential during their conversation or something? What was going through his head? I couldn’t puzzle it out.

“By your leave.” Ariel led our group down the carpet and towards the exit. She wore a perfect poker face while Luke and Sylphie grinned triumphantly. And how could they not? Perugius was now officially supporting Ariel’s bid for the throne. He was in her camp now. Which meant I’d successfully completed my first mission from Orsted.

I got up and started to follow the party, then paused and glanced back at the throne. Perugius was surrounded by his twelve followers, arrogantly perched on his chair, staring down at the rest of us. He’d been watching us leave, which naturally meant that our eyes met when I turned around.

“What is it, Rudeus Greyrat?” Perugius asked.

“It’s nothing…” I was about to spin on my heel and start off after Ariel, but I couldn’t shake my curiosity. I had to ask. “So in the end, was that the right answer? Is that really what makes a true king?”

Perugius sighed and said, “It was not the answer I desired, no.”

“Then why did you agree to help her?”

He grinned. “There was a time in the past when all of us thought that Gaunis was the definition of a true king. He was flexible but cautious, generous but sensitive. He embraced his inadequacies, knowing all humans had them, and it was that very thing which made him adequate. On top of that, he looked at people as people, capitalized on their strengths, and helped them grow. He, more than

any other I knew, was the most qualified to lead the humans and their war-ravaged world."

Perugius certainly seemed to remember Gaunis fondly. The man he spoke of sounded different from the man I'd read about, but he had seen Gaunis for himself. Surely his account was more believable than any dusty old tome, though he might be seeing the past through rose-tinted glasses.

"Ariel Anemoi Asura doesn't bear the faintest resemblance to Gaunis. However, observing how she conducted herself, I suddenly remembered something. Was this not the 'ideal king' that Gaunis had spoken of?"

"Gaunis spoke of an ideal king?" I asked.

"Yes. He considered himself far from the ideal. He was always vocal about what he considered the 'ideal king,' from his younger days hanging around pubs, to his time in campsites on the battlefield, and even after he became king." Perugius paused, fixing his gaze on me. "He said, 'An ideal king is one other people are willing to sacrifice their lives for.'"

Ah, now I get it. So that's why.

Ariel had told him that a great king had "the determination to carry on the will of others." A dozen or more retainers had already lost their lives for her. They died protecting her. They did that despite not knowing if she could truly ascend the throne or not. In fact, they knew the chances of it were slim—they knew their sacrifice might never be rewarded. It was all because they thought she was someone worth staking their life on. So while she wasn't the ideal king that Perugius had hoped for, she was what Gaunis had considered the ideal king. There were as many ideals out there as there were people.

"I see," I said. "I understand now. Your ability to assess people is truly impressive." I bowed once before taking my leave.

"Rudeus Greyrat," Perugius called after me.

I glanced back. He had left his chair and had started toward a different exit before calling out to me.

“I have a question of my own,” he said.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Why did you not mention Orsted in all of this? I hate that man, but his presence is not one I can ignore. Didn’t you consider that things might go more smoothly if you brought him up?”

Orsted had already told me that Perugius had refused him. Knowing that, I couldn’t see how bringing Orsted into this would have improved the outcome at all. Was he testing me?

You want some kind of clever retort?

“Neither Orsted nor I are the ones seeking kingship,” I said.

“But Orsted does wish to see Ariel become king, yes? And you have aligned yourself with him, if I’m not mistaken? In which case, should you not have capitalized on his influence to further your aims?”

“Even if that sped things along, Princess Ariel would still be the one taking the throne, and she needs your help to do it. No matter how much help we provide, we are still outsiders. Unnecessarily using Orsted’s name to force compliance will only breed enmity.”

Hehe, that was a pretty badass answer, if I do say so myself.

Yep, as far as I was concerned, those getting involved here needed to chip in of their own volition. Once Ariel was king, she would have to run the country on her own. While I couldn’t speak for Orsted, not knowing his plans, I had no demands to make of Ariel after this was over. Since I had no stakes in this, I shouldn’t get too deeply involved.

“That’s a weak way of thinking,” Perugius spat, before leaving the room. His twelve servants remained behind, and I could barely breathe under the weight of all their gazes. I hurried toward the door, unable to bear it.

Holy crap. That was embarrassing. I guess that means half-hearted answers are a no-go with him.

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After leaving the audience chamber, I headed straight for Ariel's room. I didn't knock, instead busting the door open as I said, "Sorry for lagging behi—"

The first thing I saw was a pair of porcelain-white shoulders. Sylphie had already peeled off Ariel's fancy clothing and was in the midst of loosening her corset.

"Ah! Rudy, how dare you!" Sylphie barked at me.

"No need to fuss," said Ariel. "Lord Rudeus has served our cause well. There is no need for him to seek permission to enter my quarters. If he considers a peek at my body a sufficient reward for his services, then that is a small price to pay."

"What?" Sylphie gaped. "But Princess Ariel…"

"Oh, I see I wasn't being considerate enough." Ariel paused. "Lord Rudeus, my apologies, but I would appreciate it if you would step out."

I was already out of the door by the time she said that and only caught what she was saying as I closed it behind me. I had no idea where she got her false impressions from, but I wasn't shamelessly walking in to sneak a peek while she was undressing.

Although she does have a nice body.

The same could be said of Eris, but hers was a product of intense training, while Ariel's figure was something she was naturally born with and didn't have to struggle to achieve. She had her genes to thank. If we were speaking of balance between top and bottom, though, Sylphie was no less impressive. Her chest and bottom were both tiny and flat. It was perfect symmetry. I loved that about her. Roxy, meanwhile, was a goddess, so she couldn't really be compared to anyone else.

"Next time, I'll be sure to knock," I mumbled to myself.

Besides, not knocking in the past had led to me walking in on a pervert embracing his statue. That should have been enough of a

lesson for me.

I must be a slow learner.

Wait. Hold up a second here. Luke was in the room with them though, right? So he was allowed to look? Well, it wasn't surprising. Ariel probably felt more comfortable with him than anyone else.

"All right, Rudy, you can come in now," Sylphie said, peeking from the door.

When I tried to step inside, she pushed her lip out in a pout. "Did you see her…you know…"

"I noticed she wears white underwear."

Sylphie's cheeks swelled with air as she scowled. I knew that she was also wearing white panties, because I'd peeked when she was changing last night. I poked at her puffed-up cheeks and pushed my way inside. A few steps later, I felt Sylphie pinch my butt.

"Oh, dear, Miss Sylphie…"

"What is it, Mister Rudeus?"

"Let's save our fawning for when we get home, shall we?"

"…Hmph!" This time she smacked my butt before marching to the corner of the room where she forcefully plopped herself on a chair. Her cheeks glowed red, which made her all the more adorable.

Anyway…

Ariel sat in a chair, having finished changing. She looked like a princess even in her casual wear. Was it because her clothes were expensive, or the fact a real princess was wearing them? It didn't really matter either way.

"I apologize for walking in on you a moment ago when you were busy changing," I said.

"Not at all… So, what did you think?"

"Think about what?" I asked.

"My body."

Does she really have to ask me that? I just know Sylphie is going to be furious with me later.

No, this was probably a test. Great, everyone wants to test me today. I better not pick the wrong answer this time.

“It was amazing…or so I would like to say, but personally, I prefer Sylphie’s instead.”

“Is that truly how you feel? Then I must apologize for showing you something so unsightly.” Ariel snickered.

Sylphie’s face flushed even brighter as she grumbled, “I can’t believe you’d say that…”

Luke merely shrugged. Since we had successfully convinced Perugius to aid us, everyone was in good spirits.

“Please, have a seat,” said Ariel.

As soon as I settled across from her, her face turned solemn.

Guess I should get serious too.

“Thanks to your efforts, Lord Rudeus, we can now move onto the next phase of our plan.”

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t done anything.”

“No need to be humble. I only managed to find the answer because you took us to that library.”

But she had found that answer on her own, and she was the one who swayed Perugius with it. Granted, maybe I could take some credit for the outcome since Derrick wasn’t here to convince Perugius on her behalf, and in my future self’s timeline, she’d never succeeded in earning Perugius’s trust on her own.

Guess there’s no harm in patting myself on the back for this one. Still, Orsted was responsible for more than half of the plan.

“Now then, let’s speak of what comes next. Lord Perugius advised us to return to the palace as soon as possible and set things up. I plan to heed his words and do just that.”

“Why do you mean by ‘set things up’?”

“Exactly what the words imply.”

Yeah, see, the problem is I don’t know what they imply. I paused. Hold up, I should probably try to think for myself before I ask for an explanation.

To sum things up, Perugius wasn’t going to hit the road with us and walk the whole way to Asura Kingdom. Thus, he wanted to send Ariel ahead so she could set the stage for his entrance. This stage could be, for example, a party attended by dozens of nobles. Once we had that going, we could hail his entrance with his twelve spirits by ringing some fancy gongs. The nobles would all gape in surprise, gasping, “Urk! It’s Perugius!” before promptly prostrating themselves. Or something like that, anyway.

“Then…there’s no real reason to rush, is there? Should we not spend a bit more time preparing?” I asked.

“We cannot afford to. I have received word that my father has grown deathly ill.” Despite delivering what should have been shocking news, Ariel’s expression revealed no emotion.

Ah, so that’s it. Ariel has already heard about that. I wondered whether she had gotten that information through normal channels or if the Man-God had divulged the news to Luke, who then relayed it to her. I suspected the latter.

But wait a minute. Couldn’t it be possible that Ariel got that information directly from the Man-God? Which would mean she could possibly be one of his apostles. If so, that will throw a big wrench in our plans.

It was terrifying to think about. I would have to consult Orsted about the possibility of her being an apostle.

“Judging by the look on your face, I take it you already knew,” Ariel guessed.

“Huh?”

“Since you’re a servant of the Dragon God, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you didn’t bat an eye.”

I cleared my throat. “Ah… Well, Master Luke’s request was so sudden, and you seemed pretty driven to move ahead with your plans. I suspected something was up.”

Satisfied with my answer, she nodded.

Phew.

“I am sure you must have your own matters to attend to… In which case, fourteen or fifteen days should be sufficient for you to wrap things up and prepare for our journey, yes?”

She plans to set out in two weeks, huh?

About twenty-two or twenty-three days had already passed since I first received Orsted’s orders. That meant almost a month had passed since this all began. His estimation of when news of the king’s health would arrive had proven to be accurate.

“Fortunately, if we can enjoin Lord Perugius to prepare some teleportation circles for us, our journey will not take long. We should have some time to work with. Still, knowing my father is ill, I should like to return as soon as possible, lest it be too late. I would like to arrive before my brothers have a chance to secure their foothold.”

Judging from her words, the king’s illness was terminal. That would mean the crowning of a new king. If we dallied too long, Ariel would lose her chance to even compete for the throne.

There was just one thing that worried me. Orsted had mentioned a thorn in Asura Kingdom we would have to deal with: High Minister Darius Silva Ganius. According to Orsted, we needed to find Tristina, since she was his Achilles’ heel. We could remove him from office as long as we had her on our side. It was tempting to think that he would no longer be a factor now that we’d secured Perugius’s cooperation. But Orsted wouldn’t have mentioned Darius if he wasn’t an obstacle to our plans.

With Perugius backing her, Ariel equaled the first prince and his faction in power and influence. Getting rid of Darius would put her ahead. If our victory was to be assured, I would have to take action again.

“Princess Ariel, speaking of teleportation circles… Wouldn’t it be better to have one placed near the border to Asura Kingdom than within the nation itself?” I proposed.

“Oh? And why is that?”

“If word gets out that someone as prominent as a princess was able to slip into the kingdom without passing through the border, they may begin to suspect something unsavory at work. Especially since teleportation circles are forbidden. If you were discovered to have used them, it would spark unnecessary questions. I think it would be better to make our way from the border to the capital. That way, the people can also get a glimpse of you as we pass by.”

“Hm, I see. That’s a fair point.”

Sweet! Now all I have to do is come up with some excuse for us to make contact with this organization Triss is in. I haven’t really thought about how I’m going to go about doing that, but most outlaw-type organizations like that are willing to negotiate as long as money is involved.

“I’m opposed to that idea,” Luke said, cutting into our conversation. “If His Majesty is truly ill, the first or second prince may have minions along the road to obstruct our return. Teleportation circles may be forbidden, but long as the ones we use aren’t discovered, we can come up with excuses for how we got to the capital unnoticed.”

“That’s a reasonable argument,” Ariel acknowledged. “Continue.”

“This time, we have Rudeus accompanying us. There should be no concerns when it comes to our strength in battle. Yet rumors say that the first prince has enlisted the services of a North Emperor. While the palace may hold its own dangers, I think we would be in even bigger jeopardy if we were caught on the open road by an experienced swordsman of the North God style.” Fear filtered through his voice.

“True, we don’t want to be targeted by that sort of opponent,” Ariel agreed. Both she and Sylphie seemed to prefer Luke’s proposal

over mine. The three of them had fled the kingdom and fought tooth and nail to get to this point, losing countless others in the process. It was only natural that they feared being attacked on the road.

Still… Now what? Should I make some excuse to go on ahead of them so I can make contact with Triss?

No, it would defeat the purpose if something happened to Ariel and the others in the meantime. I had yet to satisfy all my suspicions that Luke was one of the Man-God's apostles. His suggestion might even be at the behest of the Man-God.

Ariel furrowed her brow. "You both make sound arguments… Sylphie, what do you think?"

"Hm, personally, I think we should teleport directly into the kingdom. We have no idea exactly where inside Asura this circle will take us. Plus, there can be no greater advantage than outwitting the first prince by not passing through the border checkpoint."

Uh-oh, so Sylphie backs Luke's idea?

"Also," Sylphie continued, "we managed to slip out of the country without causing much of a stir. I see no reason why we shouldn't secretly sneak our way back in. It would take over a month to travel on foot from the border. Such time could be better spent on other things."

As always, Sylphie's reasoning was sound and well articulated. It was easy to see her point and difficult to disagree with it.

"Very well… I understand your point of view," said Ariel. "In that case, we will proceed as planned and teleport inside Asura Kingdom."

Ariel made up her mind while I was busy evaluating Sylphie's persuasive skills. This was partly my own fault for not sharing more information with Sylphie ahead of time.

Oh, boy. What do I do now?

My options were either to work separately from the main group and get in touch with Triss, or find someone to do it in my stead. Ghislaine…wasn't really cut out for that kind of stuff. Elinalise was

currently pregnant, and for that same reason I couldn't drag Cliff into this. Who else did I trust who also had a talent for negotiation?

Seems like it'd be out of Zanoba's wheelhouse too, but maybe if I sent him along with Ginger… No. Ordering around another country's prince like that might cause issues for me later.

While I was lost in thought, a knock suddenly fell upon the door.

"Enter."

Sylvaril stepped inside. She glanced around the room, fluttering her wings before saying, "Just a moment ago, we discovered all of the teleportation circles inside Asura Kingdom have been destroyed."

"Huh?!"

The news came out of nowhere, blindsiding us.

"What do you mean?" Ariel asked.

