NOVEL
5
Written by
Rifujin na
Magonote
Illustrated by
Shirotaka
Mushoku
Tensei
jobless reincarnation

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

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

"Sure you don't want to go see your pupil?"
"Yes, I'm sure."

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

5

WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Paul Cuneo
ADAPTATION: JY Yang
COVER DESIGN: KC Fabellon
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Dayna Abel, Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Adam Arnold
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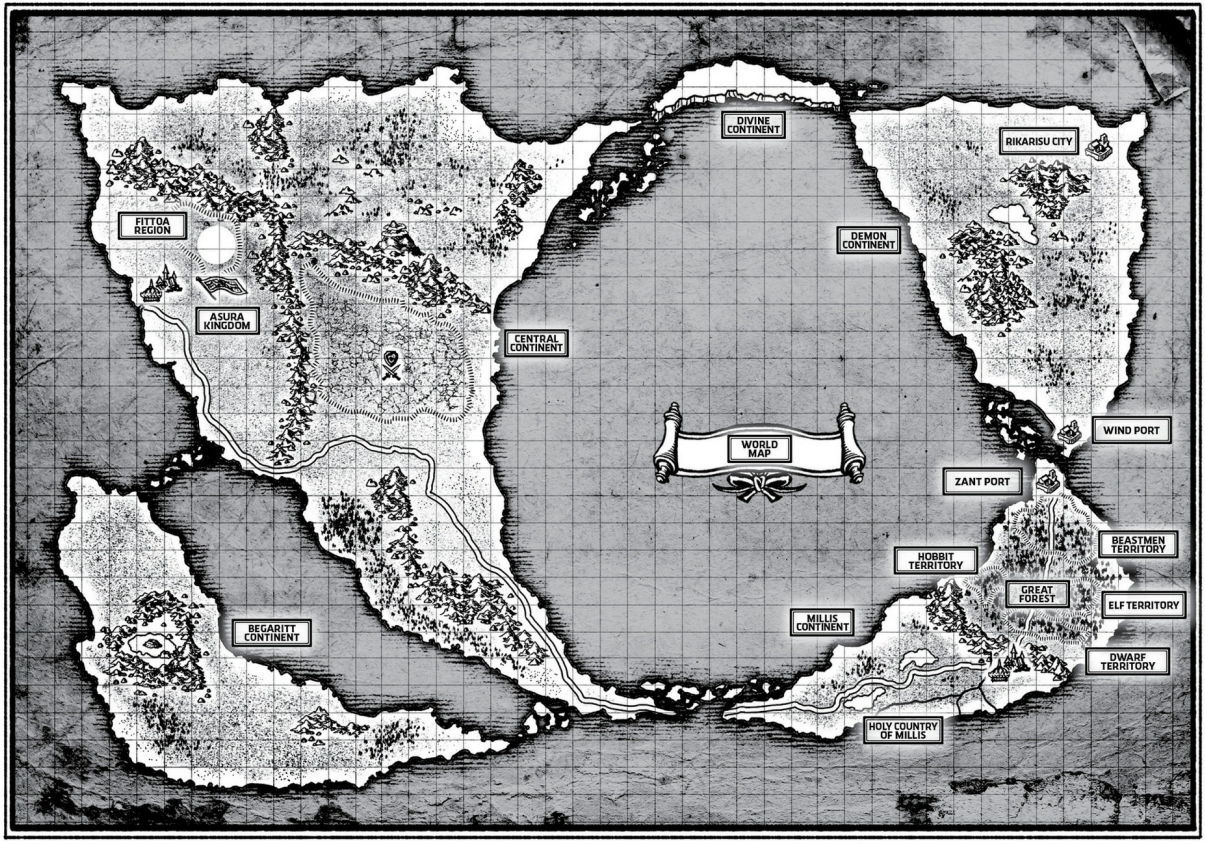
DIVINE CONTINENT
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BEGARITT CONTINENT
DWARF TERRITORY
HOLY COUNTRY OF MILLIS

"Those who've known defeat are all the stronger for it."

—It takes some guts to never get a job, actually.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
The Holy Country of Millis

My name's Rudeus Greyrat.

I was a grown man in my previous life, but in my current incarnation, I'm an eleven-year-old pretty boy. Magic is my field of expertise. I can cast customized spells without the need for an incantation, a trick that's earned me quite a bit of recognition.

About a year and a half ago, I was teleported to a friendly place known as the Demon Continent, thanks to a large-scale magical disaster. Unfortunately, the Demon Continent happens to be on the other side of the planet from my homeland, the Fittoa Region of the Kingdom of Asura. Getting back was going to require traveling halfway around the world.

I promptly became an adventurer and began the long, hard trek back home.

Eighteen months have passed since then. In that time, I made my way across the Demon Continent…and now, I'm past the Great Forest as well.

***

Millishion is the capital of the Holy Country of Millis. Approaching it from the Holy Sword Highway offers travelers a spectacular view of the city in its entirety.

First, your eyes will be drawn to Gran Lake–a brilliant blue body of water, fed by the Nicolaus River, which flows down from the Blue Wyrm mountains. At the lake's very center, the great White Palace seems to float above its waters.

Further along the banks of the Nicolaus, you'll spot two other distinctive landmarks: the city's radiant golden cathedral and the shining silver headquarters of the Adventurers' Guild.

The city that surrounds these remarkable buildings is laid out as neatly as the squares on a sheet of grid paper. At its outer edges, you'll notice seven

imposing towers, with vast green plains stretching out beyond them.

This is a place not only rich in majesty, but also in perfect harmony with nature. No other city in the world is nearly as beautiful.

—Excerpt from "Wandering the World"
by the adventurer Bloody Kant

Now *this* was the sort of city you'd expect to find in a fantasy world. I'd never seen a major metropolis with this much blue and green before, and the streets were laid out in a beautifully clean grid reminiscent of Sapporo or old Edo. The sight of it moved me in a way looking at Rikarisu never had. It was beautiful.

"Oh wow…"

The girl sitting next to me—currently gaping open-mouthed at the view—was named Eris. Eris Boreas Greyrat, to be precise. She was the granddaughter of Sauros, lord of Fittoa. For some time, I'd served as her personal tutor.

Eris was extremely ferocious by nature. While she usually did what I told her, she was the kind of girl who'd punch a President in the face if they ticked her off badly enough. The mere mention of sailing ships was enough to make her cringe, though. She was prone to terrible seasickness.

"Hmmm."

The fair-skinned guy with the shaved head, also gazing at the city in admiration, was our demon companion Ruijerd Superdia. You couldn't tell at the moment, but his natural hair color was a vivid shade of emerald. It was a trait he had in common with every other member of the infamous Superd race. To most people in this world, green-haired demons were synonymous with death and destruction. But while Ruijerd could definitely be dangerous and impulsive at times, he was basically a kind old guy with a soft spot for kids as far as Eris and I were concerned.

I'd never thought of these two as particularly romantic people, but apparently they could recognize a beautiful thing when it hit them in the face.

"It's really something, innit?"

The last member of our little group was a man named Geese, who bore

a strong resemblance to a monkey. Geese was an adventurer by trade and a good-for-nothing at heart; the sort of guy who got himself thrown into jail for cheating at gambling. He wasn't a member of our party or anything, but he'd asked to tag along with us to Millis, so we'd been traveling together since the Great Forest.

I would have asked him why he was bragging about this place as if he'd built it, but it was understandable now that I'd seen the view. I would have done the exact same thing in his shoes.

"Yes, it's certainly something. But that lake is huge…doesn't that cause all sorts of headaches during the rainy season?"

I was just being contrarian, honestly. I didn't want him getting *too* smug. Still, I really had been wondering about this. That lake was at the very center of the city, and in the Great Forest just north of here, they got three months straight of torrential rain every single year. Surely that had some effect on the weather here, as well.

"Heh. I hear it was a real nuisance way back in the day, sure," Geese replied. "But now they've got the weather totally under control, thanks to those seven magic towers. No way they'd drop a castle in the middle of a lake otherwise. You notice how it doesn't have any outer walls or anything? That's because the towers are protecting it with a magic barrier."

"No kidding. So, you'd have to take those towers down first if you wanted to capture the city, huh?"

"Uh, don't even joke about that. The Holy Knights would toss you in jail if they overheard."

"Got it. I'll be careful."

Geese went on to explain that so long as the seven towers stood, the capital was safe from natural disasters and even disease epidemics. I couldn't imagine how that worked, but it sure sounded convenient.

"Come on! Let's go already!"

Urged on by an excited Eris, our carriage began rolling forward once again.

The city of Millishion was divided into four districts.

To the north was the Residential District, where most of the blocks were lined with family homes. There were some differences between the areas where common folk lived and those where the families of nobles and knights resided, but virtually every building in this district was a house of some sort.

To the east you had the Commercial District, where most of the city's major businesses were located. You could find some retail shops here, but they tended to be small-scale operations; the district was mostly dominated by larger enterprises. This was where you could find Millishion's blacksmiths and auction houses.

To the south was the Adventurers' District, with the Guild headquarters at its center. It was full of inns, bars, and shops catering to professional fortune-seekers. It also had quite a few gambling halls and slums where failed adventurers lived, though, so you had to watch yourself. For whatever reason, the city's slave market was located here instead of in the Commercial District.

To the west was the Divine District, home to many of the Millis Church's ranking members. You could find the city's enormous cathedral here, as well as a spacious graveyard. The Holy Knights of Millis were also headquartered here.

Geese went over all of this for us in surprising detail as we drew closer to the gates.

We ended up circling around the outskirts of Millishion before entering the Adventurers' District. According to Geese, outsiders entering through a different district were typically viewed with some suspicion and subjected to more lengthy inspections. This city had some annoying quirks, from the sound of things.

The moment we passed through the gates, we found ourselves surrounded by chaos.

Millishion looked gorgeous from a distance, to be sure, but it didn't *feel* that different from any other city on the inside. There were stables and cheap inns clustered near the city entrance. A little further along, merchants running open-air stalls hawked their wares loudly to the crowd. I could see

weapon shops even further along the central avenue. Presumably, you'd find slightly nicer inns down the quieter side streets. Also, the shining, silver guild headquarters was large enough to be visible right from the gates.

First off, we dropped off our carriage at a nearby stable. As it turned out, they were willing to deliver our luggage to the inn of our choice for no extra charge. That had never been an option in any other town we'd visited, but in a big city like this, I guess you needed to distinguish yourself from the crowd if you wanted to survive as a business.

Once we'd wrapped up at the stable, Geese turned to us and made an abrupt announcement. "All right then, folks! I know where I'm headed next, so I guess this is goodbye!"

"Huh? You're leaving already?" That was a little surprising. I'd been expecting him to tag along to the inn with us, at least.

"What's the matter, boss? You gonna miss me?"

"Well, yeah. Of course." I knew Geese was just teasing, but I responded honestly. We hadn't known each other very long, but he definitely wasn't a bad guy. A traveling companion you got along with was a valuable thing on long journeys like this. He'd made my life a *lot* less stressful for a while.

Not to mention, with him gone, our meals were going to be a lot less flavorful from now on. That seriously sucked.

"Aw, don't be blue, boss. We'll probably run into each other around town one of these days, you know?" With a small shrug, Geese reached down and patted me on the head. But as he turned to leave, Eris blocked his path.

"Listen up, Geese!" She'd assumed her trademark pose—arms folded, chin jutting into the air. "You'd better teach me how to cook next time, got it?"

"The answer's still no, little lady. Talk about persistent…" Scratching the back of his head, Geese slipped past Eris, then glanced over at Ruijerd. "Hey, you take care of yourself too, chief!"

"Good luck to you as well. Don't get up to too much mischief, all right?"

"Yeah, I hear you."

With a little wave, Geese finally walked off into the crowd. *Talk about a casual goodbye*. You never would have known we'd spent two whole months on the road together.

"Oh, right. One last thing, boss!" Just before he was about to disappear from view, the familiar monkey face turned back toward me for a moment. "Don't forget to stop by the Adventurers' Guild soon, okay?"

"…Hm? Uh, sure!" We'd be going to the guild eventually, since we'd need to earn some money. But why was he bringing that up now?

I didn't get the chance to ask any follow-up questions. As soon as he heard my reply, Geese disappeared into the crowd.

***

Our immediate priority at the moment was finding an inn. This was always our first order of business whenever we reached a new city.

Most of the inns in Millishion seemed to be located some distance away from the main avenues, so we ended up wandering through side streets for a while until we found a little cluster of them. After a quick look around, I settled on a place called Dawn's Light Inn. The place wasn't too close to the city's main streets, but it was a good distance away from the slums. The area seemed safe enough. It offered all the amenities I was looking for, and seemed to be priced to attract C- or B-ranked adventurers. The main downside was that it didn't seem to get much sun, but I could live with that.

Once we had our room, the next step was to unpack and get ourselves organized, after which we'd head out to visit the town's most important locations—particularly the local Guild. If there was any time, we'd engage in some idle sightseeing, then head back to our inn for a team meeting. That was our standard routine at this point, at any rate.

"Couldn't we have stayed at a cheaper place?" asked Eris, looking around the inn quizzically.

I had to admit, she did have a point, especially since I was always lecturing her and Ruijerd about being careful with our money. At the moment, however, we had some financial breathing room. We'd been paid well for the three months we spent on guard duty in Doldia, and the

beastfolk's head warrior, Gyes, had also given us a nice chunk of change. Those funds added up to a bit more than seven Millis gold coins. We'd have to earn more money here eventually, but in the short term, we could afford a few modest luxuries.

"It can't hurt to upgrade every once in a while, right?" Sometimes it's nice to sleep in a bed that's actually *soft*.

A quick glance over at Eris suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. I went ahead and opened the door to our room anyway.

It was a neat, tidy little space. I appreciated that they'd already provided us with a table and chairs in the far corner. The door had a functional lock, and the windows came with shutters. It wasn't quite comparable to the business hotels back in Japan, but by the standards of this world, this was definitely on the nicer side.

Now that we'd reached our room, we had a few things to take care of.

First, our equipment needed its regular maintenance. Second, we needed to take stock of our expendable supplies and make note of anything we were running low on. Then it was on to drying out the beds, washing the sheets, and a bit of general sweeping and cleaning. This was all totally routine for the three of us by now, so we got to work without exchanging words.

By the time we finished up, the sun was setting and it was getting dark outside. This made sense, since we'd only reached Millishion in the early afternoon. Still, we weren't going to have time to stop by the Guild today after all…not that it really mattered too much.

After a quick dinner at the bar next to the inn, the three of us went right back up to our room. Once we'd settled down on the floor in a circle, I cleared my throat and got things underway.

"All right, I hereby call this Dead End team meeting to order. This is our first meeting since we reached the capital of Millis, everyone! Let's make it one to remember!"

I had to actually say "Applause, please," and smack my hands together a few times before Eris and Ruijerd hesitantly followed suit. Honestly. Those two never failed to disappoint.

“Now then… We’ve finally made it this far, folks. That’s a real accomplishment.”

There was some real emotion in my voice as I said those words. It had been a long, hard slog getting to this point. We’d spent more than a year on the Demon Continent, and a good four months in the Great Forest. Now, at long last, we’d reached the region of this world where humankind resided. The most dangerous part of our trip was behind us now. From here on out, the roads would be well-maintained, and the terrain mostly nice and level. Compared to what we’d been through previously, it should be a total cakewalk.

Of course, in terms of sheer distance, we still had a very long journey ahead of us. The distance between Asura and Millis was roughly one-fourth of the planet’s circumference. No matter how nice the roads were, we weren’t going to manage that in a week. In fact, we probably had another solid year of travel ahead of us.

Given that, our biggest long-term problem would probably be financial in nature. “For the moment, I’m thinking we should stick around in this city for a while to save up some money.”

“Why?” asked Eris, furrowing her brow.

It was a reasonable question. I tried to answer as clearly as I could. “Well, we’ve made it through the Demon Continent and the Great Forest just fine, but things tend to be much pricier in human territory.”

I thought back to the market research I’d conducted on our way over here. I never got the chance to poke around in Zant Port, but I still remembered what most things went for in various parts of the Demon Continent and in the small town we stopped at past the Blue Wyrm mountains. Pretty much *everything* across the board was more expensive in Millis and the Kingdom of Asura. This inn’s nightly rate would have been completely mind-boggling by the standards of the Demon Continent.

Humankind were a greedy bunch, evidently. We cared much more about money than any of the other races did.

“The value of Millis currency is very high. Only Asuran coins are worth more, as far as I know. That does mean everything is expensive here, but it also means that jobs at the local Guild will pay very well. Instead of

stopping for a week at every town like we did on the Demon Continent, I think it's more efficient for us to stay here for about a month and save up lots of cash all at once."

Once we had a nice pile of valuable Millis coins in our pockets, the rest of the journey would go much more smoothly. They'd go a long way toward getting us through the southern regions of the Central Continent.

"For one thing, we don't know how much they'll charge a Superd for passage on the boat to the Central Continent, right?" I said.

Eris grimaced at the word "boat." Our previous sea voyage was a miserable memory for her. I felt very differently, of course. My recollections of comforting her while she was seasick continued to be a source of great pleasure.

"All things considered, I think we should focus on earning money in Millishion for a while, then head straight for the Kingdom of Asura. We might not be able to do much about improving the reputation of the Superd for a while, though… Is that all right with you, Ruijerd?"

"Of course," Ruijerd replied, nodding slightly.

I hadn't really expected him to object. At this point, I was helping out with that because I *wanted* to.

Personally, I would have been happy to settle down here for a while and devote some real effort to changing the public's opinion of his people. Six months or a year of diligent work in a major city like this could have a far-reaching impact.

That said, we'd already spent a year and a half just making it this far. I didn't want to drag out this marathon of a journey even longer than necessary. I mean, I'd been "missing" for eighteen months now, right? Paul and Zenith were probably worried sick.

Wonder what they're up to right now… Oh, whoops. I never got around to sending them a letter, did I?

I kept meaning to do that, but events were constantly conspiring to distract me. It must have slipped my mind half a dozen times by now. *Well, no time like the present…*

"Okay then. Let's make tomorrow an off day, shall we?"

This wasn't a new concept for us. I'd announced "off days" several times in the past. At first, it was out of concern for Eris, but at some point, I started calling them primarily for my own sake. The girl never showed any signs of fatigue, and Ruijerd was the toughest man I knew. I was definitely the weakling of this party.

Of course, I was much stronger than I'd ever been in my previous life. I couldn't hold a candle to these two, but I was on the level of a typical adventurer, at least. Physical exhaustion wasn't usually an issue.

Mental exhaustion, on the other hand? That was a different story. For one thing, I still had some hang-ups about killing living things. The more we went around slaughtering monsters, the more stress built up inside me.

I wasn't calling this particular "off day" out of fatigue, though. I just wanted to make sure I didn't forget about writing that letter again. If we spent tomorrow gathering information, checking out the Guild job list, and dealing with all the other things on our to-do list, it was going to slip my mind yet again. This time, I was going to take a day and finally get this taken care of.

"Are you feeling poorly again, Rudeus?"

"No, this one's a little different. I need to take some time to write a letter."

"A letter?"

I nodded at Eris. "We should let everyone back home know that we're okay, right?"

"Hmm…well, all right. I guess I'll leave that to you, then."

"Yeah. I'll take care of it."

Tomorrow, I was finally going to get this done. I'd take my time, think back to my days in Buena Village, and write to both Paul and Sylphie.

Back when he shipped me off to serve as Eris' tutor, Paul warned me not to send him any letters…but under these circumstances, surely he wouldn't mind.

The odds of a letter reaching them weren't that good, of course. Back when Roxy and I were corresponding between Asura and Shirone, it felt like maybe one in every seven letters we sent actually got through, so we always had to send out multiple copies of the same message. I'd have to do the same

this time as well.

"What will the two of you be doing, by the way?" I asked.

Eris replied promptly and energetically. "I'm going to go slay some Goblins!"

"Goblins?"

Wait, wait. Goblins? Are these the Goblins I'm familiar with? Like… yellow-green guys, maybe half the size of a human, with the crude clubs? The ones that always feature prominently in fantasy-themed porn games?

"Yep. I overhead someone saying they've got lots of them popping up around here. That's exactly the sort of thing adventurers should be dealing with, right?" Eris replied cheerfully.

To be perfectly honest, I'd heard a bit about them on our journey. In this world, Goblins were basically thought of as a kind of vermin. They reproduced rapidly and caused all sorts of trouble for people. They were intelligent enough to communicate verbally, so they might technically be classified as demonkind, but the vast majority of them lived like wild animals. So when their numbers started getting out of hand, they'd typically be exterminated.

"All right then. Ruijerd, can you go along with her and—"

"Oh, come on! I can handle a few Goblins on my own!" Eris interrupted indignantly. The look on her face suggested she was more than a little offended.

What was I supposed to do here?

Eris was a very competent fighter. And Goblins were E-ranked monsters—not exactly a challenging foe. They didn't live on the Demon Continent, so I'd never actually seen one, but from what I'd heard, even a child who'd learned some basic swordplay could handle them, no sweat.

Maybe it would be *slightly* overprotective to have her take our bodyguard along. After all, the girl could handle herself just fine against even B-ranked monsters…but still. When a girl adventurer gets beaten by a Goblin, that's an instant sex-slave bad end, right? I didn't know that much about the Goblins of this world, but that was definitely their whole deal back in mine. And I mean, if *I* was the lucky Goblin who managed to knock Eris

unconscious, I'd certainly feel entitled.

If something that terrible happened to Eris the moment I took my eyes off her, I'd never be able to face Ghislaine or Philip ever again…

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“It’s all right, Rudeus,” said Ruijerd, snapping me out of my reverie. “Let her handle this one alone.”

That was unusual. Normally, he stayed out of these sorts of arguments. For the last year and a half, Ruijerd had been giving Eris lessons on how to fight all sorts of different monsters and enemies. His educational methods were a little too obscure for me to follow, but she’d clearly learned a great deal from him. If he was convinced she could do this, it was probably going to be all right.

“Okay then. Don’t get careless out there just because they’re weak, Eris.”

“Yeah, I know!”

“Make sure you’re well-prepared before you head out, too.”

“Of course!”

“If things get dicey, just turn tail and run, all right?”

“Right, right! Okay!”

“And if worse comes to worst, just grab the little creep by the hand and scream ‘This Goblin’s a molester!’ at the top of your—”

“Oh, enough already! I can deal with exterminating some Goblins, Rudeus!”

Whoops. Now I’d gone and made her mad.

To be honest, I was still a little anxious about this, but I’d just have to put my faith in the judgment of our veteran warrior. “In that case, I’ll say no more. Good luck out there, Eris.”

“Thanks!” she said, nodding in satisfaction. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this!”

“How about you, Ruijerd? What will you be up to tomorrow?”

“I think I’ll go say hello to an acquaintance of mine.”

That had to be the first time I’d ever heard him use the word *acquaintance*. “You don’t say? I didn’t know you…had any of those, actually.”

“Well, of course I do.”

From what I knew of his backstory, Ruijerd had been wandering the wilderness all by his lonesome for quite some time…but after five hundred years of that, I guess he'd probably run into a few people just by chance. It seemed a little strange that one of those people would be living all the way out here in Millishion. Then again, this was a huge city, so maybe it made sense statistically.

"What kind of person are they?"

"A warrior."

Ah. Probably someone he rescued in the wilds of the Demon Continent back in the day or something, huh? Well, one way or another, I wasn't about to pry. I wasn't Ruijerd's father and didn't feel the need to interrogate him on who he was hanging out with in his free time.

***

The next morning, Eris and Ruijerd headed out on their respective errands, and I went out into town to buy paper, pens, and ink. I figured I could take the chance to wander around the open-air stalls for a while until I had a decent sense for what most things cost in Millis.

As it turned out, food was actually a good bit cheaper than it was on the Demon Continent. Naturally, the selection was also much, much better. There was plenty of fresh meat and fish available, and they even had a nice range of vegetables.

The biggest single surprise was definitely the eggs, though. There were lots of them, they were all freshly laid, and they were *incredibly* cheap. I'd seen eggs for sale a few times in the Demon Continent, but those were laid by monsters rather than birds. The idea was to make them hatch, let the baby creature imprint on you, and then train it as you liked. Naturally, nobody ate those things. They were way too expensive to turn into an omelet.

Chickens were a thing in this world, by the way. There had been a few people who raised them back in Buena Village, and from the looks of things, poultry was a major industry in Millis as well.

All of a sudden, I was *dying* to eat egg on rice again. I know, I know… pretty basic stuff. But c'mon! It's a nutritionally complete meal all in itself!

Sadly, while I had plenty of eggs available to me at the moment, there didn't seem to be any rice or soy sauce to go with them. Bread was apparently the cornerstone of the Millis diet, just like it was in Asura.

Rice did exist in this world, even if it wasn't for sale in the market here. It was the staple food in the northern and eastern regions of the Central Continent, and Roxy once mentioned that it was available in the Kingdom of Shirone as well. They mostly used it as the base for something like fried rice or paella, with lots of meat, vegetables, and seafood. Unfortunately, it sounded like they didn't do poultry farming in Shirone, so eggs were supposedly a rare commodity. Maybe the climate wasn't suitable for raising chickens.

As for soy sauce, I'd never seen anything like it in this world. I once noticed something that looked a lot like a soybean while paging through a dictionary of plants, but it seemed possible that nobody had tried fermenting them and making them into sauce yet.

No, no. Can't let myself get pessimistic! There were eggs and rice here, right? In that case, there *had* to be soy sauce out there somewhere, too. I just needed to look hard enough.

Someday, I'd collect all the ingredients and make my dream come true. Even if the eggs were a bit unsanitary, detoxification magic could handle a little food poisoning just fine.

Once I'd finished up with my quick survey of the local market and purchased a basic stationery set, I started to make my way back toward the inn while trying to figure out exactly what to put in this letter.

This was going to be the first time I'd ever written to Paul or Sylphie. Should I start with my years in the Boreas household…? No, the important thing was to let them know I was safe. Better to begin with our teleportation to the Demon Continent.

Come to think of it, I had a *lot* to tell them about. I'd started traveling with a legendary Superd warrior, met the Great Demon Empress, and even spent three whole months in a beastfolk village.

Hmm. Were they even going to believe any of that?

I'd tell them the truth either way, of course. But it seemed unlikely that anyone back home would buy my story about receiving a magical Demon

Eye from Kishirika Kishirisu herself.

Speaking of beastfolk… It'd be nice to know if Ghislaine was all right. She'd presumably been whisked off to some random corner of the globe, too. Assuming she didn't get dropped in the middle of a volcano or something, I had to think she was safe. The woman was a force of nature, after all.

How many other people were teleported, anyway? The wall of light came from the Citadel of Roa, so it seemed possible everyone in the Boreas estate had suffered the same fate as Eris and me. Hmm. That would be Philip, Sauros, Hilda, Alphonse the butler…and all the maids, to boot. I felt like Old Man Sauros could bellow his way through life just fine no matter where he ended up, but still…

"Yeah, now I've got myself worried…"

Murmuring to myself, I turned onto a narrow side street. Millishion had quite a few of these, as it turned out. The city layout looked neat and clean at a distance, but as old buildings were knocked down and replaced, dingy little alleys like this tended to open up between them.

Of course, everything was still aligned on a grid, so you didn't have to worry about getting lost in some winding maze. That was why I'd decided to take a different route back to the inn. It couldn't hurt to explore the city's streets a bit. If I got lucky, I might stumble across some charming little lover's lane or something. Our redhead had something of a violent personality, but it seemed like she was capable of appreciating a bit of beauty now and then. And if we stayed in this city a whole month, we'd probably have time for a "date" or two. I could earn myself a few bonus affection points if I found some nice spots to take her.

Just as I was getting lost in thought, I noticed a group of five or so men moving quickly toward me from the other side of the alley. They didn't look like adventurers, at a glance, but more like common street punks. Their outfits seemed intended to intimidate. Just a bunch of rowdy kids, probably. Still, it was kind of rude to spread themselves across a cramped little alleyway like this. The polite pedestrian always left room for someone heading the other way. A kid like me didn't need that much space, true, but at this rate we were going to run into each other. They really ought to be approaching me single file and averting their eyes out of—

"Move it, kid!"

I instantly pressed myself against the alley wall.

Don't get the wrong idea, now. I just wanted to avoid any senseless squabbling. I mean, they seemed to be in a very big hurry! And I wasn't. It's not like I got out of their way because they looked kind of scary or anything. Really, I promise! I ain't scared of no delinquents! Cross my heart and swear to die.

Think about it, anyway. You can't judge a book by its cover, right? They did *look* like a bunch of street punks, but for all I knew one of them was actually some famous master swordsman.

If I'd gotten over-confident and objected to their rudeness, I might have found myself getting sliced to pieces by the Nobleman of Fury, or something. I mean, this was a world where a little girl on the verge of starving in the street could turn out to be a Great Demon Empress, right? No reason to get in a fight over nothing.

That was my initial conclusion, at least. But as they shoved past me, I noticed that two guys in the middle of the group were carrying a burlap sack. And there was a small hand sticking out of it. It seemed like they were carrying off a kid—inside a bag, no less.

Again with the kidnappers?

This world had an ample supply of those, if nothing else. Criminals were always snatching up children every chance they got. It wasn't a regional issue, either; it happened everywhere, from the Kingdom of Asura to the Demon Continent, the Great Forest, and the Holy Country of Millis.

From what Geese told me, kidnapping tended to be a very profitable line of work. The world was mostly at peace right now, with the exception of a few minor conflicts here and there. A few slaves did trickle onto the market from the central and northern regions of the Central Continent, but that was about it. And many, many people wanted slaves. That was particularly true of the richer countries like Millis and Asura, where the wealthy upper classes were constantly looking to buy people. Basically, the supply just wasn't large enough to meet demand. Kidnapping victims fetched high prices on the market, and as long as this was true, the issue was never going to go away. To eliminate the practice entirely, you'd apparently have to start a massive war or two.

In any case…what now?

Given the number of men, we were probably talking about a premeditated crime. It wouldn't be surprising if the kid in that bag was the son or daughter of someone relatively prominent in these parts.

To be honest, I didn't really *want* to get mixed up in this. The last time I rescued children from a gang of kidnappers, I ended up being taken for one of the criminals and tossed into a jail cell. And that was only a few months ago, so the memory was still painfully fresh.

Was I going to just leave the kid to his fate, then?

No, no. Of course not. There'd always be kidnappers out there, to be sure. And this *was* bringing back some unpleasant memories. But none of that justified looking the other way.

The first rule of team Dead End was "Never abandon a child in peril." And the *second* rule of team Dead End was "Never, *ever* abandon a child in peril."

Dead End was a team of good guys. We stood steadfast in the face of evil; we rescued children every chance we got. And little by little, we spread the good word about Ruijerd and the Superd.

I turned back and quietly followed the five men with the burlap sack.

***

My sneaking skills had apparently leveled up at some point. I guess following Eris and company around in Doldia was good practice. The kidnappers reached and entered their destination, a nondescript warehouse, without so much as a glance in my direction. Pretty sloppy bunch. They obviously needed to improve their sense of smell, for one thing.

The warehouse in question was located in a quiet corner of the Adventurers' District, tucked away even further from the crowds than the inn we were staying at. You couldn't see this place from the street; the only way to reach it was by squeezing through a narrow alleyway. There was no way a horse-drawn carriage could get to it. It wouldn't even be possible to *carry* anything bulky out. I wondered why the hell anyone would put a storage

facility in such an inaccessible location. The warehouse had probably been built some time before the buildings that now surrounded it. Sometimes the city planners can really screw you over, huh?

Not that it really mattered. Once I felt confident that the group wasn't just stopping by, I moved around to the back of the building and used earth magic to float off the ground, which allowed me to slip into the building through a relatively high window. I lowered myself to the floor, crept over to a jumbled stack of wooden boxes, hid inside one, then cautiously peered out to get the lay of the land.

The five kidnappers were standing around on the other side of the dimly lit warehouse, talking things over. From what I could gather, they had lots of friends drinking in the bar next door, and somebody needed to go inform them that the "job" was taken care of.

I had two basic options at this point. I could try to take these five out before they brought the whole gang over here, or I could stay put, get a careful look at their buddies' faces, and just sneak out with the kid when I got the chance. The latter approach sounded much more appealing, so I decided to settle into my box and get comfy.

What was in this thing, anyway? Thanks to the poor lighting, I hadn't really gotten a good look at its contents. Whatever they were, they were definitely made of cloth. Too small to be shirts or pants, though. And for some reason, lying in a pile of them made me feel oddly…tranquil.

I reached out and took one into my hand. The shape and texture of it was familiar—a carefully sewn piece of fabric with some definite depth and three distinct holes. In one particular section, the cloth was twice as thick; I thought I could sense a tinge of powerful mystic energy when I touched that bit.

"Whoa! Hold on, these are panties!"

"Who's there?!"

O-oh crap, they heard me! Damn it… I never expected them to lay such a devilish trap!

"What the hell? Is there someone in the boxes?"

"Show yourself!"

“Hey, go tell the boss! We need everyone over here!”

Well, this definitely wasn’t good. While I sat around, they were already calling in the cavalry. It was clearly time for a change in plans. I’d just have to grab the kid now and make a quick getaway, right? Seemed like the best option. Wait, no…they’d see my face.

Ah, what was I thinking? I had a perfectly suitable mask right on hand.

Woooo! I’m a burning hunk of ecstasy, baby!

Just kidding.

For a moment, I paused to consider stripping off my robe to better hide my identity, but then I remembered I wasn’t even wearing it. Didn’t have my staff, either. I’d just been on a shopping trip, after all.

All right then. Let’s roll!

“Whoa!”

“H-he’s wearing panties on his head, man…”

“What a freak…”

The men were momentarily dumbfounded by my sudden, dramatic appearance. I took the opportunity to launch into a monologue. “Hear me, greedy miscreants! How dare you tear innocent children from their families? Shame on you! Shame! People call this…kidnapping!”

The audience didn’t seem to appreciate my Rom Stol impression. Maybe they weren’t up on their old mecha anime.

“Wh-who the hell are you supposed to be?”

“I am Ruijerd of Dead End!”

“What? Dead End?”

Oh crap! I messed up! Introducing myself that way was pure habit by now, so the words just slipped out of my mouth. This was one case where I really shouldn’t have said anything.

Sorry, Ruijerd! As of today, you’re a creepy weirdo who rescues children while wearing panties on your head! Don’t worry, though. I will *save the kid, no matter what the cost!*

“Curse you, foul kidnappers! Thanks to you, an innocent man has just

been badly slandered! Your villainy won't go unpunished!"

"Look, kid, go play hero somewhere else! We ain't—"

"I didn't come here to talk, you fool! Sunrise Attaaack!"

"Gurgh!"

I cut the conversation short by firing off a Stone Cannon spell. It was always nice to get a few preemptive attacks in. This was the same approach I'd used to rescue the Great Demon Empress from that dirty old pedo back in Wind Port, actually. "Take that! And that!"

"Guh!"

"Blagh!"

In the blink of an eye, I knocked out the four men who'd remained in the warehouse. Once they were all down, I hurried over to check up on their captive. "Are you all right, young man?! Hmm. Looks like he's unconscious…"

I felt like I'd seen this boy somewhere before. There was something…*really* familiar about him, actually. Couldn't quite put my finger on it, though. Weird.

Well, whatever. This was no time to be thinking about it. I needed to get out of here before the rest of the gang arrived… But even as that thought ran through my head, a whole crowd of men had appeared in the warehouse doorway.

"Whoa! What the hell? He took down all four of them!"

"The kid knows how to fight! Get the captain over here, pronto!"

"He's been drinkin' a *lot* today, you know?"

"He's still one hell of a fighter, even when he's plastered!"

Two men turned and ran off, presumably to get their "captain." That still left more than ten people for me to deal with, and now I had to assume *more* reinforcements would be coming.

This was not good. This was not good at all. Maybe I really should have looked the other way…or waited until tomorrow, when I could have convinced Ruijerd to help me out. Charging in solo was definitely a mistake. At this point, my only option was to take down the entire gang.

“What kind of a freak is this guy? He’s wearing panties on his head…”

“Wait, was he here to steal our underwear?!”

“Oh god! Is he some kind of sex criminal?!”

Now that I looked more closely, there were actually a few women in the group as well. *Sorry, Ruijerd. Seriously…I owe you one.*

With one final apology to the man I’d so deeply wronged, I turned my focus to the task at hand. Fortunately, these thugs were nothing special. They kept rushing at me in a straight line, so it was easy enough to fire off a Stone Cannon before they got too close. They weren’t quick enough to dodge my magic, and a single hit was enough to knock most of them unconscious. None of them were even armed. There were no magicians to worry about, either. Everything was going better than expected so far.

“D-damn, we can’t even get close…”

“What the hell is with this kid?! Is he using some sort of magic item?!”

“What’s taking the captain so long?!”

By the time I’d knocked out maybe half of them, the others started getting visibly agitated. Maybe I’d be able to blast my way out of here without too much trouble after all.

“The captain will be here soon, everyone! We just have to hold out until then!”

Well, so much for that.

Two women had appeared in the warehouse doorway. One of them was a warrior clad in a suit of bikini armor; the other was a robed magician. It hadn’t taken very long for this wave of reinforcements to arrive, but I guess that wasn’t surprising. Their whole gang was apparently drinking just next door.

The warrior woman was showing off a *lot* of skin, for some reason. I hadn’t seen a single fighter on the Demon Continent dressed nearly so skimpily. She stood out even more in comparison to the magician, who was wearing a perfectly ordinary outfit.

Damn! Who is this woman?! I can’t…tear…my eyes…away!

“I’ll keep him busy, Shierra! Cover me!”

“Right!”

The bikini lady drew the sword at her waist and rushed toward me. Meanwhile, the robed magician in the rear took up her staff and…oh, crap. Bikini lady’s breasts were swaying like crazy every time she took a step. *Don’t let them jiggle that vigorously, girl! They’re going to break free!*

It was honestly bizarre. If nothing else, you’d expect bikini armor to keep your chest firmly in place so it wouldn’t cause you any problems in battle. Her whole outfit seemed to serve no practical purpose whatsoever.

Oh man, just look at those things go! Right…left…right! They were drawing closer, swaying back and forth… For a moment, they drooped down, then bounced back up toward my—

“Hiyaaaa!”

All of a sudden, I noticed that bikini lady was swinging her sword directly at my face.

“Gaah!” Tumbling reflexively backward, I managed to avoid the strike by a hair’s breadth. *That was close! Damn it. This girl fights dirty!*

Was she wearing that thing as a deliberate distraction?!

At this point, I noticed a faint voice mumbling something from across the room.

“*—converge where thou wilt and issue forth a single pure stream thereof—*”

Oh crap. That was a magic incantation! Someone was about to shoot a Waterball at me!

Thinking fast, I extended my hand in the general direction of the magician. My spell of choice this time was Stone Wall. The best way to ward off a water-based magic spell was to get some nice, absorbent sand and dirt in its way.

As I rushed to cast the spell, I quickly glanced over and found the magician pointing her staff straight at me, just about to launch her attack.

In the very instant she fired off her Waterball, my Stone Wall rose up to meet it. The high-speed projectile burst against it with an ear-splitting bang, rather than a splash. Water sprayed in every direction all across the

warehouse.

"What?! What w-was that?!"

From the sound of things, I'd gotten the magician pretty flustered, so I turned my attention back to the bikini lady.

"Ah…!"

The force from her attack had left her breasts swinging wildly through the air. It looked they were on the verge of breaking free. I could almost…see them…!

"Hyaaaaaa!"

Pulled back to reality at the last moment by her piercing battle cry, I managed to roll to safety again. This time, I put some more distance between us before jumping to my feet.

The bikini lady glared at me, her sword still against the floor where it had struck. "Stop scuttling around like a cockroach, you little pervert!" As she spoke, she raised her weapon again, holding it steady above waist level. She seemed to have given up on overwhelming me with speed and aggression. Instead, she began to close the distance between us slowly but steadily.

Following her lead, I inched backward to… Ooh. When she held her sword out like that, her upper arms pushed her bazongas together. That was some impressive cleavage…

Argh! Come on! Stop falling into her trap, stupid!

I couldn't keep my eyes on her damn sword. How was I supposed to fight in this condition?

Neither the warrior nor her magician buddy were especially talented, to be honest. But at this rate, I was never going to take them down. God help me if she were to suffer a critical wardrobe malfunction. I'd probably be cut to pieces instantly.

How had they learned of my one and only weakness?! Who sold me out, damn it?!

Okay, calm down.

I was just distracting *myself* here, simple as that. This wasn't some

deliberate tactic on her part. The question was…what was I going to do about it? If I wanted to turn this into a fair fight, I needed to get her to cover her chest somehow. And her pleasantly plump behind as well, for that matter. How could I manipulate her into putting some actual clothes on?

