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NOVEL
19
Mushoku
Tensei
jobless reincarnation

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Mushoku Tensei
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WRITTEN BY
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Shirotaka


Randolph
Zanoba
Rudeus
Benedikte
Pax
Roxy
DRAMATIS PERSONAE


“Rudy!”
By the time I heard Roxy shout my name, I was already falling.
As I pitched backward, I caught a glimpse of blue hair by my waist. She’d thrown herself against me.

Mushoku Tensei

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Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

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"Death is the end of all things, not least of all mutual understanding."

—We never understood each other.
Now I guess we never will.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
Zanoba's Decision

ZANOBA'S LABORATORY in the main research building of Ranoa University was more crowded than usual today. Six of us were gathered around the central table. Cliff, Zanoba, and I were seated, while Elinalise, Ginger, and Julie stood around it in a loose circle.

Maybe there were seven of us, actually. Elinalise was holding her baby.

The mood in the room was…heavy. To put it mildly.

Zanoba's expression was solemn. Cliff was frowning irritably. Julie's eyes were rimmed with red, Ginger looked seriously distressed, and even Elinalise was at a loss for words.

"Okay, let's all take a deep breath," I said. "Zanoba, can you explain again, please? From the very start?"

"…Very well."

Zanoba nodded, his face as blank and serious as ever. It was kind of unsettling, honestly. I was used to him grinning ear to ear every time he saw me. It felt like he'd turned into a completely different person.

"A few days ago, I received a letter from the Kingdom of Shirone."

He'd passed that to me a little earlier. I still had it in my hands. The envelope featured the royal seal of Shirone and the signature of Zanoba's brother Pax. Inside, I'd found three sheets of paper.

The first contained a description of the coup d'état that had taken place in Shirone about six months ago. The Seventh Prince, Pax, had returned abruptly from his "studies" in the King Dragon Realm—with the open support of that nation. He wasted no time

staging a coup and murdering his father, the king. After slaughtering the rest of the royal family, he took the throne of Shirone for himself.

That was the gist of it, at least. The version in the letter was a lot more long-winded, and it managed to make the whole thing sound almost heroic.

The second page described the aftermath. A majority of Shirone's ministers and generals were dismissed following the coup, and many people had fled the country in fear. This had left their military dangerously weak. A rival nation to the north was preparing to take advantage of the situation, and Shirone lacked the manpower to defend its borders.

Given the dire circumstances, someone had apparently suggested they summon Zanoba back to fight on the front lines. He was a Blessed Child, after all, and they needed all the help they could get.

The writer went on to argue at length that none of this was Pax's fault, as the purges had been a necessary step toward reform. Somebody was clearly feeling a little defensive.

The third page of the letter was a formal order invalidating the old king's commands to Zanoba and summoning him back to Shirone. It was stamped with the king's seal, which probably meant it was an official royal command.

Basically, we had the heroic tale of King Pax on page one, a bunch of weak excuses on page two, and a draft notice on page three.

"I took the throne by force, but then our army fell apart. Now the enemy's invading. I need you to come back here and fight them off."

The word *shameless* came to mind. Still, I could see where they were coming from. I wasn't sure how much Zanoba could personally contribute to the war effort, but he was a famous figure in Shirone. The news of his return would improve the morale of the other troops.

Personally, I felt like the King Dragon Realm should be defending Shirone, since they were the ones who'd put Pax on the throne in the first place…but maybe there was some reason why they couldn't get directly involved. Every country has its own internal politics to worry about, right?

Anyway. I could see why Pax might need Zanoba's help right now.

That said—eight years ago, Zanoba had basically ruined Pax's life by rescuing me from his clutches. As a direct result of Zanoba's actions, both of them had effectively been exiled. Pax was shipped off to study in the King Dragon Realm, while Zanoba was banished to Ranoa. If Pax still held a grudge over all that, going back to Shirone would be incredibly dangerous. This letter might very well be a trap meant to lure Zanoba to his death.

That said…the *real* issue was that he didn't seem to care about that possibility.

"So after reading this," I said, "you decided to…?"

"Return to Shirone and head for the front lines, as ordered."

Yeah, okay. I don't get it.

Cliff and Ginger had both voiced their opposition to Zanoba's plan already. I hadn't decided either way, but I was feeling seriously puzzled. I could have understood Zanoba wanting to kill Pax and avenge his murdered father. I could *also* have understood if he wanted to stay far away from Shirone for the rest of his life. But he was taking these orders seriously. He knew this might be a trap, and he was going to walk right into it.

Why was he so willing to obey Pax? The man had murdered his own father.

"I don't see any reason why you need to go," Cliff said sternly. "This is a trap, Zanoba. I'm willing to bet he wants you dead."

"Hrm."

"When someone takes power in a coup, they typically wipe out the entire family of the old king. It's the most rational thing to do,

honestly."

Cliff was speaking from experience here; he'd come to Ranoa because of a power struggle in the Holy Country of Millis. If his grandfather were overthrown by his rivals within the church, Cliff would be in grave danger himself. When you lost a fight for the throne, your heirs died with you. That was blindingly obvious, to him at least.

"And even if Shirone does get invaded," he continued, "what difference would it make to have you there? You're just one man."

"I'll be of some help, I'm sure," Zanoba replied. "I am a Blessed Child, after all."

"Fine, maybe you'll save the day! But what happens then, Zanoba?" Cliff shouted, smacking the table irritably. "What do you think Pax is going to do once the enemy withdraws?!"

Cliff knew about the reasons for Zanoba's exile. We'd told him the story of how we met, so he knew about Pax's earlier crimes as well. He was definitely assuming the worst about Pax's motives…but honestly, it was hard to blame him.

"Once you've played your role, he can dispose of you at any time he pleases!"

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't find a hole in Cliff's argument. It was *possible* there really was an invasion coming, and Pax really needed Zanoba's help. It was *possible* Zanoba could turn things around somehow.

But once the dust had settled, how would Pax "reward" him?

Zanoba was the Third Prince, a potential candidate for the throne. And winning a war would do wonders for his popularity, especially with the army. The man would become a national hero overnight. Wouldn't that seem dangerous to Pax? Wouldn't Zanoba look like a *threat*?

Probably. And it wasn't hard to imagine how he'd react to that.

"I think Cliff's right, Zanoba," I said.

"…It's quite likely that he is," Zanoba replied, nodding gravely.

So apparently…he knew that Pax had good reason to hate him, and recognized that heading home to Shirone might be suicidal. That just made the next words out of his mouth even harder to understand.

"However, I'm still obligated to go."

"…But why?"

Zanoba's response was prompt and firm: "I've received a formal royal order to return."

True, the order was legitimate, in a sense. It had the king's seal and everything. As far as the kingdom of Shirone was concerned, Zanoba now had a legal responsibility to return…

"But that order came from *Pax*, remember? Do you really need to obey him?"

"With all due respect, Master…if we ceased to recognize the king's authority every time a new one took the throne, our kingdom would be quite short-lived."

"It's not like he formally inherited the throne. The man's basically a usurper, right?"

"Regardless of the means he used to take power, Pax is now the king of Shirone. That's simply a fact."

It didn't feel that simple to me. I knew it wasn't that unusual for a king to seize their throne violently. It was common enough back in my old world, too. But were all the king's vassals and ministers supposed to merely shrug and pretend nothing had even happened? If you had the choice, would you really want to serve a murderer like that?

"Do you *want* to work for Pax, Zanoba?"

"It would not be my personal preference," Zanoba replied, shaking his head slowly.

"Then *why* are you doing this?" I asked, more sharply than I'd intended. Nothing I said seemed to be getting through to him. At this point, it was starting to get to me. "You know he's going to kill you.

You don’t want to obey him. So why do you have to go? Why do you feel so strongly about this?”

Was he worried about how they might respond? There was a chance Shirone might retaliate if Zanoba opted to ignore his orders. Still, Ranoa was a *long* way from Shirone. No matter how fast you traveled, the journey would take a good six months at least. That was enough time for us to figure out a plan. We could even go to Ariel and ask for Asura to protect Zanoba. I wasn’t sure if fleeing a coup would qualify him for asylum, but it couldn’t hurt to try.

“Well, I’ll try to explain.”

Zanoba paused for a moment and made a stiff, unnatural attempt at a grin. It was a jarring sight. Usually, his face lit up with pure joy every time he smiled.

“As you know, Master, I was always…something of a burden on the Kingdom of Shirone.”

“That’s not true. I mean, you’re a Blessed Child…”

“A Blessed Child so incapable of controlling his strength that he murdered a member of the royal family.”

It was easy to forget these days, but back in Shirone, Zanoba had a nickname: the Head-Ripping Prince. He’d accidentally torn off the head of his own half-brother, the infant son of the crowned queen. Obviously, killing a member of your own family for no good reason was considered a terrible sin in Shirone—the sort of crime that even a royal prince would be punished harshly for. But according to Zanoba, he’d essentially gotten off scot-free. It was his *mother* who’d immediately been exiled.

“I was only pardoned because of my status as a Blessed Child. They simply believed I would prove useful someday.”

“Hold on,” said Cliff, looking my way with a disturbed expression. “Is this story true, Rudeus?”

“It is indeed,” Zanoba interjected. “Nor was that the last of my misdeeds. I later ripped off my own wife’s head, which directly caused a rebellion.”

Much as I would have liked to deny all this, it was true. Zanoba had been married off for political reasons years ago. And his impulsive murder of his bride on their wedding night had set off a large-scale insurrection.

“The woman said some truly vile things to me, and I felt my actions were justified. Still, I was responsible for the turmoil that ensued. Under normal circumstances, I would have paid for that with my life.” Zanoba looked me straight in the eyes. “And yet, I was spared.”

After a moment of silence, he sighed and continued in a matter-of-fact tone. “Tell me, Master—why do you think I wasn’t executed on the spot?”

I didn’t want to try and answer that question. I really didn’t.

“Some time later, I met you and caused yet another scandalous incident, finally earning myself the punishment of exile. I’d earned my death many times over, but in the end I was merely banished. And despite all my crimes, I was provided with *ample* funds to make a new life for myself here in Sharia. Why do you think that was?”

I knew what he was getting at, of course. I understood why they’d let him live.

“It’s simple: so that I could fight for my country when she truly needs me.”

Zanoba’s tone was so forceful that I couldn’t even manage a reply. Even Cliff had frozen in his seat, his eyes wide open. Ginger was the only one who didn’t look stunned, really. The expression on her face was one of sadness and resignation.

“It’s my duty to protect Shirone against her enemies. That is the reason I’m alive, and was permitted to indulge myself for all these years. I have no choice but to return immediately, you understand? If I were to wait for news of the invasion itself, it would be too late for me to act. For all I know, the fighting has already begun.”

I had to admit he was making a coherent case. He owed his country a great deal, and there was nothing crazy about wanting to repay your debts. Deep down, maybe Zanoba had been itching to return to Shirone from the moment he heard about Pax's coup d'état.

But there was no undoing those events now. If he launched his own rebellion against the new king, it would leave the country fatally weakened and easy prey for its enemies. And so, he had to obey Pax instead. It was the only way to save the kingdom.

I understood. I really did. But it still felt weird hearing it from *Zanoba.* For as long as I'd known him, the guy had lived in his own little world, indifferent to anything happening outside it. You'd expect his take on this to be something like… "A war back home, you say? Well, that's none of my concern. Come here and take a look at my latest figurine! Isn't her waist beautifully sculpted?!"

…Of course, I couldn't say any of this to him. Not now. It wouldn't be right.

I *wanted* him to shrug and ignore that letter, honestly. But that wasn't what he *needed* to do.

After a long, painful moment, I managed to force a few words out: "You know they're going to kill you, right?"

"If my country tells me to die, then I suppose I'll have to," Zanoba responded calmly.

It was a firm, stoic answer worthy of a medieval samurai or an imperial soldier. I found myself at a loss for words.

I needed to stop Zanoba somehow. I didn't want him to die.

And yet, I couldn't bring myself to say he was making a mistake. Maybe it was because of the calm determination in his eyes. Maybe it was because I'd changed my own way of thinking over the years. But I just *couldn't* tell him this whole thing was ridiculous.

I didn't know what to say.

"Come now, Master, Cliff! There's no need for you to look so sorrowful."

Zanoba offered us a startlingly cheerful grin. It was his usual smile this time.

“I must admit, I didn’t spend much time thinking about matters of duty back when I was still in Shirone. But then I met you, Master, and you, Cliff, and Miss Nanahoshi…and as I settled into my life here, I began to reconsider my actions. I took the time to think about what I *ought* to do.”

And then he’d landed on *protecting his homeland* as his purpose in life? Now that I *really* didn’t understand. It’s not like the rest of us were a bunch of rabid patriots.

“I suppose I’m being rather pretentious about this, aren’t I?” Zanoba continued, with another smile. “To be honest, I don’t even know why I reached the conclusions that I did! Hahaha!”

I couldn’t laugh. It didn’t seem funny to me.

I had no right to tell Zanoba how to live his life. At this point, it was impossible to say for *sure* if he was making a mistake. The decision was his to make.

But there was one thing I could say for sure: if Zanoba died because of the choice he made today, it was going to hurt me badly.

Zanoba was one of my very closest friends. He’d helped me out in more ways than I could count. He got me out of a tight spot back in Shirone, of course…but I also owed him for the friends I’d made in this city. Through his figurines I got to know Pursena and Linia, and I’m not sure Cliff ever would have warmed up to me without his help. Plus, on our expedition to the Demon Continent, he’d held Atofe back with his bare hands. And without his help, I never would have completed the Magic Armor project.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how much I *owed* this guy.

Putting all that aside, I’d honestly enjoyed the time I spent making figurines for him. It was just fun having him around. For one thing, he lavished me with praise at every opportunity, and always gushed about my work. That wasn’t bad for my self-esteem. I guess

some people might react differently to that sort of thing, but I definitely found it pleasant.

Additionally, according to my diary of the future, he'd stuck with me to the bitter end, staying loyal right up to the moment of his death. I couldn't just shrug it off when a friend like that was marching off to his death. It wouldn't be *right.* I'd be betraying myself, as well as him.

…Hmm?

Hold on. The diary…

I felt something click abruptly into place inside my mind.

"Zanoba."

"Yes, Master?"

"I'm going too."

The words came out of my mouth quite smoothly, to my surprise. I'd never forget the odd mix of joy and anxiety that flashed across Zanoba's face in that moment.

After calling an end to our conference, I headed straight over to inform Orsted. On my way there, I reflected on this odd series of events from a different angle.

In the narrative of my future diary, Zanoba never returned to his homeland. I wasn't sure if he'd stayed put in Sharia for his entire life, but at the very least, he'd spent most of his time at my side. In that timeline, it seemed likely that he never received an order to return home. Maybe Pax's coup failed. Maybe it never happened at all.

Either way, events were diverging from those recorded in the diary. And that meant there was a chance that the Man-God was up to something.

Now that I thought about it, we hadn't had all three of the Man-God's disciples in action at once, for the last year and a half or so.

Maybe Pax was the third, and he'd spent that time quietly laying the groundwork for these events? It seemed like a real possibility.

Orsted had warned me to be patient, yes. But maybe the time for action had finally arrived.

Yeah, that's got to be it. This is the moment I've been waiting for all this time. I'm going to save Zanoba, damn it!

"Sir Orsted!"

When I burst in through the door, I found my commander at his usual place behind his desk, apparently dealing with some paperwork.

"Ah, Rudeus. Is something the matter?"

Orsted's face was as intimidating as ever, but I was too worked up to hesitate. I explained the whole situation as clearly and concisely as I could, focusing on the discrepancy between these events and my diary of the future.

"This has to be the Man-God at work, right?"

"…"

I delivered my conclusion confidently, but Orsted's only immediate response was to glower at me in silence. I don't think he was *trying* to glare, for the record. That was the way his face worked.

Uh, that's weird. Was there some hole in my logic?

"In the history I'm familiar with, the Kingdom of Shirone collapses following a coup organized by Pax Shirone approximately thirty years from now."

I blinked in surprise. "Did you say *thirty years* from now?"

"I did."

Orsted began to describe some details of the ordinary flow of events as he knew them. In this version of history, the Teleportation Incident never took place, and I wasn't around to mess with the internal politics of Shirone. Under those circumstances, Pax would bide his time, amassing great riches through his control of the kingdom's slave markets. Over the decades, he would attract a

group of co-conspirators and cripple his enemies through strategic hostage-taking, before ultimately launching a coup against the reigning king. His coup would succeed, earning him the throne. But once securely settled on it, free at last to do exactly as he pleased, Pax would begin to question the value of the monarchy itself.

In time, he would abolish his own position and establish Shirone as a republic. In the aftermath of these developments, Shirone would rapidly grow into a stronger nation, expanding its territory until it firmly controlled half of the current disputed territory on its borders. And this new country, the fourth great world power, would eventually produce a citizen who would cause the Man-God many headaches.

“I had assumed the Man-God guided you to Shirone all those years ago because he wanted to drive Pax from its borders, preventing these events from taking place,” Orsted explained.

It made sense. The Man-God’s advice brought me to Shirone, and I’d changed the course of history there. Zanoba and Pax had both been exiled from their homeland, costing Pax his chance at the throne. The Republic of Shirone would never come to be.

“Once Pax takes the throne, you see, the transition to a republic becomes inevitable.”

Orsted paused for a moment, frowning in thought. Basically, he thought this coup was the *opposite* of what the Man-God wanted.

“Well, the situation’s a bit different,” I said uncertainly. “The King Dragon Realm is on Pax’s side, right? Maybe he won’t make Shirone a republic this time around.”

“He will. I’ve meddled in events there in similar ways, but regardless of the circumstances, he always ends up abolishing the monarchy.”

Ah. Right. We were getting into all that *destiny* stuff again. Once you got past the point where Pax became king, apparently events would basically arrange themselves so that Shirone ended up as a republic. The same way Asura’s future was determined from the moment Ariel took the throne.

“Uh, wait. So what happened in the timeline from my diary, then?”

“I would imagine that Pax never launched his coup. Shirone remained a lesser power as the Man-God initially desired.”

Okay, so…

In the *normal* timeline, Pax launched a coup and became king, then established a republic.

In the *diary’s* timeline, the Man-God’s scheming kept Pax off the throne, and Shirone remained a kingdom.

In *this* timeline, Pax launched a successful coup, and we were pretty certain he would end up establishing a republic eventually.

That seemed odd. So the Man-God had intervened a second time just to reset events back to the status quo?

“I don’t get it. Why would he do that?”

“It’s a trap,” said Orsted, his tone darkening. “He wants you dead, Rudeus. Even if it means returning the history of Shirone to its proper course.”

In other words…he was voluntarily sacrificing one of his tactical victories for a chance to lure me into danger. Like a guy who breaks up a good hand in mahjong just to mess with his opponents.

“If you take the bait and show up in Shirone to investigate, I expect you’ll find yourself in the jaws of a carefully laid and lethal trap,” Orsted continued.

“Are we sure he isn’t after you instead?”

“I suppose it’s possible, but Zanoba Shirone is *your* friend, not mine. He’s the bait for this trap, which means you’re the more likely target.”

Pax had asked Zanoba to return home. And despite the obvious danger, Zanoba was insistent that he do so. The Man-God could not know if I would tag along, but since the risk to Zanoba’s life was so clear, he probably reckoned there was a good chance I might. He understood my personality pretty well, after all.

…Damn. That bastard could be clever sometimes.

“What’s more, Zanoba played a crucial role in constructing your equipment. Even if you don’t take the bait, he may consider disposing of your ally worthwhile in its own right.”

Two birds with one stone, huh? If I came along, he’d take us both out. If not, he’d still get a consolation prize.

“Do you see any chance that Zanoba’s a disciple?” I asked quietly.

“In this specific case, it seems unlikely. He’s a man of no great importance to the future of Shirone.”

Hey! Rude. I don’t know about Shirone, but he’s important to me, okay? Important enough that I’m gonna walk right into a trap for him… Ugh.

“All right, then. How do you think we should approach this?”

“The same way we always do. Crush the Man-God’s schemes with brute force.”

“…Sounds about right.”

With Orsted tagging along, this shouldn’t be too difficult to handle. We’d beat down anyone who came for us, same as we did in Asura. What did it matter if this *was* a trap? I would lure our enemies out into the open, and if they were too much for me to handle, he could step in to take care of the rest. He’d be the Anglerfish, and I’d be that little glowy bit dangling from his head.

Apparently, some people had recently started referring to me as a “follower” or “agent” of the Dragon God, but when you got down to it, I was basically his fishing lure.

“However, there is a *chance* that he’s completely uninvolved with these events.”

“…Could you elaborate?”

“It’s not impossible that these events were always going to happen.”

Hm. Hadn’t considered that angle.

“The theories that I laid out earlier are essentially pure speculation. That diary doesn’t contain much in the way of detail about this period. It’s possible that Zanoba Shirone went to his homeland briefly, only to return unscathed.”

In other words, the coup happened on its own, without the Man-God’s intervention. Zanoba was summoned to Shirone, did his duty to his homeland, and came back to Sharia immediately afterward.

Now that he mentioned it, I guess it wasn’t…impossible?

“…Hmmm.”

“In that timeline, Zanoba was also a wanted man with a price on his head. That might have changed things too. Perhaps Shirone didn’t recall him for fear of angering Millis, or he chose to ignore the summons, or Ginger hid the letter from him…”

Yeah. This was starting to seem a bit more plausible now. Our timeline had *already* diverged from that of the diary in many important ways. Even if Pax took the throne, he might have hesitated to call for help from a notorious criminal like Zanoba. The Holy Country had a band of knights that essentially served as mercenaries; he might have feared they would join his enemies in the field.

Of course, there was no way to know for sure. And we could waste all day thinking about the possibilities.

“But the Man-God *did* use me to change the course of Shirone’s history, right? Why would he just sit back and let Pax end up on the throne for no good reason?”

“It’s possible that Shirone’s fate was simply beyond his ability to change. Your destiny is quite strong, but it can’t bend *everything* off course.”

Fair enough. There were obviously some things I couldn’t change, even if I wanted to.

“Hm…”

At this point, Orsted paused to stroke his chin thoughtfully. Clearly, something had occurred to him.

“Uh… What is it, sir?” I said hesitantly.

“Pax was exiled to the King Dragon Realm, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“There’s a good chance they were the real power behind this coup, in other words.”

“Yeah, I’d imagine so.”

Oh, I see where he’s going with this.

Pax had spent years in the King Dragon Realm. He might have been goaded into action by someone living there. In other words, there was a chance he *wasn’t* the disciple we were looking for. The real villain might be hiding in a different country entirely.

“Very well,” said Orsted. “I’ll make my way to the King Dragon Realm and see if I can find any evidence of this disciple lurking at its heart.”

Huh? You’re not coming with me, boss? “Uh, but…there might be a trap waiting for me in Shirone, right?”

“…If you fear that possibility, you should remain here instead.”

Which would mean leaving Zanoba to his fate.

Orsted had promised to protect my family, but not my friends. I couldn’t expect him to prioritize Zanoba’s safety above all else. Unless I…married him off to one of my sisters?!

Nah. He’d probably treat them right, but…nah. Let’s try to stay focused, Rudeus…

“I owe a great deal to Zanoba. And according to that diary, he was loyal to me until the day he died.”

“…”

“I can’t just leave him to die.”

The only problem was whether I could save his life all on my own. Although—there was no real need for me to make the trip

alone. Maybe I could call in some reinforcements. Eris seemed to know plenty of Sword Saints… If we wrote a letter to the Sanctum, we might be able to recruit a decent bodyguard.

The main issue with that idea was that I really shouldn't be telling a bunch of people I barely knew about the Teleportation Circles. It was probably premature to try something like that right now, so…

"In that case," said Orsted calmly, "you head to Shirone, and I'll make my way to the King Dragon Realm. We'll crush the Man-God's schemes where we find them. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

On the whole, there was too much we didn't know right now. We'd have to investigate as best we could during the journey itself.

"Ah, yes. I nearly forgot. There's one thing I want you to promise me before you leave for Shirone."

"What's that?"

Was he going to make me swear I wouldn't die on him? Aww, it was making me blush just to think about it.

"Do not kill Pax Shirone, even if you're certain he's a disciple."

"…What?"

"Do *not* kill Pax Shirone."

Well, he said it twice in a row, so I guess he really means it. Makes sense, though. Killing Pax might prevent Shirone from becoming a republic, right? No problem, boss! I'll leave him in one piece.

"All right. I understand."

Still, this was going to make my task a bit more difficult. Pax might try to kill us, but I couldn't return the favor. I had to keep myself alive first and foremost, and also watch Zanoba's back until I could drag him home. That would be tricky.

Uh…hmm. Come to think of it, how am I going to convince him to come back to Sharia, anyway?

I wasn't sure of Zanoba's goal here. Did he want to help his country win the war? Would that be enough to satisfy him?

Well, whatever. Either way, I'd have to tag along and keep him alive for now. When the moment was right, I'd convince him to come back with me to Sharia. In the meantime, I'd also hunt for hints about the Man-God's trap and his overall objective.

"Thank you for your help, Sir Orsted."

"No need to thank me."

After bowing deeply to Orsted, I turned and left his office.

***

Hmm. So now I'm walking right into the Man-God's trap, huh?

Zanoba hadn't objected much when I told him I was coming along. But if he knew of my suspicions, I had a feeling that might change.

Then again…maybe I could use it as a way to convince him? If he knew the Man-God was using him to lure me to my death, would he reconsider his decision to go back home…?

I gave it a moment's thought, then abandoned the idea. He'd probably end up saying something like "*Perhaps you're right. It's best I go alone, then."* It would be simpler for both of us if I kept my suspicions to myself for now.

Once again, I would be hiding things from him. I couldn't blame the man if he ended up resenting me.

Chapter 2:
Bad Omens

AS I RETURNED HOME, I decided to tell my family that I'd be leaving for Shirone. I had recently been keeping the details of my "business trips" to myself, but this one might turn into a lengthy job. I wanted them to know where I was at least.

The first problem was that our "office" didn't have any direct teleports into Shirone itself. If we started our journey there, we'd have to buy a carriage in the King Dragon Realm and make our way to Shirone by road. The last time I made that trip, it took me a solid four months. Of course, we'd spent some time poking around in the cities we'd come by. A more hurried journey might get us there in about two months. Which meant four months, in total, just there and back. Eris was due in three months… If we took this route, I was definitely going to miss the birth of my child.

There was always the option of asking Perugius to bring us directly to Shirone. That would be quicker, without a doubt. And the two of us were on quite friendly terms these days, so he probably wouldn't turn me down if I asked nicely.

Still, even if I shaved down our traveling time to less than a month, there'd be no guarantee I'd be back any time soon. It was impossible to know how long I'd have to spend in Shirone before I could convince Zanoba to return. I wasn't even sure exactly what I'd be *doing* there. If I knew who my target was, it would be easy enough to estimate how long it would take for me to track them down. But our enemy was most likely Pax, and I wasn't allowed to hurt him. There was a good chance this would turn into a complicated, drawn-out mission.

"…In other words, I'm not sure exactly when I'll be back."

I explained all of this as best I could after dinner. Norn wasn't around today, but I'd gathered everyone else with the exception of

Zenith. I also described the situation in detail. The one point I chose not to mention was the possibility that I was walking into the Man-God's trap. It was only a possibility at this point, and I didn't want Eris deciding that she was coming with me whether I liked it or not. Granted, this was kind of a cowardly move on my part. But it did work. No one objected to the plan itself.

After a moment of silence, Sylphie spoke up hesitantly. "Well, *I'll* be fine, but…"

All eyes turned in unison toward Eris.

She folded her arms above her swollen belly in her signature pose and nodded. "Got it. Guess that's the way it goes."

The woman sounded pretty casual about the whole thing. Sylphie actually flinched in shock. "Come on, Eris! Shouldn't you be a bit more upset?"

"Why? I don't need Rudeus around to have the baby."

"Giving birth isn't exactly easy, you know?"

"Yeah, sure. But what's he gonna do to help, other than hold my hand?"

"I mean, a little handholding means a lot when you're in labor…"

Sylphie trailed off and fell silent. Across the table, Roxy was squeezing her own hands together with a faint smile. Apparently, those who'd gone through this experience felt that my hand played an important role in the childbirth process.

"I don't need Rudeus around," replied Eris firmly, pouting somewhat.



It made me a bit sad to hear she didn't think my presence was required, but at the end of the day, she had Lilia and Aisha to take care of her. I wasn't strictly *necessary*, when it came down to it.

"When he gets back home, he can thank me for giving him a nice, big, healthy son. That's all I need from him."

Eris was being very stoic about this whole thing, I had to say. She was probably trying to make it a little easier for me. Surprisingly considerate of her. I did feel grateful, but also a little sad. Maybe this was how women felt when their husbands said *You can manage giving birth without my help* and went off on some business trip? I mean…not that I was the pregnant woman in this scenario…

"That reminds me, Eris. You already chose a name, didn't you?"

"Yep. It's a real good one, too. You've got something to look forward to!"

She'd only chosen one name, though, and it was a boy's. What if she gave birth to a little girl while I was off in Shirone? Would she use the name anyway, and try to raise her as a boy?

"Hey…if it turns out to be a girl, why don't we name her Hilda? You know, after your mom?"

"No way! I'm not giving my kid an old lady name!"

Ouch. Poor Mrs. Greyrat was probably turning in her grave…

"Okay, everyone," interjected Aisha, "why don't we leave it at that? Eris seems okay with this. And like Sylphie always says, she's here to support Rudeus from behind the scenes. I think we'll be fine."

That seemed to sum things up nicely, so we all nodded.

Sylphie was apparently in the habit of telling everyone that she was trying to "support me" in her own way. I had to say, it was nice having such a reliable woman as the senior wife in my household. I was still a bit worried about leaving Eris here on her own, but there were plenty of caring, determined people here to look after her for me. Everything was going to be fine. I just had to trust them, the way they trusted me.

“Wish I could come along, though! You never know what trouble Rudeus might get into on his own!”

Hm. Apparently *Eris* was worried about *me*. That felt a little backward…

Then again, this was an unusually risky job. Especially since I might be jumping right into the Man-God’s trap. Maybe she was right to be concerned.

Great, now I’m starting to feel a little nervous. Am I even going to make it back alive this time…?

Well, there was no point dwelling on what might go wrong. I had to do what was necessary. If my enemies came for me, I’d hit them with everything I had. I had to play this one by ear. There was no other option.

“You seem a bit anxious, Rudy,” said Roxy quietly, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked over at her. Lara was nestled in her usual spot against her mother’s chest, and her eyes were as sleepy as ever—but they were fixed steadily on me.

“Well, yeah. There’s a chance I might get mixed up in a war this time, so…”

My vague attempt to deflect her comment seemed to backfire, as her expression only grew more serious. “To be honest, I think I bear some of the blame for this situation myself.”

“What? But why?”

“Because I taught Prince Pax personally in his youth.”

Right, of course. She’d spent years as a royal tutor in Shirone, hadn’t she?

“I’m sure he had plenty of other teachers, though. It’s not like you made him into the man he is all by yourself…”

“That’s true. But it was during my time there that his personality took a sharp turn for the worse.”

Well, that obviously wasn't Roxy's fault. She was a splendid educator, and her lessons couldn't possibly have a *bad* effect on someone's character. I said that with confidence as one of her former students.

Then again…I really didn't know that much about Pax, did I? From what Orsted told me, he had the potential to become an important monarch. Maybe Roxy's methods didn't click for him, and he turned out a bit more foolish than he otherwise might have been…

Nah, that can't be right.

A few months of Roxy's lessons transformed a pathetic scumbag into a halfway-decent human being. It wasn't possible that Pax turned out that way because of her. There had to be some other explanation.

"That obviously wasn't *your* fault, Miss Roxy."

"…You know, Rudy, I wish you wouldn't leer at me like that every time you call me *miss.*"

Hm? Was I *leering*? Surely not! I only referred to her as *miss* as a token of my undying respect for her as an educator. To be sure, we had engaged in a bit of mutually fulfilling student-teacher roleplaying in the bedroom not too long ago, but that was purely to add a bit of spice to the proceedings. It wasn't like I had a fetish or anything. No sir.

"Honestly, I have some regrets about what happened with Pax…but I suppose it might be counterproductive for me to come along…"

As she spoke, Roxy glanced down at Lara. The girl was staring sleepily up at me. It almost looked like she had something to say.

I could tell Roxy was feeling a bit conflicted. If it wasn't for our daughter and her job at the University, she'd probably be offering to come along with me.

"Seriously, Roxy, I don't think anything you did contributed to this."

I honestly did feel fairly confident of that. It was hard to say whether Roxy tutored Pax in the timelines where I didn't exist. But it seemed like he was more or less destined to start a coup d'état and seize the throne, regardless of what else was going on.

On top of that, there was a good chance the Man-God was controlling him like a puppet this time. Even if his education *had* differed somewhat because of Roxy's presence, it was hard to imagine it was a major factor in how things turned out. There were too many other variables involved.

In other words, the current situation was definitely not her fault. In any way.

"It seems like Pax is probably being manipulated by the Man-God."

"Perhaps, but… Never mind. I suppose you're right."

Roxy dropped the issue, but didn't seem entirely convinced. I couldn't blame her for being bothered by the situation. It had to be tough knowing that one of your former students was up to no good.

I glanced in Sylphie's direction. She was never my *student*, exactly, but I was the one who'd taught her the fundamentals of magic, along with a number of other things. What if she'd ended up on her own after the Teleportation Incident, and started using the spells I taught her to kill and rob people? Maybe I would have felt guilty when I found out. Maybe I would have wanted to stop her, or to lecture her on the error of her ways.

"Uhm, what's the matter, Rudy?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how you used to do anything I told you to do, back in the day."

"Where did *that* come from? I still do what you tell me. Remember the other night? I told you I was too embarrassed, but you *insisted,* so I—"

"Let's not talk about that in front of the children, dear."

"Oh. Right."

Lucie, seated at her mother's side, looked from Sylphie's face to mine with a curious expression. Very cute. It was definitely too early for her to be learning about our nighttime wrestling matches.

In any case, now that we'd all said our piece, it seemed like a good time to wrap up this little family conference. "Okay, everyone. I think that about it covers it, so let's—"

"Waaah! Waaaaah!"

To my surprise, I was cut off mid-sentence by a furious cry of protest. Looking over, I found Lara wailing loudly in Roxy's arms. The kid almost never cried, but right now she was bawling…and stretching out her stubby little arms toward me.

"Bwaaah! Aaaaah!"

"What's wrong, Lara? It's okay, it's okay…"

Roxy tried her best to comfort our daughter, but the girl refused to stop. This was the first time I'd ever seen her cry this loudly. Maybe she'd picked up on the tension in the air or something? She really seemed to be looking at me specifically, though. And reaching out for me.

"Rudy…"

"Sure."

I took my daughter from Roxy and gently pulled her to me. In that instant, she stopped crying. Grabbing at my shoulder with her little hands, she clung to me like a cicada on a tree.

Had she realized I was going off somewhere? Was that why she'd gotten so upset? The thought nearly brought a tear to my eye, but I'd gone off on business trips before, and never once had she reacted like this. Maybe she sensed there was something different about this one.

"Don't worry, Lara. Daddy will be back soon, okay? You be a good girl while I'm gone."

In any case, at least she'd calmed down for now. After patting her gently on the back, I gingerly handed her back to Roxy…or tried to, at least.

Lara wouldn't let me go. She was grabbing stubbornly onto my robe with all the strength her little hands could muster. Was this a baby girl or a rhinoceros beetle?

"Naaaaah! Aaaah!"

I tried to gently pry Lara off me, but she yelped loudly in protest. She seemed *really* determined to stay with Daddy. What a sweet widdle girl she was. I'd have to take a nice long bath with her once I made it back home…

"Okay, Roxy. Can you take it from here?"

"Hm? Uh, okay…"

For all her determination, Lara only had the strength of an ordinary infant. It was easy enough to pull her off me and hand her back to Roxy.

"Aaaah! Gyaaaah!"

But the instant she was back with her mother, Lara began to shriek bloody murder. The girl was screaming as loudly as Eris at this point, and this wasn't *anything* like the way she usually cried. I was starting to feel rather unsettled here. It felt like I was torturing my own child somehow.

"Uhm, so…while I'm gone, I guess…"

"Naaaaaah! Daaaaaa! Waaaaa!"

It almost sounded like she was shouting *No, Dad! Wait!* or something. Man, this wasn't making it easy for me to leave.

I didn't have any choice in the matter, though. I needed to go. My best friend's life was in danger.

"Byaaaah! Aaaah! Aaaah!"

I glanced down at Lara. Tears ran down her crumpled little face, and she was reaching out for me with what looked like genuine desperation.

I'd never seen her like this before. The others were staring at her as well, equally taken aback.

“There, there, it’s all right,” murmured Roxy. “I don’t understand what’s got her so upset. This has never happened before… Lilia, do you have any ideas?”

“No. I’ve never seen anything like this myself…”

Roxy was trying her best to soothe the baby, but it wasn’t having any effect.

I was starting to get seriously worried at this point. This wasn’t…normal, was it? Should I really just walk out the door like this? Lara was supposed to be some sort of messiah, chosen by the Sacred Beast Leo. There was no telling what that meant exactly, but maybe she’d been born with special powers of some kind.

Like…the gift of prophecy. Or an ability to sense death approaching.

Uh, wait. Was I going to *die* in Shirone?

“Aaaaah, byaaaaa!”

Lara’s bitter, miserable cries echoed through the air once again. Prophet or not, she was starting to frighten me a little.

“All right, Lara, I understand.”

But as the rest of us looked on, frozen, one woman took action. Raising Lara until their eyes were level with each other, Roxy spoke directly to her.

“I’ll go with Daddy and keep him safe.”

It was just a few simple words. But as she spoke them, my goddess seemed as radiant as the sun.

Lara immediately stopped crying.

***

Roxy was coming with me.

I tried to stop her, of course. I told her in no uncertain terms that she wasn't coming and laid out my arguments. She didn't flinch at a single one.

First, I tried emphasizing the danger, relaying to her that there was a very good chance the Man-God had a trap ready and waiting; in a battle, I reasoned, Roxy would only slow me down.

She responded, "Ah, so it's a trap? That would explain why Lara was so upset. Mind explaining why you didn't mention that little detail previously? And while I might not be much use in a fight, I think I'll be helpful in other ways."

Since that blew up in my face, I made my next point—that Perugius refused to let any demonfolk enter his floating fortress.

"If Perugius refuses me entrance to the fortress, I can head for Shirone on another route by myself."

Well, more importantly, I reasoned, she might lose her dream job as an instructor at the university.

"Yes," she said, "I always wanted to be an instructor. But I wouldn't trade my husband's life for a satisfying career."

With nothing else left in my arsenal, I had to resort to arguing that this wasn't the sort of decision you made simply because your baby cried at you.

"Isn't it my duty as a mother to comfort my child?"

Within a few minutes, all my arguments lay in tatters, and I had nothing else I could say. It didn't help that the rest of my family was basically on Roxy's side. It wasn't that they were eager to put her in danger or anything. But when I mentioned the possibility of a trap, the general reaction was more *"Ah-hah!"* than *"Oh, no."*

After they chewed me out for hiding the truth, Eris insisted that she was coming along. Sylphie managed to talk her down, but then said *she* wanted to join me, too. I think we'd all been a little unnerved by Lara's strange, desperate behavior.

"Should we really let Rudy go by himself? Can he manage this one alone? This feels like such a bad omen. What if something

happens to him out there?"

In the end, it was Roxy who managed to calm everyone down and bring them to a consensus. She did this by firmly asserting that she'd accompany me as a representative for the others. And her reassurances convinced Sylphie and Eris to back down.

The woman really knew her way around an argument. But of course, that wasn't working *entirely* to my advantage here. I had a bunch of considerably mixed feelings about this idea. I preferred to have everything and everyone I loved as safe as possible at any given moment. Roxy was my treasure, and a part of me wanted to keep her locked up in a nice, secure box.

But of course, Roxy was a determined woman with a will of her own. She could be downright stubborn at times, in fact. If I outright tried to refuse her, I had a bad feeling she really would just head for Shirone on her own. In that case, it would be better to bring her with me. Having her nearby would make it easier to protect her.

And on top of that…I was a bit nervous about this mission myself, honestly. Orsted wasn't going to be hanging around to save me from any ambushes I blundered into. I didn't have a clear idea of how I'd convince Zanoba to come back home with me. I was stumbling into a foggy swamp full of potential dangers.

But now I was going to have Roxy there to help me navigate the situation: the woman I respected more than anyone else in the entire world. That was genuinely reassuring.

The next day, we began our preparations for the trip to Shirone. This involved gathering the usual traveling gear and provisions, of course, but I'll skip most of the details there.

The first thing I wanted to address was Zanoba's equipment. I wanted to keep myself alive above all else, but I wasn't about to let him die, either. So I took some time to rummage through the little armory in Orsted's offices, looking for weapons and armor that could work for Zanoba.

First of all, I settled on a heavy suit of armor that I'd dismissed as too bulky for my own use. It was a magic item that granted complete invulnerability to fire magic. Perfect for Zanoba, since he had a natural weakness to that element.

…It might sound a bit odd to describe him that way, I guess. *Most* people don't do well with being set on fire. This was just one area where he *wasn't* an exception to the norm.

Next, I needed to find him a weapon.

From what Orsted told me, there simply weren't any capable of enduring the raw physical strength of a Blessed Child like Zanoba. In his hands, even the sturdiest of enchanted swords was the equivalent of a twig; it would bend or break after a few battles at most.

With that in mind, I settled on making Zanoba a customized club. It was basically a *massive* stone bat in terms of design, but I reinforced it repeatedly with my magic to enhance its strength and durability.

At a glance, the thing looked too big for an average man to even lift off the ground, but Zanoba could hold it easily with his fingers and swing it around like a toy. For the most part, anything he actually *hit* with it was going to die instantly. I'd transformed my buddy into your classic club-wielding ogre.

Despite his awesome physical strength, however, Zanoba was a bit…clumsy. And slow on his feet. So I also found him a supplementary item to help address those weaknesses. Specifically, a magic item called the Ravenous Fisher's Throw Net. I didn't know how it worked, but when you hurled this thing at someone, it would lock on to the target and hunt it down until it had them helplessly wrapped up. At that point, it was easy enough for Zanoba to drag them down to the ground and pull them into punching range.

These three items seemed like a decent toolkit to enhance Zanoba's combat capabilities. He wasn't too happy about how he looked in his big, clunky suit of armor, but apart from that, he sounded quite satisfied with my suggestions.

I took some time to improve Roxy's equipment, too. Obviously, I wasn't going to let *her* die either. I wanted something sturdy for her defensive gear. A part of me wanted to seal her inside a big suit of plate mail like Zanoba, but that wasn't a practical option in her case. For one thing, she was an experienced adventurer with her own combat style; putting her in totally unfamiliar equipment was more likely to backfire by throwing her off her game.

Given those restrictions, I picked out two lightweight magical items: a ring that would automatically deploy a defensive barrier in response to physical attacks, and a necklace that would absorb a single fatal blow for its bearer before shattering. It seemed best to leave her robe and her staff as they were.

I was still worried about her, of course. I'd have to make sure I stayed on top of things if we found ourselves in battle. There was no telling what *kind* of trap we'd be walking into, but I'd trained myself rigorously to deal with anything the Man-God might throw at me.

We also informed the University of our plans. Zanoba would be withdrawing as a student, while Roxy would be taking an indefinite leave of absence. I didn't want them firing her over this, so I had Zanoba write them a letter explaining that he'd be taking her to Shirone to serve as a court magician on a permanent basis.

The University objected to this plan, and Zanoba and Roxy had a lengthy sit-down with the Principal himself to discuss the matter. They must have been seriously reluctant to let such a talented instructor out of their grasp. I would have done the same thing in the old man's shoes, I'm sure.

Zanoba started things off in an overbearing tone, using his status to full effect: "Miss Roxy was appointed as a court magician of Shirone many years ago. She resigned her post due to certain political developments, but her worthiness as a mage was never in doubt. We're quite determined to bring her back to her rightful place."

In contrast, Roxy protested in a careful, indirect way that she didn't *really* want to become a court magician. The Principal seized on this immediately, insisting that she was an official member of the University faculty, and therefore under its protection.

After an hour of carefully orchestrated debate, Zanoba finally "folded," backing off his initial demands. He would take Roxy with him to help address the current situation, given her familiarity with the new king; but once matters were settled, he would graciously permit her to return to the University.

It was a simple enough tactic, really. We'd started off with an absurd demand and negotiated him into giving us exactly what we wanted.

At least Roxy wouldn't be sacrificing her career over this. That was a relief.

Naturally, I also took some time to review my own equipment. Compared to Roxy and Zanoba, I had no real need to change things up. As always, I'd be bringing the Magic Armor Version One, the Magic Armor Version Two, and my Gatling gun.

Come to think of it, it had been quite a while since I'd last used my old buddy Aqua Heartia. I felt bad about letting a present from Eris gather dust, but she herself had no issue with me using the best gear I possibly could. That girl wasn't exactly sentimental, you know? It made me kind of sad sometimes. I still got all misty-eyed thinking about that night…the way it felt when I touched her chest…

Ahem. In any case, my old staff was currently resting in a place of honor on my bedroom wall.

I had considered maybe formally handing it down to Sylphie. Unlike Eris, who was always ready to replace her swords, she'd been using the same beginner's rod that I'd gifted her for many years now.

I wasn't sure how she'd react if I gave her Aqua Heartia as a present, though. Would she be overjoyed? Or annoyed? It *had* been a present from another woman, after all… Then again, it was Roxy who'd originally given me that rod, too.

In any case, I planned to do most of my fighting in the Magic Armor Version Two, which was more mobile and practical for daily use. If we ran into a particularly deadly enemy, I'd break out the

Version One and hit them with my full strength. It was the same strategy I always used.

