

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation



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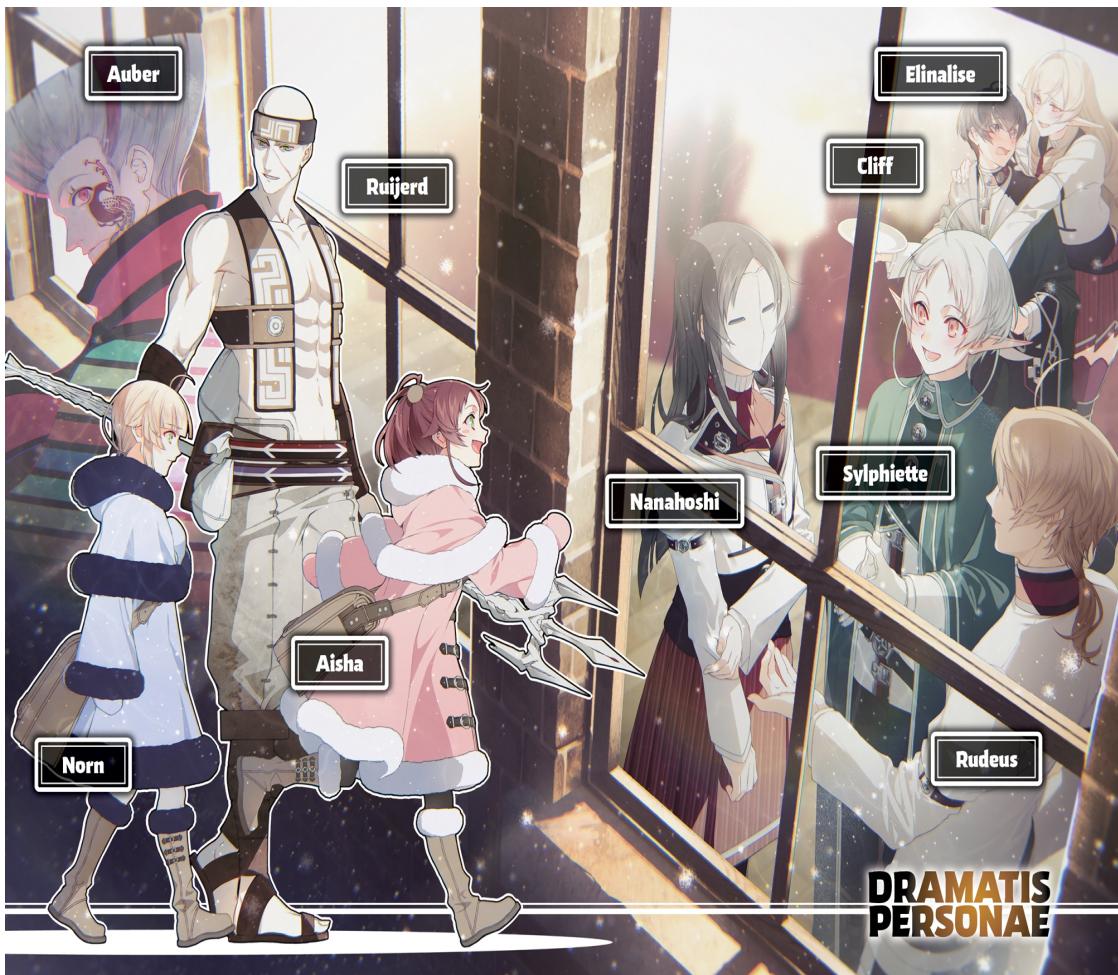
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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VOLUME 10: ADOLESCENCE – NEWLY MARRIED ARC

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“Marriage is the graveyard of life.”

—Shut-ins are zombies.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
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Chapter 1: Backing

I'LL PLEDGE MY FIDELITY to *Sylphie*, I thought as I looked at the red stain left on the bedsheets. *Sylphie* had given me something precious, and now it was my turn. I would do as she wished of me. This I pledged as I used a knife to cut out the stain left on the fabric.

The problem was, *Sylphie* rarely voiced her feelings. I could tell she wanted to be with me, but she probably wouldn't say it explicitly. Perhaps it had something to do with her being Princess Ariel's bodyguard. Should I talk to the Princess about it?

Preoccupied with those thoughts, I took the scrap of cloth I'd excised from the bedsheets, put it into a small box I created with earth magic, and placed that inside my altar. Then I put my hands together in prayer.

Finally, I felt human again.

The day I became whole again was also the day of our once-a-month homeroom session. Walking on air, I parted ways with *Sylphie*, who was walking slightly bowlegged, and peeked into the classroom. Inside were Zanoba, Julie, Linia, Pursena, and finally Cliff. As usual, Nanahoshi was nowhere to be seen.

“Good morning, Master.”

“Good morning, Grandmaster.”

Zanoba and Julie greeted me as soon as they saw me. It hit me then that Julie was pretty cute. She would be seven this year—still just a child, but already cute, with her orange hair that curled outward at the ends. I patted her head. She looked

at me in surprise, but immediately lowered her gaze and trembled.

It seemed she was still afraid of me. It wasn't like I was going to eat her or anything...

"Good morning, Zanoba. Julie."

As soon as I greeted them in return, Zanoba tilted his head with an audible, "Hm?" Then he asked, "Master, did something good happen to you?"

"What?"

So he'd noticed. Zanoba always expressed concern for me, so I wanted to share the good news as soon as possible. However, while it was fine to announce that my impotence had been cured, I'd be screwed if anyone asked me how it happened. I couldn't reveal Sylphie's true identity, after all.

I took a seat as I pondered the matter.

"Yo, Boss. Morning, mew."

"Morning. Nom, nom..."

Linia and Pursena took their seats as usual, Linia popping her toned, youthful leg atop her desk, and Pursena with her uniform so tight against her curves it threatened to burst as she munched away on a dried scrap of meat. I thought about how I'd touched the bounties of their chests, slipped off their soaked underwear, and peeked at the promised land that lay beneath. Suddenly, the two of them looked cuter.

"Mew?!"

"Fuck!"

They covered their noses when I approached. Huh? That was kind of a shock. It was probably that scent they were always talking about—the scent of arousal. I was finally back in business after several long years, so the smell was probably intense.

"What should we do?" Pursena asked. "Looks like the Boss can't control himself anymore."

"I thought he wasn't working down there, mew?"

“It must be my overwhelming charm. I’m such a sinful girl.”

“Th-then *you* be his prey, Pursena, mew! Leave our village to me, mew.”

“No, no. Maybe it’s actually you that he’s after, Linia.”

“B-but if you become Boss’ woman, you could take control of the entire world, you know, mew? You could have a daily meat buffet, mew.”

“...I-I guess I have no choice, then. I have to do it to protect you.” Pursena steeled herself after this bizarre exchange, and approached me. She batted her eyelashes adorably and hefted her breasts to make them more prominent. “Hee hee...I want you to love on me—ouch!”

I gave her a hand chop to the head. What the heck was that “hee hee”? Was she trying to make a fool of me? “Just take a seat. I’m not going to touch either one of you.”

Pursena lifted her hands protectively over her head and, with her tail tucked between her legs, took a seat beside me. It was rare for her to come within touching distance of me. Linia, on the other hand, crept to a nearby seat that was just beyond my reach. She was surprisingly guarded. This was the opposite of their usual behavior.

“Rudeus, what’s wrong? You seem different than usual.” Cliff cocked his head.

Apparently, it was true what they said about how having sex changed men. Though it wasn’t like this was my first time. “Different in what way?” I asked.

“Almost like...you’re overflowing with confidence? That’s how it seems, I guess?”

I glanced at Zanoba, who nodded in agreement. Confidence, huh? Come to think of it, the Man-God had said something about reclaiming my confidence as a man. So this was what he was referring to? I didn’t really think I felt more confident than usual, though.

“Well, everyone, thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I can’t get into the details, but my illness has finally been cured.”

My declaration drew some “oohs” from the crowd. Zanoba nodded with a look of satisfaction, and Cliff patted me on the shoulder. Linia and Pursena exchanged glances, while Julie just tilted her head in confusion.

“Well, at any rate, congrats.”

“Indeed. Congratulations, Master.”

“Congrats.”

“Congrats, mew.”

They were lined up around me and applauding, for some reason. True, it was a special occasion, but it was still kind of embarrassing. Almost like the last episode of a certain TV anime series. Maybe the order in which they’d congratulated me was the order they were going to die.

“But if Boss has been cured, that spells trouble, mew. The chastity of all female students is in peril now, mew.”

“Don’t get too close to him unless you wanna wind up pregnant.” Linia and Pursena were making obscene claims.

“How rude. I’m a gentleman.” And I wasn’t going to put my hands on anyone other than Sylphie, thank you very much.

Once homeroom was over, I headed to the staff room to sign up for supplementary lessons. I wanted to make up for the time I took off for our trip the other day. There was a chill in the air as I entered.

Vice Principal Jenius stopped me. “Mister Rudeus, did something happen?”

I guess it really did seem like something had changed in me. It was a bit embarrassing, to tell the truth. “A problem I’ve

been preoccupied with for three years has finally been resolved. I feel relieved now, that's all."

"Oh really? Glad to hear." He nodded and gave me a strained smile. "In that case, are you thinking of leaving the university?"

"Huh?" I cocked my head.

Thinking about it, he had a point. I'd enrolled here with the goal of curing my impotence. Now that that was done, it might be a good idea to head for Begaritt to reunite with my family. But...

A lot had happened this past year. I'd been reunited with Zanoba and we'd adopted Julie. I'd become friends with Linia and Pursena, and also formed a bond with Cliff. Then there was Nanahoshi, the girl from my previous world who'd been transported here. I had a feeling our meeting wasn't coincidence. The Man-God's real objective might even have been to bring me here so I could meet Nanahoshi, with Sylphie as just the icing on the cake.

Of course, Sylphie was what mattered most to me. As long as she stayed here, so would I. A bodyguard to the Princess was bound to encounter danger, and while I didn't have much to offer, I wanted to protect her with all I had.

Princess Ariel was currently in her fifth year. She would likely stay until graduation, but I wondered what she had planned after that. If she meant to return to the Asura Kingdom, would it be right for me to accompany them? Now that my illness was cured, I felt like I should touch base with Paul before I went running off across the land. I'd been periodically sending him letters since enrolling here. I had no way of knowing if any had made it to him, but if even one had, and he responded, I'd miss his reply if I left the university.

So I'd wait, for now. At the very least, I'd stay in this city until I received a response from Paul.

"No," I said to Jenius. "I'm not sure if I'll stay all the way to graduation, but I'll be continuing here as a student for the time being."

“Oh really? Glad to hear,” he said with a strained smile. I couldn’t tell if that smile meant he was happy or not.

Even though my impotence had been cured, Nanahoshi took no notice. We didn’t converse much, so maybe she didn’t really pay attention to me.

Even when we did talk, I often felt the generational gap between us. One time, I brought up the subject of a certain junior-high-school girl who punished people in the name of the moon. I was convinced Nanahoshi would recognize the reference, but she only tilted her head at me as if to say, *What the heck are you talking about?* Apparently, kids these days had never heard of Sailor Moon. Nanahoshi had even been quite the avid reader of manga and light novels, apparently. I asked her if she knew the show where characters gather seven dragon balls, and she said she *had* heard of that one.

In our previous world, she had been seventeen and I’d been thirty-four. That made me twice her age. She’d also come to this world ten years after I did, so our cumulative ages were even further apart now.

There was nothing I could do about it. It really was just a generation gap. As for not knowing *Sailor Moon*, that might just be a given, considering the show’s airdates on television. Still, it took me aback. Perhaps it was this lack of common ground that led the following question to slip out my mouth.

“Miss Nanahoshi, what would you want from a person if you were to date them?”

Her hand slipped badly. She crumpled up the paper she’d been scribbling on and tossed it. “What’s this all of a sudden? Talking about love?”

“Something like that.”

“In case I haven’t made this clear, I want to get home as soon as possible. Could you take this seriously? You’re always

chattering. We'd get more done if you'd shut up and move your hands instead of your mouth."

In spite of what she said, Nanahoshi didn't hate idle banter. In fact, she'd been perfectly open to a little chatting here and there as we worked, as long as it was kept at a reasonable level. The fact that she'd responded like that could only mean one thing.

"Does that mean you're one of *those* people? Someone with no romantic experiences?"

"Tch!" She clicked her tongue harshly. "Even I have been in love before. Although we fought and that was the end."

Come to think of it, hadn't she been in the midst of a lovers' quarrel when she was summoned here? I wasn't sure whether she loved only one of her suitors, or if she was starring in her own reverse harem, but irrespective of whether she intended to apologize or continue their fight, she still had to go home.

In fact, now that I thought about it, there was a high possibility that those other two had been transported here as well. But I'd heard no rumors of people like that outside of Nanahoshi, so it was equally possible they hadn't. Then again, the likelihood of survival after being thrown into this world all alone and mana-less would be... No, I shouldn't say that. Perhaps Nanahoshi had already made those calculations, based on how lucky she had been to make it this far...and what would happen to someone if they *weren't* so lucky.

Nanahoshi's lips hardened into a frown as she mumbled, "It's enough if the person you like just stays by your side."

It sounded like she was having a tough time. I shouldn't have asked.

It was lunch break, but I didn't go to the cafeteria. I had business elsewhere today—specifically, in the student council room. If I was going to be in a relationship with Sylphie for real, I had to let Luke and the Princess know. They'd worked to get the two of us together, so in a sense, they'd already approved of our relationship. Still, I wanted to make my intent clear.

I made my way to the top floor of the main building, where there stood a somewhat fancy door chiseled with the words *Student Council Room*. I knocked.

“Who's there?” It was Luke's voice.

“Rudeus Greyrat. I have a certain matter I'd like to discuss.”

After a brief silence, I could hear the panicked clamor of footsteps. Well, I hadn't made an appointment, after all. Maybe that was my bad.

“E-enter!”

At Luke's slightly flustered command, I opened the door and strode in.

Princess Ariel sat atop an expensive-looking chair, her beautiful blonde hair braided behind her head. Although she was obviously gorgeous, her body was quite average for her age. She had the same amount of muscle as any other girl, with breasts that were neither large nor small. Sylphie, with her sunglasses on, stood at attention beside the Princess. She looked very dignified when she was working. And dapper, almost like a military officer. The shy crybaby was nowhere to be seen, nor was the sweet, slightly childish girl I was used to. She seemed almost cold, or perhaps cool.

It made sense. If this was the image they wanted “Fitz” to project, then it was better for Sylphie to stay silent.

“It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Rudeus Greyrat.” I performed the noble's bow, took a knee before her, and lowered my head. I hadn't learned the proper etiquette to use when greeting royalty, but this was probably adequate.

“This isn’t the royal palace. We are both just students here. Please raise your head.”

I lifted my head at her request. I didn’t want to risk embarrassing Sylphie, however, so I remained kneeling. It would be wise to remain humble in front of my partner’s boss.

“So, what brings someone as widely renowned throughout this school as you, Master Rudeus, before me today?”



I could feel my brain tingling as I listened to her voice. It was pleasant. This was what people called charisma, wasn't it? Or perhaps she was a Blessed Child as well. I could easily believe there was a Blessed Child whose voice was like magic that mesmerized the listener.

"I'm sure Sylphie—I mean, Sylphiette—has already told you quite a bit. I came here in hopes of discussing the matter with you further."

Princess Ariel wore a serious expression. Although she'd retreated to the university, she apparently hadn't given up on the throne. At least, that had to be why she was taking such steps to establish connections with powerful people in her time here.

"Sylphie cured my illness," I continued. "I heard that you assisted her, Your Highness. So if you should find yourself in need of my aid, please don't hesitate to ask it of me."

Ariel slowly digested those words. Then she glanced over at Luke, who nodded before saying, "I thought you were avoiding the power struggles of Asuran nobles?"

"It's true that I have no desire to get caught in the midst of political squabbling. If someone I care about is involved, however, that changes things." I looked toward Sylphie after I said that. Her cheeks colored. "I can't stand around while she might be in danger."

"Aha." Ariel looked surprised. So did Luke. Had I said something strange?

Luke spoke. "You harbor no fondness for the Notos, the family your father ran away from? Or for the Boreas, who ordered you around?"

"I think it unfortunate that Lord Sauros was executed, but other than that, not particularly."

Something about this conversation wasn't right. Ah, wait! Had they assumed I hated the Boreas family? That wasn't the case at all. They'd treated me very well, and I owed them a debt of gratitude. Well, Eris had abandoned me, but that was a different issue.

“Although...Master Luke seems to dislike me,” I added.

Luke furrowed his brows. “That’s because you’re a thickheaded idiot who doesn’t understand how girls feel.”

“I won’t argue that.” After all, I hadn’t even realized Sylphie was a girl for a whole year. I had nothing to say in my defense of my thickheadedness.

“And you’re a piece of shit who toys with girls’ feelings, Luke,” Sylphie said in a hushed whisper.

That was a surprise. And unexpectedly harsh of her to say. Or was it just that she only acted shy around me? Luke and Sylphie had been comrades for the past six years, which meant Luke had spent more time with her than I had. That might be why she felt comfortable enough around him to not mince her words.

That made me a little jealous, to tell the truth. I wondered if she’d eventually reach that level of comfort with me.

“What, so even though you don’t have a shred of sex appeal, you’re going to take the girls’ side?” Luke demanded.

“I do *too* have sex appeal. Rudy thanked me, after all. Right, Rudy?” she quipped back, looking to me for assistance.

I didn’t mind hopping into their comic routine long enough to say, “And that’s all, folks!” But I felt a little awkward about doing that in front of Princess Ariel. I glanced at her, suddenly realizing that she had breadcrumbs around her lips. She must’ve been in the middle of lunch when I arrived.

“Please be quiet, both of you,” the Princess said.

Sylphie and Luke went silent. I got the sense this was a familiar sort of exchange for them both.

“Rudeus Greyrat. It would comfort me greatly to know that we can count on your aid.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said.

“Now then.” Princess Ariel glanced over at Sylphie. Then her expression clouded over, as if she found her next

question difficult to ask. “What do you plan to do?”

“Do’? What do you mean?”

“I apologize for being blunt, but I’ve heard about your objective in coming to this school. I was surprised to hear you were here for medical treatment, but you have now achieved your goal, have you not?”

“...I have.”

In other words, my impotence was cured. I had no doubt about that. I’d achieved my goal. Which meant my next order of business should be to reunite with Paul. That was what she was referring to, right?

“I still need to search for my missing family members,” I added. “So if your intentions are to immediately depart for the Asura Kingdom and claim political power there, I cannot be of assistance.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. I don’t mind if you hold off on assisting me until after your family matters are settled.”

I was grateful for that, though it did mean I’d owe her in the future. With any luck, I’d at least have settled things with Paul by the time she graduated, which only left finding Zenith, whom Elinalise had assured me wasn’t in danger.

“So, what do you plan to do?”

“Pardon?” I tilted my head a little, unaware of what she was talking about. I’d just told her what I was going to do, hadn’t I? Did we somehow go back in time? Was this a new Stand user?! “What do you mean?”

“Don’t tell me that now that your impotence has been cured, you’re just going to bid Sylphie goodbye and leave to find your father?”

“Of course I wouldn’t do something like that! I’m going to be with her!” I raised my voice without meaning to at this unthinkable suggestion. There was no way in hell I’d let myself be separated from Sylphie. No way; not me!

I understood why Ariel was asking, though. Travel was so time-consuming in this world that it might take months or

even years for me to meet back up with Paul, and while I might make it back before the Princess began her bid for the throne in earnest, it would be difficult to take Sylphie with me. After all, she already had her own job working full-time as Princess Ariel's bodyguard.

"Well then, what do you plan to do?"

"..."

"You wouldn't leave Sylphie to be damaged goods, without taking any personal responsibility, would you?"

"Of course I'll take responsibility." My reply was instantaneous. Partly because she'd provoked it, partly because my mind was already made up. "I'm going to marry her."

Sylphie clapped a hand over her mouth at my blunt declaration. Luke faltered, breaking his formal posture as the shock registered on his face. Even Ariel looked utterly dumbfounded. Had I said something weird again? Maybe they thought I was moving too fast.

"You're going to marry Sylphie?"

"Yes."

This *was* fast, of course. I'd only recently realized that Master Fitz was actually Sylphie. Part of me felt like we should date for several months, get to know each other better first. Also, if we got married, I couldn't take off at a moment's notice even if I got an urgent letter from Paul. Still, even taking all that into account, I meant what I said.

I thought back to Eris. Sylphie might leave me, too, if I beat around the bush once more instead of being clear and honest about my feelings. I didn't think I could take another blow like that. I was leaving nothing to chance this time.

"Marriage. A magnificent decision." Princess Ariel nodded in satisfaction and looked at Sylphie. "Sylphiette Greyrat."

"Wha?! Huh?! Greyrat... What?!" Sylphie became flustered.

"He said what he wants to do, but what about you?"

“Y-yes! I, Fitz—I mean I, Sylphie—will continue to serve you as I always have, Princess, and I also want to work hard as Rudy’s—I mean Rudeus’—wife!”

“Now that Rudeus has said he will take you as his wife, isn’t my protection unnecessary?”

“Princess Ariel, please don’t say that.”

“...Thank you.” After a meaningful moment of silence, Ariel pushed Sylphie gently.

Sylphie came over to me, scratching at her ear in embarrassment. How cute. It made me want to lick her ear. I’d hold back for now; we were in front of Princess Ariel, after all. “Um, uh, um, R-Rudy, um, I look forward to our future together.”

“Yeah, me too.” We awkwardly bowed at each other.

For a few minutes Sylphie fidgeted before looking back. She and the Princess locked eyes. Then the Princess suddenly spoke. “Sylphie, since you’re going to be Rudeus’ wife, you don’t need to dress like a man anymore. Return to dressing like a woman.”

I broke in. “But without Master Fitz as a disguise, she ___”

“In exchange, Rudeus, I will make use of your name. There isn’t a person around these parts who hasn’t heard of you, and many may jump to their own conclusions once they learn I’ve handed you my right-hand woman.”

She probably meant that since Sylphie and I would be together, people might think I was linked to the Princess. So instead of making use of my magical powers, she would make use of my reputation. The end result was about the same, but the way she framed it was entertaining.

“I would be fine with serving you in an official capacity, as well.” I did have to reunite with Paul at some point, but that was a separate matter. I was fine with her making a definitive declaration about my loyalties—if not as a sympathizer to her cause, but rather someone connected to her through Sylphie.

“Unnecessary. Your power is far too great for my hands to contain.”

Not sure I'm that strong, I thought doubtfully. Still, it'd be a pain to have to follow her around and run her errands. I decided to take her word for it.

“And of course, if anything should happen to you, you're free to drop my name as need be. Despite my current circumstances, the name of the Second Princess of the Asura Kingdom may prove useful to you.”

“I appreciate that.” It never hurt to have more friends in high places. Not that I was getting all this for free. I had little doubt she would hesitate to call upon my aid when she was ready to make her move, but decided not to dwell on that part for now.

Sylphie took off her sunglasses, bowed her head and said, “Princess Ariel, Luke...thank you for everything you've done for me.”

I followed her example and bowed as well.

And so, I became a part of Ariel's inner circle—and engaged to Sylphie.

Chapter 2: Things to Prepare Before Marriage (Part 1)

MARRIAGE. A domain unexplored in my previous life. The prospect made me anxious. As important as this was to me, could I really go off and get married without resolving things with my family? They'd probably forgive me if marriage was the reason for my delay, though. Besides, I was looking forward to all that a marriage would entail. Just thinking about sinking my fangs into that sweet young girl made my mouth start watering...though I would let Sylphie set the pace, of course.

There was just one problem. Now that I thought about it, I didn't know how marriage worked in this world. I'd never seen a wedding ceremony before. Paul didn't have one when he married Lilia, just a celebratory party to which the whole village had been invited. The nobles probably threw similar parties when an engagement was announced, but I'd never seen an actual wedding ceremony.

What did "marriage" even mean? What was a married man supposed to do? I'd spent sixteen years in this world, and still didn't know something so basic.

No, wait. It was fine that I didn't know. I could learn. If I didn't know the answers myself, I could just ask.

I started by asking Zanoba—twenty-six years old and already divorced—about it during dinner in the cafeteria.

"Marriage, huh? When I got married, I sent a gift of livestock, troops, and food to my partner's household," Zanoba said. It was customary in the Shirone Kingdom for the man to send celebratory gifts to the bride's family.

"But you're a prince. Shouldn't you be the one receiving gifts?"

“Hm? Whether you’re royalty or not makes no difference. The man is obviously the one who should be sending gifts.”

That was when Cliff stuck his nose in. “It’s the opposite in Millis. The woman is given a dowry to provide to her husband.”

He’d been eating dinner with us pretty often of late. He didn’t have many friends, so he was probably lonely.

“Hmm,” I said. “Isn’t the girl’s family losing out on quite a lot, then?”

“In exchange, the man is bound to provide assistance should his wife’s family ever require it.”

“So that’s how it works.” Both Millis and Shirone seemed to emphasize a strong connection between the families.

“But marriage customs vary by race,” Cliff continued.

“What about elves?” I asked.

“I have yet to marry Lise, so I don’t know. I promised to wait until I remove her curse. She’s not like most elves, though, so I doubt she’ll be too fussy about maintaining tradition.” He had a long wait ahead of him, then.

All this discussion, and still no mention of a ceremony. I was starting to think the concept didn’t exist in this world. “So, if I were to get married to someone, what would I need?”

“Let’s see... First off, a house, right?” Cliff suggested.

“Indeed.” Zanoba nodded in agreement.

“What? A house, right off the bat?” I asked, a bit incredulous.

“Duh. Why are you getting married if you don’t even have a house?”

A glance at Zanoba, who nodded along to Cliff’s words, told me he felt the same. Come to think of it, Paul had moved to Buena Village when he got married. Until that point, he’d

been an adventurer living in an inn, and had to enlist Philip's help to obtain a house and steady work.

"Besides, girls can't go into the boys' dorm. Normally, couples marry and leave the dorms, or hold off until graduation to get married."

Now that he mentioned it, it was true that I hadn't heard of any married couples living in the dormitories. There wasn't a special dormitory for married couples either.

"It's a different story if your partner is a girl of high standing with her own place, otherwise it's dependent on the man to provide housing," Cliff added. Sounded a bit unfair, but that might just be what was considered the norm in this world. In that case, it was only logical for me to be the provider. In fact, my partner might be disappointed if I wasn't.

"Got it. So, a house first."

Cliff got a suspicious look on his face when I said that.
"Hold up. Rudeus, are you getting married?"

"Well, yeah."

"To whom?" Was it okay for me to say Sylphie's name here? Naturally her identity would eventually be discovered, but I decided to keep it hidden for the moment. "To the person who cured my illness."

"...Ah, I see. And their name?"

"Um, I have to keep that a secret for the moment."

"Okay. Well, if they happen to be a follower of Millis, let me know. I'm acquainted with the city's bishop, so we could have a ceremony, as long as you're okay with it being informal."

So the Millis faith *did* have something like a wedding ceremony, then! I wasn't a follower of Millis, though, and I was sure Sylphie wasn't, either.

"Master, if you lack the funds, shall I assist?" Zanoba offered.