Maybe I could say something to try to get her all embarrassed… Hmm, no. If she'd chosen this outfit deliberately, that approach might backfire.

"Gasp!"

Of course! Now I had it!

Are you familiar with the story of the north wind and the sun, everyone?

Once upon a time, the north wind and the sun competed to see which of them could compel a certain traveler to undress. The north wind tried to blow off her clothes with cold, piercing gusts, but the traveler simply piled on extra layers of clothing instead. The sun, however, simply warmed her up until she started taking off her clothes of her own volition.

In other words, if I made things nice and hot and here, she'd *totally* strip off that—

No, no, no! That's exactly what we don't want, remember?!

Right. Cold. Cold was we needed here.

"You've got nowhere left to run," called the woman warrior.

I glanced behind me and realized I'd backed myself all the way against the warehouse wall. It wasn't a problem, though. I'd already worked out my strategy. Without a word, I held out both my palms toward my skimpily attired assailant.

"Icicle Field."

The moment I channeled my magical energy through my right hand, bitterly cold air rushed out of nowhere to fill the warehouse. The temperature dropped by thirty degrees centigrade almost instantaneously. All of a sudden, it was like we were standing inside a refrigerator.

"What the—?!"

I could already see goosebumps on the bikini lady's upper arms, but I wasn't done yet. This time, I let my magic energy course into my *left* hand.

“Blast.”

A great gust of wind sent the woman flying backward. By the time she’d stopped tumbling, I’d sent her all the way to the entrance of the warehouse. I was thinking I’d call this little combination spell “Polar Blast.”

“Haa-choo!”

The air in here was so frigid now that I felt like I might catch a cold myself, but I’d achieved what I set out to do perfectly. Shivering and sneezing, the bikini-armor woman frantically gestured to her friends for a coat. I was out of the woods now. Once those breasts were hidden from view, there was no way she’d get the better of me. All that was left now was to knock everybody senseless and make my getaway…

“I’m here, people! Sorry to keep you waiting!”

…or so I thought, until my newest challenger barged in.

The man in the doorway looked familiar. Something about his face actually made me feel kind of…nostalgic. I’d seen this guy somewhere before, right? But where? It wasn’t coming to me.

“Tch. This little punk’s made a real nuisance of himself, huh? Hic… Stay back, everyone! No reason to gang up on some snot-nosed kid… I’ll take him down personally.”

The man was obviously confident in his skills, but it also looked like he might be drunk. Even from a distance, I could see him swaying unsteadily, and his face was tinged red.

Seriously, though. The more I looked at this guy, the more familiar he seemed. With the brown hair and the slightly thuggish face, he kind of resembled Paul… Come to think of it, he sounded a lot like him, too. Yeah. If you put Paul on a starvation diet and didn’t let him get a good night’s sleep for a couple months, he’d probably end up looking something like this. It made me kind of hesitant to launch any serious attacks at the guy.

But of course, there was no way my father would *actually* be hanging around with a bunch of kidnappers in Millis, of all places.

“Hey, you! You think you can just waltz in here and knock my people around, huh? Well, I’m gonna make you live to regret it!”

The man stepped in front of his group, spat a few fiery words in my

direction and drew a pair of swords from their sheaths. Anyone capable of dual-wielding competently had to be a master swordsman. From his stance alone, I got the distinct feeling he was on a totally different level from the bikini-armor lady. Was Stone Cannon going to be enough to deal with him?

Hmm… I don't really want to use anything that might kill the guy, though…

Perhaps sensing my hesitation, the man abruptly charged forward.

"Wah…!"

He'd taken me a bit off-guard, but I managed to fire a belated Stone Cannon spell. The man reacted instantly, turning the sword in his right hand diagonally to deflect the projectile.

"Water God Style, huh?!"

"That's not all I've got to offer, buddy!"

He was almost on top of me now. Acting on sheer reflex, I set off a shockwave and sent myself flying backward through the air.

"Hah!"

"Whoa!"

I activated my Eye of Foresight to peek into the future to help me dodge his follow-up attacks. The man was quick with his swords, but his footwork seemed a bit sloppy. It was probably related to all the alcohol in his system. Maybe I could do this, after all.

"Tch! He moves just like the kid, dammit… Vierra! Shierra! Come lend me a hand!"

Just like that, the bikini-armor lady and her magician friend stepped forward again. *What happened to taking me down by yourself, huh? What kind of a man are you, anyway?!*

The woman warrior, now all covered in an overcoat, circled around to my side. And the magician was already starting to chant another incantation. This was definitely not good. The man's attacks were fierce and persistent, and I had my hands full just dodging them all.

Fortunately, I still had a trick or two up my sleeves.

"Wah!"

“Ugh!”

Using the vocal magic of the beastfolk, I stopped the man in his tracks for just an instant, giving me time to send him flying with a quick shockwave.

“Stone Cannon!”

Keeping one eye on the man as he tumbled backward, I fired off a quick offensive spell at the female magician. Next, just as the bikini-armor lady was swinging her sword at me, I used my Eye of Foresight to evade the strike and land a solid counter-punch.

The magician had been focusing on her incantation. My spell hit her head-on and knocked her unconscious. The woman warrior staggered backward, but she wasn’t out of the fight yet, judging by the fury in her eyes.

And of course by now, the man was coming right back at me again.

“Shierra! …You’ll pay for that one, you little shit!”

Just as he took a step forward, I transformed the floor underneath him into a tiny patch of muddy swampland. His foot plunged straight into it, and he tumbled clumsily forward onto the floor.

“Captain!”

For a moment, the woman warrior’s eyes were on him instead of me. Bad idea. Without a word, I fired off another Stone Cannon straight at her.

“Ah!”

Two down, one to go.

“Vierra! God damn it!”

Shoving one of his swords back into its sheath, the man stuck the other one in his mouth. I activated my Eye of Foresight.

The man runs at me on all fours.

Was this guy a dog or what?

I fired off multiple Stone Cannon spells to keep him away and backed up to put more distance between us. Unfortunately, this warehouse wasn’t particularly large. There was no easy way to keep him from closing the gap.

“Raaaah!”

Twisting his body strangely, the man leapt off the ground. He somehow managed to draw the sword at his hip even as he pounced at me like an animal. His attacks came fast and furious, from stances so odd I never knew what to expect.

The man grabs the sword in his mouth with his left hand and swings it underhand.

What a bizarre move.

This guy was defying my expectations at every turn. Without the Eye of Foresight, I never would have managed to avoid that last one. As it was, his blade grazed the tip of my nose. The cut tingled painfully.

"…"

My heart was pounding in my chest. I wasn't trying to kill this man, but he had every intention of taking my life. For some reason, that hadn't really sunk in until this moment. It should have been obvious from the start. If I didn't give this everything I had, I wasn't going to make it out of this warehouse alive.

I grit my teeth and lowered myself into a near-crouch. I thought back to my training with Ruijerd and Eris. This man's fierce, beastlike style was probably close to the way Ruijerd attacked when he was playing for keeps, but his movements weren't as quick or flawless as Ruijerd's. The weirdness factor was his main advantage. I could do this.

Next time he pounced at me, I'd land a counter-punch and—

At that point, I realized the man had stopped moving.

A moment later, I noticed that the pair of panties I'd been wearing on my head were now lying on the warehouse floor.

Crap, this wasn't good. They'd see my face…

"Is that…you, Rudy?"

Rudy?

There was only one man who called me by that name.

And that voice…wasn't the hoarse rasp of some angry drunkard anymore. Suddenly, it sounded like a very familiar one.

"…Father?"

***

In the years since I'd last seen him, Paul Greyrat had evidently undergone something of a transformation.

His face was gaunt; there were bags under his eyes and stubble on his cheeks. His hair was unkempt, and his breath reeked of booze. In basically every respect, my father looked like a total mess. The difference from the man that I remembered was…dramatic, to say the least.

Chapter 2:
Paul's Story

Paul

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in the middle of a grassy plain.

It was an unremarkable stretch of flat, empty land, but oddly enough, it felt familiar. I tried to determine where I was, and the answer came to mind before too long. I was in the south of the Kingdom of Asura, near a town I'd once spent some time in. It was the place I'd stayed back when I was learning the Water God style…and Lilia's hometown.

Naturally, I concluded this had to be some sort of dream. I had no reason to be here, after all. Still, it sure brought back some memories. How many years had I spent in this area? One? Maybe two? All I knew for sure was that I hadn't stayed *that* long.

Most of my memories from that period of my life concerned the training hall, and the senior students I trained with there. They were a pack of arrogant idiots with big mouths and no real skill. I had actual talent, so they were always busy trying to keep me in my "proper place." I'd always hated being bossed around like that—the whole reason I ran away from home in the first place was to get out from under my old man's thumb, after all.

But he'd at least been a genuinely competent and intimidating man, with enough power to justify his ego. The senior students, on the other hand, were just useless trash with swollen heads. By the time I reached the Intermediate rank, they were still lagging in the late stages of their Beginner lessons. It was honestly kind of pathetic.

Hell, even the master of the training hall had only ever reached the Advanced rank in the Water God style. He was one of those old coots who loved to shout about "guts" and "determination," despite the fact they'd never gotten *him* much of anywhere. I wanted to show every last one of them just how good I really was someday.

Never really got the chance, as it turned out. I eventually lost my patience with their bullshit, slept with Lilia out of spite, and ran away in the night. I'd been looking to get with her for a while…but in that moment, all I wanted was to make a mess of something they all treasured.

By the next morning, they were all out searching furiously for any trace of me. I fled to a foreign country with a sneer on my face.

God, I really was a stupid little shit. I didn't care how much the other students hated me, but taking out my frustration on Lilia like that wasn't exactly my finest hour.

"Mm…"

The wind was picking up. A bit of dust blew into my eye, and I grimaced slightly. A moment later, there was a small tug at my sleeve.

"Daddy? Where are we…?"

"Hm?"

For some reason, I was holding Norn in my arms. She was looking up at me with anxiety in her eyes.

At this point, I finally realized that I was *actually* standing in the middle of a field in the clothes I wore at home. I could feel solid ground underneath my feet…and the warmth of my daughter's body against my chest.

This wasn't a dream.

"What the heck…?"

I didn't have the first idea what I was doing here. If I'd been alone, I probably would have gone right on believing it was a dream. But Norn was right there in my arms.

Yeah. That was little Norn, all right. My adorable three-year-old daughter.

I didn't hug her like this very often. I was going for more of a stern, dignified father thing, so I mostly kept the physical expressions of affection to a minimum. What was she doing in my arms, then?

…Oh, that's right. Now I remember.

Just a few moments ago, I'd been chatting with Zenith in our house.

“You know, girls stop letting their fathers hug them once they grow up a little. You really should get a few squeezes in while you still can.”

“Nah, I’m working on my paternal dignity this time around. Compared to Rudeus, Norn seems like an ordinary kid, right? If I play my cards right, I bet I can convince her I’m the greatest man in the world.”

“Wasn’t that your father’s approach, too? I thought you hated him.”

“…You’ve got a point. All right, let me at her.”

It was just a silly, casual conversation. Lilia was nearby as well, teaching Aisha something or the other. After realizing that the girl was “gifted,” she’d decided to nurture her talents through constant lessons and lectures. I argued that Aisha would be happier if we let her have a more carefree childhood, but Lilia pushed back so ferociously that I had to back down.

The kid really was growing up fast, though. She’d started walking at a very early age, and absorbed everything we taught her like a sponge. Lilia was a good teacher, so that was probably part of it, but Aisha was making so much progress that it made me worry there might something wrong with Norn.

When I brought up to Lilia, she told me “Aisha’s nothing special compared to young master Rudeus. And Miss Norn’s a perfectly normal child.”

I didn’t really care if Norn was “normal” or not, honestly. But when I pictured her growing up in the shadow of two brilliant siblings, it made me feel a little bad for her.

I remembered thoughts like those running through my mind…

And then I was suddenly enveloped in a blinding white light.

Yeah, I remembered now. There wasn’t some sort of gap in my memory. The fact that I still had Norn in my arms was proof of that. The girl had been walking around on her own for some time now, but I was holding her to my chest.

Something very strange was going on. That much was immediately obvious.

“Daddy?” Norn spoke to me again in an uneasy voice. She’d been

watching my face this whole time.

"It's all right, Norn." Gently patting her on the head, I looked around the area. Zenith and Lilia were nowhere to be seen. Were they somewhere close nearby? Or was I the only one who'd been brought here?

In that case, why was Norn still with me?

One possibility did come to mind.

I'd once triggered a very nasty trap in the depths of a labyrinth—a hidden teleportation circle. And this felt very similar. At the time, I was lucky enough to be teleported close nearby. But I'd reflexively grabbed Elinalise by the sleeve as the trap went off, which got her dragged along as well. She was pretty pissed off at me.

If you're unlucky, a teleport trap is the sort of thing that can be instantly lethal. It wasn't really *my* fault I stepped on it, since our monkey of a scout should have spotted the thing beforehand…but that wasn't important right now. Basically, teleportation magic was capable of instantly moving both you—and anyone you were in physical contact with—to a different location. That would explain why Norn was still with me, but the others weren't.

Why had I been teleported, though? There'd been no warning at all. Had somebody done this to me deliberately?

To be honest, I did have enemies all over the place. It wouldn't be surprising if someone launched a sneak attack on me, given all the bad stuff I'd done in the past. But teleportation magic? That just didn't make any sense. For one thing, there was no known incantation for it. To teleport someone, you needed to use either a magic circle or a special magic item. Teleportation items were banned worldwide, and the creation of teleportation circles had been forbidden for so long that the art itself was all but lost. Why would anyone go to such extreme, dangerous lengths just to take revenge on a single man like me? And why would they just dump me in some empty field…?

Could one of the students from the training hall have been responsible? Maybe they were still nursing a grudge and teleported me away so they could get their hands on Lilia. Maybe they put me here to send a message…and when I made it back to my house, I'd find Zenith and Lilia being despoiled

by a gang of vicious thugs.

Damn. That *did* sound like something those bastards would think of.

"Uh, Daddy…"

"Don't worry, Norn. It's okay. We'll get back home soon enough."

Trying to reassure myself as much as Norn, I set off toward the nearby town. Fortunately, I had an Asuran gold coin hidden away in my sword sheath for emergencies. And thanks to old habits from my adventuring days, I always kept my sword on my person, even when I slept. The only time I took it off was when I made love. My Adventurer Card was tucked away inside the holder, too. Just a small precaution against exactly this sort of emergency.

I made my way to the local Guild and exchanged my gold coin for smaller denominations. The receptionist handed me back nine Asuran silver coins and eight large coppers. They'd apparently hiked their fees at some point, but I had more than I needed anyway. I quickly reviewed the tasks that were available, found one for an emergency delivery, and accepted it on the spot.

My card had run out of magic years ago, so the lady behind the counter had to recharge it for me first. When the words on it reappeared, she exclaimed in surprise and asked me why a S-ranked adventurer was taking on a job like this. Since it was an emergency request, the normal restrictions didn't apply, but under normal circumstances it would have been an E-ranked task.

I didn't have any real reason to hide my situation, but I didn't feel like taking the time to explain. I fed her some vague non-explanation, then asked if I could borrow a horse. This was one of the special perks the Guild offered S-ranked adventurers. When you accepted an urgent delivery job, they loaned you a ride free of charge. Of course, you needed to give the horse back once the job was done…but this time, I was planning to ride off in a totally different direction. I did feel bad for the client, but I had an emergency of my own to deal with.

The horse they brought out for me turned out to be quite an impressive specimen. I'd gotten lucky. That delivery job must have been very urgent indeed. There was a real possibility I'd lose my status as an adventurer for

this stunt, but I could live with that. I wasn't planning to make my living that way ever again.

I hoisted Norn onto the horse, then hopped up behind her.

We galloped out of town immediately.

Halfway through the trip, Norn fell ill. The girl had no experience riding horseback, and I kept us traveling day and night. It was probably just too much for her to handle.

With the time it took to nurse her back to health, I didn't make it back to the Fittoa Region for a good two months. It took so long I almost wished we'd just taken a carriage from the start. I'd long since failed the delivery job, of course, but the breach-of-contract fee wasn't too painful.

At the moment, though, I was in the depths of despair. We hadn't reached Buena Village yet, but I'd finally discovered just how grave the situation really was.

Everything in the Fittoa region had *vanished.*

I was bewildered. Totally bewildered. What the hell had happened? Where was Buena Village now? Where were Zenith and Lilia? The Citadel of Roa had disappeared, too. Did that mean even Rudeus was gone?

This can't be happening.

At some point, I'd fallen to my knees in shock and anguish. The words "they were wiped out by a teleport trap" echoed inside my mind.

It was a phrase I'd heard more than once back in my adventuring days, when I was still exploring labyrinths. Teleportation traps were the one thing you *had* to watch out for. They split your party up and left you uncertain of your own location. Triggering one was a very, very bad idea. I heard numerous stories of veteran teams that were totally wiped out as a result of those things. Once, I'd seen a stunned man recounting how his whole party had stepped on a teleportation circle. He'd managed to team up with another adventurer and fight his way out of the labyrinth, only to discover that all his friends had perished.

But why had this happened *here*? To us?

"Daddy…aren't we home yet?"

Norn's voice snapped me back to reality. Her small hand was clutching at my sleeve.

Without saying a word, I hugged her close.

"What's wrong, Daddy?"

That's right. I'm her dad.

This girl still didn't understand what had happened. But she wasn't worried, because she had me with her. I was her father. I was a father now, damn it! I couldn't show any weakness. I *had* to stay calm and confident. Everything was going to be all right.

Teleportation was a dangerous trap, and I didn't have any idea why this had happened. But I was alive, wasn't I? Zenith was a former adventurer in her own right. And although Lilia wasn't as nimble as she used to be before her poisoning, she still knew how to use a sword.

Aisha, though…

Think, damn it. Was Lilia touching her in that moment?

…I couldn't remember. But I wasn't going to give up hope, either.

For now, I'd just have to believe that Lilia was holding her daughter's hand when that light hit us.

***

I returned the Guild's horse at the nearest town and began gathering information.

It seemed like this magical calamity really had affected the *entire* Fittoa Region. Philip and Sauros were both missing, so Philip's older brother was currently serving as the acting lord. However, he was under intense political pressure to take responsibility for the disaster. From the sound of things, he was on the verge of being stripped of his position. All of the man's energy was currently devoted to protecting himself, so he hadn't taken any real steps to deal with the calamity itself. Instead of looking out for his people, the selfish bastard was trying to save his own skin. And you wonder why I can't stand Asuran nobles.

In the course of my investigations, I met an old man named Alphonse. He introduced himself as a butler who'd been in Philip's service prior to the disaster. His loyalty to the Boreas Greyrat family was apparently unshaken, despite the current circumstances. He was setting up a refugee camp, paid for out of his own pocket, and he wanted me to help him get it off the ground.

When I asked why he wanted me, the old man explained that Philip had sometimes mentioned my name. Apparently, he had me pinned as "a man who shows his real worth in a crisis, but also tends to create them through his own short-sightedness." I wasn't really asking for a critique, but whatever.

Alphonse admitted he'd been somewhat hesitant to approach me on the basis of this questionable "endorsement." Once he took the fact that I was Rudeus' father into consideration, however, he'd decided it would be wise to seek my help.

I'd heard a bit about how things were going in Roa through letters, but it was still nice to see my son was thought so highly of by someone he probably hadn't even interacted with that often. In any case, I accepted Alphonse's offer gladly and got to work right away.

After a month, we made plenty of progress.

Alphonse was a man with many connections. In only a few short weeks, he somehow dealt with all the preparations and gathered enough workers to get the refugee camp up and running. It was a seriously impressive feat.

For my part, I recruited most of the younger refugees who'd gathered in the area into an organization called the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad. We traveled all around the country, helping out people who'd been displaced by the calamity. Of course, my primary objective wasn't to save a bunch of total strangers. First and foremost, I was looking for my family.

At this point, the power struggle in the royal capital apparently resolved itself, since Alphonse began to receive disaster recovery funds from the government. I left a note behind at the refugee camp for Rudeus and set out with my squad for the Holy Country of Millis, home to the headquarters of the Adventurers' Guild. Asura and Millis were two of the biggest countries in the world. I figured the information I was looking for had to be in one or

the other. It felt like the logical approach.

Honestly, I thought I'd find everyone soon enough.

Talk about blind optimism.

***

My first six months in Millis were productive enough.

As it turned out, a large number of Fittoans had been teleported to this continent, and we went around rescuing every last one of them. Some had already been sold off as slaves, and forcibly liberating someone else's "property" was against the law in Millis. But the thought of someone selling Zenith or Lilia into slavery made me so furious that I never hesitated to break that law. I stuck stubbornly to a policy of rescuing *everyone* we found.

Once I'd decided on that course of action, I turned to Zenith's family for help. As it happens, my wife came from a noble house with some real power in Millis. They were well-known for producing many famous knights, among other things. With their assistance, I started to lay the groundwork for freeing all the slaves we'd located.

All in all, our efforts went smoothly. We moved fast and found many of the stranded, penniless Fittoans quickly. Once we extracted them from whatever predicament they'd landed in, we provided those capable of heading back home themselves with traveling funds, recruited any willing volunteers into our squad, and found places for the children and elderly refugees to stay.

Freeing the slaves took more effort, of course. We paid for their freedom where we could. When that wasn't an option, we had Zenith's family put the pressure on. And when *that* didn't work, we looked for chances to snatch them from their owners.

Naturally, forcibly snatching away slaves didn't endear us to the Millis nobility as a whole. Some of them even sent their personal forces after us. We had a number of fatalities.

Still, I wasn't about to stop. I had the moral high ground here. I was saving desperate people who needed help. And for that reason, my squad

stuck with me despite the danger.

I used everything I had—the Greyrat name, my connection to Zenith's family, and my reputation as a former adventurer—to find ways around the obstacles in our path. But no matter how hard we worked, no matter how thoroughly I searched, I couldn't seem to find any information about Zenith or Lilia.

Hell, I hadn't even heard anything about *Rudeus* yet. That boy stood out like a sore thumb everywhere he went, but now it felt like he'd fallen off the face of the planet.

***

Before I knew it, an entire year had slipped by.

By this point, we were hearing about fewer and fewer stranded Fittoans. We'd probably found almost everyone we were going to find in both the Millis Continent and the southern regions of the Central Continent. There were still some smaller villages we hadn't searched yet, and a number of slaves we hadn't managed to free, but that was about it. My squad was working systematically to liberate the remaining slaves. Once we got our hands on them, the rest was simple enough.

I knew it was a violent approach. I knew that every slave we liberated earned me more hatred from the local nobility. I did it anyway. Sometimes that got my people attacked in the street. Sometimes they were badly injured, or even killed. And some members of the squad blamed me for that.

Maybe they were right. Maybe I could have prevented things from taking such an ugly turn.

But no matter what anyone said, I wasn't going to change my approach now. I was too committed to the path I'd chosen.

We started getting more news about dead Fittoans than live ones. There had been more bad news than good from the start, but the ratio just kept getting worse.

To be frank, the people we found alive were very much in the minority.

The Etos, Chloe, Laws, Bonnie, Lane, Marion, Monty…all of them were gone now. Every single time I learned of another dead acquaintance, my blood ran ice-cold.

Sometimes members of the squad would break down in tears at the latest piece of awful news. More than once, we arrived just a little too late to save someone, and a friend or family member would take their anger out on me, demanding to know why I'd taken so long to get us to that one town or village.

There was a risk we'd get *ourselves* stranded somewhere if we didn't plan our movements carefully, though, so I didn't think my strategy was wrong. Under my leadership, we'd managed to save several thousand refugees.

Of course, if I'd managed to get a hold of the members of my old party, the Black Wolf Fangs, they could have searched the Demon Continent and the Begaritt Continent for us as well. But I'd only managed to get in touch with one of them, and he'd vanished shortly after a few brief conversations. I had no idea what he was doing now.

I wouldn't call them heartless or anything. We'd never gotten along that well in the first place, and there'd been one hell of a fight when I left. After the way I said goodbye, it would hardly be surprising if they still resented me.

Why the hell did I have to leave things on such a sour note, anyway? I was such a stupid kid.

But there wasn't much point dwelling on that now.

***

A year and a half had passed since "The Displacement Incident."

These days, alcohol was the only thing that kept me going. I started drinking in the morning, and I kept right on going into the night. I was literally never sober.

I knew I should stop myself. But whenever the booze wore off, the exact same thoughts always popped into my head.

I'd tell myself that my family was dead.

I'd think about the ways in which they might have died. I'd wonder what had happened to their corpses. I couldn't think about *anything* else.

Can you really blame me? Even that absurdly talented son of mine had vanished without a trace. I didn't want to believe it. I really didn't. But in all probability, he was dead. They had all probably died sometime in the last eighteen months—with tears running down their faces, waiting for me to rescue them.

Every time I pictured it, I thought I might go crazy. What the hell was I doing here, anyway? Why had I wasted all this time helping a bunch of strangers? I should have headed straight to the most dangerous parts of the world from the very start. I could have managed, somehow, even if I was on my own.

I made the wrong choice, and now I'd lost my family. The people I cared for most had been stolen from me, and I could *never* get them back.

I didn't want to believe that, of course.

So I drank. When I was drunk, at least, I could feel something like happiness.

I wasn't doing much real work anymore.

In another six months, we'd be starting an operation to send many of the Fittoans we'd found on the Millis Continent back home. These were old people, women, children, and people so sick they could barely move. Even if we gave them money, there was no guarantee they could endure a long journey. But they all wanted to return to their homeland, and so my squad would be escorting them all the way back to the Kingdom of Asura.

The planning was moving forward steadily. But despite my role as captain of the squad, I skipped out on the meetings and spent my days drinking.

I would be remaining in Millis after the operation, along with a few other key members of the Search and Rescue Squad. Once it was complete, however, our activities would be scaled down sharply. In other words, they were going to cut off the search for victims after only two years. It felt much

too early…but at the same time, I had to admit that I understood their logic. Continuing to comb the countryside would just be a waste of money at this point.

In the end, I hadn't managed to find a single member of my family.

I was such a failure.

Now that I was plastered all the time, the other members of the squad had started to keep their distance from me. I could hardly blame them. Nobody wants to waste their time dealing with some drunken moron.

There were a few exceptions, though, and Norn was one of them.

"Daddy! Guess what? Guess what happened when I was outside?"

No matter how drunk I might be, Norn would always chatter happily at me. This sweet little kid was all I had left of my family now.

Right. There was a good reason I hadn't gone to the Demon Continent or Begaritt, wasn't there? I had Norn to take care of. What was I supposed to do, abandon my four-year-old daughter? There was no way I could have left her behind and wandered off somewhere I might easily die.

"Hm? What's up, Norn? Did something good happen?"

"Yeah! I almost fell down in the street outside, but this big bald guy helped me out! And then he gave me this! Look!"

With a big smile, Norn showed me the bright red apple in her hands. It sure looked fresh and juicy.

"Oh yeah? Well, lucky you. Did you say 'thank you' like a good girl?"

"Yeah! When I said thanks, the baldy patted me on the head!"

"No kidding? I guess you ran into a real nice person. But you shouldn't call him 'baldy,' okay? Some guys are kind of sensitive about their hair."

Chatting with my daughter was always so fun. Norn was the light of my life. If anyone ever tried to harm her, I'd end them, even if it meant picking a fight with the Pope of the Millis Church.

"Captain! We've got a problem!"

Just as I was starting to feel a little better, one of my men burst into my room. I can't say I was pleased to have a conversation with my daughter

interrupted like this. I might have tossed the guy out with an angry roar, but Norn was still in the room. Some scrap of petty pride kept my voice calm. “What’s going on?”

“The guys who went out on that job today just got attacked!”

“What, seriously?”

Now who’d go and do a thing like that?

Dumb question. It was obviously those bastard aristocrats again. We had explained a hundred times that innocent residents of the Kingdom of Asura had been enslaved as the result of a magical calamity, but the scumbags stubbornly refused to hand them over. As I recalled, we’d been planning to rescue a slave from one of them today.

“All right! Get your gear on, everyone! Let’s go!” I rushed out of my room and called to the squad’s brawlers. None of them were exactly seasoned warriors, but it wasn’t like we’d be going up against a bunch of veteran labyrinth explorers, either. With my people following close behind, I headed for the place where the fight had broken out.

It wasn’t a long walk. They’d attacked the building right next door—one of the Search and Rescue Squad’s warehouses, a place we used to store clothing and supplies for our personnel. If our enemies had found it, we had a problem on our hands. We might need to change our base of operations.

“There’s only one of them, but he’s tough. Be careful, Paul.”

“Is he a swordsman or what?”

“No, it’s a magician. Looks like a kid, but he has his face hidden.”

A kid magician? I knew my people were amateurs, but they were adults in decent shape, and he’d taken down a bunch of them. This “kid” was probably a hobbit, if you asked me. They were always taking advantage of their childlike appearance to deceive people.

A veteran hobbit mage, then…hmm. Could I beat him in this condition? I was confident I could handle a typical thug or three no matter *how* drunk I was, but…

Nah, it should be fine. I’ve got plenty of tricks up my sleeve.

Shaking my head, I stepped into the warehouse.

Chapter 3:
Family Squabble

Paul was staying at a place called The Dawn-Door Inn, but he led me to the bar next door. There were ten or so round wooden tables inside, and at the moment, I was seated at one across from my father.

It was still daytime, but we weren't the only ones in the bar. In fact, every seat was taken. The guys I'd knocked out in the warehouse earlier were sitting around having their injuries tended to by the group's healers. It went without saying that the looks they shot me weren't too friendly.

Everyone here was apparently a member of Paul's gang. And the most attention-grabbing of them all was definitely the woman warrior sitting diagonally behind Paul.

She had short chestnut hair that curled outward at the ends, a pouty mouth, and a fairly charming face. But it was her figure and her outfit that *really* made her stand out. Her chest was huge, her waist was thin, and her butt was plump. For some reason, she was still wearing that bikini armor. I guessed she was in her late teens.

It was the same girl who'd given me so much trouble earlier. Paul had called her "Vierra." She definitely had the kind of body I could see my old man drooling over. I myself found it difficult to look away when I glanced in her direction…and that absurdly skimpy clothing certainly didn't help matters.

"Bikini armor" itself wasn't so rare in this world. After all, most injuries could be instantly healed with magic, so there were some swordswomen who opted for lighter protective equipment, accepting the fact that they'd get cut up sometimes. I'd met a few people like that on the Demon Continent, and I had to assume it was the same for her. But I'd never seen anyone in an outfit *this* minimal before. Normally, armor like that was worn over lightweight clothing, not bare skin. And you'd wear protectors to cover at least some of your joints. I guess we were just sitting around in a bar right now, so it would make sense to not bother wearing those. By the same token, you'd normally wear a coat over that sort of armor when you weren't

fighting. That was what the ladies on the Demon Continent did, at least. Although some of the more elderly swordswomen sometimes didn't bother…

Wait. Hadn't she put on an overcoat back at the warehouse after I cast that spell? Why the heck would she take it off again?

Well, whatever. Might as well enjoy the eye candy while I could. *Mm, yes indeed. Splendid, splendid… Whoops.*

I'd accidentally met the girl's gaze while ogling her. She gave me a quick wink, so I returned one of my own.

"Hey, Rudy… Rudy?"

At this point, I noticed that Paul was speaking to me, and regretfully tore my eyes away from the woman warrior. "Hello, Father. It's been a while."

"Yeah. Uh…it's good to see you're still alive, kid."

Paul's voice was full of exhaustion. The man really had changed quite a lot. And not for the better, that's for sure. I'd never seen him so haggard or disheveled before.

"Well…thanks…"

To be honest, I was having a very hard time making sense of this situation. What on earth was Paul doing here? This was the Holy Country of Millis. It was about as far from the Kingdom of Asura as Mongolia was from Africa. Had he come out here to look for me?

No, that couldn't be right. He didn't even know I'd been teleported to the Demon Continent. There had to be some other reason. What happened to his job protecting Buena Village?

"So…what are you doing here, Father?"

The question seemed like a reasonable starting point to me, but Paul reacted with obvious surprise. "What? You did see my message, right?"

"Your message…?" What was he talking about? I didn't remember getting any messages from him.

For some reason, Paul frowned sullenly at my confusion. Had I managed to upset him somehow? "You mind telling me what you've been doing up until now, Rudy?"

“Uh, mostly trying to survive. It’s kind of a long story…”

I was really hoping Paul would explain the situation first, but since he’d asked, I decided to tell him the story of my road to Millishion. I began with my teleportation to the Demon Continent with Eris, describing how we’d been rescued by a demon, became adventurers, and spent a solid year traveling all the way to Wind Port.

In retrospect, it had been a pretty fun journey. We got off to a rough start, true, but by the sixth month or so we’d gotten used to the adventurer life. I gradually started to enjoy telling my own story. My descriptions of events grew more eloquent, and I began to describe various episodes in increasingly dramatic ways. It was all non-fiction, but I found ways to weave everything into one big, spectacular tale.

For starters, I split our adventure on the Demon Continent into three clear parts:

Chapter One: I meet my dear friend Ruijerd, and we make a name for ourselves in the city of Rikarisu.

Chapter Two: Vowing to help Ruijerd in his quest and right various wrongs, the great magician Rudeus sets out on a great journey.

Chapter Three: I fall into a cowardly beastfolk trap, and find myself a helpless captive in their village.

There might been a few *slight* exaggerations thrown in here and there, but I kept the narrative rolling smoothly. After a while I was enjoying myself so much that I started waving my hands around and adding dramatic sound effects to the action scenes.

Also, I opted to leave out the whole affair with the Man-God.

“And then, as we finally arrived at Wind Port, the first thing that met our eyes…” Just as I was wrapping up Chapter Two of my “Chronicles of a Rambling Journey Across the Demon Continent,” I abruptly fell silent. For some reason, Paul’s mood had taken a turn for the worse. There was something very much like a scowl on his face, and he was drumming his fingers on the table in irritation.

Was it something I said? I didn’t really understand why he was upset, so I decided to try and continue. “Uh, so anyway… After that, we headed for

the Great Forest—”

“Enough,” Paul said, his tone distinctly irritated. “I get the picture, okay? You spent the last year and a half playing around.”

The way he put that kind of ticked me off. “Excuse me? I had a *lot* of a trouble out there, actually.”

“Oh yeah? When?”

“Huh?”

He’d caught me off guard with that one. My voice came out a little strange.

“The way you just described it, the whole thing sounded like a damn walk in the park.”

Well, yeah. That’s because I deliberately told the story that way. Maybe I’d gotten a little too carried away, in retrospect.

“Look, Rudy…let me ask you one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Why didn’t you bother trying to find out if anyone *else* had been teleported to the Demon Continent?”

I fell silent. It was the only thing I could do. I didn’t have a good answer to his question, after all. There was only one possible reply. One simple reason.

It had slipped my mind.

At first, I did have my hands completely full with our party’s problems. But even after we started to get a handle on things, it never occurred to me that anyone other than us might have been sent to the Demon Continent as well.

“I guess…I forgot about that. Um…I sort of had my hands full…”

“Did you, though? You found the time to help out some random demon you’d never met before, but couldn’t spare a thought for the other people who’d probably been sent out there, too?”

I fell silent again.

Maybe I had gotten my priorities wrong. Fine. But I couldn’t see the

point of raking me over the coals about it after the fact.

The thought just hadn't occurred to me at the time. What was I supposed to say?

"Hah! So, what? You didn't look for anyone. You didn't even bother to write a single letter. You just wandered around enjoying the adventurer life with some cute little lady and an invincible bodyguard! And then, once you get to Millishion…hah! The first thing you do is stumble on a kidnapping, put some panties on your head, and pretend you're some kind of hero?"

With a mocking snort, Paul reached out to grab a bottle of alcohol from the next table over. He drained half of it in a single long swig, then spat loudly on the floor.

His attitude was really starting to piss me off. I wasn't going to tell him not to drink booze, but we were kind of in the middle of an important discussion here.

"Look, I did the best I could, okay? I was stranded in a totally unfamiliar place with no money, and I felt like I had to focus on keeping Eris safe. Can you really blame me if I missed a few things?"

"I'm not *blaming* you or anything, kid." Paul's tone was as mocking as ever.

I couldn't help raising my voice this time. "Why do you keep taking jabs at me like this, then?!" My patience had its limits. I didn't understand why the man was acting like this.

"Why?" Once again, Paul spat on the floor in disgust. "That's what I want to know. *Why*?"

"Excuse me?" This conversation was getting more confusing by the second. What was he even trying to say here?

"This Eris kid is Philip's daughter, right?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah, of course."

"I've never laid eyes on her myself, but I'm sure she's one cute little lady. Was that why you didn't send any letters? Might have made it tougher to make a move on her if she picked up too many bodyguards, I guess."

"Oh, come on! I already told you, I just forgot!"

Nothing like that thought had even crossed my mind.

True, Eris was the daughter of a powerful family. The Greyrats had a lot of influence. If I'd spoken to the local lord in Zant Port, they might have given us a bodyguard or two. Of course, I'd ended up in a prison cell in a beastfolk village before I had the chance to try anything like that. Hadn't I explained this to him already?

Oh, wait. No. I never got to that part, actually…

Still, I really did feel like I'd done the best job I could under the circumstances. I wasn't saying that I'd made the best possible decisions at all times, but I didn't think Paul had any right to criticize me after the fact.

When we fell silent for a moment, the bikini-armor lady put a hand on Paul's shoulder from behind. "Captain, why don't you just leave it at that? He's still a young boy, you know. There's no reason to be so harsh on him."

I couldn't help snorting. Typical Paul, really. For all his big talk, he couldn't even control himself around women. Where did a guy like that get off talking down to me like this, anyway?

I hadn't laid a finger on Eris, just for the record. To be sure, I had my moments of temptation. Sometimes my sinful urges almost got the better of me. But at the end of the day, I'd never touched her. "I'm not sure you have any right to lecture me about women, Father."

"…What?"

Paul's eyes narrowed ominously at this point. But at the time, I didn't notice.

"Who's that girl behind you, anyway?"

"Vierra? What about her?"

"Tell me, do Mother and Lilia know you're working so *closely* with such a pretty woman?"

"No, they don't. How the hell would they?" Paul's face twisted bitterly, but I wasn't even looking at it. I was too busy enjoying the fact that I'd finally gotten the upper hand.

"So you get to cheat on them to your heart's content, then? That's quite an outfit you've got her wearing, by the way. I guess I'll be getting a new

brother or sister sometime soon."

All of a sudden, I found myself lying on the ground with my face throbbing painfully. Paul was looking down on me with hatred in his eyes.

"I've had about enough of this shit, Rudy."

He punched me. Why? What the hell?

"Look. If you made it here, you passed through Zant Port at some point, right?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"So you *know* already, don't you?!"

What was he on about?! This seriously didn't make any damn sense anymore. All I could tell was that Paul was hiding something from me…and that he was pissed off I didn't know what that "something" was. What a joke. I wasn't all-knowing, damn it. The world was *full* of things I didn't know.

"I have no idea what you're even talking about!" I sprang to my feet and I took a swing at Paul.

Even as he dodged the punch, I was activating my Eye of Foresight.

He catches my leg and trips me.

I stepped down hard on Paul's foot, and pivoted to throw another punch toward his chin.

He dodges my punch and hits me with a counter.

The man moved well for someone so obviously drunk. I channeled magic into my right hand. If I was no match for Paul in a close-range brawl, I'd just have to use my spells.

The whirlwind I called forth hit my father head-on. With a wordless shout of surprise, he spun backward through the air, soaring all the way behind the bar's counter. The crash of breaking bottles filled the room as he hit the floor.

"God damn it! That's the last straw!" Paul rose to his feet at once, but staggered unsteadily when he tried to move.

You've been drinking too much, moron. He'd been so much stronger before. The old Paul would have warded off my whirlwind somehow, even

from that awkward position.

“Rudy, you little—”

“Captain!”

As Paul faltered, another woman rushed to his side. This time, it was the robed magician. The man was just surrounded by girls, wasn’t he? Pretty amazing that he had the nerve to lecture me.

“Get off me!” Pushing the magician aside, Paul strode back across the room to me.

“How many women did you cheat with while I was gone, Paul?”

“Shut the hell up!”

He throws a haymaker with his right hand.

Talk about a telegraphed punch. Was this really the Paul I knew? Even without the Eye of Foresight, I probably could have dodged this one.

“Hah!” I grabbed his outstretched arm and pulled him forward into something like a one-armed shoulder throw. Of course, I couldn’t actually do real judo. I used a burst of wind magic to propel him along, then just smacked him down into the ground as hard as I could.

“Gah…!”