Everything was going to be fine. I'd trained myself to go toe to toe with even the strongest of opponents. I could handle this.

The Magic Armor Version One was a bulky piece of equipment, and unlike the Version Two, I couldn't wear it around all day long. We'd be transporting it in pieces to our destination, then reassembling it once we got there. It would make packing much easier, plus, the Man-God knew about the armor's existence; it couldn't hurt to be a bit less obvious about the fact that I was bringing it along.

We'd sorted out our party's equipment. Now we had to figure out how we were getting to Shirone.

Thus, Zanoba and I headed off to grovel at Perugius's feet.

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Upon our arrival at the floating fortress, the two of us were ushered into a luxuriantly appointed room. It was one I'd never seen before, actually—some kind of art gallery, from the look of things. The walls were lined with paintings, and the shelves were occupied by a collection of palm-sized sculptures.

Somehow, the artwork here felt different from anything else I'd seen in this castle. The paintings in Perugius's hallways and reception rooms tended to look more *valuable*, while the work in here was more on the *striking* or *interesting* side of things. They might have fetched less at auction, but that didn't make them inferior works of art.

"This is a pretty nice room, isn't it?" I murmured to Zanoba.

"Oh? Is this your first time here, Master?" he replied, sounding a bit surprised.

"Yeah. I guess we usually talk in the reception rooms, or the gardens…"

“Lord Perugius only invites his most *valued* confidants to this particular room,” said Sylvaril from her place by the door.

Unless I was very much mistaken, she was implying that Perugius had never fully trusted me up until now. Sometimes I got the feeling this woman didn’t like me very much. But to be fair, it was probably my *boss* she wasn’t too fond of.

“Please, Miss Sylvaril,” said Zanoba chidingly. “It’s rather rude of you to imply that Master Rudeus is inferior to myself in any way.”

Just for the record, Zanoba… It’s also kind of rude to talk to someone without even turning in their direction…

“It’s simply a fact that Lord Perugius has always instructed me to bring you to this room, Lord Zanoba, and not your companion. Although it seems he’s made something of an exception today, for some reason…”

Sylvaril’s tone was calm, but her words seemed to bother Zanoba. Enough that he snapped his head around to face her, at least. “I suppose that Master Rudeus had all but stopped making figurines by the time he met Lord Perugius, so I can hardly blame you for underestimating his worthiness. But let me assure you, his skills as a craftsman put my academic expertise to *shame*. I’d never presume to call myself his equal.”

“However, Lord Perugius seems to think—”

“Rudeus Greyrat is my master. I’ll grant you that he lacks the depth of artistic knowledge that Lord Perugius and I possess. But if it weren’t for his guidance, I never would have become a man worthy of the great Perugius’s regard.”

Sylvaril fell silent for a moment. I had a feeling she was scowling, although it was hard to tell with that mask.

By this point I was used to Zanoba showering me with praise, but for some reason, this latest bout left me feeling kind of touched. Of course, my “talent” as an artist was mainly due to the fact that I’d brought some knowledge about figurines with me from my previous life, so I wouldn’t let it go to my head.

“I see. My apologies, Lord Zanoba.”

As Sylvaril bowed in our general direction, Zanoba accepted her apology with a lordly “That’s quite all right.”

I didn’t really care if she treated me with respect or not, but this probably wasn’t the time to bring it up.

“Ah, Zanoba. Good of you to come!”

Mere moments later, the door at the back of the room burst open, and Perugius strode through. However, he paused after a few steps to study Zanoba and Sylvaril in turn. Perhaps he’d sensed a lingering hint of awkwardness in the air.

“…What’s the matter? Did Sylvaril displease you somehow?”

“Not at all,” replied Zanoba with a smile. “We were merely discussing the fact that Master Rudeus had never set foot in this room before today.”

Nice of him not to tattle to the boss. Zanoba really was a good guy at heart.

“Ah, yes… I suppose I never found an opportune moment before. Well, Rudeus? What do you think of my little collection?”

“I was just admiring it, actually. Compared to the work you have hanging in your hallways, everything in here has a really…*distinctive* style.”

“Oh?”

I couldn’t explain what it was exactly that I found appealing about the art here, so my praise came out sounding kind of vague. Perugius seemed quite pleased, though, so I decided to elaborate a little.

“The art you have on display elsewhere is clearly high-quality stuff, in a way that appeals to almost anyone. But I think you chose the works in here to suit your *personal* tastes, perhaps.”

“Exactly right.”

With a broad smile, Perugius lowered himself into a chair at the central table.

Wow, I actually got that right? Guess I'm not a totally tasteless barbarian after all! Haha, Sylvaril looks so surprised…I think. Hard to tell for sure, you know? What with the mask.

Zanoba and I joined Perugius at the table at his invitation. We sat next to each other across the table from our host. It felt a bit like a parent-teacher conference or something.

"Now then," said Perugius, his voice warm with pleasure. "What can I do for you today? Perhaps you've brought me another intriguingly unusual figurine, hmm?"

Zanoba smiled happily, but shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Lord Perugius. I've come to inform you that I will be returning to my homeland shortly, and to bid you my farewells."

"Hrm…"

Perugius furrowed his brow uncertainly and studied Zanoba's face. And as his gaze lingered, his expression quickly began to darken.

Despite Perugius's silent stare, Zanoba smoothly proceeded to describe the letter he'd received from Shirone, and the circumstances there as he understood them. Perugius didn't so much as nod at any point during this recitation; he kept staring at Zanoba's face and nothing more.

"…So as I'm sure you can appreciate, I will be returning to Shirone at once."

For a few seconds after Zanoba stopped talking, Perugius didn't say anything at all. He seemed to be thinking things over. But then he looked his friend in the eyes and spoke.

"You intend to die, then."

Zanoba stared back at Perugius with a blank expression. "What makes you think so, if I might ask?"

"It's written on your face," said Perugius gruffly. "I've seen that look on far too many faces in my time."

That seemed like a bit of a reach, but I wasn't about to stop the man from trying to talk Zanoba out of this. It would be the best-case

scenario for everyone involved if he chose to stay put. I wasn't looking to hop into a trap for the fun of it, you know?

"Let's say you're right, for the sake of argument," said Zanoba, his face still blank and unreadable. "What would you propose I do about it?"

Perugius grinned at that. "I'd lend you my aid, if you're looking to fight. I value our discussions on art greatly, after all. I wouldn't hesitate to eliminate anyone who threatened to disrupt them…such as a certain pretender-king, perhaps."

"I'm afraid I must decline that offer."

"Hah! Yes, I supposed you would."

At this point, Perugius's eyes flashed in my direction. It felt like a signal, but I wasn't exactly sure what it meant. Did he want me to say something?

Before I could make up my mind, though, he'd turned his focus back to Zanoba.

"Tell me, Zanoba… Did this man give his blessing for your suicide attempt?"

"Not exactly, but he did offer to accompany me…"

"Oh? And you *accepted* that offer?"

"I don't believe I had much choice. It was within Master Rudeus's power to keep me from leaving by force, if he so chose."

Oh. Was that why he hadn't tried to argue when I told him I was coming too? He figured I wouldn't take no for an answer?

He wasn't wrong. The man knew me too well.

"I see. Well, I expect that Rudeus would sacrifice his own life to protect you, if it comes to that."

"Haha! Don't be absurd, Lord Perugius," said Zanoba. He laughed loudly, but it came out strangely hollow. "Master Rudeus is a married man with children, and a mission he must fulfill. I'm quite certain he will prioritize his own safety if it becomes necessary."

“Are you the pupil of a man who would abandon his own friend on the battlefield, Zanoba?”

“Certainly not! However, Master Rudeus is a man of astonishing talents. Surely, he will find a way to both protect me *and* ensure his safety!”

Uh, I’m not superhuman, Zanoba…

Sometimes it was hard to tell if my friend legitimately thought that I was made of steel. But putting that aside for the moment…he was brushing off Perugius’s references to his death in a weirdly casual way. It was pretty clear that the option of *not* going to Shirone never once registered in his thoughts.

Perugius seemed to realize this as well. Apparently losing interest in the conversation, he propped his face against his fist and heaved a heavy sigh. “Very well, then. I imagine you didn’t come here just to say goodbye. Is there something you wish to ask of me?”

Zanoba nodded. “We would like to request access to a teleportation circle to the Kingdom of Shirone, permission to bring the Magic Armor inside your castle…and safe passage through its halls for Roxy Migurdia, who is the wife of Master Rudeus and a demon by birth.”

“I’ll ready the circle for you at once. You may bring the Magic Armor through my halls, as well. But I cannot permit a demon to set foot within my castle.”

Perugius visibly grimaced at the very thought. I wasn’t surprised, honestly. His familiar Arumanfi had already turned Roxy away from his gates once, and his hatred of all demonkind was clearly deep.

“You would truly refuse her entrance, Lord Perugius?” said Zanoba slowly. “Even at the personal entreaty of Zanoba Shirone?”

“Tell me this,” replied Perugius. “Who is *Zanoba Shirone* to me, that I should be so pliable to his whims?”

“A fellow connoisseur of the arts, with tastes not unlike your own—and your good friend, I hope.”

“You’d name yourself a friend of the Armored Dragon King? You, the mere princeling of some minor desert nation?”

“With the greatest possible respect, Lord Perugius…in matters of friendship, neither rank nor race are particularly relevant.”

Perugius glared at Zanoba fiercely. Zanoba held his gaze without flinching. From across the room, Sylvaril was also staring intently at Zanoba. In other words, I was the only one in the room whose eyes were darting around uncomfortably. The atmosphere in here was *heavy.* If I were in Zanoba’s shoes, I would have broken down and started apologizing by now.

And then, with a quick upward jerk of his chin, Perugius let out a bark of laughter. “Very well then. I will permit the demon passage through my halls.”

“My sincerest thanks for your kindness.”

“However, I must insist on certain conditions.”

Perugius laid out three rules we’d have to follow. Once she was inside the castle walls, Roxy wouldn’t be allowed to speak a word, touch anything at all, or see Perugius himself—none of which presented much issue, since we’d only be passing through. Zanoba and I agreed on the spot.

“Very well then… Sylvaril, see to the preparation of the teleportation circle.”

“Yes, my lord!”

As his familiar hurried off into the hall, Perugius paused one last time to study Zanoba from across the table with a small frown of displeasure.

“Zanoba Shirone…”

“Yes?”

“I shall miss our conversations.”

Perugius and Zanoba rose from their seats simultaneously. And as Perugius strode away, Zanoba bowed to him without a word.

Perugius walked as steadily as ever, but I thought I could see a hint of sadness in the way he held his shoulders.

After disassembling the Magic Armor Version One into its component pieces, we first took a trip to the Kingdom of Shirone to stash it safely at our destination. A friend of Ginger's who belonged to a woodcutter's guild helped us disguise the pieces as blocks of stone, and arranged to have them carried to a warehouse close to the capital. I had no time to accompany it, but Ginger went along ahead of us. I'd asked her to spend a few days gathering information on the situation in Shirone. My hope was that the supposed invasion from the north might turn out to be a complete fabrication. It was our last chance to convince Zanoba to stay in Sharia after all.

But as far as Ginger could tell, the Kingdom of Bista really *was* gathering their forces along the border. All of Shirone was primed and ready for war; the streets were full of mercenaries and scruffy-looking thugs itching for a fight.

She'd picked up a few other details, as well: "It seems King Pax was entrusted with ten of the King Dragon Realm's most skilled knights. It was they who butchered his enemies after the coup."

A mere ten knights might not sound like much support, but it seemed these knights were seriously formidable. Pax and those ten hadn't been the only ones to launch the coup, but it *had* succeeded due to their efforts. I couldn't discount that the Man-God's plan involved them somehow.

"Did you happen to learn the names of those ten knights, Ginger?"

"Unfortunately, no. But I did hear rumors that a man with a gaunt, skeletal face accompanies King Pax everywhere he goes. Some say he's the Death God, one of the Seven Great Powers."

"Ah. I see."

I grimaced at the thought, although I doubted the rumor could be true. It was hard to imagine the King Dragon Realm would dispatch one of the seven most powerful people in the world for

Pax's private use. Still, I needed to tell Orsted about this, just in case.

A man with a "skeletal" face, though? What did that even mean?

When I reported Ginger's findings to Zanoba, his only comment was "Hrm. They're already poised to invade, then? I suppose we'll have to make haste."

His tone was as calm as ever, but I saw a glimmer of anxiety in his eyes. I'd run out of ways to try and talk him out of this, so we agreed to leave within a few days. We'd be a party of four this time: me, Zanoba, Ginger, and Roxy. Julie would stay with my family until the danger was past.

Chapter 3:
The Return to Shirone

THE NIGHT BEFORE our planned departure, we had an unexpected visitor.

I was just stepping into the hall to use the bathroom following an evening of passionate marital bonding with Sylphie. All of a sudden, Leo started barking his head off, and a few seconds later Eris burst out of her room with murder in her eyes.

I had no idea what was going on.

“We’re under attack!” shouted Eris.

“Huh?!”

Had someone kicked in the front door or something?

Heart racing, I ducked back into my bedroom, grabbed my staff and a torch…and paused to look outside the window for any signs of danger. It was a dark night, but I could make out a familiar silhouette standing in front of our gate.

“It’s all right, Eris. That’s not an enemy out there.”

“…Right. I guess not.”

Eris looked out the window from beside me, scowling down at the shadowy figure.

I left my staff against the wall and stepped out into the hallway again. After shooing my sleepy, confused family back into their rooms, I made my way to the gate.

I opened the front door to find Orsted waiting patiently outside. Byt, currently tangled around our front gate, had wrapped his vines around him and was squeezing aggressively. It reminded me of certain…tentacle-themed works of art.

“My apologies for the late-night visit.”

“Oh, that’s all right… Stop it, Byt! Let him go!”

“I’m here because I’ve learned something that you must know. Follow me. This shouldn’t take long.”

“Uhm, okay.”

Orsted smoothly ripped Byt’s thrashing vines off his body before walking off into the shadowy street. I cast a quick healing spell on our loyal Treant. Eris stood in the doorway with her arms folded. I hurried over, told her I’d be back soon, and scampered along after Orsted.

Sadly, there weren’t any twenty-four-hour diners in my neighborhood. We had to settle for the nearest empty plot of land. It was a moonless night, so I’d brought my torch along. Its flickering light illuminated our immediate surroundings, revealing nothing but an empty patch of grass and earth.

Come to think of it, Orsted and I tended to have a lot of our conversations in the dark. It made me feel like I was doing something *evil*, you know? *I should look into getting more lamps set up in his office…*

“So…what was it you wanted to discuss?”

“The new pawn that the Man-God’s chosen.”

I had passed along all the information Ginger had gathered a few days ago. He wasn’t in his office when I stopped by, though, so I had to leave him a letter summarizing her report.

“I’ve developed a theory based on the information Ginger York provided. I’ll explain it to you, and then give you a rough strategy to follow.”

I wished we had more than a *theory* to go off at this point. Maybe the smart move was to lock Zanoba in a cage until we’d gathered more information…

Nah, he wouldn’t trust anything we said if we started treating him like that. Things were never that easy.

“First of all, on the subject of these ten knights: I expect that nine of them are not particularly notable or dangerous.”

“Okay…”

“As for the tenth, the man with a face like a corpse—I believe I am familiar with him.”

Ah, right. This was the guy who stuck with Pax everywhere he went.

“There’s only one knight of the King Dragon Realm with significant skill and a skeletal face, you see.”

“Who is he, then?”

Orsted fixed his gaze on me. It seemed even sharper than usual tonight. “Randolph Marianne, the Death God. Fifth among the Seven Great Powers.”

The Death God. Fifth among the Seven Great Powers.

The words bounced around inside my head for a while as I tried my best to digest their meaning. So those rumors were *true,* then?

“He’s the King Dragon Realm’s secret weapon.”

“…Why would they loan out their secret weapon to support a coup d’état in some random country?”

“I don’t know, but it seems fairly likely that the Man-God arranged it somehow.”

Yeah, that was the most obvious possibility, for sure. Kind of a stupid question on my part…

“It *is* difficult to imagine that King Dragon would allow the Death God to leave their service, and I did consider the possibility it was someone else. But I don’t know of any other pawn on the board capable of killing me or you. It seems safest to assume the worst. I’ll tell you what I know about him.”

Okay. There was still a chance this skull-faced guy wasn’t the Death God, but he was the most dangerous person who *might* be coming for me. Yeah, might as well brace myself for that scenario.

“Randolph the Death God does not ascribe to any established school of swordplay. His style is unique and self-taught.”

“So…he made all his moves up himself?”

“That’s correct. You can’t expect him to follow any of the familiar patterns. He uses every trick and tool he can in the pursuit of victory.”

Hmm. Sounded a bit like Ruijerd’s philosophy, actually. It was never fun to fight people who were that unpredictable…

“However, he does possess a signature technique. It’s known as the Enthralling Blade.”

Wow, okay. I bet I know how this one works. Does he move his sword around in a big dramatic circle for no apparent reason, then stab you while you’re admiring his moves?

“There are two distinct variations of this technique: the Enticing Blade and the Arresting Blade.”

“Okay. How are they different?”

“The Enticing Blade convinces his enemies to advance when it’s unwise, and counters their attack. The Arresting Blade convinces his enemies to hold back when they ought to strike.”

That…seemed kind of vague. I was having trouble even picturing those moves.

“The man is a master at manipulating his opponents’ thoughts in battle. When you believe you should attack, do not attack. When you believe you should defend, do not defend. You won’t so much as lay a finger on him if you trust your instincts. I guarantee it.”

“Uhm, it sort of sounds like I’m not allowed to do anything at all…”

“Wrong. When you want to defend, simply attack instead. When you want to attack, defend. But don’t blind yourself to the moments when an attack is *truly* rational, or caution is purely necessary…”

Sorry? That makes no sense. Is this some kind of Zen koan? My head hurts…

“Don’t fall for his acting, essentially. Stay focused and overwhelm him.”

The thought *“If this guy’s so good, why don’t you deal with him instead of me?”* flashed through my head, but I pushed it out of mind. Orsted would head to the King Dragon Realm soon.

“Do you think I can actually defeat him?” I asked.

“The man’s one of the Great Powers. As you might expect, he’s a master of technique, with numerous ways of countering offensive magic. It certainly won’t be *easy*. However, he has only recently returned to the battlefield after an absence of many years; I doubt he could even compete with the Gods of the three Great Styles at present. Now that you know the theory behind his Enthralling Blade, you have every chance of victory—as long as you can resist his feints and tricks.”

Nice to hear, although I didn’t feel entirely convinced. The mere idea of fighting anyone with *God* in their title was as terrifying as ever to me, frankly. It was hard to imagine myself actually winning.

Still, I’d put up a good fight against Auber, and he was a North Emperor. Maybe I *was* ready for an opponent like this.

“You know, from what you’ve told me so far, this Death God’s style sounds kind of similar to the North God approach.”

“As it should. He was originally considered a potential candidate to assume the rank of North God.”

Oh. Interesting. A candidate, huh? So he didn’t make the cut for that spot, in other words. Wasn’t he ranked *above* the current North God in the Seven Great Powers, though? I seemed to remember that the North God was number seven on that list… Weird.

“So how did someone like that end up getting the title Death God, anyway?”

My curiosity got me asking for the guy’s life story, and Orsted was kind enough to oblige me. Randolph Marianne was the grandson of the second North God to hold that title. The early years of his childhood were spent training under his grandfather, alongside the man who would become the third North God.

However, Randolph had a dramatic falling out with his grandfather soon after he came of age. Leaving everything he'd known behind, he went out into the world alone and began to develop his own techniques independently. In time, he grew powerful enough to defeat one of the Seven Great Powers in a battle that took place on the Demon Continent. Claiming his opponent's title, Randolph began to call himself the Death God.

But from that day on, he was subjected to relentless attacks from those who dreamed of taking their place among the Seven Great Powers. The duels and ambushes came on a daily basis. Randolph found himself locked in an endless, pointless struggle against a sea of men and women who found meaning only in battle.

After ten years of this, he grew thoroughly repulsed by his bloody routine. Resolving to change his life completely, Randolph returned to his homeland—the King Dragon Realm—and studied to become a cook. Once he was ready, he took over a nearly bankrupt restaurant from a relative. A new chapter in the legend of the Death God had begun.

Sadly, it turned out to be a brief one. The restaurant performed so badly that it went out of business entirely. Randolph was a prodigy as a swordsman, but a mediocre chef. Saddled with massive loans he had no means to repay, he found himself recruited by a general of the King Dragon Realm, and assumed his current position as a royal knight.

And that was the entire story of Randolph's life so far, from birth to…middle age, probably. What a heartwarming tale.

"So long as you approach the battle correctly, you'd match up reasonably well against the Death God. But if he does come for you, don't fight him at close range. Use your Magic Armor's mobility to maintain your distance, like you did against me."

"All right. Thank you, sir."

I carefully committed the Death God's name to memory and bowed to Orsted.

"That's all for now, Rudeus. Don't get yourself killed out there."

“Well, I’ll do my best.”

At least I had some information about the biggest threat I might face in Shirone. That was better than nothing. Our departure was tomorrow. I had to be ready to face anything the Man-God might throw at me.

The next morning, the whole family saw me off at our front door.

It was quite a crowd: Sylphie, holding Lara in her arms; Eris; Aisha; Norn; Lilia; Zenith; Lucie; Leo; and Julie, who was staying with us.

“You be careful out there, Rudy. I know you can handle anything, but don’t get careless, okay? We want you back safe and sound.”

“Got it. Keep an eye on the family for me, Sylphie.”

“No problem.”

I gave Sylphie a big hug, and groped her butt a little while I had the opportunity. It was a real pity I wouldn’t be seeing this charming little backside again for a while.

“Eris, try to cut down on any strenuous exercise until the baby comes, all right?”

“I know, I know.”

“And if it does turn out to be a girl, try to give her a name she won’t resent.”

We’d been over this before, but with Eris, it never hurt to repeat yourself. It wasn’t hard to imagine her insisting that her newborn daughter was actually a boy, and raising her accordingly—whether she liked it or not. It was a classic setup for a dramatic story, sure, but I wasn’t about to let my own kid suffer that kind of treatment.

“Good luck out there, brother dear. Even more members of Ruquag’s Mercenary Band will be waiting for you by the time you

make it back."

"Uh, right. Don't use them for anything *too* shady, please."

"Yeah, yeah."

It was nice that Aisha's mercenary company was growing smoothly, but I didn't want her forgetting that her employees were mostly rough and violent people. Unless she kept a firm hand on the tiller, the group might devolve into a lawless pack of thugs. It felt safer to keep their activities totally above board.

"Rudeus, Prince Zanoba was quite kind to me during his time here. I hope you'll find some way to get him through this crisis safely."

"That's the idea. Don't worry, I'll figure something out."

"Make sure you take care of yourself as well."

"Thanks, Norn. You keep at it with the Student Council, okay?"

Norn had taken the time out of her schedule to come see me off, but she seemed a little stiff; I guessed it was a stressful time for her right now. She was still trying to get her feet under her as the president of the student council.

"Be well, Master Rudeus. I'll pray for your fortune on the battlefield."

"Thank you, Lilia. I'll come back safe, I promise."

Lilia's farewell felt a little melodramatic, but I appreciated the sentiment. She'd truly taken to her role as the loyal matron of our household lately. Sometimes I wanted to remind her that she was still a relatively young woman, but this probably wasn't the time. I returned her bow with a smile.

Zenith took the opportunity to pat me on the head. Come to think of it, her condition was probably the main thing that kept Lilia anchored exactly where she was. A part of me felt like my family had stolen most of Lilia's life from her, but this was a road she'd chosen for herself.

"Come on, Lucie. Say bye-bye to Daddy."

"…Bye-bye, Daddy."

"Bye, Lucie. I'll be home soon, I promise."

My daughter fidgeted for a moment, stubby hand clutching at Sylphie's skirt. It seemed like she wanted to say something else, so I waited patiently.

After a moment, she stepped forward and looked up at me. "Gimme hug, Daddy."

"You got it, kiddo! Come here. You be a good girl while I'm gone, okay?!"

"Mm."

It wasn't every day that Lucie *asked* me for affection, so I jumped at the chance to pick her up and nuzzle her little cheeks against mine.

This time she didn't squirm away in protest. Maybe because I'd shaved my stubble off this morning. I enjoyed myself for some time before regretfully releasing her from my clutches.

Finally, I turned to Julie, who was standing quietly off to one side of my family.

"Hey, Julie…"

"Yes, Grandmaster?"

"Remember, you're my apprentice. You seem like you're thinking of yourself as a slave, but, uh…try to make yourself at home, okay? You're our guest, so there's nothing to be self-conscious about."

"Of course, sir. I'll try not to cause your family any trouble."

Honestly, I wasn't sure what Julie thought about her circumstances at this point, but I tried my best to be reassuring anyway. Recent events suggested she wasn't exactly unhappy, at least…

"…Thank you for accompanying Master. Please keep him safe."

"Absolutely, Julie. I won't let him come to harm."

But one way or the other, Zanoba was clearly important to her, and she seemed to treasure her role as his pupil. I wasn't sure why she was compelled to ask me to look out for him, though. I cared about Zanoba as much as she did.

"Okay, Leo, I'm leaving my family in your protection again. You keep watch over the whole house, got it? Not just Lara."

"Raruff!"

With a few final words of encouragement to our oversized guard dog, I ran my gaze across my entire family one last time.

"All right then," I said. "We'll be going."

"Goodbye for now," said Roxy quietly.

I picked up our bags and walked out the front door. Roxy followed close behind.

***

A few minutes later, we met up with Zanoba and Ginger at the city's gates. We'd already sent most of our luggage to Shirone ahead of us, so they weren't carrying much today. Our bags primarily held spare clothes. Me, I carried Roxy's luggage for her. This unassuming trunk contained perhaps seven vessels that might one day be enshrined as holy idols. I'd maneuvered it through the city streets with the greatest of care.

Cliff and Elinalise waited by the gates as well. They'd come to see us off.

"I'm sorry, Rudeus. I *wish* I could come with you, but…"

Cliff genuinely wanted to accompany us, but he had a family to consider now, and a place in society he needed to maintain. You could hardly expect him to run off on sudden months-long trips around the world like I did. It was likely to get him kicked out of the University.

“That’s all right, Cliff. Can you keep an eye on my family for me while I’m gone? Help them out if they get into trouble?”

“Of course, Rudeus. Take good care of Zanoba for us.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it covered.”

Nodding, Cliff turned to face Zanoba. “I want to tell you something before you go, Zanoba—I think your patriotism is truly admirable. Truly.”

“I see. I don’t know if I would call myself a patriot, in all honesty.”

“*However,* I want you to keep one thing in mind. As Saint Millis once remarked—”

Studiously ignoring Zanoba’s attempts at protest, Cliff launched into a speech that seemed more like a sermon. The word *lecture* also came to mind. I’d been on the receiving end of these myself too many times to count. This time, the subject concerned man’s obligation to value his life as he would a precious gift. Zanoba listened politely enough, but the smile on his face was obviously strained. You could practically see the words passing in one ear and out the other.

I glanced around to distract myself from the awkward scene, and noticed Elinalise and Roxy had stepped aside for a semi-private conversation.

“Try to keep a close eye on Rudeus this time, Roxy. The boy can be surprisingly fragile when things go badly…”

“I’m well aware of that, believe me.”

Huh? Am I really the one they should be worried about here?

On second thought, it made some sense, given that I was voluntarily jumping into a trap and all. That kind of rash decision-making tended to inspire some concern.

“If he starts getting all mopey, you know what to do, right? Push him into bed and make him forget all about his troubles. Just like last time.”

“Uh, well… I don’t think that should be necessary. Rudy doesn’t usually make the same mistake twice, for one thing…”

“Ah, that reminds me. Why don’t you take a shot at making baby number two while you’re on the road? You’re nursing at the moment, aren’t you? That sort of thing can add a bit of excitement in bed, you know…”

“I’m sure *Rudy* would find it thrilling, but I’d really rather not.”

It was nice to hear that Roxy had such a high opinion of me, but the fact of the matter was that I *regularly* repeated even my stupidest mistakes. Even so, I’d have to try and brace myself for the worst this time around. I didn’t want Zanoba to die…but if he did, I would be useless if I had another nervous breakdown.

No comment on the rest of that conversation. Elinalise was trying to help Roxy relax. Probably. The woman clearly hadn’t changed, despite her new position as a wife and mother. Every other word out of her mouth involved sex. She was going to be a *terrible* influence on her kid.

“All right, everyone. I think we’d best be on our way.”

“Right. Don’t get yourself killed out there, you understand?”

With those cheery words of farewell from Cliff, the four of us left the city of Sharia behind.

It took a half-day of walking for us to reach the ruins nearby, from which we entered Perugius’s floating fortress.

As promised, they allowed Roxy to accompany us this time. But Arumanfi grimaced visibly as he handed her the required magic item, and the teleportation circle on the other side was guarded by both Sylvaril and two other servants in Perugius’s employ. They were clearly on their guard against Roxy, absurd as that might sound.

“Sir Rudeus, I do hope you appreciate how magnanimous Lord Perugius was to grant this request. No demons are *ever* tolerated in this fortress under ordinary circumstances.”

“Yes, I know. We’re thankful for his kindness, truly.”

I tried to express our gratitude, while Roxy bowed her head silently. As one condition of her admittance to the floating fortress, she wasn't allowed to speak a word within its borders. She was also required to remain under surveillance at all times, forbidden to touch any objects in the castle, and refused the right to an audience with Perugius…and that wasn't even all of it.

Fortunately, we were passing through briefly, so none of those rules were much of an issue. Roxy had agreed to all of them beforehand.

That said, she was clearly captivated by the majesty and splendor of this place. She stared up at the towering central castle like some country bumpkin, tugging at my sleeve in excitement. It was a real pity I wasn't allowed to give her a tour, or even tell her anything specific about the fortress. Instead of saying anything, I dropped a hand on her shoulder and rubbed it affectionately.

She turned to look up at me from beneath the wide brim of her hat, blushing the slightest bit. I think she was a little embarrassed by the way she'd been gawking.

Then Sylvaril cleared her throat loudly, interrupting the moment.

Come on, we weren't even talking…

If they kept treating Roxy this way, word might get around that Good King Perugius had a bunch of petty, surly jerks for servants. Oh, for sure the rumors wouldn't come from *me,* but my pet cat and dog could always do a little gossiping on my behalf. Those two were scarily good at this sort of thing.

"This way, please…"

Flanked by the other two familiars, we followed Sylvaril down into the fortress's underground levels. It felt like we were prisoners being marched off to the dungeons, honestly. But I kept that thought to myself.

We'd asked Perugius to allow Roxy entrance to his home, knowing full well that he hated demons with a passion. I had to admit —I didn't understand why this was such a big deal to him. Still, it was

obvious that he'd only made this exception because of Zanoba. He didn't want Zanoba to die any more than we did.

"Hey, Sylvaril…"

"What is it, Sir Rudeus?"

"Can you tell Perugius I'll come back to thank him properly for this, once I get the chance?"

"Very well," said the familiar, her tone of voice somehow conveying *"That's the least that you could do."*

Nanahoshi was waiting for us in the teleportation chamber. She stood beside the glowing circle, which had already been activated some time ago. Belatedly, it occurred to me that I hadn't said a word to her about our travel plans. She must have caught wind of it somewhere and come to see us off.

"Hello, Zanoba," Nanahoshi mumbled. "Uh, I heard you were heading back home…"

Apparently, the girl hadn't figured out what she wanted to say about that. She was fidgeting with her hands, and looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Zanoba walked over to her slowly.

"That's correct, Miss Nanahoshi. The time has come for me to return to my homeland."

An odd expression flashed across Nanahoshi's face, somehow conveying both envy and real sadness.

"Fear not. I'm sure the day of your own return will come in time."

Oh, man. Did you have to go there, Zanoba? Nanahoshi *couldn't* go back home right now, even though she desperately wanted to. Thinking about that fact had to be painful for her.

"Well… I hope you're right," murmured Nanahoshi.

"So long as you refuse to give up, you *will* make it back eventually. Unless your homeland itself should disappear." Stepping

forward, Zanoba wrapped his arms around Nanahoshi and thumped her gently on the back. “For my own part, I will pray for your success —even if it must be from afar.”

That bear hug might have qualified as sexual harassment back in Japan. But Nanahoshi didn’t flinch or try to squirm away. After a moment’s hesitation, she reached up and put her own arms around Zanoba. I saw tears shining in her eyes.

“Uhm… Thank you…for…all your help, Prince Zanoba…”

“No need to call me Prince! Or to thank me, either. I’ll always remember fondly the days I spent with you and Cliff, engrossed in our research. Perhaps I’m the one who owes you a debt of gratitude.”

Come to think of it… Zanoba and Cliff had only grown so close because of their work with Nanahoshi. The long hours they spent together as her assistants had definitely played a part in establishing their bond.

Ah, man. Those were good times, weren’t they…

“Oh, please,” sniffled Nanahoshi. “You did so much for me…if it wasn’t for your help, my research *never* would have gotten this far.”

“Maybe so! But had we not met, I would never have become acquainted with Lord Perugius. In other words, it’s only thanks to you that I can return to my homeland so quickly and easily. Let’s call it even, shall we? Hah!”

With a loud chortle, Zanoba finally released Nanahoshi from his embrace.

“Well then, Miss Nanahoshi. We’re unlikely to ever meet again, but do take care.”

“Uhm, y-you too…”

Nanahoshi shot me a startled, anxious look. It wasn’t hard to guess what she was thinking: *What’s with these final farewells? I mean, he’s going to teleport back here eventually, right? At least to visit?*

I nodded firmly to reassure her. This wouldn't be the last time they met—not if I had anything to say about it, anyway. As far as I was concerned, Zanoba was heading home for a little visit, and nothing more.

"Well then, Master Rudeus—let's be on our way."

At Zanoba's prompting, our party stepped forward onto the teleportation circle.

On the other side, we emerged into the interior of a crumbling building. It was a typical enough teleportation ruin among the many scattered all across the world. This particular structure was hidden in a forest near Shirone's eastern border. It would take us around five days of travel to reach the capital from here.

"Phew…"

Finally freed from her vow of silence, Roxy let out a small sigh of relief. Then she curiously glanced down at the magic circle beneath her feet.

"These teleportation circles never get any less interesting to me. They're such fascinating pieces of work…"

"Hmm. I guess I'm kind of used to them by now."

"You know, if I could learn more about their design, I think I might be able to create one myself."

"Wait, really? You want to try?"

Roxy shook her head at my reflexive question. "No. I think the reason Perugius won't let demons in his castle is to prevent our kind from learning the secrets of teleportation magic. It would make us dangerous opponents when Laplace is reborn, I suppose. He'd likely have me killed if I made any progress."

That sounded fairly plausible. Personally, I didn't think it was the main reason for that rule, but it *was* probably a factor. I had to imagine that Laplace himself knew all about teleportation, though; it struck me as a little pointless.

“Enough chit-chat,” called Zanoba. “Let’s get going. We need to collect our provisions and equipment, first of all.”

Following his lead, our party left the crumbling ruin. We made our way to a small cabin outside the woods where most of our luggage was awaiting us.

Soon enough, we were on the road to the capital.

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After several long days on the road, we arrived at the capital city of Latakia barely before sundown. As we passed through its front gates, Zanoba was visibly moved by the familiar sights all around him. I felt a small twinge of nostalgia myself. It had been many years since my last visit to this city, but it hadn’t changed much. The streets were as brimming with adventurers to challenge the local labyrinths as ever, for one thing.

On closer inspection, though, I started to pick up on some subtle differences. The people seemed a bit on edge, the streets weren’t as clean…and some of those “adventurers” looked a bit more like thugs.

“Hmm. More mercenaries out and about than there used to be, I must say,” said Zanoba cheerfully. “But I suppose that’s not surprising, with a war on the horizon!”

The man sounded almost pleased about it. I couldn’t begin to understand why. I didn’t exactly get the sense he was putting on a brave front…

“Sounds like you’re in a good mood, Zanoba.”

“But of course, Master Rudeus. Regardless of the circumstances, the thought of war is always thrilling.”

“You think?”

“Indeed. Any red-blooded man would surely feel the same.”

I wasn't about to argue his point, but I had no idea what Zanoba was talking about. Were these the same kind of thrills you got from looking at a giant robot, or what?

In any case, we made our way straight to the inn where Ginger had reserved a room for us in advance. The plan was to spend a single night here, then put on some clean clothes so we could present ourselves at the castle. There we would report Zanoba's return and request an audience with the king.

Given that we'd never crossed the border, we were expecting a certain amount of scrutiny from the guards—but we'd already thought up a good explanation in case they chose to press us on the matter.

"Now then, Prince Zanoba…by your leave, I think it prudent that I blend into the crowds for a time and gather any information that I can."

Ginger was ready to go off on her own as soon as we arrived at the inn. Before she could walk out into the street, however, Zanoba raised an objection.

"Hrm? Ginger, you are a knight of Shirone. Shouldn't you first present yourself at the palace with me and report your return?"

"…I am a knight, yes, but your personal bodyguard above all else. And my instincts tell me that all may not be well within this city."

"I see. Very well, go and investigate."

"Yes, sir!"

As Ginger saluted Zanoba, she shot me a meaningful look. Guessing it meant something like *"Keep an eye on Prince Zanoba for me,"* I gave her a small nod in reply.

We'd made it this far without a hitch, but now things were going to get a lot more interesting.

Zanoba and I planned to present ourselves to Pax together. Hopefully, that audience would give us some hints as to what the Man-God was trying to accomplish here.

There was a possibility the Death God would try to murder me on the spot. In that scenario, I'd flee the castle with Zanoba in tow. Roxy would be waiting outside to support us as we retreated outside the city; I'd equip the Magic Armor there, and then decide whether to fight or just keep running.

I was planning to follow Orsted's advice to the letter and keep my distance from the Death God if I ever had to fight him. From the sound of things, that fancy Enthralling Blade technique wouldn't be much use if I was blasting him with my Gatling gun from half a mile away.

Assuming we *didn't* find ourselves fighting for our lives tomorrow, Zanoba and I would probably be dispatched directly to the battlefield. I had no idea what a war against this country to the north would actually look like. And apart from getting us through that in one piece, I needed to find some way to convince Zanoba not to stay here.

I had no clue what might change his mind at this point. I wasn't even sure he'd reconsider if Pax blatantly attempted to assassinate him…

Ah well. Time enough to worry about this stuff after our audience with the king.

In all honesty, I was still a bit reluctant to strut right into such an obvious trap. A part of me almost wanted to station myself a mile away and blow Pax and his castle to bits. But I knew that wasn't an option. Orsted ordered me to spare the king, and even if he hadn't, Zanoba would never forgive me. The castle was hardly a symbol of Shirone or anything, but destroying it would definitely send shock waves through the kingdom. Oh, and those guys up north would come pouring across the border as soon as they heard the news.

The simplest option wasn't realistic here, and nothing but uncertainty lay ahead. Made me want to sigh just thinking about it.

For the moment, I had to stay focused on getting through this audience. One way or another, it would at least give me *something* to work with.

“Rudy.”

A little tap on my shoulder pulled me out of my reverie. I turned to find Roxy standing directly behind me.

“You’re all tensed up, you know.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Really. Try to let your body relax a bit, okay? I know you’ve got to stay alert right now, but you won’t be much good in an emergency if all your muscles are too stiff to move.”

As if to emphasize her point, Roxy started to massage my shoulders. Her hands were small, but surprisingly strong. I sat there and let myself enjoy it for a while.

She was right, of course. I had to stay loose and flexible. As long as I kept myself pointed in the right direction, I could go with the flow. At the end of the day, it would be enough to get Zanoba and Roxy out of this mess alive. *Ideally,* Ginger and I would make it out in one piece too. That was my bare minimum goal. Nothing too complicated, right?

Yeah. That sounded doable enough.

“Thanks, Roxy. You really worked out the knots there.”

When I turned back I found Roxy staring down at me with affection in her sleepy-looking eyes. “Oh, I don’t know about that. If you were really relaxed, you would have said something utterly ridiculous by now.”

“Like what?”

“Well, let’s see…maybe ‘Thanks, Roxy. Mind massaging my little buddy down here next?’ You’d also be pulling down your pants —that goes without saying…”

“H-hey! I only say that kind of stuff in the privacy of our home…”

“Ah, yes. You do behave like an animal in that house, don’t you?”

Smiling, Roxy leaned down to poke at my cheek with her finger.

I felt like my character was being defamed here, somehow. Was it such a crime to be horny? Surely *everyone* says some stupid stuff in the bedroom at night, under similar circumstances. I couldn't be the only one!

"I'm only kidding, Rudy. Looks like you've relaxed a little, though. At last."

"Oh… Huh. Yeah, I guess I have."

My shoulders felt a lot less tense than they had a few minutes earlier, although a hint of energy lingered in my muscles. I was relaxed, but alert, and ready for action.

It was a good feeling.

"All right, I better get to bed so I'm well-rested for the audience tomorrow. Thanks again, Roxy."

"Any time. Goodnight, Rudy."

I can do this. One step at a time.

Holding these simple thoughts in my mind, I turned in for the night.

Chapter 4:
King Pax

THE NEXT MORNING, we walked right up to the castle's front gate.

At first, the guards on duty studied Zanoba's face suspiciously. They hadn't expected him to come, and he'd sent no word in advance. Even stranger: he'd come on foot instead of by carriage, and his one bodyguard, Ginger, was nowhere to be seen. It was hard to blame them for having their doubts.

After a bit of questioning, however, they seemed to realize Zanoba wasn't an impostor. Straightening their backs respectfully, they stepped aside to allow us passage.

The stiff formality of their movements really made clear the lofty status enjoyed by the royal family in Shirone. Zanoba was only the brother of the king, but you wouldn't know it from the looks on their faces.

Then again…maybe they were a bit on edge. The other royals were purged in a bloody massacre quite recently, after all.

In any case, we asked for an audience with King Pax, and were ushered to a waiting room. After about an hour, our request was granted. The two of us were promptly escorted to the throne room.

Five people waited for us within that chamber.

I recognized the man seated on the throne of Shirone immediately. He hadn't changed much in appearance…or in height. And judging from the way he leaned back arrogantly in his seat, his personality seemed unchanged as well.

It was the same Pax Shirone that I remembered.

On closer examination, he looked a *bit* more mature, and there was a subtle hint of strength in his eyes. But those were the only real differences I saw.

Next to him sat a beautiful girl who looked young enough to be a middle schooler. She had slightly curly blue hair and wore a sleek white dress. I could almost have mistaken her for a Migurd, but the shade of her hair was notably different from Roxy's. She must have been from a different race.

The girl's eyes were vacant and unfocused. Judging from the coronet on her head, though, I assumed that she was Pax's queen. Pax had one arm draped casually behind her. At a glance, it almost looked like an innocent display of affection, but I knew better. The man was *clearly* fondling her butt right now. Did he think he was being subtle or something?

Well, whatever. I didn't have time to be critiquing his treatment of some random concubine right now. My attention turned to the person standing at the woman's side—and that was where it stayed. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

It was a man who looked to be in his mid-forties. He was solidly built and carried a sword at his hip, but he wore only the lightest of defensive gear. Nothing about him looked remotely imposing, and his attitude seemed mild enough. I would have walked right past him in the street without a second thought.

Unless I got a good look at his face, anyway.

To call him *gaunt* would have been an understatement. His cheekbones seemed likely to push their way out of his papery skin at any moment. An eyepatch covered his right eye; his left, sunken deeply in its socket, looked as lifeless as a glass bead. I felt like I was staring at a zombie. Or maybe a demonic pirate captain from some old movie.

In other words: this was *a man with a skeletal face.*

I had no doubt that I was face to face with the Death God, Randolph Marianne.

A pair of armored knights flanked this central group of three. I assumed they were among those who'd been dispatched here from the King Dragon Realm along with Randolph.

"Your Majesty. It is I, Zanoba Shirone. I have returned from the Magic City of Sharia in answer to your summons."

As he spoke, Zanoba stepped forward and dropped to one knee. From the looks of things, he didn't have any issue bowing and scraping before his little brother. I kneeled as well but made sure to keep the Gatling gun hidden underneath my robe fixed on Randolph.

Pax studied Zanoba from above for a moment, then pulled his hand off his consort's backside and licked it. "You certainly made excellent time."

"The matter clearly called for urgency, so I made the utmost haste."

"Oh, did you, now? And here I was, thinking you must have been lurking somewhere inside Shirone in the first place. I never got word that you'd crossed our borders, you see…"

We'd made it to Shirone a mere month after receiving Pax's letter. Normally, the trip from Sharia would take an entire year. You couldn't blame the guy for having his suspicions.

"Indeed," replied Zanoba. "I came under attack repeatedly during my journey, so it seemed wisest to make my way here in disguise."

"Even after entering Shirone?"

"It was then that I grew *more* cautious."

"Ah. I see."

Pax snorted quietly, but appeared content to let the subject drop. It seemed he wasn't going to press too hard for an explanation of Zanoba's quick arrival. After settling back on his throne, the king pointed at me with a jerk of his thumb. "And what about your companion here?"

"His name is Rudeus Greyrat, Your Majesty—as you may remember."

“I wasn’t asking you for his name.”

“What were you asking, in that case?”

“I’d like to know what he’s doing here, obviously.”

“I recruited him to our service in the city of Sharia. He is a powerful mage, so I thought he might prove useful in the coming war.”

This was another explanation we’d worked out in advance. In this world, magicians were highly valuable weapons of war. Even Intermediate- or Advanced-tier mages were effective at creating fortifications, and large-scale attack spells could wipe out entire *legions* of troops. In a simple one-on-one duel, swordsmen held the advantage over mages of equal skill. But as the scale of a battle grew larger, so did the importance of magic. In times of war, even the haughtiest of kings would lower themselves to flattery if it meant earning the services of a Saint- or King-tier mage.