“No, no. I’d feel super lame about relying on you for that.” Though I put on a brave face by saying that, I had no idea what the housing market was like around here. I hoped my savings would be enough. “At any rate, I’ll go have a look at houses in the city tomorrow. If it looks like I can’t do it myself, I may ask for your help.”

“Of course. I can afford to buy even the biggest house in this city, so you have no need to worry,” said Zanoba with a smile.

Royals, even ones from small countries, were on a completely different level from us normies.

The following day, I went to the real estate agency. The liege lord of a region was generally the one who offered home loans to residents, but there was no clear regional lord in Sharia. Instead, the Three Magic Nations and the Magicians’ Guild jointly administered the territory through the establishment of a real estate agency that would resolve any problems that arose. As for what those “problems” might be, I had no idea.

I referred to it as a real estate agency as a matter of convenience, but its official name was the Land Management Office. They dealt with the buying and selling of vacant houses, as well as granting permits for people to build on empty land. When I told the receptionist there that I wanted a house, I was handed a list. Information about available houses was catalogued on each page: addresses, plot sizes, house sizes, the number of rooms, and the cost. There was quite the variety—from small, single-room affairs to veritable mansions.

“Hmm...”

To be honest, I had no idea how big a house I should buy. Something with a garden and room for a big dog might be best...or maybe a townhouse apartment? I didn’t mind living

somewhere small, but Sylphie was the Princess' bodyguard, and her good friend on top of that. That meant the Princess would come see her on occasion, and we couldn't be living in a shabby apartment if royalty came visiting. That said, my current savings wouldn't cover the cost of a posh residence of the kind designed for nobility. Maybe I *should* accept Zanoba's help? No, I'd feel awkward using him as my wallet. I could buy a decent house with what I had, after all.

Maybe I should've brought Sylphie with me. Shouldn't large purchases like this be discussed with one's partner? But in this world, it was apparently the man who bought the house and welcomed the woman into it. Sylphie might think me pathetic if I couldn't do this on my own. I had to show her I was dependable, at least.

"So a cheap, large house with lots of rooms." I searched the list for a match. "Hm?"

A listing at the very bottom of the stack caught my eye. A worn-out, discolored page advertised what looked like a manor of some kind. It was located in a corner of the Residential District, which meant it wasn't too far from the university. For the price it was going, I could buy it and still have some money left over. The only downside was its age.

"What about this one? Why's it so cheap?"

The employee I asked gave me a troubled smile. "To be honest, that manor is cursed."

"Cursed, you say?"

"It's said you can hear a creaking sound in the middle of the night, but if you search for the source, you'll find nothing. The previous owner passed it off as the house just rattling because of the wind...and then the next day, they were brutally murdered."

Seriously? Then again, tales about cursed manors haunted by evil spirits were a dime a dozen. "You didn't perform an exorcism?"

"We did put in a request with the Adventurers' Guild, but...the first people to take it up were brutally murdered, too."

No one's wanted to take the quest ever since.”

He went on to mention that the request they'd submitted was E-ranked. They'd wanted to raise its rank, but hadn't been granted the necessary funds. Add in the existence of some discord between them and the Adventurers' Guild, and it seemed there were a lot of complicated factors at play.

“What about the Magicians' Guild?”

“They said real estate isn't their jurisdiction, so we should figure it out ourselves.”

“What if I were able to successfully cleanse the place? Would you give it to me free of charge?”

The employee gave me a look as if to ask, *What the hell are you smoking?*

“Sorry,” I said. “How about a provisional contract, then? I'll check out the place myself in the next couple of days. If I decide I like it, then we'll make the sale official. Will that work?”

“Please write your name here, then.”

I'd failed in my attempt to haggle, but pressed on anyway, signing my name where I was told. There was a place where you could list a guarantor, and I went ahead and put down Princess Ariel's and Badigadi's names. Then I submitted it.

After taking a look, the employee went pale and retreated to the back. Almost immediately someone who looked like the manager appeared, rubbing their hands. I must be pretty famous to get this kind of treatment just from listing my name. Wait, maybe this was actually the effect of using Princess Ariel's and Badigadi's names? Or maybe a combination of all three?

After a bit of discussion, I successfully reduced the asking price by half. Apparently, I'd turned into a fussy VIP customer despite having no intention of being anything of the sort.

A few days later, I arrived at the manor in question. It had been built over a century ago, but the building itself looked solid. Mana was infused in all kinds of things in this world, so perhaps there was some in the structure that protected it from decay?

The manor's frame was constructed of mud and stone, with wooden flooring. Moss and ivy grew along the walls, but aside from that it was beautiful. I'd imagined something more dilapidated.

"Shall we go in, Mister Zanoba? Mister Cliff?"

I might be an A-ranked adventurer, but I wasn't cocksure enough to waltz alone into an unfamiliar and possibly haunted place. I'd asked Zanoba to accompany me and act as my trusty shield. If a knife-wielding, red-haired doll popped out of nowhere to attack us, he'd put a quick stop to it. Cliff had gotten this look in his eyes like he wanted to come along, so I invited him to join us, too. He was a genius in Advanced-tier divine magic, so if we really were up against evil spirit-type monsters, he would definitely come in handy.

"A respectable house. It seems a bit small, but I suppose this size is appropriate," Zanoba commented.

Cliff disagreed. "Don't you think this is way too big for just two people? You know you can buy something small to begin with, and save up to move when it becomes too cramped for you?"

If I split the difference, that meant this place was the perfect size. "Thanks to its special circumstances, this place wasn't that expensive. Now, let's go in."

"If you're okay with this place, Master, then I have nothing more to say about it," Zanoba said as he bravely led the way forward. He was holding a club, a weapon I'd prepared for him. I figured we didn't want to go in unarmed, but as Zanoba himself admitted, his superhuman strength meant he'd break any weapon placed in his hands. So, I I used

my magic to make him a club. If he broke it, at least it had been free.

Cliff was in the center. He had an expensive-looking staff held tightly in his hands as he whipped his head back and forth, surveying the area. He was probably trying to be vigilant, but to me it just looked like he was terrified.

Finally, I took up the rear, providing offensive abilities from the back. In this party, the most important thing was to protect Cliff, as he was our healer and could provide some firepower as well. As the most experienced member of our team, it was safest to have me watching our backs.

We walked down the cracked stone pathway and arrived at the entrance. The wooden doors were cracked and the hinge on one side was broken. That would need repairing.

“I don’t think we’re in danger of stepping into any traps, but still, exercise extreme caution,” I urged, activating my Eye of Foresight.

“Yes, Master.”

Zanoba put his hand on the knob, then ripped it right off the frame. Without hesitation.

“Okay, don’t just start breaking things,” I chided.

“My apologies. The door was bent and wouldn’t open. I am sure you would need to repair it anyway.”

“Well, give me a heads-up next time, okay?”

“Yes, Master,” Zanoba replied. At least he had his good manners going for him.

We finally entered the house. The first room was the lobby. Before us, a staircase led to the next floor, with doors to the left and right. Hallways led deeper into the house on either side of the staircase. There wasn’t much dust, so the real estate agency must have been periodically cleaning the place. It might look like a haunted house from the outside, but now that we were inside, I could see it had excellent natural lighting. This was a nice place.

“Master, how shall we go about this?”

“We’ll start with the right side of the first floor. We’ll look through each and every room. I don’t think there are any traps, but it’s possible that either the floor or ceiling are rotted, so watch your head and feet.”

“Understood.” Zanoba nodded.

Cliff looked back over his shoulder at me. “Y-you sure are going all out.”

“Well, I *am* an A-ranked adventurer,” I said.

“Y-yeah, that’s right, isn’t it?” Cliff seemed to be nervous about something. Come to think of it, he’d gone off on an enjoyable adventure with Elinalise the other day, hadn’t he? I wondered how it went.

“Oh yes, so how was that adventure you went on the other day?”

“...They completely ripped into me.”

“Well, they are S-ranked after all.”

The members of Stepped Leader probably hadn’t been *that* harsh on him. After all, they’d known they were dealing with a rookie. How the person receiving that criticism decided to interpret it was a different matter. Cliff was a self-proclaimed genius. He’d probably never had anyone point out his flaws before.

“What should I be doing?”

“If we run into an enemy, use basic-level divine magic to attack them.”

“G-got it. But what if they’re not a spirit?” he asked.

“In that case, just stay back. Either Zanoba or I will handle it.” Cliff looked a bit indignant the moment I said that, so I knew I’d better follow up with something. “Your magic is so strong that you might damage the house.”

He seemed satisfied with that explanation, thankfully. It was best to have a beginner like him focus on one thing at a time.

“Zanoba, there’s a possibility—however slim—that there’s a monster lurking here that can use magic. Keep your guard up.”

“Just leave everything to me.” To my surprise, Zanoba was completely unafraid. He had a warrior’s spirit, which was heartening.

The door on the right led to a spacious room with a floor area over twenty tatami mats wide. There was lots of sunlight, and a large fireplace. It could either be a dining or living room.

The fireplace was what grabbed my attention. “Master Cliff, is this fireplace a magical implement?”

“N-not sure. I’ll take a look.” Cliff tried to peek inside.

“Wait. There might be something in there.” I stopped him, examining the fireplace myself. Something was off, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. “Hm.”

The frigid winters here made a fireplace essential. If this one was magical, it could heat the entire house. If it wasn’t, I’d consider remodeling it. Although I had a hard time giving up on the idea of Sylphie and I holding each other’s naked bodies for heat...

“I’ll blow some air through it. If there is a monster inside, it might come flying out at us, so stay alert.” Having put the two of them on their guard, I conjured magic into the fireplace’s chimney, scouring it with a strong gust of wind.

Nothing happened. I strained my ears, but I could sense no movement. Some soot fell down, but that was it. I could send some fire up the chimney too, but if it was damaged in any way, the house might catch fire. For the moment, I stuck my head in and looked up the chimney. I could see the sky, albeit distantly.

Just to be safe, I used fire to illuminate my immediate vicinity. I didn’t sense anything lurking within. It was probably safe.

“I leave it to you then, Master Cliff.”

“Got it.” He searched the inside of the fireplace and immediately came upon a magic circle. No surprise, given that he’d been busily researching magical implements and curses recently.

“Does it look usable?” I asked.

“I can’t say for sure until you light a fire in it, but it seems intact,” Cliff assessed.

Good. “All right. Thank you.”

I nodded, and we were off to the next room, the innermost one to the right of the entrance. It had stone floors and something like a kiln, so this was most likely the kitchen. There was a torn piece of cloth lying on the floor next to said kiln. When I picked it up, I discovered it was a ragged apron. Maybe Sylphie would cook for me in here, naked except for an apron covering her. That gave me something to be excited about.

No, forget that, I told myself. We were here to weed out the evil spirit—or whatever it was that haunted this place. This was no time for me to be pitching a tent in my pants.

I searched the kiln and every other place where a living thing might be hiding. “Okay, nothing amiss here. Next.”

We discovered a door leading to the basement behind the staircase, but we decided to save that for later. We moved counterclockwise through each room on the first floor and found no abnormalities. There were some places where dust had built up, but the house was in such good condition that you wouldn’t think it’d been built over a century ago. Perhaps the previous owner had made some repairs to it or something.

“So this is the last one, huh?”

We were done investigating the entire first floor. From the layout, I knew both sides of this manor mirrored each other identically, save for the fact that the room corresponding to the kitchen in the left wing didn’t have a kiln. Maybe it was used for some purpose other than cooking, such as laundry. At any rate, we called it a kitchen for now.

Two kitchens, two large rooms, four small rooms, two toilets. It was almost as if two houses had been connected into one building. The only staircase was in the lobby.

“Which seems the more likely host for evil spirits? The basement or the second floor?”

“The basement, I would think,” said Zanoba.

“I’d bet on the basement,” said Cliff.

Since we were in agreement, I decided to head to the basement first. The door, located behind the stairs leading to the second floor, led to another flight of stairs heading downward. I lit the lamps we had and passed them to Zanoba and Cliff.

“I’ll keep a lookout from the middle with my demon eye. Do not drop your lamp, even if you think we’re in danger. I can’t provide backup in the dark.”

“Ha ha ha, I’m a Blessed Child! There’s nothing to fear,” Zanoba declared as we headed down the stairs. What a guaranteed death flag.

Be more cautious, I inwardly chided him. *You never know if an arrow will come flying out when you open a door or not.* Although, knowing Zanoba, it’d probably ricochet right off his body with a noisy *clink*.

We reached a door that led further into the basement.

“Hm. Nothing here.”

There were several empty wooden shelves, but it otherwise looked like an unused storage area. I shone my light around a bit, but I didn’t sense anything skulking about. There was kind of a stain on the wall, but it wasn’t human-shaped at all. The edges of the wallboard had rotted a bit, but that was it. I’d have to replace them later.

No monsters. It was a bit anti-climactic.

“Okay, the second floor it is then.”

We left the basement and returned to the entrance. From there, we headed up the flight of stairs to the second floor. The

wood beneath our feet didn't even so much as creak.

The second floor was also completely symmetrical. At either end of the two wings was a room connected to an inner bedroom. Apart from that, there were also a number of extra bedrooms, each about six tatami mats in size. That made six room in totals: four of those smaller rooms, and two medium-sized rooms which were about twelve tatami mats in size. The latter two were connected to the inner bedrooms. Finally, there was also a balcony.

“Hmm...”

Let's put a big bed in this bedroom, I decided. One with more than enough room for three people to lie in. Two normal beds pushed together might be good, too. No, wait—if the bed were small, we'd have to huddle close to sleep, which wouldn't be a bad thing. Then, when I awoke, I'd have her warmth right beside me. *And* her small breasts would be constantly within groping distance. Nope, not bad at all.

At any rate, the bed was important. We'd be using it every day, after all—and no, I didn't mean just for sex. People had to sleep, you know.

“Master Cliff.”

“Wh-what? Did you find something?”

“Do you think a larger bed would be best for a married couple?”

“Huh?” Cliff went quiet for a few seconds as he thought about it. Then he sucked in a breath. Finally, he sighed. “Oh, you. Yes, that's an important aspect of a relationship. But you're not doing your partner justice if that's the only thing you're focusing on.”

“Oh. Well, yes, I suppose you're right.”

For some reason, his words were compelling—probably because he was speaking from experience. I could very easily imagine Elinalise lunging at him, eyes full of lust, the moment the two of them were alone together.

I'd take what he said to heart, then. *Guess I'll go with a bigger bed.*

"Phew, nothing here, huh?" I said, heaving a breath after we surveyed the final room.

"I assume we'll be staying the night here, then. Just as we planned," Zanoba said.

"Yes. I'm counting on you."

I'd wanted to search the house ahead of time just to be sure, but hadn't really expected anything to come of it. According to the stories, the spirit only showed itself at night, accompanied by a creaking noise. Creepy. Probably just a monster that was squatting here, though what kind, I didn't know. I didn't think it could be too powerful, considering we were in the middle of a city. Then again, low-ranking adventurers sent to clear out the house had been brutally murdered. We couldn't let our guard down.

Perhaps the truth was actually simple: bandits using the house as a hideout, for instance. The creaking sound could be caused by them picking the lock to the front door. No—the front door was broken. Then maybe the back door? But there were no signs of anyone living here at all.

Yeah, I was stumped. Maybe I should have brought Elinalise and the others along, too. She'd seen a lot in her long life; she might've been able to help us. Though, now that my little man was back in action, I wasn't confident being around her wouldn't turn me on. I could just imagine it—I'd be keeping watch in the middle of the night, and a shadow would come creeping up to me, whispering temptations into my ear. *But Cliff is sleeping right beside us*, I'd say. And she'd respond, *So what?*

"Stay alert," I declared as we stood in the second-floor bedroom area. "The spirit might not show itself right away, so we'll be spending the night."

"Hm. I'm worried about Julie."

"I'm worried about Elinalise."

Julie was a clever kid. She knew her status as a slave, and she wasn't going to rashly provoke anyone—not when she was living in a section of the dorm primarily occupied by nobles. Zanoba had no reason to worry about her. Elinalise, on the other hand, was both popular and capricious. She might well use Cliff's absence to have an affair.

My thoughts went to Sylphie, who was probably serving as the Princess' bodyguard again, just as she always did. There was nothing to worry about. Wait, I did tell her that I was going out today, but I hadn't mentioned I'd be staying the night. What if she came to my room to talk to me before bed, and I wasn't there? She might hover in that cold hall, waiting for me, mumbling to herself, "Rudy sure is late."

"The sun's about to set," Zanoba interjected.

I could see the evening sun reflecting off the bedroom window. If I left now, it would be nightfall by the time I made it back to campus. Sylphie would probably already be back at the girls' dorm. Even if I didn't say anything to her directly, I should at least leave a note on my door, saying that I wouldn't be there tonight. Right?

All right, let's do it. Let's go right now.

No, wait. What if these two got themselves killed while I was gone? That wouldn't do. I was, after all, the leader of this party.

Just calm down, I told myself. It wasn't a big deal. As long as I explained everything afterward, Sylphie would understand. Although...wait. I'd heard something about this a long time ago. That all the instances in a relationship where you found yourself saying, "Just this once" tended to accumulate, ultimately leading to a rift between you and your partner. Crap. Now I had a bad feeling about this.

The solution was obvious: intentionally raise my own death flag. "Zanoba."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I'm getting married once we finish this mission."

“Indeed. Let’s finish it quickly so we can have a grand celebration here,” Zanoba said, his head slightly cocked as he nodded.

Wait. Now that I’d actually said it, my uneasy feeling had gotten even worse. If I said something like, “A celebration, yes! That’s exactly what we need!” in reply, I had a feeling I wouldn’t survive long enough to get married. Maybe I should put something hard in my chest pocket for now. Except I didn’t have a chest pocket. If a bullet from a .357 Magnum suddenly came flying at me, I’d have no way to stop it.

Cliff inserted himself into the conversation again.
“Make sure you invite me and Lise.”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t you be invited?”

“Just making sure. It’s one thing if I’m left out, but I’d be sad to see it happen to her.”

Cliff really couldn’t read the room...which was probably why he was always left out of those kinds of gatherings. I’d be sure to invite him, though, and Elinalise too, of course. Anyway, I was tired of this sausage fest. I wanted to hurry up, finish this, and go home to Sylphie and her breasts—*No, focus.* I could touch her as much as I wanted to later.

Day turned to night as I busied myself with those thoughts.

Meanwhile, back at the girls’ dorm, Sylphie had already caught wind of the fact that Rudeus had gone house-shopping. She was currently in her bed, arms snug around her pillow, rolling around as she fantasized the possibilities.

Chapter 3:

Things to Prepare Before Marriage

(Part 2)

WE TOOK TURNS standing watch. One person would stay awake to alert the other two if anything weird happened. I specifically instructed my companions that if they heard a creaking sound, they should not investigate, but wake the others at once instead.

We were sleeping where the previous resident had been murdered: the bedroom at the edge of the second floor. The location might have something to do with whether the evil spirit appeared or not. I didn't really think it was bandits or the like, though it sure would be nice if that was all it was. I could arrest them, turn them in, and add the resulting cash reward to our marriage funds. If it was just a regular monster, even better. All we had to do was search and destroy. Easy as pie.

“Rudeus! Wake up; it's that sound!”

It happened when Cliff was on lookout.

I immediately woke and jumped up, checking the time. To ensure that we slept lightly, each person only got two hours of sleep at a time, using an hourglass to keep track. Right now, it was on its second flip, which meant it was about two or three in the morning. The perfect time for an evil spirit to appear.

“Wake Zanoba up.” After giving Cliff that short command, I headed over to the door and strained my ears.

Kree... kree...

Klak... klak...

Kee... kee...

Oh crap. I really could hear it—quite clearly, too. It sounded like a creaking chair. It was actually kind of terrifying now that I heard it for myself. My lips pinched as I activated my Eye of Foresight.

“Aahh.” Zanoba rubbed his eyes as he let out a big yawn.

Once I confirmed he was awake, I put my hand on the doorknob. Then, slowly, making sure it didn’t make a noise, I opened the door. I looked down the hallway. Nothing. Just to be sure, I looked the opposite way too. Nothing. Then up and down. Nothing.

I strained my ears, but I couldn’t hear anything. The sound had stopped.

Zanoba got up and came over behind me. “How does it look out there?”

“I don’t see anything in the area.”

We could either search the manor or wait for something weird to happen. The previous owner had ignored the noise, thinking he’d misheard it, and then died, so we probably shouldn’t copy him.

“Let’s search for the source,” I decided.

“All right then. We’re using the same formation as before, I take it?” Zanoba asked.

“Yeah. Be careful.”

“As long as you’re guarding my back, Master, I have nothing to fear.”

He took hold of his club. Cliff followed him, looking nervous.

“Master Cliff, do you remember what you’re supposed to do?”

“D-divine magic.”

“That’s right. I’m counting on you.” Zanoba would be our shield, Cliff would use divine magic, and if that didn’t work, I would use my Stone Cannon. We were all set.

“Zanoba, let’s move out.”

Our nighttime investigation began.

I was already familiar with the house’s layout from our daytime search, and the investigation moved smoothly. First, we searched the entirety of the second floor. No abnormalities to be found. After that we cautiously descended to the first floor. We moved through each room, checking each place where something might be hiding, such as the fireplace and the kiln. Once again, nothing. All of the rooms were empty.

“Master, all that’s left is the basement.”

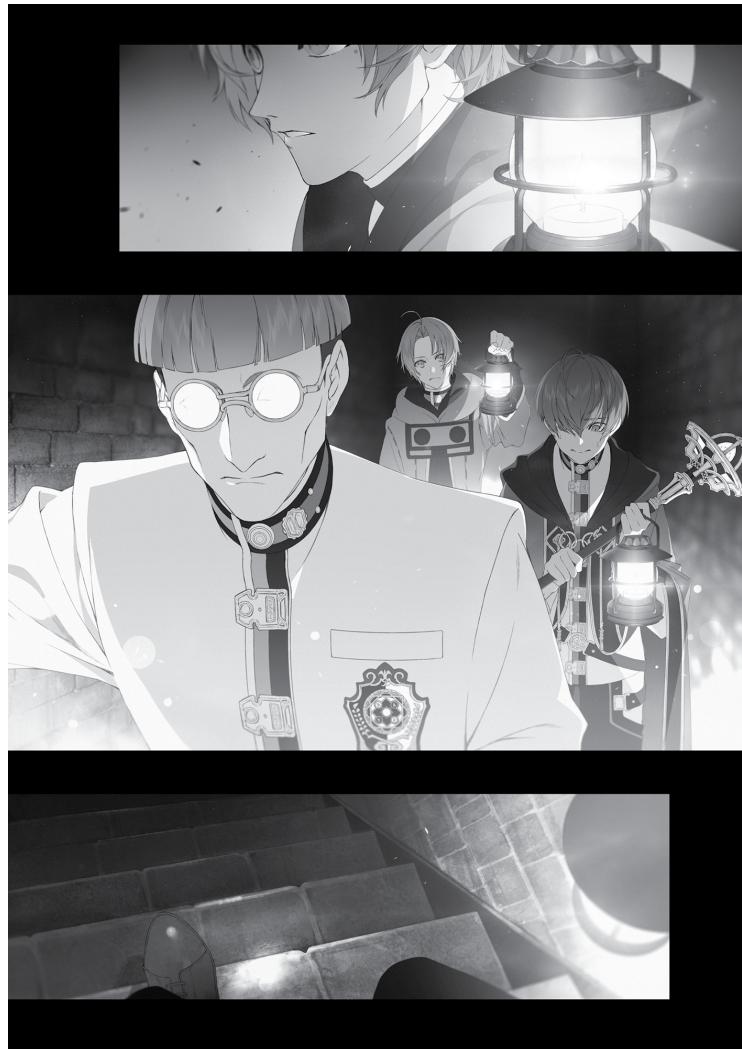
“Yeah.”

We headed down the steps toward the basement. It was dark. There’d been nothing here when we searched during the day, but now, I sensed something ominous below.

I was getting nervous. My heart drummed loudly. I took a deep breath, keeping my guard up in case anything attacked us from behind as we made our way down the stairs. It felt like we were descending into hell. Finally, we arrived at the basement.

“How is it?” I asked.

“There’s nothing here,” Zanoba answered.



I used my lamp to illuminate the area. There was nothing, not even at the edges of the room. Besides, the previous owner had surely checked the basement out. It was the most suspicious place in the manor, after all.

“Let’s return to the bedroom and prepare ourselves.”

We cautiously crept out of the basement and back to the second floor. We walked down the hallway to the room we’d been stationed in.

“Zanoba, there’s a chance it might be lurking in the room we were sleeping in, so be careful when you open the door.”

“Understood.” He tightened his grip on his club and gently set his other hand on the doorknob before opening it.

“...”

Nothing happened.

“Looks like it’s all clear.”

There was nothing. No attack.

“Phew.”

We could rest for now. Perhaps it was time to consider that the creature only attacked while people were asleep. Or while they were in the loo. Come to think of it, we hadn’t checked the garden. I should take a closer look at that tomorrow.

That’s when I suddenly looked behind us.

There it was.

It was at the end of the hallway, low to the ground, almost as if it were crawling. Only its upper half showed over the top of the stairs. It had its head cocked as it looked our way. At first, I thought it could be human. It had eyes, a nose, a mouth, but no hair or ears.

I also, somehow, didn’t get the sense that it was alive.

“...”

It painted a haunting, pale silhouette in the darkness as it watched us. For a few seconds we just stared at one another.

“Oh,” I started, trying to say something.

That was when it moved. Its body rose and it leaped onto the second floor. It was human-sized...but it wasn't a human. It had four arms and four legs. In the pitch black of night it came, brandishing what looked like a stake, loping silently on all four legs as it streaked at an unbelievable speed straight toward—

“Whoaaah!”

My legs gave out, and I landed on my ass while hastily launching a Stone Cannon. Fear that I might destroy my own house rose within me. I hesitated, but ultimately weakened the strength of my attack. The ball of earth shattered against our enemy's shoulder, but all it did was make the inhuman thing stagger. It came at me with its stake, and I used my demon eye to try and avoid it, but—

“Master!” Zanoba flew in front of me. The creature swung down hard with its weapon. It went straight for his heart.

“Zanoba!”

It didn't pierce through. Zanoba's blessed skin was too tough for the creature's attack. *Y-yeah! That's my pupil; not even a scratch,* I thought.

Zanoba grabbed the thing's face with both hands. All eight of its limbs scrabbled in the air as it rained punches on Zanoba.

Cliff peeked slightly out of the room to chant an incantation. “I call upon thee, God who blesses the land which nurtures us! Deliver divine punishment to those foolish enough to defy the natural ways! *Exorcise!*” White light from his staff struck the four-legged figure...but didn't stop it from moving. So it wasn't a spirit?

In that case, it was time for me to use my magic.
“Zanoba, get out of the way. I'm going to use Stone Cannon!”

“Please wait, Master!” Zanoba wouldn’t move. Even though the stake was tearing his clothes to shreds, he wouldn’t step aside. Why?

“Enough, move! I’ll handle it!”

“Please wait! Master, I beg of you!” Zanoba threw his arms around the thing, almost as if he were trying to protect it from me. It continued scrabbling, reducing his clothes to rags. His back, now exposed, looked so frail you wouldn’t believe he possessed superhuman power.

A few seconds passed like that. Then, minutes. The enemy continued its violent struggle, but its movements were gradually becoming duller until it stopped.