Paul didn’t even manage to break his fall properly. As he lay spread out awkwardly on the floor, I dropped down and mounted him, pinning his arms under my knees the way Eris always did. “I did…the best…I could, okay?!”

I hit him.

And hit him.

And hit him some more.

Gritting his teeth, Paul glared up at me with eyes full of bitter fury.

What was *wrong* with him, damn it?! What had I done to deserve that look?! “What do you want from me?! I was stranded in a totally unfamiliar place! I didn’t have anyone to turn to! And I still managed to make it all this way! Isn’t that good enough?!”

“You could have done better, and you know it!”

“That’s *not true*!”

I punched him again. And again.

We’d both run out of things to say, apparently. Paul just looked up at me, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

He looked so *irritated*. Like he was dealing with someone totally unreasonable. *Why?* I’d never seen an expression like that on his face before. This wasn’t like him at all. Damn it all to—

“Stop iiiiit!” All of a sudden, something smacked into me from the side. I swayed a little from the impact, and in the next instant, Paul shoved me off of him and sat up.

Assuming another attack would follow, I quickly braced myself. But Paul didn’t move toward me…because there was now a little girl standing right in between us.

“Stop it! Just stop it!”

The kid had Paul’s nose and Zenith’s golden hair. I recognized her immediately. It was Norn. Norn Greyrat—my little sister. She’d gotten a lot bigger since the last time I saw her. She’d be five years old by now, right? Maybe even six. Why was she standing in front of me with her arms spread wide?

“Stop picking on Daddy!”

I blinked in confusion. “Huh?” *Picking on Daddy? What? No. Come on…*

Norn was glaring at me, looking like she might burst into tears at any moment. When I looked around the room…for some reason, everyone was looking at me like I was the bad guy.

“…Are you serious?”

I felt my blood go cold. Memories from decades earlier flashed through my mind. Memories of all the times I’d been bullied in my past life. Whenever I’d tried to stand up for myself back then, everyone in the classroom used to look at me just like this.

Right, right, sure. Guess I was in the wrong again, huh?

Whatever. I give up.

Enough of this. It was time for me to leave. I hadn’t seen anything worthwhile here, and I hadn’t done anything, either. Might as well just head back to the inn to wait for Eris and Ruijerd. We could leave this city right away…maybe even tomorrow or the next day. It wasn’t the end of the world, really. The capital was hardly the only place we could earn some money. I mean, West Port had to have a Guild branch of its own, right?

“Listen, Rudy. You weren’t the only ones who got teleported by the Calamity. Everyone in Buena Village was, too.”

Paul was saying something or other, although it didn’t really register.

Hm? What?

What was that just now?

“I left a message for you with the Guilds in Zant Port *and* West Port. Didn’t you become an adventurer? Why the hell didn’t you read it?”

Huh? I hadn’t seen anything like that in Zant Port…

No, wait. Right. We’d never had the chance to visit the Adventurers’ Guild there, had we? I went straight to pick up Ruijerd after we arrived, and that outing ended with me locked in a prison cell in the Doldia Village.

“While you were off enjoying your little vacation, a whole bunch of people died.”

I’d seen “The Displacement Incident” with my own two eyes. I’d seen

the scale of that magical calamity. Why hadn't I figured any of this out on my own? Even the Man-God referred to it as a "huge" disaster. I had no reason to assume it never reached Buena Village.

So…everyone back home had disappeared…

"Does that mean…Sylphie's missing, too?"

"You more worried about some girl than your own mother, Rudy?" Paul said, scowling irritably.

My breath caught in my throat. "What?! Y-you haven't even found Mother?!"

"That's right. I can't find her anywhere! Or Lilia, either!"

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. My legs trembled and gave out under me; I stumbled backward, barely managing to catch myself on a chair before I fell.

"We've been looking, though. We've been looking for *everyone* who vanished. That's the whole point of the Search and Rescue Squad."

The Search and Rescue Squad? Everyone here was part of an organized search party, then? "B-but…why would a search and rescue team snatch people off the street?"

"Because some of the displaced were sold into slavery."

According to my father, it was a common scenario: You're teleported to a totally unfamiliar place. You have no idea where you even are. And then somebody takes advantage of that to deceive you and enslave you.

Paul and the other squad members had compared countless records against their lists of missing people, gone to see every enslaved Fittoan they located, and then tried to convince their owners to release them. But apparently, many of these people firmly refused to give up their "property." Under the slave laws of Millis, it didn't matter *how* you ended up a slave—once you were one, you were nothing more than your owner's private possession. So Paul had resorted to forcibly liberating slaves.

Stealing a slave was a crime, naturally, but there were certain loopholes in the law. The squad had taken full advantage of them to liberate many people.

Of course, they were willing to respect the wishes of anyone who chose to remain in their current situation. But virtually every slave they found begged tearfully to be taken back to their homeland. The boy they'd saved today had been one such case. No wonder the kid had looked so familiar. It was Somal, one of the children who used to pick on Sylphie back in the day. For the last year, he'd been forced to work as a kind of male prostitute here.

Paul and his companions had heard the bitter cries of countless enslaved Fittoans, some of whom they still hadn't managed to rescue. They'd made a lot of enemies among the local nobility, and members of the squad had begun to drop away as a result of their increasingly forceful methods. Paul was under a mountain of pressure from all sides. Every day was a nerve-wracking ordeal. But nonetheless, he persevered. The only thing that mattered was finding and rescuing the victims of the Calamity, and everything he did, he did for them.

"I thought you'd figured out the situation a long time ago, Rudy. I assumed you were already out there doing your part."

All I could do at this point was hang my head. He wasn't being fair. How was I supposed to know about all this?

But then again…when I really thought about it…

It was entirely possible that I could have found displaced Fittoans in some of the towns we'd passed through on the Demon Continent. If I'd spoken to them, I probably would have gotten a sense of just how large-scale the disaster really was. I hadn't put enough effort into understanding the situation. I'd prioritized helping Ruijerd over learning more about the Calamity.

I screwed up. Plain and simple.

"And now I find out you were messing around on some *adventure*…"

Messing around, huh…?

Yeah. Couldn't really argue with that.

The whole time I was out there stealing Eris' panties, leering at the ladies in the Adventurers' Guild, sucking up to the Great Demon Empress, and ogling a girl with cat ears, Paul was desperately searching for our missing family.

No wonder he'd gotten so pissed off at me.

Still, I couldn't find it in me to apologize. At the end of the day, I *had* done my best. I'd thought things through, and made the decisions that felt most reasonable to me.

What was I supposed to do about any of it now?

Paul didn't say another word. Norn was silent, too. But I could see the hostility in their eyes, and it hurt me deeply. It felt like they'd taken a big piece out of my heart.

I glanced around the room and saw that Paul's comrades were also looking at me with reproachful eyes.

More painful memories came flooding back. I remembered the day *after* a bunch of delinquents stripped me naked and tied me up outside for everyone to see. I remembered the way everyone looked at me when I walked into the classroom that morning.

My mind went blank.

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At some point, I'd made my way back to our room in the inn.

I collapsed onto the bed. I wasn't sure what had happened to me, or why. I wasn't sure of anything. My brain wasn't really working at the moment.

"Huh…?"

Something inside my clothes crinkled audibly. Rooting around in them, I found the writing paper I'd bought that afternoon. I crushed in my hands and tossed it away.

"Hah…" With a long sigh, I lowered myself back onto the bed and hugged my knees to my chest.

I didn't want to do anything at all.

I'd never been treated this coldly by a parent before, not even in my previous life. When all was said and done, Mom and Dad had always been pretty soft on me.

But now, Paul had totally rejected me. He'd looked at me the same way my brother in my former life had on the day he kicked me out of the house.

Where had I gone wrong?

I thought I'd done a decent job, all things considered. Even now, none of my major decisions stood out as fatally flawed. The closest thing that came to mind was the way I'd turned to Ruijerd for help at the very beginning. I'd taken the Man-God's advice on that one, even though I deeply mistrusted him.

It hadn't helped that I'd described my travels as cheerfully as possible. That was partly because I'd gotten carried away, but I also hadn't wanted to get Paul worried…and I had my pride, too. I wanted to convince him that I could handle myself just fine.

Paul was in no mood for a light-hearted tale of adventure, though. And neither were the other members of his team. I'd definitely chosen my words poorly. For one thing, I never wanted to imply that Sylphie was more important than my mother. But Paul and Norn were both there…wasn't it only natural for me to assume that Zenith was okay as well?

No. That's just an excuse. In that moment, the thought of Zenith hadn't even popped into my head.

What about the whole womanizing thing, though? Paul was the one who brought that up, and I never laid a finger on Eris. Surely a cheating scumbag like him didn't have any right to lecture me…

Oh. Wait. Now it made sense. Maybe he hadn't touched those girls, either. Yeah…that would explain why he'd flipped out on me.

Okay. I'd pieced the whole thing together now.

I'd just have to go back tomorrow and talk to Paul again. We both just got a little emotional today, that's all. I'd dealt with this sort of thing before. Once we talked it out, he'd understand.

Yeah. Everything should go fine next time. I was worried about our family too, of course. If I'd known they were missing earlier, I would have looked for them too.

It really sucked that I'd spent over a year on the Demon Continent without gathering any information. But at the end of the day, I was still alive.

I still had a chance to make things right. All we had to do was plan out a slow, thorough search. Finding a couple of stranded people in a world this big was going to take a while no matter what; Paul understood that, surely. Once I got him calmed down, we could figure out our next move. We'd want to focus on the places nobody had searched yet. I'd help out too, of course. Once I dropped Eris off back in Asura, I could either just keep traveling up to the north, or head off somewhere else entirely.

Yeah. All right then. First of all, I'll…go see Paul again. I'll go back… to that bar, and…

"…Urp!"

Suddenly overwhelmed by nausea, I scrambled out of bed and ran to the toilet. Before long, I'd puked up the contents of my stomach.

I'd worked things out on a rational level, but I still didn't *feel* any better. It had been a long time since I faced this kind of hostility from a family member, and it hurt too much for me to bear.

***

It was early afternoon by the time Ruijerd returned to the room. Looking a bit happier than usual, he took out a small envelope and started to show it to me. But when I looked up at him from my seat on the bed, he stopped and frowned. "Did something happen, Rudeus?"

"I ran into my father. He's here in the city."

Ruijerd's expression grew even sterner. "Did he say something unpleasant to you?"

"Yes."

"You haven't seen each other in some time, correct?"

"Well, yeah."

"But you had a fight?"

"Yes."

"Tell me the details."

I described the entire incident from start to finish as honestly as I could. Once I'd finished, Ruijerd said "I see," then fell silent.

That was the end of our conversation. After some time, he quietly left the room.

Eris came back in the evening.

Something had obviously happened, judging by how excited she was. There were leaves stuck to her clothes and streaks of dust on her face…but she looked happy. It seemed like the Goblin-slaying job had gone off well. That was good, at least.

"Hey there, Eris."

"Hey, Rudeus! I'm back! You'll never guess what… Huh?"

When I smiled up at her, Eris' eyes went wide with shock. An instant later, she ran across the room to me.

"Who was it?!" she shouted frantically, shaking me by the shoulders. "Who did this to you?!"

"I'm fine. It's no big deal."

"Oh, come on! You can't be serious!"

We went back and forth like that a while, but Eris was really persistent. I ended up giving in and telling her about what happened with Paul. In a flat, emotionless voice, I recounted the whole story for a second time—what I said, how he reacted, and how it all ended.

Eris' response was an explosion of fury. "I can't *believe* this! How could he say those things?! You worked your butt off getting us here! And he calls that *playing around*?! He's a total failure as a father! I'll kill that stupid jerk!"

With that somewhat alarming declaration, she stormed out of the room with her sword in her hand. I didn't even have the energy to try and stop her.

A few minutes later, Ruijerd carried Eris back into the room by the scruff of her neck like an unruly kitten.

"Let me *go*, Ruijerd!"

"You shouldn't interfere in a family squabble," Ruijerd said, depositing

his prisoner onto the floor.

Eris immediately spun around and glared up at him. “There are some things you should *never* say to your child! Even if you’re fighting!”

“This is true. But I can understand how Rudeus’ father felt.”

“Oh yeah? Well, what about how *Rudeus* feels, then?! You know him! He’s the most carefree, confident person on the planet. You can punch or kick him, and he just shrugs it off! But look at him now… He’s devastated!”

“Perhaps you ought to console him, then. I’m sure a young woman like yourself could manage that.”

“Wha—?!”

As Eris flapped her mouth wordlessly, Ruijerd turned and quietly exited the room.

Left behind with me, Eris began to fidget, then started drifting restlessly around the room doing nothing in particular. She shot frequent glances over in my direction. Sometimes she’d pause, assume her usual arms-akimbo pose, and open her mouth to say something, only to snap it shut and resume her wandering. The girl was seriously antsy. It was like watching a bear at the zoo or something.

In the end, Eris quietly sat down next to me on my bed. She didn’t say a word. And she left a little distance between us.

What sort of an expression was on her face right now? I hadn’t been looking too carefully. I didn’t have the energy.

A little more time passed in silence.

Eventually, I noticed Eris wasn’t sitting next to me anymore. Just as I was wondering where she’d gone, she wrapped her arms around me from behind.

“It’s okay. I’m here for you…” As she spoke those words, Eris hugged my head tightly. I was enveloped in softness, warmth, and the faintly sweaty scent of her body.

After the year and a half we’d spent on the road together, that smell was a very familiar one. And right now, it was oddly comforting. My family’s rejection had filled me with anxiety and fear, but now those feelings

seemed to melt away.

Maybe Eris was “family” too, at this point. If she’d been around in my previous life, I might have escaped my misery much, much earlier. Judging from how much that one embrace did for me, it sure seemed plausible.

“Thanks, Eris.”

“I’m sorry, Rudeus. I’m not too good at this sort of thing…”

I reached up to squeeze one of Eris’ hands as she hugged me. It was a swordfighter’s hand—strong and calloused. A testament to her hard work. Not exactly what you’d expect from the little lady of a noble house.

“Don’t apologize. It meant a lot to me.”

“…Okay.”

Something inside me was piecing itself back together. I felt myself growing slightly calmer.

With a quiet sigh of relief, I let myself slump back against Eris. I needed to lean on her a little…at least for now.

Chapter 4:
Reunited

Paul

I still hadn't left the bar.

The sun was on the verge of setting, so the place was starting to get more customers who weren't members of my squad. On the other hand, many of my people had already left. Not that I really cared. I was planted at a table all by myself, drinking like a fish.

Apparently, it was obvious that I wasn't in the best of moods. Everyone in the place was giving me a wide berth.

"Hey there! I've been lookin' for you, buddy."

Everyone except the most recent arrival, at least.

I looked up and found myself face-to-face with a grinning monkey of a man. It was the first time I'd seen his ugly mug in a year. "Geese…? Where the hell have you been, huh?"

"Ooh, hostile! You seem even crankier than usual, my friend."

"What do you expect?"

Clicking my tongue in irritation, I reached up and touched my cheek. It was still throbbing where Rudeus had punched me earlier. Maybe I should have swallowed my pride and let one of our healers fix me up.

That damn kid. I swear. "The Demon Continent might be tough, but my magic was more than a match for it," huh? Well, good for you. If it was such a cakewalk, why didn't you take a little time to look around for your mother?

Oh, but at least I got to hear your lecture on the best ways to cook Great Tortoise meat. "If I hadn't hit on the idea of creating a pot using Earth magic, we would've been stuck eating charred, smelly chunks of that stuff for a whole year!" Wasn't there anything else you could have done with the time you spent hunting down ingredients for some monster stew?

Ugh. God damn it.

And then, just to top it all off, you've got the nerve to accuse me of cheating! I haven't even thought about touching a woman in the last year and a half, you smug little moron! You didn't do a thing to help, and you think you have the right to get on my case?

Oh, you didn't know, huh? Great excuse. If you'd actually bothered looking at the world around you, Zenith or Lilia might be back here with us right now!

Seriously. What a joke…

"Hee hee hee. From the look of things, I'm guess you haven't bumped into each other yet." Grinning to himself for some unclear reason, Geese ordered something or other. Presumably booze. The man was a heavier drinker even than Talhand, and Talhand was a *dwarf*.

"Hey, Paul. Make sure to stop by the Adventurers' Guild tomorrow, all right?"

"Why?"

"Because I think you'll run into someone interesting."

Someone interesting? Geese apparently thought this meeting would improve my mood. Given the timing of his arrival, and who I'd "run into" today…it wasn't hard to guess who he meant. "You talking about Rudy?"

Pouting a little, the old monkey scratched at his head. "Huh? How'd you know that?"

"I already bumped into him today."

"You don't look particularly happy, considering. Did you have a fight or something?"

A fight…? Well, I guess we did. Although it barely even qualified as one.

Damn it. Just thinking about it's got my face aching again…

"What happened, Paul? Tell me all about it." Geese got up and pulled his chair over next to me. With that friendly face of his, the man had always had a talent for listening to people's problems. This wasn't the first time he'd stuck his nose into my business and encouraged me to gripe.

“All right, get a load of this…”

I went ahead and told Geese what happened earlier.

I’d been happy to see Rudeus, of course. But it felt like we weren’t really on the same page about the situation, so I asked him what he’d been doing up until now. At which point he started talking all cheerfully about his journey through the Demon Continent.

Every other word out of his mouth was some pointless boast, so I pointed out that he could have used his time more productively. Then *he* got all pissed off at *me*. He made a crack about me sleeping around. I lost my temper completely. And then we fought, and he kicked my ass. The end.

“Ahh…yeah. I gotcha…”

Geese had listened patiently to the whole story, nodding and tossing in a few brief comments here and there. I felt like he’d been sympathizing with me. But then, once I’d wrapped things up, he looked me in the eye and said, “Well, sounds like your expectations might have been a bit unfair there, chief.”

“Huh?” I replied, sounding like a complete moron.

Unfair? How I was I being unfair? And to whom? “You think I expected too much? Of *Rudy*?”

“I mean, think about it, man,” continued Geese as I blinked in confusion. “Sure, the kid’s amazing. I’ve never seen anyone who could cast spells without a word like that. And when I saw him going blow for blow with North Saint Gallus, it sent chills down my spine. Rudeus is the kind of prodigy you see once a century.”

Right. Rudeus was a prodigy. He was a *genius*. He could always do anything he set his mind to, even as a little kid. For a while, I’d been under the impression that he had some relatively serious flaws as well, but…I mean, by the end of his stay in Roa, Philip was willing to marry off his own daughter to him. Philip! The same guy who talked trash about me behind my back! “Yeah, that’s right. He’s unbelievable. When he was only five years old, he—”

“But at the end of the day, he’s still just a kid.”

Startled by Geese’s firm interruption, I fell silent.

“Rudeus is still an eleven-year-old kid,” he repeated slowly, just to drive the point home. “Even you didn’t run away from home until you were twelve, right?”

“Yeah…”

“Anyone younger than that’s still just a snot-nosed brat. Isn’t that what you always used to say?”

“Yeah, okay, sure. So what if I did?” *Come on. Rudy’s already stronger than me.*

I did have some alcohol in my system this morning. Even with that factored in, though, it was clear the kid had improved dramatically. I might have been drunk, but I was also going all-out; I lowered myself to using the North God Style’s “Four-Legged Stance,” and even busted out the Sword God Style’s “Silent Sword.” But my sword only sliced those panties he was wearing off his face. Rudy wasn’t even taking the fight seriously, either. The fact that none of my people suffered anything worse than a few minor injuries was proof enough of that.

It was hard to say just how he’d grown as a fighter since the last time I saw him. But even at the age of seven, he was cleverer than me. Now he was both smarter *and* stronger than I was. What was so unreasonable about expecting him to accomplish more than I could, then? His age had nothing to do with his capabilities.

“Paul, what were you doing when you were eleven years old?”

“Hm…?”

As I recalled, I spent most of that year at home training with the sword and getting chewed out by my old man. He found reasons to complain about every little thing I did, and took every chance he could to smack me around.

“You think you could have survived alone on the Demon Continent back then?”

“Heh. You’re forgetting one little detail here, Geese. Rudy found himself a demon bodyguard, remember? This guy speaks Human, Demon-God, *and* Beast-God, and he’s strong enough to take down an A-ranked monster single-handed. Anyone could have made it back with a chaperone like that.”

“Nope,” Geese declared confidently. “You wouldn’t have made it. No chance. Even if you went out there *now*, you still wouldn’t survive on your own.”

I can’t say hearing that put me in the best of moods. It didn’t help that Geese was still smirking at me from across the table. The man had a seriously irritating smile. “Hah! Fine! Doesn’t that just prove my point, then? Rudy pulled off something I couldn’t. My son’s a prodigy! He’s already standing on his own two feet! I’ve got nothing left to teach him. Was it wrong of me to expect him to put those talents to *use*, huh?! Am I really in the wrong here?!”

“Yeah, you are. But that’s nothing new, hey?” Still smirking, Geese paused for a moment to chug down the beer he’d just been handed. “Ahhhh! That’s the stuff. You can’t get booze like this in the Great Forest, you know?”

“Geese!”

“Okay, okay. No need to shout.” Geese smacked his wooden mug down onto the table and looked me in the eye, his expression suddenly much more serious. “Listen, Paul. You’ve never been to the Demon Continent, have you?”

“So what?”

It was true. I’d never had the pleasure of visiting. I mean, I’d heard the rumors, of course. Everyone made it out to be a dangerous place where you’d run into monsters every time you took a walk, and had to eat them to survive. But “lots of monsters” sounded like something I could deal with, honestly.

“Well, it’s where I was born and raised, remember? And in my considered opinion, the whole continent is bad news.”

“You know, you never really talked about the place, now that I think about it. What’s so awful about it?”

“First of all, there’s no proper highways. They have roads between the towns, of course, but you won’t find anything like those safe, smooth, monster-free ones they’ve got on Millis and the Central Continent. If you’re traveling anywhere, you’d better expect to be attacked by C-ranked monsters. Or worse.”

Okay, I knew the place had a lot of monsters, but C-ranked or worse?

On the Central Continent, you'd have to go deep into a forest to find anything that dangerous. Many monsters at that rank traveled in large packs, or had some lethal special ability. "I feel like you're exaggerating just a little there, Geese."

"Nope. I'm not telling you any tall tales right now, man. That's just how the Demon Continent is. The place is *crawling* with nasty monsters."

Geese looked perfectly serious, but that was how he usually looked when he was lying to you. I wasn't going to fall for his crap this time.

"Now, let's say we dump a kid out in the middle of a place like that. This is a real talented kid, mind you, but he's got no real-world combat experience."

"…Right."

No real-world experience, huh? Seemed like we were talking about Rudy again. Come to think of it, I'd never heard of him getting into any actual battles before. But he'd apparently managed to fight off some would-be kidnappers in Roa, and Ghislaine thought he might be able to beat her if he had enough distance at the start. I didn't know a single swordfighter better than Ghislaine. If *she* couldn't close in on him safely, then there probably weren't a thousand people on the planet capable of beating him at his ideal range.

All in all, his lack of hard experience didn't seem like such a big deal to me. Didn't Alex R. Kalman, the second North God, cut down a Sword Emperor in the first battle he ever fought?

"At this point, a grown-up appears and offers to help the kid out. This guy's a demon, and a really strong one, too. In fact, he's a Superd. You've heard of *them*, I'm sure?"

"Of course." To be frank, I wasn't sure I bought that part of the story. From what I'd heard, there were only a handful of Superd left, even on the Demon Continent.

"So, the kid has someone offering him aid when he's in desperate straits. This guy's willing to help him navigate a place he knows nothing about. And the Superd are terrifying, of course! He has no idea how this guy might react if he refuses. You'd basically have to accept that offer, right?"

“Yeah, probably.”

“But as the days roll on by, clever little Rudeus starts to ask himself a question: ‘Why exactly is this guy helping me out, anyway?’”

Sure. That did sound like Rudeus. The question might never have occurred to me, but the kid was always sharp about that sort of thing. I’d known just how weirdly perceptive he was ever since that day he stepped in to save Lilia from Zenith’s wrath.

“Problem is, he can’t figure it out. He doesn’t know what this guy’s really after.”

Well, how would he? You can never know what a stranger’s really thinking. That’s the whole reason guys like Geese manage to make a living.

“This Superd’s helping out for now, but he could easily abandon or betray them someday…or so Rudeus thinks. And that’s why he decides to try and get on the guy’s good side.”

“I don’t know about that plan, Geese. Does a Superd even *have* a good side?”

“Okay, don’t get all clever. You know what I mean, right? Rudeus decides to appeal to this guy’s emotions. He wants to make him feel like they’re all buddies.”

Hmm. That would explain why Rudy had spent so much time helping out this demon guy. And it did make sense, actually. Not only was he scoring brownie points with his protector, he also had a chance to develop his own skills as an adventurer in case he needed to rely on them later. I had to admit, that sounded rational. It was probably the safest path he could have chosen.

Hmph…the boy did have a good head on his shoulders, didn’t he? “Tch. You’d think a kid that smart could have found some time to look around a little, too.”

Geese held up one hand and spread out his fingers. “He’s in an unfamiliar land,” he said, folding one down. “He’s on his first adventure ever. No matter how smart he is, this is all brand new to him. He needs to learn the basics fast, before someone takes advantage of him. He’s trying to keep a demon who might betray him at any moment happy. Oh, and he’s got a little pal tagging along behind him who he needs to protect.”

By the time he'd finished with this recitation, Geese had run out of fingers. With a little shrug, he moved on to his closing argument.

"If he'd *also* managed to comb the continent for other people who'd been teleported, well, that would just make him superhuman. Seriously, I'd be ready to give the kid a spot in the Seven Great Powers."

The Seven Great Powers, huh? Now that brought back some memories. Back in the day, I used to dream about earning myself that kind of fame. Still, I felt like Rudy really did have the raw talent to make it on that list someday. And I didn't think that was just my parental pride talking.

"The kid would have worked himself to death just trying. I know Rudeus is a prodigy, but human beings have their limits, man. Especially when they're still *children.*"

"Okay, look," I interjected. "If it was that much of a struggle, then why'd he make the whole thing sound like it was some big, fun adventure? He sounded like one of those spoiled rich brats who poke around on the first floor of a labyrinth just to have something they can brag about." If the journey had been that rough for Rudy, he wouldn't have described it that cheerfully. He would have told me about the hard and painful parts instead. But he hadn't even mentioned any bumps in the road.

"Why? Because he didn't want to worry you, obviously."

"Huh?" I grunted, somehow sounding even stupider than before. "Why the hell would he be worrying about me? Am I that much of a failure as a father?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Tch. Sure, I guess you're right. I'm a weak little man who drowns himself in booze for idiotic reasons. I suppose our little prodigy would feel *great* pity at the sight of me."

"Hate to break this to you, Paul, but it doesn't take a prodigy to pity you right now," Geese said, letting out a sigh. "I know you can't see your own face, so let me tell you something. You look terrible, man."

"Oh yeah? Terrible enough to earn some sympathy from my own son?"

"Yep. If he walked in right now, I don't think you guys would end up fighting. He'd probably feel too bad for you to say anything at all."

I reached up and touched my face. The stubble I hadn't bothered shaving for several days rasped audibly against my fingers.

"Look, Paul. Let me just repeat myself here," said Geese, his tone suddenly firm. "You expected too much from your son."

Was it really that unreasonable of me to expect more? Rudy could do anything he set his mind to, ever since he was little. All I ever did was get in his way with my clumsy attempts at parenting. He never really needed me.

"Tell me something. Why can't you just be happy that he made it here? Does it really even matter what kind of a trip the kid had? Let's say it really was a carefree cruise, and he spent every minute of it making out with his little girlfriend. *So what?* He's here now, and he's safe. Ain't that something worth celebrating?"

Of course it was. And I *was* happy at first.

"Would you have preferred your son to come back hollow-eyed and down a limb or two? Hell, there was a damn good chance of you 'reuniting' with a corpse. Oh wait, my mistake… If he'd died on the Demon Continent, there wouldn't even be a body left for you to find."

Rudy? A corpse? I'd seen him healthy and full of life this afternoon, so it was impossible to even imagine right now. But just a few days ago…hadn't I pictured that exact scenario as I wallowed in despair?

"God, that poooor kid! After that long, hard trip, he finally found his dear old dad again, but the guy turned out to be a drunken scumbag! If I was him, I'd have cut ties on the spot."

Oh good. Now he was getting all theatrical. "I get the message, Geese. You're not wrong, all right? But there's one thing I still don't understand."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Why didn't Rudy know about what happened to Buena Village? I'm positive I had a message waiting for him at Zant Port."

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Geese opened his mouth as if to explain, then grimaced slightly and let it fall shut. I recognized that expression. It meant he was hiding something.

"Uh, I dunno. He probably just got unlucky and didn't notice it."

"Wait…where exactly did you find Rudy, anyway? I was assuming you ran into him in Zant Port."

I didn't know where Geese had been for the last year, but Rudeus had come to Millis from the north. And Zant Port was the only city up in that direction big enough for Geese to really thrive in.

I definitely left a message for Rudy in that city. And on top of that, we had members of our squad stationed there. Their job was to gather information from any travelers crossing over from the Demon Continent. If the kid was an adventurer now, he obviously would have stopped by the Guild, right?

"I met Rudeus in the Doldia Clan village, actually. That was a real shocker, let me tell you. He'd managed to get himself locked up naked in a jail cell on charges of assaulting their Sacred Beast."

"Naked? In a beastfolk jail? Are you serious…?"

I'd heard about this from Ghislaine. For members of the Doldia tribe, to be stripped naked, chained up in a jail cell, and doused with ice-cold water was the greatest of all humiliations. They almost never subjected outsiders to such treatment, but when they did, it usually ended in the prisoner's death. I tossed some water on Ghislaine as a joke once, and she glared at me like I'd killed her parents.

"So, uh…what happened there?"

"What? Didn't Rudeus tell you about all that?"

"All I heard was the part where he traveled over the Demon Continent." Why hadn't he told me why he never saw the message I left him at Zant Port, anyway? That was really damn important.

Oh, right. I'd never actually asked him.

Damn it. Why did I have to be so short-tempered?

I needed to calm down and think this through carefully. Rudy was a smart kid, but he'd somehow failed to see my message, or even hear about

the situation. If he'd spent any time in Zant Port, he would have stumbled across that kind of information without even trying.

In other words, he must have gotten mixed up in something the moment he arrived there—something that got him carted off by the Doldia tribe. Whatever it was, it must have been a major incident. Some of our Zant Port people should be coming back in two or three days to make their regular report, but maybe something big had gone down up north.

"Well, I don't know all the details myself," said Geese. "But I was hanging around with the Mildett in the Great Forest when I got wind of a rumor that the Doldia had locked up some human kid."

"Hm? Wait a second. You were *where*?" The Mildett? Wasn't that a beastfolk tribe? They were the ones with rabbit ears, right?

"At a Mildett village. It's the one where their chief lives, so it's actually pretty big, but—"

Geese's explanation was painfully long-winded and annoying. Honestly, I was tempted to cut him off partway through. But I'd missed out on important information by getting impatient with Rudy earlier. And although I rarely learned from my mistakes, I wasn't stupid enough to screw up the exact same way twice in a single day.

Eventually, Geese's rambling tale did come to an end. I tried to summarize what he'd told me. "So basically, you were going around to all the tribes in the Great Forest…and convincing them to send any lost humans they found over to Millishion?"

"That's right. Heh heh. Feel free to shower me with gratitude!"

"Yeah, I owe you big time…" That probably explained the constant trickle of refugees from the Great Forest area who'd been coming to me for help.

"Well, anyway! When I heard about this human kid, something sorta clicked, so I ran right over. Not to brag or anything, but I'm a man with many connections, yeah? Just so happens I even know a couple people in the Doldia village. I got one of their warriors, good pal of mine, to have me tossed in the same jail cell as the kid."

"Hold on a second. Why would you need to go in there with him?"

“So I could help him escape, if worse came to worst. It’s way easier breaking out of a beastfolk prison than breaking into one.”

I was familiar with Geese’s talent for escaping prisons. Whenever he got himself locked up for running some kind of scam, he’d pop back up soon enough as if nothing had ever happened.

“Anyway, I was assuming I’d find the kid curled up in a ball sobbing, you know? But instead…ha ha!”

“What happened? Was he all right?”

“He was lounging around casually in the nude, man! And the first words out of his mouth were ‘Welcome to life’s final destination!’ How was I even supposed to respond to that?!” Geese had to stop for a moment to cackle with laughter at his own story.

“This doesn’t sound like a laughing matter, man…”

“It was hilarious, though! I could tell right away that he had to be your kid, Paul!”

I didn’t understand what was so funny about that. Or how he’d even figured it out so quickly.

“He was *exactly* like the old you, man,” Geese went on. “Ridiculously cocky! Ready to boss around a total stranger! One time, he was trying to flirt with this beastfolk girl, right? She glared at him and said ‘I can smell your arousal,’ but he kept on ogling her anyway! That boy’s your son, all right!”

At this point, the man broke off for another cackling fit. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, reminded of some youthful indiscretions of my own.

“It did take a little longer for me to be completely sure, though,” said Geese, pausing to drain a second mug of beer. “But yeah, that’s the shape of it. You can hardly blame the kid for missing your message. From the sound of things, he didn’t spend any time in Zant Port.”

“Hm? Hold on, Geese. You were locked up in the same cell, weren’t you? Then—”

Couldn’t he have just explained everything?

“Anyway!” Geese said quickly, rising from his seat. “I’m sure there’ll

be a bit of lingerin' family awkwardness here, but do your old pal Geese a favor and go make up with the boy, all right?"

"Hey, wait. I've still got more to—"

"Oh right. Slipped my mind before, but it looks like Elinalise and company headed to the Demon Continent for you. People were sayin' some elf lady had milked half the men in Zant Port dry, and we both know what that means."

"What? Seriously?" I thought Elinalise hated me even more than the others did, frankly.

"Heh heh. When all's said and done, they don't hate you as much as they let on."

With that, Geese sauntered right out of the bar. He hadn't paid for his drinks, of course. He never did. But this time, I didn't mind picking up his tab.

In any case, I'd done more than enough drinking for one day. It was about time I turned in for the night.

I'd have to go talk things out with Rudy soon. Maybe even tomorrow…

"No more booze tonight, buddy," called Geese, who'd popped his head back in the door. "You're gonna head over to the Dawn's Light Inn tomorrow sober, got it?"

"Yeah, yeah! I know!" With a sigh of irritation, I put my mug of beer down.

Now that I thought about it, though, I *had* been overdoing it lately. Why did I keep drowning myself in this crap? I still had plenty of other things I needed to be doing.

"Um…Captain Paul? Are you finished talking with your friend?"

As I was turning things over in my head, a woman hesitantly approached my table. There was an apologetic expression on her face. My head wasn't clear enough to recognize her at first, but after studying her face for a few seconds, I realized it was Vierra—one of my squad's members.

"Heh. What's with you, girl? Felt like wearing something modest for

once?”

“Well, yes…” With an ambiguous nod, Vierra lowered herself into the seat Geese had just vacated a minute earlier. For some reason, she wasn’t wearing her usual provocative getup tonight. She’d changed into some perfectly unremarkable outfit that made her look more like an ordinary city girl.

“I was worried that what happened with your son earlier might have been my fault, sir.”

“What? Why would you think that?”

“Er, well, it seemed like…the way I dress might have caused him to misunderstand the nature of our relationship…”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. The little punk took one look at the size of your chest and jumped to his own conclusions.”

There was a reason Vierra dressed like she did. The woman had been an ordinary adventurer back in Fittoa, but the Displacement Incident had left her stranded on the Millis Continent without any equipment to speak of. She was quickly captured by a gang of bandits who treated her as their plaything. It was the kind of nightmare that would leave most people broken, but she’d managed to put it behind her through sheer willpower.

However, we’d also taken in a girl who hadn’t bounced back so quickly: her sister Shierra. Even now, Shierra trembled uncontrollably every time a man so much as looked at her. And we had a number of similar cases in our squad.

In order to protect them from unwanted attention, Vierra had started wearing a deliberately skimpy suit of armor to draw male eyes in her direction. She was also the member of our squad most adept at comforting and caring for women who’d been subjected to that sort of trauma. As a man with no way of understanding that specific kind of pain, I considered her an indispensable part of the team.

We didn’t have a sexual relationship, of course. The idea was ridiculous.

“It wasn’t your fault. We clear?”

“…Yes, sir.”

Still looking a bit dejected, Vierra got up and shuffled back over to the table where the other girls were sitting. Looking around the room a bit more carefully than before, I noticed that more than a few people were watching me with obvious concern in their eyes.

"Oh, for crying out loud… Don't look at me like that, you morons! I'll make up with him tomorrow, all right?!"

I pushed back my chair, stood up, and stomped out of the bar.

When I'd returned to my room at the inn, I found Norn already asleep.

I poured myself a cup of water from the pitcher on our table and quickly drank the whole thing. The lukewarm fluid coursed its way down into my churning stomach.

I could feel myself gradually sobering up. I'd always had a high tolerance for alcohol; I *did* get plastered when I drank a lot, but the effects never seemed to last too long. As the fog in my head slowly began to clear, I looked down at my daughter, who was curled up in bed clutching her blanket, and stroked her gently on the head.

I felt sorry for Norn. I really did. With a father like me, she had to have plenty of complaints, but she always kept them to herself and tried her very best to smile. If I ever lost her, I wouldn't have the strength to go on living.

"Mm… Daddy…"

Norn shifted around in bed just a little. It didn't seem like I'd woken her; she was probably just sleep-talking.

Norn wasn't like Rudy. She was an ordinary child. I had to keep her safe.

Suddenly, an odd thought occurred to me: If Rudy had been an "ordinary" kid as well, wouldn't he be sleeping in this room with Norn right now? He would have stayed home with us instead of going off to be a tutor. And at the moment of the disaster, he might have been tugging at my sleeve, asking if he could hug Norn, too.

If Rudy had been ordinary—a normal eleven-year-old—wouldn't I look at him the same way I looked at Norn? As someone I needed to protect?

My legs trembled underneath me. I finally understood why Geese had

told me “He’s still a kid.”

What *difference* did it make if Rudy was ordinary or not? How did that even matter? What if Norn had been the genius? Would I have spoken to *her* like that? If Norn had come back to me after going on an adventure, knowing nothing of what had taken place…would I have told her *I expected more*?

Once I started thinking about that, I couldn’t fall asleep. I didn’t even want to lie down in bed. I left our inn, found a fire bucket full of water outside, and dumped a whole jug’s worth over my head.

And then, remembering the look on Rudy’s face as he left the bar, I bent over and vomited.

Refresh my memory, Paul. Who was it who hurt the kid that badly?

Looking down into that fire bucket, I saw the face of a total idiot. Whoever this dumbass was, he was obviously the last man in the world who had any business calling himself a father.

“Ah, shit. This might be tough…”

If I was in his kid’s shoes, I’d cut ties without a second thought.

Rudeus

The next morning, I sat down to breakfast in a relatively decent mood.

We’d just walked over to the bar next to the inn. The food in Millishion was definitely tasty. Our meals had been getting better and better as we traveled toward it from the Great Forest. This morning, we had freshly baked bread, some sort of lightly flavored clear soup, a simple vegetable salad, and thick slices of bacon. Not bad at all.

While I hadn’t had any last night, apparently dinner here came with an actual dessert. It was a specific kind of sweet jelly that was very popular with young adventurers lately, having earned a mention in a recent popular ballad about a youthful magician’s adventures.

That was something to look forward to, at least. It’s always nice to get

some decent food in your belly. Getting hungry makes you irritated. Getting irritated ruins your appetite. And a ruined appetite just gets you hungrier. That's a classic vicious circle right there. It's enough to make an android cranky.

"…C'mon in."

As I reflected on these matters while sipping a coffee-like after-meal drink, the barkeep turned his attention to the entrance. A weary, pale-faced man stood in the doorway. When I saw his face, I flinched reflexively.

He looked around the place for a moment, then spotted me.

In that moment, all the emotions I'd experienced yesterday came surging back to the surface. Even though he hadn't said a word to me, I found myself averting my eyes to the floor.

From my reaction alone, the two people I was sitting with seemed to realize who the man in the entrance had to be. Ruijerd furrowed his brow; Eris kicked her chair back and rose to her feet.

"Who are you supposed to be?"

The man started walking over toward us, but Eris had planted herself squarely in his path. With her arms folded, her feet wide apart, and her chin up in the air, she glared at the man sternly—despite the fact that he was two heads taller than her.

"I'm Paul Greyrat…his father."

"I know that!"

As I stared at Eris' back, Paul spoke over her head in a wryly amused voice. "What's going on, Rudy? You hiding behind girls now? What a little playboy."

Something about those words—or maybe his tone—relieved me just a little. It reminded me of the way he used to tease me back in the day. Those were nice memories.