And yet, Pax responded with a snort. He studied me for a moment with a cold sneer on his face, then turned his attention back to his brother.

“Is that so? To be frank, Zanoba, I rather assumed you brought him here to kill me.”

As soon as those words left Pax’s mouth, I could feel a sudden ripple of hostility from the two armored knights who flanked the throne. It seemed the knights the King Dragon Realm had loaned Pax were relatively loyal to him. He supposedly had ten at his disposal; including Randolph, there were three in this room. I found myself wondering where the other seven were.

In all honesty, though, maybe it wasn’t that important. This pair didn’t look too dangerous.

“Certainly not, Your Majesty,” said Zanoba sharply. “I haven’t the slightest intention of opposing you.”

“Hmm. So it doesn’t bother you that I seized the throne by force?”

“I can’t say that it does. I pledged my loyalty to Shirone, not its former king.”

“But I’m sure you don’t intend to pledge yourself to *me*, either.”

Zanoba didn’t say anything in response to that.

Pax let out another snort, looking more bored than anything else. Another man might have interpreted Zanoba’s silence as evidence of disloyalty, but it didn’t seem to bother him too badly.

“Enough of this. To be frank, brother, I don’t particularly *care* what your real intentions are.” Pax paused to gesture with his chin at the armored men who stood behind his throne on either side. “Take a good look at these gentlemen. These are the elite knights I brought back with me from the King Dragon Realm.”

The two armored men bowed deeply at Pax’s words, although the Death God stifled a yawn and nothing more.

“This man here is particularly fearsome. His name is Randolph Marianne, known also as the Death God. Ranked fifth among the Seven Great Powers.”

Starting slightly as Pax gestured toward him, the Death God apparently decided to introduce himself. He took a single step forward with a strained expression on his face, cleared his throat, and began to speak.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sirs. I am indeed Randolph Marianne. I was born in the King Dragon Realm, but raised on the Demon Continent. I am of mixed race—part Human, part Elf, and part Immortal Demon, among other things. I earn my living as a knight, serving in the King Dragon Realm’s Blackwyrm Knights under the command of High General Shagall Gargantis. Murder is my area of expertise. I can kill quite literally anyone. Although I follow no specific style, I’ve dabbled in both the North God and the Water God traditions. I am commonly referred to as the Death God, which leads some to take me for a crazed serial killer, but I assure you that nothing could be further from the truth. I’m a gentle soul with a passion for cooking. I do hope we can be friends.”

Having rattled off this little speech without a moment's hesitation, Randolph offered us a half-hearted attempt at a smile before stepping back into his former place. I got the sense that he badly wanted to be somewhere else.

"Quite a character, isn't he? But I'd encourage you not to underestimate him. He's the one who cut down my brother's finest guards in the blink of an eye and secured me the throne."

It sounded like Randolph had basically handled the whole thing all on his own. Not that surprising, given his place on the Great Powers list. Orsted seemed to think he'd lost some of his edge over the years, but that clearly didn't mean he was a pushover.

"How about it, Zanoba? Shall we face him off against that mage of yours and see which one comes out on top?"

…Ah. So that's how they're going to play it?

They had a clear chance for the Death God to kill me right here and now. It struck me as an absurdly simplistic trap, but that meant nothing. The Man-God had never been good at coming up with fancy strategies.

"Surely you jest, Your Majesty. It would hardly be advisable to deprive ourselves of a valuable weapon with war on the horizon…"

I glanced over at Zanoba and realized there were beads of sweat forming on his brow. Was he…actually trying to protect me? It seemed that way.

Pax looked down on his brother with an expression of sincere amusement. He clearly took a lot of pleasure in making people flinch and stammer. It brought back some memories of the time I'd spent as his prisoner on my first visit to Shirone. This was the kind of guy who loved reminding you of the fact he had the upper hand. Once he saw the panic spread across your face, he'd usually back down and insist that he was *only joking*.

But if the Man-God was manipulating him, all bets were off. Finding some way to pit me against Randolph would be his top priority.

I'd braced myself for the possibility in advance, of course. I knew going in that it might come to this. Still, if I *had* to fight the Death God, I wanted to do it in the Magic Armor Version One…and that was currently in storage on the outskirts of the city. I would have to lead off with a smokescreen, not an offensive spell. Then I'd grab Zanoba, flee the castle, and return in my full suit of Magic Armor. That was my best chance to survive.

Just as I reached this conclusion, however, Pax leaned back lazily in his seat.

"Hmph. I was only joking, *obviously*."

Oh. Uh, I guess we're not doing this after all?

A bit surprised, I glanced over at Randolph to find him stifling yet another yawn. From all appearances, he wasn't even paying attention to the conversation. I was starting to wonder if that man might be sleep-deprived or something. He yawned as often as a college kid who wanted *everyone* to know he'd pulled another all-nighter. I'd never seen someone look so profoundly bored before.

"I've heard the rumors about your Rudeus Greyrat myself," said Pax with an indifferent shrug. "Although aided by the Armored Dragon King, he supposedly defeated both the Water God Reida and the three blades of the North God in the Kingdom of Asura. And Randolph here is a precious asset on loan to me from the King Dragon Realm. I'm sure he wouldn't lose the fight, but if I got him badly injured I'd be too ashamed to face His Majesty."

Apparently this was all Pax had to say about me.

He repositioned himself on his throne and fixed a sharp glare on his brother, abruptly changing the subject. "On another note…if I'm not mistaken, brother, you seem to be *quite* wary of me."

"In my defense, Your Majesty," replied Zanoba, "our last parting wasn't on the best of terms."

"Ah, yes. I suppose that's true enough. You may rest assured, however: I'm not interested in picking a fight with you after all these years."

Pax crossed his legs and rested his elbow on one knee, then leaned his cheek against his fist. Hmm. Was he *trying* to look as arrogant as humanly possible, or did it come naturally to him?

“I grant you my forgiveness for your trespasses.”

“My sincerest thanks, Your Majesty,” said Zanoba, bowing his head. “It is far more than I deserve.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Smug was probably the best word for the smile on Pax’s face in that moment. It was the smile of a man who felt utterly confident in his superiority. There was no doubt in his mind that he could crush Zanoba if he wanted to, but he would *generously* decline to do so.

“In fact, Zanoba,” Pax continued, “perhaps I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“Hm?”

“You see, it was that unfortunate incident which provided me with a chance to *change.*”

I really wasn’t sure what kind of change Pax was referring to. In appearance, he was still the same rotund little man as ever. At a glance, at least.

Yet, as I studied him more carefully, I realized he’d actually lost a decent amount of weight. It was hard to tell from a distance, especially with him leaning back on that throne, but his waist and chin were a bit less flabby than before. His neck was thick, but looked more muscular than anything else. It seemed like he’d actually gotten in shape.

…Of course, I gathered he was talking about something a *little* more profound.

“I won’t deny it—when they shipped me off to the King Dragon Realm to serve as a hostage, I wept with anger at the unfairness of it all. For many days, I bitterly cursed your name, and that of Rudeus Greyrat.”

Zanoba swallowed audibly.

“But then, I was changed.”

Pax looked over at the girl sitting at his side. She turned to meet his gaze. There was something in their eyes that almost looked like *trust*.

“I hope you won’t mind if I reminisce out loud for a moment.”

Silence. Without waiting for us to reply, Pax launched immediately into his tale.

“The story begins some time after my arrival in the King Dragon Realm. Largely ignored by my hosts, I grew increasingly sullen and withdrawn. But then, I met a certain girl.”

Not that I minded. There was always a chance he’d start blabbering about his new best friend the Man-God.

“This girl seemed to spend all her time alone in the gardens, doing nothing in particular, with a melancholy expression on her face. No one spoke to her, and she spoke to no one. When I asked her what she was doing, her reply was always *‘Nothing, really.’*”

Over time, Pax developed an interest in this strange, quiet girl. He made a habit of speaking to her in the gardens every single day. The girl wasn’t talkative, but she always replied when Pax spoke to her. She knew almost nothing of the world, and seemed to take great pleasure in hearing him describe it. Her happiness proved infectious, and Pax began to consciously look for topics of conversation that might interest her.

“But then, one day, I happened to overhear a bit of palace gossip. Rumor had it that the shame of Shirone had grown close to the half-wit girl.”

They were thought to be a fitting couple. But there was much concern expressed about the dreadful possibility they might *reproduce*, and fill the palace with children just as worthless as they were. It was a rumor meant to inspire malicious laughter.

“In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to cut the heads of those vicious gossips from their shoulders.”

Back in Shirone, it would have been trivially easy to arrange. Anyone who slandered a member of the royal family, no matter how drunk they might be, would suffer dearly for their mistake. Here, however, Pax could do nothing.

“In the King Dragon Realm, I had no authority. No power.”

It was a moment of bitter, painful frustration. He yearned desperately for some way to take revenge. But the only thing he *could* do was cry bitter tears into his pillow. When the tears stopped coming, he tried to dismiss their words as the opinions of fools—best forgotten entirely.

It didn’t work.

From that day forth, Pax approached his life with newfound diligence and determination. He’d put his self-indulgent ways behind him forever.

“I don’t even know myself why I changed so suddenly, but I suppose I wasn’t a particularly stupid boy to begin with. And I wanted to prove that there was nothing *worthless* about me.”

Dropped into an unfamiliar environment, he met unfamiliar people, experienced unfamiliar feelings…and began to act in unfamiliar ways. Just like that, he’d turned over a new leaf.

I understood exactly what he was talking about, of course. It sounded a lot like my first years in this world.

In any case, Pax began working *very* hard to improve himself. He threw himself into the study of magic, along with his other academic subjects. Apparently, his build limited what he could accomplish with the sword or on the playing fields, but he clearly hadn’t lived a sedentary lifestyle either.

Then, a year and a half before the present, Pax had participated in a grand academic tournament of sorts (which sounded vaguely like a mock exam) and produced results that placed him among the most promising young scholars in the King Dragon Realm.

This achievement caught the eye of the king himself. He was said to have remarked, *“That boy was sent to this kingdom as a hostage in all but name, and he still strives to make a better future for himself. Truly admirable. Such efforts warrant recognition.”*

In other words, he took a liking to Pax on the spot. Summoned to the throne room, Pax was offered his choice of a reward.

“You’ve earned it, my boy. What will it be? Gold? An appointment? If you wish, I’ll even permit you to defect from Shirone and become one of my subjects.”

The king’s suggestions were generous enough. But without a moment’s hesitation, Pax responded, “I would have your Eighteenth Princess.”

His beloved’s name was Benedikte Kingdragon, and she was one among the king’s many daughters. Her mother was a demon of unknown origin. The king had employed her on a whim and impregnated her on another.

Benedikte herself wasn’t even in the line of succession. Though officially granted the title of Eighteenth Princess, no one truly treated her as royalty. Quiet and inexpressive by nature, she’d acquired a reputation as a half-wit. And yet, Pax asked for her hand in marriage.

The king hesitated briefly before accepting his request. *“I might have denied you one of my other daughters, but Benedikte is no great loss. However, she is a royal princess—at least in name. You’ll need to secure your own position first.”*

He proposed that the King Dragon Realm should send Pax back to his homeland of Shirone. Once he had assumed a suitably prestigious office there, Princess Benedikte would be sent to join him as his wife. Shirone could offer up another prince to take his place as a hostage. This way, the marriage could be arranged without appearing irregular.

However, the Kingdom of Shirone politely declined to accept the king’s proposal. Pax had caused no end of trouble back home in his youth. They likely wanted him to stay in the King Dragon Realm

for the rest of his life, and they certainly didn't want to hand over another of their princes in exchange for him.

The king was enraged by this reply. The Kingdom of Shirone was something very close to a vassal state of the King Dragon Realm, and their refusal to obey him *would* be punished. He loaned Pax his realm's strongest weapon, the Death God Randolph Marianne, along with nine other knights who seemed amenable to serving Pax—and sent them off to launch a coup d'état.

By arranging for the slaughter of Shirone's royal family, he had seated Pax on the kingdom's bloodstained throne.

"…And so, it all simply fell into my lap. I have my rank, my prestige, the woman I love, and the finest underling any king could ask for."

As he spoke these words, Pax wrapped one arm around the girl beside him, and glanced meaningfully at the Death God. A blush spread across the girl's expressionless face; Randolph shrugged. Apparently the girl was this Princess Benedikte Pax had spoken of in his story.

Hmm? Hold on a second, though. He rattled off his whole life story for us, and I didn't hear a single word about the Man-God.

Initially, I'd assumed Pax was guided to the throne by a few convenient "prophecies." Maybe I jumped to conclusions on that one. I mean, his sudden transformation into a diligent young man did sound a *little* fishy, but…the single most suspicious character in that story was definitely the king of the King Dragon Realm. He'd popped up out of nowhere to offer Pax a huge reward, then flipped out on an allied kingdom over something that seemed incredibly minor. It would make sense if *he* was acting on the advice of the Man-God.

Then again, it wasn't like it had to be either him or Pax. They could both be disciples for all I knew.

"Do you understand now, Zanoba? At this point, I don't have any reason to resent you."

"I do indeed! A most impressive tale, Your Majesty. I'm overcome with admiration!"

Zanoba bowed his head yet again, seemingly overwhelmed with emotion. As he lifted his face from the ground, he gingerly posed a single question.

“But I do wonder…given that you have the finest of knights at your disposal, why did you feel the need to recall me to Shirone?”

“Hah!” snorted Pax disdainfully. “I should think it would be obvious.”

Did the man have to be so pompous about everything? It was seriously slowing down the conversation. Didn’t help that Zanoba spoke just as formally, mind you…

“To be sure, Randolph could deal with this invasion easily enough. But while he is my underling for now, he is a knight of King Dragon, and in time I must return him to its king. What would His Majesty think, to learn I was incapable of defending my own borders without relying on a borrowed blade?”

Ridiculous as that sounded, he had a point. The only reason he was sitting on this throne was that he’d impressed the king of the King Dragon Realm. If he wanted to stay there, he needed to keep doing that.

“A man like me must prove his usefulness *continually*. Surely you can see that?”

I knew where he was coming from. I was constantly trying to demonstrate my usefulness to Orsted, after all.

“In any case, br—Zanoba, I believe I’ve explained myself sufficiently. You may suspect I called you here to take my revenge, but that simply isn’t true. The situation is exactly as I described it in your summons—my coup has left our armies weakened, and the northerners wish to take advantage. Under such circumstances, I *need* warriors like you. We have put the past behind us; all I would ask now is that you serve me well.”

As he spoke those words, Pax jerked his chin down slightly. The movement could hardly be called a bow, but it seemed like a gesture in that general direction.

I wasn't sure why he'd stopped himself from calling Zanoba *brother,* though. Was it more kingly to pretend you weren't related to your family?

"But of course, Your Majesty," replied Zanoba with a nod. "It was for this very purpose that I was kept alive for all these years."

He hadn't hesitated. His answer came *so* quickly, in fact, that it caused Pax to raise a dubious eyebrow.

"Do you truly mean that, brother?" he asked. "I am a usurper, who took this throne by force. Does that not bother you in the slightest?"

He was blatantly testing Zanoba, but I understood his reasons for doing so. Pax had massacred all of their other siblings. Perhaps he no longer held a grudge against Zanoba, but that didn't mean the feeling was mutual. It would have been perfectly understandable for Zanoba to come here looking for revenge.

Zanoba looked up at Pax and hesitated for a moment, then lowered his head again in silence.

Watching his brother struggle to find an answer to his question, Pax jerked his chin upward to a more imposing angle. "You may speak freely."

This was an important moment. Zanoba's answer would probably determine whether I found myself fighting for my life against the Death God. Randolph looked completely disinterested in everything taking place around him, but he would doubtless spring into action with ferocious speed at a single word from Pax. I would need to blind him, slow him down, and blast through the castle walls to make our escape route.

As I braced myself for the worst, Zanoba opened his mouth to speak at long last.

"Whoever holds the throne of Shirone, and however they might rule—the fact remains that my life's purpose is to protect this kingdom from her enemies."

For a moment, there was silence in the throne room. Zanoba hadn't answered Pax's questions directly. But his implied message was clear enough: he would obey the new king's orders, and make no moves against him.

Pax frowned slightly, perhaps uncertain what to make of this. Was Zanoba an ally or an enemy in the making?

He ultimately seemed to give up on trying to decide. "Hmph," he muttered. "Well, it's all the same in the end."

And then, in a voice far louder and more confident, he issued his commands.

"Zanoba Shirone, I order you to organize the defense of Fort Karon. Your troops have already been deployed there. Take up your post as their commander, and hold back the invaders from the north."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

After drawing himself up to his full height, Zanoba bowed deeply one last time, and our audience came to an end. I followed my friend out of the throne room, feeling like a man who'd just dodged a bullet.

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After our conversation with the king, the two of us were shown to our room for the night. Zanoba's own bedroom no longer existed, so we'd be staying in a guest room on the second floor of the palace. A guard, presumably another knight from the King Dragon Realm, was posted outside the door. Supposedly, this was for our protection, but he was clearly there to keep an eye on us. Pax had his lurking suspicions about Zanoba.

Zanoba and I would be departing for Fort Karon in the north first thing the next morning. I wanted to explain the situation to Roxy, but we were under surveillance at the moment. Sneaking out to see

her could be risky. There'd be time enough to fill her in once we met up on the road.

I followed Zanoba into the room, deciding I'd try my best to relax for now. Despite Zanoba's royal status, he was sharing a single room with me tonight. I guessed Pax thought it would be easier to monitor our movements if he kept us in one place. We sank down onto the room's facing sofas and took a moment to catch our breath.

"Well, that was something of a surprise. Pax seems to be a worthy king."

It was Zanoba who eventually broke the silence. His tone of voice was the same as ever, and there was actually a hint of happiness on his face.

"You think?"

"Understanding that the Kingdom of Shirone should be protected by its people, he asked me for my help despite our personal differences. A most admirable attitude, wouldn't you agree?"

Well, sure, when you put it that way. He'd more *demanded* help rather than asked nicely, in my opinion, but maybe that wasn't worth getting into.

"I know you were quite concerned about his intentions, Master Rudeus, but people do change. And they do make mistakes."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Pax's methods may be violent, and his tactics sometimes incorrect. But I believe he's doing the very best he can for the kingdom."

I couldn't deny Zanoba's thoughts altogether. Pax really had changed for the better, at least to some degree. He was at least *trying* to move things in the right direction. But his intentions weren't the only thing I had to worry about. Or even the most important thing.

"Okay, but what if he's being manipulated by someone?" I said, trying to keep my tone light. "Like, I don't know…an evil god."

Zanoba responded with surprising seriousness. “Hrm. You refer to your own sworn enemy, I presume?”

“Huh? Did I tell you about this?”

“I was at the table when you discussed it with Sir Cliff.”

Oh, right… Zanoba *was* present for that conversation, wasn’t he? But as I remembered it, he didn’t believe anything I was saying…

“At the time, I rather thought that you had made the whole thing up,” Zanoba continued. “However, once I witnessed Orsted’s curse weakening under the effect of Sir Cliff’s magical implement, I realized the truth in what you said—that you and he were allied against a most malicious foe.”

Well, this was news to me. But if he’d figured out that much, it couldn’t hurt to tell him the rest. He was already mixed up in this, after all.

“All right. I guess I should tell you the whole story, then.”

“My thanks, Master Rudeus.”

I proceeded to give Zanoba a more detailed summary of my history with the Man-God.

After covering all our past encounters, I explained my concerns about the current situation. I made it clear there was a chance that Pax was currently under the Man-God’s direct control.

“Hrm… I see. However, Pax never so much as mentioned this Man-God in his tale. Perhaps there’s no connection whatsoever?”

“This god manipulated me for years, Zanoba. He’s slippery. There’s no telling what strings he might be pulling behind the scenes.”

Even if Pax wasn’t a disciple himself, someone close to him might be—like the Death God or Benedikte, for starters. At the moment, I was most suspicious about the king of the King Dragon Realm. Since the Man-God could control up to three disciples at once, however, it felt safe to assume he’d position at least one of them in Shirone itself.

“Ah, yes. He deceived you into doing battle with Orsted, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“And now, you’re concerned that he might deceive Pax into coming for *your* life.” Zanoba cupped his chin in one hand thoughtfully, then continued in a murmur. “I suppose I’ll have to protect him, in that case.”

Uhm…pardon?

“Sorry, does that mean you’re going to fight for *him* if it comes to that? Against me?”

“What? No, no,” said Zanoba with a laugh. “I could never raise my hand against you, Master Rudeus. You’re hardly a threat to Pax in any case—you were instructed to spare his life, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but you said…”

“I meant I would protect him *from the Man-God*, naturally.”

Phew. Okay, that makes more sense. He’d startled me there for a minute. The last thing I wanted to think about was Zanoba changing sides on me at the last moment. That would really leave me out of options…

All that aside, it felt pretty odd to hear him talk about “protecting” his brother. “You know, Zanoba, I didn’t think you actually *cared* what happened to Pax.”

For a moment, Zanoba looked at me in blank surprise. Then he propped his chin back on his hand and pondered my remark.

“I suppose I didn’t, up until today. After all, I hadn’t even seen the man for many years.” Zanoba furrowed his brow thoughtfully, humming under his breath. “But now that I think about it, this may be the first time he’s ever turned to me for help like that!”

All of a sudden, Zanoba’s frown gave way to a cheerful smile. Weird. He had to know that Pax was only using him, right? He’d never been the kind of guy to take pride in his dependability before. Well, maybe some of his determination to protect Shirone was carrying over to its king. They were relatively similar goals, after all.

In any case… I was having a lot of trouble guessing what the Man-God's plan was this time. It wasn't clear who any of his disciples were, and there was no sign of anyone trying to kill me at the moment. It felt like I was missing something—overlooking some crucial piece of the puzzle.

It was always possible that this "trap" was a mere figment of Orsted's imagination. I couldn't afford to be too optimistic about that possibility, though. Most likely, there *was* a trap here, and I simply hadn't yet discovered it.

The list of possible dangers was basically infinite, so I knew it wouldn't be productive to spend my time considering them one by one. Regardless, I couldn't help feeling uneasy.

Convincing Zanoba to come back home was clearly going to be a challenge, too. Pax wasn't threatening him in any way at the moment, or at least, there'd been no sudden assassination attempts. If he asked Zanoba to stay here permanently in some key military position, it was hard to imagine that Zanoba would refuse.

Frankly, unless Pax tried to have him killed, my chances of convincing him to leave seemed dim at best. So long as his life wasn't in danger, he'd essentially moved back home to take a job, you know? A boss like Pax was likely to demand a lot of mandatory overtime…but at the end of the day, Zanoba had the right to choose his own employer as he pleased.

Still, there was a good chance Pax would change his attitude eventually and try to dispose of Zanoba. At the moment I had no evidence he was planning anything, but that didn't rule out the possibility. It wouldn't do much good to have my suspicions confirmed *after* my friend was murdered. I needed to find some sign of Pax's real intentions in advance.

On top of that, even if Pax had no interest in harming Zanoba right now, he could change his mind at any moment. And right now, I had nothing solid to go off either way. Somehow, I had to search for evidence that might not even exist.

God, I think I might go bald from stress…

Resigned to the fact I wouldn’t reach any useful conclusions on my own, I resolved to ask Roxy for her thoughts tomorrow.

Chapter 5:
Fort Karon

THE MORNING AFTER our audience with the king, I headed back to our inn to pick up Roxy, while Zanoba stayed at the palace to make the preparations for our journey.

I found Roxy waiting in her room, fully equipped and ready for action. From the looks of things, she must have been awake all night, but when I walked in the door, she jumped to her feet and ran over to me.

“Is everything all right? I was a little worried not to hear from you…”

“Yeah, it actually went fine.”

Roxy hadn’t eaten breakfast, so we headed down to the first floor of the inn for a quick meal. I described our audience with King Pax as we ate. I had three main takeaways: it was unlikely that Pax was a disciple, the Man-God’s plans were still unclear, and the king of the King Dragon Realm was a potential enemy. Nevertheless, I made sure to describe every detail that had caught my attention.

Roxy sipped her soup as I rambled on, listening in silence. When I asked for her thoughts, she frowned thoughtfully. “Hmm. To be honest, Rudy, I’m a bit sleep-deprived at the moment…”

“Ah. Right, sorry.”

There were bags under Roxy’s eyes, and she moved sluggishly. A single all-nighter wouldn’t usually leave her this exhausted, but she’d been braced for battle the whole time and on the road the entire day before. A combination like that was enough to wear out even an experienced adventurer.

“Well, let’s see. There was no battle, Prince Pax seemed rational, and the Man-God’s name never came up… Hmm. That

really isn't much to go off, is it? I'm not sure I have any firm conclusions either."

That wasn't too surprising. Clever as Roxy was, we didn't have all the information we needed right now.

"It's a shame we were so worried about an ambush," she murmured thoughtfully. "I should have come along as well."

"Uhm, why?" *Was my summary too vague or something?*

"I might have picked up on something from the tone of Prince Pax's voice, or perhaps his body language."

She had a point there. I'd spent most of our audience with the king worrying about the Death God and the possibility we were all in mortal danger. The conversation kept going off in directions I hadn't expected and leaving me totally disoriented. Maybe we'd needed another pair of eyes in that room. Someone with her own unique perspective. Someone like Roxy.

There wasn't much we could do about it now, of course.

"…I wish we had *some* idea where the Man-God is planning to set his trap."

"Hmm," murmured Roxy. "Maybe Orsted read too much into things? It's possible the Man-God isn't behind any of this, you know."

"Maybe so, but let's plan for the worst. The safety of our whole family might be on the line here."

The memory of Lara's screaming fit disturbed me, even now. The Man-God might not be involved, but some other kind of danger could be waiting for us here.

"You're right. My apologies, that comment wasn't very helpful." Roxy ducked her head slightly, then paused with a thoughtful expression on her face. "Either way, attacking you the moment we showed up in Shirone would hardly qualify as a *trap*. Assuming there is one, it'll probably be a bit less obvious."

"Okay…but do you have any idea what that might look like?"

“One possibility does come to mind, given some information that Ginger shared with me earlier this morning.”

“Oh?”

Ginger was nowhere to be seen right now, but she’d apparently been hard at work behind the scenes.

“At present, it seems that only five hundred soldiers are stationed at Fort Karon.”

“Hmm…”

In isolation, that number didn’t mean much to me. Was that a large garrison, or a small one? Probably on the smaller side, given how she’d said it was *only* that much.

“From the looks of things,” Roxy continued, “they will be facing an army of five thousand.”

Whoa. What? We’re outnumbered ten to one? Those don’t sound like reasonable odds.

“Did Prince Pax mention any of this yesterday?” asked Roxy.

“…Nope.”

He hadn’t said a peep that I’d heard, anyway. All I remembered was him giving us our marching orders.

“Now, I’m only repeating what Ginger told me…but it seems Prince Pax has deployed this token force to Fort Karon to *delay* the enemy’s advance. This will buy him time to gather an army of mercenaries behind the front lines at Fort Rikon, which he can then lead into the field. Did he mention this strategy in your audience?”

“No.”

This was the first I’d heard about any of this. So they were planning to *let* Fort Karon fall? For all his talk of welcoming Zanoba back, Pax was basically sending him off to die. Zanoba would contribute to the war effort by keeping the enemy occupied for a while, until they inevitably killed him. In the meantime, Pax would be gathering his own strength for a heavy counterstrike. Assuming he viewed Zanoba as a threat, he’d be killing two birds with one stone.

“This could also be the Man-God’s trap for you,” Roxy continued.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never been to war myself, but I’ve read a historical account describing a single Saint-tier mage holding back a thousand men in battle.”

I’d have to look that up sometime. The idea of someone fighting off a thousand soldiers sounded absurd at first, but given the wide-range effects of saintly magic, it wasn’t that implausible…

“I’m a King-tier mage, and you’re on the Emperor level,” Roxy said. “With the two of us defending Fort Karon, we should be able to resist the enemy for quite some time.”

Hmm. Well, I couldn’t see us wiping out an army of five thousand all at once. I mean, if they all came charging at us across an open field in a glut, a few well-placed spells might do the trick. But this army would do plenty of intelligence-gathering before they made a move, and I had a feeling that news of our arrival at the fort would disseminate quickly. The enemy wouldn’t be stupid enough to attack our fort head-on, in other words.

Then again—with a force of that size, they’d probably have a decent number of mages themselves. If they combined all their efforts, it was possible they could ward off a Saint-tier spell or two. I could always cast another one immediately, though, so that approach might not work out too well for them.

“Unfortunately, our supply of mana isn’t infinite, and we’ll both grow fatigued in time.”

I couldn’t picture myself running out of mana in this scenario, but yeah—I’d get worn out if I had to fight for days on end. They might try launching raids at night, too, so we’d have to be on alert at all times. My mana wouldn’t do me much good if I was too exhausted to use it.

“Once we’re both worn out, Pax could send the Death God after us,” Roxy continued. “I don’t think we’d stand a chance in that

condition. What do you think? Sounds more like a proper trap, doesn't it?"

"Ooh. Yeah, for sure."

"Additionally…"

Pausing for dramatic effect, Roxy jabbed her spoon out like a finger. At some point, she'd switched over into *Professor Roxy* mode. "The Man-God can possess *three* disciples at any given time, correct?"

"That's right."

"Now, the king of the King Dragon Realm basically forced Pax onto his throne, so it's safe to assume he's one of them. But consider this—how could the Man-God be sure that a rival kingdom would immediately invade Shirone? Where would you place your second disciple, in his shoes?"

Oh…of course. The rival kingdom!

Shirone was basically a vassal state of the King Dragon Realm. That meant invading it carried real risks, so there would have been significant opposition to the plan. The disciple would be there to crush that opposition, ensuring the invasion went forward. Odds were high it was some member of their royal family, or maybe an influential general.

"So they march at Fort Karon on the Man-God's orders, wear us down for a while, then wait for Randolph to come finish the job… Yeah, I guess that would make sense."

Hearing Roxy's speculations helped me pull my thoughts together somewhat. We'd identified two likely disciples of the Man-God: the king of the King Dragon Realm, and some powerful general in the country that was invading Shirone. That only left the third.

During the events in Asura, the Man-God chose Luke for his proximity to me. Based on that, Zanoba seemed like the most likely third candidate. Judging from our conversation yesterday, though, it was hard to imagine he had the Man-God whispering in his ear.

Maybe it was Ginger, then? Or the Death God? That would be more consistent with his choice of Reida back in Asura. It could even be that quiet princess seated at Pax's side.

On the other hand, the Man-God hadn't employed all three of his disciples at once since our clash in Asura. Maybe his final pawn was somewhere else entirely, preparing for an unrelated scheme.

There were plenty of reasonable possibilities, so I couldn't draw firm conclusions about the identity of disciple number three yet. But at least we'd more or less pinned down the other two. That was more than I could have managed on my own. Good thing I had such a clever wife to help me out.

"Okay, Roxy, let's say you're right—Fort Karon *is* where they want to kill us. What should we do about it?"

"Good question," said Roxy slowly. "I suppose we'd want to avoid doing what they expect."

"Right. I guess the best option would be not to go there in the first place…"

Unfortunately, Zanoba had every intention of marching up there to do his duty, and there was no chance that we could talk him out of it. He'd go alone if necessary. Still, the fact that Pax had sent Zanoba off to lead a hopelessly outnumbered garrison should prove useful in my attempts to change his mind. Maybe Pax didn't hate Zanoba enough to try and murder him, but he clearly wouldn't *mind* seeing Zanoba die. He was trying to use his own brother as a sacrificial pawn.

I knew that wouldn't be enough to convince Zanoba, even so. He felt he had some sacred obligation to protect this kingdom. With Shirone's enemies massing on the border, turning tail and running away was the last thing on his mind.

Hmm… Wait a minute. Does that mean he might reconsider if we manage to take out that army of five thousand?

Pax would be gathering a large force of his own while we held the line at Fort Karon. In other words, if we managed to repel the

enemy's attack completely, Shirone would no longer be in any real danger. In a sense, Zanoba's duty would be done.

"…I think we have to go to Fort Karon, Roxy. It's our only chance to save Zanoba."

"Very well then."

"Too bad we're probably walking right into a trap."

Roxy nodded with a grimace. It wasn't clear what we could do about that possibility. I'd have to bring the Magic Armor Version One along at the very least. Maybe I could find a way to smash through our problems with brute force; that would certainly be easiest.

"Well, we have some time to think it over before we get there. Let's consider our options carefully."

"Yes, Miss Roxy!"

As we wrapped up our discussion, a carriage pulled up to the inn, and Zanoba stepped out from within it.

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Zanoba didn't even flinch when I told him how small his garrison would be. In fact, he nodded while smiling and said, "Ah, yes. That sounds about right."

His nonchalant attitude struck me as bizarre. Did he even understand the concept of *being massively outnumbered?* Did I need to explain?

"Okay, Zanoba. Listen carefully, because I have some words of wisdom to share. *'If you outnumber the opponent ten to one, surround them; five to one, attack; two to one, divide. If equally matched, you can offer battle; if slightly outnumbered, you can avoid the enemy; and if greatly outnumbered, you must flee. Thus, obstinacy in a smaller force guarantees its capture.'* You got all that? Basically, it means war is all about the numbers. The guy with the bigger army always has the upper hand."

Our forces would be holed up in a fort, yes. But even then, holding out against an army ten times larger than ours would be *very* difficult.

When I finished up my slightly roundabout explanation of these facts, Zanoba stared at me with a puzzled expression on his face. “Master Rudeus, I’m well aware that a large army will generally defeat a smaller one.”

“Great. Okay. Why do you look so damn cheerful, then? We’re going to be outnumbered *ten to one* at that fort.”

“What? Don’t be absurd! It won’t be nearly as bad as that.”

…Did this guy have a problem with basic math or something? I was starting to have some serious doubts about the Kingdom of Shirone’s educational system.

“Were you not listening to me, Zanoba? We have five hundred soldiers at Fort Karon, and the enemy is going to send five thousand. Five hundred times ten is five thousand. With me so far?”

“Hrm. Are you attempting to test me, Master Rudeus?” said Zanoba with a condescending smirk.

Grrr. Don’t you smirk at me like that! I’m not the one who needs to learn his multiplication tables!

“Very well. Allow me to elaborate.” Zanoba drew a deep breath, and then launched into an entire diatribe.

“Your figures fail to account for the presence of yourself and Miss Roxy. A Saint-tier magician can be worth a thousand soldiers in the field, when they are properly utilized. By that reckoning, we have the strength of twenty-five hundred men at minimum. But given that you are both King-tier or higher, it might be fairer to say we have the equivalent of three thousand men—or more. The usual rule of thumb is that a besieging force should outnumber the defenders of a fort by three to one, but Fort Karon occupies a particularly strong defensive position, so they will require an even greater numerical advantage. Finally, there’s the matter of your enormous mana capacity, and my status as a Blessed Child. All in all, one might well argue that *we* possess the stronger force.”

I found myself at a loss for words. I hadn't expected anything like that. Not from him. "V-very impressive, Zanoba. Where did you learn all that?"

"I received an extensive education in military matters as a child. They planned to make me a general of Shirone, you see."

Zanoba was kept alive for the sole purpose of defending this kingdom, but that didn't mean they'd planned to carelessly toss him into battle. Which made sense. Even if his main role was simply to thrash around causing chaos, you'd want him to have some degree of tactical knowledge and situational awareness. I guess I'd underestimated the educational standards of Shirone's royal family.

"I understand this will be your first real war, Master Rudeus, but fear not. I have a fair bit of battlefield experience from the days of my youth. With you and Miss Roxy at my disposal, I should be quite capable of holding this fort indefinitely."

He sure sounded confident. Was it really going to be that easy, though? Somehow, I doubted it. Our best option was still avoiding this fort entirely.

Hmm. Might as well try to persuade him, right?

"Okay, Zanoba…but Pax assigned you to Fort Karon without even knowing about Roxy, right?"

"Yes, I suppose that's true."

"And I don't think he knows I have an unusually large supply of mana, either."

"What are you getting at, Master Rudeus?"

I was building up to that, but apparently Zanoba wasn't in a patient mood. Time to cut to the chase, then. "It seems to me like Pax is sending you out there to die."

Zanoba stared at me with the expression of a man who'd been pinched. Not that your average pinch would do much of anything to him. You know what I mean.

"Maybe Pax doesn't want revenge on you anymore. But I don't think he cares one bit if you get killed, either."

"…I suppose you may be right, yes." Scratching at his cheek with one finger, Zanoba waited for me to continue.

"Do you *really* need to obey the orders of a king like that?"

Zanoba smiled in amusement at my question. The words "*Oh, is that all?"* were practically written on his face. "In war, sacrifices are often necessary. It is the common soldiers who are usually offered up first, but at times, even the lives of princes must be used as a tactical resource."

"Look, Pax made this mess, and now he wants *you* to die so he can wriggle out of it," I said. "He murdered the rest of your family, Zanoba—I don't see why you have any obligation to fight for him."

"As you're always telling me, Master Rudeus: it doesn't matter who caused the problem. The only thing that matters is who can fix it."

Zanoba's gaze drifted to the window as he spoke. On the street outside, ordinary townsfolk came and went, mingling with the mercenaries. They were going about their ordinary daily lives for now, but there was a visible hint of tension and fear in the way they held themselves.

When we left Sharia, Zanoba made it clear that he saw fighting the enemies of his kingdom as his purpose in life. To him, it simply didn't matter that Pax was the king of Shirone, much less what Pax thought of him. Nothing I said could possibly change his mind right now.

"All right, you win. Sorry for badgering you like that."

"No need for apologies," said Zanoba. "I understand that you only spoke out of concern for my safety."

"Since you feel so strongly about it, let's defend Fort Karon together. I'm a total amateur at war, so I'll do whatever you tell me out there. Order me around to your heart's content."

The last thing I wanted was Zanoba heading off for the front lines alone. I tried to make it clear that I was ready to cooperate, despite my misgivings.

“My thanks, Master Rudeus! Your company alone will be worth a hundred men.”

“Thought it was more like a thousand?”

All right then…

At least our first objective was clear enough. We’d defend Fort Karon from the enemy’s attempts to seize it. Pax would be gathering his own army while we held them off, so there was a chance the invasion would collapse completely if we succeeded.

Over time, the Kingdom of Shirone would grow stronger and more stable. Once he saw that the danger had passed, Zanoba might be more willing to consider returning to Sharia. I could convince him that Pax and his allies in the King Dragon Realm had things well under control here.

We decided that only Zanoba, Roxy, and I would head for the fort. Ginger would stay behind in the royal capital. She looked a bit conflicted when she learned that Zanoba was departing for the front lines, but ultimately decided she’d be more useful continuing her investigations in Latakia. It seemed there were still a few things she wanted to look into here.

Before we parted, she told me in no uncertain terms that it was my job to keep the prince safe and sound.

Our departure wasn’t exactly ceremonious. Despite Zanoba’s status as a royal prince, it was just the three of us inside the carriage; we had no guards, no send-off at the gates, and no troops marching behind us. The coachman sitting out in front was apparently a soldier, but he didn’t seem too friendly.

I got the feeling I’d been right—Pax was sending Zanoba off to die. I couldn’t help feeling angry. Zanoba had risked everything to rush back here and defend his homeland. He’d kneeled obediently at Pax’s feet and sworn to fight with all his strength. He didn’t deserve this kind of treatment.

There was no point dwelling on it, though.

We arranged to have the Magic Armor Version One transported to Fort Karon in parts, under the pretense that they were parts of Zanoba's figurine collection. Odds were, it would arrive a few days after we did. Shipping services in this world tended to be a lot less consistent and reliable than the ones back in Japan, sadly.

I had to admit that I was concerned. Something might well happen between our arrival and the Magic Armor's delivery. The thought worried me so much that I'd briefly considered putting it on and taking it to the fort myself, but then I remembered my battle with Orsted. The thing drained so much mana from me in that one fight that I almost died. I wanted to preserve as much of my mana as possible, so that I could use the Magic Armor when I really needed it.

No major roads lead to Fort Karon. Most of our journey was spent bumping along narrow dirt trails through long stretches of farmland. We passed some small villages on the way, but nothing you could really call a town. Some nights we even had to sleep out in the open.

I spent most of my time on the first stretch of the trip speculating about the Man-God's plans. But at some point, it suddenly sunk in that we were heading off to *war*. The thought instantly made me queasy with anxiety.

War. Even just repeating the word in my mind made my muscles tense up. I'd grown fairly used to killing in the years since my arrival in this world, but the concept of war frightened me in a way I found difficult to describe. It wasn't the thought of us killing our enemies, or them killing us, that scared me so much—it was war as a whole, as a phenomenon. I guess I'd always felt this way, but the fear felt a hundred times more real now that I was heading into battle.

Could we even win this fight? Zanoba's arguments had convinced me that we wouldn't be completely outmatched, but the fact remained that this would be my first time on the battlefield.

"Look over there, Master Rudeus! It's a band of adventurers, if I'm not mistaken. I wonder what they're doing out here in the middle

of nowhere with all that gear?”

In contrast to my growing anxiety, Zanoba seemed to be enjoying himself greatly. Any time he spotted something along the road, he would loudly point it out to me with a big grin on his face. The man was so damn chipper, you would think we were on our way to an amusement park or something.

“It looks like a party on their way to explore a labyrinth. There are quite a few in this region, but not all of them are located near a town. Parties with a serious interest in reaching the bottom floors will often head out to the more remote, less crowded options.”

Roxy seemed perfectly calm as well. She wasn’t as cheerful as Zanoba, but her demeanor was the same as ever. This would also be her first experience with war, but that didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest.

“Aha!” said Zanoba with a grin. “I should have known you’d have the answer ready for us, Miss Roxy.”

“Well, I spent some time poking around the labyrinths here myself, you know?”

So I was the only one all hung up on our situation. I didn’t understand how the two of them could be so relaxed. Was I missing something? Was there some reason that we *shouldn’t* be worried?

Oh, wait. Maybe they figured I could handle anything that came at us. I couldn’t exactly let them realize how terrified I was right now, in that case…

“Come to think of it, I recall you earned your appointment as court magician by completing several labyrinths single-handedly.”

“That’s right. Goodness, it feels like ages ago…”

“They say it’s no small feat to challenge a labyrinth without any companions. Perhaps such boldness is expected from the master of my master, but tell me—why risk life and limb in such a manner?”

“Huh? Uhm, well… you might say I was looking for something, I guess. It was all quite childish, honestly…”

“I see. Did you find what you were searching for?”

“Not back then. Later, yes…but it was more like it found *me*, really.”

As she spoke, Roxy shot a few bashful glances in my direction from beneath the wide brim of her hat.

Oh, right. She said she was looking for romance in those labyrinths, didn’t she?

“Ah, now I see,” said Zanoba with a nod. “So the rumors of a blue-haired master mage hunting for a husband in our labyrinths were true.”

“I was being vague for a reason, thank you very much!” cried Roxy. “Do you have any idea how embarrassing it feels to remember this?”

“Surely there’s no cause for you to blush. Why, it seems Master Rudeus here was pining for you from afar for many years, even before he enrolled at the University.”

“Was he really? I thought he only had eyes for Sylphie back then.”

“Oh, far from it. I only learned this some time later, but throughout his years of travel, it seems he carried something of y—”

And now the two of them were reminiscing about the good old days for some reason. Under normal circumstances here’s where I might have felt a twitch of jealousy, but right now I couldn’t even muster the energy to keep listening.

“Goodness, really? He carried those around for all that… Uhm, Rudy? Is something the matter?”

All of a sudden, Roxy leaned over to study my face up close. I had an impulse to lean forward and kiss her, but decided against it.

“Not really,” I said. “I was just thinking about how cheerful Zanoba seems, considering we’re heading off to war.”

“Hahaha! Well, I *am* a typical young man in some respects, Master Rudeus. The mere thought of battlefields and deadly duels is enough to make my heart pound!”

God, my stomach hurts.

After nine days on the road, we arrived at Fort Karon. It turned out to be a more impressive structure than I'd imagined.

My first impression wasn't great. From a distance, it looked like a typical small stone castle with an unremarkable design. After a moment, though, I realized it was *considerably* well positioned.

For one thing, it stood nestled in the fork of two rivers, just like that famous castle Toyotomi Hideyoshi built in a single night.

For another, the area beyond those rivers was covered in dark, thick forest. It would be simple enough to enter the Kingdom of Shirone by traveling through those woods, but leading an army through a place like that was a very risky proposition. Forests here were infested with monsters, after all. As your forces struggled along, any nearby enemy could march around to meet you on the far side, pincering you between their forces and the monsters. This point was a strategic stronghold for that reason.

As we drew closer to the fort, it seemed to grow progressively more solid and intimidating. I spotted the watchtowers and catapults positioned along its ramparts. I'd expected something smaller after hearing that it only held five hundred men, but this was definitely a proper fortress.

On the other hand, the soldiers manning it all bore gloomy expressions. Morale was clearly an issue at the moment. They must have learned how badly they were outnumbered.

"Master Rudeus, Miss Roxy—this way, please."

We stayed a few steps behind Zanoba and made our way through the fort to the chambers of its commanding officer. We found him in what looked to be a war room, studying a large map on a table with a number of his captains.

"Who are you supposed to be?"

"I am Zanoba Shirone, Third Prince of Shirone."

The officers had been sizing up Zanoba dubiously at first, but at the sound of his title, they all fell to their knees.

“I am Garrick Babriti of the Shirone Royal Knights, Your Highness—Commander of the Fort Karon Garrison.”

“My thanks for your efforts to this point, Sir Garrick. The king sent word of my coming, I presume?”

“Yes, Your Highness! A message arrived several days ago.”

“Good. No need for further explanations, then. As of tomorrow, I will assume formal command of this Fort. Is that understood?”

“…Yes, Your Highness!”