“Phew.” Once Zanoba was certain it had stopped, he pulled off his torn garments and used them to bind the inhuman thing’s hands and feet. “Master, let’s return to the room.”

“All right...”

Cliff stood in the middle of the room, trembling with terror. “D-don’t get the wrong idea! It’s not like I ran away. I just figured I’d be in the way in that cramped hallway.”

“Ah, I see. Good thinking.”

“R-right?”

His excuse wasn’t even remotely convincing, but then again, I’d gotten scared too. I wasn’t going to say anything.

“Master...”

“You saved me back there, Zanoba. But that was dangerous, you know. Unlike a certain Demon King, you’re not immortal.”

“This is amazing, Master. Here, please have a look.” Zanoba was extremely excited. He completely ignored me as he set down our bound attacker, which was making unexpectedly light clattering noises. Zanoba grabbed a lamp to shine upon it.

“I-It’s...a doll?”

Before us was a white-painted wooden mannequin, crumpled over. It had four arms and legs. Despite its strange shape, it was definitely a construct. I'd wondered why I hadn't heard its footsteps, and now I knew. Pitch-black cloth was wrapped around each of its feet. What I thought had been a stake was just a broken arm—two of its four arms were broken. It had a pitiful excuse for a nose and mouth on its face, with glass balls for eyes. Those cold and unfeeling eyes were what I'd been looking at before.

To be honest, it was entirely too creepy to bear...and it might start moving again any minute. Cliff was of the same mind. He had his staff at the ready, cautiously fixing his gaze on the doll.

"Master, this is an incredible discovery!" Zanoba, on the other hand, couldn't seem to hide his excitement.

"Zanoba, I don't care how much you love dolls—" I started to say.

"This one moved! A moving doll!"

When he said that, I realized he was right. This doll had attacked us. "A moving doll."

A moving doll! A doll that moved all on its own. So... an automaton. Like a robot. Like...a maid robot. Oooh! As those words flashed through my mind, the fear I'd felt instantly dissipated.

"You're right," I said. "This *is* incredible."

"You finally understand?"

"Yeah. I'm glad we didn't destroy it. Zanoba, your judgment was flawless."

"Heh heh. I knew what it was at first glance."

"I'd expect no less. Your eye for dolls has already surpassed mine," I said, offering my proudly grinning pupil some praise.

That aside... A moving doll. Come to think of it, there were other inanimate objects in this world that moved, like armor. This doll was carved from wood, but maybe I could

make stone figures move as well? And if I could find a way to make the figures move by *themselves*...and if I could develop a substance like silicon to give them skin, like humans...

The possibilities were endless.

“Zanoba, what should I do? My heart is pounding so hard!”

“Mine too. I can feel the tears coming!”

For now, we’d take the doll back home. Then we could research the mechanism that allowed it to move.

“Hey, you two, enough is enough!” Cliff suddenly lost his patience with us. I looked over to find him glaring at us, his staff tightly gripped in both hands. “This isn’t the time to be talking about that kind of stuff!”

“Not the time to be talking about *what* ‘stuff’?!” Zanoba grabbed Cliff’s face in one hand and lifted him up into the air. Ah, it’d been a while since I’d seen him pull this trick.

“Aggghhhh!” Cliff grabbed at Zanoba’s arm, but the latter didn’t even flinch.

“The doll moved! Do you not understand how remarkable that is?!”

“Ow, ow, ow! There are monsters out there like that, like armor that moves on its own!”

Monsters. Hearing that made me recall our initial objective. The reason we’d come here wasn’t to catch a doll that could move; it was to secure this house. Not that I couldn’t kill two birds with one stone.

“Zanoba, please release him.”

“Grr...but, Master—”

“Master Cliff has a point.”

As soon as Zanoba let him go, Cliff immediately chanted healing magic to recover. What a baby.

“This doll is likely the ‘evil spirit’ we were looking for.”

“Hrm.”

“And there’s no guarantee it’s the only one. Let’s find and capture any others on the premises. Maybe we can find some information about how they were made, while we’re at it.”

“I understand!” Zanoba nodded, finally convinced.

“We won’t be sleeping tonight. We need to do an exhaustive search of the house and figure out where this doll was hiding.”

That was how our third sweep of the building began.

We were looking for a place big enough to hide a human-sized doll, but had found nothing of the sort in our second round of searching the house. I thought it might be in the garden, since we hadn’t checked there, but that lead didn’t pan out. The doll’s footprints were clearly imprinted on the snow, but led nowhere.

I was beginning to suspect there was a hidden room in the house. It had clearly been designed to be completely symmetrical, so perhaps we needed to look for anything that *wasn’t* symmetrical. With that in mind, I searched the house’s first and second floors for anomalies in the layout, but didn’t find anything. The lack of light made it hard to tell.

“It might be better to look again tomorrow, when we have daylight,” Cliff suggested.

We agreed. Before we quit for the night, however, we decided to move the doll to the university. We bound its arms and legs tightly and put it in Zanoba’s room. In better lighting, we could tell that it was quite old. It had looked pale white before, but I could see now that the original white paint was beginning to peel, and there were patches of mold.

“Master, is this a...new doll?” Julie asked. I’d thought she might be afraid of it, but instead, she just seemed curious. “Shall I...clean it?”

When Zanoba brought home random dolls from the market, she was in charge of cleaning them up. Zanoba thought the best way to increase her appreciation for figurines

was to have her practice cleaning and polishing them, and it seemed his education was working.

“How do we get it to move again?” Zanoba wondered.

“We’ll look into that after we deal with the manor.” I understood his impatience, but he needed to calm down. For now, we sealed the thing up in a box made with my earth magic. I didn’t want it attacking Julie while we were away.

We returned to the manor, stopping to buy a bunch of lamps along the way. I decided to search the fireplace again, crawling into it to give it a thorough examination this time.

“Hm, this isn’t it, huh?”

I batted away soot and spiderwebs as I finished my search. Then it struck me...there wasn’t any soot on the floor. It was almost as if it had been cleaned, completely wiped away. Now that I thought about it, the cloth wrapped around the doll’s feet had been black. Was it cleaning the place up every night?

Now for the second floor, first floor and basement, of which the basement was definitely the most suspicious. We ventured down once more with our lamps. I left the door cracked open to ensure we wouldn’t run out of oxygen and lined up lamps so the space was thoroughly illuminated. If I were a children’s storyteller I might have exclaimed, *See, look, it’s as bright as day in here!*

There was a darkened square shape on the wall: a hidden door that we hadn’t noticed in the dark. When the house was first built, it had probably blended in, but as time passed, the wear from repeated openings and closings had darkened the area around the hinges. There were also marks on the ground where the door swung open.

“Well, let’s go in!” Cliff happily reached to open the door. I readied myself for a possible attack and trained my eye on the door, but then Cliff paused.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t know how to open it.”

I took a look for myself. He was right. There was neither a doorknob nor notch in the door to help you pull it open. It didn't seem like you were supposed to lift it open, either.

"Master, shall I break it?" Zanoba proposed.

I shook my head. Even if I was going to renovate the majority of the house, I still didn't want to damage anything if I could help it. I looked at the scuff marks on the ground. I had no doubt that the door could be opened, and that it opened toward us.

"Hm?"

I noticed something strange about those marks. They began three boards over to the left, not aligned with the wear on the wall.

In my previous life, we'd gone on a school trip to a former ninja village that had a hidden door. With that memory in mind, I tried pressing on the door's left edge. There was a creak, but the door didn't open. It was heavy.

"Zanoba, push this part right here."

"Hrm."

Once he did, the door creaked open. So that was the sound we'd heard last night, huh? There was a handle on the inside of the door, so opening it from within was apparently easy.

"I doubt there are any traps, but please keep your guard up," I said as we entered, lighting the room with my lamp. It was a cramped room with a single desk, a wooden pedestal, and nothing else. There were several books and a bottle of ink on the desk. The bottle was cracked and its contents had all dried up.

As for the pedestal, how should I describe it? It was shaped like a casket, its base hollowed with indentations that fit the doll's size and shape. Looking closely, I noticed a transparent crystal embedded in the wood right where the doll's head would rest. It probably charged itself by lying here —in a magical sense, anyway, not an electrical one.

“Cliff, can you tell me anything about this pedestal?”

He shook his head. “Nope; it’s my first time seeing something like this.”

I nervously reached out to touch it. I didn’t think it would zap me or anything, but I had to make sure it was inert. When it didn’t react, I turned my attention to one of the books on the desk. I could tell it’d been left here for quite a while, but fortunately there was no sign that bugs had gotten to it. Maybe the doll had exterminated them?

On the front cover was a title and a crest in a language I couldn’t read. The book’s interior was the same, written in a script I didn’t know, which meant it had to be Sky God tongue, Sea God tongue, or a language so obscure I’d never heard of it. Both the crest and the script felt familiar, though. Where had I seen them? The university library, perhaps?

As I thumbed through the pages, I came upon a number of sketches. Sketches of the human body, sketches of magic circles. As I flipped further, I came upon one of the four-legged, four-armed doll. “Zanoba?”

“Yes?” Zanoba, who had been stationed at the entrance, came over.

“I think this is the doll we found. What do you think?”

“I can’t read the text, but you’re probably right,” he agreed.

“Where? Let me see,” said Cliff, butting in once again.

The three of us gazed at the book, flipping through the pages. The binding was quite old and seemed like it might give at any moment. There were arrows drawn beside the sketches and words written beneath them, probably annotations or commentary. There were sketches of the doll’s arms, magic circles, and more arrows and annotations. The margins were packed with detailed scribbles.

“Judging by the sketches alone, this seems similar to the magic circles used to enchant magical implements,” Cliff muttered.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I can tell because I’ve been researching them lately. The doll must be a magical implement.”

“So that’s it.”

The previous owner—no, the first owner of this house—had probably been researching something forbidden. My guess was that he’d had the doll protect the house, which seemed to have been successful, since it had clearly been moving about the manor and attacking intruders. Then the original owner disappeared. Whether he’d left his work incomplete and moved somewhere else, or got caught, I had no idea.

Considering he’d left the fruits of his labor behind, there was a high possibility he’d passed away in some unforeseen accident.

As for the doll, it had probably stayed asleep here on this pedestal until something happened that caused it to awaken. It started cleaning the house and patrolling it, killing any intruders it discovered. It was probably programmed to return back to the pedestal to recharge once it was done.

This seemed like the most logical conclusion, at least. Though if it was patrolling the garden, then someone should’ve spotted it by now... Wait, no, we’d broken the front door when we first got here, and it had been the only broken door in the building. The doll’s original programming might have had it patrolling the garden, but it was forced to abandon that route when it couldn’t open the doors, leaving it trapped inside the house. And then we’d broken the door when we entered, allowing it to resume doing rounds of the garden—probably right around when we passed by and headed up the stairs, leading it to follow us.

Just to be on the safe side, I searched every nook and cranny of the house again and kept an eye on it for several more days. There were no more sounds at night. Once I was

certain it was safe, I went to the real estate agency to officially sign the contract. As for the evil spirit, I told them it was a fiendish monster that had roosted in a hidden room in the basement of the house.

Tomorrow, I'd have some people go in to start cleaning and making repairs. I decided to buy only the bare essentials of furniture for now. Perhaps it was just the Japanese part of me talking, but I felt like I should save the rest for myself and Sylphie to decide on together. Besides, we wouldn't actually be able to move in for another month, when the renovations would be done.

I could just imagine the excitement on Sylphie's face.
“See, this is our new house!” I'd say.

“Whoa! Rudy, it's amazing!”

“There's a lot of rooms inside, too. So we'll have enough space regardless of how many kids we have!”

“Incredible; you're even thinking about our future together! Take me now!”

“Of course, my love. I already prepared the bed for us.”

“Rudy, take me!”

Yeah, that wasn't likely to happen, but the thought still made me grin.

Wait. She wouldn't be *disappointed*, would she? Like, “Ugh, Rudy, this was all you could get for us?”

No, Sylphie wasn't that selfish. At least I was pretty sure she wasn't.

Anyway, this had been a fruitful endeavor. In just a few days, I'd gotten my hands on a nice new place *and* inherited one of the treasures that had been left inside it. I was fairly sure that doll was a magical implement. It was possible the proper protocol in these circumstances was to submit my discovery to the Magicians' Guild, but I wasn't officially a member yet.

Once the process was more or less over, I decided to move the research materials that had been left in the basement room. Zanoba carried the pedestal while I carried the books and such. We'd be using them to investigate that doll.

“Master?”

We were on the path leading back to the university when Zanoba called out to me, a serious look on his face. He had the large wooden pedestal balanced on his shoulder. It was incredibly heavy, but Zanoba had no issues lifting it. Just to be on the safe side, we'd wrapped it in cloth so it would look like a coffin to anyone watching.

“What is it?”

“Might I convince you to leave the research on the moving doll entirely to me?”

I met his gaze. Behind those round frames was a look of determination I'd never seen before.

“My mana pool is deplorably small, and my hands are far too clumsy. I'm even holding you back on the red wyrm figurine we're supposed to be making for Julie. I've barely made any progress on it.”

It would be easy to assure him that wasn't true, but I knew this was a concern for him. I couldn't speak thoughtlessly. Zanoba continued. “However, I feel like I can carry out research. Honestly, looking at the book gives me a sense of what the author wanted to accomplish.”

Hm. So he could intuit the thoughts of the doll's creator since they shared a similar passion, huh?

“That said, identifying and translating the language may take some time. Perhaps it would be faster for you to lead the search,” he suggested.

I wasn't sure about that. I couldn't spend all my time researching dolls, after all. It might be more beneficial to leave it to Zanoba. But... “Hypothetically, what would you do if that doll were to go berserk again?”

“Even if it were to go on a rampage, I could recapture it without injury. You saw that for yourself, didn’t you?”

True enough. The thought of it moving at night was a bit terrifying, but that probably wouldn’t happen as long as it wasn’t allowed to recharge on its pedestal. Leaving it in Zanoba’s room was dangerous, though, so it might be a good idea to borrow one of the university’s research chambers. One with a sturdy door.

No, wait. It was possible this really was forbidden magic at work. Maybe we’d be better off not doing this on campus, even though Nanahoshi was doing something similar with her research into magic circles. Maybe I’d have her put in a good word for me, just in case. She was an A-ranked member of the guild, after all.

“Please, Master! When your plan is fully realized, I don’t want my only contribution to be money!”

It seemed Zanoba had put a lot of thought into this. I was a little concerned about his single-minded fixation on figurines, but if this was how he felt, maybe I *should* leave it to him.

“I beg of you! Entrust this research to me!”

Apparently, he misunderstood my silence as reluctance. He’d set the pedestal aside and was now on his hands and knees, both hands spread before him as he prostrated himself in the snow.

“Okay, I get it. Just stand up! I’ll leave it to you.”

“Truly?!” He immediately leaped to his feet, an expression of absolute joy on his face. He sure changed on a dime.

“There’s a possibility you may be treading into forbidden magic territory,” I warned.

“Forbidden magic?”

“Yes. We’ll borrow a research chamber from the university for now, so do your work there.”

“...Thank you!” He quickly lifted the pedestal again, narrowly missing the tip of my nose. That was close! What had he planned on doing if he accidentally hit me in the head with that?

“Would the two of you quit drawing attention to yourselves in the middle of the street?” Cliff grumbled.

And so, Zanoba began his search into automated dolls and I got my hands on a new house. Next up: renovations!

Chapter 4: Dramatic

R*ANOA KINGDOM, the Magic City of Sharia:*

In a section of this city—heavily populated with students—was an old manor with many problems. A single step down the drive brought you to an untended garden, and then to a broken front door. The walls and ceilings had water damage, and the roof leaked when it rained. There was a fireplace that might or might not be in working condition, and the outer walls were shrouded in moss and shriveled vines. In short, it was less a house and more an abandoned ruin.

Even better? The house was haunted.

Surprisingly enough, a man named Rudeus Greyrat was attempting to move into the house. A former A-ranked adventurer and current student of the University of Magic, Rudeus had bought the house for himself and his future wife to live in. Peculiar taste, for sure. Not many people would choose such a place to begin their newlywed life.

One man took up this client's call: Balda of the Large Hollow, an artisan and renovator, and an expert architect affiliated with the Magicians' Guild in the Duchy of Basherant. He had thirty years of experience that encompassed everything from designing the layout of a building to actually constructing it. Having acquired his skills in the Holy Country of Millis, he had a number of notable achievements under his belt, such as constructing a detached school building for the University of Magic.

Balda was a bit of a stubborn man, but a good one whose skills were undeniable. He always had a hammer by his side, and if he found something he didn't like, even if it was a stranger's house, he'd tear it down and rebuild it. Such was the temperament of a craftsman. He'd beat anything into shape with his hammer, whether it be buildings or his own pupils.

That was how he'd acquired another nickname: Balda the Hammer.

"Aha. We're here. You must be Quagmire! Heard you're gettin' married!"

The person who welcomed the artisan was the client himself, a man known on the streets as "Rudeus the Quagmire," though more affectionately referred to as "Quagmire" by the artisan.

"Yes. I'm in your hands, Mister Balda."

Balda knew Rudeus. Talhand was an old friend of his, and he'd heard of Rudeus through Talhand's companion, Elinalise.

"I'm glad I was able to buy a house for my new wife, but as you can see, it needs some work."

"Well, why don't ya let me have a look?"

"Be my guest."

As soon as they tried to enter the house, the artisan furrowed his brows. "Hey now, what's this here? This doorway's in bad shape. Almost like the door got ripped right off its hinges."

"It didn't fit right and couldn't be opened, so we had no choice but to break it," Rudeus explained.

"Tsk, honestly," the dwarf spat. "You kids just like to go breakin' everything. You don't have any respect for things."

"I agree completely."

The client easily brushed off the artisan's angry words. He spoke as if he had nothing to do with the door's destruction. The artisan didn't care much for that kind of attitude, but he held his feelings in. He'd heard that Rudeus the Quagmire was quite the terrifying individual if you provoked his anger.

"So whatcha wanna do about the door?"

"What do you mean?" Rudeus asked.

“Quality of materials, design, that kinda stuff. If you don’t got a preference, I’ll just use my own know-how,” Balda explained.

“I don’t have any particular preference when it comes to materials, but I would like to request a sturdy door. Also, please add a door knocker.”

“Course. This is the front entrance, after all.”

After that they headed inside, where the artisan once again wore a look of mixed emotion. “This place’s really had a number done on it.”

“I-It has?”

“The floor’s oddly well made, but the walls and ceiling are pretty shoddy work in comparison. Almost like the basement’s the most important part of the house and everything else is just extra.”

“You can tell all of that?”

“Course I can.”

Balda’s eyes could easily tell what was well made and what wasn’t. The floor, stairs, second floor, dining area, kitchen and fireplace were all solid work. He could tell that a talented builder had exercised their architectural skills and magic abilities to create this a hundred years ago. But someone else had made renovations to the walls and ceiling. That’s where it’d gone haywire.

“Well, this can be fixed real quick.”

The artisan’s words were reassuring. Relieved, the client led him to a large dining area.

“A large room, eh? Sunlight in here ain’t bad,” said Balda.

“How about the fireplace?”

“Let’s see.” The dwarf’s eyes lit up at the fireplace that might or might not be useable. “This is a nice fireplace. Bit old, but probably best we not go makin’ adjustments to it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Here, look at this mark chiseled in here.” Balda pointed to the emblem that Rudeus was sure he’d seen somewhere before. “This is the mark of a genius craftsman. His name’s been lost to time, but in the Asura Kingdom, magical implements with this mark on them fetch a high price. Most of them are small gadgets, though. Who’d have thought the same person woulda created a whole fireplace somewhere like this?”

The client thought back to the crest on the diary he’d found in this house just a few days before, finally realizing that it looked awfully similar to this one. It seemed the original owner of the house had built these things himself.

“So, what do ya wanna do with this big room?” Balda asked.

“That’s a good question. What do you normally do with a room like this?”

“Well, it’s a big area. Plonk down a big table and you can use it for parties. Have the one on the other wing of the house as a spare. If somethin’ comes up and ya can’t use this room, then you can use that one instead.”

“So you wouldn’t use it most of the time?”

“Not normally, no. Then again, for most us livin’ normal everyday lives, one big room is more than enough.”

“I suppose you’re right. Let’s use the room in the other wing as a lounge, then.”

“Aye.”

The artisan and his client continued their exchange as they moved to the next room.

“Ya got two kitchens here, too. Though the second one’s got no kiln.”

“I assume that means it wasn’t used, then?” Rudeus asked.

“Got a drainage pipe, so it was probably used for washin’ and bathin’.”

“Oh, so a bathroom!”

The artisan looked at the kitchen, then the washing area. He checked for deterioration and clogging in the plumbing, then nodded. “This place is fine without any repairs. It’s pretty clean, for how much it’s been used. Though might not have been used much to begin with.”

“There is one thing I’d like to consult you about,” the client said, following up with his own suggestion.

The artisan’s eyes lit up. “You think of some interestin’ stuff. But I don’t have the materials for that, so it might cost ya.”

“I’ll create them myself with magic.”

“Got it all figured out, eh? Very well. Let’s see what we can do.”

And so the client entrusted the artisan with his idea.

The next day, ten of Balda’s underlings gathered together and the renovations began.

PART 1: DOOR

Early in the morning, a large door made of expensive wood shaved down to fit the frame was carried in. On the outside of the sturdy slab was a door knocker in the form of a lion, with a magic circle drawn into the edge of the door as a security measure.

“It ain’t much, but if anyone tries to force the door open, a loud noise will echo throughout the house,” the dwarf said. “Could be an alarm clock, too.”

The client laughed boldly at the artisan’s idea.

PART 2: WASHING AREA

Under the artisan's skilled ministrations, this area was undergoing quite the change. First, a partition was put in to split the area in two. The stone flooring was replaced by tile and canted toward a drain in one corner of the room. In another corner, a square stone box large enough for three people to lie in was installed. The floor below was slightly indented so the box could be set in place. Then a window was installed close to the ceiling. What exactly was this room supposed to be?

PART 3: BASEMENT ROOM

The client and artisan stood in the darkness of the basement.

"This is a nice basement area. The way it's built, you'll hardly ever get mice comin' in."

"Yes. Well, about this hidden door here. Behind it, I'd like you to create a room like this."

"Why're you wantin' such a strange—ah, forget it. I won't say nothin'. I'm a good follower of Millis, but it looks like *you* sure aren't."

Machinery and materials were brought into the basement to fulfill the client's wishes, and the stains on the corners of the hidden door were completely washed away.

Two weeks later, when the renovations were finally complete, the client brought his wife along with him.

"Oh, I wonder what it is you want to show me. I am so excited!"

"You sound like you're reading those lines off a piece of paper, Sylphie. Don't tell me you secretly gathered intel and already know what it is?"

“Oh? Whatever do you mean? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Rudeus flirted with his wife as she continued to pretend stilted surprise, and the two made their way through the snow.

“Apparently, while I wasn’t looking, the honest-to-a-fault girl I knew learned to lie. Now that I think about it, maybe I should be happy. But if you can lie so boldly now, then I’m worried you might lie to me again in the future.”

“This is your fault too, Rudy. If you use Princess Ariel’s name, I’m going to find out about it.”

“I apologize.”

“I’m going to get anxious if you don’t tell me anything, you know. I mean, you’re so handsome...” Sylphie trailed off.

“You think I’d cheat? That’s upsetting.”

“No, I mean...um, you know. I’m not very—I mean, in the chest area. They’re kind of small.”

The moment the man saw the anxious look on his wife’s face, a grin spread across his. “What’s this, you’re worried about your breast size? Don’t worry, this old man is a believer in equality. I don’t discriminate. Ha ha ha!”

“Old man? Ah, hey, don’t start suddenly touching me! People are watching!”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

By the time they reached the house, the man had grown quiet, like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs. His wife adjusted her sunglasses and grumbled in frustration. “Consider the time and place. Save that stuff for nighttime, in the bedroom! Okay?”

“Yes, Miss Sylphiette. I will never do it again.”

“Ah, b-but if you really can’t hold yourself back...then hmm...”

“Oho? You’re gonna have to speak up, kid, this old man’s ears aren’t like they used to be.”

The two of them took a look at their new house.

BEFORE:

Moss clung to the stones and ivy snaked its way across the outside of the house. The windows were shattered and the front door hung off its frame. The Rudeus Estate gave off an eerie aura, as if it were home to a witch.

NOW:

The previously moss-covered stones had all been cleaned and polished, and a new coat of pure white paint had been applied to the outer walls. The roof, previously so dull you couldn't tell its original shade, was now a bright green. Sturdy dark-brown double doors had been installed in the entryway. The doors had sparkling, lion-shaped gold hinges that looked almost like guard dogs.

Seeing this, the wife covered her mouth.

“What do you think?”

“Um, uh, what do I think?”

“I picked a color close to your original hair color for the roof. You might not have liked your hair, but I really did.”

“Huh? Oh, I see. Aah...” She kept her hand pressed to her mouth, eyes full of admiration as she looked over the house.

“Come on then, let’s go inside and see the rest of it.”

The two of them went inside. A mat lay at the front entrance for them to wipe their feet on—a representation of the client’s feelings about this world’s culture of wearing shoes indoors.

“To the right is the dining room. To the left is the living room. Which would you like to see first?”

“Um, I guess the ‘dining’ one first?”

“So you prefer the dining room! Very good. I’m sure you’ll take an even bigger liking to this place, once you see it.

Come this way.” The client’s nervousness was filtering into his speech, as if he were some kind of car salesman.

The two made their way from the foyer to a room on the left. The previously large, empty room had undergone quite the transformation. First, a long table had been placed within. It was bare at the moment, but it looked capable of seating ten people. The walls were covered in white wallpaper, and in the corner was a vase with a small arrangement of flowers. The large fireplace had been repaired with brand-new red bricks that accented the rest of the room.

“Whoa, this is amazing.”

“We’ll eat either here or in the living area,” the man said.

“What are we going to do with a table this long?”

“I’m sure we’ll use it when we invite people over.”

“Oh, that makes sense. You’re right. We’ll have guests over.” The girl removed her sunglasses and scratched at the back of her ears.

He reached over and patted her on the head, an affectionate look on his face. No doubt the client was inwardly thinking not only of potential guests but of filling the seats at the table with their children.

“Okay, then! To the living room.”

They moved to the living room. Spread out before them was a large, welcoming, family-oriented space. Couches were installed around the fireplace. A table sat close by with a pitcher and some cups resting atop it. The artisan had displayed magnificent ingenuity in implementing the client’s desire for a relaxing house so naturally.

“This is amazing. Can I sit on this?”

“Of course you can! Ah, but please don’t even mention that the cushions are hard, I already know. They’ll soften more with wear, I’m told.”

“I haven’t even sat down yet. In fact, Rudy, you’ve been talking weird for a bit now.”

“I’m just a little nervous.”

His wife cautiously took a seat on the couch. “It’s not really hard at all.”

The client settled down beside his wife. Then he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and the two faced each other, gazes connecting. His wife softly closed her eyes and—

He pulled her back up onto her feet. “Wh-why don’t we go see the next room? It’s the kitchen. The Rudeus Estate boasts a fantastic meal preparation area; come have a look!”

“Uh, yeah!”