"Allow me to explain…"

Sylvaril filled us in on the details. Following our audience session, Perugius commanded Sylvaril to immediately activate one of his magic circles. One in his floating fortress led directly to a specific location in Asura Kingdom. When she tried to do so, she found it wouldn't respond. Sylvaril sensed something was amiss and sent Arumanfi to investigate the circle on the other end, which was how they discovered it had been destroyed. He checked the other circles within Asura Kingdom, but each and every one of them had been destroyed as well.

"And so, we are no longer able to teleport inside Asura Kingdom."

The closest teleportation circle now was near the nation's border. We would have to walk the rest of the way there.

Someone had deliberately sabotaged the circles. There was no way it could be a coincidence. The only question was who? Was it the Man-God or Orsted? I could ask the latter tomorrow. Then I would know for sure.

Still, the situation triggered something unexpected—suspicion toward me. Right after I suggested we not teleport into the kingdom, they were forced by circumstance to do just that, as if it were orchestrated. Luke eyed me warily, as if he was certain I knew something about this and simply wasn't sharing. Even Sylphie looked nervously over at me. I was sure they both thought it was Orsted's doing.

Ariel was the only one not shaken by the news. "In that case," she said, "I suppose we have no other option. We will follow Lord Rudeus's suggestion."

"B-but Princess Ariel," Luke started to protest, gaping in shock.

Ariel cut him off and said, "Luke, inform Ellemoi and Cleane of the situation, and please help them with preparations. Sylphie, come with me. We need to pay our respects to the ladies and gentlemen of Ranoa Kingdom. I will leave you to your own devices, Lord Rudeus. Be sure to say farewell to your family and friends for the time being."

"…As you command," Luke said quietly, nodding.

Despite the unease lingering in the air, we all parted ways.

Chapter 9:
Before Traveling to Asura Kingdom

FOR THE THIRD TIME, I met Orsted at the cottage on the outskirts of Sharia.

"…and that is how Ariel wound up convincing Lord Perugius to help her, and how we discovered we wouldn't be able to access the magic circles located within the Asuran border."

"Hm." Orsted grinned.

It looks so sinister when he does that. But I guess it's probably just his normal smile.

"I see. You did well, then." If the wrinkle in his brow was any indication, he was plotting something even as he complimented me.

Nah, his face always looks like that.

"But I would advise you to never return to the Library Labyrinth again. That Demon King holds grudges."

"Urk… Okay, I understand."

Sadly, I wasn't spared a reprimand for my failure there. Orsted even scowled at me as he said it. No, actually—I think he was just exasperated with me. His expression seemed to say, "How in the world did you end up causing so much trouble in a library, of all places?" But it wasn't really my fault now, was it? I had no idea Luke was going to bawl like a baby over a book.

"I don't suppose there's any way they would accept an apology?" I asked.

"That would be futile. Demon Kings don't operate on common sense."

From my scant interaction with this Demon King, it seemed like they might actually be willing to hear me out, but Orsted didn't seem to think so. Admittedly, we'd made a bit of a mess. We wrecked a

number of bookshelves as we escaped, even though we had no other choice. I wanted to express how sorry I was at least, but I was giving up on ever going back, as Orsted advised. Perhaps never showing my face there again was the best apology I could give.

Nah, in the case of that Demon King, the best thing I can do is probably write in my diary. Daily updates would be impossible, but I would try to do it as much as possible.

Anyway, that aside…

“What do you think about this teleportation circle business?” I asked.

The group had all suspected my involvement for a moment. They came to their senses immediately after, but that was still enough to put a seed of doubt in their heads—to make them think I was hiding something.

“The Man-God’s work, I am sure. Seems like his first attempt to thwart us failed.” Orsted nodded to himself, confident in his explanation.

He was in unusually good spirits. He kept mumbling something like, “Just one more person…” I had no idea what he meant, but would be grateful for any enlightenment.

“If you don’t mind, could you fill me in on what you mean by the Man-God failing?”

“Hmph. Indeed.” Orsted adjusted his posture and glared at me, eyes molten. If he scowled any harder, they might start glowing and shooting laser beams at me. Pew, pew! “Perugius confirmed that these teleportation circles of his are unusable, yes?”

“Correct, boss-man sir.”

“Boss-man sir…?” Orsted paused before continuing, “There are not many of these circles within Asura’s borders. Most were placed so that royals and nobles could escape if they ever found themselves backed into a corner. Among them, several are already non-functional, and those are the ones Perugius has made use of.”

Huh, interesting. So they're like a secret escape route for the royal family.

"Thus, you have your answer," he said.

I see. So that's my answer… Like hell it is! That's no answer at all!

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded, falling on my knees and bowing my head. "Please explain! I need something more concrete to work with here!"

Orsted scowled menacingly.

Okay, not menacingly. That's just how his face always looks.

"Simply put, these teleportation circles are in places where your average civilian cannot happen upon them. Many are protected by soldiers. Someone who can go in and destroy them must be someone of respectable authority, either a noble or a high-ranking aristocrat."

"Okay, I get where you're going with this. And?"

"…Use your head a little."

"Yes, sir."

Okay, let's go over this. The culprit, who was either a royal or high-ranking aristocrat with the authority to enter a restricted area, had suddenly cut off their own lifeline by destroying all the circles that acted as escape routes for them. Not to mention these were already non-functioning circles that Perugius might use to travel. The possibility that the Man-God orchestrated all this seemed astronomically high. A normal citizen had no reason to destroy a magic circle. That meant one of his apostles was either a royal or someone in a position to manipulate the royal family. The most likely candidates for that role were…

"First Prince Grabel or High Minister Darius. One of them is the Man-God's apostle?"

"Indeed. The spread of those circles across the kingdom implicates the involvement of High Minister Darius, since his private soldiers are scattered throughout the nation."

Ooh, now I am starting to see the bigger picture! I had no idea he had a private army dispersed throughout Asura, but it makes sense!

“So we can be reasonably sure High Minister Darius is the Man-God’s apostle, then?”

“Yes. There is a possibility it might be the first prince, but that changes nothing. We’ll have to kill them both regardless.”

Well, the first prince is Ariel’s enemy, so that makes sense… But does that justify us murdering a prince? Guess it doesn’t matter. If Orsted says it needs doing, I’ll have to do it.

“That means there is just one apostle left unaccounted for,” said Orsted.

“Just one? That means you are certain Luke is an apostle now?”

“There can be no doubt.”

“What about Ariel?” I asked. “Is she a possibility?”

“No.”

Okay, come on. Enough with the vague answers. Exasperated, I said, “And what do you base that on?”

“There are certain people the Man-God cannot manipulate.”

“Okay, so, uh…how can you tell that she’s one of them?”

“…Intuition. Based on many years of experience,” said Orsted.

Intuition, huh…

He’d paused briefly before he answered, which meant he was certain Ariel wasn’t an apostle but couldn’t tell me his real reasoning. I decided not to pry any further. There were more important questions on my mind.

“What happens if your intuition turns out to be wrong and she is an apostle?”

“If that should happen, I will take responsibility and dispose of her myself.”

“Dispose of,” as in “kill”? That was harsh, especially considering how close we’d grown over the past few weeks, including the incident where I’d walked in on her while she was changing. But if Orsted was willing to stake that much on her not being the Man-God’s apostle, I should probably trust him.

Hm. In that case, maybe I should share information about him with Ariel? His curse didn’t seem to have as much of an effect on her, and if she wasn’t one of the Man-God’s apostles, it might be better to disclose everything to her. That way, she could work with us to keep an eye on Luke.

Nah, best not to do that. Like Sylphie, she trusted him implicitly. She would never believe that he would work for her destruction. And Luke was only doing what he thought was best for her. Bringing up the Man-God would be kicking the hornet’s nest. Luke wasn’t Ariel’s enemy. Being manipulated by the Man-God hadn’t changed his allegiance. He was only doing things that sounded like a good idea to him, despite the fact that they were anything but.

Right now, Orsted considered him a mere spy who observed my actions and reported them to the Man-God. He wouldn’t do anything to directly harm Ariel. However, he might end up acting on the Man-God’s advice to do something that seemed like it would help Ariel on the surface but would ultimately lead to her doom. That’s what truly made him dangerous. I could understand Orsted’s instinctive desire to kill him.

“Sir Orsted,” I said suddenly.

“What?”

“There is something I would like to clear with you, just to be on the safe side, regarding how I should approach our battle with the Man-God. Do you mind if I pick your brain?”

His forehead wrinkled. “Hm? All right.”

I started outlining his war with the Man-God.

First, we knew the Man-God could see the future. His view of it was both expansive and precise. He also had the ability to manipulate people to change the course of that future. However, he

could not see events relating to Orsted. The Dragon God's secret arts were stronger than the Man-God's prescient vision. Whenever Orsted got involved in an affair, the Man-God would see a false reflection of the future. Thus, he knew Orsted was involved whenever he sensed something slightly amiss or the future experienced a dramatic shift, but he couldn't see exactly how Orsted had brought about those changes. All he could do was guess. If he couldn't work out Orsted's objectives or what he had planned, the Man-God couldn't respond accordingly and influence the future in a way that benefited him.

Orsted's curse meant none of the Man-God's apostles had been able to get close enough to spy on his activities, so his movements had gone undetected. At the same time, that curse also limited the scope of what he could accomplish. It was only now, after I had joined him, that he had more options at his disposal.

As far as the Man-God was concerned, I was currently an invisible pawn on the chess board. But if I took concrete action, he could suss out what Orsted was planning. That was why I was keeping my movements discreet, so I could avoid showing my hand to Luke, who was acting as the Man-God's eyes and ears. I also withheld information from Sylphie and Ariel, since I knew how much they trusted him and that they would answer whatever questions he asked.

They say you can't put doors over people's mouths, so I've tried not to say anything to anyone, far as I can help it.

I planned to keep Orsted's aims and actions as secret as possible. That might make me look suspicious to the others, as it had this time, but this would lead us to victory for sure. We would keep our intentions under wraps while defeating the Man-God's apostles as we worked to achieve our objectives. I would serve Orsted for the rest of my life, and a hundred years from now, he would come out on top.

"…and that's my interpretation of the situation. Is that correct?"

"Yes. It is." Orsted nodded.

In that case, everything I had done up until now was technically correct. Perugius had called me weak, but we were on the path toward our goal. For now, we knew that Luke and Darius were the most likely candidates to be the Man-God's apostles. That left one other.

"I wonder who the last person is," I said.

"I know not. But judging by the Man-God's past patterns, it is highly likely to be someone extremely skilled at either martial arts or magic."

"Someone skilled at martial arts or magic…"

Uh, he did say it wouldn't be anyone in my family, right? Which means Eris and Sylphie are out of the running, fortunately.

Come to think of it, my future self's diary mentioned a North Emperor and Water God in Asura Kingdom. Ariel also mentioned the first prince was employing a North Emperor.

"Could it be the North Emperor or Water God?" I asked.

"Auber and Reida, hm? Yes, there is a good chance. When you leave for Asura Kingdom, be wary."

"You won't be coming along?"

"I will be tailing behind you, of course, but we will not be operating together."

The way he said "tailing behind you" sounded sinister, as if he was going to shadow me like a puppet master. Well, that means I can consult him if anything crops up. It's not so bad.

"All right," I said. "In that case, Luke, Darius, Auber, and Reida are the ones I should watch out for."

"Indeed. You may kill Darius, Auber, or Reida if you like. As for Luke…keep an eye on the situation and use your judgment. If necessary, dispose of him."

"You want me to decide whether to kill any of them?" I gaped.

"Yes. I leave it to your discretion."

Did he seriously think I was someone capable of making those kinds of decisions? Sorry, silly question. Of course he did. I hadn't shown any hesitation when I attacked him and tried to claim his life, after all.

"Well," I said, "what shall we do until it's time to depart?"

Orsted shrugged. "Make preparations."

Preparations, right… But what does that mean? "What should I be preparing, exactly?"

"First, get your equipment ready. You will likely be facing the Man-God's apostles in battle while you're in Asura. With your strength, I am sure you will have no trouble, but it would be wise to bring some form of protection." He turned and looked out of the cottage, where my Magic Armor lay in shambles. Zanoba was currently repairing it, but there was nowhere for us to store it in the city, so we had left it here. "That thing doesn't measure up to the armor of the Fighting God, but it is still a spectacular piece of work. I am sure you must have labored hard to create it."

"Well, yes…but we did get quite a bit of advice from the Man-God on its construction."

"Oh? Then he dug his own grave. What do you call it?"

I blinked at him. "Call what?"

"The armor."

"Oh. Magic Armor."

"I see… What an uninspired name. Shall I give you a new one for it? Let's see…"

"No," I said, cutting him off, "but thank you."

Orsted narrowed his eyes and chuckled. His smile was as unsettling as ever. Our taste in names (or lack thereof) aside, I wondered how Zanoba and Cliff would take it if they knew someone as supremely powerful as the Dragon God Orsted had praised their creation.

“If you plan to continue using that thing in the future, you should consider improving it. It currently drains you of all your mana in a single battle.”

I frowned. “But even if we were to make a smaller, more efficient version, it wouldn’t be finished in only two weeks.”

“Then we’ll have to shelve that idea for another time,” Orsted said, stroking his chin.

Wonder if he’d be willing to lend a helping hand. In which case, I guess the Dragon God Society logo will end up being slapped on it.

“Not being able to use Battle Aura certainly is inconvenient,” Orsted murmured. “For now, I’ll see if I can’t prepare a few magic items for you to use.”

“Oh, that would be great. Thank you.”

So Orsted was going to provide me with not just the best working environment and pay, but the best equipment as well? Damn. Makes sense though. He did set me up with this robe too. The difference between him and the Man-God’s inscrutable, completely hands-off approach was day and night.

“Speaking of which… I’ve been hearing a lot about the Fighting God’s armor lately. What is it, exactly?” I asked.

“Demon-Dragon King Laplace’s greatest masterpiece, and also his worst failure.”

Laplace’s masterpiece? So he’s the one who made it, huh?

“The armor itself glows golden with magical power and bestows immeasurable strength upon its wearer. However, the mana it contains is so great that it has given the armor a mind of its own. It assumes control over the wearer, forcing them to fight until they die. It’s a cursed armor.”

Cursed armor, huh? Guess the dragonfolk have a knack for making those kinds of things. Laplace had made all manner of cursed items, from the Superd’s spears to this golden armor… Nothing he’d created was any good.

“Having said that,” Orsted continued, “the armor is currently sleeping deep in the middle of the Ringus Sea.”

Orsted seemed to know anything and everything. It made him a truly convenient resource. Nonetheless, I couldn’t depend on him for everything; I had to find some things I could do independently. Sadly, there was only about two weeks till we were set to leave. There wasn’t much I could do.

I couldn’t get complacent simply because I was Orsted’s subordinate. He was a bit too aloof about matters. Or, more precisely, he seemed to think he could always try again if the first attempt failed. Perhaps he aimed to develop magic that could allow him to return to the past after reading my future self’s dairy. Or maybe he’d already experienced a time slip like that himself.

Come to think of it, he once said something along the lines of “trying again next time”, and as soon as the words left his mouth, he made this awkward face as if he realized he’d slipped up.