I could sense that Garrick was none too pleased about this development. Losing his command was one thing, but handing it to some pompous prince was another. He probably took real pride in the fact that he’d defended this fort up until now.

I feel like we should throw the guy a bone here, right? We don’t want our own troops holding any grudges…

“However, it’s been some time since my last foray into battle. I would prefer to play the role of something like an adjutant, leaving the actual command of our forces in your hands. Do you accept?”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Oh, okay. I guess Zanoba was way ahead of me. Sounds like a good call to me. Might as well leave the commanding to the veterans, right?

“In that case, Sir Garrick, let us get to work at once. I wish to bolster our troops’ morale. Would you gather the entire garrison for me?”

“At once, Your Highness!”

Zanoba’s first official order set the fort into a flurry of activity.

About one hour later, some four hundred and fifty armored troops stood in neat rows before a platform set up outside the fort. Of the remaining fifty, ten were in position at the lookout towers,

watching for the enemy. The rest of them were largely out on scouting duty or securing provisions.

The troops lined up before us were muscular and imposing, with the rugged faces of seasoned warriors. The boldness in their eyes caught me by surprise; this was a much more impressive group than I'd expected. I'd thought of five hundred men as a tiny army, but it hardly seemed that way when you had them standing right in front of you. It *felt* like we had all the troops we needed.

Although, the enemy forces were ten times greater, so…

"Hey, get a load of him."

"Who the hell *is* that?"

"Uh…looks like some kind of prince, maybe?"

As Zanoba stepped onto the platform in front of them, the troops studied him with openly dubious expressions. Morale was low across the board. Some of the troops were even whispering to each other, despite standing face to face with royalty.

"I am Zanoba Shirone, Third Prince of the Kingdom of Shirone."

"Welcome, Prince Zanoba!" called out the commander, straightening his back respectfully. "We are honored to have the opportunity to fight alongside you!"

Obvious lip service. You could tell the man wasn't especially happy about Zanoba's presence here. The words *"Want to tell us what you're doing here?"* were all but written on his face.

"My thanks." With a lordly nod, Zanoba scanned the rows of troops before him. He looked relatively imposing, thanks to his bulky suit of armor and the massive club I'd made for him.

"Now then! Your report on our current situation, Commander Babriti?"

"Sir! At present, contact with the enemy has been limited to small-scale skirmishes. However, interrogation of our prisoners has confirmed that they will soon launch a major offensive."

“I see,” said Zanoba with another nod. “It seems we have no time to waste, then.”

The commander was starting to look a little worried at this point; I assumed he couldn’t tell how well Zanoba understood the situation.

And then, with no warning whatsoever, Zanoba drew himself up to his full height and raised his voice to a bellow.

“First of all, troops—allow me to introduce our reinforcements!”

As those words rang through the air, the faces of the soldiers brightened the slightest bit.

Nice to see everyone’s morale rising! Uh…what reinforcements, though? Pax sure as hell didn’t send any.

Before I could make any sense of his announcement, Zanoba looked back and signaled to me and Roxy with his eyes. A little startled, the two of us stepped up onto the stage behind him.

“Hey, isn’t that…”

“I’ve seen that face before…”

“But I thought…”

A murmur ran through the troops. Many of them seemed to be looking specifically in Roxy’s direction.

Well, there weren’t too many women to be found in forts like this. Maybe they were licking their chops at the sight of her? Roxy *was* adorable, and beautiful, and a divine embodiment of all goodness, so I could certainly understand such a reaction. But it seemed to me that some female soldiers in the crowd were also staring at her as intently as the male ones. And it was the older-looking individuals who seemed the most captivated…people in their thirties or their forties.

“Our numbers are few, our enemies legion! Their offensive will come soon! Perhaps it seems that all is lost, and our position hopeless. But fear not—for I bring you formidable reinforcements from the Magic City of Sharia!”

Zanoba looked back at us again and winked. Yeah, okay. Apparently, we *were* the reinforcements. Which made sense, if Roxy and I were supposed to be worth a thousand troops apiece. If we ever launched a wrestling career, we'd have to call our tag team the Terrible Two Thousand.

"Hello, everyone," said Roxy, taking off her hat.

The murmuring in the audience immediately grew louder.

"I knew it! That's the one who used to be a court mage…"

"Didn't she reach the *King* tier?"

"She developed all the theory behind our drills, right?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Zanoba launched into a more detailed introduction. "This woman is Roxy Migurdia, a former court magician of our own kingdom. I imagine many of you recognize her name, as it was she who essentially created our current anti-magic training program. She is accompanied by her star disciple, Rudeus Greyrat. Both have reached the King tier in their art!"

Sounds of surprise and admiration rippled through the crowd.

A bit belatedly, I realized what was going on here. Roxy had been a prominent figure in Shirone for some time, as a mage employed directly by the royal family. Some of the older soldiers must have recognized her from back then.

That said, I wasn't too pleased about the way Zanoba had called her Roxy Migurdia. She was Roxy M. *Greyrat* these days, thank you very much. Okay, he'd probably just used the name they would recognize, but still!

"Troops, I'm sure you've heard it said that a Saint-tier mage is worth a thousand men in battle. Now consider the value of a *King* of magic! Perhaps some of you have never heard the tale—but in the Laplace War of old, a single King-tier mage once pushed back an army of *ten thousand!*"

Zanoba paused, savoring the startled silence of his audience.

I'd never heard about this "tale" myself, and it sounded like a load of crap, frankly. The figure of ten thousand *had* to be an

exaggeration, right? More than a few of the soldiers seemed to be buying it, though—I noticed a hint of awe in the way they looked at us.

"In addition to these two mighty mages, I offer you my strength as well. Perhaps some of you are familiar with the Blessed Child known as the Head-Ripping Prince? I am he, and I shall lead you from the vanguard!"

The soldiers' eyes lit up at the words *Blessed Child* and the mention of Zanoba's nickname. On my first visit to Shirone, people had spoken the words *Head-Ripping Prince* with revulsion in their voices. In the context of a war, that same moniker sounded almost reassuring.

"I promise you this, and this alone: *You shall have victory!*"

Zanoba balled his outstretched hand into a fist as his voice rang out across the crowd. And his soldiers answered in kind. Punching their own fists in the air, they roared their approval in unison.

It seemed fair to say morale had improved somewhat. I had to admit, the man had a talent for getting people fired up. Strange as it might sound, maybe Zanoba had the makings of a leader.

Then again—the troops had a nice solid fort to hole up in, and two powerful mages to defend it. Charging out to crush the enemy might not work out too well, but defending their position should be simple. You could understand why Zanoba seemed so confident, and why so many soldiers were looking at Roxy as they cheered.

Looking out at all those upraised fists, I felt my own anxiety lessening somewhat.

Thanks, guys. I'll do what I can, all right?

Chapter 6:
Preparations for War

THE NEXT DAY, I went out on a date with Zanoba. Our destination was an open plain just to the north of Fort Karon, which also happened to be the most likely site for the coming battle.

Zanoba had delivered his invitation by barging into my room first thing in the morning and announcing, “There’s somewhere I’d like to take you.” Since he evidently wanted the details of his plans to be a surprise, I tagged along without asking any questions—only to end up here.

To be fair, my heart *was* racing at the moment, just not in a pleasant way. This area was contested territory. There was no telling when we might encounter some enemy detachment.

“Hey, are you sure it’s a good idea for us to be out here?”

“Hm? Why so jumpy, Master Rudeus?”

“We might run into the enemy at any moment, right? Aren’t they sitting right on our doorstep?”

“Strange words, coming from a fearless warrior who challenged the Dragon God himself! We can simply annihilate any force we happen to encounter.”

I’m sorry, did you just call me a fearless warrior? I think that’s literally the last thing I would call myself. Perhaps you have me confused with my lovely wife, Eris? Though…I do have the Magic Armor Version Two on underneath this robe. I guess getting ambushed by some random grunts wouldn’t be too much of a problem…

“In any case,” Zanoba continued, “I highly doubt we’ll stumble on their scouts here, close enough to be visible from Fort Karon.”

“Uh, don’t you have that backwards? I feel like they’d *have* to get in close enough to see the fort, if they want to bring back any

useful information."

"A reasonable argument, but according to Garrick, the enemy already knows our exact numbers. One or two men may be monitoring our movements from the shadows, but surely not an entire scouting party."

Hmm. Well, all right then. If you say so. Can't say I'm too happy that they know how small the garrison is, though…

"Good to hear, Zanoba. I guess. But would you mind telling me what we're doing out here in the first place? You gonna get down on one knee and confess your love for me?"

"Haha! I'm terribly fond of you, Master Rudeus, but I can't say I have any romantic interest in men. Ah, but I understand such tastes are quite common among the nobles of Asura, aren't they?"

"Uh, maybe…but my family seems to turn out nothing but womanizers."

The Notos clan had a history of producing sons who loved extremely busty women in particular. Although I suppose that wasn't the rarest of fetishes in general. Now, don't get me wrong—I was an exception to this rule! I enjoyed breasts in all their shapes and sizes…just like half the other men in this world.

"That aside, allow me to explain. We believe this area is where the enemy's forces will array themselves when they launch their attack in earnest."

"Oh, yeah?"

I surveyed our surroundings again. It didn't take long, because there wasn't much to see.

A rolling field spread before us, dotted with patches of tall wild grass and sizable boulders. There were dips and hills in the terrain, but overall, it sloped downward as you moved away from Fort Karon. From our current position, we had to look up at the fort from below. Plus, the nearby river flowed from south to north, so you'd have to fight the current to make any progress on the water. They really had placed that fort in the perfect spot.

“How do we know they’re going to position themselves right here?”

“Because this area is just close enough for the archers’ volleys to reach us.”

“Hmm…”

The fort looked pretty far away from here, but I had to take Zanoba’s word for it. It sounded like those archers had impressive range. Of course, our guys would be shooting down at them from the ramparts of the fort, so we’d still have the advantage there no matter what.

“Accordingly, I would like to alter the terrain here to make it impossible for them to properly array their troops.”

“Ah, okay. Now I get it.”

If I made the terrain out here difficult to traverse, the enemy would be forced to deploy their forces a little further from the fort. That would leave them in an awkward spot where *our* archers could still hit them, but *their* archers couldn’t fire back. And if I could make it difficult for them to move forward through this area, it would be much easier to pick them off from above as they advanced.

All in all, it was a smart preemptive move.

“Well then, Master Rudeus—have at it, if you please.”

“Sure thing. What kind of terrain can I get you today?”

“A mountain would be lovely. Or perhaps a valley.”

“Okay, one valley coming up…”

In the end, I spent most of the day out in that field, thoroughly reshaping its terrain. I started by opening a number of yawning trenches in the ground—each about ten meters deep, five meters long, and twenty meters wide. Then I covered some of them with a thin ‘lid’ of soil, turning them into simple pitfall traps. The trenches were too huge to be easily filled, and I’d placed them fairly close together. If the enemy was planning on hitting us with catapults or something, they’d have a hell of a time rolling them into range. Oh, and the walls were far too steep to climb, naturally. They had little

hope of clambering inside them to use as defensive positions or anything.

While I was at it, I whipped up a stone wall, enclosing the natural rivers that already surrounded Fort Karon, and created an extra moat on the outside for more layered protection. This would make it tough for the enemy to see what we were up to from a distance. Even if they managed to push past my pitfalls, they'd have a slightly harder time getting at the fort itself.

"Phew. Okay, I think that's an improvement."

"My thanks, Master Rudeus. Your work is as superb as ever."

It took a solid day of work to get everything completed, but I had been very thorough. It sure as hell wasn't going to be easy for anyone to march an army through *this* field.

"Maybe we can relax a little now, huh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Zanoba calmly. "I'd imagine *you* could destroy our fort from the far side of these traps, couldn't you?"

"True enough." I could see the fort from here. That meant it was well inside my effective range.

"Then," he said, "it seems prudent to assume that other mages could attack us from that range as well."

True, I didn't actually know what kind of range your average magician had on their spells, but any higher-ranked mage could manage it for sure. And it was possible the Man-God had arranged to send some King- or Saint-tier mage our way.

"Alternatively, our opponent might put their mages to work filling in your traps," Zanoba suggested.

Most of my work today had consisted of constructing those pitfall trenches. For a bunch of holes in the ground, they were effective obstacles. But they were also…nothing but a bunch of holes in the ground. They might be dealt with almost instantly if the other army happened to have an earth mage in their ranks.

"In either scenario," Zanoba continued, "I believe the first phase of the battle will require you and Miss Roxy to counter or

disrupt the enemy's spells."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense."

We *did* have two excellent mages on our own side, didn't we? If the enemy tried to mess with my landscaping efforts, the two of us could just counter their spells from a distance.

"I hope to elaborate further at a later date," said Zanoba, "but essentially, the traps you laid today form one part of our larger plan."

When the enemy saw my traps, they would array their forces on the other side and try to find some way to advance. Basically, they could either use mages to alter the terrain or try to push through with a massive human wave. In the former case, I'd counter their spells; in the latter, our archers would pick them off from the fort.

It seemed like a solid strategy. I couldn't imagine the enemy would overwhelm us easily, at least.

I was starting to feel *almost* confident about our chances here.

The next three days or so passed uneventfully.

The Magic Armor Version One had been delivered to the fort, and I took the time to piece it together. It was fundamentally designed for close-range combat, though, so I probably wouldn't equip it unless the enemy made it to the fort's walls. I didn't want to burn through all my mana stomping around in it, given that I might have to fight one of the Seven Great Powers right after this.

After all that, I spent most of my time reinforcing the fort under Zanoba's direction. Mostly, this just involved sealing holes and strengthening the walls. None of these were jobs that required a lot of mana, so I was happy to help out.

While I was patching things up, Roxy gave magic lessons to the troops—not only the combat mages, but the ordinary foot soldiers as well. Even if they just managed to learn a basic spell or two, it might save their life in a pinch.

Perhaps because of her reputation as a former court magician, Roxy seemed to be pretty popular with the garrison in general. The

troops treated her with obvious respect. On the other hand, I felt like people were starting to avoid me. Not like they were hostile or anything; they were more intimidated. I guess they'd been a bit spooked by the way I'd totally transformed the terrain in a single day. Every time I strolled around the fort, soldiers would jump out of my way like startled rabbits. When I asked someone a question, they'd answer politely; but it was really rare for anyone to speak to me first.

It was kind of depressing, honestly. Especially since Zanoba and Roxy already seemed to have earned their trust. Maybe they just had better social skills than me? There was always the aggressively talkative approach, but I wasn't sure if it would help this time…

Well, I hadn't come here to make friends or anything, so it wasn't the end of the world. Just kind of a downer.

It wasn't all bad here, anyway. The people weren't too friendly, but the food was delicious. That was actually a side effect of Pax's close ties with the King Dragon Realm. Although they hadn't sent him an army of reinforcements, they provided material support for Shirone's war effort. For the most part, it came in the form of food supplies. Sanakia rice was the staple of the King Dragon Realm diet. You could find it in Shirone as well, but in this fort it was the main component of our meals. Its flavor was a bit different from the "Aisha rice" we were developing back in Sharia. To put it bluntly, it wasn't quite as good. Aisha had been experimenting to improve our home-grown variety according to my tastes, after all.

Still, rice was rice, and I got to eat it every single day. I was half-tempted to enlist as a soldier of Shirone, if this was how they fed them.

Too bad that would mean having Pax for a boss.

Anyway…on the fourth day, we got word from our forward scouts that the enemy army had deployed from their own fort.

The enemy would be coming for us soon. Their fort was about a five-day march from ours. I wasn't sure how quickly our scouts

could make that journey, but I had to guess they also hadn't made it back here in a single day.

We had three days at most, then. Maybe two.

The fort launched into a frenzy of activity. Zanoba and Garrick hurriedly reorganized the troops, while Roxy began inscribing a magic circle on the ramparts of the fort. The soldiers were sharpening their weapons, tending to their armor, and double-checking their exact number of arrows. Some were even writing last-minute wills.

Awkwardly enough, I found myself with nothing much to do. It sure *felt* like I should be doing something, but I'd already finished my assignments in the previous days. For lack of any better ideas, I ended up helping out Roxy with her work.

She explained that we were making the magic circle for the Saint-level spell Flashover. Roxy had never officially mastered this spell herself. She wasn't good with fire magic, and couldn't have controlled it effectively. She *had*, however, memorized the design for its magic circle. Instead of using this thing herself, she planned to have a group of the garrison's combat mages do so by pumping all their mana into it. Roxy would stick to her specialty: Saint-level water spells.

Generally speaking, fire magic didn't get much use when you were fighting monsters. The spells were powerful, but in a labyrinth you ran the risk of suffocating yourself, and spewing flames everywhere was dangerous for the people around you. Most adventurers stuck to other elements.

When you were fighting other people, however, it was extremely effective. Normal human beings tended not to survive a ball of fire to the face.

During the battle, I would be right next to Roxy on the ramparts, blasting spells down at the enemy. We had a detailed plan for the engagement, and my job was pretty simple for the most part.

There was one thing that concerned me, though.

Was I actually capable of doing this?

Killing people was never something that came easily to me. Throughout my new life in this world, it was something I always hesitated to do. Not like I had some principled moral stance against violence. I had plenty of blood on my hands by now. And if I felt a twinge of guilt when I told my children *killing is wrong*, well, I could live with that. The only thing that nagged at my conscience sometimes was the fact I'd told Ruijerd not to kill anyone, many years ago.

Up till now, though, High Minister Darius of Asura was the only person I'd deliberately murdered in cold blood. And, well…I guess you could add Auber to that list too. I wasn't the one who finished him off, but I played a major part in his death.

That experience left me nauseated, but I knew that both of them had to die. This time around, however, I would be killing people who'd basically done nothing wrong. There was no clear reason that I *needed* to murder any of them. I was doing this for Zanoba's sake, sure. But that was a choice that I was making, not something I'd been forced into. It was my choice to rain down spells from a distance on a crowd of soldiers who were just following orders. This wasn't going to be like how it was with Auber. I wouldn't even see their faces.

Could I do it? Yes, I could.

Was I going to do it? Yes, I was.

But once it was all over, I wasn't sure how I might react. I doubted I could keep myself from puking on the spot. Would I be in any shape to fight the Death God, if he came for us then?

"What's the matter, Rudy?"

Roxy was looking at me curiously. There was a little blotch of ink on her cheek.

She seemed weirdly nonchalant about this whole business compared to me. She'd spent most of her life as an adventurer, so this was probably her first experience with war too. And now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure she'd even killed someone before. I couldn't remember ever discussing it with her.

“Well, Roxy…uhm…I was wondering…”

This wasn’t an easy thing to ask. How were you even supposed to phrase this? *Hey, you ever killed someone?* Sounded like the kind of question that would get you reported to the cops back in Japan.

“Ohhh…I see. Goodness, what am I going to *do* with you? Well, there’s a room in the fort that seems to be unoccupied, so let’s head there.”

“Huh?”

“Men tend to vent their passions rather vigorously on the eve of battle, from what I understand. I’d like to be capable of standing up tomorrow, but I’d prefer that you turn to me instead of—”

“Uh, wait, no. Sorry, that’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Oh. Really?”

Come on, sex isn’t literally *the only thing I think about. Hmm. Though…is it just me, or does Roxy look a little disappointed? I mean, if she’s up for it, I’d be happy to oblige…*

No, no. Priorities, please! Ask the damn question already!

“Roxy, have you…ever killed someone before?”

“Yes, I have.”

Her response came instantly. It startled me, to put it plainly. Roxy had killed someone? My Roxy? The woman who’d already made friends with half the fort?

“There’s nothing unusual about that, really,” she continued. “I was an adventurer for many years, remember?”

“Uhm…how did it happen?”

“Let’s see… I think the first time was in my early years as an adventurer on the Demon Continent. Someone thought I was a child and tried to take advantage of me. We got into a fight, and it turned violent quickly…”

Ah. Maybe she’d hit them with a stronger spell than she intended?

“Were there any others?”

“A few, yes, while I was traveling on my own… I had to fight off kidnappers quite a few times back in those days, actually. Given my size, I suppose they took me for an easy target. I soon disabused them of that notion.”

Yeah. None of this was really that surprising. We lived in a violent world. Some people didn’t have the option of keeping their hands nice and clean.

“You seem really calm about this situation…but you’ve never been in a war before, right?”

“That’s right. However, I’ve come very close to death on multiple occasions,” said Roxy crisply. “We should be at a safe distance from the enemy this time, and we have the option of fleeing if the battle turns against us. I’m not overly concerned.”

“Wait, you want to run away if we start losing?”

“If things seem hopeless, certainly. I’ll carry you away from here if I have to. The whole reason I came along was to protect you, remember?”

With her brush still in her hand, Roxy flexed for me like a bodybuilder. Her forearm looked more squishy than stout, but the gesture was oddly reassuring.

“Rudy, are you afraid of killing people?”

“Yeah. It scares me.”

“Why is that?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

Roxy nodded thoughtfully and wiped the sweat off her brow with her sleeve. Ink smudged on her forehead. Maybe she’d dripped some on her robe when she did that silly pose.

“Well, you’ve always been a bit timid, I suppose. I still remember how terrified you were to get on a horse for the first time…”

Yeah. Fifteen years ago, I was too scared to even leave my house, wasn't I? Man, that really takes me back…

"What is it about your fear that you don't understand? Try to describe it for me in detail, please."

Sounds like I'm dealing with Instructor Roxy now. Haven't seen her in a while.

"When I try to kill someone, I sort of…stop myself at the last moment."

"I see. And why do you think that might be?"

I mean, if I knew the reason why, we wouldn't be having this conversation… But I guess I shouldn't give up just because nothing comes to mind immediately. Think, Rudeus. When did you start having trouble killing people, and why?

"When I traveled across the Demon Continent as a child, I started consciously modifying my magic to make it less lethal," I said slowly. "I was trying really hard not to kill anyone by accident."

It was starting to come back to me now. I originally reduced the power of my Stone Cannon to help Eris gain more combat experience against the monsters we encountered. But I later took up tinkering with my spells even further, trying to make them non-lethal against humans. Dead End, our party with Ruijerd, had a strict policy when it came to murder.

"My party back then had this…rule about not killing people. And I was the leader, so I felt like I had to set a good example. I kept that up for so long that I guess it just…became second nature to me."

Basically, I'd given myself a fear of killing. When you're strictly forbidden from doing something as a child, the very thought of it can become terrifying. Often, you'll carry that trauma with you into your adult years. The details were a little different in my case, but the principle was the same.

"I see," said Roxy, brushing her bangs out of her eyes in a gesture that left a smudge of ink on her nose. "And how do you feel

about that habit now, Rudy? Do you want to lose this tendency to hold back?"

"…No. That idea scares me even more."

In this world I was a person with incredible power. Enough power to kill most people with just a flick of my fingers. I was capable of killing everyone who annoyed or inconvenienced me, and then killing anyone who tried to punish me for doing so. Without this reflex, I could easily turn into that callous, vicious murderer who'd visited me from the future.

That wasn't the kind of person I wanted to be. It just…wasn't.

"Then I don't think you have a problem," said Roxy with a smile.

I don't? Really? I feel like this is gonna keep causing me some major headaches, though…

"Now, I *could* argue that you're not responsible for the deaths you cause in this battle, since you're only acting on Prince Zanoba's orders. But I get the sense that would only upset you."

In the context of a war, soldiers were sanctioned to commit murder by their country. All responsibility lay with their army, and the nation that controlled it. In that sense, the killing I committed on this battlefield wouldn't really count as *murder.* Pax was the one responsible for my actions.

But of course, that was little but a convenient excuse.

"If you can't bring yourself to cast any spells when the enemy arrives, I'll fight in your place. You can stand by and carry me to safety if I run out of mana."

"…Sounds like a better plan than you carrying me, at least."

"Exactly!" With a big smile, Roxy reached out for a new pot of ink…and grimaced as she spotted a patch of wet black liquid on her sleeve. "Uhm, Rudy? Is there ink on my face?"

"Oh, yeah. I think your forehead might start casting spells at any moment."

Roxy pulled a handkerchief out of her robe and rubbed it vigorously over her face. Fortunately, it didn't spit out any fireballs, although her skin had turned rather red.

"Ugh. Where is it?"

"Your cheek, your forehead, and the tip of your nose."

"…Wipe it off for me. If I'm seen like this, my marriage prospects will be *ruined*."

"You know, I could have sworn you were already married…"

I took Roxy's handkerchief from her and dampened it with water magic. She closed her eyes and leaned in close. I wiped off her forehead, and then wiped off her nose, and then kissed her on the cheek.

Roxy held her breath. She had opened her eyes at some point and was staring into mine. Her face was still a vivid shade of red.

"I-I'll be done with this magic circle soon, all right?" she stammered. "We can, uhm…continue this later."

"Sounds good to me."

Well, now I have something to look forward to.

After that, I sat around waiting for Roxy to finish her work like a dog impatient for his walk. Then we headed to a private room to vent off some passion.

I still wasn't sure if I'd be of any use in this war. But I had Roxy with me, so I knew I'd be all right either way.

***

The next day, we received word that the enemy army was approaching.

The soldiers rushed to their positions, their faces tight with tension, and I hurried to my own place on the ramparts.

Roxy and I had a simple job: to fling spells at the enemy from above, under the command of the combat mage squad captain. Until the army came into range, we'd basically be twiddling our thumbs.

I had the Magic Armor Version Two under my robes. The Version One was leaning against a wall in the rear of the fort, just in case I needed it. I could reach it quickly enough by hopping down from above.

Up till this point, it seemed like the Man-God hadn't made a single move against us. Would his first strike come immediately after this battle? Maybe during it, right as things got chaotic? There could well be a disciple in that army, or even lurking somewhere in this fort. And Pax or Randolph might hit us from behind at any moment.

As I struggled to control a growing sense of anxiety, I noticed something moving out of the corner of my eye.

"Hm?"

It was a group of armored soldiers. They were crossing the river to the *back* of Fort Karon, in the opposite direction from the enemy, and heading for the woods.

There looked to be maybe a hundred of them. Surely they weren't deserting…?

"Uh, Captain? Do you know what's going on there?"

"Yes, sir!" replied the mage squad captain, a man named Billy. He followed my gaze and nodded at the sight of the soldiers. "That's the unit Prince Zanoba put together the other day. They will defeat any units that try slipping through the forest, and look for an opportunity to launch a surprise attack on the main enemy force. The prince hopes to sever their chain of command at the head."

"What?!" *I'm sorry, what?!* "I didn't hear a word about any of this!"

"Uh, yes, sir… The Prince expressed some concern that the fort would be left too lightly defended if you accompanied him."

"Okay, but he could have told me about this plan!" I insisted.

“It was his belief that you would insist on coming with him, prompting Miss Roxy to insist on coming with you,” he said, by way of explanation.

Look, I got that Zanoba was trying to be thoughtful, in his way. And it was hard to argue with his logic. If he’d told me about this crazy plan to head out with a tiny force, I probably would have decided it *had* to be the Man-God’s trap. And if I’d insisted on coming, Roxy probably would have too. You could use magic effectively from anywhere on a battlefield, but it would be hard for us to cast the right spells at the right time if we were trudging through a forest.

I understood his reasoning, okay? I really did.

But what was the point of *any* of this if that moron got himself killed out there? Did he even remember what I was doing here? I’d come all the way out here to fight in someone else’s war because I wanted to protect Zanoba. He could at least have said *something* to me beforehand, right?

God, what if we hit him with some spell accidentally? What if the enemy found out our *commander* was wandering around in the woods with only a hundred soldiers?

Maybe there was still time for me to jump down there and—

“There!”

But no. Before I could take action one way or another, a sudden murmur ran across the ramparts, and the fort’s alarm bell began clanging a warning. Everyone had their eyes fixed on the same spot: a cloud of dust to the north, obscuring the horizon.

The enemy had arrived.

Chapter 7:
The Battle

OKAY, SO… Zanoba had wandered off to god-knows-where. He wanted to find and kill the enemy's commander. Which didn't make any sense to me. Not one damn bit of sense. But I couldn't leave my post at this point. I didn't like the idea of throwing spells onto a battlefield where Zanoba could be hiding anywhere…but from the sound of things, he'd at least worked out his plan with the commander and the captains. I had to trust he wasn't careless enough to blunder right into our line of fire.

He'd thought this through, right? *Right?*

I mean, he'd brought a hundred troops with him. They must have planned out this operation as a part of the overall battle strategy. The best thing I could do for him right now was to play my own part well.

"…Hooo."

Calm down, Rudeus. Zanoba's not an idiot. He's doing this for a reason. You just focus on doing your job, and everything will work out fine.

"Hooo…haaa…"

All right. First of all, let's get a look at the enemy.

In the time it had taken for me to clear my head, the opposing army had marched into view and arrayed themselves in formation beyond my field of traps. They were barely far enough away that our archers couldn't reach them yet. Naturally, they couldn't hit us with theirs, either. The battle wouldn't begin in earnest until the majority of them had pushed their way into the zone I'd filled with pitfalls.

"Yep, sure are a lot of 'em…"

"Hmm. Only looks like three thousand or so to me."

"There's a whole bunch more waiting in line behind."

The soldiers on the ramparts were busy guessing at the exact size of the force in front of us. Hmm, weren't you supposed to count the number of enemy flags or something?

"Rudy, we need a counterspell!"

"Huh?"

Startled by the urgency in Roxy's voice, I looked out across the battlefield. Something like a tornado was taking shape near the middle of the enemy's formation.

"They're going to fill in all the traps at once with earth magic!"

Ah, right. That's the Saint-level spell Sandstorm, isn't it?

They sure hadn't wasted any time coming for my traps. They'd probably learned about them in advance from scouts or spies, and worked out a plan to neutralize them with a single massive spell.

Needless to say, we'd been anticipating this possibility ourselves.

"All right. I'm going to counter that with Violent Storm."

With those words, I held out both hands toward the steadily growing funnel of dust and earth.



I'd chosen to respond with a Saint-level wind spell. Despite its rank, its effects weren't particularly fancy. But they *were* very powerful. A number of Saint-level spells, such as Cumulonimbus and Sandstorm, were combined magic that used wind plus some other element. Violent Storm, on the other hand, was a *pure* burst of wind. While it cost the same amount of mana as something like Sandstorm, all of that power was devoted to a single purpose.

In practice, that meant it was capable of totally erasing the more complex phenomena created by water or earth spells. It was also devastatingly effective against flying monsters of all kinds, for the record. But other spells were better choices if your enemies were on the ground; the wind would lose some of its force at longer range as it pushed past trees and other obstacles.

There was a theory that pure wind magic had been developed as a way to counter other elemental spells, just like how this one would work on the battlefield. That was only a theory, though, and I wasn't sure I believed it.

While Violent Storm might lose *some* power as it traveled, it was strong enough to rip out massive trees by the roots if you used sufficient mana. And again—that fall-off in power only happened when it moved across the ground. In the air, it wasn't an issue at all. This spell could easily have been designed to bring down flying dragons.

Hmm. I had a feeling dragons used a bit of wind magic themselves, though. I mean, how else would they keep those massive bodies airborne, right?

On another note, some claimed that the overuse of spells like this could make you bald. The theory was that all those sharp gusts of wind would eventually start to rip out hairs by the roots. Sounded plausible to me, given that the toupee-toting principal of our university was a King-tier wind mage.

Okay, okay. I'm nice and calm now. Niiice and calm!

By the time I finished running through all that trivia in my mind, my heart rate had returned to normal and my spell had blown apart

the enemy's dust tornado. The soldiers around us broke out in a spontaneous cheer.

I hadn't dealt any meaningful damage to the army itself, though. They were still pretty far from us, but you'd expect a blast strong enough to break up a Saint-tier spell to have a major effect on the ground, too. Was it because I'd aimed it so directly at the tornado? Or maybe the mana from our spells had interacted somehow?

Well, it didn't matter that much either way. Now we could focus on—

"Rudy, they're trying it again!"

"Huh? Really?"

That seemed kind of pointless. I could just counter their spell again, right?

Oh, wait…they don't know about my mana capacity.

Most mages would run dry in no time if they kept casting Saint-level magic. And since the enemy outnumbered us ten to one, they probably had ten times as many mages, too. They probably thought they could sit there firing off the exact same spell from a magic circle until we ran out of juice.

Huh. Wouldn't that mean there's no disciple of the Man-God over there?

Anyone working for the Man-God would know about me. Surely they wouldn't let the mages waste their time and mana like this, right?

…No, I couldn't jump to conclusions. The Man-God might be giving them advice, but that didn't mean their commander would always listen.

"For now, I'm gonna keep countering their spells until they give up. Does that sound like a plan?"

"Uh, yes, of course. Are you…all right on mana?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

The captain seemed a bit awestruck at this point. Or maybe terrified.

Well, my mana capacity was probably the single most reliable thing about me. If these people wanted to make me fire off ten Saint-tier spells, I could handle it, no problem.

In the end, the enemy mages cast their Sandstorm spell another five times, but I countered every single one of them in the exact same way. It was a shame I couldn't use Disturb Magic to save myself some mana. That wasn't an option at such long range.

After their sixth failed attempt, the enemy forces seemed to put a pause to their attacks. They might have run out of mages capable of using Saint-tier spells. It was also possible that their magic circle had faded away, or they'd realized they were getting nowhere with this strategy.

"Do you think they'll try a charge?" I asked, looking over at the mage squad captain.

"Hard to say," he replied, frowning at the distant enemy lines.

I didn't think I'd risk sending all those troops charging onto a field full of pitfalls, if I were their commander. The best option would be to withdraw, right? If you realize early on that you've misjudged your enemy, why not retreat to gather more information? Seemed like it would be the smart move to me.

"Ah…looks like they're going for it."

There was movement in the enemy lines once again. They were rippling *slowly* forward—almost like they were dragging something heavy along behind them.

Well, I guess that figures.

The commanders of that army had probably hashed out all sorts of tactical options and contingency plans before they showed up on our doorstep. They'd expended valuable food and resources to come this far—and they had their troops' morale to consider, too. They probably *couldn't* back off after one failed exchange of spells.

I mean…for all they knew, at this point our mages could be running on empty too. Maybe they were hoping that would allow them to cross the pitfall zone without taking too many casualties.

“Archers, ready!”

At a bellowed command from their captain, our line of archers stepped forward. They nocked their arrows and pulled back their bows, aiming at the lines of soldiers picking their way through the pitfall zone.

“Fire!”

The first volley of arrows zipped into the air.

It was a modest barrage; we only had fifty or so archers up here, and there were at *least* a few thousand enemy soldiers moving toward us. Any effect would obviously be minimal.

The enemy commander seemed to have reached the same conclusion. A few moments later, we heard the sound of trumpets from below, and the enemy’s advance immediately grew more rapid. I saw soldiers tumbling into my traps here and there. Others, however, were laying crude bridges across the trenches, and yet more made their way safely around them. They were making steady progress forward.

From the looks of things, they’d interpreted our volley of arrows as a sign that we didn’t have any mages still capable of casting offensive spells. Which was a miscalculation, of course.

“Combat mages, ready!”

The soldier-mages readied their staves in response to their captain’s command.

The squad numbered twenty. Eight of them stepped forward to the edge of the rampart. Another eight stood by behind them. The last four positioned themselves in front of Roxy’s magic circle.

“Don’t get jumpy! Hold until we’ve drawn them further in!”

The mages tightened their grips on their staves. Roxy followed suit, closing her eyes to concentrate. Not wanting to be left out, I balled my hands into fists and stared intently down at the enemy.

The majority of their troops were now inside the pitfall zone.

“Incantations! Now!”

At the captain’s order, the eight mages in the front line began the chant for a fire spell in perfect unison. As their incantation reached its halfway point, the eight behind them began to chant as well.

“—Fireball!”

Eight balls of flame flew from the staves of the mages out in front. Arcing down onto the battlefield, they hit the enemy line right at its center, leaving a handful of charred bodies behind.

The front line immediately stepped back and began to chant all over again.

“—Fireball!”

A few moments later, the second line of mages had fired off their own volley. By staggering their incantations, they effectively cut the time between their attacks in half.

The Fireballs kept flying steadily. But as the second volley began, they were answered by a huge flurry of Waterballs from the enemy. While they couldn’t reach us at the top of the fort, they *were* smacking into the Fireballs and reducing them to steam.

It was a counterspell, in other words. Apparently, they hadn’t wasted all of their mages’ mana on our earlier exchanges.

Well, yeah. Obviously they wouldn’t.

“There, Miss Roxy. Do you see that scorpion flag on the right wing?”

“Yes. I see it.”

With a nod to the mage squad captain, Roxy turned to look my way.

That scorpion flag was right around where the barrage of Waterballs was coming from. The enemy mages were concentrated in that area. In other words, if we blew everything in that area to

smithereens, we wouldn't have any more counterspells to worry about.

"Let's get started, Rudy… Uhm, or would you rather observe?"

"No. I'm with you."

"All right then."

With a small smile, Roxy turned away and began her incantation. I took one deep breath, then began to channel mana into my hands.

A moment later, I killed a lot of people.

***

After that, the battle devolved into one-sided slaughter.

Wiping out the vast majority of their mages rendered them defenseless against our spells. Most of those who died were burnt to ashes by the Saint-level fire spell unleashed by our combat mages. But then, as their charge gave way to a rout, the survivors found it all but impossible to retreat across the field of traps behind them. Some units seemed to have lost their commanders; their movements grew panicked and disorganized. And then Roxy and I hit them with more Saint-level magic.

It felt like we'd stepped on an anthill. Soldiers ran in all directions, terrified and disoriented. Gusts of wind blew them into pitfalls, and bolts of lightning fried them where they stood. They died by the dozens.

I could finally understand that famous line from *Castle in the Sky*. From this distance, people looked exactly like so many scraps of stray garbage.

Still, not all of them panicked in the face of death. Some made it past the pitfall zone, escaping our spells' area of effect. A few of these were mages who managed to get close enough to launch

spells at us. We countered almost all of their attacks, but a few still landed, and we suffered casualties.

Some of the encroaching enemies were archers, who dropped their bows and drew their swords as they approached. The rest were foot soldiers. Together, they pushed their way to the fort's walls, where a force of three hundred well-rested defenders waited for them. Meanwhile, we rained magic upon them like a hail of stones.

In the end, only a bare handful survived. Some had lost their will to fight; others struggled fiercely. Some were taken as captives, and others killed, but I couldn't tell you why.

In comparison, I could count our losses on my fingers. We beat back the enemy so soundly that the words *historic victory* came to mind.

When it was all over, Commander Babriti let out a roar that seemed to shake the fort to its foundations. The mages and archers on the ramparts answered him in kind, their eyes shining with elation.

I shouted right along with them, although I wasn't sure if I felt the same kind of joy they did. It didn't feel *real* that I'd killed so many people, or that we'd won the battle. Still, the people around me more than made up for my lack of excitement. Soldiers who'd treated me with wariness and stiff formality ran over to thump me on the back. Some threw their arms around my shoulders, and others hugged me. One of those was a young female archer. She looked up at me and said something like "*We did it! You saved us! Thank you so much!"* with tears in her eyes. At that point, a surge of pride and happiness washed over me at last.

Finally, Roxy threw herself into my arms and kissed me on the lips. That wasn't the sort of thing Roxy *ever* did in public, so she must have been as fired up as the others. We received a mixture of cheers and good-natured whistling from the soldiers as we embraced.

I was happy in that moment. Truly happy.

To be clear, it wasn't solely because a charming woman had thrown herself at me. There was some group psychology at work too. The sheer delirium around me had overwhelmed my brain completely. Not a bad feeling, you know? Kept me from thinking about all the people I'd just murdered with a snap of my fingers. At the end of the day, we'd won the battle with virtually no casualties. That was something worth celebrating. No reason to think too hard about the ugly details, right? When I looked back on this day, all I had to think was: *Hey, that wasn't too bad for my first time. Guess it wasn't such a big deal after all.*

Maybe that was how you had to live in a world like this. I didn't *have* to keep judging everything that happened here by the moral standards I'd picked up in my first life. I didn't *have* to drag some old arbitrary rule around forever like a ball and chain. I could kill when I needed to, and hold back when I didn't. One battle wasn't going to turn me into a bloodthirsty maniac. I had more self-control than that.

"Prince Zanoba has returned!"

The cry of a messenger from below startled me out of my thoughts. Once the battle had begun in earnest, I'd *completely* forgotten about Zanoba and his unit.

I rushed down into the fort, taking the stairs as quickly as I could. But I froze in astonishment when I reached the bottom.

A crowd of soldiers had formed around a group of roughly ten people who seemed to have dropped in from another planet. Their bodies were covered in twigs and leaves, their faces were smeared with dirt and soot, and their hair was slick with blood and sweat. One of them, an imposing man clad in a bulky suit of armor, called out cheerfully at the sight of me: "Greetings, Master Rudeus!"

Wait, who are you supposed to be?

No, seriously. I honestly didn't recognize him at first.

His hair was crusty with dried blood, his armor was covered with gashes that weren't there that morning, and his glasses were smudged where he'd wiped…some sort of red liquid off them.

"Zanoba?"

Yeah, that's definitely Zanoba. He looks like someone else entirely, but it has to be him. Oh. I guess I should, uh…chew him out for disappearing on us without a word of warning.

"What the—"

As I approached Zanoba, the crowd of soldiers parted in front of me, and I lost my train of thought in mid-sentence.

Someone lay on his knees at Zanoba's feet. He was covered in mud himself, but he was also wrapped inside a net. I recognized that net. It was the magic item I'd given Zanoba right before we left.

"Thanks to your splendid efforts, our surprise attack went off perfectly. Behold—we have captured the enemy's commander!"

"Uhm… Wow…"

I glanced around and realized that the soldiers around us were cheering the filthy band of ten. They no longer looked at Zanoba with wariness or uncertainty; their eyes shone with admiration.

Wait. Ten? Why are there so few of them? I was fairly positive I'd seen about a hundred leaving the fort earlier. "Uh, where are the others?"

"Lying on the battlefield," replied Zanoba. "They died bravely, every one of them."

Oh. Right. I guess that's what happens when you attack an army that big with only a hundred soldiers.

Though… I'm not sure I understand. We didn't need this sneak attack to win that battle, right? We were winning anyway. I can't be the only one who's picking up on that. Am I missing something here?

"S-so, uh…this guy's…worth the loss of ninety soldiers, right?"

"Unquestionably. He is a member of the Bista royal family. With him as our hostage, it should be simple to negotiate a conclusion to

this war."

Ohhh. Okay… Yeah, I get it now. If he's that *valuable, I guess Zanoba made the right call.*

Beating back one enemy advance didn't mean you'd won the war. But Zanoba's raid turned our tactical victory into a huge strategic one. From that angle, maybe the lives of ninety soldiers were a small price to pay.

Wait, no. Why was I falling for this line of thought? We'd knocked the hell out of that army. They must have lost a thousand troops, maybe even two or three. If they'd had someone with a functional brain in charge, they would have quit trying to invade.

Or maybe I was overestimating our victory a little. Maybe all the troops we saw only amounted to a few thousand. And the majority of the enemy force had retreated. If they really did have more soldiers waiting in the rear, maybe we'd only taken out something like five hundred?

"Ah, what a joy to have succeeded," said Zanoba, beaming at me cheerfully. "I could hardly have asked you and Miss Roxy to sit around this fort indefinitely, after all!"

Okay, yeah. I think I get it now.

The enemy might not have given up after a single disastrous battle. Who knew how rational their commander was, anyway? We might have given them a bloody nose today, but they still had the numerical advantage. If their next attack came when Roxy and I weren't around, Fort Karon might well fall. And the two of us didn't have the option of staying in Shirone for years. By capturing an enemy prince and negotiating some sort of a truce, we could end the war in one decisive stroke, before any of that became a problem.

Still, couldn't we have found some other way? Maybe I could have blasted one of *their* forts to pieces, or something?

…Nah. It would be stupid to entrust a job like that to a guy who spent the last few days whimpering about killing people…

“I must say, everything went off according to plan. You and Miss Roxy offered us a superb diversion with your magic! And this enchanted throw net? What a splendid tool! I’d been hoping it might enable me to capture an enemy commander from the start, but it worked even better than I’d imagined.”

Zanoba had cut into the ranks of the enemy as the wind and rain raged, taking advantage of the general confusion to capture their leader. The risks had been horrific. He had gambled with his life. But he came away a winner. He turned the chaos Roxy and I created into an opportunity, pushed himself to the very limit, and made our victory count.

“You know, Master Rudeus—I’ve seen Saint-tier spells at a distance before, but they’re something else *entirely* when you charge right into one!”

“Oh…yeah, I’d imagine so…”

A nasty shiver ran down my spine. Cumulonimbus had a wide area of effect. It was a spell designed to wipe out large numbers of enemies indiscriminately. Which might mean…

“Uh, hey, Zanoba…you guys didn’t get hit by lightning out there or anything, right?”

“Hrm…”

Zanoba put a hand to his chin and seemed to consider his reply carefully. After a moment, he delivered it with a serious expression on his face.

“No war is won without sacrifice, Master Rudeus.”

We’d hit them.

Bolts of lightning from our Cumulonimbus spells had struck our own allies. Maybe we’d knocked others into those pitfalls with gusts of wind. I might have killed someone who ate dinner next to me yesterday. Roxy might have killed someone she’d taught a little magic to.

Odds were I’d never even spoken to most of them. But at the very least, I knew some people whose faces had grown familiar to

me were gone forever now.

"And of course," Zanoba continued, "I bear the *full* responsibility for every soldier who we lost this day, as the man who commanded them in battle. You have nothing to feel guilty about in the slightest."

In theory, that made sense. But theory wasn't doing much for me right now.

"You must be weary after all your labors, I'm sure. Promise me you'll take the remainder of this day to rest." Zanoba patted me gently on the shoulder, then dragged his captive further inside the fort, issuing rapid commands to the surrounding soldiers as he went.