Besides the existing stone kiln, the kitchen also hosted an assortment of the newest cooking equipment. There was a counter large enough to butcher an entire boar on, and a cooking stove with a gigantic generic pot. There were also casks, jars and earthen containers for storage purposes.

“It’s so normal.”

“It sure is.”

As her husband’s expression turned solemn, the wife in turn gave her own solemn nod. Once that was over with, they were on to the next area—the washroom. They walked down the hallway and slipped in through the entryway. When they did, the wife tilted her head.

“Oh? It’s quite small.”

There was a large bucket and washboard in the room, and nothing else. It was more than enough space to do laundry in, but what caught her attention was the door at the back.

“Have a look.” The client led his wife through the door.

The sight that awaited her was an enormous bath.

BEFORE:

It was nothing more than a plain room with no stone kiln, too large to be used just for washing clothes in. A desolate second kitchen area.

NOW:

The floor was replaced with tile, and at the edge of the room was a large tub filled with warm water. It was angled such that the water trickled smoothly down the drain that had been installed. The room that had formerly been covered in stone was now a stylish bath.

“Um, could this perhaps be...a bath?” His wife asked.

“I should’ve expected you’d figure it out. You know what a bath is, then?”

“Oh, yes. I had a little experience with them when I lived in the royal palace. But this is the first time I’ve ever seen one this big before. Is this what you call a hot spring?”

“It’s a little different from a hot spring.”

She couldn’t mask her surprise. The client watched her with a curious expression. You could almost hear his sinister inner voice saying, “I’m looking forward to bathing together, heh heh heh” just from the look on his face.

“I put water in it just so I could show you, but normally we’ll keep it empty.”

“Okay. You can teach me how to use it later. Ahh!”

He’d suddenly thrown his arms around her. Apparently, he was overcome with emotion at her words.

“Jeez, what’s this about?” she demanded.

“I was worrying about how I could get you to take a bath with me. So, when I heard you say that, I just couldn’t help myself,” the client said.

“You were really worried about that? A bath isn’t something you do alone, right? The Princess is always going in with her attendants. I’ve even helped her wash up before.”

“There’s a custom in one of the tribes out there where the wife and husband wash each other’s bodies. Have you heard of that one?”

“I haven’t. That sounds kind of embarrassing, but I’ll give it my best.”

Once their conversation was over, they took the stairs and ascended to the second floor. The ceiling had been beautifully restored with bright wooden panels, eliminating all concerns about being dripped on when it rained. The client took his wife straight to the door furthest in.

“Right now, this is the only room I’ve remodeled on the second floor.”

“Ah, it’s amazing.” His wife’s eyes widened with surprise as she entered. The most conspicuous thing in the room, of course, was the massive bed wide enough for three people to comfortably sleep in. There was only one pillow on it: the client’s favorite. “Why such a big bed?”

“That’s obvious, of course. It’s so we can really enjoy ourselves when we’re alone together.”

“Oh, so that’s it. I guess that makes sense. Hee hee hee.”

They both wore toothy grins on their faces.

And so I introduced Sylphie to our new house, documentary-style.

She sat on the bed and cuddled with me. She was in a good mood, a big smile on her face. I was glad she liked the place. I wanted to push her down and get to husband-and-wife business, but there was a little something I wanted to talk about first.



“Sylphie, it’s been approximately three weeks since I announced our betrothal. I realize that isn’t a long time, but we have taken a bit of a break from discussing it.”

“Y-yes.”

The reason I was talking so stiffly was because this was a serious conversation.

Sylphie had to realize that too, because she straightened up.

“Even though I said we’d get married, to be honest, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I went ahead and bought this house, but honestly, I can’t help feeling like I’ve rushed on ahead.”

“I-I don’t feel that way at all. I’m really happy with everything you’ve done. In fact, I’m the one wondering if it’s really okay for me to live in such a luxurious place.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear that you have no issues, but I wish to discuss what happens in the future.”

The future. When I said that, her face went red, and for some reason, she started fidgeting. “Um, I’m fine with however many you want. But elf blood runs strong through my veins, so it might be difficult to get me pregnant.”

“Y-yeah.”

That was incredibly sexy to hear. This wasn’t modern Japan, after all. I’d have been disappointed to hear she wanted to put off having kids for financial reasons even though we just got married. That’s right. I was loyal to my instincts. And by that, I meant the natural animal instinct to reproduce. In other words, make babies.

Even so, I intended to be understanding about her career. “But what are you going to do about your work for Princess Ariel?”

I didn’t know what the Princess thought about all of this, but I didn’t see how Sylphie could continue her work as a bodyguard if she got pregnant. I supposed I or someone else

could fill in on the battlefield, but that wasn't the only aspect of being a bodyguard.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Wouldn't it be difficult to do both at the same time?"

"I've already spoken with the Princess about that." Huh. Made sense. "We plan to stay in this country for the next two years at the very least, and even then, it's not as if we'll make tracks for the Asura Kingdom the instant we graduate. We're looking at roughly five more years. So, um..."

It seemed Sylphie had no intention of quitting her bodyguard work. The fact that quitting had never even been mentioned spoke volumes about the strength of her bond with Ariel and Luke. I wondered what the old Sylphie, the one who was entirely dependent upon me, would say. Perhaps she'd offer to throw it all aside to follow me. That would make me happy too, but...

"Sorry. Now that I think about it, it's unfair to you, isn't it? You've provided me with such a magnificent home, but I won't be able to spend much time in it because of my work with Ariel. I guess I don't really deserve to be your wife, do I?" She lowered her head, face full of sorrow.

It wasn't a hard-and-fast rule here that the man worked while the woman stayed at home, perhaps because there wasn't quite as much of a social power gap between men and women in this world. Still, it *was* the norm more often than not.

"Am I not good enough after all?" Sylphie asked, eyes welling up with tears.

I felt kind of guilty. I'd spent two years in abstinence. Once my libido was finally restored, the white-hot emotion that had been bottled up for those two—no, three years—came bursting forth, and the only thought in my head was *Sylphie = someone who will let me have sex with her.*

I didn't think that was necessarily a bad thing. Sylphie had initiated it, after all, even giving me an aphrodisiac and letting me have my way with her even though it was her first

time. Even though I was such a sex fiend that even the beastfolk were turned off by me. If she'd found me scary, she'd shown no sign of it. When I woke the next morning, she'd looked at me and smiled.

If not now, then when? If not Sylphie, then whom? If I hesitated again, and she ended up marrying someone else, I was sure I'd regret it for the rest of my life. If she were taken from me—wait, that was right. Sylphie already belonged to *me*.

“You’re mine, Sylphie.”

“Eh?! Uh, yes. I’m yours, Rudy.”

“So please—marry me.”

Come to think of it, this might be the first time I’d explicitly asked.

“... Yes.” Her cheeks heated up as she nodded. Then she let out a small sigh of relief.

“Please don’t worry about your work as a bodyguard. I’ll take care of the house. You just do what you need to do.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I would like you to sleep with me every few days or so if possible, though.”

“Huh?”

Ooops. My sexual desires had come spilling out.

“By sleep, do you mean *that*?” she asked.

“No, no, only if you want to, of course. If you’re not up for it, just let me grope your tiny breasts and we’ll be fine.”

“Um, I’ll try my best, okay? I don’t want to make you restrain yourself, you know?”

“Yeah, but don’t push yourself, either. When you’re exhausted, you need to recuperate. If you let me just touch you a little bit either before we go to bed or after we get up, I’ll take care of it myself.”

My desires were just falling right out my mouth. Then again, there was no point in playing it cool for Sylphie, anyway. This was who I was.

“Do you like my breasts that much?”

“I love them,” I said.

“But Luke said there’s nothing appealing about them.”

“Don’t trust anything a young whippersnapper like that says.”

The younger a guy was, the more obsessed he was with breasts being bigger or smaller. That wasn’t the important part, though. It was the heart. Right, you breast-loving hermit?

“But my chest isn’t much different from yours?”

“That’s not true. Mine are chiseled pectorals, yours are small, beautiful breasts. They’re totally different. If you don’t believe me, why don’t you try touching mine?”

“Sure, okay.”

I puffed my chest out and Sylphie gently reached over to cop a feel. “You’re right, they’re completely different. Yours are kind of hard.”

“Hmph!” I grunted.

“Whoa!”

I flexed my chest, prompting Sylphie to panic and retract her hand. “These pectorals belong to you, so you’re free to touch them whenever you like.”

“M-mine belong to you too, but keep in mind the time and place when you touch them.”

“How about now?”

“B-but we’re having an i-important conversation right now, aren’t we?”

Oh yeah. We’d gotten a little off track.

“Right—back to what I wanted to talk about. Let’s communicate openly with each other openly when we need something or when we’re dissatisfied with something, okay?”

That'll keep our married life peaceful," I hurriedly summarized.

Sylphie nodded. "Yeah, I agree."

"And on that note, is there anything you want to tell me now?"

Sylphie considered it for a moment, then lowered her eyes. With a sad look on her face, she smiled and said, "Just don't suddenly disappear on me, okay?"

"Yeah." That was right. It was heartbreaking when someone suddenly left. "I understand. I won't suddenly disappear."

I knew painfully well how much it hurt when someone you cared about suddenly disappeared on you.

With that, our important conversation was basically over. There were still probably some things left we needed to talk about and sort out, but for the moment, this was enough.

"Well, then, may I?"

"G-go ahead." She had a nervous look on her face as she thrust her chest toward me.

I reached a hand out to touch them, but stopped myself. Last time I'd gone at her like a beast. This time I wanted to prioritize being gentle with her over my own desires. So I softly took her in my arms and slowly pushed her down onto the bed.

"Y-you're not going to grope?"

"That's for morning and night."

"O-okay."

We stared at each other, faces close together. I could see my face reflected in her moist eyes. She softly closed them. I patted her head and gave her an awkward kiss.

That night, I dragged my lethargic body down to the basement. There was nothing in the underground storage area, since we'd just moved in. It was bare, save for a few shelves that had been installed. I walked deeper inside and put my hand on the hidden door that had been restored by the dwarven artisan.

BEFORE:

It was a noisy door that creaked and groaned when being opened or closed. Despite being called a hidden door, the edges were so dirty you could spot it at a glance.

NOW:

The device that opened and shut the door had new metal put in, with an ample application of oil to ensure it would be soundless. The wallboards for the basement had also been completely restored. No one would have any idea there was a door hidden here.

I quietly opened the door. Tucked within was a small shrine of unvarnished wood. It was there, inside an altar constructed of lustrous black stone, that my idol was enshrined. The dusty old research room had been thoroughly cleaned and transformed into a space of divinity. There, in the quiet of night as everything else slept, I offered a prayer to my god from this new holy land.

Chapter 5: Wedding Reception Preparations

A WEEK HAD PASSED since the renovations were completed. Ariel had given Sylphie seven days off as a gesture of consideration, and I took full advantage of that time to have Sylphie pamper me, and I her in return. We spent romantic nights together, sweet as honey.

...I wish. That wasn't how it went at all.

Now that I was the king of my own kingdom, there were things I needed to do. In this world, it was apparently the norm for newly married couples who'd just bought their own place to invite close friends over for a meal. It wasn't just a housewarming thing, but something you did specifically if you were getting married *and* buying a new house. In other words, a wedding reception.

Sylphie and I sat on one of the living room couches with our foreheads pressed close. Below us was the subject of our gazes: the list of people to whom we would be sending party invitations. There was also a chart to determine seating.

"We really do have a diverse group of friends..."

I would be inviting Elinalise, Zanoba, Julie, Cliff, Linia, Pursena, and Badigadi. Then I had to decide whether or not I would invite Jenius and Soldat. Sylphie would be inviting Ariel, Luke and two others. All together, there would be eleven people, give or take a few. I'd like to have Paul and my family there, but I couldn't invite people who were a million miles away. I'd put a letter in the mail informing them of my marriage, but who knew how long it would take it to reach them?

"We've got royalty, beastmen, a demon, a slave, an adventurer, and some of them can't keep their mouths shut. I foresee trouble."

Linia and Pursena still bore Ariel a grudge, and I could very easily imagine sparks flying when they met face to face. If this were a marriage ceremony in my previous world, we could just seat them at opposite ends of the venue to keep them from meeting, but even the biggest rooms in this house were no ballrooms.

“You think so? Princess Ariel wouldn’t cause a stir in a situation like this,” Sylphie said.

“Still, I wouldn’t want her to go home in a sour mood because of something that happened at a party at our house. Perhaps it would be better if we split the party into two, separating the troublemakers.”

“Hmm. But Princess Ariel really wants to meet the others, considering some of your friends will hold important positions in the future.”

I pictured Ariel getting fired up and putting on her makeup, saying, “This is my chance! There’s a lot of sexy men at wedding receptions that you don’t normally get to see!”

No, I knew that wasn’t what she was after. She wanted to make connections with the other special students. Ariel was calculating, after all.

“All right, then let’s invite her with the understanding that she’s responsible for managing herself. Which just leaves the problem of seat order.”

I didn’t think we could just let them sit wherever they wanted. It would be difficult to seat them in order of importance, though. What order could we choose that wouldn’t offend anyone? Badigadi was a reigning Demon King, so he had the most authority, but after that was Ariel, Zanoba, Linia and Pursena. A veritable crowd of royalty, or the equivalent thereof. Also, Cliff seemed the type who would complain if we put him at the end of the table. No, wait—despite his personality, he had been taught courtly etiquette. Surprisingly, he might be just fine with it. Plus, as long as we seated Elinalise with him, she would cover for us.

Julie had the lowest status of them all, as a slave, so she'd be seated last. I didn't want to separate her from Zanoba, though. She was still a child and not yet completely fluent in the language. Plus, she was my pupil as well. There had to be something I could do.

"What sort of status do the Princess' attendants have?"

"Um, they're mid-ranked nobility."

Based on what Sylphie had told me, I assumed they were both women. Figuring out where to seat them was proving difficult. The same could be said for Luke. It was probably best not to put him too far from the Princess. I didn't think it was likely, since the guests were just my friends, but it would be bad if Ariel somehow wound up assassinated.

"Hm? Haven't we forgotten someone?" Sylphie asked as she studied the list.

I looked over. Had we forgotten someone? Who could it be? I didn't feel like we had. Unless she meant Miss Goliade?

"Oh, that's right! Miss Nanahoshi! We need to invite her too!"

I checked the names and sure enough, Silent Sevenstar wasn't among those listed. I'd genuinely forgotten about her. However...

"I wonder if she'll even come," I said.

"I'm sure she will."

"I guess we can invite her, at least." I hadn't intended to exclude her, but it did seem like she'd completely shut this world out. "After we've done all this preparation, what are we going to do if no one shows up?"

The Christmas episode from a certain anime came to mind. A character had gone all out and made a cake for the occasion, but then lost it after no one showed up. It was a heartrending episode.

"I can promise you that Princess Ariel and Zanoba will be there, at least. Princess Ariel would like to get to know you better, and Zanoba knows it would absolutely destroy your

trust if he doesn't come." In a single breath, Sylphie managed to allay my anxiety. Of course Ariel would come with her three followers, and my two pupils, Zanoba and Julie, would also be there. Those six would definitely attend. Even if we didn't invite Zanoba, he would probably prostrate himself in front of our gate on the day, begging us to let him take part. "I guess you do worry about these kinds of things after all, huh?"

I-It's not like they particularly bother me. I'm not the type who sweats small stuff like that. I'm a laid-back guy!

"I'm sure Linia and Pursena will come too. Beastfolk aren't the type to refuse an invitation from someone of superior status," Sylphie remarked.

"Really?"

"Yeah, and if they don't come, we'll just have to put them in their place again."

Sylphie said that was the way things were done in beastfolk custom. Now that I thought about it, Gyes might have prostrated himself in front of me because he thought Ruijerd might go berserk otherwise. He didn't even complain when Eris kicked him, either.

"I guess Cliff will definitely attend too, since he specifically asked for an invitation," I said.

"Personally, I'd like for Elinalise to come," Sylphie murmured.

Elinalise? I wondered why. I'd never really seen the two of them talk before.

"There's a little something I'd like to ask her," Sylphie explained. "It's not really a big deal or anything, though."

I wondered what it was. Maybe she wanted to ask if Elinalise and I had slept together? Well, there was nothing between the two of us, so it didn't bother me if she wanted details.

At any rate, we now had a plan going. With over ten guests attending, we'd need to serve up quite the meal, so we

decided to go shopping. Together, we walked side-by-side toward the Commerce District.

“Before we get groceries, I’d like to buy some new clothes for you, Rudy,” Sylphie proposed.

I looked at what I was wearing. I was in my usual gray robe. There was no need for heavy coats to keep warm during the day.

“Um, I do like how you look in your robe, but there are people who pay attention to those kinds of things, and if they saw you in something that tattered...um, well, you know? Or are you just really attached to that robe?”

I didn’t really put much thought into my wardrobe. When I was an adventurer, I’d seen people who looked far more unkempt. It was true that it would call Sylphie’s character into question if I looked disheveled, though. I couldn’t shame her that way.

“I guess so. It was the first robe I bought in the Demon Continent, so I’m attached to it, but it *is* tacky-looking.”

The only other thing I had was a fur vest. It didn’t really fit the look of a magician, so I hadn’t worn it in a while. Plus, it was a bit too shabby to wear when I was with Sylphie. I’d just look like a bandit.

“Then let’s go to a clothing store. Pick whatever outfit you like,” I said.

“Thanks. Just leave it to me.”

We headed for a ritzy shop, not a place I’d ever set foot in of my own accord. Sylphie had put on her sunglasses and returned to her Fitz persona.

“Ah, Lord Fitz, good to see you. Thank you for your continued patronage.” The owner bowed deeply at Sylphie. It seemed she was a regular—in other words, it was Princess Ariel patronizing the place while disguised as Fitz. A place that catered to Asuran royalty. Could we afford it? This was anxiety-inducing.

“Could you show me some robes for magicians?”

“Certainly. This way, please.”

Apparently, even fancy stores like this still had robes for magicians. I guess that made sense; magicians were everywhere, especially in Sharia. This was a city where even the children of nobility became magicians.

We were guided to a section with dozens of resplendent garments made of expensive-looking materials. It seemed magician’s robes came in essentially the same shape and style regardless of the retailer, though these did have some delicate embroidery.

“Excuse me, may I ask what elements you favor?” the owner asked.

“Oh, yes. I guess those would be water and earth.”

“In that case, how about this one here? It’s made from the hide of a rainforest lizard from the Great Forest and is quite water-resistant. The designer is Foglen. They design for Ranoa’s royal court magicians.”

Hmm. If memory served me right, the rainforest lizard didn’t have particularly high resistance to water. We had fought them along our travels, but they’d frozen easily when I used my water magic on them.

“If you prefer earth, this might suit you as well. Made from the hide of a great earthworm from the Begaritt Continent, it can weather even a sandstorm. The designer is the promising newcomer, Flone. They’re known for their highly creative use of colors. Plus, it’ll make it difficult for monsters to spot you.” He held up a desert camouflage-patterned robe as he spoke. I wondered if naming the designer was an essential aspect of these fancy stores.

I didn’t dislike the camouflage, but something about it wasn’t quite right. If I was going to go with this kind of design, I’d prefer winter camouflage instead.

“Syl—I mean, Master Fitz, which do you prefer?”

“Let’s see...how about this one? It’s quite like the one you’re wearing right now,” she said, pulling out a robe that was an even darker shade of gray than the one I was wearing,

almost black. What did they call this color again? Charcoal gray? It was more complicated than my current one, too. There were pockets and black buttons to fasten back the sleeves, and a cord that could be used in place of a belt.

“That one is made from the hide of a lucky rat from the Demon Continent. The designer is Kazra. Known for their subdued designs, which tend to be popular with the slightly older crowd.”

“A lucky mouse?”

“No, no, a lucky rat, sir. A superior species to the mucky rat, and the equivalent of a D-class monster. Their coats are splendid, with a strong resistance to poison and acid.”

Incidentally, I’d seen the latter creature while traveling the Demon Continent. The mucky rat was twenty inches tall, and the lucky rat was even bigger. I’d been horrified the first time I saw them. A horde of those enormous vermin had infested a warehouse, with a single lucky rat among them. I think I stood in the background, flabbergasted, while Ruijerd and Eris made short work of them.

That aside, I did like the robe itself. My wife had good taste. What concerned me was the price tag—and now that I took a look at it, yes, it was expensive. You could buy a house on the Demon Continent with how much this cost.

“Well, they do say that names represent nature,” I said. “If ‘lucky’ is in the name, maybe it’ll bring me good luck. I guess we’ll go with this.”

“Names represent nature? Pardon my manners, but might I ask for your name?”

“Oh, yes. My name is Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Oh my, you’re a member of the Greyrat family? Forgive my rudeness. Master Luke is a treasured patron of our establishment, so I’ll give you a discount on your purchase this time.”

Was this what I thought it was? A way to curry favor with Luke? No, that wasn’t it. Maybe he was just trying to

encourage us to come here again for our next purchase. Whatever the case, I was glad of the discount.

“Does Luke come here often?” Sylphie asked.

“Surely you’re aware of that, Lord Fitz?”

“Oh, yes. Um, I mean aside from when he comes with me.”

“Yes, he’s always coming here with different women.”

While Sylphie continued chatting with the owner, I was pulled aside by one of the shop’s staff to have my measurements taken. The robe we looked at had just been for display; they would tailor one to my size. The female staff member used a measuring tape to take my vital statistics, and I wondered if they sold those at a magical item shop. I wanted to try some role-play with Sylphie that involved measuring hers.

“We have the materials on hand, so this will be finished within three days. If you’ll tell us your address, we can have it delivered.”

Feeling happy and a bit embarrassed, we shared the address of our new home.

After that, we went grocery shopping. First, we purchased spices. Then the non-perishables. Thanks to the distribution routes that Nanahoshi had developed, we were easily able to get our hands on cooking oil as well. We also snagged some frozen fish and vegetables that would keep a while, then ordered some meat that we’d pick up at a later date.

“Can you cook, Sylphie?”

“Yeah. I learned from my mom and Miss Lilia. Oh, but I’m not sure if my cooking will suit your tastes.”

“I’ll be sure to tell you it’s delicious, even if it’s half-burnt charcoal.”

“Half-burnt charcoal? Come on, who do you think I worked so hard to learn to cook for?”

A good fashion sense, and good at cooking. Come to think of it, she said she could do laundry and cleaning too. Contrary to her appearance, my wife was quite the capable woman.

“Miss Sylphiette, you’re such an ideal wife that I can’t help feeling nervous that I’m not worthy of you,” I said.

“You know you’re my ideal husband, too.”

“W-well, if you there’s some part of me that isn’t so ideal, I’m all ears. I’ll work hard to match your expectations.”

“In that case, be more assertive. You’re a bit too submissive sometimes.”

More assertive? And what would happen to me if I did that. and my actions somehow soured the mood of some god passing by? There were people in this world that beat you to death for the crime of looking at them funny.

Then again, would I want to be married to a man with no confidence who did nothing but sit hunched over in the living room, reading the paper? Nope.

All right, then. I'll act with more confidence from now, I guess. Starting today, I'll be a smug asshole!

“Hmph. Sylphie. Make sure to show how much you love me. Don’t slack off.”

“Um, that’s not quite what I meant, but sure. I’ll do my best,” Sylphie said as she clenched her hand into a fist.

Aww, my Sylphie is sooo cute! I just wanna smoochie-woochie with her!

But I restrained myself. Sylphie wasn’t a fan of PDA on crowded streets. If I tried to touch her here, she’d definitely scold me. But she wouldn’t mind if I put my arm around her shoulder, right? No, maybe I should try holding her hand first? Of course, despite my internal debate, both my hands were currently occupied with shopping bags. Grrr.

“We need to buy some large plates as well. Oh, guess you can just make them.”

“As long as you’re okay with plates made out of stone,” I said.

“The ones you make don’t look like they’re made out of stone, so it’s fine.”

So it was a question of appearance, huh? Well, if she really wanted something pleasing to the eye, then I’d make one and polish it so spectacularly that she could see her reflection in it. The baked type of pottery that Japan was known for didn’t seem so popular here. Apparently, they preferred something more posh than the Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetic. Maybe I should really go all out and create something like porcelain? Though it would still be gray or brown, whatever I did.

“Is there anything else we need?” I asked.

“Um, some tea to serve our guests.”

Black tea and teacups, huh? Okay, no problem. Maybe we should buy a rug while we were at it. Might be a good idea to prepare a guest room as well, just in case.

“Shall we go ahead and buy a couple of things like a bed and a closet for guests?”

“Ah, good idea.”

Our house was so large that furnishing it was slowly but surely draining my funds. I was glad I hadn’t wasted any money on purchasing magical implements and the like. I still had some cash left, thanks to the discount I’d gotten on the house, but it was being depleted with each purchase. Maybe I should earn a little extra by hunting down some monsters? No, I couldn’t do that. How stupid would it be if I went and got killed on an elimination quest for that trivial a reason?

Suddenly, I could kind of understand why Paul had returned to his position as a knight in order to get a steady paycheck.

“Um, Rudy, don’t worry. I have money coming in from my work with Princess Ariel.”

“Ugh, sorry.”

I supposed that if the need ever arose, I could join Soldat’s party or someone else’s. Wait, no. Adventurers left their houses for days at a time for relatively little pay in return. Maybe I should start looking for a steady job myself.

Marriage sure was complicated.

That night, I invited Sylphie to join me in the bath, supposedly to teach her how to use it. My real motivation was to spend some quality time together in the bath. If this were a book, it might be narrated thusly: A pervert was poised to sink his fangs into an adorable young girl.

I’m going to do it tonight. I’m going to do it! Just you watch, Father!

Wait, “Father” would be Paul, right? Then I’d rather he not watch.

“Now then,” I explained. “The etiquette for bathing in our house is a little different from that of the Asuran royal family.”

First, we moved to the washing area, which doubled as a changing area. There, I told her, she was meant to take her clothes off and put them into one of the baskets. This time, I removed them myself, then folded them and tossed them into one of the baskets.

Sylphie had a petite figure that lacked extra body fat, but she wasn’t all bones. While she was thin, she also had muscles. Though her breasts were small, they were still soft and shapely. My breathing turned erratic just looking at her.

“Um, uh, is it necessary for you to undress me?”
Sylphie asked.

“Nope.”

“And why are you breathing so heavily?”

“Because I’m turned on.”

“Um, and is getting turned on necessary for entering the bath?”

“Nope.”

I gave the appropriate answer to each question as I briskly undressed so we could enter the bathing area. There was no shower or mirror, but there was a bucket and a chair. Just for kicks, I’d inscribed “Kerorin” on the bucket, just like the aspirin ad you often saw printed on the buckets at public baths in Japan.

“You’ll be pouring water over your shoulders before you get in the bath. So take a seat here and use this cloth and soap to wash your body.”

“Hey Rudy, why is there a hole in the middle of this chair?”

“To make it easier to wash your body, of course.” I moistened the cloth with warm water, sudsed it up, and started washing Sylphie’s body. I mainly focused on the back of her ears, the hollow of her collarbone, her back, and other areas that got dirty easily. I used my hand for the softer areas, ones that I couldn’t scrub with the cloth. That was why the hole was there.

“Um, you haven’t been using the cloth for a while now, and you’re only focusing on *those* places. Plus, your thing is pressing up against me.”

“Oops, my bad.”