I decided that Paul was trying to bridge the gap that had opened up between us. He'd gone out of his way to find me here first thing in the morning, after all. I was calm enough to at least try and have a conversation.

"Rudeus isn't hiding behind me! I'm hiding him! From his failure of a

father!” Balling her hands into fists, Eris quivered with fury. It looked like she was about ready to take a swing at Paul’s chin.

I shot a glance over at Ruijerd. Apparently sensing what I wanted, he grabbed Eris by the scruff of her neck and lifted her up off the floor.

“Hey! Let me go, Ruijerd!”

“We should leave the two of them alone.”

“You saw Rudeus last night, didn’t you?! That man has no right to call himself a father!”

“Don’t be so harsh on him. Most fathers are far from perfect.”

Ruijerd headed for the exit, carrying a struggling Eris with him. But as he passed by Paul, he paused for just a moment. “You have every right to say your piece. But the only reason that you *can* is that your son is still alive.”

“Uh…yeah…”

Ruijerd’s words carried some real weight. He did seem to consider himself the world’s single greatest failure as a father. Maybe he felt some sympathy for a fellow screw-up.

“You really shouldn’t order people around with a jerk of your chin, Rudy.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Father,” I protested. “That was pure eye contact. My chin wasn’t even involved.”

“Not sure that really makes a difference,” said Paul, seating himself across the table from me. “So, was that the demon guy you were telling me about yesterday…?”

“Yes. That’s Ruijerd of the Superd tribe.”

“The Superd, huh? Seems like a friendly enough guy. I guess the rumors must have been a bit exaggerated.”

“You’re not afraid of him or anything?”

“Don’t be stupid. He’s the man who saved my son.”

He didn’t seem to think so yesterday, but…it probably wouldn’t be too helpful to point that out.

Now then…

“So anyway. Can I ask why you’re here?”

My voice came out stiffer than I’d intended, and Paul flinched in his seat. “Uh…well, I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Everything that happened yesterday.”

“There’s no need to apologize.” It was useful that he was willing to do so, but after a good night’s sleep on Eris’ chest, I was ready to own up to the mistakes I’d made. “To be honest, I really was playing around up until now.”

Things had been a little dicey at the start, true. But for the most part our journey had gone smoothly, and I’d found plenty of time to indulge in various perversions. The fact that I never got around to gathering information on the Fittoa Region was, without a doubt, a failure on my part. I never had a chance to poke around in Zant Port, but we’d spent a decent amount of time in Wind Port. I could have found some sort of information broker there and learned more about the Calamity.

I didn’t look into something that I really should have. That was sloppy and thoughtless of me.

“It’s understandable that you were angry with me, Father. I’m sorry as well… I can’t imagine how hectic things must have been for you.”

The entire Fittoa Region had been “displaced,” and our family scattered to the winds. When I thought about how Paul must have felt in the days and weeks that followed, I couldn’t bring myself to blame him for his harsh attitude. I’d been traveling in a bubble of cluelessness, happily ignorant of the ongoing tragedy all around me.

“Don’t talk like that, Rudy. I know you must have had a hard time out there, too.”

“No, that isn’t true at all. It was honestly a piece of cake.” Ruijerd had been there for me, after all. After our bumpy start in Rikarisu, things had gone comparatively smoothly. Our bodyguard ensured that monsters never ambushed us. He’d hunted down our dinner without being asked to, and even stepped in when Eris and I got into fights. For me, at least, the journey had been virtually stress-free. The word “cakewalk” sounded about right.

“Oh yeah? A piece of cake, huh…?” I didn’t know what Paul was

thinking at the moment, of course. But for some reason, his voice was trembling slightly.

"I do feel bad that I never saw your message, by the way. What was it about?"

"I just said that I was fine, and asked you to search the northern part of the Central Continent."

"I see. Well, I can head there to look around once I drop Eris off back in the Fittoa Region."

Why was I talking like a robot? Everything I said right now came out sounding weirdly tense. It almost felt like I was *anxious*. But why would I be? I'd forgiven Paul, and he'd forgiven me. Things definitely weren't the same as before, but this was an emergency situation, right? And everyone gets tense in an emergency. Sure. That made sense.

"Putting that aside for now, could you go into a little more detail about the current situation in the Fittoa Region?"

"Yeah, sure thing." Paul's voice was just as stiff as mine and quavered slightly every time he spoke. Was he on edge as well?

No, no. I should try to figure out my own behavior first. There really was something odd about this… I couldn't seem to act the way I usually did.

How had I spoken with Paul before this? We used to be pretty casual with each other, didn't we?

"Let's see. Where do I even start…?"

His voice still tense, Paul gave me a thorough summary of what had happened back in Fittoa while I was gone. Every building in the region had disappeared, and every resident had been teleported to some random corner of the planet. Many deaths had already been confirmed, and many more people were still unaccounted for.

Paul described how he had recruited volunteers for the Search and Rescue Squad and molded them into a functional organization. He'd chosen to base their operations in Millishion because it was home to the Adventurers' Guild headquarters and a good central spot from which to gather information.

The squad had another base of operations in the capital of the Kingdom

of Asura, and the former butler Alphonse ran things there. Alphonse was also the overall leader of the organization, and was actively providing aid to the refugees who'd made it back to the Fittoa Region.

Paul also explained that he'd left messages for me in cities all around the world. He'd been hoping that we could split up and search for the missing members of our family separately.

As the oldest and most independent of his children, it probably had been my responsibility to help. I was still a child, yes, but I had the mind of an adult. If I'd actually seen Paul's message, it would have stirred me to action.

Zenith, Lilia, and Aisha were all missing. And it was entirely possible I'd passed by one of them somewhere on the Demon Continent. That was just a fact, and it was enough to make me regret everything I'd done there. I'd been in such a hurry that we rarely stayed in a single town for more than a few days.

"Norn was all right, though?"

"Yeah, we got lucky there. She was touching me when it happened."

According to Paul, that was just how teleportation magic worked in general—if you were in physical contact with someone when it hit you, you'd be sent to your destination together.

"Is she doing well?"

"Yeah. She seemed a little uneasy about moving to such an unfamiliar place at first, but now she's basically the squad mascot."

"Really? That's good to hear."

At least Norn was safe and happy. That was definitely the one silver lining in this whole ugly mess. It was something worth celebrating, for sure.

But for whatever reason, I was still feeling kind of gloomy.

"…"

"…"

Our conversation ground to a halt. This felt weirdly…awkward. Paul and I weren't like this before, were we? What happened to the way we used to crack jokes and banter with each other? Very peculiar.

After a while, Paul said something or other, but I couldn't manage much of a response.

My replies grew increasingly brief and listless.

At some point, all the other customers had filtered out of the bar. Before too long, we'd probably be asked to leave so they could get ready for the lunch rush.

I guess Paul picked up on that as well. He moved on to our final major topic.

"What are you planning to do next, Rudy?"

"First of all, I'm going to take Eris back to the Fittoa Region."

"There's not much of anything left in Fittoa, you know?"

"I know. But we're still going."

Even though Philip, Sauros, and Ghislaine were still missing, and we probably wouldn't find any familiar faces waiting for us, we had to go. Getting back there had always been our objective, after all. We'd follow through on our initial goal. And once we arrived in Fittoa, we could witness its state with our own eyes.

After that, I could head up to search the northern part of the Central Continent…or maybe even ask Ruijerd to help me get all the way back to the Demon Continent. Hell, I could even try heading to the Begaritt Continent. I did know the language, more or less. "After that, I'll start searching other parts of the world."

"…All right."

With that, the conversation petered out again. I had no idea what else there was to say.

"Here." At this point, the barkeep abruptly thumped two wooden cups down in front of us. Tendrils of steam rose gently from the liquid inside them. "That's on the house."

"Oh. Thank you." Now that I thought about it, my throat was painfully dry.

Once I realized that, I also noticed a few other things. I'd been clenching my hands tightly; my palms were damp with sweat. My back and

my armpits also felt oddly chilly. And my forelocks were plastered to my forehead.

"Hey, kid. I won't pretend I know what's goin' on here, but…"

"Hm…?"

"At least look the guy in the face."

It was only when I heard those words that it hit me. I'd been avoiding Paul's gaze this entire time. After averting my eyes when he walked in, I hadn't looked him in the face again. Not even once.

Swallowing anxiously, I looked up at my father. His face was full of uncertainty and angst. He looked like a man on the verge of breaking down in tears.

"Why are you making that face?"

"What face?" said Paul, smiling weakly.

With his listless expression and hollow cheeks, he looked like a completely different person from the man I'd known before. But for some reason, I felt like I'd seen a very similar face somewhere before. Where was that? I had the feeling it was a long time ago…

…Now I remembered.

I'd seen it in the bathroom mirror, back in my old house.

This would have been a year or two after I'd become a total shut-in. At that point, I still thought I had time to turn things around. But I was also aware that there was a growing gap between me and everyone I knew—one that I might never be able to bridge.

Still, I was simply too afraid to go outside again. And so, feelings of anxiety and frustration steadily built up inside me. It was probably the single most emotionally volatile period of my life.

I see. So that's how it is…

Paul had searched desperately for his family with no success. For all his efforts, he hadn't found a single scrap of news for ages. He worried about us constantly. And eventually, he started to ask himself: *What if they're hurt? What if they fell ill? What if they're already dead?* The more he thought about it, the more worried he grew.

And then, at long last, I showed up…with a cheerful smile on my face. It was so very different from what Paul had imagined that he grew irritated despite himself.

I'd once experienced something similar. Not long after I began my life as a loser, somebody I knew from junior high stopped by to visit and started to tell me about what was going on at school. I was deeply depressed and in so much pain, but he talked about his life like he didn't have a single care in the world. It made my stomach hurt. I ended up snapping and hurling harsh insults at him.

The day after that, I told myself that I'd apologize to him the next time he dropped by. But he never came over again. And I didn't reach out to him, either. I let some sort of stubborn pride hold me back.

I remembered now. That was *exactly* when I'd seen that face in the mirror.

"I've got a proposal, Father."

"What…?"

"Under these circumstances, I think we need to try and act like grownups."

"Uh, yeah, I guess I wasn't too mature yesterday… I'm not sure what you're getting at, though."

The gloom inside my heart was melting rapidly away. I finally understood how Paul felt now. Once I had that piece of the puzzle, the rest was simple enough, really.

I thought back to the past again—to the day Paul had chewed me out for fighting, and I'd fired back sharp words of my own. At the time, I'd been less than impressed with his parenting skills. But he was only twenty-four then, very young for a father, so I decided not to judge him *too* harshly.

It had been six years since then. Paul was now thirty years old. He was still a good bit younger than I had been in my previous life, and he'd already accomplished more than I ever had. When I'd fought with my friend, I didn't even try to patch things up. I just found ways to convince myself that it was all his fault. By comparison, Paul was making a *much* better effort.

I wasn't the same person I was back then. I'd sworn to myself that I

was going to change, hadn't I? I'd forgotten about that lately, but I couldn't let myself repeat the same stupid mistakes over and over again.

This was a much bigger fight than our last one, yes. But I was behaving the exact same way I did on that day six years ago. We were *both* making the same stupid mistakes all over again. I thought I'd come a long way since then, but instead, it seemed that I'd been treading water. I had to acknowledge that.

And more importantly, I had to take a real step forward.

"Let's pretend yesterday never happened."

It was a simple enough proposal. I was deeply hurt by what Paul said to me in that bar. The pain had been almost unendurable. My friend, who'd stopped by out of concern for me, must have felt something similar when I pushed him away. And that was how things ended. We never saw each other again.

It wasn't going to turn out that way this time. I wouldn't let my bond with Paul be broken.

"The two of us didn't have a fight yesterday. Right now, in this moment, we're seeing each other again for the first time in years. Got it?"

"What are you talking about, Rudy?"

"Don't overthink this, please. Just spread your arms open wide. Go on!"

"Uh…okay…" Paul spread his arms, looking a little dubious.

I promptly threw myself into them. "Father! I've missed you so much!"

His body smelled faintly of alcohol. He seemed to be sober right now, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he was still nursing a hangover. When had he started drinking so heavily, anyway? I felt like he'd barely touched the stuff back in the day.

"R-Rudy?" Paul didn't seem to know how to react.

Resting my chin on his shoulder, I slowly murmured a little advice. "C'mon. You've just been reunited with your son. Isn't there anything you want to say?"

This was all a bit ridiculous, yes. But even so, I hugged Paul's solidly

built body with all my might. It wasn't just his face that had gotten thinner. His body felt like it was a size or two smaller than it was before. Of course, I'd done some growing in the last few years, so that probably had something to do with it; but it was obvious that my father had been through some very hard times.

After a moment's hesitation, Paul managed to mumble "I…I missed you too."

And once he got those first words out, it was as if the floodgates opened. "I missed you too, Rudy… I missed you so damn much! I searched and searched, but I couldn't find anybody… I started thinking you might be *dead*… I started…picturing you…"

When I looked up at Paul again, tears were streaming down his cheeks. It wasn't exactly a pretty picture. The man was sobbing like a baby. "I'm sorry… I'm so sorry, Rudy…"

Well, great. Now he's got me going too.

I patted the back of Paul's head a few times. For a while, the two of us just cried together.

And so, for the first time in five years, I was finally reunited with my father.

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Chapter 5:
Objectives Confirmed

After that, Paul and I spent a long time just talking. We didn't discuss anything particularly important, deliberately sticking to more trivial topics for the most part.

First of all, he told me all about how things had gone back in Buena Village during the years I spent in the Citadel of Roa.

Paul had two wives at this point, but that apparently hadn't translated into twice the "fun." Zenith and Lilia had had some secret discussions and worked out an agreement. As a general rule, Paul was expected to keep his hands off Lilia. The one exception would be if Zenith were to get pregnant for the third time, but in that case Paul would be required to get her approval beforehand.

Zenith was still a bit conflicted about their arrangement, but I guess she'd mostly come to terms with it. That was certainly very convenient for my father. I was a little envious, to be honest.

"So, do you think I had a third little sister on the way?"

"Nah. For some reason, it wasn't happening for us… I dunno why. We made *you* on our first try."

"You took one shot at it and got yourself a son this perfect? What a lucky man you are, Father."

"You really think you're funny, don't you?"

This didn't seem like the sort of conversation an eleven-year-old should be having with his father, but we were both enjoying it anyway.

One thing we *didn't* discuss was whether Zenith and Lilia were even still alive. It was the elephant in the room, but we both knew bringing it up would only put us in a miserable mood.

"Was Sylphie managing all right without me?"

"Oh yeah. That girl's amazing, Rudy. I guess you've got some talent as a teacher."

From the sound of things, Sylphie had been doing well. She spent her mornings running and practicing basic magical techniques, and in the afternoons, she usually worked on her healing spells with Zenith.

Incidentally, little Aisha had also started getting lessons from Lilia after a few years, although those mostly covered stuff like etiquette rather than spellcasting.

"Anyway, that kid's definitely…uh, I guess *earnest* is the word. She was always coming over to our place to do something or other in your room."

"…Do you know if Sylphie happened to find anything in there?"

"What? Was there something hidden away you didn't want her seeing?"

"No, no! Of course not. Don't be ridiculous, Father."

Ha ha. What a preposterous suggestion.

"Well, it's all gone now either way, I guess."

From what Paul told me, virtually every object in the Fittoa Region had disappeared in the disaster. That included everything from small things like quill pens and ink bottles to large structures like buildings and bridges. The only exceptions were the items people had on their person in the moment they were teleported.

"Oh. I see…"

That was a pity. I couldn't quite remember *why* it was a pity, but I felt a definite twinge of melancholy anyway.

"So what were you up to back then, Rudy?"

"Oh, you mean in Roa?"

I obligingly launched into a quick summary of my time as a tutor.

The story began with my first day on the job, when Eris punched me and I nearly gave up entirely, then moved on to our "unfortunate" kidnapping. I explained that Eris warmed up to me a bit after I got us out of that predicament, but still refused to take my lessons seriously.

Next, I described how I'd gone crying to Ghislaine for help, and how she'd convinced the little lady to pay attention in class. And after *that*, I covered how my relationship with Eris had gradually improved, our dance

lessons, and the events of my tenth birthday.

"Ah, right. Your birthday. Sorry about that, kid…"

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Well, I couldn't even be there, you know?"

To the people of the Kingdom of Asura, a child's tenth birthday was an event of monumental importance. I still didn't understand exactly why, but it seemed to be considered some sort of lucky milestone. Your family was supposed to have a big celebration and shower you with gifts.

"That's all right. Eris' family threw me a wonderful party."

"Oh yeah? What did they give you?"

"A very nice staff, although the name's a bit embarrassing. It's called Aqua Heartia—Arrogant Water Dragon King."

"What's wrong with that name? Sounds pretty cool to me."

Was he serious? Just saying that whole thing out loud made me want to bury myself in a hole. Maybe in this world it was normal to give overblown names to more powerful items.

"Oh, didn't they give you one other gift, Rudy? I heard all about it from Alphonse."

"Another gift?" Hmm. Now what would that be? Wisdom, courage, and unlimited power? I felt like I was still a little lacking on all those fronts, though…

"C'mon, I'm talking about Philip's daughter. Today was the first time I'd ever seen her, but she's one cute kid. And so devoted, too! That was downright heartwarming, the way she protected you…"

Nobody really *gave* Eris to me, though.

I mean, Philip did say I had his permission to make a move, but I hadn't actually done much of anything yet. I cared about Eris, and I didn't want to rush things. Just yesterday, she'd been there for me when I needed her most. I'd never had anyone hug me and stroke my head until I fell asleep like that before. There was no way I'd ever betray her trust. She'd promised me that we could take the next step when I turn fifteen. But even then, I'd hold back if she wasn't ready yet.

Of course, I did have a *slightly* overactive sex drive, which might be even stronger in four years. There was a chance I wouldn't be able to control myself…but, for the moment, I was planning to try.

"Eris is important to me, yes. I'd rather not talk about her like she's some object I received from her parents, though."

"Well, I guess you're marrying into their family, so it's more like they're receiving you."

"Wha—?" *Who's marrying into what?*

"You're going to join the nobility with Philip's support, right?"

"What are you talking about? When did anyone say anything about that?"

"Huh? It was a year or so before the disaster, I think. Philip sent me a letter saying you and Eris were really hitting it off, so he wanted you to marry into his family. If you ask me, the Asuran nobility are a bunch of rotten scumbags, but I said you could do what you wanted…"

Interesting. So Philip had already reached out to Paul about that before our conversation on my tenth birthday. Even if I'd shot down the idea, he was probably planning to spend the next few years trying to push the two of us together. That wasn't some spontaneous proposal at all.

In any case, that explained why Paul jumped to a few conclusions about me and Eris. Two young people in love, stranded in an unfamiliar land, all alone and deeply anxious? You'd kind of assume they would "get to know each better" over the course of their journey.

"From the look on your face, I'm guessing Philip set you up."

"It would appear so, yes."

The two of us heaved simultaneous sighs. Philip was a devious man, but you probably had to be to survive in the ruthless, cutthroat world of the Asuran high nobility.

"Either way, it seems like you're pretty friendly with the little lady. Does that mean Sylphie's…" Paul hesitated mid-sentence. "Uh, sorry. Forget I said anything."

Sylphie remained among the missing, as far as either of us knew. Still,

I found myself considering the question Paul had begun to ask.

I did care about Sylphie, but what I felt for her wasn't quite the same as what I felt for Eris. She was more like a little sister to me, or maybe even a daughter. It upset me when I saw her getting picked on, and I wanted to help her grow up strong and happy, but we'd parted before those feelings could develop into anything more.

It wasn't *that* different from what I had with Eris, but these days she was supporting me as much I was helping her. If you asked me which of them I was more interested in right now, the answer would have to be Eris.

But of course, it wasn't like I'd done a thorough side-by-side comparison. It was all about the amount of time we'd spent together, really. Eris had been a part of my life for years now. People love writing stories about guys reuniting with their childhood friends, but it's easier to fall for someone when you've spent a long time at their side. By now, I'd been with Eris for twice as long as I'd been with Sylphie. And our years together had been eventful, to say the least.

Of course, that didn't mean I wasn't worried about my missing friend.

"I hope Sylphie's all right…"

"Well, the girl isn't quite on your level, but she'd been working her butt off. I mean, she can use healing magic without incantations, you know? That's enough to make a living anywhere you go. Healers are real valuable, at least outside the Millis Continent."

"Oh. Right…" *Huh? Wait. Did he just say what I think he said?* "Hold on. Sylphie can cast healing spells silently?"

"Hm? Yeah. Zenith was shocked at first. But you can do that too, can't you?"

"Not with healing magic, no." I didn't understand the underlying principles behind those spells, so I'd never managed to cast them silently. No matter how many times I used them, I couldn't figure out the mechanisms by which they healed the body.

"No kidding?"

"Nope. I can only cast those spells if I use the incantations."

"Well, I'm not gonna pretend I know much about magic, but they say

everyone's naturally better with some kinds than others, right? I guess Sylphie's just got a knack for healing."

Maybe Sylphie had gotten *way* stronger than me since we were separated. Now I was a little afraid of seeing her again. What if she took one look at my magic and said "You haven't improved at all, Rudy"…?

Paul and I kept on talking for a while. By the end of our conversation, the chasm that had opened up between us disappeared entirely.

In the early evening, two of Paul's comrades came over to fetch him.

Specifically, it was the bikini-armor lady and her magician pal. The former was wearing drab, ordinary clothes today, for whatever reason. It was a dramatic change from that getup she had on yesterday. She had been one of the causes of our fight, though… Maybe she was trying to be considerate?

"Father."

"Yeah?"

"I do trust you, of course. But after everything that happened yesterday, I just want to formally double-check… You're not having an affair, are you?"

"Hell no."

That was good to hear. We'd both jumped to conclusions yesterday. Instead of getting the actual facts, we just accused each other of being sex-crazed idiots without… Whoops. No, no. I'd already officially erased those events from history.

In any case, it didn't seem like Paul had any time or energy to spare for womanizing right now. He was focused on finding his family, and he wasn't about to risk breaking it apart. I'd have to learn from his example and cut back on my own perverted antics.

"Rudy. You're going to escort Eris back to the Fittoa Region, right?" Before he left, my father apparently wanted to confirm that my mind was made up.

"Yes," I replied with a firm nod. "But would you rather I join the Search and Rescue squad as well?"

"No, that won't be necessary. We have an obligation to deliver any

members of the Boreas family we find back to Asura, either way."

"That makes it sound like a very important mission. Are you okay with leaving it in my hands?"

"I can't think of anyone better suited for the job. And you've already earned her trust, obviously."

Evidently Paul had a lot of faith in me. Maybe too much faith, honestly. I felt like he tended to overestimate my capabilities. It didn't really matter, though. Whatever he thought of me, I was going to try and live up to his expectations this time.

"Of course," said Paul with a smirk, "I could always assign her a couple bodyguards if you'd rather stay here in Millishion instead."

Oh, please.

In purely rational terms, splitting up from Eris here was a valid option. Not that I'd stay in Millishion in that event—I could just go off and search another part of the world for my family. Returning to the Demon Continent might be a reasonable approach, for example.

But that was only true on a purely rational level. I couldn't just abandon Eris for my own benefit. I *had* to get her back home safe.

Also, the idea of leaving my job half-done so I could work on something else brought back a few unpleasant memories. In my previous life, I'd never really finished anything I started. I didn't want to fall back into that destructive habit. Knowing me, it would probably end up with Eris failing to reach Fittoa safely, and my solo search of the Demon Continent turning up absolutely nothing.

Better to focus on one thing at a time, then. There was also the whole Ruijerd issue to consider, after all. It was hard to imagine our stubborn friend getting along with some random members of the Search and Rescue Squad, and he'd probably be furious if I tried to drop out of our party now. In his book, that would qualify as conduct unbefitting of a warrior.

"It's nice of you to offer, but I do think it would be best for me to escort her back."

"Yeah, it's not like we've got anyone stronger than you in the squad, anyway. Not surprised you wouldn't want to hand the job off." There was a

hint of a grimace on Paul's face as he said those words.

Maybe he was a little self-conscious about the fact I'd beaten him in a fight? He was clearly tipsy at the time, so I felt like it didn't count…but if I said so now, it would probably be more humiliating than anything else. Sometimes the best move is just to keep your mouth shut.

"Anyway, how long will you be staying in Millishion?"

"Well, we're planning to earn money here for the next leg of our journey, so probably about a month."

"We can cover your traveling expenses," said Paul. Turning toward the two young women waiting behind him, he spoke to the meek-looking freckled magician. "We've got some set aside, right?"

"Yes. Mr. Alphonse entrusted us with funds to be used in the event we located any members of the Boreas family."

Evidently, the former family butler had left Paul with a lump of money intended to ensure a comfortable journey back home for any member of Eris' family they found on Millis.

"Right. So that's all yours."

"I see… Well, I'm glad you didn't blow it all on booze."

"Why do you think I put Shierra in charge of the money?" For some reason, Paul actually sounded proud of himself. Kind of sad, but I wasn't going to say anything.

"How much money is this, exactly?" I asked.

"It's the equivalent of twenty king's dollars," Shierra responded instantly.

King's dollars were the most valuable currency on the continent of Millis. Using the one yen to one stone coin scale, they were the equivalent of roughly 50,000 yen apiece. So twenty of those would be…

"One million yen!"

"…One million what?" said Paul, raising an eyebrow.

Okay, so maybe my initial reaction was a little too gleeful. Can you really blame me, though? For the last year and a half, I'd been obsessing over every coin we spent, and now they'd dropped a cool million in my lap out of

nowhere.

"Seriously, though?! With that kind of money, you could spend your whole life messing around!"

"Well, you could probably build yourself a house in the south with that much, I guess. But it's not gonna last you a lifetime."

What? But it's a million, man! One million yen! That's like…what, a thousand green ore coins?! You could even buy a Superd passage on a boat with that!

Oh, that reminds me.

"Hm. There's still one other problem we'll have to deal with, actually."

"Seriously? What's that?"

"Back in Wind Port, they wanted a ridiculous amount of money to let a Superd on the boat to Millis. I'm not sure how things are in West Port, but I'm assuming they'll demand some huge fare as well. I don't know if even twenty king's coins will be enough…"

"Ah, right…" Paul folded his arms thoughtfully. Surely he wasn't going to suggest that I leave Ruijerd behind or anything?

"Shierra, what do they charge to bring a Superd over to the Central Continent?"

With a small nod, Shierra promptly replied "One hundred king's coins."

Had she memorized all the fares or something? This girl seemed to be really on top of things. She did kind of look like the 'quick-witted secretary' type, come to think of it…

As I looked in Shierra's direction, our eyes briefly met. She let out a little scream and instantly looked down at the floor. The ex-bikini lady casually stepped forward to hide her from my view. I couldn't help feeling hurt.

"I'm sorry, but she's a little uncomfortable with eye contact. Could you try not to look at her too much?"

"Uhm, okay…"

I'd gotten my relationship with Paul back to normal, but apparently the

other members of his squad still weren't too fond of me. Well, I'd just have to live with that.

More importantly…a hundred king's coins, huh? That was roughly five million yen we were talking about. Not really the kind of cash you can scrape together in a hurry. It was enough to make a man sigh.

"Why's it always so expensive for the Superd in particular, anyway?"

"It's mainly because the rules were established some time ago, back when the persecution of that tribe was at its height," replied Shierra from somewhere behind the bikini-armor lady.

From the tone of her voice, you might have thought this was common knowledge, but even the people working at the checkpoint in Wind Port hadn't been able to tell me that. The girl's chest was fairly small, but apparently, she had a massive brain.

"Also, the noble who runs the customs station at West Port is well-known for his hatred of demonkind," added Paul. "Even if you came up with the money, he might find some reason to deny you passage."

"You don't say. Uhm…could we ask Mother's family to pull some strings on our behalf, maybe?"

"Sorry, but as it is, they're already going out on a limb for us. We can't drag them into any more trouble right now."

In other words, we'd probably need to turn to smugglers again. That hadn't turned out too well last time, so I'd been hoping to find another way. For one thing, we were still on the same continent as the group we'd attacked. If the local crooks had connections to some larger syndicates, we might be on some sort of blacklist at this point.

The more I thought about the problem, the more it made my head ache.

"All right then. We'll just figure something out ourselves."

"Sorry, kiddo," Paul said, then grinned and turned to the women waiting behind him. "Hey, so what do you think of my little guy? Talk about self-reliant, right?"

"Uhm, sure."

"Err…"

The two of them looked at each other, smiling awkwardly. Not sure what he was expecting them to say. Did he even remember that whole "fistfight in a bar" thing from yesterday?

"Father, you really shouldn't make a habit of asking young ladies to evaluate your 'little guy.' It might tarnish the reputation of the Greyrat family."

"Your dirty jokes aren't helping either, kid!"

Paul and I both burst into laughter. The two women in the room were visibly not amused, but you can't please everyone.

"All right then, Rudy. It's about time for me to get going."

"Okay."

Finally rising from his seat, Paul rolled his shoulders with an audible pop. I hadn't even noticed, but we'd apparently been talking for quite a long time.

When I glanced over at the counter, the barkeep had a somewhat wry smile on his face. We'd taken up one of his tables right through the lunch rush, hadn't we? I'd have to leave a good tip when I paid up.

"Once you've worked out your plans, get in touch with me. We should least have dinner with Norn before you hit the road."

"Sounds good to me."

With that, Paul sauntered out of the bar, the two young women following closely in his wake.

He really did *look* like a dirty old man sometimes, didn't he?

***

Not long after Paul left, Eris and Ruijerd came back into the bar. Eris was sporting a black eye, and Ruijerd had a distinctly unhappy expression on his face.

"What happened, you two?"

"Nothing," said Eris, folding her arms with an irritated little snort.

“How did things go with that man?”

“We made up with each other.”

As soon as those words left my mouth, Eris’ eyebrows creased sharply together.“What?! Why?!” She punctuated her question by slamming her fist down on the table so hard that it loudly broke apart.

My goodness, what a powerful young lady…

“I see,” said Ruijerd calmly. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Rudeus!” Eris grabbed me forcefully by the shoulders. And I do mean forcefully. The girl’s grip was really something else. “Why would you do that?!”

“What do you mean, why?” I asked, somewhat taken aback.

“Don’t you remember how depressed you were yesterday?!”

“Well, of course. And I appreciate what you did for me. That hug really calmed me down.”

It was only thanks to Eris that I’d managed to look Paul in the face today. If she hadn’t been there to comfort me, I might have stayed shut up in my room for days.

“That’s not what I’m talking about! That man didn’t even show up for your tenth birthday, Rudeus. And the way he treated you yesterday was unbelievable! You had to travel all the way across the Demon Continent! You got locked up in a jail cell in the Great Forest, for crying out loud! But when you finally, finally made it back to him, he basically told you to get lost! How can you just forgive that jerk?!”

Wow. That was quite a rant.

I understood where Eris was coming from. When you put it in those terms, Paul did sound like a really crappy father. I could even have believed that he hated my guts. If I was an ordinary child, his actions would have been unforgivable.

But the way I saw things, it was inevitable that he’d make a few mistakes trying to deal with a son like me. I was reincarnated with my memories intact, and I took full advantage of that from the very start. How could anyone be expected to be a “normal” dad to a kid that weird? Paul had

had a hard time figuring out how to interact with me, let alone how to raise me. And to be honest, I don't think he really knew what it meant to be a good father in the first place…not that I did either, of course.

As his son, all I needed to do was watch his awkward attempts at parenting with warmth, understanding, and just a pinch of condescension. Paul could mess up as many times as he needed to. I'd take his mistakes in stride. They weren't going to hurt me as deeply as that fight yesterday did.

But of course, we'd be going our separate ways soon anyway.

"Eris."

"Yeah? What…?"

I wasn't sure what to say. Eris was angry because she cared about me. But as far I was concerned, the whole thing was already in the past. "My father's a human being. Everybody makes mistakes, okay?"

With that said, I put my hand to her face and got to working healing her bruise. Eris accepted my attentions tamely enough, but the look on her face told me that she wasn't convinced. Once I'd finished with my spell, she stomped sulkily back to our room at the inn.

As we watched her walk off, I spoke to the third member of our party. "So, Ruijerd…"

"What is it?"

"Where did that bruise on her face come from?" That thing definitely wasn't there yesterday.

"I had some trouble stopping her," Ruijerd replied in a level tone of voice.

Hmm. Normally, he was the kind of guy who'd explode in righteous anger if he saw someone strike a child, but maybe his principles were more flexible than I thought. Eris must have thrashed around like a lunatic in her fury. And of course, the two of them did spar constantly, so this was hardly the first time he'd given her a bruise or two…

Looking at his face more closely, though, I realized that wasn't really relevant. Ruijerd wasn't calm right now. He wasn't an expressive man, but I could see something like anguish in his eyes.

He never wanted to hit her. He must have had no choice.

I didn't know exactly what had happened, or what words they'd exchanged. But there was one thing I could say for sure: It was my fault the two of them got in a fight. But I was able to make peace with Paul as a result…which meant I ought to be more grateful than anything.

"Thank you, Ruijerd. It would have been tricky to make up with my father if she'd murdered him."

"There's no need to thank me."

Still, at this point Ruijerd apparently needed to punch Eris to stop her. That girl just got stronger and stronger by the day.

A little while later, the three of us held a quick team meeting.

"Okay then. Let's get our second official meeting in Millishion underway, people!"

This time, we were conducting our business in the bar rather than our room. Come to think of it, I hadn't taken a step outside this building all day. It was a cozy place, and it never got too crowded, either…although I'm sure the owner had some mixed feelings about that.

"Didn't we just have one of these two days ago?" said Eris.

She didn't seem to be angry anymore. I expected her to sulk in the room for at least a couple hours, but she ended up emerging after only about ten minutes. The girl knew how to move on fast. I'd have to try and learn from her example.

"Yes, but the situation's changed since then. To be specific, there's no longer any need for us to earn money in Millishion. I think we should move on relatively soon."

With twenty king's coins in our purse, there wasn't much point trying to make more money here. And as for gathering information, Paul had already told me basically everything he knew. With our Superd PR campaign on the back burner for now, that didn't leave much for us to do in this city—as I briefly explained.

I'd been hesitant to tell Eris about the current state of the Fittoa Region. But ultimately, I took this chance to go ahead and do so. It would probably be

best if she knew what awaited us, if only so she could brace herself in advance.

"Eris, it sounds like our home doesn't exist anymore."

"Yeah."

"Also…Philip and Sauros are both still missing."

"I'm not surprised."

"Nobody knows where Ghislaine is either, so it's possible—"

"Listen, Rudeus," said Eris, folding her arms and sticking her chin into the air. "I was always expecting things to be at least this bad."

Her gaze was steady. Her expression was as intense and arrogant as ever. There was no hint of doubt or uncertainty in her eyes.

Eris hadn't forgotten about Fittoa. She'd *been* ready to face the worst.

With a small snort, she continued. "I'd bet Ghislaine is still out there somewhere, but I knew there was a good chance Father and Grandfather were dead."

The two of us had been stranded in the middle of the Demon Continent, after all. I guess she'd realized that many others might have landed in equally dangerous situations. Of course, there was a chance she was just putting on a brave face right now. With Eris, it was hard to tell the difference between actual confidence and bluster.

"Oh, and I knew you were trying to hide all this from me, by the way."

I wasn't clear on exactly what she thought I'd been "hiding." From the sound of it, though, this wasn't just an act. Eris *had* been thinking things through in her own way. In other words, I was the only one who'd forgotten entirely about the Fittoa Region.

That was kind of embarrassing.

"I see. Well, all right then."

Eris really was one impressive young lady. Having reached that conclusion, I decided to move on to our next topic.

"In any case, I was thinking we could depart Millishion about a week from now."

“Are you sure?” asked Ruijerd.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Once we leave, you might never see your father again.”

“Well, *that’s* a little ominous…” Coming from Ruijerd, those words carried some real weight. But it wasn’t like I was heading out to the frontlines of some war. “The thing is, I’ve also got a few other family members I might never see again. Right now, I think I’ll worry about finding them.”

“I see. That’s true enough.”

Since Ruijerd seemed convinced on that point, I moved on to the meat of the matter. “For the rest of our journey, I’d like to prioritize information gathering.”

We’d still be staying for about a week at every major town we reached. But instead of focusing on earning money, we’d primarily use that time to collect rumors and local gossip.

First and foremost, we’d be looking to find displaced Fittoans. The route from Millis to Asura was this world’s equivalent of the Silk Road; no other was more traveled, particularly by merchants and traders. The Search and Rescue Squad had no doubt combed every mile of it. Still, there was a chance we might find something they’d overlooked.

We’d also do what we could to improve the reputation of the Superd while we poked around. But unfortunately, the name Dead End wasn’t that well-known on Millis and the Central Continent. We might have to reconsider our previous approach.

“There is one problem, though. I’m not sure how we can afford to cross the sea.”

This was definitely the single biggest issue right now. In this world, even “routine” sea travel was serious business. There were plenty of ways to sneak your way across national borders on land, but when it came to boats your options were severely limited…especially if you happened to be a Superd.

“About that, Rudeus… Take a look at this.”

Ruijerd pulled out an envelope. It was the same one he was about to show me yesterday, before he’d noticed my condition.

I took it from him and examined it. The words “To Duke Bakshiel” were scribbled on the front. On the back, I found a red wax seal, roughly imprinted with something that looked like a family crest.

“What’s this?”

“A letter. An acquaintance of mine wrote it for me yesterday.”

Oh, right… Come to think of it, he’d mentioned he was going to go say hello to someone he knew in this city.

“Can you tell us who this acquaintance is, Ruijerd?”

“A man named Gash Broche.”

“What’s his occupation?”

“I wouldn’t know. It seems he has some status here, though.”

Ruijerd went on to explain that he’d met Gash on the Demon Continent some forty years ago, after rescuing his traveling party from a group of monsters that very nearly wiped them out. Gash was only a child at the time, and he’d initially looked at Ruijerd with a mixture of terror and hostility. After spending some time together, though, they parted on relatively friendly terms. Ruijerd delivered his party safely to the nearest town, and Gash told him to stop by if he ever happened to visit Millishion.

Since he never left the Demon Continent, Ruijerd had forgotten about that offer entirely. But then he happened to spot the man with his “third eye” as we circled around the city’s outer walls, and it all came back to him. Interested to see how the years had treated Gash, if also somewhat anxious that the man might have forgotten him entirely, Ruijerd headed over to pay a visit.

To his surprise, Gash recognized him instantly and showered him with hospitality. At first, Ruijerd had just intended to say hello, but apparently the two of them really hit it off. He ended up recounting the whole story of our journey so far, and once he was finished, Gash wrote him up a letter on the spot and told him to give it to the man in charge at West Port.

It was an interesting story. For one thing, Ruijerd didn’t usually make friends that easily. Maybe this guy was something like Gustav of the beastfolk? Judging from the way he’d dashed off a casual letter to a duke, he presumably had some real clout around here…

I wanted to take a peek at the letter inside, honestly. But as I recalled, breaking this sort of seal would invalidate its contents.

"Sounds like this Gash guy is probably some sort of noble, huh?"

"I couldn't say, but he did have many men."

Whatever *that* meant. Was he talking about servants or something? The word "many" was really vague, too…

Well, in any case, the man was a friend of Ruijerd's. I wouldn't be too surprised if he turned out to be a kindhearted contender for the role of Mamodo King. "Were you at his house?"

"Yes."

"Was it large?"

"It was indeed."

"Uhm, how large?"

"Not so large as Kishirisu Castle."

Kishirisu Castle? Okay, so that ruled out the big palace in the middle of the lake. Not that I was really expecting the guy to be a member of the royal family. Still, this building had to be pretty damn big if Ruijerd was using a castle as a point of comparison.

Hmm…

We were talking about a friend of Ruijerd here. He probably wasn't a bad guy. But from what Paul told me earlier, the noble in charge of the customs station at West Port hated demons with a passion. If our friend Gash was only moderately influential, handing over this letter might backfire badly. Maybe we should take some time to find out exactly who he was?

Ruijerd looked so proud when he took out that letter, though. If I voiced any suspicions about his new buddy, he'd probably give me an earful about trust and honor.

Well, whatever. It wasn't like I had any better ideas. For now, I might as well go with the flow and keep Ruijerd happy. I could secretly ask Paul about the name Gash Broche later.

"Okay then," I said. "Let's hope that letter does the trick."

Ruijerd responded with a small nod of approval.

That basically wrapped things up for now. We'd be setting out from Millishion in one week. Until then, we'd accomplish what we could inside the city.

"Personally, I wouldn't mind leaving first thing tomorrow morning!"

With a small smile at Eris' proposal, I declared our team meeting officially adjourned.

Chapter 6:
One Week in Millishion

The next morning, I headed over to the headquarters of the Search and Rescue Squad to let Paul know about our plans.