I stood in a daze and watched him go. At some point, I'd completely run out of words.

Oh, right. I've got to get ready for that attack from the Death God… No time to stand around like an idiot. No time to rest. Not yet. I should just…stand near the Version One. I'll be ready for him, if he shows…

That evening, a raid was launched on the fort.

It wasn't the Death God, though. And I wasn't the target. It was the enemy, and they came in an attempt to free our royal hostage.

I didn't kill any of them. They weren't dangerous enough for that. Instead, I knocked them all unconscious and handed them over to the fort's garrison.

What happened to them after that? No idea. But at least I exercised restraint instead of casually murdering them. That was a good sign, right? It felt that way. Despite my emotions being all over the place, I could control myself. I still had that reflex against killing.

I was going to be just fine. Or so I kept telling myself, over the course of that entire night.

The Death God never came.

There was no sneak attack.

***

The next day, I questioned the hostage after getting approval from Zanoba. He was, in fact, a royal from Shirone's rival to the north.

I asked him if he recognized the name Man-God. His answer was no.

I asked him if anyone in his kingdom had been going around making suspiciously accurate predictions or prophecies. His answer was no.

I asked him how they'd gathered an army of five thousand on Shirone's border so quickly after the coup d'état. He said it *hadn't* happened quickly. They'd been looking for a chance to invade for several years.

All that pointed to one conclusion: the kingdom to the north was clean. There was no ally of the Man-God running things up there. I mean, the Man-God might have manipulated events to get them to invade…but I felt confident this guy wasn't a disciple, at least. He was your typical puffed up, clueless commanding officer, and nothing more.

The Death God hadn't come for me, and the invaders were simple invaders. Nothing was turning out the way that I'd anticipated. For the first time in a while, I felt like I'd been jumping at a *lot* of shadows. I was starting to think I had misunderstood this whole situation on a very fundamental level. Maybe there was no trap. Hell, maybe the Man-God wasn't involved in any of this.

I refused to let down my guard, even so. Half-convinced that it was pointless, I forced myself to stay alert and ready for anything.

And then, ten days later…the ground shifted underneath us.

Chapter 8:
An Urgent Message, and Zanoba's True Feelings

TEN DAYS HAD PASSED since the battle of Fort Karon. In that time, Zanoba had proposed a ceasefire with the enemy, using our royal hostage as a bargaining chip. I didn't know the specific details, but it sounded like the war would officially be over soon.

We'd also sent a messenger to the capital on a fast horse to inform them of our victory, the captive we'd secured, and our efforts to strike a truce. Zanoba had proceeded with the peace talks without waiting on orders from the king, but Shirone was in no condition to fight a drawn-out war, so it was hard to imagine Pax objecting. The man wasn't stupid, after all. Although it felt a little worrisome when we didn't hear back immediately.

Even after more than a week, the fort echoed with passionate commentary on our victory in battle. Roxy and I had left a big impression with our huge, flashy spells, while Zanoba's bold performance on the front lines was just as talked about. Some of the troops were still riding that adrenaline high, I guess.

Perhaps because of my performance in the battle, or the way I'd dealt with that sneak attack, the soldiers were finally warming up to me a bit. They'd always treated me with politeness, but their faces used to clam up every time they saw me. These days I was getting actual smiles from the people I ran into. Even a bit of cheerful small talk. I guess they'd reclassified me from "a dangerous foreign mage who popped up out of nowhere " to something like "a comrade in arms." No one gave me a hard time about the soldiers I'd killed accidentally with my magic, at least.

Between that, my regular counseling sessions with Roxy, plus Zanoba's attempts to cheer me up, I managed to pull myself together emotionally. At this point I could look back on my actions without viewing them as crimes or terrible mistakes.

Honestly, I'd beat myself up about it way too much. This was not a peaceful world in general, and I was a direct subordinate of Orsted. To protect my family, I'd picked a fight against a vicious god. I must have known this day would come. At some level I must have accepted that, even if half-heartedly.

But even so—I felt pretty sure I wouldn't sign up for any more wars after this one, no matter who tried to recruit me. War was like… a whole different world. I preferred the one I usually lived in. I wasn't going to kill anyone unless I absolutely had to. I'd decided to stick with my old policy on that one after all. For one thing, all this anguish about it after the fact was exhausting. Hardly felt worth taking lives if all I got out of it was a bunch of week-long nervous breakdowns, you know?

I was trying to put all that behind me now, anyway. Moving on…

I'd stayed alert for signs of danger in the ten days since the battle, but nothing much had happened. My mana capacity had fully replenished by this point, so I was in peak combat condition. I also had the Magic Armor Version One close at hand, and I wasn't allowing myself to get careless. It was hard to imagine the Death God coming for us now. His advantage would have been greater if he'd attacked during our audience with Pax.

The possibility that the Man-God wasn't actually pulling the strings here got more plausible by the day. Maybe it was like Orsted said. Maybe these events *had* taken place in the other timeline and simply weren't mentioned in the diary. Zanoba might have dealt with this problem without my help, or he might never have been summoned in the first place.

I wouldn't call this whole trip a waste of time, though. My friend's life had genuinely been in very serious danger. But the war was over now, in any case. There were no more enemy armies lurking on Shirone's borders. Surely that accomplishment would be enough to satisfy Zanoba's sense of duty. Now we just had to talk him into coming back home to Sharia. I wasn't about to leave him here under Pax's thumb.

“Hnnngh!”

I stretched out the kinks in my arms and back as I basked in the morning sun. I had no solid proof the Man-God wasn’t up to something, but given that we’d been left alone this long, the odds he’d laid a trap for me were low. Thanks to that reassuring thought, I’d gotten a good night’s sleep for once. I woke up with a spring in my step, and decided to go wash my face in the nearby river. A bit of magic would have done the job just fine, but I was in the mood for a stroll.

By the time I got there, a few small groups of soldiers were already at the riverbank, splashing water on their faces and brushing their teeth.

“Hey, it’s Rudeus! Good morning, sir!”

“Thanks for keeping watch again last night!”

“You know, I just assumed that huge metal suit was some toy of Prince Zanoba’s or something. Quite the impressive magical implement!”

I was surrounded before I could even reach the water’s edge. I had *really* become popular in this fort all of a sudden. This daily barrage of flattery sure took some getting used to.

Incidentally, the soldiers were all dressed in light brown shirts and pants, the standard clothing they wore when off duty. The outfit was the same for men and women. And it seemed the women didn’t wear bras to bed, judging from the visible perkiness currently being displayed by that archer who’d given me a hug the other day. What a lovely way to start my morning.

“Ah, I was wondering what this crowd was about. Good morning, Master Rudeus.”

Turning, I saw Zanoba had come strolling up to us as well. He wore the exact same outfit as his soldiers. Thanks to his height and oddly skinny limbs, he looked a bit like some unwashed NEET leaving his room for the first time in a year.

“Prince Zanoba!”

Despite his less than regal appearance, all the soldiers dropped to their knees at the sight of him.

“There’s no need for that. Go on, get back to your washing up.”

“B-but Your Highness…”

“At the moment, I’m a drowsy soldier like the rest of you,” said Zanoba, emphasizing his point with a big yawn. “And surely you don’t expect me to act all high and mighty in *this* outfit?”

The man had been absurdly busy lately. I couldn’t tell you all the details, but evidently there were a thousand different tasks that needed seeing to after such a large-scale battle.

Incidentally, although the fallen were left lying on the battlefield, a group of tough-looking customers showed up within a few days to strip them of their equipment and incinerate the bodies. It seemed there were people who hung around in war zones and made their living off this kind of work. Sort of professional versions of the peasants who hunted down deserting samurai for cash.

Zanoba and I made our way to the riverbank together, and kneeled down to splash our faces with water.

“…So how’s it going with the negotiations? You think they’re going to sign off on the truce?”

Instead of jumping straight into persuasion mode, I led off with a light jab. Once we got that truce signed and implemented, there would be no real need for Zanoba to keep hanging around in Shirone. The war would be over, after all.

“They will. We received a provisionary reply just yesterday, in fact. While no official decision has been made, all indications are they will soon accept a truce. There should be no further incursions for…oh, at least the next three years.”

At those words, several of the soldiers within earshot murmured in excitement.

Whoops. Maybe that wasn’t a question I should have asked in public…but I guess the news was good, so it shouldn’t be too much of a problem.

That tidbit about “three years” was interesting, though. Given the way he’d phrased the sentence, Zanoba thought the Kingdom of Bista hadn’t fully abandoned their hopes of conquering Shirone, despite that crushing defeat the other day.

I had to assume they would dismiss most of their current command structure, which meant they’d have to find new generals who were competent. Replenishing their forces would take time, as well. And they’d have to find some halfway-plausible excuse for breaking the truce they were about to sign. At a bare minimum, it would take three years to sort out all of the logistics. In practice, it might well be far longer before they were ready to make another move…

“That should be time enough for our purposes, however,” said Zanoba. “Given three years of peace, I’m sure our kingdom will grow strong and stable once again.”

While Bista was regrouping, Shirone would have a chance to fully rebuild its own government and armies.

“You think King Pax can pull it off, though?” I asked.

“I don’t doubt it for a moment,” replied Zanoba with a firm, confident nod.

I wasn’t sure where his certainty was coming from, but maybe there was some plan in the works. One way or another, it sounded like this war was over. That sure hadn’t taken long.

“Good to hear. Hope they sign off soon so he can get started,” I said.

“Indeed…”

There was happiness on Zanoba’s face in that moment, but a hint of melancholy, too. I guess I could understand that. He wouldn’t have much of a role to play around here once things were nice and peaceful.

This seemed like a good opportunity to change gears.

“Hey, Zanoba…what are you planning to do next, once this war is over?”

I led off with a second light jab, although the question came out sounding more ominous than I'd intended. Hopefully Zanoba didn't have any plans to propose marriage to his sweetheart, which was the surest foreshadowing for his death. If he hit me with "*I've already bought the bouquet,"* it might be beyond my power to save his life.

"I suppose I'll return to the capital to receive new orders from His Majesty, first of all. Although he might also opt to keep me posted at this fort for now…"

"You mean you're staying here? In Shirone?"

"…Hm? Well, yes. Naturally."

To be fair, that was the reply I'd been expecting. But it almost seemed like the thought of returning to the Magic City of Sharia had never crossed his mind. The Magic Armor hadn't been fully perfected yet, our study of the automated doll was stalled halfway through, and our plans to sell figurines produced by Julie were only now beginning to come together. Wouldn't he regret leaving any of those projects unfinished?

Well, of course he would. He was passionate about them all.

"Look, Zanoba…"

"Yes, Master Rudeus?"

"Once that truce gets signed, how about you come back home to Sharia with me? Let's keep making figurines together."

Damn, that kind of sounded like a proposal. And I didn't even buy a bouquet first.

You know…maybe it is a proposal, in a way. I'm not looking to get married or anything, but I'm basically asking him to choose me over his homeland.

Zanoba looked over at me expressionlessly, water continuing to drip from his face. All the emotion had drained right out of him. It was hard to believe he'd been smiling so cheerfully just a moment earlier.

Not good. He was clearly going to shoot me down. I'd messed this up completely, hadn't I? I should have gotten him in the right

mood before I declared how I felt. All of my well-calibrated rejection sensors were screaming *brace for impact.* This guy was about to break my heart.

"Uh, I mean…it's not like I'm asking you to abandon the kingdom or anything, just…Hmm?"

At that moment, I heard a commotion coming from the fort, and the loud sounds of hooves against the earth. There was no cavalry stationed at Fort Karon. Who could that be?

I looked back toward the fort in time to see a single rider turn the corner and head in our general direction.

"Hmm. A messenger from the capital, perhaps?" said Zanoba as we rose to our feet. "I expect they carry a letter from Pax regarding our negotiations."

"So what's the plan if he tells you to stay out here fighting until the enemy's completely crushed?"

"Ah, now there's a question. I suppose it may be possible, if you were kind enough to accompany us…"

As we bantered, the horse had grown steadily closer. I realized that I recognized its rider. It was someone we both knew well.

"Ginger?"

It was her, all right. And she was driving her horse forward with a look of pure desperation on her face. What was going on here?

She spotted us and turned the horse sharply, spurring it directly up to us. The nearby soldiers stepped in between us, forming a protective wall.

"That is my personal guard!" Zanoba shouted. "Make way at once!"

An expression of relief flashed across Ginger's face as the troops stepped aside and Zanoba strode forward to meet her. Then she slipped out of her saddle and tumbled to the ground.

"Ginger! What's happened?! Speak to me!"

"Haaah…haaa…"

Zanoba lifted her off the ground in his arms. She was in clear distress, and her breathing sounded harsh and labored. She had no obvious external injuries, but her face was clouded with exhaustion. It looked like she'd been riding at top speed for days without a moment's rest.

"A-an uprising in Latakia, Your Highness. Jade, the former general, rose in the name of the Eleventh Prince. His army has… surrounded the royal palace!"

Managing to barely gasp out her message, Ginger promptly fell unconscious.

"The *Eleventh* Prince? But there were only ten of us! What's the meaning of this, Ginger?! Explain yourself…you must explain at once!"

"Calm down, Zanoba. She obviously needs some rest…"

After I got Zanoba to stop shaking Ginger frantically in his arms, we brought her to a room inside the fort to recover.

The Eleventh Prince was a boy named Haruha Shirone.

He was a child three years of age, sired by the former king Palten Shirone quite late in life. His mother came from a farming family, a lineage that should have disqualified her completely as a potential royal consort. For that reason, Haruha's existence was never publicly acknowledged. Officially "finding employment" with a provincial lord, his mother was granted an isolated mansion in a distant corner of the kingdom in which to raise her son in secret.

Precious few within the kingdom even knew of Haruha's existence. There was the king himself; the minister who procured the mansion; and General Jade, who happened to be the brother of Haruha's mother.

Two of these men died in Pax's bloody purge, but General Jade did not.

Jade had sworn an oath of undying loyalty to the former king. Despite his humble origins, Palten recognized the man's uncommon

talents and raised him steadily through the ranks to his position. And that position allowed Jade to lift his family from a life of grinding poverty into one of comfort and indulgence. Jade owed the king everything, and his gratitude was great. So great that when the king's eye settled on his younger sister, he offered her up willingly.

At the time of Pax's coup d'état, Jade had been stationed at Fort Karon. The fort's garrison numbered nearly a thousand back then. Jade took half that number and rushed back to Latakia. But by the time he arrived, it was too late: he learned the king was already dead, along with the rest of the royal family.

There were around two thousand soldiers stationed at the capital, now under the command of Pax. Jade's own army was now fifteen hundred strong, swelled by the troops of local lords who'd sent reinforcements along the way. They were outnumbered, but given Jade's great skills as a commander, they could potentially have triumphed.

But in the end, Jade opted not to fight. The reason for this was simple: his own army was now internally divided into a pair of rival factions. Half of his allies wanted to drag the usurper Pax off the throne. The other half wanted to recognize him as king at once. Watching the nobles squabble viciously with one another, Jade realized he had no *real* hope of victory. He surrendered without a fight, and swore his allegiance to the new king of Shirone.

There was, of course, more to this decision than met the eye. Jade had learned for a fact that his sister's child, the Eleventh Prince Haruha Shirone, was still alive.

He would wait patiently for the right moment. He would bide his time. And in the end, he would avenge the king's death in the name of his nephew. This was the true oath he swore that day.

In the weeks that followed, Jade made his arrangements quietly. He sought out those who resented Pax's rule, and unified them into a secret alliance. He searched for the Eleventh Prince. He made the necessary bargains with the local lords…and before long, he had raised an entire rebel army, ready and eager to strike at his command.

Victory was now a real possibility.

And then, the *perfect* opportunity presented itself.

Bista's armies were preparing to invade, and Pax began to send his troops to garrison the northern fortresses against this threat. Thanks to Jade's departure and the chaos of the coup d'état, Shirone's military had been severely weakened, and the King Dragon Realm wasn't sending reinforcements. In all likelihood, this war would not go well. Once the enemy pushed past Fort Karon, the most defensible of Shirone's border forts, Pax would have little choice but to use his trump card and send the Death God to the north. And with Randolph gone, even a smaller force could succeed in murdering the king.

Jade had failed to account for one crucial factor: the sudden return of the Third Prince Zanoba Shirone. His appearance on the scene was shocking enough, but he'd also brought along the former court magician Roxy Migurdia—and a mage named Rudeus Greyrat, said to have felled both the North Emperor Auber and the Water God Reida in battle.

Perhaps Jade had considered reaching out to Zanoba, on the chance he'd returned to take revenge on Pax. But Zanoba showed every sign of loyalty to his brother, and set out to defend Fort Karon on his orders.

Jade's plan soon careened off course. Shirone beat back the invaders at Fort Karon in a historic victory, and the Death God stayed put at Pax's side.

The armies of Shirone were currently weakened, but would recover in due time. And there was a good chance Pax might recall the forces he'd moved north to the area around the capital. In particular, if Prince Zanoba, Roxy Migurdia, and this Rudeus returned, any attack would be doomed to failure.

Jade's window of opportunity was closing fast. And so, for lack of any other option—he launched his uprising. Gathering his rebel troops, he seized the capital in one lightning-fast strike and besieged the royal castle.

This was Ginger's outline of the incident, which she gave to us when she woke up after several hours of exhausted sleep. She was in Latakia itself when the rebellion began, but managed to slip out the gates in the first chaotic hours of its occupation. The very next moment, she rode straight to Zanoba as fast as her horse would carry her.

"When I fled the capital, it seemed like the king was holed up in the palace with a small force of defenders…but I couldn't say where things stand at this point."

Ginger brought her lengthy story to a close with a calm and steady voice.

The royal palace was a solidly defensible position. But days had passed since Jade's forces surrounded it. Pax might well be dead, and his castle occupied by the rebels.

But *why* had he chosen to hole up inside its walls? His "small force of defenders" included the Death God, Randolph Marianne. They could have broken through the enemy's encirclement and fled.

There was so much we didn't know yet. The best option, I assumed, was to move carefully and gather—

"I see. Let us head for the capital at once, then," said Zanoba, in the tone of someone proposing a quick stop at the convenience store. He rose from his seat before he even finished speaking.

Ginger seemed relieved by this pronouncement. But at Zanoba's next words, her face froze up with shock.

"If His Majesty has escaped, we can bring him back to this fort for his protection. If he's been unable to flee, we can enter the castle through a secret passage known only to the royal family, and escort him out to safety."

"W-wait, Your Highness!"

Pushing herself up in her bed, face filled with desperation, Ginger grabbed Zanoba's sleeve before he could stride away.

Zanoba smiled over at her reassuringly. “We’ll be quite all right on our own, Ginger, I assure you. Stay here and rest up while we’re gone.”

“Do you *truly* mean to take King Pax’s side in this?!” cried Ginger. Her tone was one of utter disbelief.

Zanoba turned back to face her, quirking one eyebrow quizzically. “Naturally. Who is this Eleventh Prince to me? I’ve never seen the boy’s face, and have heard nothing of his birth until now. I’m somewhat skeptical that he’s even my father’s son.”

He did have a point. It was possible General Jade just loathed Pax for other reasons, and had fabricated this new prince to serve as his puppet. Assuming the king really had been intimate with his sister, it would be easy enough to make the story sound convincing.

Ginger was having none of this, however. The bewildered frown on her face was only growing deeper.

“So you intend to come to King Pax’s aid, rescue him from the palace…and then do what, exactly?”

“Our course of action will be a matter for His Majesty to decide. But if he orders me to defeat the rebel army, I suppose that will be my next priority.”

“You can’t mean that, Your Highness. Why would you go so far to help that vile creature?!”

Zanoba’s eyebrow twitched at that. There was anger on his face now. “Did you just call our king a creature*,* Ginger? Is that truly what I heard you say?”

“I’m aware I overstep my bounds! But Prince Zanoba, please—have you forgotten what Prince Pax did to me?”

“What on earth are you talking about?!”

“*He took my family hostage,* Prince Zanoba!”

Zanoba’s eyebrow twitched again.

I’d almost forgotten about that ugly detail myself, after all these years, but you could understand why the memory stayed fresh for

Ginger. She suffered Pax's cruelty directly, and such memories stayed with you forever. I had to assume Lilia and Aisha would back her up right now, if they were here.

"What sort of a king coerces the obedience of his personal guard by threatening their families?! Why lift a finger to keep him on his throne?!"

I recalled that the Edo-era shoguns built a whole system around that concept. Too bad Ginger hadn't been around to chew them out. Though from what I remembered, the royal family's personal guards were a big deal in this kingdom. The more knights a prince had under his direct control, the higher they moved in the order of succession…or something like that. The guards probably took pride in their vaunted position. They weren't ordinary lackeys.

"Hrm," said Zanoba after a moment. "Well, Ginger, I have a question of my own. Why do *you* protect a prince such as Zanoba Shirone?"

"What…do you mean?"

"I sold you to my brother, as you may recall. Hardly the deed of a worthy prince, or one deserving of protection. Why do you serve me nonetheless?"

A very reasonable point. It was Zanoba who'd put Ginger at Pax's mercy in the first place. He'd literally traded her for a figurine of Roxy that Pax had purchased somewhere. Why *was* she so damn loyal to this guy, anyway?

Oh, right. She'd promised his mother to look after him…

"Well, I…I know that you're far wiser than you let on…"

Ginger didn't bring that up, though. I guess it wouldn't help her case that Zanoba was any less crappy of a boss than Pax.

"Pax is quite a clever man in his own right, wouldn't you say?" replied Zanoba.

"Perhaps clever, but not *wise.* He gives no thought to the consequences of his actions, only the pleasure they bring him in the moment. It's the behavior of a fool…"

“And I’m a fool who’s devoted my life to dolls and figurines. It seems that Pax and I are much the same.”

“That’s not true,” said Ginger, locking eyes with Zanoba without moving from her kneeling position. “You are a Blessed Child, Prince Zanoba. To reveal that you possessed both strength *and* wisdom would have put a target on your back. You played the fool to avoid your rivals’ notice…I’m certain of it.”

Zanoba said some oddly profound things from time to time. He’d deciphered that bizarre ancient writing we found on the automaton’s core—he made the Magic Armor for me. Since returning to Shirone, he’d also proven himself a quick-witted commander with real strategic vision. There were plenty of reasons to believe Ginger might be on to something here.

That said, his obsession with dolls was…clearly genuine. There was no way to fake that kind of passion. If anything, I guessed he wasn’t that interested in showing off his intelligence in front of people.

“I have no need to *play* the fool, Ginger,” Zanoba said. “I’m the very definition of one. All I want from life is to drown myself in my absurd interests.”

“In that case, let’s head back to the Magic City of Sharia immediately. You could devote the rest of your life to your passions there.”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option. A puppet like myself can only move as it’s directed.”

“I…don’t *understand…*”

At this point, Ginger turned to look at me. The message in her eyes was clear enough: *Say something to him! You know I’m right about this.*

I agreed that Pax had done some truly unforgivable things. He’d captured Lilia and Aisha, lured me into a trap, and tried to make Roxy into his own personal slave. I’d seen him punch Lilia in the face. I kept my cool at the time, but it sure as hell pissed me off to think about that now.

“Listen, Zanoba…I don’t like this plan either.”

“…Oh?”

“Maybe Pax did change a little during his stay in the King Dragon Realm. But that doesn’t mean he’s someone worth risking your life for.”

Zanoba turned to face me now, pouting irritably. “I hardly expected this from you, Master Rudeus. As I’ve explained before, my life is the property of this kingdom. And of course, this kingdom *is* its king. With his life in danger, I can hardly sit back and—”

“Do you remember what you told me before we left, Zanoba? ‘It’s my duty to protect Shirone against her enemies. That is the reason I’m alive…and was permitted to indulge myself for all these years.’ That sound right to you?”

Zanoba made no reply to that. I’d memorized every word perfectly.

“Why would you care if it’s Pax or this Eleventh Prince sitting on the throne? Your job is to protect Shirone from invasion, not to sort out all its ugly power struggles. Once that truce is signed, the war with Bista will be *over.* Seems to me like you did your duty perfectly.”

“Master Rudeus, please…”

“Can’t you call it a day for now? Maybe I shouldn’t say this out loud, but the trip over here isn’t exactly grueling. You could go right back to your normal life in Sharia, and pop over whenever it seems like a war might break out.”

“Hrm.”

Zanoba brought his hand to his chin and looked up at the ceiling. After a moment’s contemplation, he turned his gaze back to me.

“It’s quite an appealing idea, I must admit…but I can’t accept.”

“Okay, but *why not*?”

It was getting harder to keep my cool. Much harder. I knew I had to try, though. Shouting at someone was the last way you'd ever change their mind.

I knew there were flaws in my reasoning, of course. The Kingdom of Shirone wasn't likely to let Zanoba just wander off because his job was done for now. And if he kept popping up out of nowhere to take command at the last possible moment, it would cause all sorts of headaches and complications.

I could see all that. I knew my arguments were flimsy. But he could still use them as *excuses* to come back home with us, to the place where he was happiest.

"Can you at least give me an explanation, Zanoba?"

"Hmm… I'm not entirely sure I understand it myself."

Oh, come on! Are you serious?!

Ugh. Okay, calm down. Gotta stay patient. He has to have a reason. There has to be something that's making him this stubborn. Just stick with it and keep poking, and we'll get there eventually…

"Listen, Zanoba… You do understand Pax must be terrified of you, right?"

"Terrified of me? But why?"

"I mean, he killed the rest of your family, remember? And you're a Blessed Child."

Zanoba bore the man no grudge, but Pax had plenty of reason to feel guilty about his actions. Kings in that position tended to get paranoid.

"If you show up in the palace to help him escape, he could easily assume you're there to kill him. You might end up getting murdered by the Death God on the spot."

I was met with silence.

"The same thing could happen later on," I continued. "You could save his life a dozen times, and I *still* don't think Pax will trust

you. Eventually, he'll find some convenient excuse to have you killed. It makes no damn sense for you to stay with him."

Zanoba said nothing. He gazed at me, his face impassive and unreadable.

"You told me that if your kingdom wants you to die, then you'll accept that. And I can understand why you'd be willing to die in battle, okay? It's your duty. It's the reason they let you live. But why would you let Pax murder you out of paranoia? What good would that do for Shirone, exactly?"

Zanoba closed his eyes and drew a long, slow breath, as if trying to digest my words. As he exhaled, he opened his eyes halfway.

"Despite it all, he's still my little brother…and the only family I have left," he said.

And just like that, he'd knocked all the wind out of my sails. The man was fighting dirty now. What was I supposed to say to *that?*

Seemingly unaware that he'd already won the argument, Zanoba kept going.

"Perhaps it sounds absurd, coming from a man who's never spoken of such things before…but Pax is my *brother,* Master Rudeus."

His face was blank. There were none of the usual theatrics—no laughter, no shouting, no pompous posturing. Zanoba was merely staring at me. Or maybe through me.

I let out a long, audible sigh. It seemed I had to add *persuasion* to my list of his skills and gifts. By introducing the "he's family" angle, he'd kneecapped my ability to oppose his plans altogether. His stubbornness suddenly seemed understandable.

I found myself wondering what I would do in his shoes. If Aisha murdered Norn, or vice-versa, I'd obviously be furious. It was hard to see myself forgiving that.

But what if I barely even knew one of them, or maybe both? And what if the killer was mixed up in something much bigger than

her? What if she was *trying* to move forward, to accomplish something meaningful, despite her mistakes and crimes?

I'd still give her a piece of my mind. But I'd probably try to help her, too.

"All right, Zanoba."

Zanoba had no intention of coming back home to Sharia with us. None whatsoever. I finally understood that now. I didn't know how honest he was being about his motives. But even if he was just manipulating me, he'd used the word *family* to do it. That was the strongest possible weapon you could use in an argument with me.

He'd made his decision, and he clearly wasn't going to bend.

Sorry, Cliff. Sorry, Julie. Looks like I won't be dragging Zanoba home to you after all.

The only thing I could do here, realistically, was to protect and support Zanoba until he somehow managed to win King Pax's trust.

"To be honest, I was planning to bring you back home with me even if it meant groveling in the dirt and blubbering. But since you put it *that* way…I guess I'll stick around for just a little longer."

"My sincere thanks, Master Rudeus, and I'm glad it didn't come to that. The sight of your tears would certainly have weakened my resolve."

"Damn. Maybe I should have started off with that."

"Spare me, please!"

For the first time in a while, Zanoba and I grinned at each other in amusement.

Cliff would probably understand once I explained the whole story to him. As for Julie, well…I could ask her what she wanted, and bring her safely to Zanoba if she chose to join him.

The Ruijerd figurine plan would have to be scrapped. That was rough, considering we'd already gotten Perugius's permission for it, secured Ariel's cooperation, and put Aisha to work looking for

employees… It did hurt to know that those years of preparations would amount to nothing, honestly.

Still, I wouldn't complain. I couldn't. Not if Zanoba was doing this for his family.

He wasn't…exactly on good terms with Pax at the moment. But that was something that could change with time. They could apologize for the past and find a way to forgive each other. Slowly, bit by bit, they could build a relationship based on trust and respect. Their mistakes could be corrected.

I didn't like Pax one bit, but he was capable of change. He'd proven that much already.

Anybody could change.

"No…you can't be serious…"

Ginger stared up at us, her face pale with horror.

I could understand where she was coming from. She hadn't been there at our audience with King Pax, had she? In her mind, he was still the same Prince Pax she'd known many years ago—a vicious, petty little bastard, in other words.

"I'm sorry, Ginger. Zanoba's made his feelings pretty clear, and I think I have to respect that at this point."

Under the circumstances, it was hard to imagine Pax maintaining his hold on the throne for long, but we'd have to see what we could do. The first step was obvious enough, at least. Plus, there was *some* room for optimism. When Zanoba showed up to rescue him, maybe Pax would actually reconsider his mistrust.

"I believe that concludes our conversation, Ginger.
My apologies for everything I've put you through."

With a gentle pat to his loyal bodyguard's shoulder, Zanoba stepped past her toward the door.

"Y-Your Highness, wait! Please!"

Half-falling out of her bed, Ginger grabbed Zanoba by the leg. She made no move to release him, or to rise up off the floor, and

there was total desperation in her eyes.

“I understand there’s no stopping you, Prince Zanoba. But at least allow me to make *one* small request of you!”

“What request would that be?”

“Don’t die, even if King Pax orders you to do so! Please…just don’t die!”

Her choice of words was clumsy. She probably hadn’t thought this out beforehand. Still, her meaning was plain enough. At the end of the day, all she wanted was for Zanoba to stay alive.

“Hrm. That seems a potentially unreasonable—”

I cut Zanoba off and accepted her request on his behalf. “You have *my* word on that, Ginger. I’ll make sure Zanoba survives this, no matter what.”

I understood Zanoba felt that he owed Pax his loyalty, but his death wouldn’t help either of them. If their relationship fell apart and there was no salvaging the situation, I’d have to drag Zanoba back to safety myself. That was the job I originally came here to do. I wasn’t going to let myself lose sight of it, no matter what else happened.

“Thank you so much, Sir Rudeus. You have my sincere gratitude…”

Ginger bowed her head deeply and said no more.

Chapter 9:
To Pax's Side

WE USED THE MAGIC ARMOR as our means of transportation to the capital.

Disassembling it for transport by carriage would have been tedious and time-consuming, and I wanted it for the battles that might await us in the capital. Wearing it along the way seemed like the easiest solution. It would mean wasting a good amount of mana, but I could justify that at the moment.

We considered having Roxy and Zanoba ride on my shoulders, but the experience would be horribly bumpy and uncomfortable. This was no single day's journey, either. They needed some sort of vehicle to sit in.

We ended up employing the bed of a wagon for that purpose. After adding stabilizers with my earth magic to reduce the risk of it tipping over, I hooked it securely to the Magic Armor, allowing me to pull it behind me.

Unfortunately, my efforts to improve the ride didn't work too well. By the time we made it to the capital, Zanoba was puking everywhere; Roxy had her hands clamped over her mouth. Clearly not the sort of transportation we wanted to be using regularly—but we'd managed to make it to the capital in only five days.

I wasn't sure how much mana I had left. My body felt a little sluggish, so I definitely wasn't working with a full tank. At least I hadn't needed to use it in combat, which hopefully meant I hadn't drained myself too badly.

Our entire mission here was to rescue Pax. In theory, the Death God would be on our side this time, but there was no way to guarantee how things would actually play out. I sure as hell wasn't going to let down my guard, anyway.

We arrived at Latakia, only to find it tightly sealed.

The gates into the city were closed and barred. Soldiers of the rebel army manned its walls. The surrounding area was crowded with bewildered, anxious people who'd been locked out. I saw merchants, adventurers, mercenaries…and even soldiers in uniform, who camped out at a wary distance from the walls. Maybe they'd marched here from nearby cities, or were out on patrol when the rebellion took place.

"Hrm. I suppose they don't want anyone interfering until they've settled things decisively," Zanoba observed.

"Well," I said, "I guess that means Pax is still alive, at least."

Roughly ten days had passed since the rebellion seized this city. From the looks of things, the royal palace was holding out against their siege. It wasn't clear exactly how badly Pax was outnumbered, but he was really hanging in there. Probably didn't hurt to have one of the Seven Great Powers on his side.

Then again, there was still a chance he *was* already dead, and the rebels were sealing off the city for some other reason.

We approached Latakia in a cautious, roundabout way, careful to make sure no one got a good look at us. There would be a commotion if Zanoba was recognized as a prince, and that would probably catch the attention of Jade's soldiers. Jade had already identified us as allies of King Pax, so it was much safer for us to remain undetected.

We *had* considered carrying out a frontal assault, but ultimately decided against it.

"This way, Master Rudeus. The entrance to the hidden path lies on the riverbank ahead."

Following Zanoba's lead, we made our way along a quiet stretch of riverbank not far from the city's walls. It felt oddly peaceful here. The river flowed gently, fish shone in the sun as they swam within it, and vaguely duck-like birds paddled around on the surface. You never would have thought there was a battle taking place so

close nearby. How well-defined was the border between *peace* and *war*, anyway?

“That’s it right there.”

As we rounded a slight turn in the river, a watermill came into view. We’d apparently reached our destination, so I deactivated the Magic Armor and stepped out of it.

“There should be a passage that leads underground somewhere inside that building,” Zanoba remarked. His tone was cheerful enough, but his face was deathly pale. I’d temporarily soothed the symptoms of his motion-sickness with my magic, but all that nausea had left him physically drained.

“How about we take a break first?” I asked.

“I think not,” replied Zanoba. “The situation could be critically urgent. Let us infiltrate the palace at once.”

Yet we had no way of knowing what we’d find waiting for us. This little mill might be the last safe spot for us to take a breather. And this secret passage would probably be too small to accommodate the bulk of my Magic Armor, so I wanted us to go in prepared for anything. Taking a break would allow me to regenerate at least a fraction of my mana, but more importantly, Roxy and Zanoba could use it to recuperate from their miserable wagon ride.

“Slow down and think about this, Zanoba. We should *really* catch our breath before we go charging in there. You and Roxy both look terrible right now, and I could use a bit more mana in my tank.”

“Hrm…”

“Haste makes waste, as the saying goes.”

After a moment, Zanoba nodded reluctantly. “I’m not familiar with the expression, but…very well.”

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. The last thing I needed was us wandering into danger with our eyelids drooping.

“Before that, I think we ought to make sure there really is a passage in there,” said Roxy.

“Ah, yeah. Good idea.”

We made our way inside the little building and began to poke around. It was stacked with wooden boxes and barrels, like some kind of storage shed, and Zanoba and I had to move them out of the way so we could tap at the floors and the walls.

Eventually we found something on the far side of the mill, directly underneath a heavy wooden box. It was a metal plate of some kind. It could be classified as some kind of door, but it completely lacked handles.

“Ah, this must be it!” cried Zanoba.

“Well, let’s not jump to conclusions,” I said, although I honestly felt the same way. “Might be a basement storage room or something.”

Careful scrutiny of the plate revealed no keyholes nor carefully disguised handles. It seemed to be little more than a solid sheet of metal. How were you supposed to open this?

After a moment, I remembered that this passage was intended as an escape route. Maybe they’d deliberately made it impossible to open from here, and so you had to push it up from the other side.

“All right, Zanoba. Can you pry this open?”

“Hrrmph!”

Within moments, Zanoba had ripped the thing out with brute force, revealing a ladder leading down a dark hole. With a bit of fire magic, I illuminated the bottom of the shaft about three or four meters below us. A hole in one wall pointed in the general direction of the capital.

Still, that didn’t rule out a storage cellar. Just to be sure, I clambered down the ladder and cast light directly into the hole. No boxes. Just an empty, narrow tunnel that vanished into the distance.

“What do you think?” Roxy’s voice resounded.

“This is it all right!” I called back.

“Excellent. Now climb back up here and let’s get some rest.”

“Sounds good!”

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After a three-hour nap, I headed outside and fetched the Magic Armor Version Two from our wagon. There was no chance of squeezing the Version One through that passage, unfortunately.

The Version Two was highly effective in its own right, unless I happened to be fighting someone on the level of the Seven Great Powers. Given that the Death God Randolph was almost certainly waiting on the other end of this passage, however, I couldn’t help feeling a little anxious.

That said—bringing in the Mark One would probably require *blasting* my way straight through the palace walls. I wasn’t shy about causing a bit of property damage now and again, but Zanoba didn’t approve of the idea.

The secret passage was so narrow that two people would have found it challenging to walk abreast. There were also no lights whatsoever, so I used one of my Lamplight Spirit scrolls to illuminate our way. It was a dark, empty tunnel, nothing more. About as basic a passage as you could get. The three of us moved through it in single file, with Zanoba in the lead, me behind him, and Roxy bringing up the rear.

“Quite the tight squeeze,” murmured Roxy from behind me. “Brings back some unpleasant memories.”

I tried to think of something comforting or considerate to say in response, but drew a total blank. “Ah. Right.”

Those were the last words anyone spoke for quite some time.

Silently, steadily, we made our way deeper into the darkness. After something like an hour of walking, a door finally came into view. It was a simple metal plate, much like the one back in the mill. Again, there was no doorknob. It wasn’t made to be opened from this side.

“Hrnngh!”

Somehow wedging his fingertips into the tiny gap between the plate and the wall around it, Zanoba violently ripped it out. We'd made the right call having him take the lead, for sure.

"Oh? My goodness…"

As he tried to step forward through the doorway, Zanoba let out a strange little grunt and stopped dead in his tracks. Leaning over so I could peer around him, I saw that the passage ahead was packed solid with something like earth or sand.

We'd hit a dead end. There hadn't been a single fork in the road along the way. Which meant, uh…

"Either the passage collapsed in an earthquake," said Roxy, "or General Jade knew about it, and sealed it off well ahead of time."

Yeah, those seemed like the most plausible possibilities. There was a chance that Pax had done this himself during *his* coup, but in any case, this was probably a major reason he hadn't been able to escape.

"Master Rudeus, do you think you could get rid of this dirt for us somehow?"

"Well…I'll give it a shot."

Squeezing past Zanoba, I took his place in front of the open doorway. Fortunately, I was pretty comfortable working with earth and sand at this point. I *was* the guy who'd dug out a nice little basement under Orsted's office, after all. My basic approach was to compress the dirt under intense pressure, while simultaneously hardening sections of the walls and ceiling. It was a bit like building a big rock pipe, one segment at a time. The result this time was somewhat rushed, but it was solid enough not to collapse on us. I'd picked up an intuitive feel for that sort of thing now.

After about an hour of slow, steady "digging," the wall of earth ahead crumbled noisily away all on its own. I'd reached the other side after tunneling about five meters. Could have been worse, I suppose. And it would have taken an absurd amount of time to dig through all that without the use of magic.

Another hour of walking followed, bringing us to a total of four hours spent in this tunnel. Zanoba, who didn't spend a lot of time on his feet, was starting to look a bit worn out by the end. Thankfully, this time we reached the exit.

Initially, we found ourselves in what looked to be a basement. We'd stumbled out of a door that was hidden in this room's far wall. It was a chamber with a well-built stone ceiling and walls, maybe ten square meters in size. The walls were largely featureless, except for a few candle fixtures; a staircase in the corner spiraled upward.

It didn't take me long to realize that we were in the royal palace of Shirone. I *recognized* this chamber, after all. It happened to be an old apartment of mine.

"Uh, Zanoba, isn't this…"

"Indeed. The very room in which we first met each other."

When you put it that way, it sounded almost romantic…but this was the place where Pax had held me captive within a magic barrier, in other words. The room seemed weirdly empty at the time, but apparently it *did* have a purpose. It was the palace's emergency exit. That explained well enough why it was set up to power magical booby traps…although the circle for that barrier seemed to be gone.

"Ah, what a pleasant memory. On that day, when I met the artisan who'd created that wondrous figurine, I was *positive* my life had reached its high point. Who could have known that even happier days lay—"

"Let's save the nostalgia trip for later, please?"

Cutting off Zanoba's apparent attempt to narrate some strange documentary, I headed over for the staircase in the corner. It led us up into a hallway. We proceeded cautiously.

The castle was quiet, and darkness lay outside its windows. The sun had apparently set while we were crawling along that secret passage. Not a single light illuminated the hall. Maybe the maids were all gone too. You could have heard a pin drop in this place,

seriously. Where were Pax's troops? Had he positioned them outside or something?

"Any idea where Pax might be?"

"I would expect to find him in our father's room."

Which meant…the royal bedchamber or something, probably?

After a quick look around, Zanoba took the lead and set off down the hallway. He clearly knew this place like the back of his hand, but didn't seem sentimental about it; his eyes were fixed firmly on the path ahead. We followed him silently.

"…Oh."

Roxy came to a sudden halt. She'd stopped right in front of a specific room.

"You notice something, Roxy?"

"No, not really. I just realized this used to be my room."

The door to the room was hanging open. There was nobody inside, and little furniture except an ordinary bed and desk. It looked like its occupant left in a hurry not too long ago; the bed was a rumpled mess, and a jumble of personal items were spread across the desk and floor. Someone else had apparently started living in here at some point after Roxy left Shirone—it looked more like an apartment than a hotel room. But even though it was clearly someone else's space now, the thought that Roxy had once lived here too made me feel weirdly…sentimental, I guess.

So this was the room where Roxy was staying way back when I was tutoring Eris…

"Master Rudeus? Miss Roxy?" Zanoba asked. "Is something the matter?"

I shook my head. "Nah, not really. Roxy just spotted her old room and got a little nostalgic, that's all…"

"What happened to *saving that for later*? Good grief…" Zanoba walked back to join us, looking a bit exasperated. He glanced at the

room, hummed, and turned to Roxy. “The room you stayed in was the next door over, actually.”

“Huh?!”

Visibly flustered, Roxy rushed over to the next room and threw its door open. After comparing it to the first one, she looked up and down the hallway for a moment…and blushed fiercely in embarrassment.

“I-It was too dark for me to tell, I guess.”

Curse you, Zanoba. You’ll pay for this… No one embarrasses my precious, perfect Roxy like that. If she calls a circle a square, who are we to disagree?

“Master Rudeus,” Zanoba murmured, “why are you stepping on my foot?”

“Oh, sorry! This carpet’s a little slippery, huh?”

“I’m quite aware of your love and admiration for Miss Roxy, but would it truly be right to let her reminisce over the wrong room?”

A reasonable point. I decided to hold off on further foot-stomping.

In any case, it was kind of nice to get a little glimpse into Roxy’s past like this. If it wasn’t for the Teleportation Incident, maybe this place would have ended up as her home.

“Let’s just…keep moving, please,” said Roxy. The three of us resumed our progress down the hallway.

In the end, we didn’t run into *anyone* as we made our way through the palace. There was nobody in here at all, and it wasn’t clear why.

“Now, the formal entrance hall of this palace is actually located on its *second* story, meaning any guests from the outside enter on that floor. The third floor is largely devoted to more practical functions, such as—”

Zanoba was very chatty the whole way, for whatever reason. Maybe he was trying to fill the silence.

The first floor was mostly living quarters for the troops and servants who kept this place functional. The second floor held the entrance hall, the throne room, and various other waiting rooms and chambers where guests might be received. The third floor contained the offices and conference rooms where domestic administrative matters of all kinds were attended to, as well as passages leading to the castle's ramparts and main defensive tower. The fourth floor was where the princes and princesses of the kingdom resided. Their personal guards also had their quarters here. And finally, the fifth floor was where we'd find the king's chambers.

There had been no one on the first floor. Or the second. Or the third.

As we came to the fourth floor, I glanced outside the windows once again. There were bonfires burning all around the palace; it was clear the rebel army had it closely surrounded. But I saw no sign of Pax's own forces whatsoever. It sure didn't look like there was any fighting going on. I couldn't see a single silhouette on the ramparts, and I didn't think the darkness was to blame. This castle was *deserted.*

Zanoba seemed to have picked up on these ominous signs as well. After we reached the fourth floor, his chattering came to an abrupt halt, and his face grew tight with tension. Something strange was happening in this palace. By the time we reached the final flight of stairs, you could almost feel it in the air.

Finally, we arrived on the fifth floor—the equivalent of this castle's keep. That was where we found the king's own bedchambers, the most valuable room in all Shirone in both monetary and symbolic terms.

A single man waited for us in front of its door.

It was the Death God, Randolph Marianne. For some reason, he sat in a chair, casually leaning forward like a man taking a break.

Elbows on knees, hands folded together, head tilted to one side. The one uncovered eye in his pallid skull of a face stared fixedly in our direction.

“I don’t get it. I really don’t. Why would a king build his bedroom all the way up here, anyway?”

The moment he spotted us, Randolph began to speak.

“Seems ridiculous to me. Just makes his own life worse, really. Isn’t it a nuisance, going down all those stairs every time he has to do his duties? Isn’t the food always a little cold by the time it reaches him from the kitchens on the first floor? Isn’t it sure to be a struggle just to make it up here, once he starts getting old and frail? Isn’t he *ensuring* he will burn to death if this building ever catches fire?”