Apparently, my desires had gotten ahead of me. We couldn’t have that. This wasn’t a part of bathroom etiquette in our house.

“Um, if you really can’t restrain yourself, um, well, we can go ahead and do it if you want?”

“We’ll do that *after* the bath is finished.”

The bath came first. We had to wash our bodies.

“Once you’re done washing every corner of your body, next is your head. Now close your eyes.”

“O-okay.” Sylphie squeezed her eyes shut. How cute. It made me want to kiss her and pull her toward me for some sexytimes, but I shoved the thought to the back of my mind. Letting my guard down even for an instant could be fatal. Phew, this whole washing thing sure was hell.

“Once you’ve wet your hair with water, use the soap to lather it up. Not just on your head, but all the places hair grows on your body. You probably don’t have to wash your hair all that often.” I continued to shampoo her hair as I talked. It was short and easy to clean. “Once you’re done, make sure to rinse all of it out with warm water.” I used magic to conjure water and rinse out her hair.

She giggled. “This kind of reminds me of when we first met.”

Oh, yeah...I’d used warm water to rinse her off back then, too. That had been back in Buena Village, around the time I started being able to walk about the town. I’d found Sylphie sobbing as the neighborhood kids bullied her. She’d been delivering her father’s lunch when they accosted her and started throwing mud balls at her. So I saved her, then used warm water to wash her off and a warm breeze to dry her. She looked like a boy back then, in part because her hair was short.

Ah, it really did bring back memories. I could never have dreamed that that little boy would become my adorable wife. Life sure took you to some unexpected places.

“Once you’re done washing up, next is the bath. Be careful; it’s easy to slip.”

Sylphie followed my instructions and slid herself in, sinking into the water. I kept the water gently warm so we could enjoy a long soak together.

“Ah, I can feel the warmth seeping into my arms and legs. It feels good.”

It seemed it was just right. Very nice.

Once I was satisfied that Sylphie was enjoying the bath, I started to wash myself. Honestly, I kind of wished I could soap Sylphie up instead and use her body to wash mine, but I was holding off on that for today. There was no need to do everything at once. I was going to treat her carefully, gently.

“...”

Suddenly, I realized Sylphie was peeking over at me. I thought maybe she was watching to get an outside perspective of how to wash one's body before getting in the bath, but that didn't seem to be it. She must've been intrigued by the sight of that one body part I had and she didn't. Curiosity, I assume.

“Phew.”

Once I was done washing, I sank into the bath, making sure to rest my hand towel on top of my head. When I submerged myself in the warm water, I could feel my bloodflow increase and expand to my chilled arms and legs. Ahh, baths were so nice. The very peak of human culture. I used to hate baths in my former life, back when I found washing myself to be a nuisance. Now, I enjoyed the sensation. Living in a snowbound country had taught me just how precious a bath was.

“By the way, don't put the cloth you washed yourself with into the bath,” I said.

“Why not?”

“It'll get the water dirty.”

Although, since we were family, it didn't really matter. There were also no public baths in this world, so there was no need to follow that rule. As I considered those things, Sylphie nestled against me. She held my hand and rested her damp head on my shoulder.

“How long are we supposed to stay in here?”

“Until you can feel the warmth all the way in the marrow of your bones.” I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. When I did, she spun around and positioned her body as she if she were sitting on top of me.

The two of us were pressed close, facing one another. Sylphie's cherries were rubbing against my chest.

Crap. I felt like I wasn't going to be able to hold back anymore. Men were supposed to display endurance and women were supposed to display love. And by love, I didn't mean love *juices*.

"Hee hee, this is kind of fun," Sylphie giggled.

I looked down at her. I could see down her slender back all the way to her tiny butt, as well as her thin legs kicking at the water's surface. There was movement around my chest and shoulders: Sylphie was clinging to me, burying herself in my neck. From that position, she caressed my body with her hands.

Heh heh, go ahead and stroke me all you like. That's what these muscles are for.

A long time ago, I'd looked at Sylphie and thought she would someday be a beautiful man. Instead, she'd grown into an adorable and beautiful woman who surpassed my every expectation. Maybe I was just biased by my feelings for her, but still. This beautiful woman was naked and clinging to me right now. At this rate, we were going to end up doing something that would clog the drains in here.

I stroked her back, then moved to her armpits, then to her sides. Mmm, she was so slender.

"Rudy, that tickles," Sylphie said, her body twisting.

The symbol of my desire had been pressing against her for a bit now, but she didn't voice any complaints. She got angry if I touched her when we were walking home, but she let her guard down in this setting. She was at my mercy. Whatever I did, she'd allow.

Then she looked up into my eyes. I looked into hers. Our gazes naturally met. And suddenly Sylphie giggled, her expression splitting with a toothy grin. "Rudy, I love you," she said as she planted a kiss on my cheek.

Crap.

“Agh!”

I took her into my arms, princess-style, and lifted her out of the bath with a splash. I was still in the midst of instructing her on bathing etiquette, but I could always resume that once we finished. Still sopping wet, I made for the second floor and beelined to our bedroom.

Chapter 6: Hosting the Wedding Reception

A FEW DAYS LATER...

We planned to hold the wedding reception in the afternoon, since it fell on a holiday. Jenius declined our invitation, as did Soldat, on account of being busy with meetings. I figured Badigadi would be too busy to come as well, but surprisingly, he was free and indicated he would attend. The other eleven invitations we'd sent out were all accepted. Yes, even Nanahoshi's.

On the day of the reception, Sylphie was all fired up from the very moment she woke. "This is a wife's job, so just leave it to me!" she said as she hustled around the house. We'd prepped an empty room on the second floor for the occasion, by which I meant we'd furnished it with a modest bed, closet, and table, plus a water pitcher in case someone happened to get sick and needed it.

Linia and Pursena were the first to show up, right in the midst of our steadily progressing preparations. They had arrived two hours early.

Don't tell me they got the time wrong, I thought.

"It's customary in our culture for those attending to arrive early and bring their own kill, mew."

"That's right. We got here first. A show of our loyalty."

A giant boar sat atop the snow sled they'd dragged behind them. Apparently it was beastfolk tradition, when attending a wedding, to go hunting in the morning and offer their kill to the host. How early one went out to hunt, make a kill and return with it were all a measure of your respect for the host.

"Incredible. But what did you plan on doing if you weren't able to hunt anything down?"

“In that case we planned to buy something in the markets, mew.”

“Yeah, we’d use money instead.”

Guess that made sense.

They were both wearing their school uniforms. That was something I had decided on. There was a vast wealth disparity among the invited guests, so if the rich ones overdid it with their outfits, it would just make the regular attendees feel out of place. Fortunately, everyone participating had their own uniform—except Julie, so we bought her one.

I bid them relax in the living area until the festivities were ready to begin. Entertaining guests was the husband’s job. They’d been outside since this morning, and were freezing. They settled down on the couch closest to the fireplace and curled up against each other.

“Everything else aside, I never imagined you and Fitz would get married, Boss, mew.”

“So Fitz was a girl after all. I wondered about that, based on her smell.”

“Yeah, mew. But now it all makes sense, mew.”

The two of them groomed each other’s tails as they spoke. We’d shared Fitz’s real identity with the invitees, asking that they keep it to themselves for now, though it was inevitable the truth would eventually become public at this point.

“What makes sense?” I asked as I served them warm tea.

“That you have a preference for flat chests,” Pursena said.

“Even though the stench of arousal is just oozing out of you, the reason you didn’t attack us was because we’re not your type, mew.”

They spoke as if I were some kind of pervert that indiscriminately attacked any woman I saw. Honestly, how rude of them. Maybe I *should* thoroughly grope them in

retaliation—but no. I’d already sated myself with Sylphie the day before. All of my desire rested within her now. Today I was a sage.

The next to arrive were, surprisingly, Zanoba and Julie. They came about an hour before the party. “Pardon. I spied an interesting figurine on the way here, and it distracted me. I would have been in trouble if Julie hadn’t been with me,” he said.

Julie was wearing her uniform as well. It was dwarf-sized, and fit her so perfectly she looked cute as a button. “Grandmaster, thank you for inviting us today,” she said as she lifted the edge of her skirt slightly in a polite greeting. Aww, how cute.

Zanoba bowed again when I glanced his way. Then, in a deeply respectful tone, he said, “Master Rudeus Greyrat. I am deeply grateful for your invitation.”

Wow. Zanoba was being normal. Very good. Then maybe I should follow his example and reply with the same level of sincerity.

“Zanoba, Your Highness, you have my gratitude for—”

“Oh, Master. There’s no need to show me such courtesy. I know it’s just for appearance’s sake, anyway. I’d much prefer you be rude to me, like you usually are.”

“Oh, okay. Well, then go hang out in that room.”

“Ha ha, very well. Come then, Julie, let us be off.”

What the heck? And there I was, trying to be serious. What a waste, I thought as I prepared more tea. I was still the host and he was still a guest, even if I treated him rudely. While thusly preoccupied, I heard Linia’s and Pursena’s boastful voices drifting from the living room. They were bragging about how they’d gotten here first. I could hear the frustration in Zanoba’s replies, but I was just glad they were enjoying themselves.

Third to arrive was Ariel and her group, thirty minutes before the start of the party. There was Ariel, Luke, and two other female students I'd seen somewhere before. So these two were the Princess' attendants? Which meant they were also Sylphie's comrades in battle. I couldn't afford to ignore them.

"I am most grateful for your invitation today. Unfortunately, I am a bit unfamiliar with the etiquette of common people, so I pray you will forgive me for any discourtesies," Ariel said as she bowed. I'd assume Luke or the attendants would be the ones to bow, but perhaps she was trying to be polite.

"There are guests of many different races gathered here, so please don't worry about etiquette," I said. "In fact, I'm more concerned that you'll be the one shown courtesy."

"My thanks. Ladies?" She gave a signal with her eyes and the two attendants came forward.

"We are Princess Ariel's attendants. I'm Ellemoi Bluewolf."

"And I am Cleane Elrond."

Their first names aside, their last names were at least easy to remember. A blue wolf and a legendary elf. My name was "gray rat", so perhaps there were many among the Asuran nobility whose names were a combination of a color and an animal. Maybe there was even someone with a name like... Hm, what was the other word for donkey again? Oh yes, ass. Maybe someone had the last name Whiteass.

"Please accept this." The two offered me a box wrapped in expensive fabric. "A gift to celebrate your wedding."

"Thank you; this is very thoughtful," I replied.

"We brought things we thought might be of use to a married couple. Please see for yourself."

At her bidding, I took a peek inside, only to find myself speechless. Nestled within was a familiar bottle of pink liquid and a wooden rod. To put it more bluntly, it was an aphrodisiac and a long dildo. What the heck?

“I am sure that, as a member of the Greyrat family, you’re perfectly capable of satisfying women. But should the need arise, please use these.”

“S-sure.”

Ariel was completely composed. Maybe this was considered a normal gift? Luke and the other two looked unruffled as well. It must be a cultural difference.

I guided the four of them into the living area. The atmosphere around Linia and Pursena turned tense as soon as we entered.

“...”

There was no way they were actually going to start a fight, right? Yes, they were beastfolk, but they wouldn’t disrupt a celebration they’d been invited to, would they? I gave them both a meaningful look. They seemed to sense what I was thinking.

“Nice to see you, Miss Linia, Miss Pursena. My apologies for the trouble before.”

“Nice to see you too, mew.”

“We caused you trouble too, so it’s fine,” Pursena added.

Ariel greeted them gently, taking a nearby seat. The other three remained standing. I shot Zanoba a look, signalling that he should intervene in case anything happened. He nodded sharply and, as if he’d completely misunderstood, got to his feet and bowed toward Ariel.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess Ariel. I am the Third Prince of the Shirone Kingdom and beloved pupil of Master Rudeus Greyrat, Zanoba Shirone.”

“Pleasure to see you again, Prince Zanoba. I am glad to see you are in good health. I paid you a visit soon after you entered the university. Could it be you’ve forgotten?”

“Ah. I apologize for my rudeness. It seems that while I’ve been blessed with super strength, I’m lacking when it comes to intelligence.”

“Truly? I’ve heard that you had top grades in your earth magic class,” the Princess replied.

“That is entirely thanks to my master’s teachings.”

I listened in while preparing their tea, shocked at Zanoba’s refined social skills.

Cliff and Elinalise showed up just ten minutes before the celebration was supposed to begin. Nanahoshi accompanied them. What an unusual combination. I’d expected Nanahoshi to come alone.

“She was standing outside your gate looking flustered. She’s an acquaintance of yours, yes?” Elinalise asked.

“Yes, of course. This is Miss Silent Sevenstar.”

When I said her name, Cliff looked at her in shock. Apparently, they had never met. “O-oh! So you’re the one they call Silent, huh? Hmph. I’m Cliff. I’m sure you’ve at least heard of me before, right?”

“Yes, I have. They say you’re amazing. And yes, I’m Silent.” Her speech sounded stilted and unnatural, probably because she was only pretending to know who Cliff was. Cliff seemed to be in a pleasant mood, though, so I wasn’t going to say anything.

“Pleased to meet you. I am Elinalise Dragonroad. That’s an incredible mask.”

“A pleasure. Your hairstyle is amazing, too,” Nanahoshi replied in a completely flat tone. Watching how she interacted with them made me nervous. Still, she surely wouldn’t start anything, since she wanted to avoid trouble.

Honestly, I hadn’t thought she’d come. I’d sent her an invitation just in case, which she’d accepted. But even then, I hadn’t thought she would *actually* attend. She’d just responded, in a voice devoid of emotion, “Marriage? I guess you really are serious about living here in this world.”

“This is rare,” I said to her in a low voice. “Seeing you outside that room.”

“You’re the one who invited me, aren’t you?”

“True enough. Well, just relax today. We made potato chips for you.”

“Potato chips? You actually made them?” she asked in surprise.

“We procured cooking oil quite easily, thanks to you.”

“That’s remarkable.”

“Not really. All we did was slice a potato thinly, fry it in oil, then cover it in salt. Since the ingredients were from this world, it has a slightly different flavor from the chips we enjoyed in our previous one.”

“Well then, if you’ll excuse us.” Elinalise charged into the living room, dragging Cliff and Nanahoshi along without an ounce of hesitation. As an adventurer of no noble title, she ranked just above Julie in terms of status, but clearly, she didn’t care. Granted, notions of status didn’t translate smoothly from one race to another.

The two of them were their usual selves: Cliff threatening to ruin the mood with his bragging, Elinalise smoothing over his behavior. Cliff meant well, but often came across as acerbic. Nanahoshi was generally quiet, but she responded if someone spoke to her. I’d thought she was a shut-in with communication issues, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

After a while, Sylphie came to inform me that preparations were complete. Now we were just waiting on Badigadi. The food would get cold if he was too late, but just as I started to worry, Elinalise spoke up.

“There’s absolutely no way Badigadi will be here soon. Beings who’ve lived thousands of years have no concept of how time passes for the rest of us. You should probably expect him a month from now.”

And so, we decided to go ahead and start the party on time. Sorry, Badi.

The party was a cocktail-style buffet. We'd decided to do away with assigned seating, but fortunately, the room was spacious enough that people could move about even with the table in the middle. We did leave some chairs at the edge of the room in case anyone got tired of standing. The menu was all food that could easily be eaten while standing, and we started by offering everyone a cup of alcohol. Nanahoshi turned down the liquor, so we gave her fruit juice instead.

I was in charge of the speech for our toast. Sylphie and I stood beside each other, the center of attention. Eleven pairs of eyes gazed expectantly at us. There was nothing unpleasant about their gazes, but I still felt nervous even though I had a speech prepared.

Sylphie squeezed my hand. She gave me a toothy grin and whispered, "You can do it."

Ah, she makes me want to carry her off to the bedroom right now, I thought.

"My, my, Rudeus' face is bright red. Heh heh."

Elinalise laughed and, for once, Cliff actually read the room. "Lise, be quiet."

Okay then, here goes.

"Ahem. Thank you for making room in your busy schedules to be with us today. Allow me to make this declaration once again. Sylphie and I are—"

"Bwahaha! And now I enter with a *ba-bang!*"

I thought my heart was going to punch right through my chest from surprise. I looked behind me, and there he was. That black body and tall figure. The six arms, all stuffed into a school uniform bursting at the seams. The Immortal Demon King Badigadi had entered with a bang...through the back door in the kitchen.

His arrival left everyone speechless, even Cliff. I, too, had no idea what to say.

“Badgadi, you’re late,” Elinalise cleverly cut in.

But Badigadi wasn’t the least bit concerned. “Hmph. It’s true I am late, but in my tribe, when a Demon King attends a party, they must wait for the perfect moment to astonish and disrupt the occasion with their entrance. Such is our way.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all. Though Kishirika did make up that particular custom on a whim, so I agree it’s ridiculous!”

And yet he still did it? What an irrational person. *This was why you guys’ve been eradicated by the humans so many times...*

“I even went out of my way to enter through the back door. Be grateful! Bwahaha!”

You bastard, I started to think, then stopped myself. No, calm down. This is just how he is. You already knew that, didn’t you?

“Ha ha ha, all right then. Thank you.”

“No need for thanks. Now then, carry on and marry yourselves before me. Few get to marry in the presence of a Demon King. I don’t provide those kinds of services, after all!” Badigadi said, before plunking himself on the ground.

We have chairs, I protested inwardly. But many among the demon folk preferred sitting on the floor, so I guessed it was fine.

“Well then, returning to our previous order of business...” I cleared my throat. “Thank you for making time in your busy schedules to be with us today. Allow me to make this declaration once again. Sylphie and I are getting married. I realize the two of us are still young and lacking in many aspects, but I hope we will have a fruitful life together. Uh, all twelve of you gathered here have been especially close to us within these past couple of years. We’ve spent less time with some of you than others, but somehow, we were all able to get along, and I consider you friends. Should you ever find yourselves in trouble, I hope to be there to support you, as your friend. Should you ever experience discord amongst

yourselves, I hope you'll remember us and try to be the bigger person and let things go. Um..."

Oh crap, this speech was way too stiff. They all had questionable looks on their faces.

Just then Badigadi gave me a soft pat on the shoulder. "No need for such formality. You two love each other and you want everyone here to recognize that, yes?"

Oh! Yes, exactly. That was it. Okay! "Well, how to put it? Sylphie and I will be moving forward with our relationship. I hope you'll be there for us if we need you. Thank you, everyone."

"Okay, now let us toast to the future of the young couple!"

"Cheers!"

Badigadi raised a wine cup that he'd swiped at some point without me noticing. Everyone joined him by raising theirs. A bit of alcohol was spilled as the party began.

Pursena went straight for the boar meat that had still been steaming just moments ago. I wondered if it was conventional for beastfolk to first eat the prey they'd caught themselves...no, this was definitely just a Pursena thing. Linia was by the fireplace, munching away at some nanahoshiyaki, the imitation fried chicken.

Nanahoshi had grabbed a plate of potato chips and retreated to a corner of the room where she was crunching away. Julie suddenly took a seat beside her. Nanahoshi looked dumbfounded, but Julie ignored her and shoveled chips into her mouth. Just the other day, she'd eaten some for us as a taste tester. She must have been angling for them ever since.

Nanahoshi and Julie. They made an interesting picture, side by side. Perhaps thinking the same, Badigadi approached them. Nanahoshi panicked and whipped out one of her rings.

That idiot. She claimed she didn't want trouble, but then guarded her food like a lioness.

I noticed Zanoba glancing over at me. I wasn't sure what he wanted, but it seemed he was waiting for Ariel to make her move—and she did soon after, guiding her entourage over to where Sylphie and I stood.

"Sylphie, congratulations."

"Princess Ariel, thank you." Sylphie gave her usual toothy smile and bowed her head.

"So, do Rudeus and this house meet your expectations?"

"They're even more amazing than I'd hoped for. The house even has a bath in it!"

"Oh? Very few personal homes have baths in Asura. I'm envious. Sylphie, you know you can take a year's break from being my bodyguard, if you'd like."

"I-I'll save that for when we have kids."

Ariel giggled. Sylphie went on to chat with Luke and the princess' attendants, the latter of whose names I'd only just learned today. Apparently, they had a strong bond with Sylphie. They seemed close, and the blue wolf girl had tears in her eyes. It was almost like watching girls at the track club say goodbye.

"Well, I figure you still don't like me, but let's try to get along," Luke said, holding his hand out to me all of a sudden.

Despite what he said, I didn't have any animosity toward him. Well, I was ready to be friendly if he was.

"Sounds good to me, Luke...sir."

"Take good care of Sylphie." He let go of my hand after that short remark. To be honest, it felt like Luke was the one who didn't like me. What was it exactly? It wasn't exactly jealousy, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Zanoba came over once Ariel had left. It seemed he was paying heed to social hierarchies, which made sense, given that he was royalty. "Once again, Master, I offer my congratulations."

“Thank you, Zanoba.”

He turned toward Sylphie and bowed. “My lady. I honestly thought you were a man. Please forgive me for making such a shameful mistake.”

Sylphie hurriedly waved her hand. “Oh, no, please raise your head. You’re royalty. You can’t be bowing to someone like me.”

“‘Someone like you’? I deeply respect my master, and you’re his wife. Your holiness is second only to God.”

“But even Rudy mistook me for a man, so it’s fine, okay?”

She looked to me for backup. As embarrassing as it was, it was true, so I nodded in agreement. Once Zanoba left, Linia and Pursena came next.

“Is it considered good manners among humans to greet each other in the middle of meals, mew?”

“It’s bad form.”

That was all they said. They didn’t even congratulate us, really. I would definitely need to investigate beastfolk wedding etiquette beforehand when it came time for these two to get married. Though I had no idea if they could even find partners.

“But it does make sense for the two of you to get married. It’s good when strong people get together, mew.”

“That’s right. Strong children bring tranquility to the tribe.”

In my opinion, it was “bad form” to speak so candidly in the middle of a meal.

Next to approach was Nanahoshi, who’d managed to get away from Badigadi...who’d been doing who-knew-what, since her hair was a mess. I looked in his direction to see him currently having a blast letting Julie ride on his shoulders.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

She started to retreat after that short remark, but Sylphie stopped her. “Um, Miss Nanahoshi, can I ask you something?”

“What would that be?”

“You said before that the two of you come from the same place. But what did that mean? Um, correct me if I’m wrong, but you come from a different world, right?” Sylphie’s voice dropped to a whisper in the latter half of her question.

Nanahoshi looked at me as if to ask what I wanted to do. I didn’t mind which way she answered. I wasn’t trying to hide anything from Sylphie...though she might look at me funny if she found out. It would be tricky to explain.

“I misunderstood, since he spoke the same language as me,” Nanahoshi said. Well, that decided it.

Last to approach us were Cliff and Elinalise. Cliff had us line up, and then he cut a cross-like shape through the air with one hand, offering a simple prayer. “The two of you aren’t followers of Millis, but this is the only blessing I know.”

I was happy for the sentiment, at least. After all, it was extremely common for people to celebrate Christmas but not partake in Mass. I had a god I believed in, but she wouldn’t mind if I accepted the blessings of another religion.

“Rudeus, I’m happy for your recovery,” Elinalise said, with a slightly pouty look on her face. That’s right. I hadn’t told her that my impotence had been cured until now. “You know you *could* have told me a little sooner.”

“And if I had told you, you would’ve made a move on me. ‘Let me see for myself if that’s true,’ etc. etc.”

“I’d never. I told you before, didn’t I? I have no intention of becoming Paul’s daughter.”

So that was how it was. Maybe I *should* have told her sooner. Among this lot, she was the one I’d known the longest. Granted, it was only by six months or so.

“But then again, if Cliff wasn’t with me, I might have entertained the idea of doing it with you once.”

“I might have felt the same way if I didn’t have Sylphie.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate, isn’t it? Since it wasn’t in the cards for us, let’s just continue being friends, then.”

“Yeah, let’s keep it that way.”

Elinalise turned her attention to Sylphie, a gentle expression on her face. “Miss Sylphiette, congratulations. I pray for...for your...happiness from...from the bottom of...” Tears started rolling down Elinalise’s cheeks. She continued looking at Sylphie as a sob escaped from her throat.

I was dumbfounded. I had no idea why she was crying all of a sudden.

Elinalise reached out to touch Sylphie’s cheek with a trembling hand. Then her legs started to shake and gave out from under her. Her face was a complete mess, but she just continued to look at Sylphie. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe I’m doing this...”

Sylphie had to be shocked, too. Or at least, I thought she would be—but instead, she looked only mildly puzzled, not surprised.

“Um,” Sylphie said. “I’ve been meaning to ask you this for a while, but Miss Elinalise... are you perhaps my grandmother?”

I wasn’t the only one flabbergasted. Cliff—and Elinalise—looked utterly dumbfounded, too.

“Father told me that my grandmother was one of Rudy’s father’s companions,” Sylphie explained.



Had he really said that? Wait...that made sense, actually. Laws had said he and Paul became friends while he was helping guard the village. Maybe he'd figured out Paul's connection to Elinalise through their conversations, though I doubted Paul knew of it.

It was a small world. Now that I thought about it, the wood-carved pendant that Sylphie made me had the same shape as the pendant on Elinalise's sword. In fact, their facial features were similar, too.

"Miss Elinalise, is that really true?" I asked.

"Y-you're mistaken. There's no way your grandmother could be a whore like me."

"My father told me it was because of you that he was chased out of the Great Forest, and that people opposed him marrying my mother," Sylphie said.

"What...?!"

"He said you were devastated by guilt, and might not reveal who you really were, even if we met."

I would never have guessed Elinalise and Laws had such history...though I could understand why people had opposed his marriage to Sylphie's mother. I'd hesitated, too, when Cliff asked me to introduce him to Elinalise. I could see how being Elinalise's son might have tarnished Laws' reputation.

"I...I...!" Elinalise broke out into a sob. She tried to say something, but the words wouldn't form. Sylphie looked a bit flustered, as if worried she'd said the wrong thing.

"Master Cliff?" I said.

He looked completely flustered, too. "Wh-what is it?"

"Please take Miss Elinalise to one of the bedrooms on the second floor so she can rest."

"R-right. Yeah, I-I got it."

"Sylphie, how about you continue your conversation with her after she's calmed down?"

“O-okay,” she said.

Cliff was pulling Elinalise along by the hand when she looked at me, terrified. “R-Rudeus, I-I know I might be a mess, but, um, Laws was a completely normal boy. And of course his child, Sylphie, is too. So please...”

So please what? Don’t look at them with prejudice? She really didn’t have any faith in me. To be fair, I had been avoiding her lately. Maybe that had caused some misunderstanding.

I put my mouth to her ear. “Please don’t worry. I’m not going to break up with Sylphie because of you.”

“But—”

“More importantly, don’t you think you should be more concerned about the fact that now you’re related to Paul, whom you hate so much?”

Elinalise smiled weakly. “Heh, Rudeus. You really do say some entertaining things sometimes.”

I relaxed a little. She probably just needed to calm down a bit. “You can take your time and talk to Sylphie, just the two of you, a bit later.”

“Yes. I appreciate you being so considerate.”

After that Cliff guided Elinalise off and they retreated upstairs. *Time to step it up, Cliff. Do a good job comforting her*, I thought.

Badigadi never came over to congratulate us. He set himself in one corner of the room, bellowing out his usual “Bwahaha!” laugh, and kept the mood boisterous. I was grateful for his presence.