The HQ itself was a perfectly ordinary two-story building. It didn't take long for me to find my father. He was hard at work in what seemed to be a conference room, discussing something or other with roughly a dozen other men. I could make out snatches of the conversation from outside; it seemed they were preparing for a large operation of some kind.

From the way Paul looked the other day, I'd assumed he spent every day in Millishion either getting drunk or nursing a hangover, but maybe my timing had just been bad. Right now, he was the picture of a focused, competent leader. I was impressed despite myself…at least, until someone alluded to the fact that he'd skipped a month's worth of meetings while on a massive bender. From the sound of things, it was only yesterday that he'd abruptly gotten motivated again.

It was most likely because Paul wanted to show me his better side. In other words, he'd gotten back to work because of me.

Goodness gracious. The boys do love showing off for me…

With a theatrical sigh, I decided to wait for Paul to find a little free time.

Sitting around in the room outside might get boring, so I opted to wander around the building for a while. After a few minutes of exploration, I came across my little sister Norn at play. She was in a room that seemed to be serving as a nursery, playing blocks with a bunch of other kids around her age.

"Hey there," I said, raising a hand in greeting as her eyes met mine.

Norn started in surprise, then scowled and hurled the wooden block in her hand, which I managed to catch. "Go away!"

This didn't strike me as the friendliest way to say hello. Hmm. Had I done anything to make her upset with me? The only thing that came to mind

was that time I beat the crap out of Paul before her eyes.

Yeah, that *probably* had something to do with it.

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“Um…Father and I made up with each other, Norn,” I protested gently.

In response, she shouted “You liar!” and scampered off as fast as her little legs would carry her.

Apparently, my baby sister hated my guts now. That was a bit of a downer.

I didn’t want to upset her with my presence, so I headed back over to the closest thing the building had to a waiting room. As I sat down in the corner, a number of heads turned in my direction. I recognized at least a couple of the guys I spotted “kidnapping” Somal the other day.

I was starting to get the feeling I might not be too popular in this place.

But before I really had time to bathe in the awkwardness, a familiar woman walked into the room, and all eyes were suddenly on her. It was the bikini-armor lady, back to her old half-naked ways. She spotted me immediately and walked right over.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Good morning,” she replied with a smile and a small tilt of her head. “Did you need something from us today?”

“Yes. I’m here to see my father, um…” What was this lady’s name again? I felt like Paul hadn’t told me. “Ah, pardon me. I haven’t introduced myself, have I? My name is Rudeus Greyrat, miss.” Rising to my feet, I put one hand to my chest and offered an aristocratic bow.

“Uh, oh…m-my name’s Vierra,” replied the bikini-armor lady, her hands fluttering anxiously in the air. “I’m a member of Captain Paul’s squad.” She proceeded to return my bow, offering me a truly irresistible view of her cleavage.

The girl really was a sight for sore eyes. Or even non-sore eyes, honestly. I’d only just resolved to cut back on my perverted behavior, so I didn’t *want* to stare. But I couldn’t seem to look away. All my good intentions were meaningless in the face of her chest’s gravitational pull.

That outfit was just unfair.

“I’m very sorry I was so rude the other day. My father’s something of a womanizer, so I’m afraid I got the wrong idea.”

“No, no! It’s all right. I can understand why you’d think that, given how I was dressed.” Vierra emphasized her words by shaking her head vigorously. Certain other parts of her body also moved as a result. That bikini armor did seem to be fixed in place to some degree, but it wasn’t enough to keep her from jiggling when she made sudden movements. Those things were *big*, after all.

Whoops. I was doing it again.

With an effort of will, I managed to tear my eyes away. “I’m not sure it’s a great idea to hang around a bunch of men in that armor if you can help it, miss. I’d imagine some people might find it a bit distracting. Maybe you could put on a cloak over it, at least?”

Vierra smiled awkwardly. “I’m sorry, but there’s a reason that I wear this.”

Maybe I was imagining things, but it felt like a lot of people were looking over at me all of a sudden. Had I said something I shouldn’t have? Well, whatever. I’d have to ask Paul about this later. “Do you know when Father’s meetings will be over?”

Vierra cocked her head thoughtfully to one side. “Well, he has a whole month’s worth of work to catch up on at the moment. I expect he might be very busy for a while.”

“All right then. When you get a chance, could you let him know that I’m planning to leave Millishion seven days from now?”

“Really? That seems awfully soon.”

“Well, it’s what we’re used to at this point.”

“I see… In that case, let me go get Shierra for you. Just a moment, please.”

With that, Vierra pattered off somewhere or other. A few minutes later, she returned with a familiar robed healer.

When the girl saw I was looking at her, she let out a little gasp and stepped behind Vierra before saying anything. “The captain’s schedule is jam-packed at the moment, but he has some free time in the evening four days from now. Would you care to have dinner with him then?”

“Um, it’s all right if he’s too busy, you know.”

“When he talks to you, the captain’s full of life and energy. He *is* very busy, but I hope you’ll come anyway.”

Shierra’s voice sounded composed enough, considering she was still hiding behind Vierra. This girl really seemed to hate me. Or maybe even fear me. That was kind of regrettable, but…oh well.

“Four days from now, right? Okay then. Should I meet him at his inn?”

“I’ll make you a reservation at a restaurant our squad frequently visits. Please head directly over there instead.”

Shierra proceeded to calmly provide me with an exact time and location. We’d be eating at a place in the Commercial District by the name of “Lazy Millis.” Just to be on the safe side, I asked about the dress code, but apparently there wasn’t one.

This felt kind of odd, though. Like I was scheduling a business meeting with the CEO of some major corporation. Paul had a secretary planning out his days now, huh? The guy had certainly come up in the world.

“Will you be bringing a companion?”

Eris’ face popped into my mind, but in the same instant, I recalled her shouting “I’ll kill that stupid jerk!” as she stormed off to murder Paul.

“No, I think I’ll come alone.”

With that, we’d ironed out all the details, so I took my leave.

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Now then. A week wasn’t much time to work with, so we’d have to use it productively. With that in mind, I headed over to the Millishion Adventurers’ Guild.

The building was on the large side, as one might expect from the headquarters of the whole organization. It was two stories tall and occupied much more space than any other Guild branch I’d ever seen. Of course, I’d seen a few skyscrapers in my time, so the sight didn’t exactly take my breath away.

Once inside, I got to work gathering information.

Initially I asked around about the Fittoa Region, but nobody seemed to know anything that Paul hadn't already told me. In this city, at least, the Search and Rescue Squad was probably better informed about Fittoa than anyone else.

Next, I looked for information on the monsters native to the Millishion area.

From the sound of things, they weren't comparable to the creatures of the Demon Continent on the threat level. Mostly, you had stuff like the Giant Locust, which was just a big grasshopper; the Meat-cutter Rabbit, a carnivorous bunny; and the Rockworm, essentially an overgrown earthworm. The majority of them posed very little danger to anyone.

They also tended to be very small, at least in comparison to the beasts of the Demon Continent. In that harsh land, monsters several times larger than humans were commonplace. Even the Pax Coyotes, which we'd hunted to the brink of extinction (slight exaggeration), were over two meters in size; Acid Wolves were more than three. As for the Great Tortoises, an ordinary specimen might be eight meters long, and at their largest they could grow to over twenty. The monsters that emerged during rainy season in the Great Forest were mostly about the size of a grown man as well.

Size didn't always correspond to strength, but sheer mass was a weapon in its own right. All in all, the monsters around Millishion were puny weaklings.

That was fine with me. One less thing to worry about.

Once I'd heard enough about the monsters, I took some time to consider how we could improve the locals' opinion of the Superd people.

Unfortunately, it seemed like we had our work cut out for us.

For one thing, there was a prominent political faction in Millishion that advocated the "expulsion" of demonkind. The leaders of this group were associated with the Temple Knights, one of the Millis Church's holy military orders. They loudly declared that all demons should be banished from the Millis Continent entirely.

At present, this party wasn't in control of Millis. The current pope belonged to a more powerful faction that called for coexistence with demonkind; as a result, the Temple Knights couldn't take active steps to

expel them. However, if a demon happened to cause trouble in the city, they'd eagerly come running to harass everyone involved. Despite their political weakness, they often got away with taking aggressive action in the name of "justice" or "public order."

If Ruijerd were to publicly announce he was a Superd and start doing jobs around Millishion, the Temple Knights would be making our lives miserable in no time. They had eyes and ears all over this city, from the sound of things.

In that case, maybe we could try working outside of it.

With that thought in mind, I snatched up a B-ranked task the Guild had only just put up on the board. Apparently, a rampaging monster in a local village needed killing. The location was near enough that we could easily make a day trip of it.

Our target this time was a Leaf Tiger. This was a monster native to the southern regions of the Great Forest, but for whatever reason this one had wandered south to take up residence in this area.

Leaf Tigers had coats of spotted green overlaid with a brown pattern. This allowed them to blend into the forest perfectly. Because they were hard to see and often moved in small packs, they were considered to be B-ranked monsters. However, the one we were after was on its own, and its camouflage was useless in these open grasslands. It was probably less of a threat than your average Acid Wolf. I'd have placed it at Rank D, at most. Back when we were on the Demon Continent, I would have jumped for joy to find a job *this* easy on the board.

The three of us headed over right away. And just as we arrived, a big green cat happened to be sauntering out of the village with a chicken in its mouth.

It noticed us and dropped its prize to growl in our direction, but Eris just said, "I'll take this one," ran up to it, and cut the thing clean in half.

Mission complete! Huh, that was quick.

The people of the village offered us their heartfelt thanks. This tiger had killed a lot of livestock and attacked several farmers in the area recently.

Normally, one of the holy military orders would have been dispatched to protect them. But just a few days ago, there had apparently been a serious incident where a Blessed Child was attacked in this vicinity. Her escort, a unit of Temple Knights, was almost entirely wiped out; only their captain had survived.

The knight captain just barely managed to protect the Blessed Child, fortunately. But she was still relieved of her post in punishment for the grave losses suffered.

The holy military orders were already on edge after a recent string of suspicious slave kidnappings, even before this disaster. The news of it threw both the Millis Church and their knights into an uproar. As a result, they'd totally failed to do anything about a certain dangerous B-ranked monster. For lack of any better options, the villagers had turned to the Adventurers' Guild.

It was an interesting story. Not that it had much to do with us.

Now that I'd gathered what information I could, I moved on to a little experiment.

To be specific, I told the villagers about the Superd. I explained that our friend Ruijerd belonged to that tribe, and that his people were traveling all over the world doing good deeds in an attempt to gain the friendship of the other races.

"At a glance, the Superd might seem cold or even hostile, but it's easy enough to break through that stony exterior. You see this little statue right here, folks? All you have to do is show a Superd one of these and mention Ruijerd's name. That fearsome scowl will melt into a happy smile, and you'll be best friends for life in minutes!"

It was a perfect sales pitch, if I do say so myself. Still, the village chief looked less than enthusiastic. They were grateful to Ruijerd, but that wasn't enough to change their views on demonkind as a whole. And as followers of the Millis Church, they weren't interested in owning a statue of a demon. With that said, he pushed the little figure back into my hands.

It seemed the experiment was a failure. This probably wasn't a problem we could hope to solve immediately.

Maybe a figurine of a sexy girl would have been more effective. Ooh,

what if I made a gender-swapped version of Ruijerd?

Wait, no. That would defeat the whole purpose.

"I had no idea you'd made such a thing," said Ruijerd, studying the figurine admiringly as the three of us trudged back toward Millishion.

"Isn't it amazing? Rudeus is really good at making those things!" For some reason, Eris seemed very proud that I'd earned his approval.

While this one had been rejected, my figures did actually fetch a good price on the market. They had quality enough to earn the admiration of a certain beastfolk Sword King and a prince in some foreign country, after all.

Yes indeed. I was practically a royal artisan at this point!

"This position is no good at all, though."

"Yeah, the stance is all wrong. You'd have to crouch much lower…"

Sad trombone noise.

Those two really knew how to burst a guy's bubble.

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Three days later—the day before my dinner appointment with Paul—I realized that I didn't have anything to wear to the restaurant.

There wasn't a dress code, and this was just a family get-together. Still, the clothes I'd bought back in the Demon Continent looked a bit shabby on the streets of Millishion, so I headed out with Eris to do a little shopping.

This probably qualified as a date, although it wasn't a particularly exciting one. Eris was never too motivated about buying clothes and tended to think everything looked "fine." I figured I should take this chance to get her a few new outfits as well. From this point on, we'd be traveling in humankind's territory, and they say first impressions are all about how you present yourself. At the very least, I wanted us dressed well enough that people wouldn't treat us rudely.

I kind of wished I could turn to a friend who knew *something* about fashion for advice. But the only people I could even call "acquaintances" in

this city were that monkey-faced newbie and Vierra. I had no idea where Geese was, and I wasn't friendly enough with Vierra to ask her for a personal favor.

Ultimately, I decided to study people going by until I had a feel for things. Eris and I sat by a street and engaged in a bit of idle crowd-watching.

After a while, I noticed that blue clothing seemed somewhat popular at the moment. Also, some people had cloaks or jackets on, but many others didn't bother. The climate here was nice enough that most outerwear was on the lighter side.

"Looks like blue's in style right now, doesn't it?"

"Blue doesn't work at all for you, Rudeus."

Wow, blunt. Fortunately, I really didn't care that much about the trends of the hour. "What does work for me, then?"

"You've got that thing Geese gave you, right? Just go with that."

She was talking about that fur vest, right? That thing was a little big on me, though. It was long enough to look more like a coat. That said, it wasn't uncomfortable at all, so I did wear it sometimes. Mostly on colder days.

"That one's not bad, but I feel like it's a bit too long for me."

"Yeah, I guess so. Why don't you just cut it down to size, then?"

"That would just be a waste. I'm still a growing boy, remember?"

Chatting casually, the two of us picked out a few purchases. It didn't take long at all, which I chalked up to our mutual lack of interest. So, it came as something of a surprise when, at the very end, Eris chose a rather fashionable black dress embroidered with small white roses.

"Do you really want this one, Eris?"

"…What? Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, no. I bet it would look great on you."

"Hmph. You don't have to flatter me, you know."

After paying for our purchases, we headed back to the inn.

Finally, the big day arrived.

In the afternoon, I let Ruijerd and Eris know that I'd be having dinner with my father that evening.

Ruijerd said "I'm glad to hear that" with a slightly relieved expression on his face. I could actually see the happiness in his eyes. From the looks of things, he very much wanted me to leave this city on good terms with my father. Not that he had any cause to worry, of course. I was going to take full advantage of this family-bonding opportunity.

"I'm coming, too!" announced Eris.

Turning, I found her staring me down in her usual arms-akimbo pose.

"Uhhh…"

"What? Is that a problem?"

If it wasn't for the other day, I would have given in immediately, but Eris clearly still felt some hostility toward my father. That was probably an understatement, in fact. It seemed like she hated his guts. I could understand how she felt to some degree, but I'd already decided to make nice with Paul.

If that was the only issue, I might have brought her with me and tried to get the two of them on better terms. But this dinner was going to be our first meal as a family in many years, you know? And I hadn't patched things up with Norn yet, either. Also, I did say that I'd be coming to the restaurant alone.

"Would you mind staying here instead, Eris?"

All things considered, I wanted Eris to show a little self-restraint here. Carrying a bomb into the middle of a raging forest fire didn't strike me as the best of ideas. Formally introducing her to the family could wait until the two of us got a little more intimate than we were right now.

"Yes, I *would* mind! I'm coming too, got it?!"

Silly me. The word "self-restraint" wasn't part of Eris' vocabulary.

"Ruijerd, could you say something here?"

When I turned back to Ruijerd in search of help, I found him holding a hand to his chin in thought. His intense gaze moved from my face to Eris', and then back again. "You've made up with your father, haven't you? It shouldn't be a problem, then. Let her come along."

Wow! Stabbed in the back! Was this the same guy who'd punched Eris to stop her from intervening last time?

Oh well. I guess I'd have to let the majority rule on this one. "Well, if you say so, Ruijerd…"

"Hmph! What did you expect?"

"Just one thing, Eris. I want to stay on good terms with my father, so please be polite to him, okay?"

"…Fine!"

Judging from her tone of voice, she had no intention of actually keeping that promise. Not exactly reassuring.

Afterwards, I went upstairs to put on my brand-new clothes, then headed over to the restaurant as a brand-new me (a.k.a. Newdeus). Eris tagged along in the black dress we'd bought the other day.

I did my best to avoid the narrower side streets. There were lots of kidnappers lurking in those dark alleys, and they could get a little violent in some places. No reason to risk our new clothes getting messed up.

The main avenues had their dangers too, of course. Since it was around dinner time, quite a few people were buying something like yakitori from the outdoor stalls. If I bumped into one of those guys, the result would no doubt be tragic. And if one of them walked into *Eris*, her Boreas Punch would probably leave both of us drenched in their blood.

As a precautionary measure, I kept my Eye of Foresight active. By constantly looking one second into the future, I was able to navigate us safely through the crowds. I felt a bit bad for using such a powerful ability for something this mundane, but at least we reached our destination without incident.

That whole thing with the "reservations" had gotten me a little nervous. As it turned out, though, Lazy Millis was a perfectly ordinary place. It was a stand-alone bar and restaurant, not part of an inn; most of the clientele seemed to be relatively respectable locals. When I gave my name to the waiter up front, he brought me and Eris over to our table immediately. The fact that there were two of us went unremarked on. Paul was already sitting at

the table with an awkward smile on his face, along with a very grumpy-looking Norn.

"Sorry, am I a bit late?"

"Uh, nah… Sorry about this, kiddo. Shierra got kind of carried away for some reason. I told her the usual place would be fine, but…"

"Nothing wrong with a change of pace every once in a while, right?"

I started to pull out a chair, then stopped as I noticed that Eris was looking rather grumpy herself. This technically wasn't the first time she'd met Paul, but maybe introducing them would be a good idea. "Um, Father, this is Eris. As I told you the other day, she's Philip's daughter, and a member of the Boreas—"

"Oh. Right, right." Cutting me off mid-sentence, Paul rose to his feet and turned to Eris. He straightened up and put one hand to his chest, then lowered his head slightly. It was a practiced bow—no less smooth than Philip's. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, miss. I'm Paul Greyrat, Rudeus' father."

Taken aback, Eris tried to glance at me, but couldn't manage to totally break eye contact with my father.

"Uh, I'm…E-Eris Greyrat…sir." The expression on her face was still grumpy. Nonetheless, she grabbed the ends of her dress and gave an awkward little curtsy. It felt like she'd missed her chance to start screaming or throwing punches.

I had to admit, I was impressed with Paul. Apparently, he'd learned a thing or two about handling girls from his years as a womanizer.

…Since when could he pull off a bow like that, though?

"All right then. Why don't we all sit down?"

In any case, our family dinner got underway without any bloodshed.

Eris and I settled into our seats. For the moment, Eris was keeping quiet, but it was obvious she'd bare her fangs in an instant if things took a wrong turn. Paul still looked a bit uncomfortable. And as for Norn… Well, she hadn't even glanced at me yet.

Long story short, the mood wasn't so great. Maybe it really had been a

mistake to bring Eris with me.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who found the situation a bit awkward. After a few moments of silence, Paul turned to Norn with a troubled expression on his face. "C'mon, kiddo. Your big brother's here, see? Why don't you say hi to him?"

"No! I don't wanna have dinner with some jerk who punched my daddy!"

Eris scowled and started to open her mouth, but Paul was quicker. "Don't say that, kiddo. Sometimes Daddy deserves a punch or two."

"But you didn't do anything wrong!" said Norn, puffing out her little cheeks in an adorable show of indignation.

"Your big brother and I already made up, okay? Isn't that right, Rudy?"

Oh boy. He was throwing this over to me, huh? Well, maybe this was an opportunity of sorts. An opportunity to demonstrate my wit and charm!

"Oh, absolutely," I said with a smile. "Want us to kiss and prove it?"

"Huh?!"

"Huh?"

For some reason, the line went over like a lead balloon. Actually, I couldn't really blame the guy. I didn't want to kiss him, either. Maybe we could just forget I ever said that.

"Uh, anyway…the two of us are friends again now, Norn. Why don't you make up with your big brother too?"

"No way!"

Paul patted Norn on the head as she pouted. That golden hair of hers really was pretty, though. It reminded me of Zenith. Come to think of it, she used to sulk up a storm just like this whenever something ticked her off. Maybe Norn had inherited that habit from her mother?

After submitting to Paul's petting for a little while, the kid abruptly turned to glare at me. She had to tilt her head back just to look me in the face, so the overall effect was more adorable than intimidating. "Daddy's trying *really* hard."

Since this comment seemed to be directed at me, I responded as gently

as possible. “Yeah. I know he is.”

“He doesn’t kiss any girls or anything!”

“So I’ve heard. I’m sorry to have doubted him.”

“He’s always really nice to me, too!” Norn’s little eyes were filling up with tears. *Crap, did I say something mean? Please don’t start bawling, kid…* “Daddy always looks like he wants to cry!”

Flustered by Norn’s obvious distress, Paul and I looked at each other uncertainly. “Wait, really?”

“Uh, well, I got a little—”

“I feel so *sorry* for him!”

Neither of us had anything to say to that.

“How could you beat him up like that? You’re so mean!”

Looking at Norn’s face, I had to fight the urge to heave a long, heavy sigh. Paul and Norn had been teleported together. I knew all about that now. She’d gotten very sick during their journey back to Fittoa and was nearly attacked by monsters several times along the way. And it was her father who’d protected her from all those dangers.

With her mother, maid, and sister missing, and her heart bursting with anxiety, Paul was the only person she could rely on. For years, he was the only family she had left.

And then some stranger showed up out of nowhere, knocked him down, and started punching him in the face. That would be enough to traumatize most kids her age.

“Norn, look. That was all my—”

“It’s all right, Father.”

If she was a little older, the three of us might have found a way to talk this through. At her age, though, that was probably impossible. Both Paul and I had made mistakes and jumped to conclusions; we’d reconciled by acknowledging our faults. But you couldn’t expect a child to understand that. “Norn’s still very young. And if I was in her shoes, I don’t think I’d forgive the jerk who punched you, either.”

It was sad that Norn hated me, but there wasn’t much I could do about

it. We'd just have to talk things through a few years down the road. Once she was older, I was sure she'd understand. Time's not an infinite resource, but it can heal at least some wounds.

"No, it's not all right." Evidently Paul wasn't on board with my plan, though. "You guys might be the only siblings you've got left, okay? I want you to be good to each other."

As the meaning of those words sunk in, I frowned at my father. "That's a little ominous, don't you think?"

"…Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

Well, this was no good at all. The mood was getting heavier by the minute. It seemed like it was time for a change of subject. "By the way, Father, what's good here? I skipped lunch today, so I'm starving."

Not the smoothest transition, no, but Paul seemed to pick up on what I was doing. With a strained smile, he took his cue. "Hm, let's see. They've got a damn tasty seafood stew with fresh fish from the sea down south. Oh, and the beef's good too. They raise a lot of cattle in the farms around here, you know? It actually tastes pretty different from the Asuran kind, especially since they tend to boil it. Gives it a real nice, rich flavor."

"Oh, I've got to try that. All the meat on the Demon Continent was seriously foul."

"You said it was mostly cuts of Great Tortoise, right? Yeah, most monsters do taste pretty nasty."

The conversation was finally starting to pick up some steam, but Norn still had her head turned away. She only responded when Paul said something to her, refusing to even glance in my direction. I'd more or less resigned myself at this point, but it still kind of stung, you know?

Of course, this was the exact same thing I'd done to Paul just a few days ago. I felt terrible about that, in retrospect.

Eris wasn't too pleased by Norn's attitude, judging from the way she was staring at her. I really didn't want this to turn into a fight, but…it was best to leave things be for now.

"Oh, right. There was something I was meaning to ask you about, Father."

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Do you know of anyone by the name of Gash Broche?”

“…Uh, nope. Where’d you hear that name?”

I took the chance to tell Paul about Ruijerd’s letter and the mysterious friend who’d written it for us. I’d made a rough copy of the emblem on the wax seal, so I took that out and showed it to him.

“A sheep, a hawk, and a sword, huh? Looks like the family crest of a paladin. I don’t think I’ve heard the name Gash Broche before, though. Not that I’m familiar with all the Millis nobles or anything.”

“I see… Do you think Shierra might know something about him?”

“Hmm, dunno. I’ll ask her later.”

It wasn’t reassuring that he’d never heard of the guy, but we’d just have to wait and see.

With that topic exhausted, Paul and I went back to chatting about anything that came to mind. Eventually we landed on the subject of my tenth birthday.

According to Paul, the monsters in the forest outside Buena Village had grown much more active about a month beforehand. Paul and Zenith had been so busy trying to get the situation under control that they just didn’t have the time to worry about my presents. They finally managed to clear the forest the day before my birthday, but just as they were getting ready to send me a few things, the Calamity took place.

As she listened to all this, Eris pouted with her lips pursed. Come to think of it, she’d looked really sad when she found out Paul wasn’t coming to that party.

“Just out of curiosity, what were you planning to send me?”

“I was going to give you a pair of gauntlets. I felt a little guilty, since I’d just found them in the back of our storehouse, but these were magic items from the bottom of a labyrinth. Those things were light as feathers. They never fit me, but I thought they might look good on you, Rudy.”

“No kidding? I didn’t know you had anything like that lying around.”

“Yep. Zenith said hers was a secret, but sometimes I noticed Lilia

looking at this little locked box with a smile on her face. I'm guessing that was for you, too."

"A box?" Now he had me curious. What could have been inside that thing? Not that there was much point thinking about it. Whatever it was, it was long gone now.

After this, we somehow got onto the topic of Zenith's family. They were evidently well-known among the Millis nobility, and had a history of producing many talented and righteous knights. Unfortunately, my grandparents had basically disowned Zenith when she left home, so they weren't too enthusiastic about helping search for her at first.

They'd changed their tune completely once they got a look at Norn, though. This world was different from my old one in a lot of ways, but the power of a cute grandkid was evidently universal.

"Hmm. I wonder if they'd give you more money if I stopped by?"

"Uh, I think that would probably backfire…"

"Yeah, you're right." I could try to act like a sweet little tyke for them, but my true nature would most likely reveal itself in time. It wasn't worth the risk.

Not long after this exchange, the waiter finally brought our food out to the table. "Okay, let's dig in," said Paul, his fork hovering theatrically in the air. "Hmm, what first…?"

"This does look appetizing," murmured Eris, studying the spread with shining eyes. She seemed more like Paul's child than I was, honestly. Then again, Paul and Philip *were* cousins, so maybe that wasn't too bizarre.

In any case, this seemed like a golden opportunity to improve Norn's image of me slightly. "Father, your manners are—"

"Cut it out, Daddy! You've got to pray before you eat!"

The two of us had spoken almost simultaneously. Norn looked over at me in surprise, but turned away sulkily a second later.

"Ha ha. Okay, kids."

"…Fine, fine."

Paul scratched his head ruefully, and Eris looked a bit reluctant, but

they both leaned back in their chairs for the moment. The four of us proceeded to say a short Millis-style prayer. All this involved was clasping your hands together and closing your eyes for a few seconds.

Eris and I weren't believers, and Paul probably wasn't either, but this was just good table manners in this world. When in Rome and all that, you know? We went through the motions without complaint.

For some reason, it seemed like Eris and Norn were in a slightly better mood after this.

We enjoyed our food while chatting about nothing of real importance. Paul and I did most of the talking, of course. Norn never looked in my direction, and for her part, Eris kept mostly silent. Paul did start to speak to her now and then, but the waves of hostility she emitted were strong enough that he always thought better of it. It was probably wise of him not to poke the beehive.

As Eris and I left the restaurant together, I heard her mutter, "Hmph, I guess he kept himself under control this time," under her breath.

I didn't even want to think about how she might have reacted if Paul had yelled at me, let alone taken a swing at me. But since there hadn't been any of that, her desire to murder him might have faded—at least slightly.

In that sense, at least, it had been a productive use of our time.

Our week in Millishion came to an end in no time at all.

On the day of our departure, we headed for the Adventurers' District gate. We'd finished loading our stuff into the carriage and were just getting ready to head out when Paul showed up to see us off. "Hey, Rudy. You sure you don't want to stick around a little longer?"

Much as I appreciated the sentiment, it was a bit late for that now. "I'm sure that would be nice, but we might end up lazing around here for the next year if we don't get moving."

"You and Norn haven't even made up yet, though."

"There's time enough to work on that once we've found the other three."

Also, this wasn't just about me. I glanced over at Eris. Ruijerd had

seized her by the scruff of her neck as a precautionary measure, but she was still glaring daggers at Paul. I might have overestimated that girl's ability to quickly move on. "And I'm not the only who wants to see their family, you know?"

"Right, of course. But the Boreas family's probably—"

"Let's not talk about it," I said, cutting Paul off with a movement of my hand. "It's possible that Philip and Sauros will be waiting for us when we get back to Fittoa, you know? The news might not have made it here yet."

"Right. Yeah, that's true. But you know, Rudy…" Paul paused for a moment, his face growing grim. "You really shouldn't be too optimistic about that. Even if the two of them do make it back alive, there's no telling what might happen to them after a disaster of that scale."

"What do you mean by that?"

Paul lowered his voice just a little. "Philip's brother James is busy trying to save his own neck. There's a chance he'd push all the blame for this mess onto one of them."

Wow.

The idea hadn't occurred to me before, but it sounded plausible. Sauros was the lord of Fittoa, and Philip was the mayor of Roa; they'd both held major positions of authority. Even if they made it back home, they might be held responsible for the massive loss of life and property caused by the Calamity.

I didn't know exactly what that would mean. But at the very least, it was hard to imagine they'd get to step back into their old roles and rebuild their power. In fact, it wouldn't be that surprising if someone had them assassinated immediately. That would prevent Philip's brother from using them as scapegoats, making it far easier to corner him politically.

"If things do look ugly, just make sure you keep the little lady safe. Some people might trot out a bunch of crap about the 'duties of the nobility,' but you don't have to pay them any mind."

"Of course," I said, nodding with the most serious expression I could muster. "I'll be careful, Father."

Paul smiled proudly and nodded back. "Oh, and I asked Shierra about

that letter, by the way. She's never heard of the guy, either."

"I see…"

"She did say he probably wasn't anyone dangerous, though."

"All right then. Would you mind thanking her for me?"

Paul nodded slightly. And then, finally, he turned around and spoke to the little girl who'd been standing behind him. "Come on, Norn. Say goodbye to your big brother."

"…Don't wanna."

Norn didn't move from her hiding spot behind her father. Half her face was peeking out, though. Talk about adorable. I found myself wondering if she'd grow up into a beauty like her mother. "I don't know how long it will take, Norn, but let's meet again someday."

"Don't wanna."

Right until the very end, my little sister refused to look me in the face. Smiling awkwardly, I headed back to our carriage.

And just like that, our party left the city of Millishion behind.

Paul

Just like that, Rudeus was back on the road again.

The kid was as impressive as ever. He figured out his plans in no time, then put them into action immediately. Elinalise once told me I was "rushing through my life," didn't she? You had to wonder what she'd think if she got a look at *him*.

It might be fun to get the two of them to meet sometime, but…maybe that wasn't such a great idea. Yeah. The last thing I wanted was to end up as that woman's father-in-law.

Just as I'd reached this conclusion, someone slapped me on the shoulder. I turned to find a monkey-faced man grinning at me. "Hey there, Paul. You done sayin' goodbye to your son?"

“Geese…” I was grateful to this jerk; more grateful than I could express in words. If it wasn’t for him, I probably never would have made up with Rudeus. “I seriously owe you one, man.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it!”

At this point, I noticed that Geese was dressed for the road. “What’s with you, though? You going somewhere?”

“Yeah. Not sure where just yet, but there’s plenty of places you folks ain’t poked around in yet, right?”

It took a moment for me to realize what he was saying. Geese was going to keep searching for my family. That came as a shock, frankly. Of all the members of my old party, Geese had struggled the most after I disbanded it. He wasn’t a fighter, but a jack-of-all-trades without any real specialties. No other party would take him in, and he wasn’t strong enough to handle tough jobs on his own. He’d been forced to leave the adventuring life behind. He had all the reason in the world to resent me, even hate me.

“Why are you…doing this, Geese? Why are you trying so hard to find them?”

The corners of Geese’s mouth twitched up into his usual ironic smirk. “Just feels like my fortune.” And with that typically cryptic “explanation,” he turned and walked away.

I put my hands on my hips and watched him go with a wry smile on my face. The man had a lot of ideas about luck, and none of them had ever made much sense to me. But this time, I wasn’t exactly complaining. “All right then!”

Once Geese disappeared from view, I reached down and hoisted Norn up onto my shoulders. All of a sudden, I was bursting with energy and motivation.

First things first—we had to make sure that the refugee relocation operation went off without a hitch. And once that was done with, I’d find the rest of my family. No matter what it took.

With my resolve fixed firmly in my heart, I headed back into the city.

Interlude:
Eris the Goblin Slayer

Apologies for the abrupt digression, but let's talk about a young man named Cliff Grimor.

Cliff was twelve years old at present—right between Eris and Rudeus in age. As a young child, he'd resided in an orphanage in Millishion. This facility was operated by the Millis Church, and served as a symbol of its power and prestige. Naturally, it didn't lack for funding or support; its children were well taken care of in every way, and many were eventually adopted.

After several years in this upscale institution, Cliff was adopted at the age of five by his current foster father. This was Harry Grimor, an elderly man of high rank in the Millis Church.

Once Cliff joined Harry's household, he underwent a rigorous educational program designed to nurture his natural talents. In only a few short years, he attained an Advanced rank in Healing, Detoxification, and Divine Strike magic. He also learned to cast spells of the Intermediate rank in all the disciplines of offensive magic, and even Advanced-tier Fire spells.

In a word, Cliff was a prodigy.

Everyone around the boy showered him with praise; everyone told him that he would one day make his mark on the world.

In these respects, his early years were similar to those of Rudeus. But unlike Rudeus, who had the memories of his previous life to keep him humble, Cliff grew arrogant. The kid was full of himself, quite frankly. Very much so.

In a sense, it was hard to blame him. Even among his instructors, there was no one who could use such a wide variety of magic as proficiently as him. Some could cast Saint-tier Healing spells, true; others had mastered Saint-tier Detoxification spells. However, only Cliff was Advanced in *four* distinct disciplines. The sheer breadth of his skills was such that some said he was a sage in the making. The boy's ego grew larger by the day. Gradually,

he stopped listening to his tutors entirely.

Some day in the future, Cliff would be expected to succeed his foster father and take a position in the Millis Church. Cliff was aware of this, of course. But at present, he longed to be an adventurer.

Why an adventurer, you might ask?

The cause lay in his early years back at the orphanage. Many of those raised in this facility went on to become adventurers. Those children who were not adopted by their tenth birthday were sent to a school operated by the Millis Church, where they underwent five years of training in the practical combat arts of swordplay and magic. After graduating, they took on jobs suited to their particular talents. Those who produced superb results in academics, swordplay, *and* magic sometimes became knights, but the majority of these graduates ended up as adventurers.

These young men and women would frequently stop by to visit their old home. They relished the chance to catch up with their old teachers—and to tell exciting stories of their adventures to the children living there. Many of the orphans, captivated by these tales, dreamed of following in their footsteps, and Cliff was no exception.

Of course, he didn't believe his dream would ever come true. Despite what his heart wanted, he understood his present circumstances clearly. A child adopted from an orphanage couldn't hope to choose his own destiny.

He could accept that…at least at first. But the dull routine of his daily life wore on Cliff, and the constant praise he received swelled his head. And so, one day, he hit on the idea of fleeing his home to register as an adventurer.

He just wanted to put his skills to the test, really. Even some of his magic instructors had made a name for themselves as young adventurers. Surely he ought to gain some similar experience while he was young…at least, that was what he told himself. With the staff his foster father had given him for his tenth birthday in his hands, Cliff headed from the Divine District to the Adventurers' District, where he bought himself a blue magician's robe.

Now that he was dressed the part, he headed over to the Guild. Concerned that the church would quickly track him down if he registered as a healer, he decided to list his profession as "magician" instead. For some

reason, he thought this would make a difference.

Soon enough, Cliff's registration was complete. He was now officially an adventurer. A whole new world of danger, excitement, and glory had opened up before him.

His heart thrumming with elation, Cliff looked around the room. Almost everyone he saw was a muscular man. It was clear that most of them were swordsmen or warriors by trade.

Cliff had learned from the adventurers who visited the orphanage that talented spell-casters were in great demand. He assumed that by simply introducing himself as a magician, he'd quickly find a spot in someone's party. He hadn't paid any attention to the receptionist's explanation of the Guild's rank system, so he thought he could jump right into any party, regardless of his rank.

"That's not gonna work, kid."

Inevitably, he was rejected. Everyone he approached bluntly brushed him off. When this happened for the fourth time in a row, the boy's patience finally ran out. "Why?! Why won't you let me in your party?!"

"I told you already. Our ranks are different."

"What does that matter?! I'm as powerful as any A-ranked magician! You should be grateful that I'm even willing to work with the likes of you!"

"What the hell? I've had enough of your crap, you stupid brat! You really want to pick a fight with me at close range?!"

"All you fools know is how to swing a sword. I wouldn't get too cocky if I were you!"

"You little shit…"

The burly adventurer in front of Cliff stepped forward and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. This wasn't how he'd expected things to go, but if he could manage to beat this man down, it would serve to demonstrate his strength.

"Stop it. You're being childish."

Before he had the chance to try, however, a red-headed girl about his age stepped in to intervene.

***

Let's a take a slight step back in time.

That same morning, Eris Boreas Greyrat had parted from Rudeus and Ruijerd to pay a visit to the Millishion Adventurer's Guild. As she hurried down the main street leading to the building, the grin on her face was so big that anyone who saw it would probably have smiled as well. She was wearing her usual adventuring outfit: a thick shirt, leather chest protector, leather pants, and thin-soled but durable boots. With her weapon at her hip, it was obvious at a glance that she was a swordswoman by profession.

Today, she'd chosen not to wear her usual hood. Over the last year, she'd learned that wearing it to a Guild was a good way to get herself confused for a magician…which tended to encourage strange men to approach her.

Before long, Eris had reached her destination. The Millishion Adventurers' Guild stood at the end of a major street. It was the headquarters of the entire organization, and the single largest building in the Adventurers' District.

Its imposing front gate wasn't enough to intimidate Eris. She strode right on inside. The sheer size of the building's lobby, however, almost made her stop and fold her arms. Not only was the room bigger than anything she'd seen in other Guild buildings, it was larger than the banquet hall in her family's mansion in Roa. Any young man or woman setting foot in here to register with the Guild would probably have hesitated at this impressive sight.

But of course, Eris was no timid newcomer. She was an A-ranked adventurer—an established veteran. It only took a second for her to make a beeline for the bulletin board.

The board here was far larger than any other she'd yet seen, but it was nonetheless overflowing with sheets of paper. Folding her arms, Eris began to look over them.

Today, instead of heading for the B-ranked tasks that were Dead End's bread and butter, she was studying the E-rank section of the board, looking for tasks classified as Open Quests. These were special missions, posted

periodically by the country in which the Guild was located. Their rewards were on the lower side, but as they were of high priority, any adventurer could accept them regardless of their rank.

There hadn't been any of these on the Demon Continent, of course. There were no "countries" to be found there.

From among a handful of Open Quests, Eris' eyes settled on one in particular.

***

Open

TASK: Exterminate Goblins

REWARD: 10 Millis copper coins per ear

DETAILS: Help cull the local Goblin population

LOCATION: East of Millishion

DURATION: None / Deadline: None

CLIENT: The Holy Knights of Millis

NOTES: New adventurers should be wary of Hobgoblins, which are sometimes found among groups of Goblins. Do not remove this request from the board; simply bring the ears you collect directly to the front counter.

***

Goblins were a species of monster that mostly lived on the boundaries between forests and open plains. They were humanoid in shape and used crude weapons, but couldn't comprehend human speech. In small numbers, they were mostly harmless, but if left alone for too long, they would rapidly reproduce and begin attacking any nearby villages. They were considered a somewhat dangerous pest. However, as they resided on the outskirts of wooded areas, they also acted as a sort of natural buffer against the more dangerous monsters that spawned inside forests.

They were weak creatures and could be slain without too much

difficulty by any young man or woman who knew how to use a sword. The Adventurers' Guild took advantage of this fact, offering regular Goblin-extermination tasks with mildly generous rewards as a sort of introduction to combat quests.

What was more—although Eris wasn't aware of this—the creatures were also sometimes used as a tool of torture against captured foreign spies. For all of these reasons, the Holy Country of Millis made no effort to exterminate the Goblins within its borders, preferring to keep their population at a stable level.