Maybe he’d been through these time slips not once, or twice, but a number of times now. I had no idea why he would keep that under wraps, but since he hadn’t mentioned it, he probably wouldn’t answer me even if I asked.

But even if Orsted could simply do things over again next time, there was no next time for me. You only get one life to live…or so I’d like to say, but that probably wasn’t the most convincing coming from me, given my experience with reincarnation. Even so, after talking to my future self, watching his last moments, and reading his diary, I could sense how full of regrets he was. I couldn’t just bank on wiping my slate clean and starting over if I messed up. Or rather, I felt like I would be betraying the person I’d been up till now if I kept up that mentality.

Which is why I need to put everything I have into this.

But how, specifically?

Of course, I could hone my fighting and magical skills, but I didn’t think that more practice would suddenly make me that much stronger. Were that possible, I would happily work out a strict

regimen to boost my abilities, but it wasn't. On top of that, anything new I achieved in only two weeks of preparation would be unreliable and half-baked. It was better to continue building on the abilities I already had.

Aside from that, I decided to set aside time to run some mock battles. I'd felt like something was lacking for a while now. Practice and training were important, but nothing could replace testing the techniques I'd learned in battle. Sparring, as one might say if this was boxing. Or exhibition matches, if you preferred fighting game terminology.

My sparring partner would be Eris. She was now a Sword King and far better than me at melee combat, so she would put up a good fight. If anything, I was more worried that she wouldn't find me a challenge. At least I could use my Quagmire and Deep Mist spells to give her some new battle experience. As much as she boasted of her battle prowess, she was still vulnerable to traps that targeted her weaknesses.

Also, I would ask Zanoba and Cliff to try repairing and improving my Magic Armor. It needed to be smaller and more fuel-efficient, even if that meant reducing its capabilities. They probably couldn't get it done in two weeks, but it would serve me in the long run, so I wanted them to start on it now. With Orsted's help, we could surely finish the project over the next couple of years. It seemed he'd also provide any equipment we needed, so I was set on that front, at least.

So that was how I planned to improve my training and gear. Now I just needed to think about what was left. With so little time left, I needed to plan carefully. So I decided to schedule my next two weeks.

First, I would announce my upcoming long absence to the family. It wasn't a topic I wanted to broach, in part because I would likely wouldn't be around when Roxy went into labor, but I couldn't avoid telling them forever.

Next, I needed to get in touch with Cliff. In addition to the improvements I wanted him to make on the Magic Armor, I had one

other request for him. Namely, I wanted him to conduct experiments on Orsted's curse.

Come to think of it, I wonder if Orsted knows what's going on with Zenith.

"By the way, sir…" I started to say.

"What is it?"

I explained Zenith's condition to him and brought up the book I discovered in the Library Labyrinth that referred to a Blessed Child who could remove curses.

"That Blessed Child doesn't seem to be among the living now," I said, "but do you know of any other way I might cure her?"

Orsted fell into silent contemplation. After a bit, he finally spoke, his voice gentler than usual. "It's true that you may be able to return her to normalcy if you use this Powerless Blessed Child's abilities. However, their skills are no substitute for an actual cure. If you try to force her mind back to what it was before, it may backfire and things might go in the opposite direction."

So there's decent odds it'll only make her worse, huh?

Then again, after everything she'd been through, it was a miracle she was even alive. If trying to meddle with her mental state meant possibly making it worse, it was probably wiser to just keep an eye on her for now, instead. Her condition wasn't a health concern at the moment.

Guess I just gotta be patient and watch over her.

"All right. Well, with that out of the way, I will begin preparations to set out for Asura Kingdom," I said.

I cleared up all the questions I had, so all that's left is doing the best I can in the time I've got!

***

The following day, we had our family meeting as I planned.

In fact, I feel like we've been having a lot of these family meetings lately.

This time it was to announce my departure for Asura Kingdom. I told them I would be gone for about three to four months to help Ariel.

The reaction to that was indifference.

"Okay, well, good luck with that. Oh, but before you go, I'd appreciate it if you could make some soil for the garden," said Aisha. She was more concerned about her dirt than my well-being.

"So Princess Ariel will be dropping out of the academy then…" Norn muttered. Like Aisha, she didn't seem too worried about me either. "I wonder if they'll have a farewell party…?"

This is…odd. Last time we did this whole song and dance, they seemed a bit more—I don't know—emotional? I want a tear-filled farewell again. I want to be able to hug my sobbing sisters and console them by doing my best Terminator impression and saying, "I'll be back!"

"Hey, Aisha," I said. "You know, uh, I might not be coming home this time…"

"Huh? Every time we do this, you always act like you won't be coming home, but then you show back up on our doorstep like it's no big deal."

I'd barely escaped death each time, but perhaps my little sisters didn't see it that way. Or perhaps they were trying to be considerate and not make me worry before I left. Whatever the case, I would do my best out there. I would be satisfied if the two of them could live their lives peacefully in the meantime.

"Besides, this means there'll be another woman joining our household," said Norn.

"Exactly," Aisha agreed, "which makes us feel silly for even worrying. And this time, you'll have Miss Sylphie and Miss Eris going with you. That gives us extra peace of mind."

As if on cue, Eris retreated to her room to begin packing for the journey. Earlier, when I'd first said where I would be going, she said, "Oh? Then I'm going too." She hadn't even hesitated.

"Speaking of," Aisha said, turning to Norn, "who do you think he'll bring back this time?"

"Hard to say for sure. Maybe one of the girls serving Princess Ariel? Miss Ellemoi or Miss Cleane perhaps?"

My two sisters were saying some really rude things, but for the record, I didn't intend to take any more wives. For one, I had hardly ever spoken to either Ellemoi or Cleane. I thought of saying so, but on the other hand, I didn't really trust the head between my legs.

But I seriously doubt anything like that is going to happen this time. I'll have Sylphie and Eris with me, after all.

Exactly. I had been alone in the past couple ventures, which had left me emotionally devastated. I drifted with the currents because I had no one to hold onto. I needed a levee to stop the overflow. Sylphie and Eris would make perfect dams. All I had to do was enlist their help and the floodwaters would recede.

"I will pray for your safety," said Lilia. She and my mother acted no different than normal.

"Miss Lilia, um, about Lucie…please take good care of her." Sylphie's expression was heavy with guilt.

"Yes, my lady. I will take care of everything while you're away." Lilia bowed her head.

"I know it's not good to leave her behind like this, but I just…"

Lilia shook her head. "You need not worry. This is the very reason you have a maid like me here."

Lucie had started to speak simple words, such as names of family members or pets, like: Mama, Asha, Lala, Oxy, Beebee, Dillo. My heart trembled with emotion, watching how hard she worked to get the words out. She had yet to call me "Dada." She would say "Rudy" sometimes, but not "Dada." I hadn't spent much time with her

lately, so my name would probably be the last one she learned. And now, Sylphie and I were going to leave her behind to go on a trip.

I had a feeling the two of us hadn't quite grasped what it meant to be parents yet. Especially me. I had no idea when that day would come. I did think Lucie was the most adorable angel, but thinking that wasn't the same thing as actually being a parent, was it?

"So I won't see you again for four months? It will be lonely," Roxy said, crestfallen.

I wasn't just leaving my child behind, but a pregnant wife too. I felt awful about that.

"Well, I'm not sure. I would like to return before you give birth, if possible," I said.

"Don't worry. Take your time. As long as I have Miss Lilia and Aisha by my side when it's time, I don't need you here. In exchange, I'd like you to bring me back a souvenir. I would love to eat some of Asura Kingdom's sweet and sour candies—those dried fruits slathered in sugar. Those are delicious."

Roxy was back to her usual poker face. She was probably anxious, since this would be her first birth, but she didn't let any of that inner turmoil show.

"That's a pitiful look you have on your face, Rudy," she continued. "I have no idea what you're worried about, but in the Migurd Tribe, it's natural for the men to go out hunting while the women stay at home to protect the house and children."

She puffed out her chest as she spoke, ever the reliable wife. I knew everything would probably turn out fine if I left it in her hands, but could I really justify leaving her like this?

"It is a bit of a shame, though, since I finally got this long vacation." Roxy sighed. "I thought I'd be able to spend it quietly with you."

"Yeah, I wish we could have done that."

Roxy had taken time off until the baby's birth. In Ranoa, it was normal for a wife to quit her job when she got pregnant so she could

focus on raising her child, but Roxy wanted to continue being a professor, so she persuaded Jenius to give her some maternity leave. I didn't learn until afterward that she had used my name to get her way, but if that got her what she wanted, then by all means.

There was still a little time left before our departure. I decided to spend the spare minutes and hours I could find with Roxy.

That night, I heard Sylphie and Eris's heated voices spilling from the latter's room. Sylphie would say something and Eris would snap back. From the other side of the door, I caught Eris shouting words like "Why?!" and "How come?!" Each time, Sylphie would respond calmly, and gradually, Eris's tone grew quieter until, at the end, she finally mumbled, "Fine, I get it."

Later, Eris came to my room, just as I had crawled into bed and was about to fall asleep. She sullenly burrowed under the covers and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me close as one would a body pillow. Her soft, ample breasts pressed against me.

Oho, not very chivalrous of you to sneak in here in the middle of the night and tempt me with these.

Not that I minded; I was a gentleman of the night myself. As far as sex was concerned, anyway. But before we got into that, there was one thing I needed to ask her.

"Did you have a fight with Sylphie?"

"No," she huffed.

"Okay."

I hadn't heard any fists flying. It was possible that if I slipped from bed and went to Eris's room, I might find Sylphie passed out on the floor, but I decided to take her word for it.

"Starting tomorrow, I'll be tagging along with Sylphie," Eris said. "We're going to meet with Ghislaine and help get things ready."

Ariel had already begun making preparations. She was going to pull out of the academy to return home, and the short notice meant packing was a nightmare. She also had to make calls to

various people in the region, which was probably why Eris had been asked to help out as a bodyguard.

“So in the meantime,” Eris continued, “she wants you to spend as much time as you can with Roxy.”

“‘She’? You mean Sylphie?” I asked, surprised.

“Yep.”

So that was why the two were having a row. Sylphie was trying to be considerate of Roxy, and if I had less on my plate to deal with, then I could spend more time with her. She’d really thought this through. Still, I was shocked she’d managed to persuade Eris without having to throw down. Eris sure had matured. She was no longer the same girl who pummeled people indiscriminately. If you made a well-reasoned argument, she would actually hear you out.

“And that’s why she said I could have you tonight,” Eris said.

Perhaps I spoke too soon—apparently, Eris had set her own conditions. Even so, it was still impressive that she agreed to Sylphie’s proposal. She had mellowed out. She had been so self-centered all those years ago. Now, that was gone. Her raging passion had cooled, and her clenched fists would no longer find their way to faces. The berserker princess was dead, the wild monkey silenced, the mad wolf claimed by eternal sleep. The Eris who had bared her teeth at everyone was gone forever…

Nah, this is probably an exception.

It was just like Sylphie to give up her turn with me as part of their agreement, setting aside her own desires. I would have to do my best to shower her with kindness while we were on our trip.

Preoccupied with those thoughts, I wrapped my arms around Eris. Almost immediately, she began tearing my clothes off.

“You know,” I said, “it’d be awful timing if you found out you were pregnant on the trip, so maybe we should take today easy and—”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it!”

And she had her way with me that night, just like she always did. Family planning were clearly words that did not exist in her dictionary.

The following day, Cliff happened to come by for a visit.

“Hey, Rudeus, if you’re free tonight, want to go out to eat?”

It was a dinner invitation, and the only people going were Cliff, Zanoba, and I. I’d never had a boy’s night out; normally when we did this, Sylphie, Elinalise, and a number of others would tag along. Maybe this time, the other lads planned on going somewhere too raunchy for the girls. Or maybe they wanted to discuss something that would be too awkward to bring up with women present.

“All right,” I said.

Whatever the case, I instantly agreed. I had no reason to turn him down, and more importantly, I had a favor I wanted to ask of him anyway. So this was perfect timing.

***

The sun was beginning to set when I met Cliff and Zanoba at the agreed-upon spot. The restaurant they brought me to was more posh than the places we usually frequented. As we entered, I paused to check the sign out front, which read The Red Sea Eagle.

This was a naming trend in the Three Magic Nations: places with eagle in the name were typically restaurants, while falcon was for bars and pubs, bat for brothels, and horse for inns. Granted, not every establishment followed this nomenclature. Some places would start out serving excellent alcohol, but then the proprietor improved their cooking skills and food became their mainstay. It was surprisingly common, in fact. So the naming trend was more like a general guideline.

The Red Sea Eagle was exactly the kind of place Cliff would select, sophisticated and luxurious. The customers were mostly minor nobility or rich merchants. One of the staff guided us to a

stylish room. According to them, this was the third best room they had to offer.

“Had we known Lord Rudeus would be paying us a visit, we would have prepared one of the better rooms,” they said. But there was no need to apologize on my account.

So this is what a luxury restaurant looks like, huh? When Cliff said we would be going out to dinner, I figured we’d be getting some casual chow, but this place actually had dinner courses.

The four of us took our seats at a square table.

“Now, then, Rudeus, do you know why we came here—why we specially reserved a room to speak with you?” Cliff asked, brow furrowed.

He seemed sort of angry, and I had a feeling I knew why. “Is today…your birthday?” I asked.

“My birthday has already passed,” Cliff replied dryly, unamused by my joke.

Hold on, is he twenty now? Or twenty-one? He was baby-faced, so he looked five years younger than he actually was, but by this world’s standards, he’d long reached adulthood. Some people already had two or three children by his age.

“We are here for something else,” Cliff said.

“All right.” I sat up straighter. Apparently, we were about to have a serious conversation.

“You see…”

Knowing Cliff, it was probably about Orsted. I had sworn I would fill him in on the details about what happened with Orsted when I returned home after getting beaten to a pulp, but I never did make good on that promise. I figured he’d called me here to give me an earful.

“Regarding the child Elinalise and I are having… I have been thinking of calling it Clive if it’s a boy and Elleclarisse if it’s a girl. What do you guys think?”

Wait. A name? That's what we came here for today? So I had the completely wrong idea?

"Basically, we will be going with a Millis-style name if it's a boy, and an elf-style name if it's a girl. What are your thoughts, Rudeus?" Cliff turned toward me.

"Uh… Well, Clive sounds like the name of a clever man with good odds of making it as a politician, but it also sounds like a name someone with a fussy personality would have. Elleclarisse is a pretty name and has a nice ring to it. Although I can't help feeling she might have a bad encounter with a thief in her future, one who will steal something important from her. Like her heart."

"That was about what I figured you would say," Cliff replied as he leaned back in his chair, gazing at the ceiling. After a moment, he looked back at me, his expression tight. "Actually, that was a joke. We've already decided on the names. While I do appreciate your input, that isn't why I brought you here today."

Oh, so he was just pulling my leg. Couldn't have done it with a straighter face. If you're gonna mess around, at least smile a bit. Both you and Zanoba look stiff as statues, you know?

"Surely, you have already guessed what it's about by now, Rudeus. It's related to your actions as of late." Cliff jabbed a finger in my direction.