Chapter 7: End of the Wedding Reception

THE RECEPTION was a success. We didn't seal our promise with a kiss or exchange rings, but spent the whole time eating, drinking, chatting, and having a good time. I appreciated the ease and informality of it all.

People broke into groups of two or three when it was time to go home. The first to bid us goodbye were Linia and Pursena. Perhaps it was considered good manners among the beastfolk not to linger too long?

"Well, mew... Enjoy yourself, Boss."

"Now you really *are* the boss of the school. I'm looking forward to next semester."

After saying that, the two of them began trudging home through the snow.

The second to leave was Nanahoshi, with whom Luke had randomly struck up a conversation. Most of it was him trying to hit on her, though he wasn't being *completely* transparent about it. He made a concerted effort to talk about food and clothes, topics it seemed Nanahoshi might be interested in. He was good at sounding interested in a topic the other person cared about, even though he was a bit out of his element here. Still, it was educational. Not that I intended to make use of such knowledge.

Nanahoshi, on the other hand, made no attempt to disguise how clearly bothered she was by him. She looked at him in annoyance; she sighed in annoyance. In the end she ran to the bathroom just to escape him. When she re-emerged, she came straight over to where I was, looking agitated. "It's about time for me to leave. That one's annoying me."

"All right, then. I'm sure you're exhausted. Thank you for coming today," I said.

“I’ll be counting on your help again tomorrow. And one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Sometime in the future, can I use your bath?”

Apparently, she’d gotten a look at our bathroom while on the way to the restroom. As a fellow Japanese person, she probably missed baths. Her name *was* Shizuka after all. “Sure. But you might have Nobita peeking in at you—”

“Forget I said anything.”

“No, I’m just joking, honestly. You can come any time.”

Nanahoshi nodded and started to leave. The sun hadn’t set yet, but I wondered if she would be safe walking home alone, even though she’d come here herself, and had magic items for her own protection.

“Escort Master Silent back to her residence, please.”

“Yes, Princess.”

While I was hesitating over what to do, the Princess moved to send one of her attendants as an escort. I should’ve expected it of someone with such charisma. However, Nanahoshi stubbornly refused the offer and went home by herself.

Next were Zanoba and Julie, then Badigadi. Badigadi, Zanoba and Ariel had all shared drinks while happily chatting amongst themselves. Since I knew of Badi’s affinity for alcohol, I’d prepared an appropriate amount just to be sure. But it apparently hadn’t been enough. Before I knew it, two of the three wine casks I’d stashed in the basement were empty. I debated sending out for more, but before I could, Zanoba got hammered.

“Bwahaha! You sure are weak for a ‘Blessed Child’,” Badigadi chortled.

“Ha ha ha...urgh, I’m ashamed. It seems I got carried away.”

“Master, are you okay?” Tiny Julie was trying to support Zanoba as he stumbled.

“Hee hee hee. Maybe you should rest in one of the rooms here?” Ariel suggested. She hadn’t drunk that much herself—keeping her wits about her was probably part of her training as a highborn lady. Everything she did was poised elegantly, from the way she tipped her cup to the way she laughed. She was probably a bit tipsy, but the faint blush the alcohol had given her just made her more charming.

“No. As a pupil, and a proud member of the Shirone Noble family, it already brings me shame to be so utterly inebriated in my own master’s house. I’ll take my leave while I can still walk.”

Zanoba came to say his farewells to me. Personally, I’d have been fine with him staying in our guest room… Well, whatever he wanted to do.

“Suppose I should be off, too. Princess of Asura, stay well!” said Badigadi.

“Yes, your highness. I hope you will stay in good health as well.”

“Bwahaha! I don’t get sick or injured!”

And so, both Zanoba and Badigadi took their leave. Huh. I’d thought for sure they would be the last ones to leave.

The reception drew to a close as Ariel and her group prepared to depart. While they were doing that, I decided to check on Elinalise. I went up to the second floor and peeked into the guest room.

I was greeted by an exciting display—no no, not the sexual kind. Just Elinalise using Cliff’s lap as a pillow. Apparently, he was done comforting her, and they’d moved on to the lovey-dovey bits. I felt kind of envious. I’d have to do the same with Sylphie later.

“Um, Mister Cliff, I’d like to talk to grandmo—I mean, Miss Elinalise. Do you mind?” Sylphie asked timidly as she crept up behind me.

Cliff looked to me as if he were asking for help. Elinalise lifted herself up and nodded at me. I nodded back. At that, Cliff stood up and left the room.

“Thanks, Rudy.” Sylphie smiled softly before heading inside.

Cliff and I headed down the stairs together. He looked anxious. “Are those two going to be okay?”

“If they aren’t, we just have to be there for them afterward,” I replied as we made our way to the ground floor.

When we arrived, Ariel and her lot had just finished their preparations to depart. The two attendants were helping Ariel slip her coat on. When she saw me, she dipped her chin. “Lord Rudeus. Thank you for today.” The rest of her party likewise bowed deeply.

I bowed in return, Japanese-style, though I was pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to do that in this situation.

“How is Sylphie doing?” Ariel asked.

“She’s talking to Elinalise right now.”

“I see. It was certainly a surprise to find out Sylphie had family here. I thought she’d lost them all.”

“Indeed. It really is a small world.” Not to mention that Elinalise and Sylphie were as different as day and night. Mainly in terms of chastity.

“In any case, this is the perfect opportunity. Lord Rudeus, may I have a moment of your time?”

Her words hinted at an ulterior motive, but I nodded anyway.

“Very well, then. Come this way.” As she spoke, Ariel quickly cut across the room and moved into the hallway. From there she proceeded to the front entryway, opened the door and headed outside. As if it came as naturally as breathing to them, the other three tailed her. I followed suit.

Outside, the sun was beginning to set. Ariel stopped along the path where people had been walking and the snow

had barely had a chance to pile up. She turned back to look at me.

“Lord Rudeus. I realize it might be inappropriate of me to ask...” A moment’s hesitation. “Would you agree to a duel with Luke? No magic, just sword against sword.”

A very sudden request. Unable to respond, I pursed my lips. Luke looked completely composed, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. This was clearly not something Ariel had decided on the spur of the moment. “Could you explain your reasoning, at least?”

She just smiled softly. “Just for fun.”

“‘For fun’?” I said, and Luke unsheathed what was a very *real* sword. Considering it was double-edged, he wasn’t going to be hitting me with the blunt side. “Can we use wooden swords, at least? I don’t even have a real sword.”

“I don’t mind if you conjure one for yourself,” she replied.

“I thought you said no magic?”

“I’m fine with you using it to create a weapon.”

Very well, then. I used my earth magic to create a stone blade. I made it thick and durable, which meant that it was heavy, too. I did practice my swings every day, so I could wield it just fine, but if it hit someone in the wrong spot and the worst came to pass, they could die. It wasn’t something you should hit someone with “for fun.”

“Don’t worry,” Ariel said. “This is something Luke requested.”

“Luke did?”

“I don’t mind if you use your full power to beat him senseless.”

Without my magic, I was just an average swordsman. There was no guarantee I *could* beat him senseless.

“For reference, Luke is an intermediate in Sword God Style and a beginner in Water God Style. His sword is a magic

item, made to cut through steel shields as easily as butter. His boots are the same as Sylphie's, giving a boost to the wearer's speed. His cloak can block heat, his gloves increase his strength, and beneath his uniform, he's wearing swordproof clothing."

"That's incredible." So he was garbed head to toe in a dashing hero's gear! Even selling my freshly renovated house wouldn't get me enough money to pay for all of that. "In other words, *I* might be the one getting beat senseless."

"I doubt it. But if you do sense your life is in danger, feel free to use magic."

"I'll just pray he doesn't cut me in half before I get the chance."

Why had he proposed this in the first place? None of us would benefit from someone dying here.

"Before we begin, I'd like you to tell me why we're doing this. Have I done something to upset you?" I asked.

"No. It's just for fun. Of course, you can refuse if you'd like."

"Whether I accept or not, this troubles me. Even this stone sword is deadly enough that it could kill someone if it hit them in the wrong place."

"Luke is prepared for that possibility."

Well, I wasn't. I was newly married and I didn't want to kill *or* be killed.

"Please," Ariel said. Her voice was somber.

What was this match going to prove? Maybe it was some kind of Asura Kingdom tradition. I could easily picture old man Sauros saying, "If you want to take Eris as your wife, you must defeat me first!"

But Sauros was dead.

"Rudeus. Please accept. If you're a man, then you should understand," Luke said.

There it was—the “if you’re a man” line. An unfair remark. It was almost like he was saying I wasn’t a man *because* I didn’t understand.

Ah, well. It’s not like we were seriously going to go at each other’s throats.

“All right. Please be gentle with me, then.” I was going to use my Demon Eye of Foresight, at least. I didn’t want anyone to die accidentally.

“Thank you for accepting our request.”

I still didn’t understand why they were doing this, but at Ariel’s words, Luke readied himself. As soon as Cliff saw that, he called out to me, confused. “H-hey, Rudeus, you sure about this?”

“Oh, Master Cliff. If things start looking bad, please cast a healing spell immediately.”

“Y-yeah. I was already planning on that.”

Stone sword in hand, I slowly took a stance of my own. We were about three steps apart. That meant one step and we could swing at each other. It was closer than the distance I normally set for myself in my simulations.

“Now then, are you ready?”

“Yes.”

After hearing my confirmation, Ariel said sharply, “Begin!”

“Haaaaah!” Luke bellowed and kicked off from the ground. As the snow scattered, he launched his body toward mine.



He was slow. No—compared to the average person, he probably wasn't that slow. He was probably about as quick as Linia, but still, slow enough that I could predict his movements. He was nowhere at Eris' or Ruijerd's level, never mind Orsted's. He was probably a step behind Soldat, too. This was all he could muster, even with a magic item?

Luke closed in, swinging his sword diagonally. “Hah!”

His form was technically correct, and he was putting his weight into the swing. He wasn't relying too much on his magical items, either. But he still moved much more slowly than my mental simulations.

“Hah!”

I aimed for his forearm. Sword God Style – Initial Strike, Arm Chop! It was a skill I'd learned long ago, a movement ingrained in me through hundreds of thousands of practice swings.

“Guh!”

The weight of my blade broke his arm in a single swing. He dropped his sword and it disappeared into the snow below.

“Not yet!” Luke immediately tried to pick it up with his left hand.

“No, it's over.” I prevented him from grabbing the sword by slamming a foot into his chest, sending him flying. He went rolling through the snow. When he tried to get up again, I pointed my sword at him.

“That's enough!” Ariel's exclamation ended the duel.

“Grr!” Luke punched the ground with his broken hand, then groaned in pain and cradled his arm.

“Ellemoi, heal him.”

At the Princess' command, one of her attendants raced over to him. She held his broken arm so close that her enormous breasts threatened to swallow it whole, and then cast healing magic.

“Amazing,” Cliff said admiringly. He didn’t know the first thing about swordplay, so he had no idea the match had been a joke. There were plenty of swordsmen and warriors out there more skilled than I was, such as Soldat or Eris. I was sure I couldn’t defeat either of them without using magic and my Demon Eye. Luke was merely a normal swordsman. If I hadn’t used my Eye, we might have traded a few blows, but it was just as Ariel had said. He was no match for me.

“Master Luke, are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

Once I heard his calm reply, I tossed my stone sword aside. It sank through the snow.

Luke stood up and looked my way. His usual superficial smile was nowhere to be seen. He looked serious. “Take good care of Sylphie.”

“Of course.” Was he was testing to see if I was strong enough to protect Sylphie? “It would help if you’d explain your reasoning.”

“It’s not terribly important,” Ariel remarked. “Luke just had his own feelings on the matter. Male pride, I suppose.”

“Male pride? What, is he in love with Sylphie too?”

I hadn’t mean to make fun of him, but Ariel furrowed her brow at my question. Crap. Maybe that was a rude thing to ask.

“We all love Sylphie, but not in a romantic sense of the word,” she said. “As comrades who’ve been through life and death situations together, we share a powerful bond.”

“My apologies. It was a rude thing to ask.”

“As long as you understand.” Ariel’s expression regained its usual composure. She looked toward the house, where Sylphie and Elinalise were likely still talking.

“Eventually I will return to the Asura Kingdom. There are only two paths from that point: Either I take the throne, or I die. There is a significantly higher probability that it will be the latter and the palace will be my grave.”

“Do you *have* to go back?”

“If I didn’t, I’d betray the memories of those who died to get me this far. It is my duty to return to Asura.”

Privilege came with responsibility. Despite her grim words, there was no emotion on Ariel’s face. Hers was the face of someone who didn’t doubt for a moment that they were doing what they must. Not that I was in a position to judge, but as far as I was concerned, that conviction made her a good candidate for the throne.

“Sylphie, however, has no such duty,” she continued.

True. Sylphie was neither a royal nor a noble; just an outsider who’d been tossed into the royal palace during the Displacement Incident.

“Sylphie saved my life. She’s been there for me as my friend this whole time—even after she found out her parents had passed. I’ve depended on her so much. But enough is enough. It’s about time I stopped relying on her and left her to walk her own path.”

Even so, Sylphie had every intention of following the Princess. They’d been through so much together. I could understand why Sylphie wanted to see things to the end. If Ruijerd had decided to challenge Laplace to battle, for instance, I’d probably have gone along with him, my legs trembling the whole way.

Wait, that probably wasn’t a good comparison. But the feeling of wanting to fight alongside your friend was the same. If Sylphie chose to follow Ariel, I would be proud of her. But if I thought it was a fight she had no chance of winning, I would want to stop her.

“Sylphie intends to stick with me to the end,” Ariel said. “But she’s married now, and if the two of you try your hardest, I’m sure you’ll eventually have children. When that happens, I expect her resolve to follow me will wither of its own accord.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. When that time came, would I even be able to stop her? I didn’t think so. If anything, I’d probably go with her to help.

“Having said that,” Ariel continued. “If you mistreat Sylphie, then I *will* take her back. I’m sure we can’t defeat you with a raw show of power, but there are plenty of other methods. So please, don’t make me feel like she would be better off coming with us.”

“I’ll take those words to heart.”

“Well then, Lord Rudeus. Please take good care of Sylphie.”

Ariel turned on her heel. Her two attendants bowed to me. Luke gave me a look of acknowledgment as he picked up his sword. Then the four of them left, shuffling through the snow until they disappeared, not even waiting for Sylphie to come downstairs.

As I watched them leave, I thought to myself, *When that day comes, no matter what Ariel says, we’re going to be there for her.*

When we returned to the house, Elinalise and Sylphie were just coming down the stairs. The former’s eyes were swollen, but she looked like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “Oh, Rudy. Where is Princess Ariel?”

“She just left.”

“Oh. I’m sorry for not being there. Did she say anything?”

“Just ‘Take good care of Sylphie.’”

I was still debating how best to mention the duel, but Cliff cut in front of me. “Luke suddenly challenged Rudeus to a duel! But leave it to Rudeus. He countered Luke with a single blow. Ahh, I wish I could show you the way that insufferable jerk cowered as he held his broken arm.”

You never disappoint, do ya, Cliff? Totally misread the room right there, I thought dryly. Not that it mattered, but I got the feeling he didn’t like Luke very much. Well, whatever.

When Sylphie heard that, she drew her brows together. “Rudy, you had a fight with Luke?”

“No, I wouldn’t really call it a fight. I was asked to duel him, and Princess Ariel watched us.”

“I see. Luke probably wanted to see for himself.”

“See what?” I asked.

“Your strength. Until now, Luke has been the one protecting me and the Princess.”

I understood what she was trying to say, but I was surprised to learn his zeal ran that deep. I guess you never really knew a person’s heart, huh? More importantly, my wife had just learned I’d been in a duel, and she wasn’t even worried about me? My opponent *had* used a real sword, after all.

“But thank you, Rudy.”

“For what?”

“For going easy on Luke. He’s weak. You’d kill him if you used your true strength.”

Apparently, it never even crossed her mind that I might lose. Poor Luke, though.

“Well, enough about me,” I said. “Are you done talking?”

“Yeah.” Sylphie nodded cheerfully.

So Elinalise was Sylphie’s grandmother, after all. Laws’ mother, in other words. Elinalise had birthed half-elf children all over the world and, due to the curse and her own personality, trouble followed her everywhere. Her conflict-resolution abilities were something she’d only mastered in recent decades; prior to that, she’d often left storms and scandals in her wake, some of which still haunted her.

Her reputation was particularly bad among other elves, who routinely ostracized her children just for the crime of

being related to her. Many of her children and grandchildren disparaged her, trying to distance themselves from her.

Elinalise stopped revealing her true name to any children she went on to have. She would raise them to adulthood, then cut ties with them. That was how she'd been living, until now.

Elinalise had known with just one look that Sylphie was either her grandchild or great-grandchild. She hadn't intended to reveal as much to her, but when she saw Sylphie looking so happy about her marriage, she was overwhelmed with emotion. It was an emotional story. I got teary-eyed myself during the recounting of it. But Elinalise refused all attempts to comfort her, claiming this was the result of her own actions.

Once that conversation was over, Cliff called me to the corner of the room. "Rudeus?" he said.

"Yes, Master Cliff?"

"Stop with the 'Master' crap, and no more stiff speech. Please call me Cliff from now on. No, scratch the please—just do it."

So there was no need to be respectful, yet he was ordering me around like an authority figure? Ah, well. I'd give him a break this time.

"It's about Lise," he continued.

"Okay."

"Honestly, she's not the person I thought she was."

"Uh-huh. And?"

I'd understand if he felt disillusioned. After all, the person he'd loved all this time actually had not only children but grandchildren as well. Judging by her conversation, there was a possibility she even had great-grandchildren. Even I'd be considerably shocked. However, if he was going to say "Help me break up with her" after hearing that conversation, even I'd be pissed. It wasn't like Elinalise had deceived him. Cliff had misunderstood her and fallen in love with her of his own accord. People in similar situations often felt disenchanted after hearing the truth, but it still disgusted me.

Granted, I wasn't going to stop him. Elinalise was better off cutting a creep like that out completely and then living with us. Then, if Sylphie permitted it, we could have our own little pseudo-family—wait, no, I couldn't be with anyone other than Sylphie. Well, hold on, you *could* say we were doing this for Sylphie's sake.

"She's even more tragic than I thought. I'm going to get rid of her curse, no matter what it takes. Since I'm a genius, I'm sure I'll figure out how to do that eventually, but just to be certain, would you mind helping me out?"

Which one of us was the horrible piece of crap now? Me. Sorry, Cliff. "So you don't feel disillusioned after hearing what she said?"

"Disillusioned? Of course not. Why would you even say that?" he replied without an ounce of hesitation.

"B-but the woman you love has slept with a bunch of other people and not only does she have kids, she even has grandkids, you know?"

"And what of it? I'm a follower of Millis. No matter what her circumstances are or how far she is from my picture-perfect ideal, she loves me and I have a duty to make her happy."

He said it. I trembled. Oh crap. Maybe I really had underestimated him. I should probably call him *Lord* Cliff from now on. Well, maybe it wasn't necessary to go that far. I'd just call him Master Cliff like I always did. "Okay, I understand. I am happy to be of assistance with whatever I can."

"Yeah, it'll be good to know I have your support." He gripped my small hand firmly in his when I reached out for a handshake. "Also, stop being so formal. We're friends, aren't we?"

"I refuse."

I was filled with a deep sense of respect toward Cliff. Meager as my help might be, I was happy to lend it to him.

Cliff and Elinalise were the last to go home. Now it was just Sylphie and me. The two of us began cleaning up the messy room our guests had left behind. Well, I said “messy,” but our guests had mostly been well-bred, so all we had to do was wipe down the floor where they’d spilled alcohol on it. We had quite a bit of food left over, but it was probably better than having prepared too little. We’d be eating leftovers again for dinner.

By the time we finished cleaning, the sun had set and the sky had grown dark. I lit up the place and returned to the living area. When I took my spot on the three-seater couch, Sylphie plopped down beside me. I was suddenly exhausted from the day’s events.

“A lot happened, but I’m glad it went well,” Sylphie said with a smile, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Yeah.” When I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, she leaned all of her weight against me. I buried my face in her hair and took a deep breath, drawing in her smell. Mmm, such a sweet scent.

“Rudy, that tickles.”

But she didn’t rebuff me. I kept on sniffing.

“I’m thinking about growing my hair out,” she suddenly declared.

I’d suggested she do that many times long ago, only to be refused each time. I’d always thought twintails or a ponytail would suit her, but I never thought I’d get to see it. “Are you certain that’s what you wish to do?”

“Why are you being so formal?”

“Because it’s a serious conversation.”

“Um, it’s not really *that* serious. I just, you know, my hair isn’t green anymore, right? Princess Ariel told me to be more feminine, but I still plan to wear pants at school, so I thought maybe I should at least let my hair grow out.”

So that was it. She didn't feel self-conscious about her hair anymore. Curious, I asked, "You're not going to wear the girl's uniform?"

"No way. It wouldn't look good on me."

C'mon, it totally would, I thought. If she's got to see it to believe it, then I'll just buy her one when I get the chance.

That aside...

"Well, I'd like to see how you look with long hair. No doubt you'd be cute. Though you already look cute right now."

"Hee hee, thank you. Okay, then. I'll grow it out."

That meant I would soon have to say farewell to the short-haired Sylphie. I needed to burn this image of her into my mind while I still could. Although I guess I'd be able to see her like this again if she cut her hair.

"Rudy, I'm going to work hard so your love for me stays strong."

Why'd she have to say it like that? Now I felt teary-eyed. How did I get to be so loved? I'd have to work hard too, so her feelings for me would never fade. Apparently the smug asshole type wasn't quite what she had in mind, so I'd quit being thick-headed and aim for being clever instead. I wasn't sure if I could actually do it, but I had to at least try.

"Sylphie, thanks for all the work you did today."

"Thank you too, Rudy."

Since we were both exhausted, I decided we'd just hit the bath and then relax.

That was how Sylphie and I got married.

Chapter 8: Life With a House

TWO MONTHS HAD PASSED since Sylphie and I got married. The university entered a new semester, I became a second-year student, and my daily life underwent a dramatic change.

First, I moved out of the dorm and began commuting from home. I woke up every morning in a big bed inside my own house. If Sylphie was beside me, we shared a good-morning kiss. Her mornings began early, so she woke about the same time as I did for my training.

Once I was up, I'd start my routine by running a circuit around the inside of the city, then practice swinging the stone sword I'd conjured before during my duel with Luke. As usual, I was unable to wrap a battle aura around my body, but that didn't mean practicing was pointless.

For some reason, Badigadi often popped in during my practice, bellowing out the obnoxious laugh that was so loud it annoyed the entire neighborhood. I greeted him politely, nonetheless, and he sometimes acted as my sparring partner. Skill-wise, he didn't match up to the likes of Ruijerd or Ghislaine. In fact, he was weaker than Eris...actually, no. It wasn't that he didn't measure up, just that I got the sense he wasn't using his full strength. Since he had an immortal body, maybe he just didn't feel like defense was necessary? On the other hand, he'd offer me surprisingly useful advice every so often, so maybe he really *was* quite strong.

After training, we'd make tracks for my house, where Sylphie would greet us with breakfast. Badigadi would disappear as soon as he ate his portion. The man was truly a mystery to me. I wondered what he was thinking. Some days, it didn't seem like he was thinking at all.

On days when Badigadi wasn't there, Sylphie and I would lovingly feed each other. When breakfast was over, we

would head to the university, which was about a thirty-minute walk away. Zanoba remarked that it was a bit inconvenient, but it didn't feel that far to me. I could cover the ground pretty quick if I ran.

We would arrive well before class started. Sylphie and I would part ways just before the dormitories, and I'd kill some time here and there before going to check in on Zanoba and Cliff. Cliff had his nose to the grindstone researching curses every morning. He'd claimed a research lab and spent his time in there disassembling magic items, digging through books, and searching for patterns. Eventually, he began work on an original magical instrument of his own design.

"I know you mentioned transferring a curse, but I can't think of any way you'd go about that," he told me. "But if my own theory is correct, I should be able to design a magical instrument that can negate curses."

His theory was that magical items and curses functioned much the same. A curse placed on an object produced a magic item, whereas a curse on a person produced a Cursed Child. In other words, if you could do something about the effects of a magic item, then you could do something about a curse. (The fact that he was stuck using language as ambiguous as "something" was proof his research was still in the beginning stages.)

"I have nothing which requires your help right now. This is my research, so please let me handle it. This is a matter of pride for me."

He sounded like a child who thought I might be there to nab his toys. It'd be one thing if Nanahoshi were the one offering to help him, but I didn't really think there was much I could do to assist.

Afternoons brought with them a high likelihood that Elinalise and Cliff would be all over each other, so I refrained from visiting him during that period.

Zanoba often spent his entire day in his own research room. Generally, he'd be trying to decipher the writing we'd discovered in the manor, or affectionately rubbing his cheek against that of the automated doll's. He'd made no progress so far, but that was to be expected. His passion was undeniable. I was certain he'd eventually crack the case.

"Master, please watch Julie. I'll take care of this."

Apparently, he was terrified that I'd stick my nose in his research. He spoke as if I'd solve the puzzle at a single glance and bring his quest to an end. People were really overestimating my abilities. I didn't know anything outside my area of expertise.

On a related note, Zanoba was continuing to make gradual progress on the red wyrm figurine during his breaks from research. Julie sat nearby, making a figurine herself. He'd given her her own desk to work at and she'd been practicing diligently.

"Grandmaster, thank you for your instruction."

Now that I couldn't teach her at night, I was teaching her earth magic in the mornings instead. We were coming up on a year since we'd found her, and her growth was startling, but it was still too soon for us to put our mass-production plans into practice. For now, all I could do was have her focus on practice through steady repetition.

According to Sylphie, if a child continued practicing the same school of magic while they were young, it would increase their proficiency with it. Therefore, I had her focus on using only earth magic. If Sylphie's theory was correct, then Julie would soon be an expert in earth magic. We could move onto the next phase once she'd progressed some more. There was no need to rush.

I still went to the cafeteria for lunch. For various reasons, I'd decided to not bring food from home. The seats in the corner of the first floor were for our exclusive use—"our" being Zanoba, Julie, occasionally Badigadi or Cliff and

Elinalise, as well as Linia and Pursena. These days, Luke or Sylphie showed up almost daily. They didn't eat with us, but they would exchange a few words before taking their leave. According to them, it was to give the appearance that Ariel and I were friends.

I didn't chat much with Luke, but I was getting more lovey-dovey with "Master Fitz," who was beginning to look more feminine as her hair grew longer. Some people still thought she was a man, and regarded us with strange looks when they saw us being affectionate. Sylphie still didn't like public displays of affection when she was in her Fitz persona. She got really upset when I touched her butt one time. She didn't get angry or glare at me; she just looked sad. She told me she wanted me to refrain from being a creep in front of people.

That was fair, I supposed. Sylphie wasn't the type to worry about public attention, but she probably didn't want people to think her husband was some kind of sex-crazed baboon who couldn't keep it in his pants. I'd behave myself, for her sake.

After lunch, I'd always head to class. As usual, I was taking Advanced-tier healing and Intermediate-tier detoxification classes. I'd sit beside Pursena, and we'd focus entirely on memorizing information, casting healing spells on each other, and eating meat. On days when I didn't have a class, I would teach Linia offensive magic.