Eris was an A-ranked adventurer whose skills had been acknowledged by Ruijerd Superdia, and was perfectly capable of beating an average C-ranked warrior with her bare fists alone. You might be wondering why she would bother with such a basic job at this point.

There were two reasons.

First: this was something she'd dreamed of doing for a very long time.

During the brief period of her life when she attended school, Eris had often listened in on a group of boys in her class. They were constantly talking about what they'd do once they became adventurers. Their plan was to start off by hunting Goblins. After saving up some money and growing stronger, they'd eventually make their way to the southern regions of the Central Continent, where they could take on high-ranked jobs and dive into labyrinths.

Listening to their excited chatter, Eris started to indulge in these same fantasies.

One day, she walked over to the little group and demanded they let her join the conversation, which somehow led to a fight in which she brutally beat all three of them. She was expelled from her school, but soon met Ghislaine, whose stories only intensified her yearning for a life of adventure.

After meeting Rudeus, she constantly daydreamed about becoming an adventurer with him. In her imagination, they formed a party of two: Eris the swordswoman and Rudeus the mage. Together, they challenged unknown labyrinths in search of treasure.

When she actually found herself stranded on the Demon Continent with him, however, things played out very differently from her fantasies. In

particular, Rudeus turned out to be very businesslike about the whole thing. He kept the party far away from labyrinths and their unknown dangers. If Eris had proposed they go slay some Goblins, he would probably have raised an eyebrow and said “Why would we bother doing that?”

To be sure, Eris wasn’t a rookie anymore. She’d fought her way through the dangers of the Demon Continent, and she knew there was no real *point* in taking this job now. But even if it was pointless, slaying Goblins had always been at the very top of her “Things I want to do once I become an adventurer” list. She wanted the experience, if nothing else.

That was her first reason. The second one…was a secret.

“I wonder if I can make it back before the sun goes down…”

Studying the task she’d spotted on the board, Eris tried to figure out how long the round-trip journey would take. She was going to be traveling on foot for this one. It was still morning, but it was best to have a comfortable margin for error.

“…Hm?”

But as she was thinking it over, she happened to notice a note posted at the very edge of the board, out past the F-ranked tasks.

***

Displaced citizens of the Fittoa Region: Please contact the following address:

***

After reading the first line, Eris looked away. She’d seen this same note in the Zant Port Adventurer’s Guild as well.

Rudeus never spoke about the Fittoa Region. Eris assumed this was just because he didn’t want to make her anxious. She suspected that the whole reason he’d called this “off day” was so he could take some action on that front.

Eris tried not to think too much about complicated problems. She'd convinced herself she wasn't smart enough to understand them, and she had Rudeus to do the thinking for her. Once the time came, she was sure he'd explain his plan to her in a way she could follow. She never would have dreamed that Rudeus wasn't even aware of the existence of these notices.

"All right then!"

Having done what she'd come here to do, Eris walked away from the board in high spirits and headed for the exit. Now it was just a matter of heading out east and slaying some Goblins. Given how enthusiastic she was feeling at the moment, she would likely wipe out a whole nest or two before she was through. There was nothing and no one that could stop her. A moment of silence for our little green friends, please…

"Why?!"

It seems we've gotten a bit ahead of ourselves. Just as she was about to leave the building, Eris stopped in her tracks at the sound of a scream.

Turning toward it, she saw a young boy surrounded by a group of men nearly twice his size. "Why won't you let me into your party?!"

The boy who'd shouted seemed to be a magician, considering his blue robe. He was a bit shorter than Rudeus; his dark brown hair was long in the front, hiding his eyes from view. The staff he carried wasn't as impressive as Rudeus' Aqua Heartia, but you could tell from the size of its magic crystal that it was made from quality materials. His family was probably well-off, but not as wealthy as Eris' own.

"I'm as powerful as any A-ranked magician! You should be grateful that I'm even willing to work with the likes of you!"

His arrogant attitude wasn't going over too well with the men surrounding him. Not exactly surprising. Eris would have punched him in the face without a word if he'd said something like that to her.

"What the hell? I've had enough of your crap, you stupid brat! You really want to pick a fight with me at point-blank range?!"

"All you fools know is how to swing a sword. I wouldn't get too cocky if I were you!"

"You little shit…"

One of the adventurers grabbed the boy by his shirt. His face stayed calm, but Eris could see that his legs were trembling slightly.

Striding over to the little group, she stepped in to intervene. “Stop it. You’re being childish.” If Rudeus had been there, his jaw would likely have hit the floor at this point. This wasn’t the sort of line you’d ever expect to hear from *Eris,* of all people.

Honestly, Eris found this whole thing kind of thrilling. As an A-ranked adventurer, she was a cut above any of these people. She was the calm veteran, stepping in to protect the newbie from a bunch of bullies! Very cool, if she did say so herself.

Of course, Ruijerd frequently had to intervene like this to keep *her* from punching some hapless idiot in the face, but this inconvenient fact had slipped her mind entirely.

“…Tch. Yeah, I guess you’re right. I wasn’t actin’ too mature.”

To her surprise, the man backed down immediately. She’d been expecting this to turn into a fight, so it felt kind of anti-climactic.

“Come on, guys. Let’s go.” The men walked off, leaving the boy magician behind. Eris waited for him to thank her with a little smile on her face. In her imagination, it would go something like this:

Boy: Thank you for helping me, miss. Who are you?

Eris: Oh, no one special.

Boy: Please! At least tell me your name!

Eris: Hmm. All right…you can call me Dead End Ruijerd, then.

Rudeus liked to use that last line sometimes. She’d been meaning to try it out.

“Who asked for your help, huh?!”

Eris’ proud expression froze in place as the boy shouted at her.

“I could have handled those thugs just fine with my magic! Don’t stick your ugly nose in where it doesn’t belong!”

The boy was fortunate, in a sense. After all, he was knocked unconscious by her very first punch, and those men from earlier were still in the vicinity. If they hadn't run back over to pull Eris off of him, he likely would have awoken missing a rather delicate part of his anatomy.

***

In a somewhat lousy mood, Eris made her way to the front gate of Millishion. She usually put unpleasant things behind her quickly, but this time, she was still feeling testy. There was a reason for this, of course.

"Wait! Please wait!"

It was because the boy from the Guild, having regained consciousness, had come running after her.

"I'm sorry about what I said earlier. It was just a heat of the moment thing…"

Once he caught up to her, he immediately apologized and bowed his head politely. Because of this, Eris' mood stayed in the only "somewhat" lousy range. The boy had escaped a gruesome fate for now—but only barely.

Of course, had he remained conscious after that first punch to bear witness to her rage, he wouldn't have been foolish enough to pursue her in this way.

"My name is Cliff. Cliff Grimor!"

"…I'm Eris." Eris briefly considered using the name Dead End but decided against it. She wasn't going to mention Ruijerd's name to someone she'd flipped out on.

"Eris! That's a wonderful name! From your outfit, I'm guessing you're a swordswoman, yes? Would you like to form a party with me?" Cliff had planted himself right in the middle of the road to blather at her. Eris was sorely tempted to punch him in the face again, but managed to control herself.

"No thanks." She dismissively turned her face aside and started walking again.

To be honest, she wasn't especially accustomed to dealing with this

sort of thing. Rudeus was basically the only other person who'd come back for more after his first beating.

"Oh. All right. In that case, at least let me support you from the rear! Everyone says I'm a budding sage, you know. I'll definitely be useful!"

Had Rudeus been there to witness this desperate full-court press, he likely would have made a comment along the lines of "More like a budding priest, you creepy little virgin!" to himself, at least.

Eris didn't say anything so crude. She did, however, idly wonder how "useful" the boy might prove if she chopped him up for composting.

"I'm sure you've never seen a spellcaster as amazing as me before, Eris," said Cliff with a confident grin. "I'm even better than your average A-ranked magician, as it happens!"

This remark ticked Eris off a little. As far as she was concerned, the most amazing magician in the world was clearly Rudeus Greyrat. Even *Ruijerd* acknowledged his skills. While he was an A-ranked adventurer, there was nothing "average" about him.

"You really owe it to yourself to at least see what I can do!"

All right then, Eris found herself thinking. *Let's see if you're all talk.* "Fine, all right. Follow me."

"Of course!"

And so, Eris and the young magician Cliff set out to slay some monsters.

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In an instant, a great wave of flame consumed seven Goblins at once.

"How do you like that? Pretty amazing, right?" said Cliff, surveying the monsters' corpses with a look of great satisfaction on his face. "Your average magician could never pull *that* one off!"

Eris looked at the remains as well. All of the creatures had been burnt to ashes, meaning there were no ears left to collect.

"You think? I can't say I'm impressed." That really was her honest

opinion. She couldn't have been much *less* impressed, in fact. Cliff had used an Advanced-rank Fire spell called "Exodus Flame." Eris had seen Rudeus cast that one as well. But unlike Cliff, he hadn't rattled off some lengthy incantation first, and his flames had also been more powerful. Of course, Rudeus wouldn't have used a spell like that on that pack of Goblins in the first place. He would have killed them without damaging their ears.

What's more, Eris had kept the monsters occupied until Cliff finished his incantation, giving him a chance to show what he could do; but as he hadn't warned her when he finished, she'd nearly been caught in the radius of his spell. Rudeus *never* would have made such a dangerous blunder.

"Ah, it seems you don't know very much about magic, Eris. You see, there are many different kinds of spells, and…"

Cliff proceeded to give her a lengthy lecture about the various ranks of spells, explaining that the magic he'd just used was an Advanced-tier spell, so complex that even most adults were incapable of casting it.

Eris already knew all of this, of course. She'd learned about it in her lessons with Rudeus. And compared to Cliff's rambling explanations, Rudeus' classes had been ten times easier to understand.

"So? *Now* do you understand just how amazing I am?"

Eris badly wanted to punch this little jerk in the face. He was really putting a damper on her long-awaited day of Goblin-slaying. With her arms still folded, she coldly delivered her verdict. "Okay, I've seen enough. You're not going to be much help, so you can leave now."

Had Rudeus been in Cliff's shoes at this moment, he likely would have chosen to beat a tactical retreat. But Cliff was oblivious to the hostility in Eris' eyes. "Are you serious?! I can't leave you out here alone! You were struggling to kill a handful of Goblins!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Eris hit him. Hard.

Cliff staggered back and clapped a hand to his face. There was blood gushing from his nose. He quickly cast a basic Healing spell on himself to stop the flow. "Hey, what was that for?!"

Eris clicked her tongue in irritation. She'd gone a little easy on him this time, since leaving him unconscious in the middle of an open field wasn't

really an option. Apparently, he needed a little more punishment before he learned his lesson.

Just as she clenched her fist for a follow-up attack, however, Cliff finally seemed to figure out the situation. “Wait, no! I get it! You’re obviously *very* strong, Eris. How about we head over to the forest for a while, then? I can’t really demonstrate my real value as a mage against a bunch of Goblins, after all.”

There were no sinister motives behind this proposal. Cliff just wanted to show off in front of Eris. It wasn’t that he had a crush on her, or even wanted to impress her; he was simply eager to revel in his own power.

“Forests are dangerous,” said Eris curtly. This was something Rudeus was always saying, and Ruijerd agreed with him. She trusted their judgement completely.

“Surely you’re not *scared*, Eris?”

“Of course not!”

But of course, Eris was a simple girl. When you challenged her pride, she’d take the bait every single time. No self-respecting member of the Boreas family would let some novice adventurer talk down to them, after all. “The forest, right? Fine! Let’s go!”

And so, the two of them took a detour to a dark and gloomy wood nearby.

“I guess even the woods aren’t too bad in Millis, huh?”

Eris cut down a monkey-like creature called a Utan as she spoke. This was a D-ranked monster, considerably more dangerous than a Goblin, but it posed no real threat to her.

“I guess not. These things are no match for me!”

Cliff, for his part, was slaying Utans with Intermediate-level Wind spells while steadily pushing further and further into the woods.

“Oh…” Suddenly, Eris stopped dead in her tracks.

“What’s the matter, Eris?” Cliff said, turning back and approaching her with a big smile on his face.

With a grimace, Eris folded her arms, planted her feet shoulder-width apart, and stuck her chin into the air. “Tell me something. Were you keeping track of our route out of here?”

“No, not really.” Cliff hadn’t even thought to pay any mind to that. This whole trip had been an impulsive, spur-of-the-moment thing, so he hadn’t done any planning or preparation beforehand.

“I see. That means we’re lost, then,” said Eris flatly.

Cliff fell silent. After a moment, his face went very pale. “Uh…what should we do?”

Since Eris seemed unperturbed, Cliff assumed she must have some sort of plan. That wasn’t the case, however.

This wasn’t good at all. What would Rudeus and Ruijerd say if they found out she’d gotten herself lost in the woods? How could she explain how she’d even ended up there, when she was supposed to be out hunting Goblins?

Of course, Eris didn’t let her anxiety show. As a woman of the Greyrat family, she was expected to stay calm and composed at all times. “Cliff, shoot yourself up into the sky and see which way the city is.”

“Are you joking? That’s absurd.”

“Rudeus can do it just fine.”

“Rudeus? Who the heck is Rudeus?”

“He’s my tutor.”

“What?!”

Eris let out a small sigh. There was no point getting into an argument right now. What *should* she be doing in a situation like this? Hadn’t Ghislaine taught her what to do if she got lost?

Yeah. You were supposed to gather lots of branches and start a fire, right? The smoke would be visible from a long distance away. But who would see the signal? Ruijerd and Rudeus both had other business to take care of today. They weren’t out looking for her.

Eris folded her arms and begun to scowl. She closed her eyes and tried to think carefully. Ghislaine always said that it was critical to stay calm,

especially when you felt anxious, and so Eris never allowed herself to panic.

"Wh-what do we do, Eris?"

"There are probably a few other adventurers in this forest, right?"

"Oh, of course! We can just ask for help… Let's try to find some!"

Cliff started to run off immediately, but Eris didn't budge. Ruijerd had told her that it was better *not* to move in this sort of situation. He'd taught her to stay still and consciously sharpen her senses. Eris didn't have that convenient third eye of his, but she had her ears and her nose. And she could feel the flow of magic energy in the area. She was still inexperienced in many ways, but she trained every single day.

"Uh, Eris…?"

"Be quiet!"

Her eyes still closed, Eris drew a deep breath and emptied her mind. She listened to the forest. She could hear rustling branches, monsters on the move, the buzz of flying insects…and somewhere in the distance, the faint sounds of combat.

"All right. Follow me." Without a moment's hesitation, Eris began to walk once again.

"What's going on?!" said Cliff, hurrying after her. "Did you notice something?!"

"There're other people here, all right. They're over this way."

"How can you know that?!"

"I sharpened my senses for a while."

"Did your teacher show you how to do that too?!"

Eris had to think about that one for a second. Was Ruijerd her teacher? Probably so. He'd taught her many things, if not quite as many as Ghislaine. She could probably even call him her current master. "Yeah, that's right."

"This Rudeus must really be something…"

"Hm…? Yeah, Rudeus is incredible."

A bit confused as to why the subject had changed so suddenly, Eris forged on ahead.

Just as the two of them reached the edge of the forest, they spotted a carriage lying on its side in the middle of the ruts its wheels had made.

"Get down!"

"Ack!"

Eris seized Cliff by the head and pushed him to the ground, then dropped low next to him to observe the situation.

Six people were still on their feet at this point. One was a fully armored and helmeted knight, standing with their back against a tree and their sword drawn. The other five were men clad all in black, positioned in a semi-circle around this lone warrior.

Three corpses lay in the grass nearby. All of them wore the same armor as the encircled knight. Slowly but steadily, the men in black were moving closer to their prey.

This battle was already lost. But for some reason, the knight made no move to flee. Looking more closely, Eris realized there was a young girl cowering at the base of the tree behind the armored warrior—a girl whose face was full of terror and shining with tears.

"That armor… That's a Temple Knight, Eris!" Cliff whispered.

Eris' heart was pounding now. She knew about the Temple Knights. They were one of Millis' three holy military orders. The elite Cathedral Knights were entrusted with matters of national defense. The Missionary Knights were dispatched abroad as mercenaries of sorts, so that they might spread the teachings of the Millis Church and demonstrate its power. And the much-feared Temple Knights, with their infamous Inquisitors, were tasked with stamping out heresy.

The Cathedral Knights wore white, the Missionary Knights silver, and the Temple Knights cerulean. Even at a distance, the cornered knight's armor was very clearly blue. There was no room for doubt. It was a group of Temple Knights that had been ambushed here.

"You fools! Don't you know who this lady is?!"

It was only when the cornered knight shouted these words that Cliff and Eris realized she was a woman.

The black-clad men glanced at each other and snorted with laughter.

“Of course we do.”

“Then why would you seek to harm her?!”

“Shouldn’t that be obvious?”

“Are you lackeys of the Pope, then?! Damnable brutes!”

Eris couldn’t make much sense of this conversation. But one thing was very clear to her: Those menacing black-clad men were going to kill that terrified little girl. She reached for the sword at her hip.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Cliff hissed. “We can’t get mixed up in this! That girl’s the Blessed Child who’s supposedly a potential future Pope, all right? That means those men in black are the current Pope’s personal assassins! They’re well-trained and ruthless. Even I wouldn’t stand a chance against them!”

Eris didn’t even pause to wonder why Cliff knew so much about all this. There was only one thing on her mind right now: Unless she intervened, that girl was going to die before her eyes.

Eris was a member of Dead End in her own right. If she sat back and watched a child be murdered, she’d never be able to look Ruijerd in the eye again. And more than once, she’d seen Rudeus put himself in danger for very similar reasons.

“Come on. Let’s just stay quiet and hope they don’t notice us…”

“Sorry, but that’s pointless. They already know we’re here.” One of the black-clad men had noticed their presence the moment she pushed Cliff to the ground. Eris hadn’t overlooked his slight reaction.

She didn’t know exactly what they would do once their mission was accomplished, but it hardly really mattered. She intended to take the initiative here and now. “You just hide back here, Cliff!”

“Eris! No!”

Drawing her sword, Eris leapt forward at the assassins.

The black-clad men immediately scattered, but… “Too slow!”

Eris moved *far* more quickly than they had anticipated. Her lead attack was the Advanced-tier Sword God Style technique “Silent Sword”—a move of less complexity than the “Sword of Light,” but deadly in its own right. Her

sword whipped through the air without the slightest sound.

In the course of her training with Ghislaine and Ruijerd, her swordplay skills had been polished to a remarkable degree. Her blade took one of the men at the shoulder, sliced diagonally through his ribcage, and cut him in two.

Although this was the first time Eris had killed anyone, she didn't falter even for an instant. Her focus had already shifted to her next target. The black-clad men were moving quickly to surround her, but Eris was a step faster than any of them. Ruijerd had lectured her about the proper way to move when surrounded by multiple enemies. Many monsters hunted in packs; your goal was to pick them off rapidly before they could encircle you.

"Haaah!" In the blink of an eye, Eris cut down another of the assassins.

The three remaining men were visibly unnerved. This girl's movements were erratic, and her attacks came from unexpected angles with no warning. It was all but impossible to dodge them while also trying to do anything else.

Still, these were professional killers. In the moment it took Eris to kill their comrade, they had successfully encircled her. Two of the assassins leapt toward Eris almost simultaneously, deliberately staggering their attacks.

They were fast, but not as fast as Ruijerd. They weren't as perfectly coordinated as the Pax Coyotes of the Demon Continent, either.

These men weren't quite good enough.

"There's poison on their daggers! Watch yourself!" Shouting words of warning, the knight who'd been defending the little girl rushed forward to take a swing at one of the assassins from behind.

Eris accurately anticipated how the black-clad men would react to this, and found her chance to break free of their encirclement. In the very instant she realized she was going to win this fight, her sword cut through a third assassin.

"Damn! Retreat!"

The two remaining men spun around sharply and began to run. But Eris was never one to leave a job half-finished. In a heartbeat, she caught up with one and savagely slashed into him from behind, disemboweling him. His entrails spilled across the ground as he fell.

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The last assassin didn't look back. By the time Eris turned to him, he'd already vanished into the distance.

With a small snort of disdain, she vigorously flicked her sword to throw the blood and gore off its blade. From all appearances, she was as calm as ever. But her heart was still pounding rapidly in her chest. She'd just experienced her first life-or-death battle against other human beings. For the first time ever, she'd killed someone.

What's more, her opponents had wielded poisoned daggers—even a single scratch might have proven fatal. And Rudeus and Ruijerd hadn't been around to watch her back, either. She'd jumped into the fray without too much thought, but if it wasn't for that woman knight, she might have died.

Naturally, Eris kept these thoughts completely to herself. Sheathing her sword, she turned to face the armored Temple Knight. "Sorry. One of them got away."

These words left the knight somewhat dumbfounded. The girl standing before her wasn't even a full-grown adult, but she'd cut her way through a deadly group of killers. And she seemed totally unfazed, to boot.

Without even removing her helmet, the woman pressed her fist to her stomach and bowed in the style of the Millis Holy Knights. "My sincerest thanks for your assistance."

Eris found herself remembering how Ruijerd answered words like these, and decided to follow his example. Making no bow of her own, she said "I'm glad the child's unharmed" and nothing more.

"I am Therese Latria of the Temple Knights. I assume you're an adventurer, miss? Might I ask your name?"

"I'm Er—"

Eris began to give her real name, but then stopped short. That wasn't right. What did Rudeus always do in these situations?

"I'm Dead End Ruijerd. Believe it or not, I'm actually a Superd."

Beneath her helmet, Therese's face went taut. Although Eris wasn't aware of this, the Temple Knights as a whole advocated for the expulsion of all demonkind from the Millis Continent.

Of course, Eris lacked all the distinctive features of a true Superd. It

only took a moment for Therese to relax once again. This girl had given her a clearly false name and assumed the identity of a demon that the Temple Knights would view with hostility. This seemed to be a message that she had no interest in any further involvement with them or this affair.

In other words, she expected no reward, despite having saved the life of an important personage. Therese found this pleasantly surprising. “I see. Very well, then…”

For a moment, she paused to study Eris as the girl glared at her with folded arms. Once she’d memorized her face, she whistled loudly.

Before long, a horse came running out of the forest.

This was the animal that had been pulling their carriage previously. It fled when the carriage was overturned, but now returned at Therese’s call just as it was trained to do. After lifting her young charge onto its back, Therese jumped up behind her.

“Should you ever have need of assistance, ask for Therese of the Temple Knights!”

With those final words, the lady knight set off at a gallop. Eris watched her go without a word.

Back in the shadows, a certain young man—still unable even to stand—was also watching. And to his eyes, the fleeing knight and the fearless red-headed swordswoman who saw her off looked like nothing less than characters from a fairy tale.

Some time ago, a prelate of the Millis Church fell in love with a woman of the Hobbit race. The woman bore him a son, and in time, that boy grew up and took a wife of his own. Cliff was this couple’s first and only child.

At the time of Cliff’s birth, various factions within the church were engaged in a vicious power struggle. The violence cost both of his parents their lives. In order to keep Cliff at a safe distance from the conflict, his grandfather—the prelate—temporarily left him with the orphanage in Millishion. He proceeded to triumph over his enemies, take the papacy for his own, and bring Cliff back into his household.

In other words, Cliff Grimor was the true grandson of the current Pope of Millis…although few, even within the Church, were aware of that fact.

Because of this, Cliff knew perfectly well why that carriage had been attacked. That Blessed Child, said to possess miraculous powers, was the most powerful tool in the arsenal of a certain archbishop. And that archbishop's faction was currently in active conflict with Cliff's grandfather.

Cliff had met the girl before, in fact. He had no idea what she'd been doing out by that forest; but he *was* familiar with the black-clad assassins who'd attacked her. Those men were among his instructors. He'd known for some time now that they carried out these sorts of jobs for his grandfather. He also knew just how powerful they were. He had sparred against them many times, but never once come close to winning. And yet, they hadn't stood a chance against Eris.

In reality, the fight had been a very close call indeed. But the way Cliff saw it, this girl had totally overpowered a group of men he never could have bested in a million years. As they walked back to down, he found himself staring at her weary face with deep and genuine admiration.

This girl was going to be *someone* before too long.

With that thought firmly cemented in his mind, Cliff blurted out an impulsive offer. "Eris, will you marry me?!"

"What?! Not a chance!" She shot him down instantly. With an awful grimace on her face, no less.

It seemed bizarre to Cliff that any girl would turn down a proposal from someone as profoundly talented as himself, so he began to search for an explanation. He thought back over all their conversations. After a moment, he recalled her mentioning a certain "teacher" several times. What was he called again? Ru… Ru…

"Rudeus."

Eris turned at the sound of that name.

"That's your teacher's name, right? What's he like?"

Within minutes, Cliff would come to curse himself for ever asking this question. He'd gotten the impression that Eris wasn't very talkative, but that clearly wasn't the case. Once you got her started on this Rudeus person, she

would proudly babble on indefinitely. She kept going all the way from the plains outside Millishion to the Adventurers' Guild. Everything she said was an effusive compliment, and the expression on her face made the intensity of her feelings very plain. It was more than enough to make Cliff deeply jealous.

"I'm going to head back home now," he finally interrupted, aware that his expression was probably rather sullen at the moment.

Eris had seemed ready to keep talking for another hour or two, but now she just waved her hand in a vague, disinterested gesture. "Oh, okay. Bye." It was hard to believe she was the same girl who'd been speaking so passionately about her tutor only seconds earlier.

Cliff silently watched her walk off until she disappeared from view. Who *was* this "Rudeus" who'd so totally enchanted that powerful, beautiful, and flawless girl?

With visions of a mysterious rival floating through his mind, the young mage returned to the headquarters of the Millis Church, where he received a harsh talking-to from the people who'd been searching for him.

Incidentally, the power struggle inside the Church quickly intensified in the aftermath of the incident with the Blessed Child. The Pope soon decided it was too dangerous for his grandson to remain in Millishion, so Cliff was sent off to live in a foreign land. But of course, none of this had anything to do with Eris.

As for Eris herself, she basically forgot about the whole encounter the moment she returned to the inn and saw Rudeus sitting miserably on his bed. But that, too, would be an entirely separate story.

Chapter 7:
To the Central Continent

After two months on the road, our party finally reached the city of West Port. Its streets looked very similar to those of Zant Port, the northern coastal city. It was, however, considerably larger.

The route between the capitals of the Holy Country of Millis and the Kingdom of Asura was a crucial artery of commerce. Many towns along its length served as bases of operation for merchants and traders; West Port was one of the more prominent.

While it couldn't compare to Millishion's Commercial District, a number of enterprises had their headquarters here, and the city's streets were packed with their subsidiary shops and businesses.

Now that we'd made it this far, it was time to say goodbye to our horse and carriage.

In this world, there were no ferries that would carry land vehicles across bodies of water for you. Just like when we left the Demon Continent, we needed to sell off our means of transportation here and then buy a new one on the other side.

Unlike that charming lizard, I hadn't gotten too attached to our horse, so I decided to give it a name at the very end. *Farewell, faithful Landbiscuit.*

Once we'd sold off our friend, we headed straight over to the checkpoint. This proved to be a very large building, unlike the one in Wind Port. There were even soldiers in helmets and armor standing outside the entrance.

Fully armored knights had been a pretty common sight in the streets of Millishion as well. At a glance, their equipment appeared to be very sturdy, but when I thought about what Eris or Ruijerd could do, I wondered if it would serve much purpose. The people and monsters of this world tended to pack some serious firepower. One hit might be enough to smash off your fancy suit of armor and leave you in your boxer shorts. Hell, the knockback might even send you falling down a pit for an instant game over…

Okay, sorry. I'll stop now.

Entering the customs building, we found it packed with people. Many of them seemed to be adventurers, and many others were dressed like merchants. A number of alert-looking clerks were briskly processing their requests. It was a world of difference from Wind Port, where the office had been mostly empty and the staff apathetic at best.

I walked up to the nearest open counter. "Hello there."

"Hello. How can I help you today?"

Once again, I found myself facing a receptionist with impressively large breasts. In this world, there seemed to be some sort of unwritten rule that clerks had to be stacked. Not that I made any comments to that effect, of course.

"Uhm, I'm looking to secure my party passage across the sea."

"All right. Please take this, then." The woman handed me a small wooden card with the number 34 engraved on it. This was evidently quite the bureaucratic operation they had going here.

I headed back to the waiting area and took a seat. Eris dropped down in the chair next to me, but Ruijerd stayed on his feet. When I took a look around, there seemed to be plenty of other people waiting for their number to be called as well. "Hmm. This seems like it might take a while."

"Aren't you going to give them the letter?" asked Ruijerd.

I shook my head. "Not until they call our number."

"Well, if you say so."

Eris was already a little fidgety. Understandable, since waiting patiently wasn't exactly her specialty. After a moment, though, she muttered "Rudeus, I think someone's looking at me…"

I looked around the room more carefully this time, trying to spot the person she was talking about. As it turned out, it was the guards. Many of them were shooting brief glances over in Eris' direction; and she was glaring right back, of course.

"Please don't start a fight with them, Eris."

"I wasn't planning on it."

That was somewhat difficult to believe. In any case, you had to wonder why they were looking her way. No plausible explanation really came to mind. Were they just captivated by her beauty? Nah. Eris was definitely growing prettier by the day, but she was still a kid. Unless all of the knights working here were pedo scumbags, that couldn't be what was going on here.

"Number thirty-four, please come forward."

Anyway, they'd finally called our number, so I stood up and headed to the counter.

I explained to the receptionist that we wanted to book passage to the Central Continent, and then handed over Ruijerd's letter. She took it from me with a polite smile, but when she looked at the name written on the envelope, her expression grew somewhat dubious.

"Wait just a minute, please." With that, she stood up and walked off into the rear of the building.

After a little while, I heard a loud thump, and the sound of someone shouting. An armored soldier soon hurried out from the back, approached another guard, and whispered something in his ear. That guard proceeded to run out of the office with a very serious expression on his face.

All this struck me as somewhat ominous. I'd handed over that letter because I trusted Ruijerd, but maybe it would have been smarter to do a bit more digging on that Gash Broche character.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

The receptionist from before had returned. Her businesslike smile couldn't hide the tension on her face. "Duke Bakshiel says he'll see you now."

I had an extremely bad feeling about this.

"I am Duke Bakshiel von Wieser, director of the Millis Continental Customs Office."

This hog bore a strong resemblance to a pig.

Whoops, my mistake. This *man* bore a strong resemblance to a pig.

His neck was so enormously fat that his chin had disappeared

completely. His light blond hair was plastered to his forehead, and there were huge bags underneath his eyes. He had the face of a crafty, nasty old man.

He was also scowling at us with open hostility.

I'd seen a guy a lot like this way back in the day…every time I looked into the mirror.

"Hmph. To think some filthy demon would be brazen enough to bring me a letter like this…"

Duke Bakshiel was seated in a luxurious leather chair, which he didn't seem inclined to leave. It squeaked underneath him as he tapped the piece of paper in his hand with a pen. There were countless pieces of paper on his expensive-looking desk. Among them, I spotted a familiar envelope, now torn open. Presumably, he was holding its contents.

"You certainly chose an impressive name, I'll give you that. And that seal looked *very* real, as well. But I wasn't born yesterday, my friends! This is obviously a fake!"

Bakshiel tossed the letter carelessly over at us. I reached out on reflex and caught it.

***

This man is of the Superd. Nonetheless, I owe him a great debt.

He is a man of few words, but noble in character.

Waive all customary fees and see him safely to the Central Continent.

—Galgard Nash Vennik,
Commander of the Missionary Knights

***

One look at the name at the bottom left my head spinning. What happened to Gash Broche? Who was this Galgard Nash Vennik guy?

It took a few seconds for me to realize that you could shorten "Galgard Nash" to "Gash." Maybe he was the kind of guy who introduced himself

using a nickname? Ruijerd might have gotten the impression that he really was just named Gash. Although that didn't explain the "Broche" part, of course.

More importantly, though… "Commander of the Missionary Knights"?! Was he seriously the leader of one of the three holy military orders?! This was giving me a serious headache. Why would Ruijerd's old acquaintance be such a major figure?

It did make sense, though, in some ways. The commander of the Missionary Knights had to be pretty high-ranking in the Millis hierarchy, right? It might not go over well if everyone knew a guy like that was friends with a Superd. Maybe that was why he'd used a false name.

Of course, there were simpler explanations for that too. It had been forty years since Ruijerd first met the man. Maybe he'd married into a powerful family and changed his name or something.

"In the first place, there's not a chance that close-mouthed man would write a letter like this. I know him well, and I know that he *detests* putting pen to paper, even when it's simply necessary. Do you really expect me to believe he wrote this on behalf of some lowly demon? What a farce."

Ruijerd listened to all this silently with a conflicted expression on his face. This man was asserting flat-out that his letter was a fake simply because he was a Superd—or so it likely seemed to him. And he might not be entirely wrong about that, to be honest. Paul had warned me that this Duke Bakshiel was famous for his hatred of all demonkind.

Surely this Gash, or Galgard, was aware of that as well, right? If he knew what Bakshiel was like, he really should have written a slightly more thorough explanation.

Was the man not really who he claimed to be, then?

No, no. Remember what Ruijerd told you.

He'd met Gash in a building big enough that he compared it to Kishirisu Castle. That would be very large for a home or mansion, but what if it was the headquarters of the Missionary Knights? That would likely be a large building, with many knights inside it at all times…and if Gash was the commander, all of those knights would be his subordinates. That would explain why Ruijerd said he had "many men."

Of course, figuring all that out wasn't particularly helpful at the moment. Duke Bakshiel had already made up his mind that this letter was a fake. Since things had come this far, saying "Yes, it's a fake! Sorry about that!" wasn't going to end well for us.

I took a step forward. "In other words, you believe this letter to be a forgery, sir?"

"Who are you supposed to be?" said Bakshiel, looking at me suspiciously. "I don't have time to prattle with children."

Wow. This was kind of a new feeling, in a way. It had been a long time since anyone was this condescending to me, you know? When I wanted to be treated like a child, people treated me like a grownup. But when I wanted to be treated like a grownup, people treated me like a child. What a nuisance.

Keeping these thoughts to myself, I put my right hand to my chest and bowed in the style of the Asuran nobility. "My apologies, sir. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Rudeus Greyrat."

Bakshiel's brow twitched slightly. "Rudeus…Greyrat, you say?"

"That's correct. While I blush to admit it, I am a small, unworthy part of the same Greyrat clan that is counted among Asura's high nobility."

"Hrm. But the Greyrat families use the names of the ancient wind gods to distinguish themselves, do they not?"

"That is true, sir. I belong to a branch family, and therefore have no right to use one." The instant the words "branch family" left my mouth, I could see the caution in Bakshiel's eyes give way to disdain. But before he could say anything, I indicated Eris with the palm of my hand. "However, Lady Eris here is a trueborn member of the Boreas Greyrat family."

When I clapped her lightly on the back, Eris took a step forward as well. She looked at me in surprise for a moment, but didn't panic.

At first, she folded her arms and spread her feet to shoulder-width, but quickly realized that wasn't right. Her second impulse was to reach for the edges of her skirt so she could curtsy; unfortunately, she wasn't wearing a skirt. She finally settled on putting her hand to her chest and bowing as I had.

"I am Eris Boreas Greyrat, daughter of Philip Boreas Greyrat. A pleasure to acquaint you, sir."

Her delivery was a little stiff. Also, I felt like she'd messed up that last bit.

I glanced over at Bakshiel's face. It was hard to tell how he was taking this, but…whatever. We'd just have to lean hard on the influence of Eris' family here.

"Hmph. And what is the daughter of an Asuran noble doing here, pray tell?"

That was certainly the obvious question at this point. Fortunately, there was no need for us to answer it with anything but the truth. "Sir, are you familiar with the calamity that befell the Fittoa Region some two years ago?"

"Of course. Many Asurans were teleported all around the world, as I understand."

"That's correct. The young lady and myself were two of those affected."

As I explained it to Bakshiel, I had escorted Eris all the way across the Demon Continent with Ruijerd as our hired bodyguard. When crossing over to the Millis Continent, we'd barely managed to afford the voyage by selling all our assets, but we didn't have enough funds to pay for the journey from Millis to the Central Continent. In particular, the cost for Ruijerd's passage was simply too high.

Accordingly, we'd turned to Sir Galgard for help, as he both was an old acquaintance of the Greyrat family and a personal friend of Ruijerd's. He had been kind enough to write us a letter.

This story wasn't quite the truth, of course. But it felt close enough.

"The young lady may be dressed as an adventurer at the moment, but that's solely because we didn't want any ruffians realizing that she's of noble birth. I'm sure you can understand the potential dangers, Duke Bakshiel."

"I see," said Bakshiel, the expression on his face still sour. "So that's how it is. You're in league with that 'Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad' that's been causing no end of trouble in Millishion recently, are you?"

"Uh…what? No, no. What are you talking about, sir?"

"I've never heard the name Eris Boreas Greyrat before," said Bakshiel with a distinctly swine-like snort. "However, I *am* familiar with a certain Paul

Greyrat—a thuggish little man who's supposedly taken to stealing slaves by force."

Oh, lovely. Daddy's got a real reputation.

"Let me make sure I understand you, Duke Bakshiel. You believe that Sir Galgard's letter is a forgery and Lady Eris is not truly a member of the Asuran nobility, yes? And you take us for mere lackeys of this worthless lecher Paul Greyrat, who drinks all day, lashes out at his own son, has smelly feet, and causes his poor daughter no end of worry?"

"Indeed."

Honestly now, what a terrible thing to say. Paul was trying his best out there. To be sure, he had his flaws, and some of his methods might be less than perfect. But to dismiss him as "worthless"? Now that was just offensive!

"May I ask why you concluded that the seal on our letter was inauthentic?" I said, pointing to the envelope on Bakshiel's desk.

The man frowned slightly and nodded. "It's not uncommon for forgeries of the Missionary Knight's seal to circulate on the black market."

Really? That was the first I'd heard of it. "And why do you think that my employer, Lady Eris, is not who she claims to be?"

"Pah. Did you really expect me to believe this rustic boor of a swordswoman was the daughter of an Asuran noble?"

I glanced over at Eris, who'd assumed her usual cross-armed pose. While her arms weren't marked by any scars, they were tanned and more tightly muscular than your average young adventurer's. Not exactly what you'd expect from a sheltered little princess, to be sure.

"Ah," I said with a small snort of laughter. "It appears you're not familiar with Sir Sauros, then."

"Sauros? You mean the lord of the Fittoa Region?"

Apparently he recognized *that* name, at least. Good. "I do. He's also Eris' grandfather, and the man who chose to nurture her talents with the sword from a young age."

"What? Why would he do such a thing?"

"This is something of a family secret, but…it was decided some time

ago that Lady Eris would marry into the Notos family. And Sir Sauros detests the current head of that house."

"I see."

Just to be perfectly clear, I was implying that Eris had been trained into a savage little warrior so that she might one day murder the head of the Notos family in his bedroom. Fortunately, Eris seemed puzzled by my words. If she'd understood what I was saying, I would probably have lost a few teeth at this point.

"For that reason, among others, the young lady must return to Asura. Should you insist that she's an impostor, we'll simply have to turn back to Millishion and file an appeal with the appropriate authorities."

I had no idea who those appropriate authorities would even be in this case, of course. It wasn't something I'd bothered looking into.

"Hmph. If you want me to believe all this, then show me some sort of proof."

"Sir Galgard's letter is surely proof enough."

"This is absurd. You're arguing in circles."

"So what if I am? Look, Duke Bakshiel, do you really want to make an enemy of the Asuran Greyrat family?" *Crap. I don't even know what I'm saying anymore.*

Fortunately, the threat I'd blurted out did seem to have some sort of an effect, judging from how sharply Duke Bakshiel was glaring at me.

"Very well then. I'll permit you and the young lady to book passage, then."

"But our guard—"

"By my authority as a duke, I will assign a few knights to escort you. Surely that would be preferable to the protection of this…demon."

Compared to granting a demon passage, Bakshiel preferred to loan us a couple of his own men. He seemed stubbornly determined not to let Ruijerd through, no matter what. I hadn't seen this sort of thing with my own eyes before, but the discrimination against demonkind on this continent was evidently worse than I'd imagined.

What options did we even have at this point? Should we just try to arrange passage for Ruijerd separately? I could easily see that resulting in another bloody battle against a group of smugglers. It really didn't feel too appealing…

But just as I was considering my response, there was a sharp knock at the door.

"What is it? I'm in the middle of something," said Bakshiel, looking a bit suspicious.

The person outside didn't wait for permission to enter. The door swung open, and a blond woman in blue armor stepped into the room.

"Pardon me. I was told that a certain 'Dead End Ruijerd' was in here."

"…Mother?"