Randolph cocked his gaunt head as he muttered these thoughts, gazing steadily in our direction. His body language was like that of an exhausted middle-aged office worker’s. And yet, a chill ran down my spine.

“Now, I would have built my chambers right down on the first floor. Attending to my duties would be easier, my food would reach me piping hot, and I could emerge whenever I pleased… But I suppose that’s the logic of a *commoner*, isn’t it?”

Randolph giggled shrilly to himself as he babbled on. Somehow, the man’s face looked even *more* skull-like when he was smiling. Roxy swallowed audibly at the sight.

“To be fair, the spot does have its advantages. It’s an ideal place to hole up in if you find yourself under siege like this. They used *plenty* of magic-resistant brick when they made this place, after all—no need to worry about any long-range spells. And every floor has strong defensive chokepoints, so it would pose challenges for anyone storming their way up here. They built this place for *war,* to be certain.”

What was Randolph even getting at? He was just…sitting there. Maybe we could walk right around him?

To tell the truth, I didn’t want to take a single step closer.

“Sir Randolph.”

As I hesitated, Zanoba moved forward instead. Randolph didn’t even straighten up, much less rise from his seat, but he did favor Zanoba with another unsettling smile.

I really wished he’d stop doing that. That face of his was even creepier at night.

“Good evening to you, Prince Zanoba,” said Randolph. “What brings you all the way out here?”

“Something odd appears to be taking place in this castle. Do you know anything about the situation?”

“Why, naturally! It’s all my doing, after all.”

Randolph reached up and lifted his eyepatch. Beneath it, his eye glowed with an ominous red light, a star-like symbol clearly visible at its center.

It was a demon eye, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

“On the orders of His Majesty, I made use of my Eye of Severance to produce a makeshift wall around the palace. Thanks to its power, I have kept the enemy’s army at bay.”

An Eye of Severance? I hadn’t heard of that before. Orsted had never even mentioned its existence. Honestly, that man was always leaving out the most important details…

Still, if Randolph had to wear an eyepatch over that thing, it probably meant he couldn’t control too well, right? Maybe I shouldn’t be worried?

“I see,” said Zanoba. “What of the others?”

“All slain or fled, regrettably.”

“…And where is His Majesty?”

“Within his chambers.”

“Ah. Good. My thanks, Randolph. You’ve done well to keep him safe.” Zanoba stepped forward, trying to make his way past Randolph to the door.

Abruptly unfolding his hands, Randolph reached out to bar the way.

“Why do you block my path?” asked Zanoba sharply.

“His Majesty ordered me to allow no one entrance.”

“But I have urgent business with him!”

“However urgent it may be, I’m afraid His Majesty is terribly busy at the moment.”

Busy? Busy doing *what?* There wasn’t anyone left in this castle for him to be ordering around.

“I must ask you to step aside, Randolph. I came here to rescue His Majesty, and that’s what I intend to do.”

“That’s quite thoughtful of you, but he evidently has no intention of leaving this palace.”

The irritation on Zanoba’s face was growing stronger by the second. Was it just me, or was Randolph being suspiciously vague right now?

“I would hear this from His Majesty’s own mouth!”

Zanoba moved to push his way past to the door…and Randolph rose to his feet. It was a slow, subtle motion. It almost seemed as if his pale, gaunt face had floated into the air, carrying the rest of him along with it.

“Now, now, let’s all take a few deep breaths,” said the Death God mildly. “King Pax is rather anguished at the moment, you see. He needs a little…space.”

“Anguished? Why?”

“These rooms offer an *excellent* view of the city around this castle. He can see the hostile soldiers within his own walls, glaring his way with hatred in their eyes. And the soldiers gathering beyond —who simply watch and wait, making no move to save him…” Randolph’s gaze moved behind us for a moment.

I followed his gaze and saw that he was right. A massive window on the landing offered a sweeping, panoramic view of

Latakia and her surroundings. The rebel army was camped around the palace, yes. But you could also see the crowds and campfires clustered around the city's sealed-off outer walls. From up here, it did look like a huge army was sitting out there with no interest in attacking the rebels. But I knew that the majority of those people were simple merchants, adventurers, or ordinary travelers. They were never going to storm the city's walls.

"Until His Majesty comes to terms with these events, I won't move from this spot," concluded Randolph.

"And how long will that take?" asked Zanoba through gritted teeth.

"Ah, how I wish I had the answer to that question. I do expect it won't take *too* much longer…"

"Enough of this! I have no time for your obstinacy!" Zanoba had finally reached his breaking point. He reached out for Randolph's shoulder to shove him physically out of the way—

"Huh?!"

—and was instantly sent tumbling back down the hallway.

The momentum carried him all the way down the stairs behind us. The back of his head slammed against the far wall, dislodging a sizable chunk of masonry.

"My sincere apologies for the hackneyed line, but—*you shall not pass.* Unless it's over my dead body."

As he spoke, Randolph drew the sword at his waist halfway from its sheath. The blade glowed a sickly shade of green, casting an eerie light into the darkness of the hallway. There was no doubt it was enchanted somehow.

Ah, shit. This is very, very bad. I don't have the Version One… we really shouldn't be fighting him.

"Calm down, Zanoba! Picking a fight is *not* a good idea right now," I warned him.

"But Master Rudeus…!" he protested.

Based on what Randolph said, he was simply protecting Pax and following his orders. Zanoba had come here to help Pax as well. We had no reason to be enemies. Of course, that logic wouldn't apply if he was a disciple of the Man-God, but the odds of that were low. This was way too convoluted to be a trap designed to kill me. And if the objective was to murder Pax and prevent Shirone's transformation into a republic, the Death God could have accomplished it a long time ago. Like…back when Pax was staying in the King Dragon Realm.

It couldn't hurt to ask, though. Just to be sure.

"Sir Randolph, we're willing to wait if you really think it's necessary," I said. "But I do have just one question for you first."

"By all means, go right ahead."

"Does the name Man-God mean anything to you?"

Randolph grinned at my question. It was a spine-chilling smile, worthy of the dark and silent castle that he stood in.

"Yes, I'm familiar with the name. What of it, might I ask?"

With a harsh, rattling chuckle, he admitted it. *He admitted it.*

We had a reason to fight now.

Randolph was a disciple of the Man-God—acting on his orders, furthering his schemes. I didn't know what that scheme *was* yet, but Randolph had caused this situation, and its outcome would work to the Man-God's benefit somehow. That made him my enemy. An enemy I had to defeat while I still had the chance.

I had to kill him—and I think he saw it in my eyes.

"So it comes to this after all? What a pity."

Randolph drew his sword, illuminating the hallway with its greenish glow. Zanoba took up his club in response; Roxy raised her staff as well.



And so, without further ado, it began. Our battle against one of the Seven Great Powers was underway.

Chapter 10:
Wasted Effort All Around

WE'D STUMBLED OUR WAY into a battle against the Death God. I hadn't planned to fight him without the Mark One, but it was too late to back down now. I couldn't let myself hesitate.

"Raaaaaah!"

Zanoba made the first move, rushing forward down the hall.

We were facing one of the seven most powerful fighters in the world, but he didn't seem to give a damn. With all the tactical sophistication of a wild boar, he sprinted straight at Randolph and swung that massive club at him, shouting as he did so.

"Goodness," remarked the Death God as he neatly sidestepped the attack. Exactly as I expected that he would. You couldn't shrug off Zanoba's attacks; when he landed one, it was always going to be a bone-crunching crit. The problem was that he didn't stand much chance of hitting Randolph.

It was my job to change that. I'd already summoned a Quagmire on the exact spot Randolph had hopped over to.

"Oh, my…"

As his feet sunk into the muck, the Death God's body swayed.

"Ice Smash!"

In that same moment, Roxy fired off a well-timed offensive spell. The Death God deflected it with a flick of his sword, but the motion left him even more off-balance than before.

Zanoba's follow-up attack was already on its way. With all the strength that had enabled him to hold the Immortal Demon King immobile, he swung his club with stone-shattering force.

Despite his awkward posture, the Death God managed to nimbly evade this second blow, but it was plain for all to see that he

was in no position to counter-attack. He'd fallen on his rear—the soles of his feet in the air, sword pointing in the wrong direction, weight on his left elbow.

The look on his face was one of pure astonishment.

"What on earth? This can't be…"

We had a chance to finish this. I shot a look at Roxy, then stepped forward.

Zanoba, for his part, was already charging for the kill. I held both hands out toward the Death God and channeled mana into them. If Zanoba landed his attack, we'd won. If he didn't, I'd use my Eye of Foresight to fire off Electric in whatever direction Randolph moved toward. Once I had him paralyzed, I'd use the magical weapon on my left arm to hit him with a deadly Stone Cannon barrage. Even if he somehow managed to avoid *all* of that, Roxy and I could keep up the pressure steadily until he lost his balance again. Eventually, he'd get unlucky.

We hadn't worked out this strategy in advance or anything, but we ended up coordinating perfectly. We backed Randolph into a corner.

"Hrrngh!"

Once again, Zanoba swung his club viciously at the Death God.

But this time, something *unbelievable* happened.

The Death God blocked his strike. He blocked Zanoba's club, swung with the inhuman might of a Blessed Child. And he did so with his bare hand.

It was an incredible feat of strength. The man had clearly earned his place among the Seven Great Powers.

In the end, though, that wasn't going to save him. His arm broke under the strain. This was it—checkmate.

"*Move*, Zanoba!" I shouted.

Zanoba leapt reflexively to one side, and a purple flash of lightning burst from my right hand. With a crackle that lingered in the air behind it, the bolt of electricity struck the Death God and danced over his body.

I'd landed a direct hit.

Randolph's body stiffened in shock and slumped over like a falling tree. He stared at me, pallid face twisted with bewilderment. His Battle Aura might have prevented my spell from frying him, but it couldn't prevent the paralysis it caused.

Now all I had to do was finish him off. Mana coursed into the weapon mounted on my left arm, and I fired off my follow-up attack.

"Shotgun Trigger!"

A hail of Stone Cannon spells, each with the power of a King- or Emperor-tier attack, flew toward the Death God. This Stone Cannon was my killing move, my specialty. Orsted himself had complimented its power; when I landed it squarely on target, it was even capable of harming *him.* My timing was perfect, the opportunity too beautiful to pass up. The Death God had no way to dodge this. This was no attack you could just shrug off.

We've won.

"…Huh?"

And then, a split-second after I'd convinced myself that it was over—all my Stone Cannons disappeared. Reduced to puffs of sand in midair, they fell harmlessly against my target.

I couldn't make any sense of it.

"Oh! Sir Death God!" cried Randolph, his gaze turning to something behind me. "Have you come to save me?!"

What?! The Death God?! Isn't that who we're fighting right now?! Was he misleading us from the very start?!

Heart pounding fiercely, I spun around in search of this sudden new arrival. And in the hall behind us, I saw—

No one at all.

The only thing back there was an empty staircase, illuminated by the moon.

"Rudy!"

By the time I heard Roxy shout my name, I was already falling. As I pitched backward, I caught a glimpse of blue hair down at my waist. She'd thrown herself against me. With no time to wonder *why,* I turned in midair to wrap my arms around her protectively.

I hit the stairs back-first an instant later. My Magic Armor creaked in complaint, but I hadn't been injured.

"Wha—"

I looked back up toward the hallway and saw a *very* startled-looking Zanoba…and the Death God, who had clearly just swung his sword.

The man was moving *just fine.* Hadn't I paralyzed him with Electric? Hadn't he been crumpled on the floor? It made no sense. What the hell was going on?

"Word to the wise, Sir Rudeus—a Death God *always* stands behind his prey."

His face was perfectly composed, his tone completely confident.

And finally, finally, I understood. It had been an act. He'd *allowed* me to shock him with my spell. He'd *deliberately* stumbled, *deliberately* fallen. All of that, just to coax me into turning back.

Damn it! Orsted warned me about the way Randolph fights! I should have seen that coming half a mile away!

Still, how had he managed that trick earlier? Why did my Stone Cannons just disappear like that? Had he used Demon Eye somehow?

…No. On second thought, I'd seen this one before. It was the same as when I'd used magic on that Manatite Hydra. Which meant —

"You've got a Stone of Absorption on you, huh?"

“My, my,” he said. “You saw through that quite quickly… It seems your reputation was well-earned.”

The Death God held out his hand, fingers spread wide. A Stone of Absorption was embedded in the palm of his leather gauntlet. I hadn’t noticed it before, but he must have used it to drain the mana from my spells. Orsted never mentioned anything about him having one of these…

Could that be one of the stones *we’d* brought back from that labyrinth in Begaritt? It wouldn’t be surprising for an elite knight of the King Dragon Realm to collect items of that kind…and that was the sort of thing Orsted might not even know about.

Well, whatever. I got a little cocky there at first, but I never expected to beat one of the Seven Great Powers *easily.* It would be tough to beat someone capable of totally canceling out my magic, but I knew exactly how those absorption stones worked. You had to extend your hand in the direction of the incoming spell and feed the stone a bit of mana. I just had to make that impossible.

Getting behind him seemed like the way to go. This landing didn’t give us a lot of room to maneuver, but with the three of us working together, there had to be some way to get it done. From the looks of things, he only had one of those stones on him. Maybe if Roxy and I cast spells at him simultaneously from in front and behind, while Zanoba charged in to attack…

Well, I knew it wasn’t going to be that simple. But if it didn’t work out, we could try something else. Trial and error was our only real option here. He’d have to go down *eventually,* right?

“Roxy, I need you to slip behind Zanoba, please.”

Silence. There was no reply. Come to think of it, Roxy hadn’t moved a muscle since we came tumbling down here, had she?

Wait. Was my hand wet? It felt like her shoulder was a little damp or something…

“…Hm?”

What the hell? It’s all red…

“Roxy? Wh—oh, god. What is this?”

There was a long gash in Roxy’s robe, and blood seeped from underneath it.

My heart pounded in my ears. Memories of the past flashed vividly before me—images of a man who died pushing me to safety. Images of his body lying lifeless on the ground.

Paul had died saving me. And now history was repeating itself…

Roxy! No! What?! No, I have to be dreaming!

“No, no! This can’t be happening! Roxy!”

“…I’m afraid it *is* happening,” she grumbled. “Would you please stop poking at my wound? It hurts.”

I jerked my gaze away from her injuries and I found Roxy glaring with the narrowed eyes of a fairly irritated woman.

“Uhm, right. Sorry.”

I’d overreacted somewhat. When I released Roxy from my arms, she murmured a healing spell that stopped the bleeding immediately.

Thank goodness. She scared the hell out of me for a second there…

“What’s this?” murmured Randolph from above, stroking his chin quizzically. “I was *quite* sure I’d struck a fatal blow…”

I admit I shivered a little at those words, but my wife was obviously fine. It seemed a bit weird that a guy who called himself the *Death God* couldn’t tell whether he’d killed someone or not, but hey, even monkeys fall out of trees sometimes. Instead of taking Roxy’s life, he’d cost me a few years of mine.

Better luck next time, you bastard. Let’s get back to it.

“Hm?”

Just then, there was an audible series of *cracks* from around Roxy’s neck. I saw the necklace I’d given her before we left break

apart and fall in fragments to the floor. A moment later, the ring she wore on her finger shattered too.

As I recalled…that ring was supposed to deploy a barrier in response to physical attacks. And the necklace was designed to absorb a single lethal blow.

“Ah, so that’s what did it,” said Randolph lightly. “*Now* I see.”

I shuddered involuntarily. It felt like a blizzard was howling through my body, draining all the warmth and confidence from me as it went. And I could have sworn that frigid wall of wind was descended from where the Death God stood.

I knew this feeling—I’d lost my nerve. But recognizing the problem didn’t mean I could *do* anything about it. Reflexively, I wrapped one arm around Roxy and held her tightly to me.

“R-Rudy…?”

This was it. We had to stop. I hadn’t planned beyond this. I’d made that necklace as an insurance policy against this scenario. It wasn’t luck that had kept Roxy alive, in other words—it was my foresight. But there would be no more safety nets from this point on. The man we were fighting could kill us *instantly* with a single strike.

Trial and error? How many trials could you really hope for, against a monster like this? We had no Continues left. If we kept this fight going, *one of us was going to die.*

What the hell had I been thinking, anyway, picking a fight with one of the Seven Great Powers at close range with no plan or preparations? Orsted had *warned* me to keep my distance unless I had the Magic Armor on. This whole thing had been a massive mistake from the outset.

“Zanoba, back off! Now! We need to get out of here!”

“Master Rudeus?!”

“We can’t beat him like this, all right?! We need to get the Version One if we’re going to stand a chance!”

Zanoba didn’t lower his club, but he did take two steps backward and frown at me over his shoulder.

“Oh, I think you’re putting up a respectable fight,” murmured the Death God. “In particular, that last attack was *very* nasty. I’m not sure I could ward that off again, now that I’ve revealed my trump card…”

Not gonna lie, I thought we had him in the first half. But I wasn’t buying this crap now. Randolph was lying to me. Orsted had explained it clearly enough. The Death God lured you into attacking or defending. These words were another part of his technique, that was all.

Then again…could I be *sure* of that? Maybe he’d turned off his Enthralling Blade mode and spoken his actual thoughts. That comment wasn’t exactly subtle, after all. What if he was trying to make me *think* he—

Arrrrgh! To hell with this!

Bottom line, *nothing* this man said was trustworthy. And there was at least one thing I knew for sure: I couldn’t beat the Death God. Not like this. That had been drilled into my head in a single terrifying moment.

Zanoba seemed to feel differently, however.

“If you won’t fight, Master Rudeus, just stay right there and watch. I’ll face this man alone, force my way past him, and see my brother face-to-face!”

Once again, he charged at the Death God.

For me, the next few seconds played out in slow motion. Zanoba took one step, then another, his progress maddeningly sluggish; all the color drained out of the world, and sounds faded into silence.

In my Eye of Foresight, the Death God was already moving—far faster than the stumbling man we’d fought a little earlier. He was a *blur*, too quick even for my superpowered senses to follow.

Time snapped back to normal.

The flash of a blade left an afterimage in the air.

“Zanoba!”

Randolph's sword had caught Zanoba low on the flank and cut diagonally to his shoulder. Zanoba's suit of armor shattered, and his body was sent flying upward; he hit the ceiling hard, and plummeted to the ground just in front of me.

The world was still strangely quiet. It felt like I was having some surreal nightmare.

"Huff…huff…"

My heart was pounding so hard it hurt.

Was he still alive? That strike had *pulverized* his armor. Its thick breastplate and pauldron had broken like they were made of glass. How was it even possible to shatter metal like that with a single swing of your sword? I couldn't begin to guess.

"To think my Armor-Crushing Slice could be endured…"

With those words from the Death God, my hearing finally returned to normal.

It was true. Upon closer inspection, there wasn't a scratch on Zanoba. The tunic under his armor was slashed cleanly through, but there was nothing but a bluish bruise on the skin beneath.

"Urgh… Ggh…"

With a groan, Zanoba pushed himself to a sitting position and glared fiercely up the stairs at Randolph.

"You're quite the impressive specimen, oh, Blessed one. It would seem that slicing you to pieces may not be practical."

The Death God met his gaze from above, that horrific smile stretched firmly across his face. Then he slowly slipped his sword back into its sheath.

"That said, I'm no adherent of the Sword God Style…I feel no pressing need to use my blade exclusively. You're quite vulnerable to fire magic, as I recall? King Pax mentioned something of the sort."

Oh, hell. He can use magic too? But at least Zanoba's armor should nullify any fire…wait. Damn. There's no way that enchantment's gonna work when it's all smashed up like this.

Zanoba was back on his feet. The man *still* hadn't given up. He picked up his club and put one foot on the stairs, tensing for another charge.

Roxy got up as well. She stepped forward with her staff raised, ready to support Zanoba—and placing herself protectively in front of me.

Finally, I got to my feet. Zanoba was one very stubborn man. He might keep fighting until Randolph literally killed him. I couldn't sit back and let that happen. Plus, I couldn't allow any harm to come to Roxy. If she died here, I'd die too—in spirit, at the very least.

"You haven't given up, then?" said Randolph, studying us with no particular emotion in his eyes. He hadn't assumed any stance, nor was he chanting the incantation for a spell; he was just *standing* there, confident and relaxed. It seemed he had no intention of launching an attack before we did.

He'd claimed we were putting up a "respectable fight." What a joke. It felt like he was taking it easy on us. The man had nullified my entire barrage of Stone Cannon spells; he could have canceled out all our magic from the very start. But instead, he'd let us cast at him and teased me into carelessness. He could very well have other tricks up his sleeve as nasty as the first one.

What had Orsted told me again? When you want to defend, attack instead…when you want to attack, defend? Could that mean my current hesitation was *exactly* what the Death God wanted?

I couldn't tell. I had no *idea* how to proceed. He had me second-guessing every single thought. Roxy's necklace was gone. So was Zanoba's armor. We had no idea what kind of tricks our enemy was capable of, and even the Version Two might not protect me from even one attack.

This wasn't going to work. It just wasn't. We *needed* to back off, at least for now.

But what about Zanoba?

I had to talk him down. If that didn't work, I'd have to knock him senseless from behind. Then we could fall back to the Version One

and regroup for another try.

"You understand now, Zanoba? This is hopeless. If you keep charging straight at him, you're going to die."

"But Master Rudeus, Pax could be—"

"The Death God was waiting for *something* here," I interrupted. "We've got some time to work with! Let's regroup and come back with a plan."

I saw Zanoba hesitate. On some level, he had to know we stood no chance right now.

"Oh, are you leaving now?" said Randolph. "What a pity… I think His Majesty will be finished up quite soon."

Ignore him. It's another trap…

"Yeah. We'll be back soon, though," I called up, watching the Death God warily. The only question now was how easily he'd let us go. "I'm sorry for attacking you so suddenly, all right? I guess we got a little carried away. Do you think you could find it in your heart to let us leave for now?"

I wasn't expecting this pathetic whimpering to work, of course. Even as I spoke, I was steadying my breathing and looking for some sign of how he might react. Most likely, we'd have to fight to retreat back to the Magic Armor along the route we'd taken here; once we got to it, we could finally turn on our heels and battle. If he chose not to chase us all the way, so much the better.

"Well, if that's what you want…go right ahead."

Huh? Wait, he's just gonna let us walk away?

That was a bit anticlimactic. Randolph's actions didn't seem especially…coherent. What was his objective here?

"Uh, Sir Randolph," I said, "what instructions did the Man-God give you, anyway?"

"Hm? None whatsoever. I've never met him in my life."

What?! "But…you said you knew his name!"

“A relative of mine was acquainted with him some time ago, and I learned the name from him,” Randolph explained. “That’s all there is to it, really. I’ve never seen this Man-God or communicated with him in any way.”

Oh, hell. So that means… “You’re *not* one of his disciples?”

“I’m not sure exactly what the term implies, but I suppose not.”

Goddammit, I jumped to conclusions! What is the matter with me lately?!

I asked for further clarification. “Does that mean you’re not an enemy of King Pax, either?”

“I am a staunch ally of both King Pax and his Queen Benedikte, I assure you. They were the only ones to ever compliment my cooking, you see…”

Exasperated, I continued pressing him. “So there isn’t some weird ritual going on inside there or anything? And you’re not just buying time until it’s over?”

“Well…I suppose you could call it a ritual of sorts. But I’d rather not elaborate with such a young lady present.”

The Death God’s eyes darted in Roxy’s direction as he spoke, and she scowled at the patronizing comment. To be fair to Randolph, she really didn’t *look* like a woman with a husband and a child.

Anyway. As much trouble as I was having with processing all this, it seemed this fight had been totally unnecessary. And in that case…I probably owed the Death God an apology, didn’t I?

Yeah. Sure felt that way.

“Uhm… Okay then. I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions. It sounds like we’re on the same side here… Let me apologize again for attacking you like that.”

“No. It was my fault as well,” replied Randolph, bowing *his* head to *us*. “I should have explained myself more clearly.”

Wow, what a nice guy. Glad we got all that cleared up…

Ugh. Wait a second. What if all of this is just another part of his act? What if he's just buying time while he charges up his super instakill move or something? Okay, dumb example. But you never know!

Damn it, I can't even think straight anymore. If this really is the next number in his puppet-master act, he's got me doing the tango on his palm…

"Oh?"

Just as I was getting myself all worked up again, Randolph glanced backward and visibly relaxed. I didn't let my guard down a bit, of course. I wasn't about to let myself get careless now.

"It seems it's over…" Randolph muttered.

Over? What's over, Randolph? Our lives?!

"Come now, there's no need to be so wary," he said, glancing my way. "I have no intention of killing you three."

"…Uh-huh, very believable. Didn't you say something about a *fatal blow* before? Maybe I was hearing things?"

"Haha, I suppose you've got me there… I must say, you're quite the wit, Sir Rudeus."

Oh, good. I'd amused Mister Skull-Face. Not that I'd been trying to.

"In any case, King Pax ordered me to let no one enter until the thing was finished. And now it is, so I've fulfilled my task." Returning his sword to its place at his hip, Randolph settled back onto his chair with a little sigh. "Please feel free to enter."

Could this be another trap? Maybe he planned to cut us all in half the moment we walked past him. Seemed plausible to me.

Randolph studied us before asking, "Does the thought of showing me your back disturb you? I suppose I could excuse myself for a moment…"

"That won't be necessary," said Zanoba, securing his club back to his waist. "We'll take you at your word."

And so, inspired by my friend's brave example, I finally decided to believe that the fight was truly over. Our battle against the Death God had ended as awkwardly as it began.

***

The king's chambers occupied the top floor of the royal palace. It was the finest suite anyone could have asked for, an extravagant testament to the Kingdom of Shirone's wealth. The walls were lined with paintings. Beautiful statues stood on finely crafted desks. And near the back of the room, there was an *enormous,* canopied bed—the thing had to be almost five meters wide.

The sheets were rumpled. In the middle of the bed, a blue-haired girl was wrapped in them, sleeping quietly. It was Queen Benedikte, and judging from the clothing scattered carelessly on the floor nearby, she was lying there naked.

A familiar scent hung in the air. Two people had very recently been loving each other very much…in a way you can't describe within earshot of a child. So Pax and his queen had been getting busy up until just a moment ago. The man *was* aware his kingdom was falling apart around him, right? Talk about nonchalant.

Pax himself was out on the balcony at the moment, leaning on its railing and gazing out at the capital below. His stubby limbs and large head made him look almost childlike, and his features were more homely than regal. He was clad in only his underwear, showing off a back that was moderately muscular. It was also covered in scars and faded bruises.

The story of his life was written on his body.

"I was wondering what all that commotion was about. So you've returned, brother?"

The instant Pax turned back toward us, I realized how wrong I'd been about his state of mind. He had the face of an exhausted man. A man on the verge of giving up entirely. But he seemed oddly

calm as well. Randolph had said something about Pax “coming to terms” with his situation. Apparently, there had been some actual… coming involved in the process.

I mean, I’ve been there. Sometimes you’ve got to let it all out…

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’m here to rescue you. Let us abandon the palace and make our way to Fort Karon together.”

Zanoba strode up to the balcony, and extended his hand to his brother. Pax looked at it dubiously for a moment, then snorted. “You want to *rescue* me? Surely you’re not serious.”

“Your Majesty, it would be wisest to surrender this position for now and gather our strength elsewhere. You can take the palace back at any time once we’ve gathered an army of sufficient size.”

“…And then what? Do I repeat the cycle once again?”

Pax met Zanoba’s gaze with eyes so cold I nearly shuddered. If you’d told me *he* was the real Death God, it would have seemed almost plausible in that moment.

“Repeat…what cycle, Your Majesty?”

The reply to Zanoba’s question was another disdainful snort. Muttering “as if *you’d* understand” under his breath, Pax’s gaze flicked out over the balcony once again.

“Comical as it may sound now, I did my best to rule this kingdom well. I dismissed the corrupt ministers my father left behind, and gave their posts to others more deserving. I gathered mercenaries to guard against the threat of war. I won’t deny that public safety suffered as a result…but I was trying to secure a *future* for Shirone.”

Pax slumped back against the balcony’s railing, then pointed at Zanoba.

“That was the same reason I allowed your return, brother, and gave you that unreasonable task. It seemed the wisest choice available. In all honesty, I still hate you—but I do respect your usefulness as a Blessed Child.”

“I’m well aware, Your Majesty. And I understand how difficult these decisions were for you.”

Zanoba’s reply sounded calm and reasonable to me. But for some reason, it seemed to infuriate his brother. Clenching both hands tightly into fists, Pax glared at him with bitter fury in his eyes.

“You don’t understand a thing! *No one* understands me, and no one cares to try. Just look, you fool. The proof is right before your eyes!”

With a wide sweep of his arm, the king gestured at the world beyond his balcony. The city far below us lay silent in the night, despite the ring of rebel bonfires burning all around the palace. You could barely make out the huge crowd massed around the city’s walls; their campfires and tents were visible even from here. At this distance, it really did look like Latakia was surrounded by a massive army.

“A horde of soldiers, my own troops, and yet they make no move to crush these rebels!”

“You’re mistaken, Your Majesty. The large majority of that crowd consists of ordinary citizens, not soldiers. Many among them are simply merchants or adventurers of unclear origin.”

“What difference does that make?!” shouted Pax bitterly, slamming his fist against the railing. “It’s still proof that everyone in this kingdom has rejected me!”

I was starting to feel a bit alarmed, but forced myself to keep looking on in silence. This wasn’t the time for me to speak. Zanoba was the only person here who might be able to calm his brother down.

“That’s simply not true. Not all your subjects have turned against—”

“Don’t patronize me! You yourself could have led an army to this city, but instead there’s only three of you. And the other two are here to keep *you* safe, not me! Isn’t that right?!”

“Well, er…”

Pax wasn't wrong about that. I'd been opposed to helping him in the first place. In all honesty, I didn't care much what happened to him, or even to Shirone—I was here because I didn't want Zanoba to die. Period.

"That's what I thought! It's always been this way. No matter how hard I try, no one gives a damn. Whenever I convince myself I've succeeded, everything crumbles apart mere moments later. My efforts always backfire in the end! Always!"

Pax paused his diatribe for a moment. Just long enough to jab an accusing finger in Roxy's direction.

"Roxy!"

Startled by the sudden attention, Roxy froze in alarm and made no reply.

"You know what I mean, don't you? Or have you forgotten entirely by now?"

"Wh-what—"

"Think back to the moment when I mastered my first Intermediate-level spell!"

Roxy's eyes darted around uncertainly. Did she even know what he was talking about?

"I studied to the best of my ability! I practiced, and I practiced! And when I finally succeeded, what was your reaction?!"

"Uhm…well…"

From what I could see out of the corner of my eye, Roxy seemed completely flustered by this question. I couldn't tell if it was because she'd forgotten all about this, or because she remembered all too well.

"You sighed, damn you!" cried Pax.

"Wha…"

"As I celebrated my accomplishment, you *sighed* at me!"

"I…uh…"

“You might as well have come out and said it: *About time. Took you long enough.* Do you have any idea how crushed I was?!”

Roxy’s eyes went wide, and she bit her lower lip. Was this story actually true? It was incredibly hard to believe. She’d always been so happy for me every time I made the slightest progress…

“And still, despite it all, I adored you! You treated me *less* dismissively than almost anyone I knew. Even after that awful moment, I desperately strove to catch your interest. But to no avail! Your mind was always elsewhere, and your eyes looked right through me! You were too busy writing letters—to some man I’d never heard of—to so much as glance in my direction! Why, I began to ask myself, was I even bothering? Why work so hard, when all my efforts were so clearly wasted?! My motivation waned and failed. So then you *gave up on me entirely!* You looked at me like I was a rotting piece of garbage, and your lessons grew more half-hearted by the day! In the end, you shrugged and left Shirone for good!”

Pax tore at his hair with both hands as he ranted on and on. The memories must have been flashing vividly through his mind. His eyes were rimmed with tears, and grew more bloodshot by the second.

“I…I’m sorry, Pax. Back then, I was—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear your excuses!”

Roxy fell silent. The expression on her face was one of deep regret.

I guess some people might have stepped in here to say “*No effort is ever wasted”* or something equally cliché, but I had no right to be lecturing him on that subject. Since my arrival in this world, at least, I’d gotten plenty of external validation for my efforts. When I tried my hardest, I usually got results. Not to say I never failed, of course—but when I succeeded, there were people there to compliment me.

How would I know if effort was its own reward? I’d never been in this guy’s shoes.

“Oh, never mind. It’s not like you were wrong about me, clearly.”

Abruptly, Pax deflated before our eyes. His shoulders slumped; his voice grew softer.

“His Majesty handed me the Kingdom of Shirone on a platter, and look what I’ve made of it. No one accepts me as the king. No one rallies to my banner. Instead, they flock to join a rebel army in the name of some random *child* who may not even be a prince. And in their uprising, I’ve lost all the knights the King Dragon Realm entrusted to me. I can only imagine His Majesty’s disappointment.”

Pax smiled in bitter amusement. Tears flowed freely down his face.

“In the end, I suppose it was only Benedikte who ever truly cared for me. She loved me as I was, for what I am. Words never came naturally to her, but she smiled for me, and that meant the world.”

It seemed that Pax’s earlier bellowing had been audible from the ground. I was starting to hear the murmurs of distant conversation from the bonfires around the palace. Maybe some of the soldiers had spotted Pax up on the balcony.

Pax glanced down at them with a look of dull disinterest. “Tell me, brother…what *should* I have done?”

“I would not presume to say. However, I imagine killing all our siblings went a bit too far.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose that’s true. But if I’d let them live, I think they would have started another rebellion much like this one.”

“You…may be right.” Zanoba paused for a moment, then shook his head as if to chase the thought away. “In any case, everyone makes mistakes. And once you’ve reflected on them, you can apply the lessons you’ve learned to your next endeavors!”

The words echoed through the king’s chambers, filling the entire floor with Zanoba’s cheerful voice. You had to hand it to him—

the man had an amazing ability to ignore even the heaviest of moods.

“It seems I’m incapable of that. All I ever do is repeat the same mistakes, over and over again.”

The slow, steady way Pax shook his head in that moment looked *exactly* like the way Zanoba did it sometimes. The two of them were completely different in appearance, but they had a lot of mannerisms in common, at least.

Raising his head, Pax glanced at something behind me. “Randolph?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

I startled. Just a little. The man was standing right behind me, and I hadn’t even noticed his approach. Kind of unnerving, you know? What with the whole *always stands behind his prey* thing?

“Proceed as I instructed earlier, please.”

“Your wish is my command, Your Majesty.”

“Good, good…”

What were these instructions he’d given earlier? Were we about to find ourselves back in battle with the Death God? Our positioning was *terrible*, if so. He had gotten way too close. Without the Version One it would be a tough fight anyway, but if the fight started at point blank range, we didn’t stand a chance.

All these thoughts flashed through my head instantaneously. But before I could react in any way—

Pax hopped up and over the railing of his balcony.

“Wh—”

Wait, this is the fifth floor. Is he— Huh? He jumped off the damn balcony?!

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

Zanoba sprinted forward. There wasn’t the slightest chance he’d make it in time, but he ran anyway, his hand outstretched desperately. He grabbed hold of the railing with both hands, and

leaned forward…and his momentum ripped the metal off the balcony, sending him tumbling into the air.

“Zanoba!”

My heart pounding with panic, I spun around and ran out of that room as fast I could.

We found them in the palace gardens.

Zanoba was kneeling in the dirt, his face blank with shock, cradling his brother’s lifeless body in his arms.

“H-hurry, Master Rudeus,” he croaked as I approached. “Use your healing magic…”

Kneeling, I retrieved a scroll from within my robe and placed it against Zanoba. The fall from the fifth floor had left him visibly bruised and battered.

“No, no…use it on *Pax…*”

I shook my head without a word.

Pax was already dead.

It looked like he had hit the ground head-first. It was a gruesome sight. I wanted to believe he hadn’t felt any pain, at least.

“He’s…gone?” asked Zanoba quietly.

“Yeah. I’m sorry, Zanoba.”



I hadn’t even considered that he might suddenly leap to his death like that. But in retrospect, it might have been his intention from the start. Pax had been surrounded by his enemies, and felt he had no allies he could turn to. Maybe that was why he’d never tried to flee the palace—he thought he had nowhere to go.

Maybe he’d anguished over the situation for days on end, ultimately deciding he was a complete failure as a king. Maybe he was ready to die from the moment we walked in that door.

“Master Rudeus…”

Still cradling his brother’s body, Zanoba looked up into the night sky. The top floor of the palace was visible far above; a beautiful full moon hung in the sky beyond it.

There was no king in that majestic castle now. It was nothing but an empty shell.

“How could I have failed so completely?” Zanoba asked.

I didn’t know what to say.

“Were all my efforts simply meaningless?”

“No,” I answered. “You did everything you could, Zanoba. I mean it.”

Pax hadn’t recognized his brother’s efforts for what they were. He was desperate for others to acknowledge his own hard work, but couldn’t do the same for Zanoba.

I mean…in all honesty, it felt like the man was barely even aware of Zanoba as anything except another piece on his chessboard. But that could have changed over time. Pax *could* have eventually learned to trust Zanoba. I’d always thought of Pax as an irredeemable scumbag, but even so…I felt like Zanoba would have gotten through to him eventually.

“Why… Why did it have to come to this?”

“…I wish I knew, Zanoba.”

For a little while after that, Zanoba brooded wordlessly. He eventually looked up at me with the expression of a man who’d just

remembered something.

"Could it be…that this too was the Man-God's doing?"

I still had no idea what strings the Man-God had been pulling. None of his disciples had revealed themselves. But in the normal flow of history, Pax was destined to turn this kingdom into a republic eventually, following a few twists and turns. Now those events were never going to happen; if the Man-God was involved, that was probably the reason. Maybe his one and only goal this time had been to cause the death of Pax.

That pixelated bastard could see the future. He didn't have to send someone to murder you if he could set off some series of events that he knew would drive you to despair and suicide, right?

Well…maybe. To be honest, that sounded like a really slow, roundabout way of doing things. Maybe the Man-God had played no direct part in anything that occurred here over the last few weeks.

But in hindsight, there *was* one thing I knew for sure: he'd arranged for my first visit to this kingdom, many years ago. That directly resulted in Pax's exile to the King Dragon Realm. And according to Orsted, the Republic of Shirone would cause the Man-God problems in the future. He'd acted to prevent it from coming into existence at least once. It seemed safe to assume that he'd always been looking for ways to deal with Pax, one way or the other.

What a disaster. I should have realized all this from the start. I'd jumped to all sorts of conclusions, some of them less than reasonable, because I hated Pax too much to think the damn thing through.

"Yeah," I finally replied. "It's possible."

"I see…"

Zanoba gently lowered his brother's body to the ground, then exhaled very slowly. His expression suggested he was crying, but no tears ran down his face. I don't think I would have been so stoic in his shoes.

After a long silence, he turned to me and murmured “Let’s go home.”

I nodded. There wasn’t much more to be said.

Chapter 11:
Aftermath

I SUGGESTED WE CREMATE Pax; incinerating what was left of his remains and burying him seemed the best choice to me. That was, after all, one of the most universally common ways in this world to hold a memorial service for someone who'd passed.

Zanoba shook his head and stopped me before I could go through with it. He reasoned the rebellion wouldn't end if they didn't have Pax's remains. His voice was flat and unaffected as he elaborated that it would be better to leave him intact instead, so that chaos reigning within Shirone could finally subside.

Pax had been a king, for however short his reign had lasted. I didn't think it was right to hand his corpse over to the rebels, but there was something indescribably persuasive about the way Zanoba talked me down. In the end, I made no further argument, instead using my water magic to at least clean Pax up before we carried him back up to the fifth floor.

By the time we arrived, we found Randolph with Benedikte draped over his back and luggage in his hands. Roxy had apparently helped him; per Randolph's request, she had dressed the naked girl and fashioned the sheets into straps to keep her safely secured to his back. Once she was done, she'd snatched the clothes from the closet and stuffed them into a bag for Randolph to take with him. She did this all without uttering a word.

"What of His Majesty?" Randolph asked. Those were the first words out of his mouth when he saw us.

"Dead," Zanoba answered flatly. "I will hand his remains over to the insurrectionists in order to put an end to their rebellion."

Randolph's expression remained placid, revealing nothing. That was the biggest indication to me that he already knew before he'd even asked.

“His Majesty requests I take his queen with me and escape, that I might deliver her safely back to the King Dragon Realm,” Randolph explained.

I was even more confident now that he had to have known that Pax was contemplating suicide. Much as I wanted to demand why he hadn’t stopped Pax, I had no right to drill him about it.

“In that case,” said Zanoba, “it would probably be best that you come with us. We know the way out.”

“Very well, Your Highness. Your consideration is deeply appreciated.” Randolph bowed his head to end their brief exchange.

We had been at each other’s throats only moments ago, fighting to the death, and now Randolph was accompanying us peacefully. Normally, I would have kept my guard up, suspicious that this could be the very trap the Man-God had laid out—that the last battle was still lingering just on the horizon. But I knew better than that. It was clear that Randolph had no desire to battle us. It was strange how I knew that, but I did.

Randolph Marianne, the Death God, ranked fifth among the Seven Great Powers. His strength put him on a level that far exceeded my own, and yet even he looked fatigued. Not that he was the only one, of course; Roxy and I were bone-tired, too. If someone suddenly barged in and pleaded with me to fight with him again, I would probably limply shake my head. Not a single one of us had any energy left. Zanoba was no exception. He stayed deathly quiet.

In total our group numbered four—five, if you counted Benedikte. We lumbered down the stairs, our footsteps heavy as we made it through the exit tunnel and its narrow passages to make our escape.

It was still pitch-black outside, hours away from dawn breaking, when we made it back to the watermill. My Lamplight Spirit raced through the darkness, illuminating the way until its light hit upon the Magic Armor we’d left sitting beside the watermill.

“Is this…the Fighting God’s armor?” Randolph asked abruptly. He stared up at it, dumbfounded.

“No, this is something Zanoba and I put together,” I said. “It’s a magical implement—Magic Armor, as we call it—used for intense battles.”

“Oh, is that so…?” he murmured thoughtfully. “Yeah, if you’d used this thing, I might have been in a bad way.”

I shook my head. “I’m not so sure. Ultimately, I was powerless in the face of your Enthralling Blade.”

Randolph grinned. “You had me cornered before I even had a chance to use it.”

“Sorry?”

“Your synchronized attack left me pretty battered, and the last of my mana was pretty much drained getting rid of those Stone Cannons you launched at me,” he explained, as if trying to comfort me.

In other words, perhaps his *real* Enthralling Blade had been him pretending he still had plenty of fight left. My own cowardice convinced me not to press the attack, but if I had, we could have won. That’s what it sounded like, anyway, but who knew if his words now were genuine.

No, either way… I started to say to myself, unable to do anything but sigh. *I guess not fighting was the best option anyway. Win or lose, it wouldn’t have mattered. And now I only feel more exhausted from thinking about it.*

“By the way, Sir Randolph, you said you knew about the Man-God, right?” I decided to ask the question while it was on my mind. It was a rare thing for anyone to know of the Man-God, and after all my efforts here, I’d let Pax die anyway. It would be pathetic to walk away from this with nothing to show for all my trouble.

“Yeah, not that I know much of anything about him,” Randolph answered.

“Well, would you mind telling me what you *do* know?”

“Sure, I guess. All I heard was that a relative borrowed his power long ago to face an extremely powerful foe.”

I furrowed my brows. “An extremely powerful foe, you say?”

“He did it to protect his fiancée. At the Man-God’s suggestion, he stole the Fighting God’s armor, wore it himself, and went into battle with the Dragon God Laplace—who, at the time, was said to be the strongest in the world. Poor sod wasn’t able to protect his betrothed in the end, though, and the battle nearly took them both out.” There was a brief pause as he finished before he chuckled and tacked on, “Who knows if any of it’s even true.”

I was pretty sure I had heard a story like that before. Yes, come to think of it, Kishirika and Orsted had said something similar—about how the Dragon God and Fighting God had battled.

“It was a story I heard a lot when I was younger, when alcohol was involved. Figure it’s probably complete fiction, but…I grew up hearing it all the time, so naturally, the Man-God’s name stuck with me,” Randolph continued.

This was, in fact, pretty valuable information. He was recounting a story about one of the Man-God’s previous disciples. Though I suspected Orsted already knew about this, following up on it couldn’t hurt.

“So, who was the name of this relative?” I asked.

“The Demon King of the Biegoya Region, Badigadi.”

Oh. Uh, hmm. Maybe it was complete fiction then. The Badigadi I knew was heroic, if not a bit half-hearted at times. I could imagine someone making up such a story about him. Not that I thought Orsted was lying about the story at all, but people often claimed other people’s valorous deeds for their own.

“Thank you,” I said, voice trailing off at the end.

After all was said and done, I was totally wiped. I didn’t even have the energy to say anything else. To think I’d been on the edge all this time over nothing.

Sigh.

I didn’t want to think anymore. I just wanted to go home and crash. I had not slept for an entire day, to be fair.

“Randolph, what do you plan to do now?” Zanoba asked.

“I plan to return to the King Dragon Realm.”

“After that?”

“I’ll protect Her Majesty till she gives birth. Then, I’ll teach her kid—academics, swordsmanship, and culinary skills too.”

“Gives birth”? So Benedikte was pregnant, then? It was hard to tell by looking at her.

“I was told to give the kid lots of praise as they grow up, so they may end up spoiled rotten,” Randolph confessed with a shrug.

“I see,” Zanoba murmured.

Benedikte would birth the child, and Randolph would raise it. I wondered if Benedikte knew that Pax was planning to die. Perhaps the natural thing to ask them was why they hadn’t stopped him if they knew, but I wasn’t about to pose that question to either of them. They couldn’t have stopped him. And it was likely that they were the ones who felt the most miserable about his passing.