Zanoba nodded in agreement. He also seemed a bit irate. "Master, no matter what you decide to do, I have every intention of following you to the bitter end. That said, do you not think you have been a bit too secretive with us lately?"

"Uh, you think so?" I shrugged.

"Out of nowhere, you asked us to start building this insanely powerful armor for you. Midway through creating it, you began giving us extremely specific advice. You wouldn't even share who you were going up against, and then we find out it's one of the Seven Great—"

Zanoba was interrupted mid-sentence by the door swinging open. A staff member entered, carrying our drinks. Zanoba flinched and snapped his mouth shut, quietly waiting for them to finish

distributing the beverages. Once they left, he resumed the conversation. While I suspected they had reserved this room to keep our conversation private, their attitudes made it clear it was partly out of fear of Orsted.

“We find out your opponent is one of the Seven Great Powers, the Dragon God Orsted,” Zanoba finished. “And not only that, since you went all-out in battle, you completely decimated an entire forest!”

“Nah, it’s still there. Well, half of it is, anyway,” I said.

Zanoba ignored my defense and continued, “And after all that, you capitulated.”

“I had no other choice.”

“For him to bring you to your knees without killing you after you wore that armor and threw everything you had at him…the man must be a monster. It’s the only explanation.”

Well, in a sense, Orsted was a type of monster. It was bad enough that he could nullify spells from a distance, but I didn’t stand a chance against him in melee, or combat either. Not that I was particularly skilled myself, but I’d still thought I could put up a decent fight.

“Since you didn’t seem too torn up about it, I assumed the Dragon God must be a decent man, but he…” Zanoba paused, shivering as he dropped his gaze. After a moment, his head shot up again and he loudly declared, “That man…is a demon in the flesh! A few days ago, I saw him with my own eyes, and I knew in an instant he was our enemy!”

The two of them had a little scrap last week where Orsted completely knocked Zanoba out. That brief meeting was enough for him to be hit with Orsted’s curse.

Hm, but wait a minute. Until that point, he hadn’t thought that poorly of Orsted. Which must mean the curse doesn’t activate until someone actually meets him. Come to think of it, Aisha and Norn don’t seem as repulsed by him as everyone else. Guess the curse won’t affect them as long as they only know of him indirectly.

“I have to assume you have lost your sanity to serve a man like that.” Zanoba shook his head, unable to fathom it. The curse had to be extremely potent for him to have such a strong reaction simply from seeing Orsted once.

“Personally, I have yet to meet this Orsted myself, so I don’t know what Zanoba means, exactly,” Cliff chimed in. “But Zanoba, Sylphie, and Roxy all seem to consider him dangerous. If they’re all on the same page about him, he must be an evil man.”

That was a shocking statement coming from a man who never seemed to listen to what other people were saying. However, from the sound of it, Cliff wasn’t yet affected by the curse.

“Agreeing to work under a man like that doesn’t sound like the wise Rudeus I know,” Cliff said.

Yeah, well, I’m not particularly wise.

Still, this posed a problem. It would be hard to keep going when so many of those closest to me disapproved of Orsted.

“But…when you asked us to repair the Magic Armor, I finally realized.” Cliff grinned smugly. “You plan to fight him again, don’t you? Dragon God Orsted, I mean.”

“…Huh?” My jaw dropped.

“You’re only pretending to work under him so you can wait for an opening and pounce. That’s your strategy, right?”

“Uh, no, Orsted and I—”

Cliff held up a hand to stop me. “You don’t have to say anything to me. The whole reason you asked us to improve the mana efficiency of the armor…is because you want to make it accessible to Zanoba and me, right? In other words, you plan to have us fight with you eventually…” He smirked triumphantly. “Well? Am I wrong?”

Yes, you’re absolutely wrong.

It almost felt silly to argue the matter at this point. It was better to shrug it off and say sure, they’d eventually fight with me and this was merely preparation for the battle to come. That way, they would

eventually see for themselves (albeit gradually) that Orsted wasn't such a bad guy.

So I started: "Master Cliff…"

Then I paused. Given how close we were, I didn't think it was right to sugarcoat things and lie to suit my own self-interests. They might not believe the truth, but I had to at least try telling them.

"What is it?"

"Actually," I explained, "Orsted has a curse placed on him that makes everyone around him hate him. Would you believe me if I told you that?"

"What? Seriously?"

"An evil god tricked me, which is why I got stuck fighting Orsted in the first place. Would you believe that too?"

"An evil god? Uh, you mean the one you worship with the panties and the blood-stained cloth?"

I glared at him. "I'll murder you right where you sit if you dare say that again."

"Uh…huh? Err, sorry. I guess not that god then. Right, I get what you're saying. Keep going."

Whoops, I accidentally let my anger slip for a second there. Even so, it wasn't right to deride another person's religion. Roxy was a righteous goddess.

Anyway, that's beside the point…

"That was how I wound up meeting Orsted. For whatever reason, his curse doesn't work on me, so the two of us were able to talk and work things out. In exchange for his forgiveness, I agreed to work alongside him to combat this evil god. Would you believe that as well?"

"Hmm…"

"I certainly won't," said Zanoba, his glasses gleaming in the light. "I am skeptical that a man like that would ever volunteer to fight alongside anyone else."

“Huh, surprising to hear someone like Zanoba take that kind of stance,” Cliff said. He crossed his arms in contemplation.

“Think about it this way,” I said, “Zanoba is only interested in dolls and figures, yet he’s strangely insistent about his distaste for Orsted. Doesn’t that strike you as odd? It has to be an effect from the curse.”

“Well, now that you mention it…” Cliff paused. “No, when I think about it, Zanoba does care a lot about matters concerning you. If Orsted really is that untrustworthy, it only makes sense for him to worry.”

Perhaps that was true. Maybe Zanoba really was worried for my well-being. I was grateful that he cared so much…but at the same time, this was one instance where I wished he didn’t. Yes, Orsted was hiding some things from me, and I didn’t yet know if I could trust him completely. Even so, I wasn’t foolish enough to bounce between Orsted and the Man-God and risk making enemies of both.

Well, guess I have no other choice. I’ll just have to lie, then.

“All right, I understand. In that case, we’ll go with Cliff’s explanation.”

“My explanation? What do you mean?”

I cleared my throat. “Ahem, it’s as you said, Master Cliff. I plan to eventually take Orsted down. But it’s too early to make a move right now. I’ll have to bide my time and do as he asks.”

“What? Are you sure about that? Then what about the conversation we just had?”

I shrugged. “Wishful thinking aloud. It’d be nice if that were the truth.” Once Cliff saw Orsted in person, he would likely be in the same boat as Zanoba. It was better to play along with his little theory. “With that in mind,” I continued, “I would appreciate your continued cooperation in the future.”

“I will have your back, Master. In preparation for the next battle with Orsted, I will make armor that even Julie could wear.”

“Great. Looking forward to it.” I had no intention of making Julie fight, of course, but knowing he was motivated to go that far was enough.

“With that out of the way, there is something else I would like to ask of you,” I said, turning to Cliff.

“Yeah?”

I had originally planned to ask him for help combating Orsted’s curse, but now I would have to explain it in a way that aligned better with his theory.

“You see, Orsted is actually protected by a sort of barrier,” I said.

“A barrier? Like a magical one?”

“No, more like a curse.”

Cliff furrowed his brow.

“The curse makes it so that when you gaze upon Orsted, you automatically pull back, too intimidated to fight at full strength,” I explained.

“Really? He has a curse like that?”

“Yes. That is the whole reason I lost to him. I assume it must have been the same for you, Zanoba?” I asked, turning to him.

“It did seem as though I had been defeated out of nowhere. I couldn’t understand what had happened. Now that you mention it, I got the sense that my body wasn’t moving the way it normally does.”

Yeah, that’s just your imagination…but I’ll keep that to myself.

Cliff nodded. “I see, well, a curse like that would be bothersome indeed…”

“Yes, extremely bothersome,” I agreed. “And for that very reason, I would like you to see if you can’t do something about this curse of his.”

“But all my research has been centered specifically on Elinalise. I have no idea if it would work for Orsted…”

“Well, if it doesn’t, then we’ll just have to counter it some other way. But you can’t work on your research on Elinalise’s curse while she is pregnant, right? So I’d like you to test how much you can weaken the effects of other curses in the meantime.”

Cliff was trying to become a specialist in curses. While he hadn’t managed to completely suppress Elinalise’s curse, he had managed to significantly reduce its potency. I hoped that he could next look into weakening Orsted’s curse, so he wouldn’t strike fear into everyone who looked upon him (or at least not as much as he did now).

“But are you sure Orsted would agree to participate in such research? How are you going to trick him into it?” Cliff asked skeptically.

“Orsted is like a wolf starving for prey; he hungers for battle. In reality, he’s displeased by the effects of the curse as well.”

Cliff’s eyes widened. “Really? But it’s thanks to that curse that he’s got an advantage over his opponents, right?”

“He said it himself. For once he would like to face an opponent and fight them at full power without them cowering before him.”

That was a bald-faced lie. I would have to ask Orsted to play along and maintain this farce in front of Cliff.

Time to set up my dominoes and let everything fall into place.

“You mean it…?” Cliff stared at me in disbelief.

“Yep. That’s why I need you to dive headfirst into researching him, no holds barred.”

“Hm… All right. I don’t like deceiving people, but if you’re sure about this, I’ll give it a shot.”

Woohoo! You’re the best ever, Master Cliff! Miss Elinalise, be sure to give him some good loving!

With that out of the way, I could slowly start talking Sylphie and the others into seeing my side. Victory would be mine if I found a way to deal with Orsted’s curse.

On the other hand, phew… The guilt I felt was no laughing matter. Why did I have to lie like this to everyone around me? It wasn't the morality of it that bothered me—sometimes lies were just necessary. Even so, Cliff, Zanoba, Sylphie, Roxy, and Eris were all seriously worried about me. Lying to them made me feel like I was betraying them. I hoped we could all laugh about it later, once we managed to lift Orsted's curse.

"Well, that's that, then. I look forward to your continued assistance, Zanoba, Master Cliff."

"Yes. I am relieved that you had something up your sleeve after all, Master."

"It's no small task you've given me, but I'll take care of it."

With that, we all nodded.

Not long later, our food finally arrived. Exquisite dishes lined the table, and we all had alcohol in our cups, which meant the banquet was ready to commence. I lifted my brimming glass and said, "All right, now that we've finished with the serious discussions, why don't we say cheers and dig in?"

"Yes, that's a good idea." Zanoba mirrored my actions. "What shall we raise our glasses to?"

Cliff lifted his own cup and said, "Well, there are no girls with us today, so I guess we can toast to male friendship… What do you think?"

That's a little too sentimental, isn't it?

Sentimental or not, I knew that neither Zanoba nor Cliff would ever betray me when it came down to it. That much was clear from my future self's diary. Cliff had helped me even at the risk of his entire country turning against him. Zanoba had stuck with me even when I became a real piece of shit. They were true, irreplaceable friends.

Admittedly, I had lied to them today, but come what may, 'til death did us part, I wanted to be there for them. That thought alone made my eyes misty. So what if we were being too sentimental? In

between my life in Japan and my time here, I had lived long enough to be a mushy old fart anyway. This suited me perfectly.

“In that case, to our friendship!”

“Yes, to friendship!”

“Cheers!”

We clinked our glasses, spilling alcohol everywhere.



“But speaking of male friendship…what kind of things do men even talk about in times like this?” Cliff asked, puzzled.

“Raunchy, sexy stuff?” I suggested.

“Sexy stuff? Ah, come to think of it, I heard you have a new wife now.”

I grinned. “Yep, her name is Eris. She was actually a childhood friend.”

“Lady Eris? Now, that name brings back memories,” said Zanoba, narrowing his eyes as he recalled our first meeting. “I wondered how the woman once referred to as the Mad Dog had turned out. I shall be sure to pay her my respects soon.”

Zanoba and Eris hadn’t really spoken much back in Shirone Kingdom, but I guess he still remembered her nonetheless. She was rather intense, so it would be hard to forget her.

Huh. I paused. “Wait a minute. Now that I think about it, Master Cliff, you knew about Eris before too, right? Didn’t you say something about meeting her a long time ago?”

“W-we had a brief interaction a long time ago,” he mumbled. “I don’t feel anything for her now.”

Ah, so he’d had a small encounter with her years ago… Odds were she had completely forgotten he existed. That wouldn’t be surprising, knowing Eris.

“The more important matter here is you, Rudeus. I told you this before, but women aren’t collectibles.” Cliff launched into a long, drawn-out sermon. “You can’t just bring in a bunch of them to wait on you hand and foot…”

Once the three of us were sufficiently drunk, Zanoba was the one who launched into sexy talk. The conversation started about the wife that he’d married years before, but turned into a horror story midway before finally transitioning into a series of complaints about how she couldn’t understand his dolls. Cliff and I joined in with anecdotes about Eris and Elinalise. Both were monsters in bed, so we could sympathize with one another’s plight.

Sadly, Zanoba quickly grew bored with this conversation, so we switched over to discussing my Magic Armor instead. When I began relaying the details of how I wore it in my fight with Orsted, the two of them listened eagerly, eyes alight with fascination. Apparently giant robot versus super monster was a universally entertaining trope.

In the course of this, I mentioned how Orsted had restored my missing arm. Without the prosthetic, I could feel up my wives' chests to my heart's content, but on the flipside, my strength had taken a serious hit. I could no longer do the same strenuous work that I could when I used the prosthetic arm.

"We'll make another one right now!" Cliff declared, reaching over to grab Zanoba and myself by the arm.

"Mm? Right now?" Zanoba grunted.

"That's right. This restaurant should be closing soon. We can knock back a few drinks in my room while we work on creating a new prosthetic hand!"

"Sounds good! Let's go!" I agreed eagerly, leaping out of my chair.

Zanoba chuckled. "Hahaha, I suppose I have no other choice but to accompany you, then!"

The three of us left the restaurant as they closed for the night. On the way back to Cliff's room, we stopped to buy some drinks. Elinalise, who should have been waiting at home, was nowhere to be seen when we arrived. We found a note saying she had left to visit my house, so at least there was no reason to worry.

We carried our beverages into Cliff's study and began constructing a brand-new prosthetic hand while nursing our drinks and babbling back and forth.

"I'm telling you, if you make it that light, it won't have any strength to it! Ah, see! See! It broke! That's why I kept telling you. It's gotta be thicker!" Cliff grumbled.

Zanoba huffed. "Nonsense, with Master's earth magic, we can do this! I swear to you!"

“Okay, hand it over here then!” I thrust out my hand. “I’ll show ya what my magic can really do! Oooooh, how’s this!”

“Dummy, it’s no different than it was a second ago!” Cliff barked at me.

“Hah, your eyes fail to see the truth. But I swear to you, it’s twice as strong as it was before. Try it for yourself.”

“…it broke instantly.”

“Uh, whoops?”

“In that case, let us revise our design,” said Zanoba. “As long as one can insert their fingers into it, that’s good enough, so if we alter where the palm is supposed to be here…”

“Hey, Zanoba, hold it just a moment,” I interrupted.

“Come now, Master, everyone fails sometimes.”

I shook my head. “Let me try again. Just give me one more chance!”