It was *Zenith*.

"Huh?!"

Everyone else in the room turned in unison to look at her.

The woman stared down at me, looking somewhat miffed. "I'm a single woman. I don't have any children, let alone one as old as you."

Say what? Come on now, Mom. Did you lose your memory since the last time I saw you? Oh, maybe she just got sick of Paul's nonsense…

As I looked more closely at the woman, though, I began to notice a few details in which she differed from my mother. After years apart, I couldn't remember Zenith perfectly…but the shape of this woman's face and the color of her hair were very subtly different. It wasn't her after all. "I'm sorry. My mother's missing, and you look a great deal like her."

"…I see."

Great. Now she was looking at me with pity in her eyes. Maybe she'd pegged me as a lonely lost child or something. People didn't treat me like a kid too often these days, but I still *looked* like one, at least.

With a snort, Duke Bakshiel glared at the armored woman. "Well, if it isn't our freshly-demoted Temple Knight. Did you need something from me?"

"A Superd has appeared in Millis territory. Any diligent member of my

order would come running at that news."

"You don't assume your post here for another ten days. Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Where it doesn't belong? What a strange thing to say, Duke Bakshiel. To be sure, I haven't yet officially assumed my duties here, but my predecessor has already departed for Millishion. When problems arise at a checkpoint, it's the Temple Knights' responsibility to address them, correct? And yet I seem to be the only Temple Knight in this room. Would you care to explain that?"

This diatribe left the man at a loss for words. He stammered slightly, his face a bit pale.

"A team of two leaders should oversee the defense of every customs post. That is an ironclad rule established by the Millis Church, Duke Bakshiel. Surely you don't intend to defy it?"

"Of course not. I only thought… Well, you've only just arrived here. Why not take a few days to relax and grow accustomed to the city?"

"That won't be necessary."

From the look on Duke Piggy's face, you might have thought he was in line to be slaughtered. I was *really* going to enjoy the next time I got to eat some pork.

"Now then. Could you explain what was being discussed here?"

All in all, it seemed like this lady knight was on equal footing with Bakshiel here. Normally a duke would be at the very top of the aristocratic pecking order, but in the Holy Country of Millis, the Church was extremely powerful in its own right. That system probably had something to do with this.

"Well, as it happens…"

Duke Bakshiel proceeded to summarize the situation. At times, he threw in remarks based solely on his own assumptions, so I had to interject with a few corrections.

The knight listened to the whole story in silence, then looked over our party.

“Hm. That man certainly is a demon, isn’t he…?”

She narrowed her eyes while studying Ruijerd, but as she turned to Eris, her expression instantly softened.

Finally, she met my gaze…and put a hand to her chin thoughtfully.

“Young man, you thought I was your mother, yes? Might I ask her name?”

“It’s Zenith. Zenith Greyrat.”

“And your father’s?”

I glanced over at Bakshiel. Man, this was going to be awkward…

“Paul Greyrat.”

Understandably enough, the duke’s eyes went wide. I’d just have to insist that my father was a totally different person, not that scumbag back in Millishion. *My* daddy was basically a saint. He’d even give you money if you punched him a few times.

“I see,” murmured the knight. And then, for some reason, she squatted down and wrapped her arms around me.

“Huh?!” This came as something of a surprise, to say the least.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through…” Not only was she hugging me, now she was stroking my head as well.

This wasn’t the softest of embraces, thanks to that thick armor she had on, but at least I was getting a nice whiff of feminine fragrance. Naturally, my little buddy downstairs…didn’t even twitch. Huh.

What’s the matter, my boy? I thought you loved the smell of a slightly sweaty woman. Why, just the other day it only took one whiff of Eris to get you going…

Glancing over at the young lady in question, I found her staring at us with her eyes wide open and her hands clenched into fists. Talk about terrifying.

“Um…miss?”

After patting me on the head a few times, the knight rose to her feet once again. And instead of looking in my direction, she turned back to face

Duke Bakshiel. “I’ll take these three under my personal protection.”

“What?!” sputtered Bakshiel. “One of them is a *demon*, woman!”

Keeping him in the corner of her eye, the knight snatched Ruijerd’s letter from my hands and quickly looked it over. “This letter is authentic, incidentally. I recognize Sir Galgard’s handwriting when I see it.”

“Would you ignore the teachings of the Millis Church completely? What sort of Temple Knight are you?”

At this point, Eris let out a little “Oh!” The lady knight turned toward her for a moment and winked.

…I was starting to feel completely lost.

“I’m a captain of the Shield Company. And I’m quite serious about this.”

“Pah! A captain demoted for losing her entire unit!”

“Hmph. Aren’t your own circumstances *somewhat* similar? No, my mistake. I at least completed my mission, whereas you simply abandoned your duty.”

Duke Bakshiel ground his teeth together and growled. From the sound of things, he’d been sent here as some sort of punishment as well. Once you knew that little detail, his grand title actually seemed more pathetic than intimidating. There was something like real hatred in his eyes now.

“Look, woman. I don’t care how powerful your family is. This sort of insolence will not—”

Bakshiel wasn’t able to finish his sentence. Halfway through it, the knight had bowed her head to him.

“I apologize. My words were uncalled for. Since I’ve been assigned here, I have no desire to put myself in conflict with you. However, this particular matter was of personal significance for me. I hope you’ll forgive my rudeness.”

It was seriously impressive timing. She’d fired off everything she wanted to say, but then apologized at once. You could see the anger on Bakshiel’s face fading. I’d have to try and imitate her next time I really pissed someone off.

“Personal significance?”

“Yes,” said the knight, with a small nod to her dubious colleague. She then dropped a hand onto my shoulder.

“This boy is my nephew, you see.”

Pardon?!

***

Therese Latria was the fourth-born daughter of the Latria family, a cornerstone of the Millis nobility. She was also a highly promising knight who’d won the rank of captain in the Temple Knights at a remarkably young age.

Count Latria was her father. And Zenith Greyrat was her sister.

One he learned that I was a blood relative of Therese, Duke Bakshiel’s face took on a resigned expression. With a reluctant sigh, he agreed to waive the fare for my party’s passage to the Central Continent.

At the moment, I was in an inn in West Port, wrapped in Therese’s arms.

Only Eris, Therese, and myself were in the room at the moment. Perhaps sensing it might make things awkward if he stayed, Ruijerd had slipped away for the moment. “You know, Rudeus, my sister told me all about you in her letters.”

“Did she really? What did she say about me?”

“That you’re adorable, mainly. I can’t say that was the first word that came to mind when I saw you in that office, but now I get it. You’re cute as a button, all right!” Even as she spoke, Therese was nuzzling her face affectionately against the back of my neck.

This was a bit of an unusual experience for me. Over the last thirteen years, quite a few people had described me as “creepy,” “impudent,” or “suspicious,” but Zenith had to be the only one who’d ever called me *cute*.

In any case…despite the fact that I was currently being embraced by a

beautiful woman with large breasts, for some strange reason the railgun between my legs wasn't ready to fire off any coins.

Was that just because she was my relative?

"Therese, can you let go of Rudeus already?"

Eris watched us with her chin propped on one hand, drumming her fingers irritably against the table. Was this a bit of jealousy, perhaps? It wasn't easy being such a playboy…

"I can understand how you feel, Miss Eris, but there's no telling when I'll see Rudeus again. And by the time we're reunited, he'll most likely have lost all vestiges of the cuteness he now possesses. My sincerest apologies, but I'd like to make some memories with him while I can." Therese proceeded to nuzzle me even more vigorously than before, showing no signs of contrition whatsoever.

"Can I ask why you're speaking so politely to Eris?"

"Because I owe her my life."

Now *that* piqued my interest.

On the day Eris went out to hunt Goblins near Millishion, she'd apparently rescued Therese from a group of assassins who'd surrounded her. Therese had been on duty defending a certain "important personage" at the time; if Eris hadn't shown up when she did, both Therese and her charge would have lost their lives.

This was all news to me. When I looked over at Eris, she had a slightly embarrassed expression on her face. "Sorry. I forgot to tell you about any of this…"

From what Eris told me, once she got back to the inn and saw how depressed I was, she'd forgotten all about everything else that had taken place that day. It was basically my fault, huh? In that case, I couldn't really complain.

Therese was still petting me like crazy, incidentally. Since she was sitting behind me, it was hard to say for sure, but I'd bet the woman had a pretty blissful expression on her face. It was definitely kind of awkward. I mean, I had a lady pressing her breasts against me and I wasn't remotely excited. It was a very…unfamiliar feeling.

“Seriously, though. You are just *too* cute, Rudeus. I could just eat you up!”

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“Sorry, does that mean you want to sleep with me?”

Therese’s response to this modest attempt at humor was to cover my mouth with her hand. “You’re definitely cuter when you stay quiet. Hearing you talk brings Paul Greyrat to mind.”

It seemed as if my aunt wasn’t a big fan of my dad. Petting me like a puppy, she went ahead and changed the subject.

“Anyway…Commander Gash never changes, huh? He *must* have known how Duke Bakshiel would react to a letter like that, but he went ahead and wrote it anyway.”

Galgard Nash Vennik was, in fact, the man in command of the Missionary Knights of Millis. This order was essentially a mercenary force that dispatched young knights to turbulent regions of the world, where they could gain real combat experience while also spreading the teachings of the Millis Church. At present, they were in between campaigns, and had returned to Millis to bolster their ranks with new recruits.

Ruijerd’s buddy Gash, a.k.a. Galgard, had been their leader for some time now. He’d survived a disastrous expedition to the Demon Continent as a young knight, and in the decades since, he’d reshaped his order into the strongest force it had ever been. He was a brusque and quiet man who rarely so much as smiled, but he was also known for his fairness and impartiality towards even the worst of villains.

In Millis, no one was considered to be a full-fledged knight until they’d experienced at least one expedition with the Missionary Knights. These campaigns were often highly dangerous. But with Gash in charge, more than ninety percent of the young knights dispatched now returned alive. This was the reason many hailed him as the greatest commander the order had ever known. Every knight in the three holy military orders respected Gash deeply. Many even owed him their lives.

“Of course, he’s also famous for writing little and saying less.”

On the battlefield, he would snap off orders quickly and precisely, but at most other times he was too apathetic to even return an officer’s greeting. He almost never wrote letters of any kind, and merely rubber-stamped reports that others wrote. So few people had ever seen his handwriting that fake documents routinely circulated in his name.

Ruijerd had described him as a talkative and passionate man. But of course, Ruijerd was pretty close-mouthed himself. Maybe his standards for "talkative" differed from ours…or maybe Gash just acted differently around him.

"Okay, look," interrupted Eris. "Are you *ever* going to let go of him?"

I could see the girl was about five seconds from snapping at this point, so I finally slipped out of Therese's grasp.

"Aww…my nice warm Rudeus…" My aunt looked mildly heartbroken, but I wasn't her body pillow. And it's not like I was really enjoying the experience, anyway.

"Come here, Rudeus!"

Just as ordered, I sat down next to Eris. She promptly grabbed hold of my hand.

"Um…"

Within seconds, the girl was blushing to the tips of her ears. Staring at the side of her face as she glared forward, I couldn't help smiling.

Therese, on the other hand, was busy punching a pillow on the bed. Understandable, but why not punch the wall instead? That's much more satisfying, in my experience.

"Hah…enjoy your youth while you have it, kids." Therese shook her head with a sigh, then looked at us with a more serious expression. "Right. There's one thing I wanted to warn you about, Rudeus. It might not matter too much, since you're about to leave Millis, but I think you need to be aware of it."

She paused for a moment after this long lead-in, and then continued firmly: "You'd be smarter not to mention the word Superd within this country's borders."

"Why's that?"

"One of the Millis Church's older teachings holds that demonkind should be totally expelled."

Specifically, this meant that all demons should be driven from the Millis Continent. It was currently something of a dead doctrine that few took

seriously, but the Temple Knights were still striving to put it into practice. And of course, the Superd were particularly infamous, even among the demonic races. If word got around about one moving through Millis, the Knights would come after him with everything they had—even if he wasn't really what he claimed to be.

"Given everything that he's done for you and Eris, I have to make an exception in his case. But ordinarily, I wouldn't have overlooked this."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Eris coldly. "You'd never beat Ruijerd in a million years, no matter how many people you threw at him."

"I suppose you might be right about that, Miss Eris," said Therese, smiling wryly. "But the Temple Knights are a bunch of fanatics, I'm afraid. Myself included. We'd fight that battle, even if we knew we didn't stand a chance."

There were apparently quite a few people like this among the Holy Knights of Millis. And so, she emphasized, we should be very careful if we ever happened to return to this continent.

This whole incident really drove home just how deep-seated humanity's prejudices toward demonkind were. I felt like it might be tough to work on the reputation of the Superd from here on out.

Also, should anyone learn that I venerated Roxy like a god, I might end up getting tortured by an inquisitor or something. It was probably best to keep my personal religion to myself.

***

Our trip across the sea went smoothly this time around.

My aunt made sure we were well-prepared for the voyage. Not only did she provide all the provisions we'd need, she even got us some sort of medicine for seasickness. I was under the impression that medicine was kind of a neglected field in this world, but evidently, they didn't rely on Healing magic for everything. There were remedies for this sort of illness, at least.

That said, such medicines didn't come cheap. Good thing I had relatives in high places.

Therese took particular care to accommodate Eris' every need. There was always some hostility in her eyes when she looked at Ruijerd, but what can you do? People don't change their whole perspective on the world overnight.

Thanks to the medicine Therese had procured, Eris spent most of our voyage mildly uncomfortable rather than completely miserable. Which meant she wasn't begging me to use Healing on her all the time.

To be perfectly honest, that was a little disappointing. I'd been hoping to see her all meek and mild again. But on the plus side, my super meter didn't charge up, I never unleashed my Buster Wolf, and Eris didn't need to hit me with a Sunny Punch. It was business as usual.

Eris did seem to be a bit anxious after last time, though, since she stuck to me like glue once we got on the boat. She definitely wasn't "meek" at any point, but at least I got to see her hopping around in delight as we looked out at the sea. That was good enough for me.

One of the sailors did take the opportunity to tease us, though. "Hey there, lovebirds! You two getting hitched in the King Dragon Realm or what?"

"You bet," I said, putting an arm around Eris' shoulders with a grin. "It's going to be one crazy wedding."

At this point, Eris punched me in the face. "I-It's way too early for us to get married, stupid!"

Despite the violence, she didn't seem *too* displeased by the idea itself, judging from the way she fidgeted around afterward. The "public teasing" part was probably the main issue.

If I wanted to bring up this subject, it should be in a nice, quiet place, with just the two of us, and only once the right mood had been established. Eris was a monster of a swordswoman by now, but she was still an innocent maiden when it came to romance.

Still…marriage, huh?

Philip and the others had certainly tried to push the two of us together. But now, nobody even knew where they were. Paul did say not to be too optimistic…

It wasn’t just Philip, Sauros, and company, of course. Zenith, Lilia, and little Aisha were still missing, too. There was no news of Sylphie, either. Heck, we didn’t even know if *Ghislaine* was still alive. There were so many reasons to be anxious.

Still, I couldn’t let myself sink into pessimism. By the time we got back to Fittoa, maybe everyone would be waiting for us there, safe and sound.

I knew the idea was absurd. I knew it wasn’t remotely likely. But at the same time, tearing my hair out with worry wasn’t going to do any good at the moment. That was what I told myself, at least.

For better or worse, we’d put the Millis Continent behind us.

Interlude:
Roxy's Homecoming

At about the same time Rudeus and his party set sail from Millis, Roxy Migurdia was returning to her hometown for the first time in many years.

The Migurd village hadn't changed at all. And everyone she knew there looked pretty much the same as well. There were more residents than before, perhaps, but it was still an eerily quiet place.

Roxy hadn't found this silence strange as a child, but now that she'd traveled all around the world, she could say with confidence that it was highly unusual. You wouldn't hear a single voice speaking in this village. And yet, its people were communicating *perfectly*.

When the residents of the village spotted Roxy, they just stood and stared at her. She knew they were attempting to speak to her through telepathy, the unique innate ability that set the Migurd race apart from other demons. But she couldn't tell what they were saying. All she could make out was a faint sort of buzzing noise. Roxy couldn't respond to their words.

After some time, her parents appeared. The years hadn't changed them, either. They welcomed their daughter with joyful words and asked her if she'd come all this way alone in voices full of concern.

Elinalise and Talhand had chosen to wait outside the village. Perhaps they'd thought she would rather have some privacy for this.

Roxy told her parents about her travels in a calm, dispassionate voice. They expressed surprise at her story, and with relief on their faces, told her to stay as long as she liked.

But Roxy felt like an outsider here—even as she was speaking to her own parents. Their words of concern and welcome were all spoken in a language that was foreign to them. Her people never said anything truly important with their mouths, especially not when they wanted to express love or affection.

It was entirely possible her parents were sincerely worried about her

from the bottom of their hearts, but they had no way to convey that to Roxy. She couldn't use telepathy, so their messages couldn't get across to her.

That made her feel terribly lonely.

Staying here for any length of time would just be painful. She'd just be rubbing her own nose in the fact that she wasn't a true part of the Migurd people, so she decided to set out again immediately.

"You're really leaving already?" her father asked, his expression concerned.

"Yes."

"Can't you at least stay a single night?"

Roxy shook her head expressionlessly. "I'm sorry, but this journey really is an urgent one. I just dropped by since I was in the neighborhood."

"When can you come back again, dear?"

"I don't know," Roxy replied honestly. "I might not come back at all."

It was her mother's turn to look concerned now. "Roxy…surely you can make the time to visit us every twenty years or so?"

"I suppose," she replied, her tone noncommittal. "Maybe I'll stop by within the next fifty years, then."

"Really? You promise? We'll be waiting, then."

"All right," said Roxy, nodding ambiguously.

At this point, she noticed that her mother had quietly begun to cry. "Uh…Mom…?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I told myself I wasn't going to cry, but… I'm sorry, dear…"

At the sight of those tears, something gave way inside Roxy. Before she knew it, she was hugging her mother tightly, and then her father had wrapped his arms around the both of them.

In that moment Roxy finally realized that words and language were far from everything. In the end, she stayed in the Migurd village for about three days. And for the first time in ages, she actually managed to relax a little.

***

The “Kennel Master” of Dead End was, in fact, Rudeus Greyrat.

It had taken some time for Roxy to admit this to herself.

After reaching the Demon Continent, her party had traveled steadily northward in search of information about Rudeus. The further north they went, the more people recognized his name.

Roxy was getting closer, but at the same time, it felt like there was something off about this. Everyone who’d seen Rudeus described him in ways that overlapped with the stories about the Dead End impersonators. Several times in the course of their journey, Talhand pointed out that this human boy who could cast spells silently sounded *exactly* like the Kennel Master from that party.

In truth, Roxy had realized this herself at an early stage. She just didn’t want to admit to herself that she’d passed her pupil on the road without even realizing it.

By the time they reached the city of Rikarisu, however, she had no choice but to do so. In that city, she learned of the “Dead End Incident” that took place there two years ago. She also heard the story of a man named Nokopara, whom she’d once been in a party with. Given what her parents had told her when she stopped by their village…all the pieces fit together. Roxy simply had to admit the truth.

The Kennel Master had to be Rudeus.

At the moment, Roxy was in a Rikarisu bar with her old comrade Nokopara.

When she’d asked about Rudeus, he’d been initially hesitant to say much. It seemed he’d taken up a somewhat disrespectable line of work at some point. Roxy wasn’t about to judge him for that, however. On the Demon Continent, you did what you had to if you wanted to survive.

“I see… So Blaze died on the job, huh…?”

“Yep. Poor bastard got swallowed whole by a Red-Hood Cobra.”

It had been years since Roxy left the Demon Continent; the two of

them had a lot of catching up to do. And yet, they'd found themselves mostly talking about the old days.

Closing her eyes, Roxy thought about Blaze. The man had a pig's face and a filthy mouth; he'd cussed out Roxy every time she messed up. Still, he wasn't a bad guy deep down, and you couldn't have asked for a more reliable warrior.

According to Nokopara, Blaze was the veteran leader of a B-ranked adventuring party at the time of his death. On the Demon Continent, that was no small accomplishment. Roxy was impressed at how far her sharp-tongued old colleague had come. At the same time, though, his party was apparently called *Super Blazers.* Seriously? The man never was any good at naming things.

In any case, Nokopara said the monster that wiped out Blaze's team of veterans was then slain by Rudeus and his group, who'd only just formed their own party. In other words, he'd taken down an A-ranked monster right after becoming an adventurer.

There wasn't a chance in hell Roxy could have managed that back in the day. But it did sound like Rudeus, all right. The thought put a small smile on her face.

Sipping at his drink, a typically strong Demon Continent liquor, Nokopara murmured, "You've really changed, Roxy."

Roxy looked down at her reflection in her drink and wondered if this was true. "Have I? It's kind of hard for me to tell."

"Yeah. You seem a lot more grown-up than you used to."

"What? Are you making fun of me or something?" By the time she started adventuring with Nokopara and Blaze, Roxy had already looked like a full-grown Migurd. Her face and figure hadn't changed significantly since then. She was perfectly aware that she looked very much the same.

"Nah, I'm serious! It's, like, yer general vibe, I guess. Ya used to come off more like a kid, you know?"

"Well, I've put a lot of years behind me since then, you know? Even if it doesn't look that way." Roxy shrugged, tossed a handful of roasted snacks into her mouth, and crunched away. These things were actually Stone Treant

seeds. She didn't find them particularly tasty, but for some reason it was hard to stop shoveling them into your mouth once you'd gotten started.

"This is exactly what I'm talkin' about, though. Back in the day, you used ta be *desperate* to get everyone to think of you as a grownup. Ya probably woulda been on cloud nine if I said somethin' like that."

"Is that right…? Yes, I suppose I was like that for a while."

That was back when she didn't properly understand her own skills and limitations. In those days, Roxy had worked furiously to convince people that she was an adult and someone to be taken seriously. She'd bragged of her talents as a magician and her competence with every aspect of magic. She'd insisted she was capable of anything.

Her opinion of herself had been completely reversed since then, but the reputation she'd built up continued to spread on its own. These days, it felt like people were constantly expecting her to pull off things she *couldn't* do. She'd been getting a lot of surprised reactions from people on the Demon Continent when she told them she was Rudeus' former teacher. For some reason, the boy had been telling everyone that he owed his skills to "the teachings of his master." Naturally, they'd assumed that Roxy must be capable of silent spellcasting as well, which she most definitely was not.

Perhaps Roxy's own master, who once disparaged her in the harshest terms, had experienced feelings similar to these. If that was the case, Roxy felt bad about how she'd responded. It was a hard thing to be the mentor of someone more talented than you. Apparently, you had to experience this for yourself before you truly understood it.

In Roxy's case, it was a source of embarrassment as well as pride. She no longer wanted Rudeus to stop calling her his master, but for some reason, the fact that he'd totally ignored her orders on that point made her kind of happy.

"Anyway, *you* haven't changed one bit, Nokopara."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Except physically, of course."

The man had always been greedy for money and had a tendency to prey on the weak, and that was obviously still the case. Back in the day, Roxy

had often thought he was the last person she ever wanted to make an enemy of.

"Hey, what's that supposed ta mean? Ya implyin' I'm all old and wrinkly now?"

"Sure, you could put it that way. You've gotten old, Nokopara. And wrinkly."

"Hah! Ya got a mouth on ya now, girl!" Nokopara let out a whinny of sarcastic laughter, then sighed. "Man, this really takes me back…"

"I know what you mean."

In the old days, there would have been two others at this table: a boy who was always cursing furiously at Nokopara, and another boy who'd break up their fights with a sigh. Those two were both gone now, leaving only two middle-aged ex-adventurers behind.

True, one of them hadn't aged too much due to her race, but the old days were never coming back. That much was for sure.

The two of them ended up reminiscing in the bar for hours, right up until Nokopara finally drank himself under the table.

Roxy had seen her parents, and now a very old acquaintance. That alone meant her voyage up here hadn't been a waste of time. She was truly, deeply happy that she'd come.

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Had Rudeus already reached Millishion by now? Roxy wondered.

Assuming they passed each other by at Wind Port, he had likely left this continent a good six months ago. The rainy season had been just about to start, true…but the Holy Sword Highway was a safe, easy road to follow. Unless he'd stopped off at an Elf or Dwarf settlement, his party would surely have made it to the city by now.

In other words, she didn't have to search for him in the first place. Just as Paul had assumed in that letter, the boy was fine on his own. He'd forged his way across the entire Demon Continent in no time at all, along with that "Eris" girl he was teleported with. Most travelers would have fallen prey to

its dangers or struggled to make progress, but he'd made it look easy. On top of it all, he'd somehow recruited into his party a member of the Superd race Roxy had always feared.

"Your pupil's one impressive kid, Roxy."

"Indeed. I can hardly believe he's actually Paul's son."

Elinalise and Talhand were full of compliments as well.

The way Roxy saw things, though, it didn't really matter whose pupil or son Rudeus was. The boy had been a prodigy from the get-go. He could have pulled this off just fine even if she'd never even met him.

But putting all that aside…

"What shall we do now, then?"

Roxy paused to consider Elinalise's question. The initial goal of this journey had been finding Rudeus, but he was probably safe in Millishion by now. Roxy very much wanted to see him, but at the same time, she didn't want to abandon their broader objective.

"Let's search the northwest region of the Demon Continent."

They'd tracked down Rudeus, but the other three members of his family were still missing. On the road here, they'd already found a number of displaced humans from the Fittoa region; there were probably some in the northwest as well.

"Sure you don't want to go see your pupil?" asked Talhand.

"Yes, I'm sure," said Roxy with a slight nod. For one thing, what if he figured out she'd passed him by without even realizing it? That would just be *too* humiliating. Her standing as his "master" was on shaky enough ground as it was. "There are plenty of cities on the Demon Continent we haven't checked yet. Let's keep moving through them one by one, just like we've been doing."

Talhand and Elinalise just looked at each other and chuckled.

One way or another, Roxy Migurdia's voyage wasn't over yet.

Extra Chapter I:
Dragon Meat, Nanahoshi-Style

We'd arrived at the city of Eastport in the Dragon King Realm—the biggest port city in the entire world.

People here spoke the same language as in the Holy Country of Millis, but the names and appearances of the shops were subtly different. Still, this was the fourth port city I'd seen, so the place didn't really feel like anything new. Once we were off the boat, I got us right to work on the routine task of finding ourselves an inn.

As we were walking along the street, however, Eris paused and murmured, "Something smells good."

Hmm. Like the scent of your neck right after a training session? I'm a big fan of that one, personally. But with one sniff of the air, I understood what Eris meant. There was certainly a tempting aroma wafting around the area.

I glanced up towards the sun sitting high in the sky. Now that I thought of it, my stomach was feeling a bit empty at the moment. "I think it might be time for lunch."

"Yeah…" Eris agreed, nodding slightly.

The two of us had our eyes fixed on the restaurant that seemed to be the source of this interesting smell. Its exterior was less than promising. The brick walls were in terrible shape, with visible holes here and there, and the wooden sign up top was so grimy and weathered that it was impossible to read. Even the front door was about ready to fall off its hinges. It looked more like an abandoned house than a fine dining establishment.

However, the smell drifting from its interior was a whole different story. It wasn't the sort of rich fragrance that would get a man's mouth watering immediately, but there was something kind of *nostalgic* about it. I felt my stomach rumbling.

"You want to go in there?"

Ruijerd's question startled me slightly. I'd been wandering closer to the

restaurant without even realizing it. "…Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Don't you always say that we should eat at more visually appealing restaurants?"

I did remember saying something to that effect, yes. But that was back on the Demon Continent, where you could pretty much count on a shabby-looking place to have truly awful food. Sometimes you'd find an exception to the rule where everything was much better than expected, but…one way or another, I wouldn't normally have set foot in a place that looked like this.

For some reason, though, I felt really drawn to this one. "A change of pace can't hurt, right?"

"Well, if you say so…"

With Ruijerd and Eris tagging along, I pushed open the front door. It protested loudly at this cruel and unusual treatment.

Unsurprisingly, the restaurant itself was also on the grimy side. Well… maybe "grimy" wasn't quite the right word. It looked clean enough to serve as a place to eat, at least. More than anything else, it was just *shabby*. Half the chairs seemed to be missing legs, most of the tables were cracked, and there were shallow holes all over the floor.

As one might expect, there were no other customers inside. "We've got the place to ourselves," murmured Eris cheerfully. I guess she didn't find anything suspicious about a restaurant being totally empty at lunchtime. It was enough to make me anxious, of course. But for some reason, my sense of anticipation was still stronger.

"Welcome, folks…" As the three of us took our seats, a skeleton-thin man approached us with a menu. Was he the one who ran this place, maybe? I had to say, his face was seriously gloomy. I mean, it was obvious at a glance that the shop wasn't doing booming business, but it couldn't hurt to at least slap on a fake smile for your customers…

"Rudeus, are you sure we shouldn't reconsider this?"

Wow. It wasn't every day Ruijerd second-guessed me like this. Still, you can't go around judging people by their appearances, right?

"Now, now. The food might be delicious, right?"

Smiling awkwardly at my words, the skeletal man opened his menu for

us. There were only two items listed on it:

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- *Dragon Meat, Nanahoshi Style*
- *Alba Fish Stew*

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Back in Millishion, the restaurants typically gave you more than ten options to choose from. Even bars that mostly focused on their booze offered a bit more variety than this. On the plus side, the prices here were low. Maybe it all cancelled out.

"What'll it be, folks?"

So the choice was meat or fish, huh?

The Alba Fish was a species native to the seas down south. It was a standard part of people's diets in this part of the world; I'd already tried some back in West Port. The menu said it was a "stew," but in this case that probably meant a sort of fish and vegetable soup. It was supposedly a very common dish in the King Dragon Realm.

On the other hand, though, we had "Dragon Meat, Nanahoshi Style." I'd never even heard of this one before. I knew that King Dragons resided in a nearby mountain range that took its name from them. They were said to be capable of manipulating gravity itself. Was this actually the meat of those monsters? Or maybe something that looked and tasted very similar…?

Also, what did "Nanahoshi" mean? The term was totally new to me, though it sounded almost…Japanese. Of course, I wasn't too familiar with the various cuisines of this world. Maybe it was a popular cooking method in the King Dragon Realm.

One way or another, it definitely caught my interest. "I'll take the meat."

"Me too."

"Three of the meat, then."

Once his carnivorous guests had placed their orders, the skeletal man vanished back into the kitchen expressionlessly.

There was no water provided, not that I'd expected any different. As a general rule, you didn't get much of anything for free in this world. This called for some self-service. I created cups with Earth magic, filled them with water, and passed them to Ruijerd and Eris. With a few ice cubes, you couldn't ask for a better tonic for a weary body.

Eris gulped down the contents of her glass in seconds, chewed up the ice, and stuck her cup back out at me. "Rudeus, refill."

Shaking my head ruefully, I filled it back up for her. Ordinarily I might have told her to cast the spell herself, but we *were* inside a restaurant here. No reason to risk her messing it up and flooding the place.

As always, Ruijerd was just sipping at his water. The man was a fast eater, but he always took his time with his beverages.

"Anyway, it doesn't seem like there's much information to be gathered in this city, does it?"

"I guess not. I kind of wanted to look at the swords a little longer, but maybe we should just move on to the next city."

There were a huge variety of bladed weapons on sale here. Even your average roadside stall had a range of swords on display. Eris had earlier been looking over some with shining eyes, but she soon realized that they were all blunt pieces of crap targeted at beginners who didn't know any better. Her skills as a fighter had come a long way, but that didn't mean she could tell a good sword from a bad one at a glance yet. Not too surprising, really.

"Hey! I'm comin' in!"

Our conversation was abruptly interrupted by a loud *bang*. Someone had thrown the door open. A thuggish-looking man stomped his way into the restaurant without even taking off his shoes. Not that anyone did here, granted. That wasn't really a thing.

At the sound of this interloper's voice, the skeletal man emerged from the kitchen. "Shagall…"

"Hey there, Randolph! You finally in the mood to make the right decision today?"

“My answer isn’t going to change, no matter how many times you ask. Would you just leave, please?”

“Hah! How long are you gonna keep this empty wreck of a place running, man?”

“Until I die, of course. It’s been in my family for generations…”

From their exchange, I could make a reasonable guess as to the situation here. Long story short, this business was struggling to survive. The proprietor had probably taken out all sorts of loans just to keep its doors open. This thug was probably some shady speculator who wanted to buy up the land cheap or something.

“Wait out here for a while, at least. I’ve got customers at the moment.”

“Customers? Oh, wow, you really do. Now that’s a rare sight!”

“I won’t give up on this place, not as long as I’ve got a single customer.”

“Hah!” Snorting with laughter, the thuggish man dropped down in a nearby chair. With a sidelong glance in his direction, the skeletal man trudged back into the kitchen.

It definitely sounded like times were tough. I didn’t know all the details, of course, but if the food was any good, maybe we could try to spread the word about this place.

“That man’s looking at us…”

I had a feeling Eris might overreact to any eye contact from this guy, so I went ahead and covered her eyes with my hands. A problem like this needed to be resolved through the power of food, not by her fists of fury.

“Hey! Rudeus! I can’t see!”

Agh. Wait. Not my wrist, Eris! Oh, my bones. My poor delicate bones…

“Sorry for the wait, folks.”

As I was playing around with Eris, our food emerged from the kitchen…and my eyes went wide at the sight of it. “No way…!”

“Dragon Meat, Nanahoshi Style” was apparently a meal with three distinct parts.

First of all, there was a transparent vegetable soup of some kind. I could tell at a glance that it would have a simple, refreshing flavor. That was fine. Standard stuff. But the other two parts were a different story.

First, to the left, we had a staple food I hadn't seen once after coming to this world. It was white rice! The emperor of all grains!

No…wait. On second thought, the color wasn't quite right. There seemed to be other grains mixed in there as well. Okay, so multigrain rice, then. It had been so long since I saw anything of the kind that I'd gotten slightly mixed up.

In any case, that certainly explained why the smell coming from this place had felt so nostalgic. He must have been cooking rice at the time. No wonder I'd been pulled in like a magnet.

Finally, there was the third part of our meal. This consisted of golden-brown chunks of deep-fried goodness. In other words…

It was, without a doubt, *karaage*.

Which meant…although the soup wasn't exactly miso, and the rice wasn't exactly white…this was a classic *karaage* meal.

"I can't believe this!"

"What is it, Rudeus…?" Eris was looking at me dubiously. Understandable, since I was trembling and clutching the table with both hands.

"Uh, sorry… It's nothing."

I never even dreamed that Japanese-style fried food might exist in this world. The heavens had truly smiled upon me today! Maybe that Man-God character was finally starting to understand what I wanted out of life.

Okay then! Let's go! Let's eat! Right now!

Putting my hands together, I offered a quick prayer of thanks to all the spirits of the heavens and the earth.

"Let's dig in!"

There were no chopsticks, naturally, so I shoveled a big chunk of rice into my mouth with my fork. "Aaaah…" A single tear trickled down my cheek.

In my previous life, my passion for rice knew no bounds. It was basically what I lived for, especially in my late twenties; I must have gobbled down a gallon of the stuff every single day. And compared to the rice I ate back then, this stuff was lousy. Under the Japanese taste rankings system, it wouldn't even have earned a C.

And yet, it was still *rice*. Real, honest-to-goodness rice.

For the first time in my life, I truly understood that all rice was created equal.

"R-Rudeus? What's the matter?"

"Oh, it's nothing…nothing at all!" I wept silently as I ate, doing my best impression of a Japanese soldier who'd just returned home after years in a Siberian internment camp. Every bite filled my mouth with the familiar, comforting flavor of rice.

Oh, wait. There's not that much, is there? I should eat it with the side dishes…

It was about time I gave this karaage a try. With a greedy stab of my fork, I skewered a deep-fried piece of meat and brought it to my mouth.

"Mergh!"

Instantly, my joy gave way to shock.

This was deep-fried meat, to be sure. But it definitely *wasn't* karaage. The coating was wet and oily; the meat inside was dry and tough. And the more I chewed it, the stronger its rancid odor grew.

It was actually making me nauseous.

Anger bubbled up inside me. *You expect me… You expect me to eat rice with THIS?!*

I could eat rice all by itself, of course. I could eat unlimited amounts, as long as I had a little salt. Yes, salted white rice was all the samurai in my soul really needed.

And yet. I couldn't manage to suppress my fury. This karaage was nothing less than an act of blasphemy against rice itself.

"I want to see the chef! Right now!"

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When the owner of the restaurant anxiously emerged from the kitchen, I started things off with a few compliments.

First of all, the pseudo-miso was quite passable. It was a simple clear, salty vegetable soup, but it complemented the distinctive flavor of the multigrain rice very nicely. In combination, those two dishes almost felt like a complete meal all by themselves. Only a skilled artisan could have pulled that off.

The way he'd cooked the rice was also impressive. It seemed like he'd used the right quantity of water and the perfect amount of heat. In this, too, you could sense the touch of a veteran professional. Every grain I tasted brought a tear to my eye. If he'd gone just a little further and paid more attention to the quality of the water he was using, it would have been worthy of a perfect score. And I was perfectly willing to present him with a few megatons of delicious Rudeus-brand H2O. The stuff I carefully conjured out of thin air was tastier than anything sitting in your backyard well.

With all that said, I moved on to topic of the karaage…or rather, the Nanahoshi Style Dragon meat.

I shredded it. I shredded it thoroughly and brutally.

That stuff wasn't fit for human consumption. How *dare* he serve it to a paying customer? Did he have any idea who I was? I was Rudeus Greyrat of the party Dead End, damn it! He'd pay dearly for this insult!

Long story short, I flipped out on the guy like a psychotic celebrity chef in a particularly foul mood. In retrospect, I'm not even sure why I got so angry. Maybe the fact that I was still hungry had something to do with it.

Eris and Ruijerd must have thought I'd lost my mind. By the end of that ugly episode, they had to drag me out of the place kicking and screaming.

Honestly, I went too far. My love for rice had gotten the better of me, yes…but that didn't justify some of the things I said. Especially since I was only an amateur myself.

This world didn't have the kind of ingredients that were readily

available back in Japan. Even the oil you needed to deep-fry meat was probably of a much lower quality here. At the end of the day, I'd learned that some people in this world ate rice with side dishes, and that deep-frying was a thing here. That was fantastic news. So why the heck had I let myself get so furious?

By the time we left his restaurant, the owner of the place had shriveled up completely, and I could see tears shining in his eyes. I'd definitely been a childish jerk.

Let's do better next time, Rudeus.

The Owner

Business was terrible.

For the last several years, I'd barely gotten any visitors at all. Even when someone randomly came in, they never turned into a regular customer. I was sinking deeper and deeper into debt with nothing to show for it.

To top it all off, today a customer hit me with an absolute barrage of criticism. Apparently, I wasn't getting my oil nearly hot enough, or trapping enough moisture in the meat. Oh, and I should have added sweet and sour seasoning *before* I put the coating on. By the end of his rant, the boy even told me that I'd chosen the wrong kind of meat in the first place.

But Dragon had been the backbone of this restaurant's menu for hundreds of years. What was I supposed to do if the problem was that basic?

"Man, that seriously startled me…"

A man who bore a strong resemblance to a bandit broke the awkward silence. His name was Shagall Gargantis, and he'd been pestering me relentlessly for years now. "Still, I think this ought to make things crystal clear, right? Your cooking's lousy enough that even a snot-nosed kid can rip it to pieces, man."

Shagall had an ugly smirk plastered on his face, just like he always did. When his expression was serious, the man was reasonably good-looking, and he wasn't stupid, either. If he walked into the right room, dozens of

subordinates would bow their heads to him. But for some reason, he liked to dress up as a thug and sneer at me.

Maybe he intended it as some sort of a disguise.

"You're right…but…"

"Look, I understand why you'd want to protect somethin' that's been in your family for generations. The thing is, though, you don't have a head for business. Or the power to keep this place running."

Those words hit me like a punch to the gut. He was absolutely right. I was a hopeless businessman. And I didn't even have any talent as a chef, either. My cooking was clearly atrocious if it couldn't even satisfy a child like that.

"That said, you've got real skills in a different field. Everyone's got some jobs they're just better suited to than others, don'tcha think?"

"I suppose so…"

I couldn't help but agree. All my determination had finally crumbled away, leaving only resignation in its wake. "All right, you win. I'll close down my restaurant."

This place had been founded 250 years ago; it had passed down through the generations of my family. But I'd failed to preserve that legacy.

I'd just have to carry this disgrace with me for the rest of my days.

On that day, High General Shagall Gargantis of the King Dragon Realm succeeded in recruiting a certain individual…namely, Randolph Marianne, the Death God, ranked fourth among the Seven Great Powers.