“Sir Randolph, would you permit me one last question?” Zanoba asked, as if something had suddenly crossed his mind.

Surrounded by darkness, Randolph tilted his skull-like face as he waited for Zanoba to make his query.

“Why did you stick by Pax for so long? Because the king of the King Dragon Realm ordered you to do so?”

Randolph wore a thin smile. “Nope. I did it because I liked the guy.”

“Very well, then allow me to extend my gratitude.”

“Gratitude,” Randolph echoed, as if testing the word on his lips. “Prince Zanoba, you are an intriguing man.” His faint smile remained as he turned to me and said, “Oh, by the way, Sir Rudeus…”

“Yes? What is it?”

“From what I hear, it’s best not to involve yourself with that Man-God. My relative said as much—doesn’t matter whether you’re on his side or against him, it won’t end well for you either way.”

“Wise words,” I said. A bit too late, though. If only Randolph could have told me that ten years earlier.

“Thanks to his relationship to this Man-God, my relative had a rough time of it himself,” Randolph continued.

Right, Badigadi. It did occur to me that Badigadi had once said something which implied he did know of the Man-God. Unfortunately, I had absolutely no idea where he was right now.

“Well, everyone, be safe,” Randolph said, bidding us farewell.

“You as well.”

He exchanged a handshake with Zanoba before turning on his heel and leaving. His skull-like face faded into the darkness.

Left on our own, no one spoke a word. We dragged ourselves inside the watermill and passed out, sleeping like a couple of logs.

***

We awoke by noon the next day and made our way back to the capital. The rebel army already moved into the palace, and the groups camped outside the walls had vanished. The chain once holding the gate shut was nowhere to be seen.

The Eye of Severance. That was what Randolph had called the Demon Eye he possessed, but I had no idea how it had kept the king’s enemies from infiltrating the palace. In any case, the effects had worn off at some point, either because Randolph had strayed too far from the castle or because enough time had passed since he activated it.

Pillars of smoke rose from inside the castle, likely from cooking fires. You could almost feel the elation from afar. Those inside were bound to be drunk on victory, much like the soldiers of Fort Karon were in the wake of our battle. And the atmosphere wasn’t confined to the palace. The celebratory mood pervaded all corners of the city, as if people were cheering for the fall of the foolish king and the

bright future that now awaited them. There was no sign of mourning or despair anywhere.

Pax's remains were put on display in the city's main plaza. The rebels declined to show him any decency, having stripped him of all his clothes. For some reason, there was an ugly cut on his shoulder, and he was covered in dirt. That, too, was the work of the rebels, who presumably wanted to present his death as though they had orchestrated it.

General Jade had made his proclamation: "Pax was an irrational tyrant. My nephew is the true king!"

Typical propaganda. Without an education in politics, I couldn't really say if Pax had been truly a tyrant. The label probably would have fit him years ago, but the man I'd met in recent days seemed neither irrational nor a tyrant. Sure, if you focused on the part where he massacred the entirety of the royal family, you could argue that he was a despot.

But even with these disgraceful rumors circulating, only a tiny group could be seen slinging stones at the former king's corpse. People hadn't loved him, but neither had they hated him. He had spent too long abroad and ruled for far too short of a period. If anything, most people probably thought, *So who the hell was that guy, anyway?* In other words, most were indifferent to his death. That was the impression I got.

Zanoba trembled as he watched. His eyes stayed wide open, fists shaking at his sides. Even I could feel bile rise in my throat. Perhaps it would have been better for us to cremate him after all. Maybe handing his body over to the rebel army wasn't the best idea. They probably knew they'd secured victory the moment they took control of the palace.

In fact, before all of that—I could have probably saved Pax from his fate. I could not have anticipated that he would leap from the balcony, but I could have sailed over the edge with him and deployed my magic from midair. Maybe then I—

No. It was no good entertaining such thoughts.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think he would jump. By the time he did, it was already too late. If anything, I should have realized that he was contemplating suicide sooner, but even that seemed like I was asking too much of myself.

“Did I make the wrong call again?” Zanoba suddenly blurted as I was lost in thought.

I had no idea what he was feeling. It was impossible to know how much he really thought of Pax, as his brother. All I knew from studying his face right now was that he had held some kind of special feeling for the man. Perhaps something in their past—something that I didn’t know about—that spurred such emotions in him.

“I don’t know,” I confessed honestly. “But seeing this should discourage people from trying to oppose the next king. And, I guess…the country will be more stable now?”

I couldn’t remember the name of this supposed thirteenth prince, but if I remembered right, he was only three. There was no way he could have incited all of this. General Jade must have been the instigator. I understood why he did it, but that didn’t mean I liked it.

I wondered if General Jade had actually been the Man-God’s disciple. Was I supposed to kill him then? But if his whole aim had been to kill Pax, those cows had already left the barn. Everything was already over. It was possible the Man-God had already withdrawn from here.

Best to leave things be, I decided.

There was no use spinning my wheels here. Whatever I did seemed unlikely to help our overarching goal. In fact, I’d lost all confidence in my own decision-making. The best thing to do would be returning home for further orders from Orsted. I needed to inform him about Pax’s untimely demise…but I couldn’t leave without Zanoba.

“Zanoba, I’m thinking about going back to Sharia as soon as tomorrow. What about you? Do you plan to stick around a bit

longer?” I asked.

“I intend to go back with you, but before we do, could we wait here for Ginger? I suspect she’s already headed this way,” he said.

“Oh, right. Okay, then.”

Whoops. I’d completely forgotten about Ginger. We did need to rendezvous with her first; we could leave once she’d rejoined us.

So we went and found an inn where we stayed for three days. We’d decided against heading toward Fort Karon to meet Ginger on the road. I was eager to head back home, but I also wanted to take in a little more of this country before we departed. I didn’t think we’d come across any groundbreaking revelations in the few extra days we were spending here, but I made sure to gather what information I could, nonetheless.

The hot topic of the town was, of course, the most recent incident. People spoke of how the rebel army surrounded the city, clashing with Pax’s royal forces. They described how the Death God Randolph had engaged General Jade in a death match that lasted several days. There was also talk of how wise and noble their new king was. It was all people talked about, from the markets to the mess room in the inn, to the wells where people gathered. It was hard to tell truth from fiction in these tales, and most seemed to be fabrications. History is written by the victors, as they say, cruel as that reality may be.

Of course, not all of these rumors were invented by General Jade. Some might have started as jokes, with eavesdroppers taking that humor as fact. Judging by how quickly the rumor mill worked, these whispers had probably already started while the enemy army was still camped outside the palace. People loved theatrics, after all. They do say truth is stranger than fiction. From my experience, reality was strange, but also mercilessly and depressingly unforgiving.

Among the intel I gathered, some rumors suggested that the next king would sell off half of the kingdom’s territory to its northern neighbor. Whatever happened to the ceasefire negotiations, I

wonder? Did the guys at the fort continue what we had started, or had all our effort amounted to nothing in the end?

I had no idea, and Zanoba no longer seemed to care. He spent most of each day in the inn lost in thought, sitting in his chair and spacing out. It occurred to me that he had lost all of his family now. His brothers, his fathers—everyone. He'd called this country his home, but his place here was gone. Maybe he no longer felt like this place was worth protecting.

He wasn't particularly depressed or brooding, though. He simply spent most of his time in quiet contemplation. Perhaps thinking about what he'd do from here.

The person who got depressed was in fact someone else entirely—Roxy. She had hardly spoken for the past few days. She barely touched her food. When night came around, she spent her time staring into the fireplace with a despondent look on her face.

Pax's death, it seemed, had come as a great shock to her. I could see why. At the very end, Pax only had words of reproach for her. It was as if he blamed her for his suicide. If I were in Roxy's shoes, I'd probably be at a loss too.

"I'm back," I called out.

After a long pause, Roxy responded, "Welcome back." She hugged her knees as she stared vacantly at the fire, as she had for several days now.

I took my seat beside her as usual.

"Hey, um, Roxy…"

The conversation died there as usual. Everything I could think of saying to her seemed so cliché and insensitive. I couldn't bring myself to force the words out, even if they could assuage whatever guilt she felt.

"It's true," she murmured, speaking for the first time. "I did sigh at him back then."

Roxy didn't look *at* me as she spoke, but I could tell she was speaking *to* me. Her lament didn't stop there.

“I mean, the day that Prince Pax mastered that intermediate spell. He was so elated when he came to show me, and I just sighed at him. I may have even muttered to myself, ‘It sure took you long enough.’”

“That would be hurtful,” I acknowledged.

Roxy clutched tightly at the hem of her robe. “Honestly, I think when I was teaching him, I kept comparing his progress to yours. I found myself thinking things like, ‘Rudy could have grasped this instantly,’ or, ‘Rudy would have learned this at the snap of my fingers.’ And because of that, I saw him as being beneath you. Maybe I really did look down on him.”

I had learned intermediate magic almost instantly. Roxy herself picked it up just as quickly, I assumed. Not everyone found it so intuitive, though. I’d found that out the hard way by teaching Eris and Ghislaine. Pax had probably done the best he could. He put in effort, contrived his own methods for using the magic, practiced them, and finally reached the next level. He was probably hoping Roxy would shower him in praise for his accomplishment, but to his disappointment, she’d sighed. If Roxy had done the same thing to me back when I was living in Buena Village, then…well, I probably wouldn’t respect her the way I do now. I might not have married her either.

“At the time, I was more focused on the power and spells I hadn’t mastered. Even after I reached the King tier, I had my sights set on something even greater. Perhaps I was arrogant, and ignored those who weren’t on my level.” Roxy chewed on her lip, squeezing her knees tightly.

I reached over and stroked her back. She trembled slightly under my touch.

“I thought I had learned from my past mistakes. I knew that I’d messed up and swore to do better,” she said, eyes welling up with tears. “But it seemed like I didn’t learn a thing. It occurred to me, if only faintly, that maybe I had failed as an instructor, but I tried to defend myself by insisting that no, it was the environment at the palace that was the problem.”

Tears began trickling down her cheeks as she continued, “I never realized it was my attitude that warped him. It never occurred to me—not once—not until he said so that day.”

As she broke into a sob, she pressed her face into her knees, as if trying to shut off her tears. She curled in on herself, shrinking even as I continued rubbing her back.

“I always thought I could just do better with the next student, but…Pax only had one chance to learn for the first time. And I blew it.”

Roxy continued to weep. I kept comforting her, letting silence fall between us. The only sound in the room was her sobbing. She was still trembling under my touch, but I didn’t let that stop me.

After a while, the tears subsided. When she lifted her head, her eyes were red and bloodshot.

“Rudy, do you really think it’s okay for me to continue being a teacher after this?” she asked.

How was I supposed to respond to that? I didn’t know. I wasn’t a teacher. The only thing I thought of was the one word I’d used to address her so long ago.



“Teacher,” I said.

The next words I had were superficial, plucked right from the pages of some manga or a video game, I couldn’t remember which. Maybe it was self-aggrandizing for me to say it. Maybe it would only provide empty consolation. And maybe I was only trying to obfuscate the problem.

“My teacher, you haven’t failed. You’ve only gained more experience.”

Others might judge differently, but I didn’t think it was wrong to say this.

“As long as you don’t repeat the same mistakes, then your other students will grow into amazing adults and find happiness of their own, just as I did,” I said.

Roxy stared at me. I studied her—the blue hair, the blue lashes, and those tiny, trembling lips. These were all things that I couldn’t have at one point in my life, but now things were different.

“Rudy, are you happy?” she asked me.

“Yes. I’ve been through some awful things, but thanks to your teachings, I’ve found happiness.”

“Rudy…you always say that.”

Of course I did. Because it was the truth. That wouldn’t change.

“I can’t explain it very well,” I admitted, “but the only reason I was able to take my first real step in this life is because you pulled me onto that horse with you.”

She shook her head. “You’re being overdramatic. I’m sure that’s because it was so long ago, and you’ve convinced yourself it’s a bigger deal than it really was.”

“True, maybe I am exaggerating a bit. But one thing is for certain: every time I failed, I remembered how you would keep moving forward even when you didn’t succeed. That gave me strength,” I said earnestly.

Yes, maybe having Roxy as a teacher did lead one of her students to choose the wrong path in life. I could have told her that she wasn't the only factor that led to his demise, but since she already felt personally responsible, as far as she was concerned, she may as well have pushed him over that balcony herself.

However, I *could* argue that there were other students who were still alive because she'd been their teacher. I was certainly one such example. She wasn't the only one who had kept me going, sure, but she had definitely been an important influence.

"I have no intention of telling you to just forget what happened," I said. "If anything, I think it's better if you don't. But at the same time, I don't want you to overlook the fact that there are other students whose lives you have saved, like mine."

I knew I sounded pompous saying that, but that was genuinely how I felt. I didn't want Roxy to dismiss her career as a teacher.

Roxy's jaw dropped as she stared at me. She seemed to be having some kind of epiphany. Her body trembled, and thanks to all the sobbing she'd done, snot was now trailing down her upper lip. In a panic, she buried her face back into the folds of her robe.

"Rudy," she murmured.

"Yes?"

"I'm certain Lara must have been trying to set things up so I would meet Prince Pax once again."

Who was to say either way? Only Lara knew for sure. Roxy might be convinced that was the case, but I wasn't so sure.

Yet, despite my reservations, I said, "…Yeah, I'm sure that must be it."

Roxy continued weeping for a while after that. I stayed beside her the entire time. But by the time the sun rose the next day, she was in better spirits than she had been for a while.

Five more days passed. General Jade made arrangements for the coronation. He planned to make a grand affair of it. Though I

doubted if the country's coffers could fund it, after all the financial strain between the coup and the hostilities with their northern neighbors, I understood the importance of putting on a show to make the change in leadership clear.

As whispers of the coronation plans spread, we finally managed to rendezvous with Ginger. After we left Fort Karon, she'd remained until she recovered enough of her stamina to catch up with us. Since she had exerted her horse well past its limits, she needed to find a new mount, which slowed her journey to rejoin us.

As she figured out what happened—in between seeing the situation in the capital and hearing our version of events—her expression stiffened, as if she thought it natural how things panned out. But almost as quickly, her face turned blank once more and she muttered an innocuous, "Oh, I see."

I couldn't blame her for not being torn up about Pax's death; he'd done horrible things to her. But that didn't make it any less depressing.

"Well then, Your Highness, what do you plan to do now?" she asked.

Zanoba hummed thoughtfully, considering the question.

"I assume…you most likely intend to continue protecting the Kingdom?"

Although Ginger's expression betrayed no emotion, her voice trembled slightly. Pax was dead. There was no longer anyone here who might threaten Zanoba's life. Yes, the next monarch might view him as a potential threat, but General Jade was a shrewd man. He wouldn't hold a personal grudge against Zanoba for his brother's misdeeds, and he would see the usefulness of having a Blessed Child on their side. There were still risks, but at least General Jade was someone who could be reasoned with. He would be much easier to handle and serve than Pax, if that's what Zanoba chose.

"No." Zanoba shook his head weakly. "I will be returning to Sharia."

After a short pause, Ginger nodded emphatically, suppressing a smile as she said, “Understood.”

I always thought she wanted him to be a shining example of royalty and abide by the duties that entailed, but her reaction told me she was more interested in seeing him healthy and whole.

I was relieved, honestly. I’d managed to achieve my initial objective—keeping Zanoba alive. Yet as I gazed at his face, my stomach twisted.

“Ginger,” he said, face firm with resolve. It was the same look of determination he’d worn when he first set off on this journey to Shirone. “I am considering…abandoning my country.”

“Abandoning your country?” Ginger repeated, confused. “Oh, you mean defecting? A fine idea. Ranoa Kingdom would surely welcome you with open arms. Perhaps if Lord Rudeus were to put in a good word, Asura Kingdom might even—”

Zanoba shook his head. “No, I don’t mean defecting.” He gazed down at her as she continued kneeling before him and said, “I am considering relinquishing my status as royalty. We’ll let people think I died in the course of this rebellion, and I will return to Sharia not as Third Prince Zanoba Shirone of Shirone Kingdom, but simply as *Zanoba*. And that, I believe, is how I shall spend the rest of my days.”

Ginger’s face clouded over. She probably disapproved. I had no idea what it really meant to discard your status like that, since I’d never possessed that kind of status to begin with.

After another short pause, she finally said, “I think that is also a fine idea.”

To my surprise, she didn’t oppose him.

Zanoba had lived a good life in Sharia. He would only lose face by returning to Shirone now. Even if he defected to another country, they would most likely use him for the power he had as a Blessed Child. If those were his only options, perhaps it was best to abandon his status so he could live the way he wanted. Not being royalty anymore might be financially difficult, but I could help him there. He

could become a specialized mechanic for my Magic Armor, and I could pay him a salary to maintain it. If that didn't appeal to him, he could do some kind of job in our mercenary company instead.

"Indeed," Zanoba said. "Ginger, you have been a faithful retainer."

"You honor me with those words."

Zanoba nodded, looking pleased with himself. For her part, Ginger seemed relieved.

"Having said all that, what do *you* plan to do now?" he asked her.

She stared back at him. "Why, I plan to continue serving you the way I always have."

His brow furrowed. "You may be my personal guard, but you are a knight of Shirone. If I'm no longer part of the royal family, then you have no reason to serve me any longer."

"For me, it's hardly relevant whether you're part of the royal family or not."

"Hm, but I won't be able to pay you, you realize? If I remember correctly, you have been forwarding your payments to your family, yes?"

"They have all since grown and become independent. There's no one I need to financially support anymore," she answered.

The sharpness in Zanoba's tone dulled as they continued arguing back and forth.

"You also realize that if you remain in my services for much longer, your chances of finding a suitable partner for marriage will wane, don't you?"

Come to think of it, how old is Ginger anyway? I'm pretty sure she's already missed the prime marriage age, at least as far as this world is concerned.

"Marriage?!" Ginger snapped, losing her patience. Her chin rose as she lifted herself so that she was on both knees, then she

threw her arms open wide. At first I wondered what she was doing, but then she threw herself forward, slamming her fists against the ground. It looked like she was prostrating herself. Perhaps this was the biggest sign of respect one could show in Shirone. It would make sense, given that Zanoba often did the same thing.

"Lady Minerva made a direct request that I look after you! It doesn't matter whether you're royalty or not. Nor do I care if I stay at your side in the capacity of a mistress instead of a knight. But I beg of you! If you're truly concerned for me, *please*, keep me with you!"

Her declaration was so sudden that I couldn't hide my confusion.

Minerva…if I remember right, that's the name of Zanoba's mother.

"Hm." Zanoba cupped his chin, as if considering her plea. He slowly crouched down and responded, "I hear you, Ginger. Lift your head."

Ginger did as she was commanded, eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"If you're truly that insistent, I will not push you away against your will. However, I will also not treat you as a knight or even a retainer. From now on, you will be my supporter. Understood?"

The tears finally spilled over, racing down her cheeks as she answered, "Yes, sir!" And then she lowered her head, prostrating herself once more.

I couldn't decide if it was a beautiful sight or not. From the outside, it seemed so surreal.

In any case, Zanoba had decided he would return home. Our mission here was done. I couldn't say we'd pulled it off without a hitch; we hadn't really solved any problems. The whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth. Not only was I despondent over my failure to save Pax, but it also seemed like all the effort we'd put in had been for naught, leaving only stress.

Lingering sentiments aside, it was over and done with. Time to go home.

Chapter 12:
Zanoba's Chosen Path

Zanoba

THERE WAS A TIME when I couldn't discern the difference between humans and dolls. The only difference was that one spoke while the other didn't. When I grew a little older, I was able to distinguish between them a little more, but they still felt the same to me. If you grabbed a human and swung them around a bit, their arm or their head would pop off, just like a wooden puppet.

I loved dolls. All dolls. Yes, there were some that were better made than others, but I adored even the inferior ones. In fact, the *only* type of doll I didn't like were humans. Despite being exactly like dolls, all they did was complain and try to rob me of my freedoms. I hated them.

It wasn't until I met my master that my view of them began to change. Even then, the shift was gradual. After he left, I headed for the Magic City of Sharia where the two of us reunited. At some point in the years after that, I stopped hating every single human.

I suspect Julie was the catalyst for that. She was a slave we—Master, Lady Sylphie, and I, that is—picked out together, one whom we intended to teach to craft figurines. At first, she could neither speak nor take care of herself at all, making her a burden.

But Master entrusted me with the task of looking after her. Though it was troublesome, it was no different from crafting a figurine; to craft one, you had to first whittle down a regular piece of wood until it took shape. Naturally, I resolved myself to be diligent with Julie's care and taught her everything one step at a time.

At some point during that process, Julie stopped being a burden. It made sense: she listened obediently and absorbed the

skills that Master taught her quickly. I watched as she gradually transformed into exactly the kind of human that I *do* like, so of course, I couldn't hate her.

I didn't realize that until Ginger came into the picture, though. From my perspective, Ginger was someone who always found fault in everything, and never stayed quiet about it. She'd call the most banal and irrelevant things "important." For example, if we were talking about a tree, she would keep fussing about the state of its leaves or branches, and even though I'd argue with her that solid roots—or a solid foundation—was what made a healthy tree, she would never get the point I was trying to make. Honestly, she was a pain in the neck.

It wasn't until we met again in Sharia that I stopped seeing her that way. She still complained incessantly, but somehow it didn't get under my skin. Why? Why had my feelings changed so much?

I knew it had to be my master's influence. He would never have abandoned me for any reason. It didn't matter that I was clumsy, that all I had going for me was my physical strength, or that I would destroy a figurine as soon as I created it. It didn't matter to him that I lacked mana and that I couldn't live up to his expectations. Nor did he seem to resent me for all the desperate, wasted effort he'd poured into trying to teach me his secret figurine-crafting techniques.

I had nearly given up on my dream. I was convinced I could never make figurines myself, that it was a skill reserved for gods alone. Master didn't throw in the towel. He tried all kinds of methods to teach me. He tried to find some way to include me in the process. I was grateful. Up to that point, not a single person in my life had ever truly looked at me as a person.

Had it not been for Master, I probably never would have realized that Ginger also looked at me for *me*.

Foolish as I was, it was only then that I finally understood the difference between humans and dolls. I knew it was important to make that distinction, but once again, being a fool, I didn't understand *why*. I only knew that it was. Master didn't spell it out for me. Instead, he led by example and helped me realize it myself.

I owed Master for guiding me, and I respected him for it too. In fact, I was even proud of myself for having the foresight to recognize him as my master.

Ever the buffoon, I unfortunately didn't understand some of my master's actions. Lady Nanahoshi—the girl known as Silent Sevenstar, Shizuka Nanahoshi—was one such example. She appeared to be studying summoning magic as a method of returning to her home. No one had ever elaborated on where exactly that home was, but I had no interest in knowing. Personally, I only had bad memories of my own home. I couldn't empathize at all with her intense desire to return to where she came from. From what I'd heard, Master's own memories of his home in Asura Kingdom were largely bitter. In spite of that, he devoted himself to helping Lady Nanahoshi. When she broke down, he dragged her to his own home and looked after her. When she was deathly sick, he traveled all the way to the Demon Continent to search for a way to heal her.

I helped too, but only because it didn't bother me to do so. If Master was doing something and it meant helping him, I didn't have to think twice. But that didn't change the fact that I didn't understand *why* he was helping her.

It was in the midst of all of this that something within me changed. At some point, I began developing some attachment to my own birthplace. There were some days when I'd find myself intensely nostalgic for Shirone's palace, in spite of how awful it had been. Nanahoshi was always talking about her home, so I could only assume that had rubbed off on me. That was likely why I immediately felt compelled to answer Pax's summons when I received the letter from him requesting aid. I did genuinely love my country and wanted to protect it if the need ever arose, so when it did, I felt like I *had* to go.

I was wrong.

When Master tried to persuade me to return home with him at Fort Karon, my heart wavered. I considered it. My days were so fulfilling and enjoyable back in Sharia, making figurines with Master, enough that I honestly considered abandoning my homeland for it.

But I couldn’t do it. It was like a wall went up, saying I couldn’t go back.

“Pax is my brother, so I want to save him.”

That was nothing more than an excuse I blurted out in the moment. It was a calculated move, since I knew it was the one thing that would surely convince him. Yet somehow, that answer also resonated with me. I didn’t know why. I’d heard before that if you speak a lie, sometimes you end up believing it yourself. I thought at first maybe that was it, but no, it wasn’t.

It wasn’t until after Pax jumped from the balcony and I saw his remains that I realized the truth. It brought a memory from the distant past back to the forefront of my mind.

My elder brother, the second prince, had been hosting a party, and I was invited. I don’t remember now what the party was for, but it was the type where attendance was mandatory. But I didn’t remember if I had actually even attended or not.

The one thing I did remember was that, by pure coincidence, the young Pax had been seated right beside me. This was before Lady Roxy began serving at the palace. Pax could not have been older than ten at the time.

We didn’t talk. We only sat beside each other. I sensed that he wanted to speak with me, but I couldn’t be bothered to engage in small talk. I didn’t even glance his way. And he never worked up the courage to speak to me. Even though he’d never said anything to me, in a way, I had ignored him.

As I cradled his dead body in my arms, I couldn’t help but think, *Why didn’t I say anything to him back then? Even a word or two.*

That dispelled any doubt I had. I finally understood. My own puzzling actions mirrored that of my master’s. It made sense to me why he helped Lady Nanahoshi now—he’d likely seen her as a little sister.

Why hadn’t I realized it sooner? Master had two biological sisters, and the way he interacted with Lady Nanahoshi was nearly

identical to how he treated the older of his two siblings. He kept a watchful eye on her, and if there was any trouble, he jumped in to help. He took care of her as tenderly as he did his real sisters.

I had been asking so many questions of myself. Why did I help Master in the Demon Continent? Why did I find myself recalling my homeland afterward? Why, when Pax's letter arrived, did I shake off the opposition of all those around me and resolve myself to return home? In the wake of the battle at Fort Karon, why did I feel compelled to rescue Pax? Why did I blurt out that lie about wanting to save him because we were family? And finally, why did that lie resonate so much?

I finally understood the answers. It all made sense to me. The puzzle pieces fell into place.

But it was too late. That was my folly—realizing it all too late. Pax was dead. We weren't able to save him like we did Nanahoshi.

Even so, there was still something left that I could do.

Rudeus

WE MADE IT BACK to Sharia. People often say things like, "Going is the easy part, it's coming back that's hard." That didn't really apply to us; we had a smooth return trip. I used my Magic Armor to draw our carriage back to the woods, where we had a teleportation circle prepared to take us back. Zanoba and I worked together to disassemble my armor, then hauled it back to the floating fortress. Roxy went on ahead while Zanoba and I stayed behind to pay our respects to Perugius.

He said a curt "I see," when he first saw us, and we filled him in on what had happened. Afterward, he guided us to the room we'd last spoken in and offered his own words of wisdom: "It's foolish to let any country tie you down."

Zanoba nodded earnestly and told Perugius he was abandoning his royal status, which left Perugius looking pleased. He even offered me some words of encouragement, saying, “You did well.” Honestly, I was relieved that I hadn’t lost a friend I enjoyed sipping tea with.

We also stopped by to visit Nanahoshi, who reacted to our return with a drawn-out sigh. I could understand her exasperation; Zanoba coming back like this ruined any sentimentality she’d felt during her teary-eyed, heartfelt farewell.

Anyway, Eris was due to deliver within the next month. The least I could do was be with her for the birth. The problem was that although I wanted to head straight home, I needed to do something else first. Namely, report to Orsted.

The Man-God had really pulled the carpet out from under me this time. On the plus side, I had succeeded in my goal of bringing Zanoba home safely, and I hadn’t died or been maimed. On the downside, we learned nothing about the Man-God’s goals this time around, and we failed to keep Pax alive. Orsted had already told me that someone pivotal to his plans would be born in the Shirone *Republic*, which meant he’d lost a powerful piece on the board because of this. It was an utter defeat.

Perhaps our return had been a bit premature. Maybe it would have been better to stay for a little longer and influence things so that Shirone would still wind up becoming a republic.

Nah, if it was that easy to turn the nation into a republic, then Orsted wouldn’t have ordered me to keep Pax alive.

Regardless, it was probably best to be completely honest about how it all turned out. If there was a way to compensate for this setback, I would do so.

“Okay, Roxy, I’m going to head to the office for a few. I’d like to stow the Magic Armor,” I said.

“All right. I’ll head on home and let everyone know we’re safe.”

The two of us parted at the entrance to the city, and I made my way toward the office. For some reason, Zanoba had decided to tag

along with me.

“Something wrong?” I asked him.

“No, but that armor helped keep me alive, so I thought I would thank Orsted for lending it to me and apologize to him for having destroyed it during our journey.”

“Oh, okay.”

It was odd that Zanoba wanted to thank Orsted directly. I figured Orsted’s curse would be potent enough to snuff out any positive emotions Zanoba had. Perhaps this sudden change was courtesy of Cliff’s painstaking research. Maybe Zanoba might start throwing punches once he actually came face-to-face with Orsted, but as long as I held him back, everything would work out, surely.

Feeling confident, the two of us walked together the rest of the way to the office. I stowed my Magic Armor, locked the door to the storage, and headed into the main building. We passed through the deserted lobby and made our way straight to the boss’s office.

I sucked in a deep breath before going inside. I was about to report that I’d failed, after all. Not like I hadn’t failed numerous times before (I had) but this one was a considerably larger failure than the others. He might reprimand me for it.

Maybe I’ll be lucky and he won’t be in today?

Nah. It would be better to get it done and over with.

Okay. Well, first thing’s first…time to knock.

Indeed, a courteous knock could put one in a good mood. I needed to keep mine calm and polite. I raised my fist and very lightly tapped it against the door.

“Rudeus, hm?” echoed a voice on the other side.

So much for the hope that he wouldn’t be in.

Despite my anxiety, I had already mapped out an explanation in my head. All I had to do was stick to the truth and be honest with him.

“Pardon the intrusion! I, Rudeus Greyrat, have at last made my return from Shirone Kingdom!” I threw the door open, barged in, and bowed deeply. When I straightened up, a strangled cry escaped my throat. “Gah?!”

Orsted was wearing a black, full-face helmet. I could only assume this new face—er, magical implement, I guess—had been newly crafted by Cliff.

“Seems you have returned safe and sound,” Orsted observed.

“Uh, y-yes.”

His appearance had taken the wind out of my sails, but I carried on. I had resolved to give a most sincere, accurate report about my mission’s failure. Yes, indeed. All I had to do was say, *“Sir Orsted, I achieved absolutely, positively nothing!”*

Hold up, that doesn’t seem right…

“Allow me to give you my report,” I said, and launched into a matter-of-fact overview of the events that transpired. I noted all the things I had been wary of, plus whatever signs I hadn’t noticed at the time. As I spoke, I was careful to keep a level head and lay out every detail one by one, so it wouldn’t be a problem if he wanted to be nitpicky. My report had a rhythm to it: first, I described an event, then what I felt about it, what I thought about it, who I consulted about it, what conclusions I drew and what actions I took. Then, I told him what the results were. I also included what I suspected the Man-God’s motivations were, and how I thought best to proceed in relation to that. I didn’t leave anything out.

“I offer my most sincere apologies. I failed to fulfill my duty, thereby allowing Prince Pax’s death.”

A suffocating gloom filled the air. I couldn’t read his expression beneath the helmet, and that only made it several times more terrifying than usual. Frankly, I preferred him without the helmet.

Actually, while we’re on the subject, why is he wearing that thing anyway? Couldn’t he just—I don’t know—take it off for me?

“The King Dragon Realm’s King, Leonardo Kingdragon, is one of the Man-God’s disciples. Most likely, General Jade of Shirone Kingdom is one as well. He manipulated the two of them in order to drive Pax into a corner, forcing him to commit suicide,” Orsted said.

So there were two disciples involved this time. The Man-God had used the King Dragon Realm’s monarch to support Pax, which then instilled in Pax the idea that he had to live up to the king’s expectations, lest he become a failure again. The king gifted him a queen and the Death God, which gave him every advantage. But at the height of it, the Man-God used Jade to orchestrate Pax’s fall.

That was my read of the situation, anyway. If the Man-God really could see the future, then he knew exactly which pieces on the board he had to move to coax Pax into taking his own life. Who knew if my interpretation was correct, but it seemed the most direct conclusion to draw.

“So who was the last disciple, then?” I asked.

“Perhaps the king of the Bista Kingdom, although there’s also a good possibility he didn’t employ a third.”

“Oh, come to think of it, the Death God did mention that Demon King Badigadi might have once been one of his disciples.”

There was a short pause before Orsted responded, “If he were a disciple this time, it wouldn’t make sense for him not to show himself.”

True. Badigadi was the type who liked to be in the spotlight.

As far as the Man-God was concerned, I was an irregularity. So it was likely he’d actively pick people I wasn’t likely to have met. Alas, I had failed to figure him out this time. I felt pathetic.

“We could still take Jade out, if you want?” I offered.

“It’s too late.” Orsted’s voice betrayed no emotion.

“Um… I really am very sorry about this.”

“I made an incorrect prediction from the start. After I disposed of Leonardo, I should have gone to Shirone Kingdom personally, rather than leaving everything up to you. That was my mistake.

However…” His voice trailed off. It didn’t seem like he was going to comfort me and tell me not to worry about it. Apparently my failure in this was rather far-reaching.

“Um, isn’t there anyone else who could serve as a replacement for Pax?” I asked.

“No.”

“There’s really no other option?”

He didn’t respond.

Was the Shirone Republic really that important to his plans? I had tried pushing him to consider another path, but he’d dismissed me twice. Now what? How was I supposed to salvage this?

“Sir Orsted, would you mind if I spoke?”

A voice broke in from behind me. I glanced backwards and found Zanoba standing there. How long had he been there? *Err, from the beginning, I guess, right?* He hadn’t spoken the whole time, so I figured he was waiting outside.

“Zanoba Shirone, hm?” Orsted murmured as though he hadn’t noticed Zanoba until now either.

No, there’s no “as though”—I think he really didn’t notice him until now. He probably couldn’t see anything in front of him with that helmet on. In fact, the realization just hit me that he was finally able to speak with that thing on. That had to mean he could actually breathe with it, unlike before.

“Firstly, allow me to extend my heartfelt gratitude to you for lending me armor to use during our foray to my homeland. It was unfortunately destroyed in the process, but happily, it preserved my life.” Zanoba took a step forward and bowed.

I still couldn’t read Orsted’s expression beneath the helmet, but that helmet probably helped mitigate whatever menacing aura he would have otherwise given off. *Right. I guess that’s probably why he’s wearing it.* He had probably sensed Zanoba’s approach and put it on for that very reason.

“If you wish to thank anyone, it should be Rudeus. Is that all you wish to say?”

“No, it isn’t.”

Strange. A moment ago, I was under the impression that was his only intention in speaking to Orsted, but now he advanced a step, as if trying to exude his own intimidating air.

“Judging by your conversation with Master just now, I take it that Pax was caught in the middle of your battle with this enemy? Is that interpretation correct?”

Uh-oh. Did he think that this was all Orsted’s doing? If so, perhaps it would be better to stop him now?

“It sounded to me as though you were the one trying to save my younger brother, though. Is that correct?” Zanoba went on.

“I wasn’t particularly trying to save him, no. What I wanted was a person who would be born in the country your brother would build.”

Confused, Zanoba echoed, “The country he would build? And you wanted someone who would be born there?”

Orsted was being more cryptic than usual. Honestly, I wanted to know more about all of this too. Without all the information, it would be impossible for us to rectify the situation.

“Sir Orsted,” I cut in, “if at all possible, I think we would appreciate a more detailed explanation, please.”

Orsted didn’t respond immediately. Silence dominated the room, only broken when I heard him suck in a deep breath from inside his helmet. Under any other circumstances, that might have eased some of the tension in the room, but I sensed anger in the way he gulped in the air. My anxiety ratcheted up.

“After becoming king, Pax Shirone would have created a republic,” he explained.

He’d told me that part before. What I wanted to know was what happened *after* that.

“After Shirone became a republic, a man who had once been a slaver would rise to prominence. A man by the name of Bolt Macedonius. Pax would have appointed this man to an important position.”

Huh. So the key person we needed here was Bolt Macedonius then.

“Bolt Macedonius would go on to be an authority in the Republic and put down roots there.”

“So what role does he play?” I asked.

“Bolt himself plays no role in my plans. But one of his descendants gives birth to the Demon God Laplace.”

Laplace? So that’s where he came in, huh?

“Now that Pax is dead,” Orsted explained, “I have no idea where Laplace will be born.”

In other words, Shirone becoming a republic was a precursor to Laplace’s rebirth.

“In that case, we could still make Shirone into a republic. Or we could at least make sure that Bolt Macedonius meets the partner he’s supposed to, so that he can marry and have kids,” I proposed.

“It’s pointless. Do you truly think I haven’t tried that before?”

No doubt Orsted had tried all sorts of things in the long loops he’d been stuck in. Apparently Laplace’s rebirth was a really unpredictable wild card, which was why Orsted had hoped to pin it down, making it easier to locate him. I suspected the Shirone Republic wasn’t the only domino required for this part of Orsted’s plan. He’d probably been orchestrating things for a hundred years just to make sure Laplace was reborn there. Perhaps some of my other missions had played a hand in that. But with one element gone awry, the entire house of cards had collapsed.

“Reaching the Man-God requires that I first kill Laplace,” Orsted explained. “After he reincarnates, he’ll spend a little while lying low before gathering his comrades and starting a war. At that point it would require significant effort and mana to dispose of him

and his followers, and then I'll have to face the Man God immediately afterward."

"Um, so there's no option to defeat Laplace, take some time to recover your mana, and then face off with him?" I asked for clarification.

"Laplace's reincarnation is largely set in stone. It always happens near the end of a loop. I have attempted to usher in his rebirth sooner, but to no avail." Orsted let out a breathy sigh. "Going through a war like that means I won't be able to reach the Man-God. This loop is a failure."

A failure. The word echoed in my brain, bouncing around. The scumbag inside of me screamed back, *Well then, why didn't you come to Shirone if it was so damn important?* But I kept silent. He'd entrusted this mission to me, and I had failed. This had been a test to see how useful I was.

I guess that means I'm done for then, huh? He's probably already fed up with me, isn't he? I assume that means he's going to give up on this loop. But if he does, where does that leave me? And what about my family?

"It's a bit hasty to call it a failure at this point," Zanoba cut in cheerfully.

Zanoba, did you actually comprehend everything he just said? I wondered if perhaps he was confused after all that talk of the future and what was to come.

He said, "If a war is coming and we must take down Laplace and his followers, then that means we should start preparing forces of our own to combat them."

"Oh?" Orsted said.

"We don't have to put together an entire army, but surely, we could begin gathering comrades powerful enough to stand toe-to-toe with Laplace."

Ooh, Zanoba actually said something good there. His plan made sense, too. If the main issue was that all of this would sap

Orsted of mana, then all we had to do was make it so that Orsted didn't have to fight.

"I understand that your curse makes it hard to gather such comrades yourself, but you have my master to assist you. And I will aid you as well." Zanoba took a few more steps forward and then went down on one knee, lowering his head. "Though my proposal is based only on what I understood from our short conversation, I won't deny that it may be off-base."

It sounded like a good idea, even if we didn't know if it would pan out or not. If, as Orsted claimed, Laplace's rebirth was fairly consistent in all loops, then we had about eighty years, give or take a few. In the interim, we could gather a group of strong allies—people like the Death God or Perugius—who we could then pit against Laplace when he returned. That would leave Orsted unscathed for the battle to follow.

"I don't know the precise details of the situation," Zanoba continued, "but I have heard that the two of you have combined forces to battle this 'Man-God,' as you call him. This Man-God…" Zanoba paused and lifted his chin, staring directly up at Orsted. Then he slapped his hands against the ground. "He's the one who killed my younger brother!" He pressed his forehead to the floor, prostrating himself. At least he did it less violently than usual, maintaining some grace even as he kowtowed. "I beg of you, allow me to be one of your subordinates as well, Sir Orsted."

Silence.

"I want to avenge my brother!"

Orsted's neck turned ever so slightly, as if he was glancing in my direction. I was pretty sure he couldn't see anything while wearing that helmet, but perhaps he wanted me to weigh in.

"With Zanoba on our side, we could make better progress with the Magic Armor. I think the suggestion he made a moment ago was smart, too. This failure has admittedly increased our future workload, and even one more pair of helping hands would—"

“Very well,” Orsted interrupted, not bothering to let me finish. He nodded and rose to his feet, gazing (or at least it looked like he was) at Zanoba. “In that case, I would have you work under Rudeus and take orders from him. If you propose we make more allies, then that is what we shall do.”

“Yes, sir!”

Orsted made his declaration without bothering to take off his helmet. Zanoba kept his forehead pinned to the floor the entire time. Just like that, I suddenly had a new co-worker and Orsted had a new subordinate.

Pax was dead, and Shirone would not become a republic. These two facts had largely derailed Orsted’s plan. We’d lost an enormous amount of progress. All because I hadn’t made the correct decisions.

On the flipside, we’d gained Zanoba as an ally. I had no idea what that meant for the larger picture, but at least my Magic Armor would see steady improvement with Zanoba on our side.

I had to wonder if I was proving to be beneficial to Orsted or not. From what he’d told me, all my efforts till this point had given him considerable breathing room, but I felt like my failure this time had undone it all. Perhaps I was becoming less of a help and more of a hindrance. Would my efforts in the future ever be enough to compensate for this?

No, they have *to be. I need to make sure they are. Otherwise there would be no meaning in Orsted rescuing me from the Man-God’s clutches.*

Besides, while Orsted might be able to casually abandon one loop for the next, I had only this single lifetime. It was a miracle that I got this do-over. I was unlikely to be lucky enough to get another.

And even if I was granted another chance to live as Rudeus Greyrat all over again, I wanted to live the life I had right now to the fullest. I’d already burdened Orsted with this screw up. If I impeded him any further, he might start seeing me as a destructive interloper

instead of simply a useless nitwit—not that that was much better—and cut me out completely.

If I didn't suck it up and do a good job now, there wouldn't be a next time. Should Orsted decide I did more harm than good, then in the next loop, I might be used by the Man-God again and try to find a way back to the past, only for my younger self to be pitted against Orsted and killed. Assuming he didn't decide to kill me sooner, that is. He could snuff me out when I was still a child in Buena Village, or after I started working as Eris's home tutor, or even when we ventured back to Asura Kingdom after being teleported off to the Deon Continent. What he decided to do with me next time depended on what happened this time.

Orsted was being kind to me now. I was sure there were a multitude of reasons for that, but it was probably a calculated move on his part. I couldn't forget that he was always contemplating his next loop, and that it was perfectly possible he was feeling me out to see what pleased me and what didn't.

During this mission, I'd been too dependent upon him as usual. Somewhere inside of me, I'd convinced myself that as long as I obeyed his commands, he'd swoop in to rescue me if I got myself into a tight spot and needed help. That things would just magically work out. A part of me genuinely believed that.

I couldn't keep leaning on Orsted like a crutch. I swore to myself that I wouldn't anymore.

Chapter 13:
It's All Right to Be Happy

WITH THAT OUT OF THE WAY, it was time to return to my family. Eris was close to giving birth so she might not be in the best mental state. She had times when she got depressed too, just like anyone else.

I decided to have Zanoba stop by our house too. I wanted to entrust Julie into his care again. Not that she had outstayed her welcome, but I figured she'd be happier with him.

Incidentally, Ginger was out scouting for a place they could live in—Zanoba had vacated his dorm room and it was no longer an option for them. Even if he decided not to go back to a dorm, though, wasn't there some way he could resume his studies at the university? He was only a few months from graduation. It seemed a waste. Perhaps if we put in a request with Jenius, he could pull some strings for us. Honestly, I was pretty sure that many went into research upon graduation as members of the Magicians' Guild.

"Well, Zanoba, I look forward to working with you," I said.

"As do I, Master."

At least Zanoba would stay with me from here on out. That was something to celebrate. Our research on the Magic Armor would proceed apace, and we didn't have to give up on selling those figurines either. Since Zanoba had lost his home here, I could always lend him money until he got back on his feet. Getting money involved usually led to unnecessary trouble, but I wouldn't hesitate if it was for Zanoba.

We arrived at the house as I was lost in thought. Byt was tangled around the gatepost. Between him and the green roof, our house looked like an ecologically conscious one.

As we approached, Byt opened the gate for us, as he always did.

“I can only hope that Julie hasn’t caused any unnecessary trouble for your family,” Zanoba muttered.

“I’m sure she did fine. She gets along well with Aisha and—”

Fwish!

As we entered the estate’s grounds, the air whistled as something cut through it. I instantly knew what it was; I’d heard this same sound hundreds and thousands of times before. Someone was practicing with their sword. I could only assume Norn had come back to visit.

Fwish!

Huh. Weird. Norn’s swings sounded more confident and sure than I’d ever heard before. I hadn’t overseen her training for a while, but the sound of it hadn’t been quite so sharp back when I was teaching her. It was more of a *fwoom*, and not a *fwish*, which signaled that the blade was moving straight and true. My own swings never made such a pleasant noise.

Yeah. In fact, this sound kind of reminds me of Eris’s—

I turned my gaze in the direction of the noise, and I couldn’t believe what I was seeing at first.

A lone woman stood there, wielding the stone sword I’d made for her to practice her swings. Her hair was such a vibrant red it looked like someone had dumped a paint can over her head. And despite the weight of the weapon—given it was stone—she handled it with ease, using only one hand.

Th-that’s my pregnant wife! Eris!

“Oh, Rudeus,” she remarked upon noticing me. “Welcome home. You got back kind of late.”

“H-h-hold up just a s-second!” I squeaked, stuttering uncontrollably. “Eris! What are you doing?!” I raced over to her.