“Ha ha, all right, but this is the last!”

Making a prosthetic hand was proving extremely difficult. Probably because we were all in a drunken stupor. No one had enough sense to make the right calls, so we were all getting too bold. Yet somehow, our work was surprisingly precise…or at least, I thought it was.

Regardless, drinking with the boys and bantering while trying to make something turned out to be insanely fun. I was in high spirits.

If another opportunity presents itself, I’d like to do this again, I thought to myself as we drank the night away.

***

While the boys were busy getting hammered, shouting, “Ain’t scared of no mama tonight!” three pajama-clad girls sat on an

enormous bed on the second floor of Rudeus's estate.

"Today marks the twenty-sixth session of our regularly scheduled Greyrat House meetings. Could we have a round of applause?" asked the white-haired girl.

The blue-haired girl promptly clapped her hands. The red-haired girl sat with her legs folded under her, a serious expression on her face as she obeyed the command. One among them was old enough not to be called a "girl" anymore, but if anyone said as much, the master of the house would roar in anger like a demon possessed, so everyone was careful to keep their mouths shut. As the master would argue, she looked young enough to be a middle-schooler, so what was the problem with calling her a girl? Although a person from the master's previous world would be perfectly justified in pointing out that that was precisely the problem.

Digressions aside, the red-haired girl, Eris, stared blankly at the other two in her company. She had been training in the yard when Sylphie dragged her inside to this bedroom without explanation. She felt a bit lost.

The white-haired girl, Sylphie, cleared her throat. She was wearing her usual soft, two-piece pajama set—the kind Rudeus liked. "Ahem, since Eris joined us recently, allow me to explain—"

"I will take care of the explanation." The blue-haired girl, Roxy, interrupted. She had on a nightgown with an adorable design on it. Anyone who didn't know better would think it was made for a child. "These meetings are something Sylphie came up with as a way for us to bond. We each have our own expectations and feelings of jealousy and possessiveness, but if we succumb to that and compete amongst ourselves, it will only hurt Rudy. As members of this household, our duty is to do all we can to make this a safe haven for him."

Eris glanced down at her own attire. It was plain and casual. She inwardly swore that she would go shopping tomorrow to find some proper pajamas.

"Eris, are you listening?" Roxy asked.

“Y-yeah!” Eris bobbed her head. But she was honestly still a bit confused, since she’d never imagined they held meetings like this.

“At any rate,” said Roxy, “if there’s anything you want to say to us, please do so here. Let’s try not to do any bickering in front of Rudy. Especially since he’s been so busy lately. We’d like to keep from adding to his burdens as much as we can.”

“Got it.” Eris nodded solemnly.

No fighting inside the house. No causing trouble for Rudeus.

Eris was born in the Asura Kingdom, and although her father, Philip, took only one wife, many houses in the kingdom had multiple wives. It was especially common in high-ranking noble houses who were eager to produce as many offspring as possible, since their line risked dying out otherwise. Even Eris’s beloved grandfather had taken multiple partners.

Eris recalled something her grandfather told her long ago: “You can tell the caliber of a nobleman by how well his many wives get along with one another.”

The better the three of them got along, the more positively it would reflect on Rudeus.

“With that out of the way… today’s topic has to do with us. See, the two of us don’t know you very well, Eris, and you don’t know us very well either. That’s why we’d like to take this opportunity to deepen our friendship.”

As Sylphie spoke, she reached under the bed and pulled out a bottle of strong liquor that one could find just about anywhere. Roxy retrieved some cups and a tray of assorted snacks, and placed it in the middle of the bed.

Almost like a swordsman stabbing their blade into the ground, Sylphie set the bottle in the middle of their circle and declared, “For today, we’re going to spill our guts, no holds barred. We’ll each recount how we first met Rudeus and what brought us to where we are now. In the process, we’ll demonstrate how deep our feelings for Rudy are.”

“Bring it on!” Eris puffed out her chest. She was confident that her love for Rudeus was second to none.

“In that case, I’ll begin,” said Sylphie. “Rudeus and I first met when he was still living in Buena Village. We were about five at the time…”

Thus began the girls-only gathering at Rudeus’s estate, a meeting which continued well into the night. Since Roxy was pregnant, she held off on the alcohol. Eris only got a little tipsy, perhaps due to a strong natural resistance. This meant Sylphie was the only one that got absolutely hammered.

“Y’know, Rudy was the first friend I ever made. I’ve loved him eeeeever since. Oh, it brings back so many memories. He squeezed me in his arms back then too. Didn’t say a word, just put his arms around me like this and squeezed… Ehehe.” The stench of booze thickened Sylphie’s breath as she latched onto Eris.

Although Eris was a bit annoyed by Sylphie’s clinginess, it didn’t repulse her. She merely curled her lips, pouting. “So what? Rudeus hugged me when we were younger too.”

“Yeah, you already told us,” Sylphie whined. “I’m so jealous. You got to be with Rudy during the best period of his life. You even got to be his first. How was it, by the way? Our first time together was incredible.”

“I-It was no big deal,” Eris huffed. “Pretty normal, I guess? Besides, y-you got to have his first kid and marry him first… I’m more jealous of that.”

The conversation was turning sour, which was why Roxy took the opportunity to cut in. “Now, now, there’s nothing wrong with not being his first. I haven’t been his first for anything, but I am still perfectly happy.”

“Boo!” Sylphie jeered. “You don’t get to talk, Roxy! You’re his number one. You’re the one he respects the most.”

“Respect…? I honestly don’t understand why he seems to revere me so much.”

“Rudy told me it’s because you taught him the most precious thing in the world. Something really special! I bet it’s something pervy—something he’s really into!”

Roxy shook her head. “He was plenty perverted by the time I came along. I had nothing to teach him in those matters. When he was younger, he even spied on me when I was showering. All I ever taught him was normal stuff… Hmm.” She fell into thought.

Honestly, what did Rudeus see in her? From what Roxy could remember, he’d been pretty attached to her from the start. But what could she have possibly taught him back then that was so special? Nothing stood out in her mind.

“Well, your special circumstances aside, even Eris has her own distinct charms. I’m really losing confidence over here…” Sylphie hung her head.

“Distinct charms? What’s that supposed to mean?” Eris demanded.

“I mean, you know. You’re strong, right? I’m jealous you get to fight by Rudy’s side. I worked hard to get where I am and have grown a lot, but I’ll never compare to him. You saw it in the Library Labyrinth. Rudy’s always trying to protect me. I appreciate that, but…” Sylphie fidgeted in place, having drunk way more than she should have.

Despite seeing how anxious the other woman was, Eris didn’t let those words swell her ego. She went to the Sword Sanctum precisely to train herself to be his equal. Her goal was to rival him in strength, and she had achieved that; she was confident she could beat him even if he whipped out his magic in battle. That brought her great satisfaction, but she still couldn’t help feeling a little envious of the relationship between Sylphie and Rudeus. Especially because she was strong enough to protect herself and could never be the woman Rudeus had to look out for.

While Sylphie agonized over the issue, Roxy cocked her head, and Eris crossed her arms. Out of the blue, the door to the room swung open.

“Pardon me, mistresses.”

“Oh, it’s you, Miss Lilia,” said Roxy.

In walked a middle-aged woman in a maid outfit. Wisps of steam rose from a bowl of boiled potatoes and other assorted vegetables.

“I brought you an extra late-night snack,” said Lilia.

Roxy smiled. “I apologize for inconveniencing you like this.”

“Not at all, Lady Roxy. Looking after you and the other mistresses of the house are a part of my duties as a maid.”

Roxy bowed her head in thanks, and Lilia dipped her chin in turn.

“Uh, um…well, I am most humbled and deeply…uh, thankful…” Eris stammered, unused to using such polite turns of phrase.

“Not at all, Lady Eris. You needn’t thank me. Now that you are one of Rudeus’s wives, that means I consider you my mistress as well.”

Eris was still struggling on how to interact with Lilia. Her family’s estate in the Fittoa Region had employed a number of maids, but Eris got the feeling she shouldn’t treat Lilia the same way. She was the mother of Rudeus’s younger sister, after all. In a way, she was like a wet nurse or second mother to him. The last thing Eris wanted was to make Rudeus’s mother hate her.

“Also, you needn’t use such polite language with me. I heard much of you when I lived in Buena Village.”

“Uh, wh-what did you hear?”

“Well…” Lilia hesitated. Eris already knew it was nothing good if it was something Lilia had heard way back when she was still a child. “I heard that you were so violent no one could get you under control and that it would be difficult for you to ever live the life of a proper noblewoman…”

Eris scowled, sticking out her bottom lip. Despite the development in her sword skills, she wasn't so different now. There was a period where she'd tried her best to fulfill the role given to her, but she'd thrown all that away.

"But now look at you. You have turned into a stunning young lady. The Sword God—and even the lord of the Fittoa Region—would be proud to see the woman you are now."

"I guess…" Eris dropped her gaze. "But my dad and grandpa are already…"

"Ah, I apologize." Lilia's eyes filled with sadness, and she lowered her head.

"It's fine. That disaster affected everyone. I'm not the only one who lost someone. Rudeus's mom and dad were also…"

Silence fell. In that brief exchange, the atmosphere in the room had turned gloomy. Steam continued to rise from the hot food Lilia had brought in.

Uncomfortable with the change of mood, Sylphie piped up, "C-come to think of it, Miss Lilia, you've been with Rudy since infancy, right?"

After a pause, the maid answered, "Yes. I was hired to be his wet nurse, after all."

"That means you knew him before Roxy and I ever met him. What was he like back then?"

"As an infant?" Lilia went quiet for a moment as she thought back. "Hm, I must confess, I found him a bit disturbing at first."

"Huh? Why?"

"It's difficult to put into words… Lord Rudeus was as elusive as a ghost. He'd disappear suddenly and just when you thought you'd found him, he'd have this creepy grin on his face. Perhaps that's why."

She smiled as she remembered the past. Why had she avoided Rudeus so much back then, even though he was such an adorable child? Lilia remembered feeling disgusted by him, but she

had forgotten those emotions with time, and all that remained were happy memories.

“But honestly, that’s not any different from how he is now, right?”

“Yes, true,” Lilia admitted. “Back then, whenever I picked him up, he would have this lecherous grin on his face as he groped my chest…”

“I don’t think that has changed at all either, has it?” Sylphie asked.

“Now that you mention it, no, it hasn’t.”

Rudeus had been a pervert from the moment he was born, apparently.

Lilia’s stories left an awkward air in the room. And yet, there was one girl among them who snorted triumphantly.

“If he liked Lilia’s chest that much, then he should be plenty happy with mine,” Eris declared. She did indeed have an impressive bosom. “I was kinda worried, actually. Sylphie and Roxy are so tiny, I thought maybe my body wasn’t his type.”

“R-Rudy isn’t the type to judge a girl by her curves,” Sylphie said, a tremor in her voice.

“Now that I think about it, while we were traveling together, he did stare at girls’ chests all the time,” Eris mumbled to herself.

“What, even while you were traveling?” Sylphie stroked her chin. “Although, now that I think about it, he did find every excuse he could to touch my chest right after we got married. On my days off, he’d spend the whole day doing that.”

“He hasn’t really touched mine that much… I wonder if he’s just not interested in my chest…” Roxy’s shoulders sagged as she squeezed at her breasts. Sadly, there wasn’t much to grab.

“Well, at any rate, I should excuse myself…” said Lilia.

Sylphie called after her, “Miss Lilia, you should drink with us. It couldn’t hurt to do so occasionally.”

Roxy nodded. “Yes, now that you mention it, I don’t remember you drinking much while we were in Buena Village either. As you well know, I can’t have any right now, but since you’re already here, why don’t you join us?”

“I…but I have to look after Mistress Zenith…”

“Then bring her along too,” said Sylphie.

Eris nodded. “Yeah. We’re all adult women here. We can drink together!”

The one thing a drunkard didn’t lack for was gusto, and these girls had that in spades right now. It took Sylphie no time at all to cajole Lilia into dragging Zenith into their drunken merrymaking.

Elinalise was lonely that evening without Cliff. He had gone out earlier, insisting he had something to talk to Rudeus about—man to man. Not wanting to dampen his pride, Elinalise wished him farewell while lauding herself for being such a virtuous and forgiving wife.

However, she quickly enough found herself bored with nothing to do. She and Cliff had been having sex regularly despite her swollen belly, but with him gone, there was no way for her to satisfy her carnal urges. In fact, since she was pregnant, they were no worse than normal. She figured she would be fine skipping a day, and so she left their abode to visit the Greyrat Residence in order to check in on Sylphie and Roxy.

She arrived to find a group of five ladies throwing their own drinking party. “Oh, dear me, seems you girls are up to something fun.”

“Ah, Grandma!” Sylphie beamed. “Your tummy sure has gotten big. Is my little brother in there? Or will I get a little sister? Oh, wait… If Cliff is basically my father, then that makes Rudy… Uh, um…”

When Elinalise walked in, Sylphie was in the midst of feeling up Eris’s boobs from behind. For her part, Eris ignored Sylphie, eyes glued to the food she was silently shoving into her mouth as she nursed her drink. Zenith was sitting nearby, acting as Eris’s personal

drink refiller. Beside her, Lilia was chugging away from her own mug, with Roxy topping off her glass whenever it grew empty.

“Miss Roxy,” said Lilia, “why…why is it that my daughter can’t earn Lord Rudeus’s love as well?!”

“He does love her.” Disappointed as she was that she couldn’t join in because of her pregnancy, Roxy still humored Lilia with an earnest response.

“I wonder if that’s really true…”

“Well, admittedly, he does only see her as a younger sister,” Roxy said.

“But doesn’t a woman’s true happiness come from being loved by a man?!”

“Well, I definitely am happy, but I don’t think that’s the only form of happiness one can have. Besides, Aisha is a talented girl. I am sure she will find a wonderful partner eventually.”

Lilia shot up straighter. “Someone even better than Lord Rudeus?!”

“Well, it would be difficult to find a man better than Rudy… When you put it like that, I really hit it big, didn’t I? Like buying up a prime spot of land for pocket change before everyone realizes its value and the price shoots up…”

Watching them, Elinalise remembered how single girls from the Adventurers’ Guild would gather to throw parties. Those lamenting how they couldn’t snag a good man would regularly meet up to get drunk and make merry before ultimately getting told off by the bartender and ending up on the streets after closing hour, where they’d nod off till morning.

Elinalise would eagerly join those girls from the Adventurers’ Guild when she could. She had nothing to fear; unlike them, she never lacked for male partners. The only reason she participated was so she could enjoy some alcohol with a group of people.

“Rudeus would weep if he could see you girls like this. The only time a girl is supposed to get this inebriated is in her partner’s

company, when it's just the two of them," she said.

"Aw, don't say stuff like that, Grandma," said Sylphie. "Oh, hey. You're always teaching Roxy how to do stuff in bed, right? Why won't you teach me anything, huh? How come?"

"Oh, Sylphie, honestly…you are completely wasted. But as for why I have never taught you anything, it's because Rudeus will be more turned on by you if he thinks you're an innocent girl who doesn't know anything about sex."