"You haven't been touching us lately, mew."

"You still stink of arousal, but I can't get over how weird it feels that you don't try to touch us."

The two of them couldn't hide their surprise at my good behavior, but I had pledged my fidelity to Sylphie, and I wasn't going to touch other girls. Pursena would tease me with flirty giggles, but I just ignored her. Linia would sometimes flash her underwear at me, but I tried to avert my eyes. Unfortunately, I couldn't beat my deeply ingrained instincts, so I knew she was wearing blue today.

As the afternoon came to an end, I would pay Nanahoshi a visit. She was as crabby as ever. Now that my libido had returned, I could appreciate the petite Japanese build and features that made her stand out amidst the people of this world. My preferences must have changed since my last life, since I didn't find her gloomy aura that appealing. It did, however, fill me with a sense of nostalgia.

"Just so you know, if you lay a hand on me, I'll go crying to Orsted."

"Please don't do that."

"Hmph."

She'd say things like that if I stared too much. She knew how terrified I was of Orsted. I had no intention of touching her anyway, so the exchange was basically reaffirmation that we were maintaining our distance.

Nanahoshi always gave off an aura of irritation and impatience. However, we'd burned through her stock of untested magic circles in the past six months. It seemed it was about time for her to move to the next stage.

Once I finished with Nanahoshi, I'd meet back up with Sylphie. Her bodyguard duties continued on the same schedule as before, but since we were newly married, the Princess let her go home for a while once class ended. She did still have to guard the Princess at night, so after eating dinner, doing a bit of cleaning and taking a bath, she'd immediately head back to the school. It seemed like twice the effort. I was putting her through a lot.

Sylphie, however, didn't seem to feel that way. "I like having a house to come back to." Or so she said.

Sylphie was on night guard duty two days out of three. That meant she only had one day to rest. Which was quite a bit, considering that she'd had no days off up till now. The fact that she even got the one day off now was all thanks to Elinalise, who'd personally volunteered to guard the Princess

instead. I'd never seen them talk, but apparently, they got along quite well. The two of them seemed like oil and water, what with Elinalise's promiscuity and Ariel's circumspect nature, but according to Sylphie, Ariel wasn't all that pure after all. She was just putting on a show.

On the days Sylphie didn't have night duty, she and I would stop by the market on our way home to buy three days' worth of groceries. Most of the food for sale were things with a long shelf life, such as beans, potatoes, and dried meat. I craved rice. If we expanded the distribution routes that Nanahoshi had developed, perhaps we could import rice from the south. An issue for later, at any rate.

Once we got home, it was dinner time. Contrary to her tomboyish appearance, Sylphie was a good cook. She didn't know all that many recipes, but her cooking reminded me of my childhood. It tasted like the food I'd eaten growing up in Buena Village, which made sense, given that Lilia was the one who taught her.

She looked so cute with her apron on, bustling about the kitchen. It made me want to take her in my arms from behind. I once tried to help her cook, but she politely turned me down. Apparently, there was something about making food that she didn't want to share with anyone else, even though it wasn't like she was a chef or anything. I thought of suggesting that she wear nothing but an apron, but had the feeling she'd turn me down.

We occasionally had guests when dinnertime rolled around, and by "guests," I meant the thirteen we had previously invited. Cliff and Elinalise came over relatively often. Zanoba, perhaps showing restraint, rarely ever showed up. Nanahoshi came over about once a month to use our bath. She probably wanted to visit more frequently, but refrained from doing so. Before any of you get the wrong idea, just let me say it right now—I did *not* peek at her while she was bathing. Nanahoshi seemed to be on her guard about the possibility, anyway. She only ever came over when Sylphie was home.

Once dinner was finished and our guests had gone home, we were left to ourselves for some sweet, sweet alone time. As “Master Fitz,” Sylphie behaved with dignity throughout the day, and expected me to exhibit similar restraint and propriety, even though just seeing her from afar made me want to run up to her like an excited puppy. By contrast, she was loving and submissive at night. She’d do whatever I asked. Even when I let myself slip and said something filthy, she’d gladly fulfill my requests.

“Compared to the people in the Asura Palace, you’re completely normal,” she told me. Sylphie never asked anything of me. In fact, she was taking a bat to my my calm, rational side when she said, “I want to do whatever you want to do, Rudy.”

I’d given in to temptation several times, and done just that. But I couldn’t keep treating her like an object. Sure, I loved sex. This was everything I’d ever dreamed about. Still, Sylphie was my wife. Respect—that’s right, I wanted to respect her.

Or so I thought, but when she looked at me with those shimmering eyes and said, “You don’t have to restrain yourself,” it felt stupid to even try. I was a weak man. There were words I wanted to try saying at least once in my life, or have said to me. There were things I wanted to try doing at least once in my life, or have done to me. In the past two months I’d managed to strike half of those off my list. I didn’t pressure Sylphie into anything, though. Anything she wasn’t keen on, we didn’t do.

Even so, I wanted to do something for her. With that thought in mind, I asked, “Hey, Sylphie, is there anything you want me to do for you?”

“Huh? Okay, well, do you remember what you promised me before?”

As soon as I heard that I prostrated myself. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember.”

Flustered, Sylphie forced me to look up, saying, “It’s not your fault, it was a year ago. Remember the thing you

used? Disturb Magic. I want you to teach me.”

“That’s no trouble at all. I’ll teach you every last detail.”

“Well, I know Advanced-tier healing magic. Rudy, you’re taking classes on that, right? I can teach you too.”

So we spent our time after dinner teaching each other magic. I would teach Sylphie how to use Disturb Magic and she would teach me how to use healing magic without incantations. There was no real purpose to the latter, but she wasn’t satisfied with just me doing the teaching. I wondered why that was. Was she the type who weren’t happy if they weren’t providing their partner with something? Or the type that felt uncomfortable receiving anything from other people?

It was true that I couldn’t cast healing magic without incantations, anyway, so I gratefully accepted her instruction. I could keep an eye out for anything else I wanted to learn from her in the meantime.

“Um, I don’t think it’s all that different from casting other types of magic without an incantation,” Sylphie said at one point.

I used to think so, too, and yet the fact remained that I couldn’t use healing magic without an incantation. Not even after listening to Sylphie explain how it worked, and trying to put her instructions into practice.

“Rudy, is it possible that you don’t understand what it feels like to be on the receiving end of the spell?”

Healing magic entailed touching another person’s body and pouring your own mana into them, using your mana to alter the flow of *their* mana and heal their wounds. I was unable to conjure the feeling of having someone else’s mana interfere with mine. Put more simply, it was like pressing your right index finger against your left palm, but only the finger felt anything.

Offensive magic was as easy as breathing to me. This was odd. Maybe it wasn’t just healing magic that I couldn’t cast without an incantation, but all kinds of support magic? Maybe—like with battle auras—it was just something that

people who'd been reincarnated here from another world couldn't master. Or maybe I just didn't have a knack for healing magic.

"I'm kind of relieved, y'know? There are actually things you can't do," Sylphie said with her characteristic toothy grin.

Being outshone by someone at anything was a bit vexing, but it had to have been discouraging for Sylphie to think that there was nothing she could beat me at. So I didn't let it bother me.

Unlike my futile attempts at healing magic, Sylphie mastered the essentials of Disturb Magic in no time. She still needed practice, but I was sure she'd be able to use it in battle eventually. Sylphie really was an exceptional student. I'd taught magic to a number of people—Eris, Ghislaine, Zanoba, Julie, Linia—but I felt like Sylphie was the quickest among them to learn. She might even be a kind of genius herself.

"But this is kind of unfair, isn't it? A magician can't do anything if you do this."

"Well, one of the Seven Great Powers used a similar technique."

"Really? So that's where it came from. You're acquainted with one of the Seven Great Powers, then?"

"No, I'm not. Nanahoshi is." Sylphie would probably worry if I told her one of them had nearly killed me. It was probably safer to keep any mention of Orsted to myself, too. There was no guarantee he wouldn't come at me for teaching people how to use Disturb Magic. "You probably shouldn't share this information with anyone else. That goes for Disturb Magic as well. If one of the Seven Great Powers came after us, I wouldn't be any match for them."

"Got it. It's a secret," Sylphie said, nodding earnestly.

On days when Sylphie was on night duty, I made a concerted effort to do the cleaning and laundry. In general,

washing Sylphie's clothes was my job, including her panties and bras. Of course, as her husband, I refrained from any acts of perversion. I didn't pocket them or take them to my room to use them to pleasure myself. I took a sniff at most. Sylphie satisfied my young, active libido once every three days.

I also cleaned the house, more or less, though I did a sloppy job of it, according to Sylphie. Back when I was an adventurer, I would clean every inn room I moved into for the first time, but other than that, I was the messy type. Sylphie would clean on her days off, but this manor was too huge for the two of us to keep spotless. I did think cleaning was a necessity, but the house was just way too big. Maybe we needed to hire a maid.

Thinking about a maid reminded me of Lilia, and I wondered if Paul and the others had already reunited with Zenith. It had been three years since Elinalise and her comrades had located my mother. I estimated it would have taken Roxy and Talhand a year or two to cut across the Demon Continent and arrive in Millishion. If memory served me right, they would then have departed for the Begaritt Continent's Labyrinth City of Rapan, and I didn't think that would be a whole year's journey. I'd sent my first letter a year and a half ago. If it arrived as planned, then I should be getting a reply soon.

I should be more patient. Elinalise had assured me there was nothing to worry about, but I still felt anxious. Roxy was on the case, and I trusted her. I should keep calm and wait.

Now that I thought about it, with Buena Village gone, Paul and the others had nowhere to live. Maybe they'd decide to settle down in Millishion, but if they headed this way, we could live together in this house. Now that I thought about it, you could say that me getting married and buying a house *was* for the sake of my family. Of course, that was something I only thought of after the fact, so it was nothing more than a convenient excuse.

In any case, to think that a former shut-in like me might be looking after my parents! It was kind of moving...though it

would be difficult to give up the privacy of my two-person love nest with Sylphie.

Chapter 9: The Letter

WHEN I WOKE in the morning, Sylphie was sleeping on my arm. I took in her white hair, the pale nape of her neck, her long lashes. Such an unbelievably cute girl was lying in bed in nothing but her panties, using my arm as a pillow. Her face as she slept looked so completely relaxed and vulnerable.

When I folded back the blanket, her sakura petals came into view. There were small bruises on her skin just above them. In other words, hickeys. Ones I'd put on her last night. In my previous life, I hadn't understood the appeal of hickeys on someone, but now I loved waking up and seeing the ones I'd left on Sylphie. It was something similar to what those terrible boyfriends who made their girlfriends get a piercing or tattoo must have felt, if not as vile: a sense of pride. Sylphie was mine. I wasn't going to let anyone else have her.

At that thought, my little man stood up for morning roll call. He sure was full of pep, considering how hard we'd gone at it yesterday. In my previous life, the only attention he'd gotten was from my hand, and he'd been a shut-in himself these past couple of years. Now that he had a place to stretch his legs, he was truly bursting with energy.

Ah crap, I can't start getting excited this early in the morning. Sylphie has work today. I would just have to divert that energy into exercise instead. So I extracted my arm from beneath Sylphie's head and replaced it with a pillow.

"Mm. Rudy, you're not supposed to drink from that..." Sylphie stirred, curling up in a ball. Her sleeptalking was cute. I wondered what she was letting me drink from in her dreams?

Somehow, I found myself stroking her chest. I'd wake her if I wasn't careful, so I did so very gently. Like touching silken tofu. Very discreet. I had to be the happiest man in the world, getting to experience something this wonderful every

morning. Was this what it felt like to be really, truly happy IRL?

“Mm...Rudy...” Sylphie opened her eyes slightly and looked at me. Then she grabbed my hand and, still half-asleep, smiled and said, “Be safe.”

“Will do.”

Then I left the room. It would be another three days before we could sleep together again. I would wait anxiously for it.

Life had been genuinely peaceful lately. The only event of note was Linia and Pursena introducing me to some boy. Apparently, he was a first-year delinquent who, in the span of two months, had fought and defeated all the other punks in his grade. Then he got so full of himself he wanted to try challenging the Boss’ group, but his first target—Zanoba—utterly annihilated him. After all that, he somehow became a part of my group. It was completely out of the blue.

According to the rumors I’d heard of late, the university was apparently ruled by something similar to the Four Heavenly Kings, called the Demonic Circle of Six. Rumor had it that the Circle answered to me. If someone could beat my Circle of Six, then they earned the right to challenge me. Sounded like the setup for a shounen manga. They weren’t going to call it a Fistival (Fist Festival) or something like that, were they?

Incidentally, those six people were Zanoba, Cliff, Linia, Pursena, Fitz, and Badigadi. If someone did actually defeat all of them, that meant I’d be facing someone who could defeat a Demon King. No thanks. In any case, the first challenger this year had already met a miserable defeat at the hands of the first person he targeted. By the time I met him, he was already hanging his head and acting meek, like a dog with its tail between its legs.

Apparently, it had been a decent fight, thanks to the boy putting distance between himself and Zanoba so he could attack at range with his magic. But Zanoba had withstood all the attacks till his opponent was drained of mana, then closed the gap and sealed his victory with a single punch. It seemed ranged combat wasn't Zanoba's specialty. I would have to teach him the secret Chinese technique of taking a golf shot at your opponent with a rock.

In any case, I'd somehow become the boss of the school without my knowledge. At least it made the delinquents listen to me. That was especially useful when I recently found some of them beating up a student behind the main school building. I intervened verbally, though I was prepared to fight them if necessary...and they just went pale and stopped.

It was nice, being able to stop bullies with just a few words. Not bad at all, having power like that. As long as I lived, I wouldn't allow others to harass the weak. Not even if the person being bullied *was* somehow to blame.

Then, one day, it finally arrived: a letter from Paul.

Dear Rudeus,

I got your letter. So you're enrolling in the University of Magic? Congratulations. I'm glad you're walking your own path. I'm sure you've heard this from Elinalise already, but we've found Zenith's location, thanks to Roxy, Talhand and Elinalise, and are on our way to retrieve her. Give Elinalise my regards. Of course, she'll probably just look disgusted if you do.

On to the real topic. We're currently in East Port. We're about to head to the Begaritt Continent next. I've never been there before, but it's said to be one of the harshest places in the world, after the Demon Continent.

I hesitated to take the children with me. Norn and Aisha are still only nine. That's when the idea came up to send the two of them to where you are. Of course, it's not like they could just go by themselves. Ginger volunteered to accompany them, but I wasn't sure if that would be enough.

Just then, I ran into someone. Someone you know. They offered to take on the task of escorting the children to you, and I agreed. I'm sure you'll be surprised when you see them. They're very reliable.

Honestly, it was a painful decision. I kept thinking, what if something happens to them along the way? What if something horrible happens, and I'm not there? Much as I want them with me, I also want them to be safe. You as well.

Once they get there, just find a place to live, no matter how small, and send them to school. I sent them along with enough money to cover their living and enrollment expenses. It's quite a large sum. Don't go using it to buy women, okay?

I'm just teasing. Knowing you, you'll do a good job, I'm sure. But, yeah, I get this is something I should be doing myself. Sorry for being a terrible father. I feel bad asking this of you, but please, do me this favor.

Come to think of it, you're already fifteen. Though I guess you may be sixteen or seventeen by the time this letter gets to you. Either way, you're an adult. I feel bad we couldn't celebrate your birthday together. I won't be able to celebrate Norn or Aisha's tenth birthdays, either. Ah, well. We can have one huge party when we all get back together—as a family.

Leave finding your mother to me. The Fittoa Search and Rescue Corps have effectively disbanded, but I have plenty of firepower on my side. Between Lilia, Talhand, Roxy, Vierra, Sherra, and myself, we can make it to the Begaritt Continent and back. If things go smoothly, we should be able to join you in Ranoa in another year or two.

I did consider sending Lilia along with the children, but apparently, she's more worried about me than she is about them. What a mess. I feel pathetic.

Anyhow, Lilia trusts Aisha. She's basically taught the girl all she could. Aisha is a genius. I'm a bit scared by the power of my own genes, honestly, considering how you and Aisha both turned out.

Norn, though, she's a normal kid. She's not like you and Aisha. You might get really frustrated with her, but try to be patient. I'm afraid I spoiled her, and it's made her a bit selfish. She hates you, and she doesn't get along well with Aisha, so she may feel isolated over there. As her older brother, please be kind to her.

I also gave them a copy of this letter, just in case. I'm sure they'll be fine, considering who's looking after them, but if they don't show up within six months of this letter's arrival, I'd like you to go out and look for them.

So, that's the gist of it. I feel bad for leaving everything up to you. But thank you.

—Paul Greyrat

It was a letter full of guilt. Honestly, Paul.

I was a bit nervous about Norn and Aisha coming here, but I supposed it was better than them being dragged along to the Begaritt Continent. Couldn't he have left them with Zenith's family? No, maybe that presented its own problems. Norn aside, Aisha wasn't related to Zenith by blood.

They'd probably be fine traveling here. Compared to the Demon Continent, the Central Continent was relatively safe. Kidnapping was so rampant in this world that it might be a concern, but the folks who did that generally targeted the vulnerable. If Norn and Aisha had two capable bodyguards around, they probably wouldn't be an appealing target.

Speaking of their bodyguards, Ginger was a knight and a former member of Zanoba's imperial guard. I couldn't remember how capable she was, but Shirone knights were

trained in Water God Style, so that should prove useful for an escort mission.

Then there was the other, whom Paul called reliable. Who could it be? Geese, maybe? There was no way it could be Eris. Who else was reliable that both Paul and I knew? Ah! Could it be who I was thinking of? They'd mentioned searching the Central Continent, but perhaps good fortune had allowed them to cross paths with Paul. If I was right, they could handle it. In fact, they wouldn't even need Ginger's help.

I could tell how much Paul trusted me based off his letter. I had to make sure I lived up to his expectations. I was his oldest son, after all. I was also relieved that I'd made the right choice by marrying Sylphie and getting this house ready. Particularly the latter—we had plenty of rooms. We could welcome my sisters into our home once they got here.

The biggest problem I could see was that both my sisters were still young. Our lovemaking sessions wouldn't be very good for their education. But then again, I supposed we could just put them in rooms far from ours. I was looking forward to their arrival, actually. I wondered how soon it would be. Two months from now, perhaps?

Wait, there was something I had to do before that.

“This is exactly the kind of thing I need to consult Sylphie about first.”

I went looking for her. Right about now she would be in the kitchen preparing breakfast. When I ventured in, I found her chopping vegetables. There was a rhythmic *thunk* each time the blade came down on the cutting board. She was so short, with tiny shoulders and a thin frame. Seeing her from this angle just heated me up.

“Sylphie!” I threw my arms around her from behind. Then I slipped my hands in through the sleeves of her apron and groped at her soft breasts.

“Ouch!”

“Oh no!”

When I looked, Sylphie had cut her finger. Crimson swelled from the wound and splattered across the top of her cutting board. She'd sliced herself open the moment I hugged her.

"Eeeeeek!" I screamed.

"That's an exaggerated reaction, Rudy. But it's dangerous to do that when I'm holding a knife." Sylphie, in a rare display, responded reproachfully to my scream. She quickly healed the wound on her finger. The way she wordlessly cast the spell was so natural, almost like it was second nature to her.

"I'm sorry. I won't hug you when you're cooking."

"Yes, just hold on a while. The food will be done in a moment."

I retreated from the kitchen and waited in the dining area, feeling restless and guilty. I sat in my chair and waited. Then, when Sylphie appeared from the kitchen, I lifted my head. "I deeply apologize for what happened just a moment ago."

"I'm not really that angry. You can just say you're sorry like normal."

"Okay, sorry," I corrected.

"That's better. Just be careful next time."

Sylphie sat down by me, and we began to eat. Lately I felt so loved—too loved—that I was scared of the recoil when her love for me ran out.

"So then, what is it? It's rare to see you that excited."

"Oh yes, the letter from my father arrived."

"What? From Mister Paul?!"

I handed my surprised wife the letter. Her face was tense as she started reading it, but her expression soon turned to disappointment. "Oh. Our letter about getting married hasn't arrived yet." It seemed she'd wanted to know my family's reaction to us getting married. As she read further, her

expression turned serious. At the end she murmured, “I see.” Then finally she said, “That’s great, Rudy. I’m glad everyone’s safe.”

“Yeah.” Come to think of it, I’d brought this up without a second thought, even though Sylphie had lost both of her parents. Maybe I was a bit lacking in tact.

Sylphie looked at my face and smiled sadly. “Come on, Rudy; don’t make that face. It’s true that my mother and father are gone, but right now I have you and Elinalise. I’m not lonely.” She grasped my hand as she said that and giggled.

She’d gotten even cuter lately. Her extremely short hair had grown out, and she was looking more and more feminine. Her adorable ears jutted out between smooth strands of white hair. This girl was my wife. It wasn’t a dream, was it?

“Sylphie...”

I wanted to create a new family with this cute girl. This desire came naturally bubbling to the surface, though Sylphie was the one who would struggle when it came to childbirth. She had an adorably tiny butt, but the narrowness of her hips might cause problems during birth. This world had healing magic, so death during childbirth was rare, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t still be in a great deal of discomfort.

More importantly, were we actually ready to raise a kid? Honestly, Sylphie and I still didn’t have much life experience. We had steady incomes and we were considered to be of age in this world, but could we actually be parents to another human being?

It’s fine, I told myself. Every other living thing in the world managed just fine. I should be able to do it too. Even if I couldn’t, I had Sylphie with me. We just had to try our best. Paul would probably show up in another two years. Lilia was experienced in childrearing, and Zenith and Sylphie got along well. As for Paul, he’d probably just be excited to see his grandchildren.

Wait, crap. This wasn’t the time to be thinking about that.

“As you read in that letter, my sisters will be coming our way. I’m thinking about letting them live here with us, but I wasn’t sure if you’d be okay with that,” I said.

“Of course I am. The house will be a lot livelier,” she replied with a toothy grin.

No problems, then.

Once we finished eating dinner, we moved to the living area. It was time to study magic. I still couldn’t cast healing spells without their incantations, but I could make do by memorizing the words and studying the theory. Voiceless casting wasn’t the only technique out there. I did think I was talented, but far from the *most* talented in this world. Better to make sure my foundations were solid and that I maintained my current level of ability.

“Nngh...!”

Currently Sylphie was trying to use Disturb Magic to neutralize the water ball I’d created. She had the tip of her finger pointed at my hand, and her face was bright red as she grunted. I was using my mana to maintain the water ball so as to make sure she couldn’t neutralize it.

If the undulating ball of liquid burst, she would be the winner. She would earn the right to do whatever she wanted to me in bed. Not that she really needed that right—all she had to do was say something and I’d go along with it. Meanwhile, if I could maintain the ball’s shape until the end, I would be the winner. Then I could shower her with my affections in bed as much as I wanted. Though I guess I could do that even if I didn’t win.

Sylphie was currently Advanced-tier in all schools of offensive magic except fire magic. She also knew advanced healing and detoxification magic as well. In other words, her skill levels were as such:

FIRE MAGIC: Intermediate

WATER MAGIC: Advanced

EARTH MAGIC: Advanced

WIND MAGIC: Advanced

HEALING MAGIC: Advanced

DETOXIFICATION MAGIC: Advanced

Extremely high stats.

I only recently found this out, but those six types of magic are called the the Foundational Six, for the six most frequently used types. The university sought to have its students achieve beginner-level proficiency in all six types during their second and third years. Once they did that, they could pick a major and spend their remaining years elevating their mastery to the Advanced tier.

If someone had no talent for magic, though, they'd stall out at the Intermediate level even if they devoted themselves to the study of just one type. Or their mana pool would be too small, or they would trip up on combined magic. There were almost no students who could reach the Advanced tier in multiple fields, let alone rise to Saint-level. Exceptional students like Sylphie and Cliff supposedly came by only once every ten years or so.

Yet in recent years, there had been one such exceptional student at this school every single year. You could probably call them geniuses, but I honestly considered them ordinary, compared to the monsters that people referred to as gods.

What about me, then? Based on what I'd heard from Badigadi and Kishirika, my mana capacity was God-level, but I got the feeling I'd never be God-level myself. I was basically like your average car with the fuel tank of a passenger plane. I could go whatever distance I wanted without running out of gas, but my speed was unremarkable. If you added a jet engine to match that fuel tank, the car would fall apart. As a design concept, I was junk. Although it was nice to never run out of gasoline, no matter how much I used.

“By the way, Sylphie.”

“Wh-what? I’m concentrating right now.”

“Do you think our kids will have a talent for magic too?”

“Wha—?!” Sylphie’s concentration broke. Her still-inchoate Disturb Magic spell fizzled and the previously undulating ball of water snapped back into a perfect sphere. I froze it and plopped it into the cup in front of me.

Sylphie bashfully rubbed her thighs together, face bright red. “W-we won’t know until they’re born.”

“And them being born is all dependent on, uh, my hard work as your husband, right?” I tried to laugh and play it off, but Sylphie started stroking my thigh. Her delicate hands tickled. I countered by rubbing between her shoulders. It felt kind of nice being able to touch her at this time of day. In seconds, the mood in our living room turned sexual. Sylphie buried her face in my neck as she wrapped her arms around me. So cute.

Your hubby is about ready to start working hard right now, I thought.

In any case, it was a bit hasty to talk about kids that hadn’t even been conceived yet, let alone born. Don’t count your chickens before they hatch, or whatever the phrase was. First, we needed an egg.

“Ah, but elf blood does run strong in me, so it may be difficult for me to... Um, I know you want to have kids, but it may take quite a few months or even years. My grandm—I mean, Miss Elinalise told me the same thing. So, um, there’s a high probability I won’t get pregnant right away.” Sylphie pulled away and hung her head, looking a bit anxious.

Several months had passed since we got married. We had a healthy sex life. It was a bit crude to say this, but the moment I pulled the trigger on my magnum, I would shout phrases straight out of an eroge. Things like “get pregnant!” and the like. There wasn’t really a deep meaning behind the words; I just wanted to try saying them in real life instead of a

video game. Sylphie might have actually taken the words to heart, though.

“But um, well, if I’m not able to have kids, you can take a mistress if you want.”

“I have no plans of doing that right now.”

“But Rudy, you want children, don’t you?”

I tried seeing it from Sylphie’s perspective. What if we discovered I was the infertile one? And Sylphie wanted to have children no matter what, so she found a different man to knock her up? I might kill myself if that happened. So I couldn’t put Sylphie through it.

“Don’t be silly. It’s not that I want children. I just want a physical representation of our love for each other.”

“Rudy...”

“I love you, Sylphie. My princess.” Although I was the one saying it, the words were still cheesy enough they made my skin crawl. As for Sylphie...well, the people of this world were incredibly susceptible to such lines. Recently when I said, “Let us drink to the beauty in your eyes,” she went all red. It was extremely effective. But we couldn’t move on if she got embarrassed so easily.

“I love you too.” Her eyes moistened as she clung to my arm. Embarrassed, she pursed her lips, cheeks colored bright.

A+ communication.

Since things had gotten so exciting, it was time to move to the second floor. I picked her up like a princess. Sylphie wrapped her arms around my neck and surrendered her body to me. It made my heart pound. I was glad she was still in the mood.