You can’t be doing this, okay? You’re about to give birth. Yeah, yeah, I get you’re strong enough to handle your sword with ease, but that thing is heavy! Flexing your stomach like that is…

Wait a minute. Her stomach…?

I glanced down at her abdomen and found it unexpectedly smooth and trim.

Um… Where is my little baby?

“Huh?” I blurted. Just to be sure, I tested my hand against her stomach.

Ooh, amazing. She’s got a six-pack, and her muscles are super tight. This is definitely not the kind of pregnant tummy I’ve seen before.

“Uh?”

What in the world was going on? Had her sinewy six-pack somehow compressed our baby like shrink wrap? Oh, god.

No, stop it, I chided myself. *This is no time to be panicking.* Perhaps the baby had been pushed lower because of the six-pack. “Is it here instead?”

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Eris snapped, socking me in the face after I groped her bottom.

I gazed up at her, having been knocked onto my own bottom. Eris had taken up a wide stance, crossing her arms over her chest. Her chin jutted out as she gazed down at me and finally said, “It’s out now.”

“What’s out?” The words left my mouth before I could think them through, even though the answer was already obvious.

“The baby.”

“Whose baby?”

“Mine, of course!”

Eris…had given birth…to our baby.

I pursed my lips as I digested this information and sat up straight, legs neatly folded beneath me. “Um, pardon me for asking, but approximately when did this event take place?”

“Ten days ago! It was super late at night, but I got through it!”

Ten days ago? What was I doing then? Oh, right. I was still in Shirone. I was probably in an inn with Roxy, and the two of us were probably— No, there was no need to recount that part. Basically, what this meant was…

“I didn’t…make it in time for the birth?”

“Yeah. It would’ve been nice if you could’ve gotten back sooner, but it’s too late now!” A cocky grin spread across her face, as if she was trying to rub it in my face that she was perfectly capable of doing it all by herself.

Well now what? Should I prostrate myself? No, it wasn’t like I’d done anything wrong. We’d known this was a possibility before I left. I still couldn’t shake the guilt, though.

While I was too perplexed to properly respond, Eris furrowed her brows. “Wh-what’s with you? Aren’t you happy?”

No, that definitely wasn’t the case. “I-I am happy, but I feel a little…conflicted.”

“Oh! Right. It was a boy, of course! His name is Arus, just like the historic human hero!”

Was joy an appropriate emotion right now? I’d failed to fulfill the mission Orsted gave me. I’d let Zanoba’s younger brother, Pax, die. We’d managed to scrape by without the whole thing coming undone, but I’d screwed up so much of what we’d wanted to accomplish. My son’s birth was heartening news—if a bit sudden—but was I allowed to be happy about it, all things considered?

“Master!”

While I waffled back and forth over my emotions, the entrance flew open. A tiny figure with orange hair came darting out. She streaked right past me and launched herself at Zanoba, clinging to his thigh.

“Ah, Julie! My dearest apprentice, I have returned home!” Zanoba reached down, slipping his hands beneath her arms and lifting her into the air.

Tears streamed down Julie’s cheeks. Her tiny fingers clutched at his sleeves. “I…I’ve been waiting patiently for your return this whole time, Master!”

“I know,” he said.



It was a heartfelt reunion. In fact, Julie showed so much emotion at his return I almost started to question whether my family had been cruel to her while he was gone.

The next words to come out of Julie's mouth were jaw-dropping.

"You know, I…I love you from the bottom of my heart, Master!"

"Oh, you do, do you? I never realized—"

Before he could finish, she cut him off and kept babbling. "Please…don't ever leave me behind like this again! Please let me stay with you until your dying breath! I beg you. Please…!" she pleaded, voice heavy with sorrow. The way she spoke made it crystal clear how much she had worried.

Zanoba stared back, initially dumbfounded, but his lips soon gave way to a gentle smile. "You needn't worry anymore," he said. "From now on, I'll be with you. Forever."

"Master! Waah!" Her cry for him devolved into a fresh wave of tears.

Zanoba pulled her close and pulled her head against his shoulder. He seemed quite happy with her reaction to his return.

Oh, yeah, I realized. *It's true that Pax died, my mission was a flop, and the Man-God seized victory from our hands this round. But we came back alive. Zanoba, Roxy, Ginger, and I are all healthy and whole. We didn't lose any of them.*

That, at least, *was* something to celebrate. It was all right to be happy.

"Eris!"

I wasn't about to fight the sudden flood of emotion that washed over me. I threw my arms around Eris and planted a kiss on her. She was shocked at first, but responded by returning my embrace and kissing me back. My hands slipped down her back, finding their way back to her butt. When I squeezed, she tightened her arms around me and deepened our kiss. Taking this as an invitation, I slipped a hand around to her chest and began groping. The next instant I

found myself kissing not her lips but the ground after her fist smashed into my face again.

“You went too far!”

“Sorry!”

She squeaked in surprise when I leaped to my feet again and lifted her, cradling her in my arms like a princess. I couldn’t wait any longer. I wanted to see my baby’s face ASAP.

“So? Where’s our boy? Where is he?” I asked eagerly.

“In the house!” Strangely, Eris didn’t try to fight her way out of my grasp. She wrapped her arms around my neck, pausing only once to point at the house in response to my question.

“Hm…Master!” Zanoba bellowed.

“Yes, Zanoba!”

“I will respectfully take my leave for today! I shall see you again tomorrow! Be sure to convey my gratitude to Lady Roxy as well!”

“You got it!”

After that brief exchange, Zanoba spun around and left. Apparently he didn’t want to impose on our harmonious little family gathering.

I raced straight into the house, through the front entrance and into the living room where we found two girls seated on the sofa. One of them was cradling a baby in her arms.

“Look, Miss Norn, look! He just smiled!”

“Aisha! Come on, let me hold him!”

“Aw, fine,” Aisha grumbled back. “I guess you *have* held Lucie and Lara before. Oh, he’s touching my breasts. I guess he must be hungry?”

Norn shrugged. “Hard to say. We both know what his father is like.”

The two fourteen-year-old girls cradled my little man and fawned noisily over him. Hold up. My “little man”? That sounded like

a euphemism for something dirty…

“Okay, Eris, I’m going to put you down now,” I announced.

“’Kay.”

My sisters noticed us the moment I set my wife down. They glanced up at me, smiles on their faces.

“Welcome home,” said Norn.

“Good to see you back,” said Aisha.

They were smiling. Both of them were really smiling. I had a sudden flashback to Pax’s face, to the self-deprecating, resigned grin he wore before the end.

“Miss Roxy told us what happened,” Norn said. “About how rough it was for you guys.”

“Forget that. Here, take him,” Aisha insisted.

“Oh, yes. Right. Elder Brother, this is your baby, little Arus.” After taking the little bundle into her arms, Norn quickly passed him off to me.

I held him delicately and drank in his features. The little tuft of hair on his head was red, and his eyes were exactly like Eris’s. *This is my son…* Perhaps it felt so surreal because I hadn’t been present for the birth. Anxiety swelled in the pit of my stomach. My little boy gazed up at me, stretching his stubby little arms toward my chest. He patted his hands against me, like he was trying to grope at something soft, but sadly for him, my pecs were rock-hard.

“Gwaaah! Aaaah!” He immediately broke into tears.

All the tension in me faded, relief sweeping in to take its place. *Yeah, there’s no doubt in my mind now. This is definitely my kid—Paul’s grandbaby.*

“Um, Arus? That’s your daddy,” Norn supplied. “He’s not a stranger.”

“B-Big Brother, are you okay?” Aisha asked. Both she and Norn were eyeing me with worry.

Only moments before, the two of them had been holding him, calling him cute, smiling as they did so. It was clear how much they loved him already. I knew that they loved me too, as family.

Again, my mind drifted back to Pax. Zanoba had no children, but I figured some of his siblings probably did. Pax had murdered them all. Every single one. He couldn't love them. Chose not to. Wasn't loved himself, either.

Oh, I realized. *Maybe this was the kind of relationship that Zanoba wanted with Pax.*

My eyes heated, shimmering with tears.

"Hey! Why are you crying?!" Eris demanded.

"I don't know. I can't help it."

"Fine, you leave me no choice, then," she said. "Give me the baby. I'll hold him, so quit your crying."

"I don't wanna." I shook my head like a petulant child, continuing to cradle our baby as I sat on the sofa between Aisha and Norn. Tears kept trickling down my cheeks for a while.

I wondered why I could not give Pax the recognition he so desired, even at the very end. I thought, at the time, that I understood how he felt. Warped though his reasons were, I should have been able to grasp his justification for being unable to love others. The environment he was in was so harsh that putting in effort seemed ridiculous. I should have realized that too. I should have seen that, in spite of the cards being stacked against him, he'd clawed his way to the throne. I could have given him recognition for his hard work. That kind of recognition had the power to change people's attitudes. Sure, maybe I wouldn't have forgiven him immediately for all he'd put Lilia and Aisha through, but I should have been able to do something to dissuade him from taking his own life.

Someone must have heard my sobs because footsteps came echoing down the stairs. After a few moments, Sylphie and Lucie popped their heads in. Roxy followed close behind, holding Lara in her arms. Lilia and Zenith, who'd likely been in the kitchen, came through the doorway as well.

Sylphie had probably heard what happened from Roxy. She saw me weeping and silently began stroking my head. Lucie decided to mimic her mother, climbing into my lap before reaching out her little fingers to pat me on the head.

“Honestly, you’re such a crybaby,” Eris said even as she joined in with the head patting. Every single one of them was being so kind.

“Aisha… Norn…” I muttered, as the tears kept falling. “No matter what happens, I’ll always support you. If you’re ever in trouble, don’t think twice about turning to me for help. You might think I’m not very dependable, but I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to help.”

The two traded glances. Judging by the looks on their faces, they seemed to be thinking, *If anything, we’re troubled* right now *because you won’t stop bawling.*

I had to pull myself together. If I kept this up, they really wouldn’t turn to me for help when the need arose.

“Okay,” Aisha said, “got it.”

“Yes, we’ll be sure to heed what you said,” Norn agreed.

They nodded in unison.

Good. It looks like there’s no problems with our family, then.

I sniffled as I glanced at Roxy and Lara. Nestled in her mother’s arms, Lara looked as impudent as ever.

It was fortunate that my life hadn’t been in serious danger this time. Although, it might have been a different story if Roxy hadn’t been there. Roxy was so dependable! No matter how hard I tried, I was always weak. Without her at my side, I could easily have faltered partway through our journey. I had Lara to thank for throwing a fit and coaxing Roxy to tag along. No amount of gratitude toward the two of them would ever be enough.

“Roxy…you were amazing on this trip,” I said.

“You were too, Rudy.”

Our journey was over. It had been a rough ride. I'd found myself doubting things I shouldn't have, and it had taken a serious toll on me mentally. All I had to show for my efforts was failure and lingering trauma. I'd let Pax die. The whole thing felt like a nightmare, but it was over now. Tomorrow would surely bring new things.

Before it did, there were some things we needed to talk about.

"Everyone," I said, "I want you to listen closely to what I am about to say."

That day, I told my family everything about the Man-God. About him, about Orsted, about the war raging between the two of them, and everything that had happened to me in the past. I mentioned that Lara might be a savior in the future and even explained why I was cooperating with Orsted. I shared every detail. And once I said my piece, I asked them for their support. When the time finally came, I wanted them to stand up for me—and by extension, Orsted.

Every single one of them nodded. Every single one of them—Eris, Sylphie, Roxy, Lilia, and of course Norn and Aisha, too—were dumbstruck by this sudden flood of information. Lucie in particular didn't seem to really understand what was being said. But they all wore earnest expressions and bobbed their heads.

It was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

***

Okay, let's review the steps required to defeat the Man-God.

In order to reach him, we needed five hidden treasures passed down by the Dragonfolk, treasures that were originally created by their distant ancestors. Each of the Five Dragon Generals possessed one, and by using the Dragon God's secret art, the door to the world could be opened.

My future self had despaired upon realizing that he wouldn't be able to get his hands on the last treasure. I suspected Laplace was

the one who held this final piece. Judging by what Orsted said about needing to kill him, I surmised that we would need to defeat each general to obtain their treasure. The Maniacal Dragon King Chaos was already dead, likely done in by Orsted, which meant we already had the item he held.

Therefore, only four Dragon Generals remained: Holy Dragon Emperor Shirad, Abyssal Dragon King Maxwell, Armored Dragon King Perugius, and Demonic Dragon King Laplace. It was possible that Shirad and Maxwell were also already dead; Orsted wouldn't share that information with me. Perhaps because he was concerned about me—not wanting me to know of his actions when they could be construed as killing his own kind—or perhaps he actually felt guilty about what he'd done. Especially since he didn't seem to be on particularly bad terms with Perugius.

In any case, Laplace's rebirth was an absolutely essential part of this plan. He would eventually come back, reborn as a child. Orsted's objective had been to pin down exactly where he'd be born; it would be easier to strangle him in the cradle.

Unfortunately, we had failed to accomplish that this time. We no longer knew the location of Laplace's return, only that he would again launch himself into a war against the humans. Orsted needed to navigate that conflict and take his life. It seemed as though getting that last treasure would prove to be quite the trial, even for Orsted. Enough that it would leave him severely weakened going into his fight with the Man-God afterward.

Orsted had thus declared this loop to be a bust. Yet I felt that he hadn't entirely resigned himself to failure. Discouraged by this setback, definitely, but he hadn't given up. In fact, the more I thought about it, it was almost as if he'd predicted this outcome.

Take the situation with Ariel, for example. Orsted said that Asura Kingdom would face a great crisis a hundred years from now, but that it could be averted if Ariel became king. He also mentioned something about someone useful being born into Asura Kingdom afterward—I wasn't clear on the details of that—but I suspected he wanted stability in Asura Kingdom for the war against Laplace. Asura

Kingdom was chief amongst the world powers. If they could put up a good resistance and wear Laplace down, Orsted would have an easier time finishing him off.

It was also possible that Orsted may have suspected that his rebirth would be different in this loop from the moment he learned about me. There was plenty of reason to believe that the mere fact of my existence threw a wrench into the usual flow of events that led to his rebirth in Shirone.

I did find it somewhat odd that the Man-God had messed around with Laplace's return to begin with, but my doubts were quickly dispelled. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that while the Man-God's precognition couldn't account for Orsted's movements, he already saw Dragon Gods as enemies. If anyone had been waving the anti-Man-God flag for centuries, it had to be Laplace. He probably suspected Orsted would revive Laplace to try something with him. Somewhere in Orsted's loop, which spanned several hundred years, there must have been a moment where the Man-God realized what he might be up to, which led to him proactively obstructing Orsted's efforts. That would make sense. Anything the Dragon God tried to accomplish would only be to the Man-God's detriment, after all.

In any case, this iteration of the world was headed down a different path than the one Orsted knew from his many, many loops. My days of obediently doing Orsted's bidding and trying to set dominos in motion for him were over. If his plans were already completely derailed, there was no point in continuing to pursue them.

Laplace was going to reincarnate. There was going to be a war. If we didn't take Laplace down, we wouldn't be able to reach the Man-God. And it would be pointless if Orsted needed to spend the bulk of his power doing so. There was no way he could defeat the Man-God in such a depleted state.

This was where Zanoba's proposal came in. We needed to gather allies. Working separately from Orsted, we could freely seek out powerful companions to build our forces. We had about eighty to a hundred years until the war. That was time enough to set up an

anti-Man-God faction and bring in allies to support Orsted—or lay the groundwork for such a group at the very least. Orsted would have his own troops by the time we were through.

In all likelihood, I wouldn't live long enough to see the war. I wouldn't be able to take part in person. But I could still leave behind those companions and the organization we built together, trusting they would carry on my will. I was sure Orsted would go on to beat the Man-God for me as well.

This would be my goal for the rest of my days.

Extra Chapter:
The Death God and the Gluttonous Prince

MANY ROYALS RESIDED in the King Dragon Realm's royal villa. They were not, however, specifically King Dragon Realm royalty: these were princes and princesses from vassal states. Officially, they were studying here or had been brought in as foster children, but in truth, they were essentially hostages held to ensure said vassal states didn't rebel. This system resembled that of the *daimyo shonin seido* employed in feudal Japan to ensure followers remained loyal.

At any rate, these princes and princesses weren't very conscious of their position as hostages. As long as their home countries stayed compliant, their safety and continued stay were guaranteed, allowing them to live in leisure. Not all of them were so carefree, however. An ambitious few spent that time improving themselves and keeping a sharp eye out for any opportunity to climb the social ladder.

Pax was one such person. He had a sudden change of heart one day and threw himself into studying sword fighting, magic, and academia. He would exercise as much as he could in the morning, leaving the latter half of the day for magic and books. Pax swore he would keep up this daily regiment, but such a drastic change in schedule couldn't stay consistent for long. Lately, he'd started dedicating his hours in the morning to a wholly different pursuit. Namely, he started visiting the gardens close to the royal villa.

"That's when I told him—'Unhand that slave! I'll be the one purchasing him.'" As Pax practiced with his wooden sword, he regaled a nearby girl with a tale. "A scuffle ensued after that. Thugs came charging at me and cut each man down, one by one! Their big boss was the last one to approach me. He had a battle axe at least twice my size. He let out a roar so intimidating even the most hardened warrior would shake in his boots, and then he lunged at

me! I skillfully evaded his attack and unleashed my most powerful magic on him, hitting him right in the face! The man stumbled a few steps, and without missing a beat, I was immediately on him with my blade. Slash! And down he went!"

Pax made exaggerated gestures with his blade, even employing magic as he illustrated his fight in real time. Once his story drew to a close, he paused to glance at the girl. Her eyes were vacant, giving him no indication whatsoever of what she was thinking. But for some reason, Pax was able to read her expression. He hadn't been able to at first, but over time he'd begun to notice the tiniest changes on her face. Right now, her eyes shone more brightly than usual and her cheeks had colored. She looked as though she was genuinely enjoying his story.

Sweat dripped down Pax's brow. He remained quiet, frozen in the pose he'd struck at the end of his story, signifying he'd laid his enemy low. But after a few moments, he resigned himself and straightened up.

"Well, such a turnout would have been ideal, but nothing ever goes as perfectly as you picture in your head," he admitted. "All I did was provide backup to my bodyguards with my wind magic."

The girl looked no less impressed than before.

"But still, my lord, you became the leader of the slums," she said.

"Indeed. Regardless of how it happened, that much is certainly true—having defeated their leader, I now rule over the slums."

"Amazing."

Pax grinned. "Isn't it?! I may have had a slight case of cold feet during all the commotion, but that doesn't change the fact that I consolidated Shirone's ruffians! Go on, I will permit you to shower me with even more praise!"

"Amazing. Truly amazing."

Benedikte was the sixteenth princess of the King Dragon Realm. Her expressions were muted, giving little indication of her

emotion, and her tone was flat with little inflection. Yet the way she eagerly listened made it clear how excited she was about his story.

To be frank, Pax had dramatized his story more than a little. In a desperate bid to retain some dignity, he slipped in the part about him using magic to support his bodyguards, but the truth was he hadn't even done that much. It pained him to fib like this, but not a single soul in the realm listened to his stories as earnestly. It was only natural to get a little carried away.

"Tell me…more," Benedikte muttered.

In all honesty, the truth didn't matter to her. Since her family had largely given up on her education, she couldn't read, and no one else spoke to her like Pax did. She was locked away in the cramped confines of the royal villa; anywhere she went, they treated her like an eyesore. She woke in the morning, ate her food, and then wandered off to find a deserted place to waste away the time until her next meal. Then bedtime would come, and she'd start the whole dull routine again the next day. Amid all of this exhausting monotony, Pax's exciting tales were like a breath of fresh air. She enjoyed it.

"More," she repeated. "Tell me…"

"Very well then. Next, I suppose, I can regale you with the tale of when I visited Spring of the Faeries. Or at least, I'd like to, but we'll save that for tomorrow. This afternoon I have my studies and magic practice to attend to."

"…Okay."

"Wahahaha, such an admirable listener. But you needn't frown so! All you need to do is wait. Tomorrow will come whether you will it to or not!"

Anyone observing Pax these days would agree he was a diligent worker. Once he finished his morning training, he would dedicate his afternoon to his studies and magic practice. Admittedly he did slack off quite frequently in the mornings, yes. But he practiced his sword swings dutifully even as he shared his stories with Benedikte, so he was gradually honing his skills.

As for his normal education, he no longer had the luxury of a private tutor since he was abandoned by Shirone. He was left to continue his studies on his own based on what he remembered learning. His persistent efforts had slowly improved his reputation at the villa.

“But before any of that, we must eat! It’s time to return to the villa!” Pax announced.

“…I’ll see you off.”

“Wahahaha! There’s no need for that. No need at all.”

Pax parted ways with her and headed for his room. The gardens were located at the edge of the estate, meaning that Benedikte’s room was close, but Pax’s was quite far away. Benedikte was always reluctant to part with him, so she would walk with him partway. Despite the way people treated her, she was still the princess of a large nation, and one who actively tried to spend more time with him. That was enough to put Pax in high spirits, which inevitably led to him rambling.

“During my magic studies yesterday, I came upon a realization. It was nothing more than a thought, but when I looked into it, I found out my assumptions were correct. Which means that, from time immemorial, magic has been…”

From the outside, Benedikte looked like she was disinterested and spacing out. Her eyes, by comparison, were filled with curiosity and interest as she listened to him speak. The maids who served the royal villa—and the occasional aristocratic guest—would give them cold, disapproving looks.

“Would you look at that? The worthless worm from Shirone is clinging to the deadbeat princess,” one of the nobles scoffed in passing.

Pax froze. He felt the urge to turn around and get a good look at this naysayer, but he stopped himself. Each time he heard remarks like that, it made him queasy—made the bile crawl up his throat. He wanted to whip around, curse the culprit and behead them

for their insolence. But those hideous desires remained wishful thoughts. He knew better than anyone that he had no power here.

“Just wait, you cur. You’ll see,” he muttered under his breath, seething.

Benedikte’s expression clouded. She hadn’t received much education at all, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t think for herself. She understood her circumstances, and she knew that Pax was being denigrated for sticking close to her.

“Your Highness,” she said. “I’ll…”

“Enough! Don’t say it, you’ll only irritate me!”

Pax, meanwhile, didn’t see it the same way she did. He was used to being disparaged. He’d faced the same kind of talk all the time in Shirone.

“Look at me,” he insisted. “Look at my body, at these arms and legs. This is how I have looked since I was born. No matter what I do, people will always belittle me. I guarantee you this: they are not saying it because of you.”

He’d lost count of the times they’d had this conversation. Despite his reassurances, Benedikte grew despondent. She had never left the palace, so she didn’t quite understand. She didn’t see what was so different about his short, stumpy body or his stubby arms and legs. She couldn’t imagine how much ridicule he suffered through because of that.

In a way, they were both in the same boat. That was precisely what drew her to Pax. Despite his constant complaints about the odds stacked against him, he still pushed himself to fight them.

“Hm?” Pax paused just as they crossed the boundary between the main palace and the neighboring villa. “What’s the smell?”

A pungent odor hung in the air, its origin unknown. It was deeply unpleasant, like someone was cremating a corpse. Yet there was also something almost fragrant about it, too, like someone was cooking. The more Pax breathed it in, the more it stirred his appetite.

But he had to wonder: could something that stank this much be edible? His curiosity couldn't ignore the bizarre balance of this scent.

"Seems to be coming from the parade grounds," he muttered. "I'm intrigued. Shall we check it out?"

"But," Benedikte started to protest.

"Hmph. Would anyone really reprimand you for wandering a little from the royal villa? If they wish to monitor your behavior to that extent, they ought to at least appoint one person to observe you. Now, let's go!"

"Okay," Benedikte answered, sounding a little happy despite herself.

***

There was a painting in Shirone Kingdom entitled *Hell's Banquet.* It depicted five morbidly obese nobles throwing a dinner party. Which wasn't so strange, but if one looked closely, they'd notice the nobles had a skeleton serving them. Three of the aristocrats seemed to be none the wiser, locked in cheerful conversation. One of them had noticed and wore a shocked look as he frantically turned to the person seated beside him. The last member of their group was collapsed on the table. It was unclear whether they were sleeping or dead.

Pax didn't know much about this particular painting, but he did remember his older brother, Zanoba Shirone, standing in front of it and mumbling to himself as he studied the scene. Had the men there wanted to be a part of that banquet? If they hadn't, then why were they forced to sit there? And who was it that had prepared the food they were being served, anyway? Zanoba had been asking such questions aloud. Perhaps it was because of that encounter that Pax remembered the painting so well.

Perhaps the painting was depicting a scene like the very one I'm seeing now, Pax thought.

A makeshift outdoor kitchen had been set up on the edge of the parade grounds to teach new recruits how to cook. Five squires were at the nearby table. Each of them was deathly pale, their eyes wandering constantly to the kitchen. The pungent odor that emanated from there was the same one that Pax had caught earlier. The smell only grew worse as one got closer to the point that even Pax felt the urge to pinch his nose.

Most intriguing of all, however, was the man who was working in the kitchen. He was a skeleton…or at least, his face greatly resembled one. He wore a chilling smile as he stood over an enormous pot, stirring the contents.

“Heh heh heh,” he snickered to himself. “Just a little longer and it’ll be ready.”

The knights’ expressions contorted into looks of despair, as if they genuinely thought their lives were forfeit—that there was no running from this.

Perhaps the men in that painting had been in a similar type of situation. They were right about being unable to run. After all, the man concocting this macabre meal was someone Pax knew well.

“Death God Randolph,” he murmured.

Randolph Marianne was indeed known as the Death God, fifth among the Seven Great Powers. He served directly under High General Shagall as a member of the Blackwyrm Knights. He had no subordinates of his own and always worked solo. He was the strongest knight in the realm and had pretty much secured the highest possible position for himself. Despite his towering station, he’d personally gathered the squires to serve them a meal. It was no wonder they couldn’t run; Randolph had them literally and figuratively outmatched.

Nonetheless, Pax couldn’t help but wonder what all of this was about. “You men there, what is going on?” he asked.

“And you are…?”

“Seventh Prince of Shirone Kingdom, Pax.”

Despite being a foreigner, Pax was still royalty, putting him leagues above the men here. The men started to rise from their chairs to get on one knee.

“No need,” Pax interrupted them. “You are permitted to stay seated and speak as you are.”

They glanced between themselves before settling back down. Slowly, they began to explain the situation.

“Well, you see, we made a rather…uh, fatal mistake during the drills.”

Three days ago, the King Dragon Realm had conducted large-scale drills for their forces. These men were squires for High General Shagall Gargantis himself. While the drills had proceeded smoothly, these boys had screwed up spectacularly. They hadn’t properly secured the saddle on Shagall’s horse. Seconds before he made the command to charge, he took a humiliating fall into the dirt. Fortunately, the healers nearby tended to him immediately, which meant the rest of the drill went on without incident. That was the only reason they got off with a scolding instead of a more severe punishment. Shagall, meanwhile, was not spared the embarrassment of having his fall witnessed by every member of the royal family present to oversee the drills.

It was little wonder the squires were so depressed. Their mistake had brought shame on the very man they so revered. If the circumstances had been different, they might have been fired on the spot. They had gotten off relatively scot-free. In their guilt, they pleaded with the High General for some kind of punishment, but he only smiled magnanimously and refused. At first, the squires had thought his reaction discomforting, but it wasn’t until today that they learned the reason why.

“Lord Randolph suddenly came to visit us today, saying he would cook for us.”

“And? What is the problem with that?” Pax questioned.

“You mean you don’t know?”

Rumors were rampant among the knights. It was a curious thing. Why would one of the Seven Great Powers, the strongest knight in all of the realm, become a direct subordinate of the High General? Under ordinary circumstances, Randolph Marianne should have been granted his own region to rule over, with hundreds of men at his command. So why was it that he always worked alone?

That was because High General Shagall had trained him to be an assassin from early on. Shagall was mixed-race, with elven and human blood, and his extended lifespan had seen him serve at the apex of the King Dragon Realm's military for many years. He had a bit of a crude side, but he was loyal to a fault and widely known for his honesty and integrity. No one spoke ill of him.

But how could that even be possible? How could a man remain spotless while in charge of an enormous organization like the King Dragon Realm's military? Well, that was because he *wasn't* spotless. He had any man who earned his ire killed behind the scenes, using the very assassin he'd reared himself—Randolph. As proof of this, only a few short years after Randolph became widely known to the public, every single one of Shagall's political rivals were wiped out. Several among them died from illnesses of unknown origin or tragically passed after being caught in an "accident."

"We're…going to be killed…because we humiliated His Excellency!" one of the men blurted, white as a sheet.

The other four began violently trembling in their seats.

"No… No! I don't wanna die!"

"Your Highness, please save us. I…I have a girl I love back home. I haven't even gotten to tell her how I feel yet… I can't die like this…"

"I at least wanted to meet my end on the battlefield. Now I'm going to be killed 'cause of a little screw-up during a practice drill? You gotta be kidding me…"

"And to think my mom was so happy to see me become a squire…"

While the squires lamented their fates, a creepy, chilling voice called over to them, “You lot sure are being awful rude. I heard you were down in the dumps after being scolded, so I decided to make you some of my delicious cuisine. That’s all.”

Pax tensed and turned. The knight with the skeletal face wore a chilling smile as he hauled over the enormous pot. The smell was so putrid it almost seemed otherworldly.

“Now then, dig in everyone. Delicious food is the best cure when you’re feeling depressed,” Death God Randolph said with a grin that almost seemed to declare his intent to rob them of their lives.

“Urk.” Pax gulped and retreated a step, too intimidated not to. His heel bumped against something. Someone tugged at his sleeve. He glanced over his shoulder and glimpsed an expressionless Benedikte pinching his clothes. Even though her face conveyed no emotion, he could read what she was thinking—*Please save them.*

Why do I have to save these fools?!

Were Pax not a changed man, he might have said that. But this plea came from a girl who’d listened to his heroic sagas daily. She was someone he *wanted* to impress.

“Randolph,” he said.

“Yeees? What is it? Uh…who are you, by the way?”

“My name is Pax Shirone, Seventh Prince of Shirone Kingdom. Since I was fortuitous enough to find my way here, I would like to partake in this repast of yours as well.”

“…Oh?”

Personally, Pax didn’t *really* intend to put that stuff in his mouth. He was a prince, after all. If this “food” was actually poison, he was certain Randolph would back down.

“Yes! Yes, of course, Your Highness!”

On the contrary, Randolph beamed in delight at his offer.

“A-as you can clearly see, I am quite the gourmet,” Pax said. “You’ll regret it if you serve me a lackluster meal.”

“Ehehe,” the man snickered. “I might not look it, but I used to run a restaurant myself, you see. I am quite confident in the flavor.”

“You *do* understand what I am saying, don’t you?” Pax said.

“Yes, I most certainly *do* understand.”

This man is out of his damn mind, Pax thought.

If his poison killed Pax, the matter wouldn’t be solely between the King Dragon Realm and Shirone Kingdom; there were royals here from a wide array of countries. A knight couldn’t get away with senselessly murdering one of them. The other vassal states wouldn’t stand for it. If the King Dragon Realm indiscriminately and randomly killed their hostages, then what was the point in keeping them? The other vassal states would rise in rebellion.

In spite of this, Randolph looked perfectly composed. In fact, he seemed to be challenging Pax: *If you think you can eat it, then eat it. We both know you’re only saying you will. You won’t actually do it.*

Or perhaps, Pax thought, *having heard that I’m a prince of Shirone and having seen what I look like, he thinks no one will care one whit whether I live or die. Dammit! I don’t care if he is one of the Seven Great Powers—he’s looking down his nose at me!*

Pax couldn’t afford to die here, yet he couldn’t allow himself to be treated with such contempt. Besides, Benedikte was watching. He couldn’t meekly back down simply because he knew the other party cared nothing for his welfare.

“Fine! Move aside!” he roared. He shoved one of the squires aside and plunged himself down. “Go on, then! It isn’t every day one gets the opportunity to sample the cooking of someone as famous as the Death God. My stomach has been rumbling since the moment I caught wind of your dish’s fragrant scent!”

Pax was being defiant now. If Randolph didn’t think he would actually eat the food, then he would do exactly that. He’d guzzle it

down, let the poison kill him, and thereby bring chaos to the entire realm. Obstinate as he was, he'd resolved himself to his fate—and everything else that came with it.

"Oh? You're the first person that's ever said something like that to me." Randolph wore an eerie smile as he went about serving the food. It didn't take long before the piping hot dish was sitting right in front of Pax.

It was a stew, with enormous chunks of veggies and meat, but the liquid itself was purple. That was…worrying. What could one possibly put into stew to make it turn *that* color? It didn't look the least bit appetizing, nor did it smell appetizing. The odor was so rank, it was hard to believe it came from something edible. Pax knew of nothing edible that smelled like this. His mind screamed, *That's not food!*

"Urgh…" He had managed to grab his spoon, but his hand wouldn't move further.

The squires who were present eyed him, their own faces deathly pale. Even Benedikte looked somewhat worried for him.

Oh, screw it!

Pax plucked up his courage, jammed the spoon into the gloppy concoction in front of him, scooped up a chunk of unidentifiable meat, and shoved it into his mouth.

"Mmph!"

He chewed, then swallowed. The squires gawked. Not a soul present honestly believed he would actually try the dish. Anyone could tell at a glance that it had to be poison.

After gulping down the mouthful, Pax sat frozen solid for a few moments before he finally mumbled, "That was surprisingly good."

"Huh?!"

"It's seasoned in a style associated with the Demon Continent, so it likely won't appeal to people around here, but it's palatable to me," Pax said.

Yes, it looked as bad as it smelled. Yet strangely, once you put it in your mouth, its rich fragrance tickled the nose, and the complex flavors of the vegetables lingered on the tongue. The meat was so tender as to instantly melt, filling the mouth with a delectable, savory flavor.

It was a puzzling dish. He'd never had something remotely similar in Shirone. As he ate, he noticed a numbness on his tongue. That was likely poison. But more importantly, the look on Randolph's face when he ate it and complimented the flavor was truly a sight to behold. Pax could tell the Death God didn't genuinely think he'd eat it, much less praise it.

Hah! Even if I die in agony moments from now, I can at least say I outplayed one of the Seven Great Powers. I'll be bragging about that from my seat in hell, Pax thought bitterly to himself as his tongue continued to tingle.

There were still so many things he still wanted to do. But he'd never done anything in his life worth bragging about, so at least he had something he could be proud of with this one last act. That gave him some satisfaction. Without that as consolation, he might just fling the plate to the ground and start bawling.

"I want seconds," Pax said, shoving his plate at Randolph.

"Um, but, Your Highness, I made this for the squires—"

"Do you truly believe these men can appreciate the quality of this stew?! I am having it all for myself!"

"Your Highness," the squires gasped, moved by his merciful intercession.

Pax thumped his fist against his chest and roared, "Enough! What are you gawking at? Do the Realm's squires make it a habit of staring at royalty as they eat? Or do you have some issue with me eating all of this cuisine for myself? Well, I shan't hear it! If you have any complaints, take them to your master, Shagall. Tell him that Shirone's prince robbed you of your chance to sample Randolph's food!"

The squires bowed and hastily fled the scene, but their expressions were full of gratitude, which was something entirely foreign to Pax.

“Hmph.”

Pax, of course, didn’t care if they appreciated what he was doing. He assumed they thought him a gluttonous prince who, on a mere whim, deigned to eat this poison-filled food in their stead.

When Pax glanced up, he noticed Benedikte had taken a seat beside him. Her expression was placid as ever, her eyes darting back and forth from the plate to Pax.

“Benedikte, do you wish to eat this as well?” Pax asked.

She nodded.

“You understand, don’t you? What this food is, I mean.”

Again, she nodded.

Pax paused in thought, but almost immediately he remembered the cruel environment Benedikte found herself in. He was the only friend she had. She was always alone, spending her time in the gardens, staring at the flowers—the ostracized, solitary princess with whom no one bothered to interact. Every day was surely miserable for her. Even Pax wouldn’t be able to withstand that kind of treatment in her place.

With that in mind Pax could find no reason to stop her. Perhaps she’d decided to join him because he *was* her one and only friend, and if he was going to die, she figured she may as well too.

Finally, Pax nodded. “All right, then, Randolph. Prepare a serving for her as well.”

“Yes, yes, of course! Ahh, what a fine day it is today.” Randolph continued eerily smiling as he plated more of his bizarre stew for Benedikte.

Benedikte gracefully took up her spoon and slowly began to dig in. Although she’d never been given instruction on etiquette, she held her utensil beautifully. She was probably mimicking what she’d seen others do.



“…Delicious,” Benedikte mumbled as she continued eating.

“Indeed, it is.” Pax resumed his dining as well. Being a voracious eater, he requested extra helpings several times until the pot was completely empty. “Hmph, what do you think of that, Death God Randolph? We finished your entire stew. It was delectable.”

“Yes, it is a great honor indeed to have you both polish off the entire pot.”

Pax narrowed his eyes. “And? When will it kick in?”

“When will what kick in?”

“Do you truly think I didn’t notice? With that numb tingling on my tongue?”

“Ooh! That. Yes, well, you should notice the effects any moment now,” Randolph answered with a snicker.

Any moment, huh?

Pax leaned back, gazing up at the sky. How long had it been since he last dined outside? Perhaps it had been the first time ever for Benedikte. No matter how coldly a member of the royal family was treated by their kin, it didn’t change how suffocating their life was. If anything, the ostracism meant the family was reluctant to let them outside at all, instead confining them to the walls of the palace.

At least his last moments were beneath a sunny, blue sky, and he’d eaten a delicious meal before the end. There could be no more pleasant way to go. It was as if his very soul had been cleansed.

“Feeling relaxed now, aren’t you?” Randolph asked. “Sanshok seeds have a strong tranquilizing effect.”

“Sanshok?” Pax repeated, bewildered.

“Yes. It’s the best spice for calming one’s emotions when they’re depressed or irritated. I truly did want the squires to try it as well…”

“So it’s not poison?”

“Poison?” Randolph blinked at him. “Oh, well, Sanshok seeds do have a poisonous color to them. Many people tend to avoid

consuming it for that reason, yes. But you needn't worry. Not a single soul has perished from eating it. Hm? But you mentioned the tingling sensation on your tongue—does that mean you knew I had used Sanshok?"

"N-no, I had a feeling you'd used something, but not quite that!"

As Randolph tilted his head, the realization finally hit Pax—this man had truly only intended to treat those squires to a meal, nothing more.

"Yes, I see, Sanshok!" Pax nodded to himself. "I was almost certain you'd taken the skin of a Kiban and added that to the stew."

"Ohh, yes, Kiban skin does make the tongue tingle as well. But you see, Kiban skin can't give the stew that delectable purple hue, now can it?"

Pax nodded thoughtfully. "True enough. Yes, your ingenuity was quite impressive!"

"Heh heh, I appreciate you saying that. It was worth having that ingredient brought in all the way from the Demon Continent." The way Randolph smiled almost seemed to suggest he had completely seen through Pax's bravado.

"Well, enough of this! Benedikte, let us be off!" Unable to withstand the man's penetrating gaze, Pax shot to his feet. "I have my studies and magic practice to attend to this afternoon. I have no time to dawdle here, engaging in small talk!"

"All right," she mumbled.

Pax straightened his shoulders and began to totter off with Benedikte close behind him. They didn't make it too far before Randolph called after them.

"Um, Prince Pax?"

"What is it?" Pax glanced over his shoulder.

Randolph sported his usual creepy smile. Yet he seemed a bit anxious, rubbing his hands together as he worked up the courage to ask, "Would it be at all possible for me to serve you a meal again in the future?"

“Very well. Your cooking is delicious, after all.” Pax quickly delivered his answer and turned away to leave. Although he’d been unnecessarily anxious about the meal being poisoned, the stew itself *was* scrumptious. Those unusual flavors were unlikely to suit most people’s palates, but Pax had never had anything like it. If Randolph was keen on serving him something like that again, he had no reason to refuse. He wasn’t lying when he said he was a gourmet with finicky tastes.

“Thank you,” said Randolph, bowing his head low.

After that, Pax began periodically eating Randolph’s cooking.

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“In hindsight, I really had resigned myself to death back then,” Pax mumbled, as he revisited the distant past in his head.

He currently stood on a staircase landing. The nearby window gave him a glimpse of the world outside the castle. Fires dotted the landscape, smoke signals rising like pillars here and there. He heard no voices from here, but he could sense the crowds below.

Pax was inside Shirone Castle, a place he’d arrived at after recklessly plunging ahead until he’d clawed his way onto the throne.

“I would have preferred not to hear the truth until my dying days,” Randolph replied, standing beside the king and gazing down at the world below. He’d removed his eyepatch, and the eye underneath emitted a glaring light. “I was really happy, you know? To hear you say my cooking was delicious.”

“Don’t start that. It may not have looked appetizing, but I wasn’t lying to you when I said it was good,” Pax said.

“Hehe, it’s hard to believe you when I now know you thought I meant to poison you.”

Their voices swelled with emotion as they conversed, gazing through the glass. Inconsequential happenstance had brought them together, and even after their initial meeting, nothing particularly

exciting or significant took place. All that happened was that each time Pax and Benedikte sampled Randolph's cooking, they praised its taste. They would chat a bit while he was concocting his odd dishes, but they'd go their separate ways once the meal was over. The cycle repeated numerous times until Randolph realized how often he was in Pax's company. It would be a stretch to call Pax his pupil or apprentice, but he did offer some advice on swordsmanship and magic.

"In the end, you and Benedikte are my only allies," Pax said as he watched the people gathered outside.

They knew not all of the people out there were enemies; a knight had risked his life to venture out and bring back a scouting report. Yes, not all of them were against him, but Pax knew that they weren't in support of him either. The vast majority of Shirone hadn't welcomed his ascension to the throne. They could be his enemies under the right circumstances, but they could never be his allies.

"Why do people hate me so?"

It had been that way his entire life. No one ever allied themselves with him. Perhaps his appearance repulsed them; perhaps he simply had no talent for finding comrades. Pax honestly had no clue. He had tried his best in his own way, but for all his efforts, only Benedikte and Randolph had come to his side. Maybe if he had conducted himself better, Zanoba and Rudeus—and maybe even the knights that had died—might have been willing to stand with him. It was too late to reflect on that now.

"Good question. People are often terrified of me as well, and I haven't the faintest idea why either," Randolph said, as if trying to comfort him. But in Randolph's case, it was no doubt because of his appearance. If only he could do something about that skeletal face and that unsettling smile, things might change a little.

Actually, even with those problems, Randolph had still gained the respect of the King Dragon Realm's High General and numerous swordsmen. Pax had nothing like that. He'd become king, and now had both a wife he loved and an excellent subordinate. But alas, that

was no way to run a country. He couldn't win the recognition of the masses.

Maybe he'd gone about this the wrong way, but the fact remained that had too few people in his corner. He no longer knew what to do to bolster his supporters. He needed comrades, but he had no clue how to get them. Pax was now at a loss for what to do.

"Randolph," he said.

"Yes?"

"When I die, take Benedikte with you and escape from here."

Randolph swallowed a breath. In the dozen or so years he'd lived through numerous battles, never once had another person made him cognizant of his own breathing, but he suddenly found his awareness heightened now.

"Go back to the King Dragon Realm. When my child is born, impart to them your swordsmanship and culinary talents."

Randolph said nothing.

"Academia as well," Pax added. "Given the parentage of our child, there's no way they'll appoint them a tutor. I'm entrusting their care to you."

Again, Randolph was silent.

"And I'd ask you to compliment them as much as possible. I doubt Benedikte will be able to do that herself. Neither of us was ever complimented much."

Finally he found his voice and said, "Um, Your Majesty?"

A rare expression crossed Randolph's face, one he never displayed to others, neither before nor after he came to be called the Death God. In fact, after becoming one of the Seven Great Powers, he'd killed so many men—tens of thousands of them—that he stopped seeing them as people. In all his long years he had only made such a face on a select few occasions. This was the look of someone who didn't want the other person to die.

"What is it?" Pax asked.

“You know, I like you,” Randolph said.

But he couldn’t bring himself to ask Pax not to die. He was the Death God, after all. Being fifth of the Seven Great Powers, he’d seen countless men die. He’d seen numerous people choose a noble death over a meaningless life. He’d paid his respects to every one of them.

The man before Randolph was a king. He had a stunted body, was unloved by his people, had suffered civil war immediately after his ascension, and would probably be forgotten in the long term, snuffed out from the annals of history. But he was a king, nonetheless. He’d done his part to earn the people’s acknowledgement and ascended to the throne. It made sense that he wanted to die as a king. His pride compelled him.

“That’s why I’ll be sure to carry out your order, even at the cost of my own life,” Randolph finished.

“I trust you will.”

Randolph Marianne may have been called a Death God by others, but a true god of death he was not. He knew of the man who’d carried the title before him. The former Death God would always listen to the words of the dying before they passed. He would honor their dignity and protect it until their last breath. This was why he had come to be called a Death God. Randolph had followed his example, because Randolph respected him more than any other—and had even inherited his name.

“Well, it seems the sun is about to set.” Having gotten the answer he wanted, Pax tore his gaze from the scenery outside and headed toward his bedroom. “I’m going to go bid my farewell to Benedikte. It’ll be our last tryst. Will you make sure no one interrupts before we are finished?”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Pax disappeared inside the room, and Randolph took up his position outside. After a while, he got tired of standing and went downstairs to fetch a chair. One he was seated, he propped his elbows against his knees and interlaced his fingers, resting his chin

upon them. He kept his gaze locked on the stairs and the window that sat just beyond them. It was as though he wanted to burn the sight—Pax's last glimpse at the city he'd ruled—into his mind's eye.

"To be honest, I rather wish you wouldn't die," Randolph muttered as he slowly closed his eyes.

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, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication.

"Never put your public image ahead of your own happiness," advises the author wisely.



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