"All the more reason for you to teach me all kinda stuff! I'm tired of letting Rudy do whatever he wants to me in bed. It's 'bout time I made him squeal for a change!"

It took only a few seconds for Elinalise to abandon all good sense on seeing her granddaughter drunk as a skunk. She was a good talker, which was precisely why she decided it best to join the girls by drinking alongside them.

"At any rate," Elinalise said, "I'm going to get me a glass." She barely managed to grab an empty one before Sylphie's hand shot out to stop her.

"You can't! Girls with big tummies can't have alcohol!"

"Tell that to Roxy."

"I don't gotta! Roxy isn't drinking, so there's no problems there! Plus, even if she did drink, she can use detoxification magic, so I don't gotta worry!" A sober Sylphie would never have said something like that, but she was already three sheets to the wind.

Elinalise sighed, exasperated, and found an empty chair to flounce into. "You know, I learned how to use that magic too at the academy."

"Well I can do it without chanting an incantation!" Sylphie huffed.

"Yes, yes, how incredible. I would expect no less from my granddaughter."

"And that's exactly why you can't drink! It's a no-no!"

“Yes, yes. I understand.” Elinalise laughed off Sylphie’s triumphant bragging and gave up on the idea of alcohol, opting to snack instead.

“It’s not ’cause I’m your granddaughter. It’s thanks to Rudy teaching me,” said Sylphie. “I do whatever he tells me to—whether it comes to magic or sex.”

“And it’s because you’re that kind of woman that you tempt him so,” Elinalise pointed out.

“Yeah! He acts way more motivated the morning after we’ve slept together. Ehehe!”

It took Elinalise about an hour to catch up with Sylphie’s high energy.

That night, four of the women drank themselves into oblivion, guzzling down drinks as they let out all the negative feelings they’d built up. Their anxiety around Rudeus doing so many things in secret lately. Their suspicions about the Man-God and Orsted. And yet, they were all optimistic that it would somehow work out. It was with that whirlwind of emotions that they knocked back their drinks and enjoyed themselves in drunken bliss.

Roxy and Elinalise, who remained sober, were kind enough to humor the others and their numerous complaints until they eventually nodded off. It was they who cast detoxification magic on the others. When all was done at last, Elinalise returned to her home while Roxy retreated to her room. The latter made preparations for school tomorrow before slipping into bed.

There was only one girl in the household who couldn’t participate in their little party and sulkily slept the night away, but Roxy wouldn’t even realize they’d left her out until the following morning.

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When my eyes cracked open, I found myself clinging to Zanoba. It should go without saying, but no homo—I only did this because I got totally smashed last night. That was some good alcohol we'd had. Honestly, I never got the point of drinking with a bunch of other men in my previous life, but it turned out that hanging with a bunch of guys I liked made the alcohol taste that much better.

"Ugh, but my head is killing me…" Since my head was pounding something fierce, I cast healing and detoxification magic on myself. The throbbing immediately receded. It was like taking a super strength aspirin that kicked in immediately, washing away both the pain and its source.

I did the same for Zanoba and Cliff, even though they were still sleeping like a couple of logs. The former had his foot resting on Cliff's face, which was probably why Cliff seemed to be having such a bad time sleeping.

Sorry, buddy, but healing and detoxification magic can't take away the source of the stench.

While my magic did an excellent job of easing the pain of a hangover, it didn't help with the dehydration. I decided to get a drink of water before my headache returned, using earth magic to conjure a cup and then water magic to fill—

"Hm?" I paused as I noticed something in the middle of the room. Whatever it was, it was shaped like an arm, but numerous metal plates had been layered together, making it slightly larger and thicker than a normal arm, and unwieldy besides.

"Uh, what was this thing supposed to be again?" I wracked my brain, trying to recall the happenings of the previous night. "In fact, where the heck am I anyway?" I scanned the room, but I didn't recognize my surroundings. I was pretty sure that I had been here before, and I could tell it was Cliff's room at least, but other than that…

"Um, let's see, I think we drank a bunch at the restaurant… Oh, yeah, we got on the topic of remaking my prosthetic hand. Cliff said he had the materials here to draw magic circles for it, so that's why we came here to his place…"

That was where my recollection ended. Everything after that was murky. Judging by the evidence, we'd guzzled alcohol while working on making this new version of the prosthetic.

"Huh."

Fuzzy as my brain was on the details, I did remember bits and pieces about our attempts not going to plan at all. I reached down and picked up the prosthetic—or gauntlet, rather—and inspected it. The thing was heavy, probably weighing about ten kilograms, which meant I'd made it with my earth magic. I had even left a perfect slot in the palm where a magic stone could be embedded. It struggled to fit it on my hand while holding it, so I set it down and slipped my hand in. It fit like a glove.

"Earth, be thou my hand," I muttered. Mana started pooling in my arm, feeding into the gauntlet, and gradually, it became lighter and lighter. My sense of touch was less sensitive when wearing it, but I could easily pick up whatever I wanted, giving me fond nostalgia for the time I spent with my prosthetic. There was no mistaking it—this was the Zaliff Prosthesis. Or the Zaliff Gauntlet, rather, if we were going for a more accurate term.

"We actually finished it!"

Indeed, we had successfully created the Zaliff Gauntlet.

After that, the three of us groggily sat around and enjoyed the breakfast Elinalise made. She had come home at some early hour this morning.

"We did it."

"Yeah."

"Let's be sure to inscribe a clean blueprint for it later."

While we celebrated the completion of the gauntlet, we lacked the energy to show much enthusiasm. No amount of healing or detoxification magic could restore the hours of sleep lost to partying 'til the wee hours.

"Well, see you."

“Yep, let’s drink again some time.”

“Indeed! It was a pleasure.”

We bid our quiet, reserved goodbyes, promising to do this again.

My feet dragged as I made my way home. It was already almost noon, and the sun beat down on me. The summer heat was inescapable. This also meant the snow was long gone, and soon enough, the beastfolk would enter mating season. Personally, I was eager to mate year-round, so the seasons didn’t have much of an impact on me, but seeing how antsy everyone else was made me restless as well.

Roxy’s belly had begun to swell. I was looking forward to deciding on a name for our baby, but in just two weeks I would have to leave with Ariel for Asura Kingdom. I could instantly return home with teleportation magic, but we had no idea how many months we would be spending there.

I hated the idea that I wouldn’t be there for the birth. After all, by the time Roxy went into labor, she would have spent over nine months with uncomfortable pregnancy symptoms, all so she could give birth to my child. There was little I could do for her in return, but I needed to show how grateful I was through my actions, at least.

Wonder if it’ll be a boy or girl…

Since Lucie was a girl, I kind of wanted a boy this time, but honestly, it didn’t matter either way.

Come to think of it, Eris mentioned she wants to have a boy.

Back in Japan, there were tips and tricks for determining the sex of your baby, but what were they again? Like, if you did thing A then it would be easier to have a boy and if you did thing B it would be easier to have a girl, or something like that. I recalled vinegar being used at some point too…

I wonder if you can change a baby’s sex through magic in this world…

Well, it didn't matter either way. We would lovingly raise our baby regardless of their sex.

Eris would likely also wind up pregnant in no time. My concern with her was whether or not she would settle down and behave while pregnant. On top of that, she seemed to be in a rush to have a baby. In the middle of intimacy, she would pause numerous times to ask, "Can I get pregnant this way?" and "Are you sure this is right?"

Part of it was because she naturally had a high libido, but maybe part of it was that she felt a step behind the other girls, since Sylphie had already had Lucie and Roxy was currently pregnant. In Asura Kingdom, there was a strong sense that one couldn't openly declare themselves a man's wife until they had their child. I had no idea what Eris thought about that, but if she wanted to have a baby quickly so she could feel more secure, I would oblige her.

Finally, I saw my house in the distance. Since I hadn't told the girls I would be staying out for the night, I figured they would probably be upset with me. Not that our household was strict about that kinda stuff.

Perhaps it would be wise to make a concrete rule regarding curfew and staying out. Kidnappings were a common problem in this world, and there was no telling what the Man-God might do. Lucie was growing up, so making a rule now would serve to protect her and our other future children.

"I'm home!" I declared as I walked in.

"Oh, Big Brother, welcome home!" Aisha said. I saw neither hair nor hide of the rest of my family.

"Huh? Where is everyone? Did they all go out?"

"They were up late into the night," Aisha explained. "They're still asleep!"

What, they were partying it up? Without little ol' me? Does that mean I was left out of all the fun?

In other words, while I was out knocking back drinks with the boys, the girls had a celebration of their own. I could only hope they

hadn’t spent the time badmouthing me.

“Can you believe them? They were so cold to me!” Aisha groused. “While I was sleeping, they got together to have drinks and chat!”

“Oh, so you weren’t a part of the festivities?”

“Nope. Leo and I slept together the whole night. Speaking of Leo… When I woke up this morning, I noticed the bed felt cold and wet. Leo apparently had an accident. I got onto him, and he looked all dejected. He may look like a big dog, but he’s still just a little pup.”

Aisha sure seems to be enjoying her days here.

“So? What did you do? Did you wash your bedding?” I asked.

“Of course I did. Oh, and Miss Eris helped me out. She promised she wouldn’t tell anyone since she used to wet the bed as well. I told her it wasn’t me, but she wouldn’t believe me, no matter what I said. Please tell her the truth. I swear, I have never once wet the bed since I was born.”

“I don’t know. You sure about that?” I teased.

“Ugh, not you too! You guys are cruel!”

We moved to the living room as we bantered.

I wonder if Eris took part in this drinking party. It left me a little anxious, but it was good she seemed to be getting along with the other girls.

“Oh, Rudeus, welcome home.”

As I was lost in thought, Eris came down the stairs. She was wearing light, flexible clothing and carrying a wooden sword, even though her real weapons still rested at her hips.

“Good to be home,” I said. “Going out for training now?”

“Yep! I have to train even harder!”

I had no idea what they had discussed during their party, but she seemed to be in high spirits.

Which reminds me, I have a favor to ask of her.

“Eris.”

“What?”

Perhaps it was thanks to the sun on the walk back, but my head was clearer than before and my body felt lighter too. All I needed was another glass of water and I’d be good to go. One big glass! And while I was in the mood, it was the perfect time to ask.

“If you’re going to do some training, how about having a mock battle with me? You know, like you and Ruijerd used to do while we were traveling together. Haven’t done that in a long time.”

For a moment, she stared vacantly at me, but she soon recovered and flashed a grin. “Sounds good! I’ll pound you into the ground like I used to!”

“Ulp… Well, I’ll try my best to keep up.”

Since this was a mock battle, I hoped she’d at least hold enough back not to kill me.

This is going to be okay, right? Right? I mean, she is a Sword King now, so she can hold herself back…right?

“Well, I’m gonna head out to the garden first then!” Eris declared, before hurrying off.

With that promise made, I left to change clothes. Eris had become quite the badass since I last saw her, and I couldn’t let myself look too pathetic in front of her.

Time to get my game face on!

The two of us stood apart, facing one another.

“It’s been a really long time since I sparred with you like this,” said Eris.

“Sure has.” How many years had it been since we traveled with Ruijerd? About five, if my approximation was correct.

“I won’t lose to you anymore!” Eris bellowed.

“Don’t worry. I don’t have any illusions about being able to win.”

I used to defeat her after I received my Eye of Foresight, but by the end of our journey, the advantage that gave me was negligible at best. The two of us had gone on to live different lives after we parted. Eris had spent all of her time studying the sword, doing nothing but fighting. Having seen her face-off with Orsted, I could already tell I didn't stand a chance of beating her.

"That said, you don't have much experience fighting a mage, do you?" I asked.

"Nope."

"And I've never faced off with anyone skilled enough to use something like the Sword of Light. Mock battles like these will help us prepare to face off against opponents of a similar skill level."

Eris huffed, grinning from ear to ear.

What's with her? I didn't really compliment her that much. Did I say something funny?

"It really has been forever since we did this, too!" she said.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Eris wasn't just referring to the sparring—she was recalling when I was her tutor and used to logically analyze what we were doing as we trained.

"Well, with that out of the way, it's time to battle! Just like before when we were traveling."

"Yep, got it!"

She lifted her wooden sword, holding it high above her head, her favorite pose since childhood. However, things were different now. The moment she took that pose, the air around her settled. The tense, cocky aura about her disappeared in an instant. Panicked, I dropped into a fighting stance and gripped my staff, unleashing my Eye of Foresight.

"Whenever you're r—"

Before I could get the word out, Eris's figure blurred. By the time I finished the sentence, a force struck my right shoulder. I

dropped my staff before I could register what had happened and went sprawling. The next thing I knew, I was staring at the sky. There was a delay before the pain hit, shooting through my shoulder.

"Agh… Urk…"

I couldn't move my right arm at all, which made me suspect she'd shattered my shoulder blade. I managed to reach my left hand over and started chanting, "Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again! Healing!" Slowly, the pain subsided.

Eris appeared in my field of vision, still holding her sword above her head with a confused look on her face, as if to say, "What now? Can I strike you again?"

"Hold it. Stop! I give!" I thrust my hand out to stay her, and she finally lowered her weapon.

I took a breath and lifted myself off the ground. "Eris, was that the Sword of Light just now?"

"Yep."

Aha, so that's the secret technique of the Sword God style. I had seen it once before, and Orsted had even hit me with the technique, but seeing it once again reinforced how ungodly fast it was. I hadn't had time to blink, let alone react. "So that's what it was…" I mumbled. "Amazing. I didn't see it coming."

"Right?! I put everything I had into it!" Eris nodded, pleased by my compliment.

"Guess I'll have to work hard and find a way to counter it."



Eris huffed. “It won’t be that easy!”

“Yeah, I don’t expect I’ll be able to do it today…”

Still, I couldn’t look like a complete loser in front of her. I needed to make sure she could learn something from these mock battles.

Well, to sum up the results of our battles… I lost miserably. Eris won nine out of ten of our matches.

I frowned. I already knew Eris was strong. In fact, I’d already figured I would be no match for her before we started. The point of these mock battles was not for me to win, but to get stronger. Experiencing the best of the Sword God style was a valuable lesson in itself.

Yet, as much as I appreciated that, I couldn’t help feeling utterly dejected after having the snot kicked out of me again and again. I really did try everything: Quagmire, Deep Mist, Earth Fortress, Vacuum Wave, and Sonic Boom. I even tried using wind and sand to obscure her vision. I thought getting cornered would be her weakness—and it certainly was—but her Sword of Light was so fast it could overcome that.

Even if we managed to strike each other at the same time, I still lost. I thought Electric would be enough to knock us both out of the fight, but Eris kept a firm grip on her sword even as it shot through her, and kept charging at me. She didn’t lack guts, for sure. Meanwhile, all it took was one hit and I was out of the game. The ridiculous gap between her stamina and mine made me worry whether she’d feel disillusioned after all of this.

“I really am a loser, aren’t I?” I sighed.

“Why do you think that?”

“I mean, look at you. You worked hard and became this powerful as a result, while this is all my efforts have amounted to. I feel like I can’t look you in the eye, especially with how many hours of training you put in compared to me.”