Why had Randolph suddenly accepted Shagall's offer, after years of steadfast refusals?

Very few would ever know the answer to this question.

Extra Chapter II:
The Death of Ariel

The name's Gustaf. I'm a humble information broker living in the city of Ars, capital of the Kingdom of Asura.

When I say "humble," that doesn't mean I've got a low opinion of myself. It's fair to say I'm damn good at what I do, in fact. For the right price, I can find out anything you want to know about anything that took place inside Asura's borders.

One day not too long ago, I happened to catch wind of a certain rumor.

It went something like this: The Second Princess Ariel Asura had been murdered by unknown assailants while en route to enroll at the Ranoa University of Magic.

Clever boy that I am, I quickly realized that this bit of "news" was being deliberately spread around the city by Prince Grabel, Ariel's most bitter rival.

About a month earlier, Ariel had left Ars, ostensibly to go study abroad. Her departure had been a quiet one. Given her popularity with the citizens of the capital, any attempt at a grand farewell parade might have gotten totally out of hand. This, supposedly, was why she'd slipped out of the city in secret. Her retinue, including both guards and attendants, numbered only seventeen. This was a very small escort for a royal princess. But since it included both the infamous playboy Luke Notos Greyrat and the highly conspicuous bodyguard known as "Silent Fitz," my information network quickly brought me news of their departure.

By that point, of course, rumors were already proliferating that Ariel had been sent into exile after losing a power struggle in the royal court. And now, a few short weeks later, we had this new piece of hearsay making the rounds.

If the princess truly had been assassinated, the word had gotten around very quickly. It would be one thing if there was some witness who could name the perpetrators, but instead, we had "unknown assailants" and an

anonymous source. The fact that such a flimsy rumor was spreading around town so quickly seemed proof enough that it was being spread deliberately.

As a professional purveyor of accurate information, I was tempted to dig around and uncover the truth. However, the last thing I wanted was to catch the attention of whichever scheming noble was responsible for this situation, so I decided to keep myself in the dark on this one.

However…a little while after the rumor of Ariel's death had begun to spread, a certain individual paid me a visit.

This man knew of me, and my reputation as a first-rate information broker. And I recognized him as a retainer of Pilemon Notos Greyrat, leader of Princess Ariel's faction among the nobility. His main role was to provide his lord with up-to-date intelligence. Of course, he came to see me in disguise and gave a false name, but he might as well not have bothered.

He seemed to regard me as a suspicious character at first, and spoke to me in a pretty condescending way. When I finally told him I knew exactly who he was, though, he bowed his head to me and presented me with a job offer.

Specifically, he wanted me to find out if Princess Ariel was really dead.

That came as one hell of a surprise, honestly. I never would have guessed that Ariel's own allies had lost all contact with her faction and didn't even know if she was safe. Even a clever boy like me can get a bit bamboozled now and then. I'd initially chosen to steer clear of this whole mess…but I decided to take the job anyway.

Why, you might ask?

Well, because the money was damn good, of course.

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I started off by retracing Princess Ariel's steps.

After leaving the capital, her party had traveled straight north, in the direction of Ranoa. I'd considered the possibility that she'd fled in a totally different direction after spreading lies about enrolling at the University of Magic, but that didn't seem to be the case.

As I followed Ariel's trail and gathered information, it soon became clear that a group of pursuers had been hounding her. Some people reported seeing suspicious black-clad characters right around the time the princess' party was passing through their town, and Ariel seemed to have lost an escort or two by the time she reached the next town along her route.

This wasn't unexpected, though. If the trip had gone smoothly, her allies back home wouldn't have been frantically looking to get word of her safety.

Despite losing one guard after another, Ariel nonetheless pushed steadily northward. With her retinue reduced to ten, she finally reached the checkpoint at the northern border. This was a solid, well-guarded facility that pressed up against a large forest just south of the valley known as the Red Wyrm's Upper Jaw.

Here, I was able to obtain a useful bit of eyewitness testimony from a man who remembered Ariel's arrival very clearly.

Border Control Officer
Smily Gatlin's Statement

I was in a lousy mood that day. Not that it was any different from any other day, in that respect. After all, at the time I felt my job was totally beneath me.

Hmm? What's my job exactly, you ask? Well, it's mostly tedious busywork. I check the passes of travelers seeking to leave Asuran territory. Sometimes, I might search them or their belongings for contraband. But, of course, the vast majority of those passing through this checkpoint are either adventurers, mercenaries, or merchants who want to do business up north for some strange reason. Most of the merchants have valid passes, and the adventurers are permitted to simply use their Guild cards instead.

Mercenary bands and first-time travelers need to go through a formal inspection process before their passes can be issued, but that's not my job. I simply direct them to a different officer. And unless you're some sort of notorious criminal or something, you usually get your documents soon

enough. We're not too strict about these things on this side of the checkpoint. Far more people want to enter Asura than to leave it, after all.

Technically, I'm also responsible for stopping criminals who try to cross the border using falsified documents, but the rough stuff isn't my department, either. The soldiers deal with problems of that nature.

As I said before, however, it typically isn't very hard to get a pass unless you're a major criminal. People of that ilk are typically on the wanted list. Rather than risk visiting a checkpoint, they usually turn to smugglers to get them across the border. And of course, hunting down and eradicating smuggling rings isn't in my job description, either.

I found my work painfully dull and completely unrewarding. No matter how hard I tried, I knew I would never earn any recognition here. The thought of growing old in this place made me utterly miserable.

It didn't help that I wasn't on the friendliest of terms with the soldiers who were essentially my coworkers. I regarded them as imbeciles, and they thought of me as a pathetic pansy with an oversized ego. The fact that our chains of command were completely separate only made things worse.

I was a man who'd graduated from a prestigious aristocratic academy in the capital. My talents were clearly being wasted in this backwater…or so I sincerely believed, at the time.

Princess Ariel's party arrived at about noon, as I recall.

At first, all I saw was a luxurious two-seater carriage accompanied by seven guards on foot. Counting the driver up front and the two potential passengers inside, it seemed to be a group of ten in total.

My initial thought was that an aristocrat was engaging in some sort of sightseeing expedition. However, this was the border of the Kingdom. Beyond this checkpoint lay only the dangerous foreign lands known as the Northern Territories, plagued by snow and monsters. Nobles did sometimes pass through on their way to far-off places, but they would *always* bring at least three carriages and twenty guards or more. Perhaps you could make do with less if you hired an elite band of adventurers, but this party didn't strike me as a group of battle-hardened warriors. All of them were dressed for the road, but some were clearly not accustomed to long journeys, and others

looked rather scrawny for bodyguards.

Perhaps it wasn't a sightseeing trip, then. Was it possible they had some business at this checkpoint itself? You could never discount the possibility of an incognito inspection from some high-ranked lord.

For the time being, I decided to proceed as usual. "May I see your pass, please?"

"Here you are."

The response to my inquiry came from a young man standing at the very head of the group. He was remarkably handsome, even to my eyes, but there were clear signs of exhaustion on his face. In particular, the dark circles under his eyes stood out.

It was at this moment that I first sensed there might be something odd going on here.

There were no issues with the pass itself. It was a genuine document issued by the Kingdom of Asura, stamped with a valid Notos family mark. Everything was perfectly in order. I would normally have waved them through the gate without a second thought.

But something about the handsome young man's face made me hesitate. I could have sworn I'd seen it somewhere before. In hindsight, this was because he was Luke Notos Greyrat, the famous guardian knight of Princess Ariel. I suppose I couldn't place him because I'd never seen him at such close range before.

In any case, I made it a professional habit to detain anyone who seemed vaguely familiar to me. Most of the faces I'd recently committed to memory came from depictions of wanted criminals, after all. "My apologies, but may I take a look at the inside of your carriage?"

At my words, a number of soldiers who'd been standing around the checkpoint moved to block off the exits. We weren't on the friendliest of terms, true, but they always performed their duties at times like these. Several of the guards around the carriage grew visibly tense at this development. I stiffened slightly myself, wondering if I really was dealing with some gang of bandits.

The handsome young man shook his head slowly. "Due to certain

extraordinary circumstances, the passenger within must have complete privacy."

There was no way *that* was going to fly, of course.

When I repeated my demand in somewhat harsher terms, the young man's face contorted into a bitter grimace. A number of his companions—the ones who seemed more accustomed to travel, specifically—also glared at me and put their hands on the swords they carried. Their movements weren't as quick as those of master warriors, but I had the feeling they'd experienced their fair share of combat.

In particular, the white-haired, short-statured boy who stood right behind the handsome leader was actually *quite* intimidating. The only weapon he carried was a small rod of the sort beginners used to practice basic magic, but something about the way he held himself suggested that he was a truly lethal fighter with the wariness of a seasoned veteran. I suppose he must have been that "Silent Fitz" character. I don't think I've ever been so frightened of a boy less than half my age.

My experience told me that a group like this could cause significant harm to our garrison. Should I order the soldiers to seize them now, or was there some other option?

As I hesitated, someone spoke from within the carriage. "Stop this, Luke."

It was a voice like gold. The sound of it turned my brain to mush. There was something almost hypnotic about it, I believe. In that moment, I truly wanted to listen to it *forever*.

It was a voice I'd heard once before—a voice I recognized.

I'd heard it ten years earlier, at my academy's graduation ceremony in the capital, as a certain personage offered a speech of congratulations to our valedictorian. Brief as that address had been, I'd never forgotten it. Never. Back then, I think nearly every single graduate in that room had cursed themselves for not having studied harder.

"These men are simply being diligent in their duties."

When the door of that carriage opened, I felt a great shiver run down my spine.

I couldn't have forgotten her if I tried.

I remembered clearly, even now, the young princess who'd attended our graduation ceremony as an honored guest. I remembered the joy I'd felt at the prospect of serving her and serving this kingdom. I remembered how privileged I'd felt to be joining this proud country's ranks.

I'll remember her until the day I die.

"M-my apologies, Your Highness…"

Even as a child, that golden-haired princess had been dazzlingly beautiful, and now she stood before me far lovelier than before. I went down on one knee instantly, without conscious thought.

There was no doubt about it whatsoever. This was the Second Princess of the Kingdom of Asura, Ariel Anemoi Asura—the most beloved member of the royal family, who regularly appeared at events around the capital and advocated for its citizens. Many of the soldiers stationed here had likely at least caught a glimpse of her from a distance at some point in the past. But this was surely the first time any of us had seen her at such close range.

"There's no need for that. As I recall, there's a law that no one serving at a border post ever has to kneel in the course of their ordinary duties."

With those words, the princess stepped out of her carriage.

Nearly all of the soldiers around us had followed my example and gone down on one knee. But as Princess Ariel pointed out, barring some sort of special circumstances, no one on duty here was ever expected to kneel. I don't know exactly why, but it's been that way for many, many years. Since starting at this place, I've never kneeled to anyone, no matter what their rank. This was also the first time I'd seen any of the soldiers do so. And no one had ever rebuked or challenged us on that.

But of course, the fact that it wasn't *required* didn't mean it was *forbidden*. We stayed as we were, and bowed our heads toward Ariel. It simply felt like what we ought to do.

"P-Princess Ariel, I…feel it is my duty to ask…why you've come to a border crossing such as this with such a small retinue."

"You weren't told anything in advance?"

I knew there had to be something strange going on here, of course, and

when I searched my memory based on what Ariel said, an event from about a month before this flashed through my mind.

The individual in overall command of this checkpoint was not myself, of course, nor was it my direct superior, the Senior Border Control Officer. It was a noble who also served as the mayor of a nearby town, the closest place where travelers could find lodgings. The man could go months without showing his face here, but he'd ride over to give us a few orders when he felt the need.

On his last visit, he'd told us: "Within the next few months, a certain very noble personage may pay us a visit here." Based on the phrase "noble personage," I'd imagined this would involve dozens of carriages surrounded by swarms of attendants, so I hadn't even remembered the incident until I actually saw the princess.

"I was told that a very noble personage might be coming, yes…"

"And was that *all* you were told?"

Her question brought my memory of that moment into clearer focus. The man had, in fact, continued: "This personage will most likely be seeking to cross the border and flee to the north. However, you mustn't allow this. Find a reason to hold their party back, and keep them waiting in town for several days."

I'd been ordered not to let her through. To stop her here.

In other words, to ensure her death.

This wasn't the first time we'd received an order of this sort. It was relatively common for nobles who'd blundered badly in the capital to try and flee north, and in such cases, the commander would give us similar directions. Sometimes we were told to let them through, and they'd make it safely to the north. But sometimes we were told to delay them for a while, and they would inevitably "go missing" in the forest just past the border.

I was born and raised in the capital, but I'm a commoner by birth. I know precious little about the royal court and its factions. Of course, I'm aware that the nobility as a whole is constantly embroiled in vicious struggles for power. I could tell that my superior wasn't dooming certain fugitives in exchange for money, much less at random. Those who lived no doubt belonged to his faction of the aristocracy, while those who died were loyal to

his enemies.

This lovely young princess had lost a fight against the allies of my supervisor, and was now on the run. That seemed the most likely possibility by far.

"What's the matter? Answer me."

For a moment, I was lost in thought.

It would be easy enough to smile brightly and reply "No. I was simply told to treat you with the utmost courtesy. However, there appear to be some slight irregularities with your pass. It might take a little time to sort this out, so could you please come back tomorrow?" That was how I'd always done this in the past. Finding some minor detail to justify delaying her wouldn't pose me any difficulty.

But at the same time, I wondered if that was what I *ought* to do.

What was the purpose of the work I did here, at this dull border posting?

I certainly wasn't "serving my country" in any appreciable way. The very idea was preposterous. Not once in all the time I'd spent on the job had such a thought even crossed my mind.

And yet, for all my cynicism, there had been one solitary moment in my life when I'd felt some genuine patriotic zeal. As I told you earlier, that was at my graduation ceremony, when I first laid eyes on Princess Ariel. On that day, I'd truly thought of myself as one small part of a proud, great country. The thought of serving it, and her, had brought me joy.

Now that I'd recalled those feelings, I had to ask myself: Was I really willing to step back and leave this young princess to her fate?

The answer was immediate and decisive. I felt no need to hesitate. "I was told to stop that noble personage here, and ensure they spent several days waiting at the nearby town."

All of the princess' guards reacted visibly to these words, but Ariel herself remained totally calm and unperturbed. "I see. What do you intend to do, then?"

"Nothing in particular."

“You’re not going to carry out your orders? No matter how strange they may be, ignoring them could get your head chopped off.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle softly at the bluntness of her words. “My orders, miss? Not sure what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard of any ‘very noble personage’ heading to a foreign country with a single shabby horse-cart and fewer than ten guards.”

“Oh?”

“At the moment, I’m just dealing with a rather pompous young lady whose name I don’t even know. Would you mind telling me who you are, incidentally?”

Princess Ariel laughed in what sounded like genuine amusement. Perhaps she was enjoying this farce nearly as much as I was. “I am Ariel Canalusa. The only child of a low-rank noble, as it happens.”

“Very well then, Miss Canalusa. What brings you to the north?”

“I’m traveling to Ranoa to enroll in the University of Magic.”

“Is that so? Well, I see no issues with your pass, so please move on through. Safe travels to you.”

“Thank you.”

With a small, graceful, and unmistakably royal bow, Princess Ariel stepped back into her carriage. The driver got the horses moving immediately, and her guards hurried forward alongside, looking somewhat nonplussed.

“Now then. Who’s next in line?”

As these words left my mouth, I realized that a number of eyes were now fixed on me. In fact, virtually every soldier in the area was looking my way.

I found myself wondering if I’d been too hasty about this.

All of these men were faithful to their duties. They weren’t like me—they were dimwitted fighters who’d been trained in the capital to obey orders absolutely, without so much as a second thought. While they were technically under my command at this checkpoint, at the end of the day I belonged to a completely different department. It was perfectly possible that their own

superiors had directly ordered them not to let Ariel pass through. In that case, my disobedience would have consequences for them as well. Since Princess Ariel was such a high-priority target, it wouldn't be at all surprising if their officers had sent word to the rank-and-file that she might be coming.

I steeled myself as best I could. It seemed plausible that these men would beat me black and blue before exposing what I had done. It had been my unilateral decision to let the girl through, after all.

As I bit my lip, one of the men slowly approached me.

This was the captain of all the soldiers in the courtyard. His shoulders were, by the way, roughly three times broader than mine.

He lifted his hand, wide and heavy as a frying pan…and then smacked it against my back.

I staggered forward, but much to my surprise, there was barely any pain at all.

"Nice work, buddy."

The moment their captain spoke those words, the other soldiers lifted their fists into the air and roared with approval. A few of them actually cheered for me.

While I only learned this later, practically all the soldiers working at this checkpoint are loyal fans of Princess Ariel. It seems she made a habit of showing up at military graduation ceremonies as well. Most of them had only heard her say a few brief words before this, but I'm hardly any different in that respect. I could understand exactly how they felt.

"Permission to speak freely, Officer Gatlin? We've all been losin' our damn minds from frustration since they dumped us out here, but you just put us in a good mood for the first time in ages! Ain't that right, boys?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Come to the tavern in town tonight, all right? I'm buying!"

As the captain thumped me on the back again, I felt a very peculiar feeling wash over me. Up till a few minutes ago, I'd been thinking of these people as…different from me on some fundamental level, you know? I'd convinced myself they were a pack of crude, unschooled thugs, not loyal subjects of the royal family. But that wasn't the case at all. Just like me,

they'd been dumped out here in the middle of nowhere and directed to obey some miserable bastard. Just like me, they'd been chafing at their reins.

And after I realized this…strangely enough, I actually started to feel some pride in my work.

Ever since that day, I've been on good terms with the soldiers here, and my job has brought me actual pleasure.

It's all thanks to Princess Ariel, without a doubt. Simply by gracing this checkpoint with her presence, she made it a far happier place.

After this, Officer Gatlin went on a long monologue about the depth of his adoration for Princess Ariel, which I've opted to omit.

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Now then. As much as I enjoyed hearing Officer Gatlin praise Princess Ariel to the high heavens, it wasn't the exact reason I was talking to him. "Did a group of black-clad men pass through this checkpoint in pursuit of her?"

At this question, the man's expression took a sudden turn for the gloomy. "They weren't…exactly in pursuit of her, I believe."

"What do you mean?"

"A group of suspicious characters passed through the checkpoint maybe three days before Princess Ariel arrived. I wasn't on duty at the time, and only learned about them later."

This was interesting. If Ariel's enemies had crossed the border first, they were likely waiting to ambush her as she left the country.

"Had I known, I could at least have warned her…but at this point, I can only pray for her safety."

"I see. Thank you very much."

Office Gatlin clearly hadn't heard the rumor that the princess was already dead. It did seem like that story had originated within the capital.

However, this alone wasn't sufficient to tell me if Ariel was alive or

dead.

I chose to keep gathering information. What I had at the moment fell short of what I needed to complete this job.

I started with the other officers at the checkpoint, and tried a few of the soldiers as well. Then I headed over to the nearby town and tried to find people who looked like they crossed the border regularly.

I needed to know what happened to Ariel on the other side of that wall. Had she made it through the forest in one piece? Or had she died there as the rumors claimed? I ran all around town looking for someone who could give me the answer…and eventually found myself a certain young merchant with a story to tell.

Bruno the Merchant's Statement

That day, I was busy bringing my wares south to Asura, just like always. I'd come down through the Red Wyrm's Upper Jaw, and was following the single road that runs through the Wyrm's Whiskers… Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, that's what everyone around here calls the forest up north. I dunno who came up with it, though.

So anyway, I was bringing down a load of…hmm. Can't really remember what it was. Probably some pelts you can only get up there in the Northern Territories, I guess.

What? No, it was just me.

Guards? Do I look like I've got the money to hire guards? I'm pretty decent in a fight myself, you know. Spent some time training in the Sword Sanctum once upon a time, as it happens. Err, what were we talking about again?

Right, right. I was coming down through the Wyrm's Whiskers. It was just me and my buddy Robinson.

Hm? You wanna know where he is? Heh. Out in the stables. They don't serve donkeys in here, I'm afraid. Anyway, the two of us were making

decent time. I was in a good mood, as I recall. Business was going smoothly, and I'd almost saved up enough dosh to buy myself a cart. Even those little ones for donkeys let you move a lot more stuff at once, you know? That was a real exciting prospect.

But then I heard the sound of clashing metal coming from somewhere up ahead, and my mood sank real fast.

It wasn't just the sound. I could *smell* something fishy in the air. I've been making my living as a solo merchant for a while, right? I've got a damn good nose for danger by now.

It's always best to steer well clear of trouble, of course. But like I said, there's only one path through the Whiskers, and I couldn't just turn back. I decided to head out into the woods with Robinson and slip by along the side of the road. I knew it would be smarter to just leave the donkey behind, but Robinson's my beloved business partner, right? Couldn't risk him getting eaten by a monster or something.

So anyway, me and him started moving along through the forest, making sure we stayed hidden. The sound of clashing metal got louder as we went, and I could make out people shouting, too. Robinson was a little freaked out, but he had me with him, so he stayed nice and quiet. The two of us have been through thick and thin together, you know?

What's that? "Enough about the donkey, just tell me what you saw?" Man, you're one impatient guy… But sure, whatever.

When I peeked out at the scene from behind the undergrowth, the first thing I noticed was a carriage. It wasn't that big, as carriages go. Probably carried three people, if you counted the driver out front. Most ones that size only take one horse, but there were two hitched to this one, so it was probably a custom-built number.

Hmm? Oh, you wonderin' why I'm so knowledgeable about this stuff? Well, I've been trying to decide what cart to buy for my donkey, right? The carriage dealer gave me the rundown on his whole line, and… Okay, okay, all right. You don't have to glare at me like that, man! I'll get back on topic.

Anyway, I realized immediately that this carriage had been attacked. I mean, it was lying on its side in the dirt, and some guys who looked like guards were fighting a bunch of other guys in black clothes. By the time I got

there, it was seven of the boys in black facing off against four guards. Two guards, or maybe servants, were already lying on the ground. Oh, and there were also four girls huddled up together by the carriage, trembling somethin' fierce. They were probably the targets of the attack.

The black-clothes guys had the numbers, but it didn't look like they were at a huge advantage or anything. Way more of them were lying in the dirt, after all. There must have been a dozen of them down already. I was kinda flabbergasted, actually. Wondered what kind of morons had sent a bunch of clumsy amateurs to do a job like this.

I had the wrong idea, though. When I looked a little more carefully, I realized the guys in black weren't bad at all. If anything, they were more skilled than the guards. In a clean one-on-one swordfight, those guys would have won every single time.

Huh? You want to know how I could tell? Try paying more attention. Like I said, I'm a better swordsman than y'might think. When I see someone fighting, I can tell how strong they are.

Anyway, this all struck me as awful strange, so I ended up stopping to watch the battle. And after a few seconds, I realized that this one guy on the guards' side was *seriously* slick. This was a kid with white hair, right? Pretty scrawny, and his only weapon was a beginner's magic rod. But for some reason, he was on a totally different level from the rest.

Back in the Sword Sanctum, I saw a few guys who were on their way to becoming Sword Saints or Kings. And let me tell you, it felt like time moved ten times slower for them. They weren't just quick on their feet; they could make snap judgments in the blink of an eye. This kid wasn't quite that good, but I could tell right away that his battlefield awareness was absolutely top-class. Whenever one of his buddies was in danger, he'd send a spell flying at the perfect moment and save their butt.

The guy was mostly just using Beginner-tier spells, too. I think he must have been carefully preserving his mana. He was putting in some seriously godly work, man. Your average magician couldn't have pulled this off in a million years. You'd have to be very well-trained in a specific way to manage anything of the sort.

From where I was, I couldn't hear him doing any chanting, either. I think it's possible he was silent spellcasting…you know, using magic without

the incantations. Never seen it before myself, but I guess there are people out there who can pull it off.

Anyway, it was impressive stuff. But I think the guys in black had adapted to his style after seein' him mow down half their team. And on top of that, it looked as if the guards were pretty damn bushed. The fight was more even than it seemed at first glance, in other words. I felt like it was close enough that if a single man on either side went down, that would pretty much decide things.

Overall, though, I guess the guys in black were a bit more coordinated. All of sudden, they changed up their whole strategy. I'm guessing they must have signaled to each other beforehand, but I sure didn't notice.

Up till that point, they'd been going with a straightforward two-on-one approach against the three frontline guards, with their extra man acting as a roaming wildcard. Now all seven of them peeled off and made a beeline for the white-haired kid.

The three swordsmen couldn't react in time. But the kid could. Somehow keeping his focus, he instantly set off a wide-range spell that took out two of them at once.

At that point, the guys in black scattered. Two of them kept heading for the white-haired boy, and the other three rushed right at the girls over by the carriage. They'd found the opportunity they needed to break through the guards' line.

The white-haired mage *still* managed to react. Without even looking at the two assassins bearing down on him, he whipped his wand over at the ones going for the women. Unbelievable, right? Normally, you'd be more worried about the guys about to kill you.

In the next instant, a whole bunch of things happened at once.

First, the white-haired kid let off a nasty spell that killed two of the assassins charging at the girls.

Second, two of the guards rushed in to intercept the two guys in black who were coming for the kid. All four of 'em went down together.

And finally, the last of the men in black pulled one of the frozen, trembling girls from the group and cut her pretty little head off.

Just a moment too late, the last of the swordsmen stabbed him from behind. Proudly holding up the severed head of his victim, the man died with a look of satisfaction on his face.

I'm guessing that must have been the young lady who the guards had been fighting so hard to protect.

The five survivors just stood there in silence, totally stunned. Understandable, right? I mean, they'd lost most of their pals *and* the girl they were trying to defend.

Now that the show was over, I quietly moved along through the woods. There was a chance the smell of blood might draw some monsters to the area, for one thing. And I didn't really want to deal with them asking me for help. Robinson and I made ourselves scarce in no time.

***

That was all there was to Bruno's story.

In combination with what I'd learned from Officer Gatlin, it seemed Princess Ariel had passed safely through the checkpoint, only to be ambushed in the woods just north of it, where the assassins took her life during a vicious battle.

The rumors were true after all. Just as the nobles of her faction had feared, Ariel was dead.

Still, there were a few mysteries remaining.

For example, what had become of the survivors? From what Bruno told me, five members of the party had made it through that fight. The status of Luke Notos Greyrat was unclear, but at the very least, Silent Fitz was still alive. That guy really stood out in a crowd, and I hadn't heard a single word about him heading back home to the capital.

There was a chance he'd taken some roundabout route instead of the one I followed here, but that would still have entailed crossing back over the border first. Nobody at the checkpoint had mentioned him returning, so I had to think he'd kept on moving north instead.

That didn't strike me as *too* strange, though. It would take some guts to

slink back home in disgrace after letting Princess Ariel get killed. Maybe he'd decided it was smarter to flee to the Northern Territories instead.

It wouldn't have been too hard to find out if that was what happened if I crossed the border and headed up there for a while, of course…but sadly, my field of expertise is "anything that takes place inside Asura's borders." I don't deal with international affairs.

Besides, my job here was to determine the whereabouts of Second Princess Ariel Anemoi Asura. Her guards were outside the scope of that assignment, so I decided to head back to the royal capital. I'm a city boy at heart, you know? I'm never too comfortable out in the sticks.

Still, I did manage to buy some rare booze from the Northern Territories off my new buddy Bruno. Once this job was all wrapped up, I was going to have myself a little party.

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You should've seen the look on the face of Pilemon's man when I reported my findings. It felt kind of good seeing a man who dealt in information way above my paygrade go white as a ghost over a few facts I'd scraped together.

Anyway, the case was officially closed, and I got my pay in full.

I decided to have myself a nice celebratory dinner to savor my pile of cash, the booze I'd bought from Bruno, and the memory of my client's face.

I headed over to my favorite bar, ordered some light food, and sat down to relax at my usual spot. You had a real good view of the whole place from here; it was basically my personal table at this point.

When I focused carefully, I could hear every conversation taking place in here at once. This was one of the more useful of my many skills. If you want to make it as a top-class information broker, you can't let any tidbit of news slip past you.

"So I hear there was a rumor going around that Princess Ariel got killed up north, huh?"

"Yeah. It's a real shame. I was a big fan…"

“Come on, don’t tell me you *believe* that crap.”

“I mean, it’s not like I want to, but…”

Someone was talking about the topic of the hour, so I glanced in that direction. A sturdy-looking guy was drinking with a significantly older man. Clearly, neither of them knew the truth. They were just clueless puppets, dancing whichever way the latest rumors pulled them.

The thought put me in an even better mood. Sometimes it feels really good to be a man who’s in the know.

“Look, I’m stationed at the checkpoint up by the border, you know?”

“Of course I know that, Uncle. You just hit twenty years on the job, right? That’s why they gave you this extended leave.”

“What a know-it-all. D’you know what I *do* in that checkpoint too? Hm?”

“Uh, no…”

The topic seemed to be drifting away from Ariel, so I found myself losing interest. I could see the barkeep putting the finishing touches on my order. The case was closed anyway, right? My next job was to find the best way to enjoy this booze.

“I work up on the lookout tower.”

Well, now he’d gone and got me interested again.

“At the very top of that checkpoint, we’ve got this magic implement that lets us see real far. We use it to keep an eye on the far side of the forest to the north, right? I’m the man in charge up there.”

“No kidding.”

“Anyway, word got around real quick after Princess Ariel went through the gates down below. All of my boys in the lookout crew were dying to at least get a glimpse of her, so we stared out there until our eyes were bloodshot.”

“S-so what happened? Did you see her exiting the forest?”

“Sure did. It was Princess Ariel, no doubt about it.”

That can’t be right, I thought to myself. Was this old soldier lying?

Could *Bruno* have lied, for some reason?

It didn't seem likely…but it was possible Bruno had gotten the wrong idea. Maybe the girl that last assassin killed wasn't really Princess Ariel. From what I'd heard, the Asuran royal family owned some fancy magic implements that could turn someone into a perfect body double. She'd likely used one to survive the attack.

I'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. I'd delivered faulty information. This was *not* good. I needed to get firm confirmation of this story, then tell my client the truth…

"Enjoy, bud." The barkeep dropped my food off at my table.

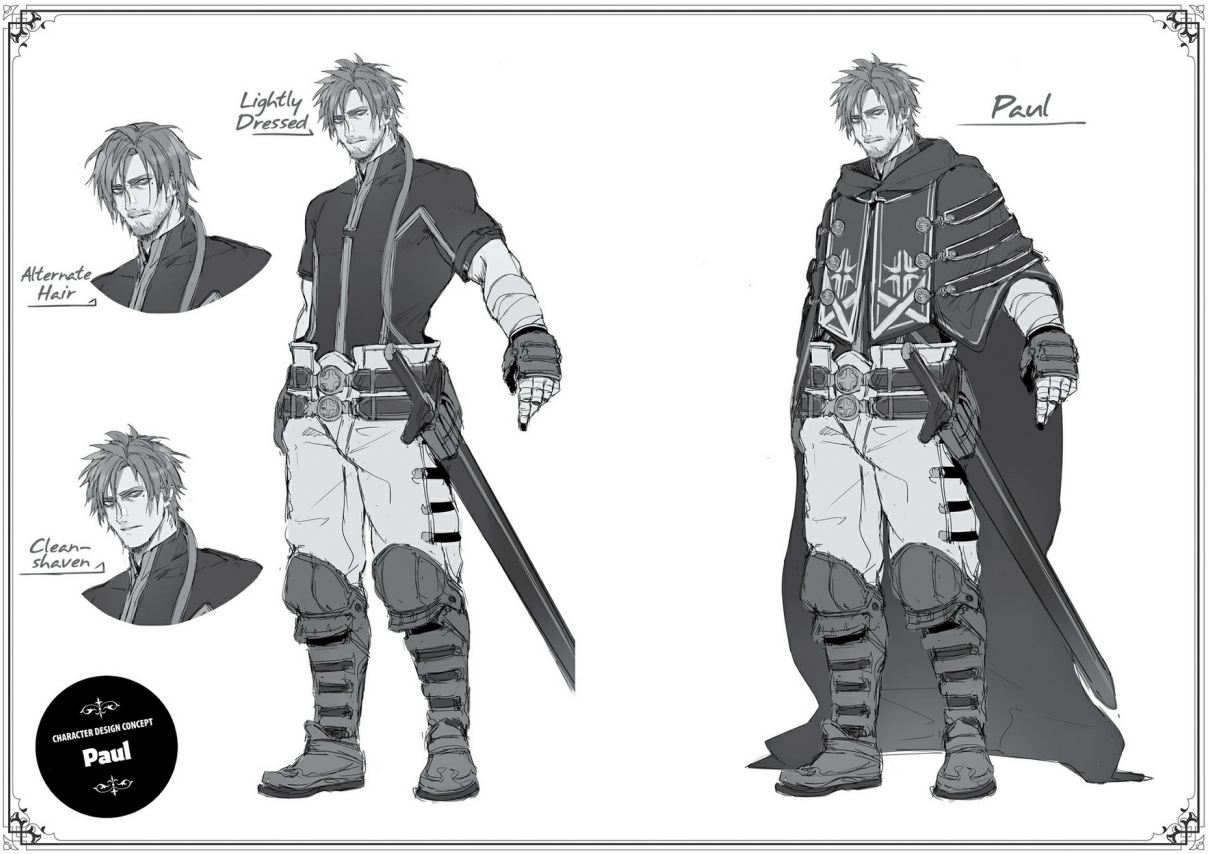
There was a plate of steaming hot grub in front of me, and next to it, a bottle of rare booze you almost never saw in Ars.

"…Ah, to hell with it." I'd half-risen from my seat, but chose to plop back down into it. If the princess was actually alive and enrolled at the Ranoa University of Magic, the truth would get around sooner or later. The last thing I needed was some stuck-up noble asking me for a refund, so I'd just have to leave the capital in a bit.

Seriously, though… Who would have thought the lookouts in that tower could have seen her from that distance? Even a clever boy like me overlooks a few things now and again, I guess.

In the end, the information broker known as Gustaf provided his client with misleading information.

As a direct result, Pilemon Notos Greyrat, the foremost member of the Ariel faction, was compelled to make a painful choice that left him in something of a predicament…but that's a story for a much later time.



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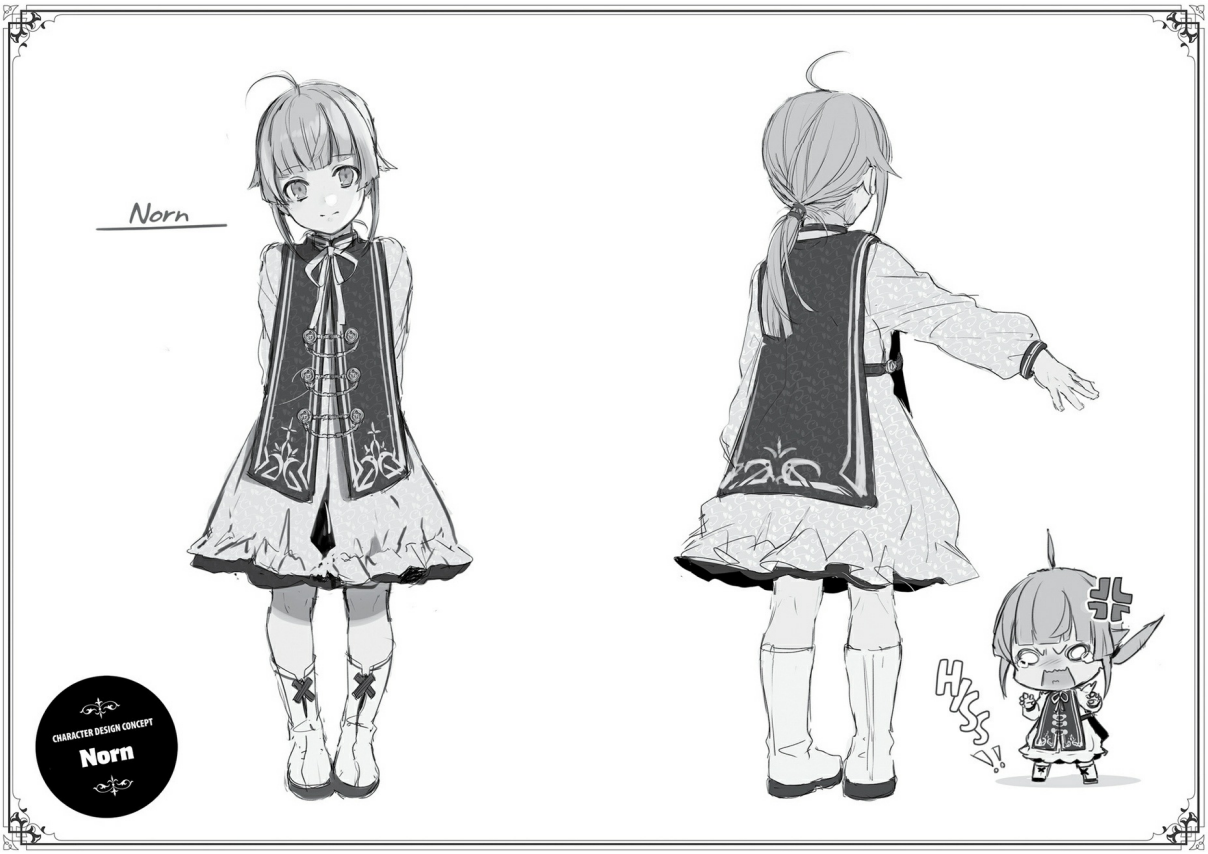
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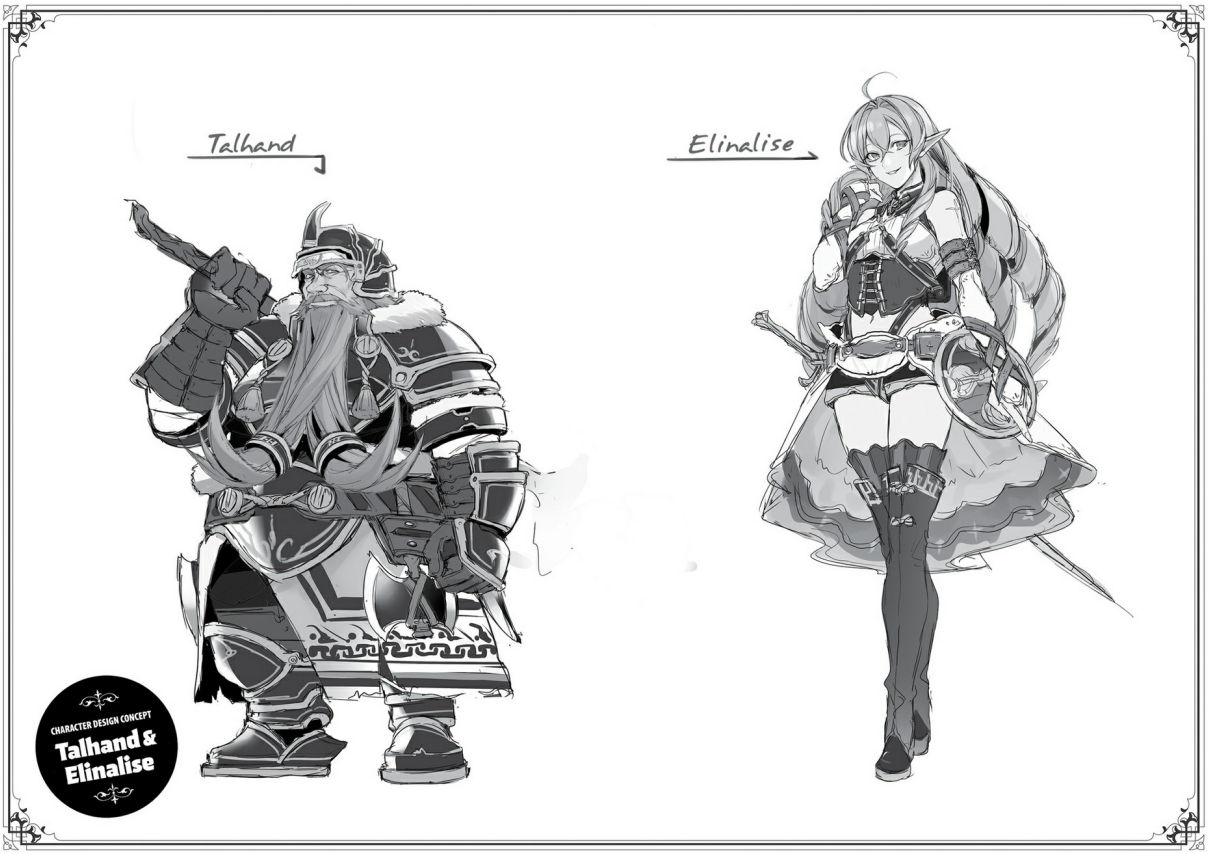

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