The one time I managed to snatch a win was when I managed to stop her sword with my Zaliff Gauntlet. Eris was thrown off by the abnormal resistance she felt through my sleeve, which left her gaping in surprise. I couldn't blame her—she thought she would break my arm with her swing, only to be met with steel that deflected her attack. The Zaliff Gauntlet had a sleeker design than its predecessor, though the two weighed about the same.

Without thinking, Eris had blurted, "What? So you can make your arm hard too?" The sexual implications made had her cheeks flush brightly. Alas, there was only one part of my body I could harden like that, and it generally remained flaccid until night time.

In any case, I might have won, but it wasn't because of my strength. Luck had favored me, and the same tactic wouldn't work twice. If she'd used a real sword instead of a wooden one, there was a good chance she would have lopped off my hand along with the gauntlet. As far as I was concerned, that win didn't count. My win rate, then, was zero percent.

Yep, just call me Big Loser Rudeus.

"That's not true at all," Eris said. "We're talking swordplay versus magic here. In melee combat, it's only natural you'd lose."

Honestly, that was not the reaction I expected. In my mind I had only imagined two scenarios. In one, she would sniff, puff out her chest, and say, "Of course! Because I'm stronger!" And then she would lose her temper and snap, "Rudeus, you need to train harder!" In the other one she would sigh, be disgusted and say, "You bore me." Her response was so different that I was left gawking.

Seriously, did I just hear the word "melee" come out of Eris's mouth?

"We start within my preferred attack range, so you're at a disadvantage from the beginning. In fact, I'm the one who should be ashamed that you won even once." Eris said all of that with a completely earnest look on her face.

Am I hearing things? Is this really my Eris?

I had to remind myself that she was a Sword King now. Of course she would be knowledgeable about combat. It would be odd if she wasn't. She had spoken this analytically when she taught Norn swordsmanship, too.

I knew that, and yet I couldn't stop myself from asking. "Eris, I have one question…"

"What?"

"Who, uh, taught you all that?"

Was it the Sword King? A Sword Emperor? I suspected it was one of those two. I wasn't really asking because I wanted to know who specifically taught her. Maybe I just wanted to reassure myself by confirming that she hadn't come up with all that on her own.

If that's the case, I'm a hateful bastard.

But I couldn't really help it. On the outside, it looked as though she hadn't changed at all, but so much about her was different and it left me a little…well, gobsmacked.

"Auber was the one who taught me about melee!" Eris declared.

Ah, as I figured, someone did teach her. But the name Auber gave me pause. I was pretty sure I had heard it somewhere before. "Wait… The North Emperor? North Emperor Auber?"

"That's the one!"

"From what I understand, you were the Sword God's apprentice, but you're saying you also learned from the North Emperor?"

"And a bit from the Water God too, yeah!"

Water God Reida too, huh?

Of course, it wasn't surprising that she would pick up on other swordplay styles in the Sword Sanctum. It was in the place's very name. Or maybe those warriors had happened to swing by, and she had received unofficial lessons from them that way.

Regardless, North Emperor Auber and Water God Reida were big names. Orsted mentioned there was a good chance we would be fighting those two in Asura, and lo and behold, they were the ones who taught Eris what she knew. I wondered if this was a trap. I wanted to believe it was a simple coincidence, but…

"Eris, to tell you the truth, there's a good chance we might be facing those two when we go to Asura."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They're on the enemy's side."

I thought that even Eris would find it difficult to face her former teachers. I'd tried to word it diplomatically, but she simply crossed her arms and grinned like she was ready to walk into battle.

"Yeah? That gets me itching to fight!"

She looked like she would gladly throw down with them right here and now. Apparently, she hadn't built the same kind of relationship with them as the one she had with Ghislaine. In fact, I wondered if she'd even made any friends at the Sword Sanctum. It worried me.

"Well, if you're raring to go, then I won't hold back when fighting them either."

"Of course! You better not hold anything back with them," she said.

I stared at her. "Because you think it would be disrespectful?"

"Because they'll cut you in two in an instant." Her expression made it clear she wasn't kidding. "But don't worry, you have me to protect you!"

"R-right…"

Reassuring as that should have been, being told they'd cut me in two was honestly terrifying. I definitely didn't want to face them head-on. Maybe we could lure them into a trap or rig things so the conditions favored us. I'd have to bank on that.

"Well, thank you for doing this mock battle with me regardless."

“No need to thank me. As your wife, it’s my duty!”

Oh, goodness. You’re going to make me blush.

“Well, then, as your husband, I’d better work hard so I can stand toe to toe with you,” I said.

“You’re fine as you are!”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Everyone has their own role to play! In fact, if I know you have my back in battle, it’ll put me at ease.”

Huh. Five years ago, Eris would never have said something like that. The skills she had picked up during the time she spent training were certainly the most notable thing, but she had matured mentally as well.

I am really going to have to work hard, so she doesn’t feel disillusioned by me.

***

I continued sparring with Eris as I made preparations for our departure. That included making improvements to my Magic Armor, working on a way to combat Orsted’s curse, as well as packing for the trip. I did all of this while trying to spend more time with Roxy.

Of course, I wasn’t with her all the time. I had several meetings with Orsted where we discussed what abilities North Emperor Auber and Water God Reida might use, as well as how to counter them. We also worked out how to contact the band of thieves Triss was involved with. Just to be on the safe side, I brushed up on my geographical knowledge of Asura’s Capital, Ars, as well as the layout of the Silver Palace where the royals resided. I also introduced Cliff and Orsted so the former could begin studying Orsted’s curse.

I was pulling out all stops to do whatever I could, all while trying to set aside extra time to spend with Roxy.

I wasn't stalking her, to be clear. Yeah, maybe I loitered in front of her door sometimes and snuck into her peripheral vision to get her attention, but most of the time I was pretty direct in asking for her time.

Perhaps because she was pregnant, she was more willing than usual to accept my company. Not that she had ever refused it before, of course, but she was making a more concerted effort to approach me. It warmed my heart.

She had always been a little aloof with me. If I was sitting on the couch, she would opt for one of the armchairs, or take a seat directly across from me, rather than settle in beside me. That had changed as of late. She would either cozy up beside me or plop herself in my lap. Can you believe that? In my lap! This was the same Roxy that hated being treated like a kid, but she was willingly perching herself on my legs. If that wasn't enough, her cheeks would light up, as if she was embarrassed to be doing it. No doubt it took more courage to do this than simply take a seat by my side.

That was why I made sure to offer prayers of gratitude to my altar every night.

My Goddesses, thank you for letting me have such a happy life.

One evening Roxy and I found ourselves sitting on the living room couch, side-by-side. We would often sit together and chat like this as the day drew to a close. We never ran out of things to talk about. Roxy would discuss how things were at school or news about the latest magical implements. Sometimes we would talk about our adventures following the Displacement Incident. None of the subjects were terribly important, but chatting with her always put me at ease. Hearing her voice alone was enough to make me happy. Roxy's words always carried deep nuance, filled with wisdom and enlightenment. I never spent a dull minute with her.

"You're being too insecure," said Roxy. "While a mage should keep their distance while attacking, if they get too far away, that means a greater delay before their attack hits."

“But when I’m fighting someone with a sword, shouldn’t I put some distance between myself and them?”

The subject of today’s discussion was my match with Eris. Most people would judge me, saying it was wrong to bring up another woman when I was spending time with Roxy, but it was actually Roxy who broached the subject. She had watched our match—watched me get my butt handed to me.

Roxy agreed. “True. If you’re a magician facing a swordsman, the more distance you can get, the better position you’ll be in. Your spell’s impact may be delayed, but at least your opponent’s attacks won’t hit you either.”

“See, like I was saying.”

“However, that all changes the moment you enter your opponent’s attack range.”

My shoulders slumped. “Really?”

“Once you’re within their reach, they have the complete upper hand. After all, they’re fast. Trying to put distance between yourself and them at that point is futile; you won’t be able to move fast enough to get out of their range. They’re going to come straight for you if you try that, and their attacks are like a cone-shaped wave that moves outward, meaning you’re more likely to get hit by it the further you move away.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

I had experienced that numerous times in my practice battles against Eris. She usually charged at me as she attacked, but she also often kept me barely within range. From that position, she could counter any magic I tried to sling at her, and if I tried to fall back, she would chase me down. I had lost almost thirty times before realizing what she was doing.

“Allow me to quiz you. When you’re up against an opponent whose area of attack is in front of them, where is the most advantageous position on the field?”

“Behind the enemy?” I guessed.

Roxy nodded. “Precisely. They’re going to lunge forward with their attack, so their center of balance is going to be tilted forward. Even if they try to defend their rear with an attack, its power will be severely reduced. If you can withstand that, you’ll have a chance to counter them. Thus, the key is to slip out of their attack range and flank them!”

“Hm, makes sense.”

So it was better to charge forward instead of falling back. The most dangerous move was actually the best path to survival. Roxy’s brilliance didn’t surprise me; she wasn’t my teacher for nothing. As an adventurer, she had probably seen her fair share of such situations. She’d probably taken down a number of powerful, demon-like beasts at close range. Calling her a god was no exaggeration.

My eyes sparkled as I stared at my wife, and she awkwardly averted her gaze. “Ahem, well, I’m sure it will be difficult with Eris as your opponent. I certainly couldn’t do it. So please don’t ask me to demonstrate for you.”

“No, I am certain that if anyone could do it, you could!” I gushed.

“No, I really couldn’t! So stop looking at me like you think I’m some kind of invincible superhuman!”

I’m not looking at you like that. My eyes are just sparkling because you’re a goddess.

Regardless, I finally had my answer. I shouldn’t try to escape my opponent by falling back every time. I needed to charge forward at least occasionally, get the drop on my opponent, and halt their momentum with a counter of my own. That would force them to second-guess themself, to make them doubt their usual method of charging in for the kill and give me the advantage instead. If I could make them think it was a risk to close too much distance between us, that would actually make it so I could fall back and gain the upper hand. Granted, it wouldn’t be that simple with Eris. I would just have to keep losing to her while cautiously testing my options.

“Ahem.” Roxy cleared her throat, interrupting my thoughts. “Well, Rudy, since your departure is fast approaching, I think it’s about time you decided on a name for the baby.”

“Isn’t thinking up a baby’s name before going off on an adventure kind of an ill omen?” I said.

“That’s a superstition born of a human hero’s story, right? It has nothing to do with the Migurd Tribe.”

Oof, she’d rejected that outright. But an ill omen was still an ill omen. Still, if my goddess said it was nothing to worry about, there was no need to buy into the superstition. I would do as my goddess bid me.

“In our village, it’s the tribe leader’s job to pick a name,” said Roxy. “And you’re the leader of our household, right? So hurry up and make your decision.”

“Are you sure you want me to make that choice all on my own?”

“Of course. While you’re gone, I’ll be lovingly stroking my belly and calling our baby by whatever name you give it. That will bring me some happiness in your absence.”

As she spoke, she caressed her stomach. I cupped my hand over hers and followed her motions. It was strange, thinking how this girl I had known for over a decade now held my baby within her. I’d experienced this same puzzling sensation before with Sylphie, and now I was again with Roxy. Happiness swelled in the depths of my chest. It was such a pleasant feeling, one I wanted to enjoy again and again.

“Ehehe,” I snickered.

“What is it, Rudy? That laugh sounds just like Sylphie.”

Just like Sylphie, huh?

“Nothing, really. Thinking about how much I like your tummy.”

“I’m not as slender as Sylphie, nor as fit and muscular as Eris…but if you still like my body, then you’re welcome to touch it as much as you want.”

“Really?” I asked, although I’d already been doing just that for the past few minutes.

“Half of the baby inside me belongs to you after all.”

“What about you? How much of you belongs to me?”

Roxy paused before saying, “Everything, at least on the outside.”

“But I can’t claim the baby inside too?”

She shook her head. “Half of the baby belongs to me. I won’t budge on that.”

Hm, makes sense. I knew she was wise. That’s right, a child belongs to both of its parents. And Roxy belongs to me.

“Let’s see, what should we do about the name…” I mumbled.

“Hm, well, a Migurdian name would be something like… Lola?”

The Migurd sure did seem to like names that started with Ro or Lo, but since our child was only half-Migurdian, there was no reason we had to stick to tradition. “I think it would be best if we took something from our names, Rudeus and Roxy, and combined them,” I said.

“That’s a good idea. Then… Rodeus? Or Luxy… I don’t think our names pair up very well.”

“Nonsense,” I insisted, “we are a perfect match for one another.”

We couldn’t simply slap our names together like that, though. Maybe we could change a vowel. Start the name off with, say… Re or Le instead.

Re… Rerere…

Oh, crap. That sounded just like old man Rerere from Tensai Bakabon. I could imagine our child humming “Rerere” to themselves as they swept the floor with their bamboo broom. There was nothing wrong with wanting things clean, but that was definitely not what we needed right now.

I liked the sound of the name that Roxy recommended a moment ago—Lola. It made me picture a young woman who was anxious to experience the feverish passion of love. But that wouldn't work either. I wanted something more…more Roxy-like. Something that sounded wise and yet endearing at the same time. I loved the way she turned when I called her name, and how she peered up at me, wearing a perfect poker face as she asked, "Yes? What do you need?" And that was exactly the kinda name I wanted for our child.

Hmm, hmm… Hmm.

La, Li, Lu, Le, Lo…which of them would be the best fitting for her baby?

I got it!

"If it's a boy, we'll call him Loro, and if it's a girl, we'll call her Lara. How's that?" I proposed.

"A fine idea. Loro and Lara. I like the sound of those names."

Of course you do! I practically ripped those names straight out of Adventurers of Lolo, after all. With some slight alteration.

"Doesn't that make you happy, Loro? Or Lara? Your father was kind enough to decide on a name for you." Despite having the appearance of a middle schooler, the expression Roxy wore as she cooed at her stomach was like that of the holy mother.

Divine! She's utterly divine! Which means our baby will be a goddess's child!

"Rudy," Roxy said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Yes?"

"I know I acted like I wasn't worried at all a few days ago, but… I expect you to come home safe and sound, okay? I want both of us to be able to hold this child together."

"Yes, ma'am!"

She didn't have to tell me twice.

Those indulgent days passed by quickly, and soon enough, we had to depart for the kingdom. There were eight of us in the party. Ariel's group consisted of Luke, Sylphie, Ellemoi, and Cleane. Then there was Eris, Ghislaine, and me. We had a single carriage, which required two of our five horses to pull it. Ariel's trappings were rather modest for the second princess of a country as great as Asura.

To the outside world, it would look like we were gearing up to sneak into the country. In reality, we planned to access a forbidden teleportation circle to transport ourselves in. Despite the secretive nature of our mission, there was a whole crowd at the entrance of the city waiting to see us off. This group included the vice principal, officers of the student council, the general manager of the Magicians' Guild, the leader of the magical implement workshop, and a handful of other heads of organizations, along with representatives for nobility and royalty from the Three Magic Nations. They all swooped in one after the other to bid Ariel farewell.

These guys don't understand the definition of covert, do they? Just because you're not throwing a party doesn't mean it's okay to gather en masse.

Well, regardless, their presence here was proof that Ariel's efforts to make connections in Ranoa had borne fruit. Perhaps a day would come when I would need to make use of those connections myself. Orsted was insanely powerful, but he didn't have very good relations with others. I was on my own on that front. I decided to mingle with the others and pay my respects to them.

And thus, we set off for Asura Kingdom.

Extra Chapter:
The Black Wolf Sword King

GHISLAINE DEDOLDIA'S mornings began before the sun came up. She would change into the day's clothes, chug a glass of water, do some basic stretches, then leave the inn where she was staying. She'd spend the next hour walking around the city.

It was quiet in the early mornings, but that didn't mean no one was up and about. People clustered behind large company buildings, in front of the Adventurers' Guild, and at the city's entrance, where they sleepily bustled about.

Ghislaine approached the city entrance as a team of adventurers were returning from a mission. They were a large group numbering over twenty, most likely a famous clan. Behind them, a brawny horse pulled a large wagon housing an enormous bovine creature. This beast was a likely sudden mutation that appeared on the outskirts of the city, and this famous clan had accepted the quest to take care of it. Their faces were heavy with exhaustion, which suggested the mission had taken them days to complete.

Ghislaine watched them for a while, then finally lost interest and turned to leave. After her walk, she returned to the inn, where she practiced with her sword in the courtyard. It was a simple exercise; all she did was swing her weapon over and over.

She had done the same monotonous routine daily without fail for over a decade. Sword God Gal Falion had ordered her to do this ages ago. She did it while she was at Sword Sanctum. She did it when she became an adventurer. She did it even after Eris and Sauros took her in and she became a bodyguard and instructor in swordplay. She did it when she was teleported to the Conflict Zone during the Displacement Incident, as well as when she made it to the refugee camp in the Fittoa Region where she helped Alphonse out. She continued doing it even after she reunited with Eris and returned

to the Sword Sanctum. Even now, as Ariel's bodyguard, she never skipped a session.

This training gave her a sense of her physical condition and mental state each day. Lately, her mind had been at peace. She'd had two objectives to fulfill: protect Eris and avenge Sauros. Now, one of them was complete. She had safely delivered Eris back to Rudeus. That mission was over. Only one thing was left. Just one.

Ghislaine liked that. Having one goal was straightforward, it was easy to understand, and she didn't have to strain herself over it. Even better, her path was already laid out before her. Rudeus had introduced her to Ariel, who understood what Ghislaine wanted to accomplish, and she had promised to let Ghislaine do just that.

Finally, everything was simple. All she had to do when the time came was charge forth and cut her enemy down. This simplicity was why she felt so relaxed lately.

That night, Ghislaine visited one of the Sharia's many pubs. Clamor filled the air, yet it was conspicuously quiet in her immediate vicinity. Despite being past her prime, Ghislaine was still a beauty—a beast woman with tanned skin and impressive musculature. And yet, no one tried to approach her. The dangerous aura she exuded reminded the people of the Berserker Sword King, who was the subject of endless rumors.

The Berserker Sword King—a person who swung their fists indiscriminately and cut people down. A person who lacked all reason and never thought twice before unleashing their fury. Just meeting their gaze could provoke them into a fight, and they were an amazing swordfighter on top of all of that. The mystery surrounding them only stoked more fear, which was why everyone gave Ghislaine a wide berth.

In truth, though Ghislaine was the teacher of this rumored Berserker Sword King, she was not the woman herself. She sat in a seat by the counter, keeping to herself, quieter than any of the other customers as she nursed her drink. That made her even more intimidating, adding weight to the rumors. Of course, Ghislaine

wasn’t intentionally trying to be menacing; she was only waiting for her food to come.

Ghislaine knew that this place had procured the meat of the beast those adventurers brought in this morning, which meant they would be serving up thick slices of juicy steak. That was why her gaze was glued to the kitchen, from which the scent of sizzling meat wafted out to tease her. She waited eagerly, salivating at the thought.

The door suddenly swung open and a chime sounded to announce the arrival of a new guest. An elf with gorgeous hair, a beautiful face, and generous breasts strolled in. Her stomach, however, was so swollen, it looked bizarre on her otherwise slender figure—a clear sign she was pregnant.

As soon as other people in the pub spotted her, their faces lit up and they eagerly called out to her.

“Hey, it’s been a while! Not looking for any male partners anymore?”

“Come to think of it, you got hitched, didn’tcha? Come grab a seat, let’s knock back some drinks together!”

The elf woman masterfully rebuffed their invitations, instead heading deeper into the pub, straight for the innermost seat along the counter. There, she took up a spot beside the one person everyone else had been avoiding like the plague. They all watched her and gulped nervously.

“Heya, Ghislaine. Sorry to keep you waiting,” Elinalise said in a singsong voice as she turned to the beastwoman.

“You’re late,” Ghislaine grunted.

“Well, I can’t help that. After all, I’m preg—”

“Wait!” Ghislaine’s sharp voice rang out, cutting Elinalise off mid-sentence. Shocked, Elinalise froze.

The proprietor appeared from the kitchen, carrying an enormous wooden plate. He headed straight over to them and slammed the meal down in front of Ghislaine.

“Is this what you wanted?”

There was an iron plate over the wood, on top of which sat a sizzling steak with steam rising off it. It came with a side of grilled potatoes and assorted vegetables that only further taunted her growling belly.

“Yep.” Ghislaine nodded, too preoccupied staring at the meat to spare the man a single glance.

“Then take your time and enjoy the meal.”

“Oh, I’d like some water and snacks myself,” Elinalise said, calling after him.

“Sure thing,” the proprietor hollered over his shoulder.

Elinalise sank into her seat. “Ah, I’m completely exhausted. I’ve been through pregnancy countless times before, but it never gets any easier.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I wonder why it is… I haven’t grown to dislike it after going through it so many times.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Speaking of which, your mating season should be soon, right? Isn’t it about time you found yourself a partner? If you’d like, I’d be happy to pair you up with someone.”

“Uh-huh.”

Ghislaine never so much as glanced at Elinalise. She simply waited with her knife and fork in hand, staring at the slab of steaming meat. Drool dripped down her chin.

“There is no need to wait on my account. Go ahead and eat,” said Elinalise.

“You sure?”

“Of course. It won’t be any good if it gets cold.”

“Meat is always good, even cold.” Even as she said that, Ghislaine began devouring the thick steak. It was a little rare, but it was still cooked through, which was the perfect way to prepare a fresh piece of meat like this.

Ghislaine sawed through it, stabbed into a chunk and tucked it in her mouth. It was slathered in tangy sauce which eliminated the gaminess, giving it a savory smell and flavor. It was rare enough to be a little tender, but that was just right for Ghislaine. She tore into it, letting its natural juices fill her mouth.

This was heaven.

Ghislaine continued cutting her meat and devouring it, letting her cheeks fill with juice as she chewed. Once she swallowed, she was back to cutting another bite. She was silent the whole time, completely ignoring Elinalise's presence. Elinalise didn't mind, resting her cheek against her hand and watching. "Is it good?"

"In that case, I was right to pick this place."

Elinalise was the one who'd clued Ghislaine in about the steaks here. Since they had the fortune of reuniting after such a long time, Elinalise decided to invite Ghislaine out for dinner for a chat. Naturally, she picked the exact type of pub that Ghislaine loved.

"Here ya go," announced the proprietor as he arrived with Elinalise's order.

Ghislaine had already inhaled half of her steak by that point. "How unusual for you," she commented. "Not going to drink?" Now that her stomach was no longer completely empty, she noticed that Elinalise had only ordered water.

"Yes, alcohol would be the better fit for our happy reunion and the depressing conversation we're about to have, but alas, I can't partake," Elinalise said, lightly tapping her swollen stomach.

"Okay then." Ghislaine didn't bother trying to pressure her.

"Recently, I actually tried to have some alcohol myself, but Sylphie stopped me. Treated me like a child, telling me it was a 'no-no.'" Elinalise wore a vacant expression as she caressed her stomach.

Ghislaine frowned. "Heard you got married, but I never figured you'd be this devoted to one guy."

“It’s a surprise for me too, but Cliff is a wonderful man. Sure, he’s not very flexible and doesn’t listen, but he’s self-confident and has a strong sense of responsibility. When we have sex, he goes all out. He doesn’t simply focus on his own pleasure, he tries his best to make sure I feel good as well. It’s so utterly adorable… Oh, Ghislaine, you should try to find someone for yourself soon too!”

“I’ll pass.” Ghislaine brushed off the romance talk without a second thought. She had already given up on living as a woman, choosing instead to focus on leading her life as a swordfighter.

“Well, I won’t force you. More importantly…”

Elinalise paused, lifting her glass and raising it toward Ghislaine. Ghislaine put her knife down and took up her flagon.

“To a fond reunion between friends,” said Elinalise.

“Yeah. Cheers.”

They clinked their cups, a pleasantly resonant sound. The two former members of the Black Wolf Fangs had finally come together again.

“It would have been better if Talhand and Geese were here to join us,” Elinalise murmured.

“…Paul and Zenith, too.”

In an instant, what was supposed to be a joyous meeting turned gloomy. But that was exactly why Elinalise had come here—to have that conversation.

“About Paul…it’s a shame what happened. In a better world, I would have been the first one to go, not him.”

“He lived fast and reckless,” said Ghislaine. “I figured he’d meet his end sooner rather than later.”

“Yeah, I seem to remember you saying something like that a long time ago.”

Ghislaine shook her head. “You’re the one who said it.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep. But the fact that he’s gone isn’t that surprising to me.”

“Paul went out with a bang though,” said Elinalise. “Care to hear the story?”

“Yeah, tell me.”

Elinalise recounted the story as Ghislaine requested. She started by explaining how Paul got separated from his family and searched desperately for them. How, despite his womanizing ways, he turned temptations away and insisted on remaining loyal to Zenith. She also shared how his reunion with Rudeus went in Begaritt—how the two had talked, and how happy Paul had looked. Finally, she recalled the details of their battle and how Paul died protecting Rudeus.

“Huh.” Ghislaine grunted. “He sure changed. Hard to believe that’s the same man who always did stupid crap with you.”

“Oh? I seem to remember you being the biggest idiot of all, Ghislaine. As I recall, you would wag your tail every time you looked at Paul for a while there.”

“I was delusional. Must have been mating season. Besides, I’m not an Adoldia. My tail doesn’t wag whenever I’m happy.”

“It was a figure of speech,” Elinalise reassured her.

“Hmph.”

“But you really were adorable back then. Always fussing over Paul at every turn…”

“That was a long time ago. Forget about it.”

Elinalise sniggered, popping a sweetly-seasoned bite of meat into her mouth. It wasn’t as tender as Ghislaine’s steak, so she had to chew a bit before swallowing. As Ghislaine watched, she decided to order the same thing.

“Here, you can have this. Let’s order something else instead and split it between us,” Elinalise said, passing her plate over to her friend.

The two feasted, letting the sound of munching fill the air between them for a while.

“Zenith’s condition was a bigger shock to me than Paul’s death,” said Elinalise.

Once the plate was empty, Ghislaine responded, “Yeah. Never would have dreamed I’d see her in such a state.”

“Indeed.”

Ghislaine didn’t respond.

“That’s just how it goes, I guess. We are adventurers. The fact that she’s even alive should be cause for celebration. Besides, Rudeus is looking for a way to heal her. Who knows, maybe she will return to her normal self eventually.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, she may be an old woman by the time that day comes.”

Ghislaine chuckled and drained her flagon. “When that happens, hopefully we can drink together again.”

“I hope so too. We’ll have to call in Geese and Talhand when that day comes and have a huge party.”

“What are those two up to, anyway?”

“Well, after Talhand and I split up…”

The two continued catching up, chatting about various topics. Elinalise talked about what happened after they split from the group, what they did following the Displacement Incident, how she met Rudeus. They even revisited their past adventures, such as the time they went diving into some old ruins trying to find a legendary holy sword. Then there was the time that Geese gambled all their money away and they had to shake down some random people for funds. Another time, when Ghislaine entered her mating season, Paul jumped in to take advantage of the situation, and Elinalise joined him, turning it into a sensual threesome. Most of their memories together were embarrassing, but they were precious, embedded deep within the two women’s hearts.

Elinalise’s eyes were half-crinkled shut as she jabbered away. Ghislaine had guzzled so much alcohol that she was totally smashed, her face vacant as she rested her chin on her hand.

“Oh, dear, oh, dear,” Elinalise said. “I rarely see you drink yourself into oblivion like this. Can you get back to your room on your own?”

“I’m fine. There are no wolves who’d bother coming after me anymore.” Ghislaine shot a look over her shoulder. Even the more rugged adventurers were quick to avert their eyes. “Maybe I should have taken up Lord Philip on his offer after all.”

“Philip? Oh, you mean the one from the Fittoa Region?”

“Yeah. He asked me to become his mistress once.”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear. You missed a prime opportunity there. You could have been set for life if you’d agreed to that,” Elinalise teased.

Ghislaine smiled sadly. “I couldn’t have faced Eris if I had agreed.”

“I’m shocked to hear you worry about such a thing…” Elinalise tilted her head. “Oh?”

Ghislaine’s eyes were fixed on the wall, burning with fury. “Lord Philip is already dead. He didn’t survive the Displacement Incident. I gave him a proper burial and claimed the heads of the ones who killed him.”

“…Oh, my. I didn’t realize. That is a shame.”

“Lady Eris is married to Rudeus now.” Ghislaine lifted her head, a murderous glint in her eye as she stared up at the ceiling. “All that’s left is to avenge Lord Sauros.”

She exuded such a menacing aura that several of the patrons decided to flee, sensing danger. Elinalise wasn’t shaken by it. She knew Ghislaine was capable of turning vicious on the fly and cutting someone down, but she also knew that she wouldn’t be the beastwoman’s target.

“So that’s why you became Her Highness’s bodyguard,” Elinalise surmised.

“Yep.”

Elinalise sighed and followed Ghislaine's gaze to the ceiling. "You sure have changed. You didn't used to be such a fiercely loyal knight."

Ghislaine froze and dropped her gaze to her glass, catching her own reflection in the amber liquid within. The answer came to her at once.

"I'm a member of the Doldia Tribe. That's why." She abruptly stood, her gait so confident that it was hard to believe she was sloshed.

"Where are you going?" Elinalise called after her.

"Home."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear. You're as hasty as ever." Elinalise shrugged and lifted herself from her seat. She pulled out a silver coin from her pocket and slapped it on the counter. Then she hurried after her friend, who had already left the building and was disappearing down the dark street. "Ghislaine!"

Ghislaine paused, ears twitching as she looked over her shoulder.

"While you're in Asura Kingdom, be sure to protect Rudeus and Sylphie! Those two are my adorable grandchildren, you know!"

"…Yeah, will do." Ghislaine's tail perked up as she answered.

With that, Elinalise turned the opposite direction, back to her humble home, where Cliff waited.

Ghislaine stared after her. "Hmph," she grunted. Her list of things to do had suddenly increased.

On the other hand, it wasn't something she had to do. Protecting those two was something she planned to do anyway.

"I've gotten wiser," she realized, pleased with herself. She was in high spirits as she headed back to her inn.



About the Author:
Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

"There are people out there who care about you more than you realize," said the author.



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