Chapter 10: Breakdown

THE INCIDENT HAPPENED a month after the letter arrived. That day I was assisting Nanahoshi with an experiment, but its parameters were a little different from the usual.

“If this one works properly, I can move on to the next step.” Nanahoshi said, presenting me with a magic circle significantly larger than any of her previous ones. It was still just half the width of a tatami mat, though. It had an intricate pattern, densely written across a rare piece of large parchment.

“Just to be sure, may I ask what this circle is supposed to do?”

“It’s going to summon a foreign object from another world.”

“And there’s no way that’ll cause another teleportation calamity, right?”

The Displacement had occurred because Nanahoshi was summoned here. Which meant there was no guarantee that a similar incident wouldn’t occur just because she was summoning something small. At least, that was what I thought, but Nanahoshi just shook her head. “It’s safe. Theoretically, at least.”

“Just in case, can I ask what that theory is?”

“Based on our previous experiments, I’ve confirmed that the bigger and more complex the object you try to summon, the more mana is required. In other words, magic in this world obeys the laws of Conservation of Energy. We’ll be summoning something simple and small this time. If we assume that the energy from my summoning was what wiped out the region, then theoretically this circle will, at most, only teleport people within a meter of its range. I honestly don’t think it’s possible, but just in case, I’ve written a safety

measure into the circle itself so I can control how much mana it uses.”

I see, I see... Okay, no, I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Conservation of Energy... uh, what was that again?” And how was that different from the law of Conservation of Mass?

“I’m not well-informed enough to explain it well to the uninitiated, but it basically means mana is responsible for most of the odd things that happen in this world. That spell you use all the time—Stone Cannon, was it? It appears as if you’ve suddenly conjured a rock in mid-air, but actually you’ve just transformed your mana into a rock.”

The law of Conservation of Energy, huh? So that was it. That was why the more mana you poured into the spell, the hotter the flame in fire magic, and the bigger the resulting mass in earth magic.

“Also...” Nanahoshi went on to explain the principle behind her circle to me after that, but it was all Greek to me after a point. Something about if you applied the law of such-and-such, the size and effect of the circle would be this and that, then if you applied this other law of whatever-she-called-it, then blah-blah-blah.

Honestly, if there even was a flaw in her theory, I wasn’t going to catch it. The only thing I did know was that she seemed confident, and that meant there was a high chance of success. Well, even if the worst happened and I got teleported somewhere, I was sure I’d find my way back home somehow.

“If this fails and I get teleported, please contact my family.”

“I’m telling you, there’s no possibility of that happening.”

I stepped up in front of the circle. “Well then, let’s begin.”

“Please.”

I wasn't sure if that word was directed at me or not. Perhaps it was more of a plea to God.

I began pouring my mana into the circle, placing my hands on the edge of the paper. A current rippled through the circle and it began emitting a glow. I could feel my mana being sucked right out through my arms.

But it was strange. Something didn't feel right. It seemed like the path the light was traveling on was obstructed. As if one part wasn't lighting up.

Pssh!

There was a soft zap and suddenly the mana stopped flowing. The light emitted by the circle faded.

It was over. There was no further reaction from the circle. I looked at it closely and found a tear on part of the paper. Maybe it had short-circuited and the safety kicked in? Regardless, this was a failure.

“Well?”

“It failed,” said Nanahoshi quietly. She fell back into her chair with a thud, planted an elbow on her desk and let out a big sigh. “Haah.”

She stared at the paper still sitting on the floor. The paint had disappeared, leaving only the underlying rough sketch of the circle, and the tear caused by the experiment. Nanahoshi continued to look at it absentmindedly, not moving a muscle. Then after a while she said, without looking at me, “Thank you for your assistance. You can go home today.”

The result of almost two years' worth of effort had come to nothing in a mere few seconds. “Well, these things happen, you know,” I tried.

Nanahoshi did not reply.

Was it my fault? No, all I did was provide the mana. I didn't touch anything else. Anyone could've done what I did as long as they had the mana for it. So even if the experiment failed because of me, it would be Nanahoshi's fault for not briefing me enough.

Nanahoshi said nothing.

At any rate, this was probably it for the day. “Well, excuse me, then.” I stood up to leave. Before I left the experiment room, I turned back to look. She was still in the same position she had been, immobile.

I passed through the messy research room, which looked more like a disorganized warehouse at this point, and stepped out into the hall. I made it just a few steps before I came to a halt. Nanahoshi had been incredibly tense over the past few months. Judging by the way she’d slumped in her chair, she was pretty rattled. Perhaps she wasn’t thinking about her next experiment or the failure at all, but just giving up entirely?

Nah. Despite what her looks might lead you to believe, Nanahoshi was tough. Surely, she had the capacity to take a failure for what it was and not linger on it.

Just as I thought that...

“AAAAAAAH!”

Screams erupted from the research room. Then the sound of something breaking. I spun on my heel and high-tailed it back into the room.

“Aaaah!”

Nanahoshi was banging her head up and down in a frenzy. She tore out pages from a book she’d written in and scattered them across the floor. She knocked over some shelves and spilled the contents of a jar. She ripped off her mask and slapped it against the ground. Then she started tearing at her face and stumbled, slamming into a wall. She punched it, then tripped again on the spilled contents of the jar and finally collapsed onto the floor, where she grabbed fistfuls of sand that had spilled out of the jar and hurled them at the ground. Then she stood and started tearing at her hair instead.

Panicked, I rushed over to her and pinned her arms behind her back. “Hold on, calm down!”

“I can’t go home, I can’t go home, I can’t go home.” Nanahoshi’s eyes looked vacant as she mumbled those words. All of the muscles in her body went tense, as if she were

preparing to go berserk again. “I can’t go home, I can’t go home, I can’t—aaaaaaah!”

She went into a writhing frenzy, fighting as hard as she could to break out of my grip. But her strength was only that of a high-school girl, and a shut-in at that. Extremely weak. There was no way she could tear herself away. Before long, her body went limp. When I released her, she just weakly sank to the floor.

“Hey, are you okay?” I got a distinct sense that she was very much not. She was white as a sheet, with vacant eyes and dark circles. Her lips had lost all color and were dry and cracked. This was the face of someone who was in a very bad state, mentally. She might just hurt herself.

I couldn’t leave her alone like this. What should I do? The person who could help most in a situation like this was... Sylphie! That’s right, Sylphie. She might be able to do something about this. And fortitously, she had no night duty today. *Okay. I’m going to take Nanahoshi back to our place for tonight, then.*

Wait...before that, I should probably find somewhere for her to calm down. “Are you okay?” I asked.

“...”

“You overdid it a bit. Let’s rest for today, okay?”

Nanahoshi didn’t respond.

I put my arm around her shoulder and practically dragged her to her feet. Then I hauled her out of the research room.

Maybe we should lock it. I paused to consider. Nah, we’ll worry about that later. It should be fine for one day. Probably.

I guided us toward the fifth-year classrooms where Sylphie should be. Should I ask someone to get her for me? Or should I go into the class and get her myself? People stared as we passed, Nanahoshi leaning on me for support. This was annoying. We were so conspicuous right now, and Nanahoshi

didn't have her mask on. It was probably best to keep a low profile. But how?

"Master!"

Someone called out to me. I turned to find Zanoba behind me. "Master, what's happened?!"

"Zanoba, Nanahoshi's in trouble. Help me."

"Is she sick?!"

"Something like that," I said.

"In that case, we should go to the medical office first."

Oh. Okay, yes. The medical office, then.

"I'll carry her," Zanoba volunteered.

"Be gentle."

"Of course. Come then, Master Silent."

He lifted her up princess-style. A solid, stable way of carrying a person. Nanahoshi didn't resist at all. She had a weary look on her face, like a husk drained of all energy.

"Make way!" Zanoba shouted and plunged into the crowd of people. They split like an ocean before him. I followed behind.

In the infirmary, we let Nanahoshi rest on one of the beds. Her face was vacant. What a terrible expression. It almost looked as if the shadow of death were upon her. We informed the resident healer that it was nothing serious. Psychological problems couldn't be solved by healing magic, after all.

Just as my gaze began to drift to my feet, Julie grabbed the hem of my shirt. "Grandmaster, your face...it looks awful."

I instinctively touched my face. *Just what kind of expression do I have right now?*

Oh no. It seemed I was pretty shaken myself. I needed to calm down a little.

“That’s just ’cause I’m no beauty.” I patted her on the head. I couldn’t believe I’d made such a young girl worry over me.

“Here, Master.” A cup was suddenly thrust at me from the side. Zanoba was the one holding it.

“Thanks.” I took it gratefully and drained its contents. He’d apparently gotten the water from one of the medical office’s pitchers. My tongue felt dry as paper. Apparently, my mouth had gotten really parched at some point.

“Phew.” I took a seat and breathed a sigh.

Zanoba stood beside me and quietly asked, “Master, what happened? I’ve never seen you so flustered before.”

“Well...” I explained what had happened in the experiment room. That the experiment had failed and Nanahoshi went berserk. That she looked like she might kill herself if I left her alone, so I helped her.

After hearing all of that, Zanoba looked down at Nanahoshi with a complicated expression on his face. “So she’s not conducting this research because she wants to.”

“Nope.”

It wasn’t like she did it begrudgingly, but she wasn’t exactly passionate about it, either. It was just something she had to do so she could go home. It had been six years since the Displacement Incident, and what she’d thought would be an important step forward had failed. She’d looked back and realized that six years had already passed and she hadn’t progressed at all.

I sighed and slumped back in my chair. Zanoba said nothing more after that. The two of us just remained there with Nanahoshi, who was staring absently at the ceiling.

After a while, Nanahoshi closed her eyes and fell asleep. Sylphie arrived around the same time. Ariel wasn't with her. "People were saying that you and Zanoba carried a female student to the medical office," she said.

What kind of rumors were they spreading now? Did the whole school think I'd knocked out a female student and carried her off to the medical office, where I was probably doing something awful to her?

Man, that's cold, I thought. *Why doesn't anyone trust me? Because I'm "the Boss"?* Well, it was not like I'd done much to earn their trust in the first place. Whatever.

I told Sylphie what had transpired.

"I can't believe something like that happened." Sylphie wore a solemn expression as she peered over at Nanahoshi.

"It might be dangerous to leave her alone, so I was thinking of letting her rest at our house today."

"But wouldn't it be better to let her rest here in the medical office?"

"I think it'd be better for her to be with someone she knows when she wakes up."

At any rate, I couldn't leave her alone. Nanahoshi was young and this had clearly shaken her to the core. When people were pushed to their limits, they could do extreme things. Things like hurting themselves.

"I have no idea how long it will take for her to calm down," I said. "I'd like to let her stay with us so I can keep an eye on her for now."

"Um, is it okay if I leave that part up to you?"

"If it's just taking care of her meals, I can do that."

We'd isolate her until she calmed down. It might be good to let her escape from reality a bit. A tactical retreat of sorts.

"This isn't cheating on you or anything."

“I know. Or is there something for you to feel guilty about?”

“Nope.” I had no reason to feel guilty whatsoever. Still, I was bringing a different woman into my house. One in a weak and defenseless position, at that. Even so, Sylphie didn’t seem to be suspicious. So this was what trust was like, huh?

“I’ll leave it to you, Rudy. Are you going to go straight home today?”

“Yeah. I won’t be able to go with you, so can you handle shopping on your own?”

“Leave it to me.”

I nodded at Sylphie’s reassuring response. I’d expect nothing less from her.

We left the school and hurried back to our house. Zanoba volunteered to transport Nanahoshi. This time he carried her piggyback, which seemed to suit him better, even if he was a prince.

“Sorry for the trouble, Zanoba.”

“No, this is the only thing I can do to help.” He easily carted the listless Nanahoshi around on his back. Julie toddled along behind us. All I had to do was give Zanoba a drill and a diving suit and people would be calling him Mister Bubbles.

Just to test this out, I tried lifting Julie.

“Eek! Grandmaster, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

Zanoba just glanced over. I kept Julie in my arms as I walked. Her body was surprisingly plump. Just a year ago she’d been all skin and bones, but it seemed she’d been eating properly. Her muscles were a bit lacking, but she didn’t really need to be a beefcake at the age of seven.

“Is Zanoba treating you well, Julie?” I asked.

“Yes, Master feeds to me lots of food.”

“Good to hear. The correct way to say it is ‘Yes, Master feeds me lots of food.’”

“Master feeds me lots of food.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Come to think of it, I wondered if Nanahoshi had been eating properly. She’d felt pretty light when I carried her. Food could lift your spirits in a rough time; even little things like eating your favorite foods or sharing a meal with someone could bring joy. I doubted Nanahoshi had been doing much of that.

“Phew,” I sighed. Just what kind of life had Nanahoshi been living? Locked up all by herself, hardly eating, scarcely talking to anyone. Just continuously drawing those magic circles.

“It’s not your fault, Master. Try not to let it affect you so deeply.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Apparently Zanoba had taken my sigh to mean something different. He had a serious expression plastered on his face as he looked at me. It seemed he was more worried about me than he was about Nanahoshi. Well, he’d barely ever talked to her, so I couldn’t blame him for that.

We fell silent for a while after that. In the quiet, I could hear Julie’s heartbeat. As a child, her body temperature was higher than mine. She was warm, and hearing her heartbeat was also strangely soothing. I should buy her something next time I went out.

When we reached the house, I had Zanoba deposit Nanahoshi into one of the two rooms I’d spruced up for my little sisters. She just slumped limply upon the bed. Her eyes were open; she must’ve woken up at some point. But they were completely empty. As if she were staring off into a distance I couldn’t see. Almost like a corpse.

Would she be coming back from this? Based on my own observations, she was in a precarious state, but not beyond

saving. I'd had similar depressive spells myself before, but they'd passed eventually.

For the moment, I patted her down and removed anything I thought could be used as a dangerous weapon. She had a small Swiss Army-style knife on her person. I didn't think she could kill herself with something like that, but I took it anyway, just to be safe.

There was nothing dangerous in her room except for the window, since we were on the second floor. Maybe I should use magic to secure it. It wouldn't help if she broke the glass, but I wanted to believe she didn't have the willpower to go that far.

Since she wasn't moving, I went back down to the first floor.

"Is she going to be all right?" Zanoba asked worriedly. He didn't seem like the kind of person who'd had any experience with depression. He had his moments of weakness, sure, but he was generally an optimist.

"Who can say? At any rate, you were a big help, Zanoba."

"No, you're the one always taking care of me, after all. This was the least I could do." That was Zanoba for you. I could always count on him. "What about you, Master? Are you going to be all right?"

"Me? Why?"

"It looks like Master Silent's breakdown had a severe impact on you."

Severe impact? Really?

Actually, he was probably right. Nanahoshi had lost it, gone berserk, and then turned into a lifeless shell once I stopped her. Seeing that from beginning to end reminded me of my past. Though it had manifested a bit differently for her, we'd both been through similar mental agonies. I felt her pain as if it were my own. If my circumstances had been a bit different, I might have been the one lying vacantly on the floor in her place.

“Just a bit. Reminds me of pain from the past.”

“Would you mind sharing more?” he asked.

“When I was little, I also had a similar experience. I became apathetic and shut myself off.”

“I can’t understand that feeling.”

Although the way he said that felt distancing, I didn’t want him to flippantly claim to understand, either. “I’m sure you can’t.”

“Regardless, if there is anything else that could use my strength, please let me know. Strength is the only thing I have in abundance.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to do that.” I appreciated Zanoba’s kindness. He was a pretty good guy, as long as dolls weren’t involved.

Zanoba went home a short while after that. With nothing else to do, I just spent my time reading in Nanahoshi’s room as she slept. I would want to be left alone if I were in her position. But she’d already been alone up until this point. Always alone.

I stayed with her until Sylphie got home.

Chapter 11: Three Heads Are Better Than One

A WEEK HAD PASSED since we took Nanahoshi under our protection, and the worst of it seemed to have passed. She was eating, albeit only a little. If prompted, she would take a bath—and get back out without drowning herself.

The ambition I'd previously sensed in her was gone. It was as if the strings that were holding her up had been cut. She suddenly felt as fragile as porcelain and lacking in agency, like those women in adult videos who got deceived by yakuza and conned into selling their bodies.

I couldn't leave her alone. I also had to be careful not to let her run into anyone like Luke. The only thing I felt from her right now was a sense of resignation. The failure of that experiment had really hit her hard.

I'd never experienced a setback of that magnitude before. The closest was when I spent several years as a no-lifer in an online game, only for my data to be erased. The moment I saw that my login was invalid and got the email notifying me that my account was banned, my heart started pounding violently. I spent the entire day unable to process anything. I took my objections to the management and protested vehemently, but in the end, I went to sleep crying. For the next month I felt no motivation to do anything. I then swore I'd never again get invested in another online game.

Nanahoshi's experiment wasn't the same as an online game. Her objective was to return to her world. If she gave up on that, I was afraid she wouldn't be able to go on living. I tried my best to encourage her, but she was just in a daze the entire time. I didn't even know if she was listening to what I was saying.

But just as I started to doubt that she was...

"I thought I'd covered everything," she blurted suddenly one day.

Instead of responding, I just listened.

“A magic circle is basically like what we called a circuit board in our world. You create a single function by combining several circuit patterns. However, one part would not connect, no matter what I did. No matter how I changed the wiring, one part wouldn’t connect with the rest. I tried forcing it, but then a defect would appear elsewhere.”

In order to connect this unconnectable circuit, she’d had to nearly double its size. Then, to compensate for the resulting distortion, she’d patched in another circuit. But still, that one defect remained in her magic circle. Try as she might, she couldn’t figure out what was wrong with it—just that one section that wouldn’t connect.

“It’s physically impossible. That means there’s no way for me to return home.”

Though it appeared flawless, the magic circle was something she’d pieced together with years of painstaking work. At a glance, it seemed like a problem that was ultimately solvable, if tremendously complicated. But the mysterious defect suggested otherwise.

“It’s hopeless,” Nanahoshi said as she flopped facedown on the bed.

I headed out to her research room to recover the diagram of her circle. Her spiel had jogged something in my memory, but I didn’t want to excite her prematurely. First, I would confirm whether anything could be done or not.

The next day, I called Cliff and Zanoba to the research room. People said three heads were better than one, so I was going to use the power of three geniuses’ brains. Since I’d summoned Cliff, Elinalise had naturally tagged along. She seemed to frequent his research room, but what about her classes? At this rate she’d be lucky if she weren’t expelled.

“It’s hard to believe someone like Silent is in that kind of state. She just seemed like she was made of tougher stuff,” Elinalise mused.

“Truly strong people don’t close themselves off from the world and bear all their burdens on their own.”

“Well, I suppose that’s true.” Elinalise shrugged. Despite her prolific social life, she hadn’t interacted much with Nanahoshi. And, though she didn’t look it, she was skilled at handling younger women. It might be a good idea to enlist her help in getting Nanahoshi to take a breather.

“Now then, the two of you. First, take a look at this.”

When I showed them the diagram, Cliff immediately scowled. “That’s a messy circle.”

Messy? That was an interesting way to put it. “There are messy and neat circles?” I asked.

“Of course there are. You have to keep your circles neat and small when creating magical implements. I would’ve drawn this much more neatly. For instance, if you connected this part here to this part over here, you could make it look much cleaner.”

“Mm-hmm,” I said. Critiquing someone else’s work was easy. If we did as he proposed, it would probably just create other defects in the circle.

“Ah, but the idea is amazing. I’d never think to loop this part right here. Oh, I see. The reason this part is so complex is because of this here...” Cliff looked at the circle and started mumbling to himself. “This here, that there... Maybe I could make more sense of it if I’d paid more attention to my theory...”

“So, Master, what kind of magic circle is this?” Zanoba asked.

“This is what Silent was studying—summoning circles. But she’s gotten a little stuck, so I wanted to get your input to help her.”

Zanoba tilted his head. “But summoning magic is out of our realm of expertise, is it not?”

“Well, if we can’t solve the problem, so be it.”

I just figured that we might be able to come up with something as a group that Nanahoshi hadn't been able to on her own. In fact, it was precisely because we were all experts in such different fields that we might be able to come up with an alternative approach.

"Anyway, please look at this section. This is apparently where the circle disconnected. See?" I pointed to the tear in the paper that appeared during the experiment.

"Huh? Oh. This is where it's disconnected? I didn't even notice. This circle is incomplete then, huh? Umm, so the part that should connect to it is...here?"

Cliff was surprised. Despite being a self-proclaimed genius, he apparently hadn't noticed that right away. *Well, that's just how things go*, I thought. "Do you have any ideas for how to connect this circuit?"

Cliff folded his arms and fell into thought. He started mumbling "here" and "there" to himself. He produced a memo pad from his breast pocket and started scribbling down various things. "This is a challenging problem. Maybe if you redrew the whole—no, but then... It's impossible."

"Wouldn't it work if you used a multi-level structure?" Zanoba interjected.

Cliff looked doubtful. "A multi-level structure? What are you talking about?"

"With the doll I'm researching, there're several layers of magical circles combined together to produce a single effect. That said, I have only just begun my research, so I've never even drawn a proper circle yet myself, but..."

"Wait, doll? You mean the one from before? Let me see."

"Master, is that all right with you?" Zanoba asked.

"Yeah, of course."

Zanoba fetched us a sliver of the doll's arm. Cliff studied it with great interest before declaring, "The person who created this was a genius!"

It had to be remarkable if someone as self-important as Cliff said that.

“I’ve never seen a magic circle like this before,” he continued. “Grr, I have no idea what the mechanics behind this are. Are these two magic circles, one on top of the other? No, that’s not it, there’s more than that. It couldn’t move properly without all of them together. But it was still able to move even though it was broken. Why? Dammit, what the hell is with this circle!?” Cliff gritted his teeth in frustration. Almost like Vegeta witnessing Goku’s power level—it was over 9,000!

“I don’t know all the details yet myself, but, according to the book, this circle apparently controls the movement of the elbow.” Zanoba answered Cliff’s question so casually that the latter looked as if he might burst into tears.

Elinalise rushed over immediately and pulled his head into her breasts, stroking his hair. “There, there, you’re a genius yourself, Cliff. You would be just as knowledgeable had you researched the matter yourself.”

“I-I know that!” His face went red as he regained his composure.

Perfect, Elinalise. I knew I could count on you. But can you save the bedroom stuff for later? We’re kind of busy right now.

“Master Cliff. If we used the same technique that was used for the doll, do you think it would solve Silent’s problem with her circle?”

“No clue. But it’s worth a shot.”

It was a lead, at least. Nanahoshi had only ever drawn her circles on a single flat surface. Perhaps she’d never thought about layering them or folding them. Then again, maybe there was a reason she hadn’t tried that yet. I prayed it was the former, and that it would be enough to motivate her once again.

The next day I took Nanahoshi with me to her research room. I'd spent the previous day putting the unkempt room in order, and it was in those premises, clean and yet still disorganized somehow, that Zanoba and Cliff awaited us. The two of them were looking through the research data that Nanahoshi had collected over the years.

Seeing them, Nanahoshi just snorted derisively. "What's this? Did you bring me here so you could all ravish me?"

Really? Just how far down the path of self-destruction had she gone? All because she'd failed once? Well, I guess it *did* only take a single big failure to disrupt a person's entire life.

"How dare you?! I'm a devout follower of Millis!" Cliff was indignant. The Millis faith's tenets regarding chastity were similar to those of Christianity's. Monogamy, no adultery, etc. etc. Very austere.

"If you say so." Nanahoshi just drifted unstably and took a seat. Then she slumped back in her chair.

"Master Cliff, Zanoba, let's just talk about what we came up with yesterday."

Nanahoshi listened with disinterest as I showed her a version of her circle that Cliff had corrected with red pen. Then Zanoba's proposal of multi-level structures based on his research. And finally, the idea I'd come up with: three-dimensional circles. She listened to it all without a hint of emotion on her face, sitting perfectly still as if she were frozen.

Then our gazes met. It wasn't that she was disinterested. She was just expressionless, concentrating.

"Ah." Nanahoshi suddenly spoke. "It might work," she mumbled. Then she leaped out of her seat. "So that's it, that's what it is. There was no reason for me to get so caught up in drawing on a flat surface. That makes sense, of course. Putting it on paper will provide depth. If I layer those papers, I can

make as big of a magic circle as I want. Why couldn't I think of such a simple thing so much sooner?!"

Nanahoshi anxiously paced around the room three or four times. She took pen and paper from her desk and began to draw. She would write something that looked like a formula, quickly erase it, then start again. "Urgh, no! This isn't it!"

"Hey, isn't this what you mean?" There went Cliff, blissfully unaware, inserting his head into the cage of the bear that was Nanahoshi. He'd produced a red pen out of nowhere and annotated her memo. *That's our Cliff*, I thought sarcastically. *The air in the room changed for the better and he, of course, still can't read it.*

"Oh, so that's it. You're pretty clever," she commended.

"Of course I am. I'm a genius."

"Then how about this? What should I do here? I've been unsure about this part for a while."

"Uh, hold on a sec."

Cliff and Nanahoshi...were working well together. They stood shoulder to shoulder, jotting things down on a sheet of paper. I glanced at their work, but it just looked like a child's scribbles to me. "Zanoba, do you get what they're doing?"

"They're far beyond my understanding."

The two of us had been left out in the cold. Still, Cliff sure was amazing. It hadn't been that long since he first began researching magic circles himself. Well, whatever. Nanahoshi seemed to be in good spirits. Even if she didn't succeed this time, at least she had a foothold once more, and reason to hope.

"Sorry, Zanoba, but I'm going to have to ask you to stay and watch these two."

"Where are you going, Master?"

"I'm going to get Elinalise. She wouldn't like her man getting so cozy with another woman when she isn't around."

I could hear the excitement in Nanahoshi's voice as I left the research room. It was the first time I'd ever heard such emotion from her.

A week later, Nanahoshi had completed her magic circle. She consulted with Zanoba and Cliff to fix the problems in the previous version, and with their input, recreated the underlying mechanism. In a magnificent display of intense concentration, she finished the circle in a matter of days. She glued together five layers of paper, creating a magic circle that looked as if it were made of cardboard.

"Now then, let's begin."

As Cliff and Zanoba looked on I began pouring my mana into the circle.

The circle began to emit a vibrant light that illuminated the room like it was noon. As the mana flowed from me, something gradually began to take shape in its middle. Once the light dissipated, we could see the object from another world that we'd successfully summoned.

It was a plastic bottle. One with no label or cap. A simple plastic bottle.

"Ooh, most impressive."

"What the heck is this? Glass? No, it's softer than glass."

Zanoba and Cliff couldn't hide their excitement at seeing a 500ml plastic bottle for the first time. Elinalise and Julie also peered at it with intense interest. Nanahoshi looked at what she'd summoned, clenched her hand into a fist and let out a barely audible, "Yes, I did it."

A plastic bottle. It was both insignificant and significant at the same time. In that brief moment, our previous world became undeniably connected to this one. We'd brought over an inanimate object, and an incomplete one to boot, but still...

we'd brought something to this world that had not previously existed in it.

"You succeeded," I said to Nanahoshi.

She nodded firmly, looking truly pleased with herself. "Yes, I did. Now I can finally move on to the next step! As I probe deeper into layered magic circles, I should be able to summon just about anything. If I can organize the circle better, then by just changing out two or three of the layers, I can most likely ..."

Nanahoshi suddenly snapped back to reality. She averted her eyes, looking a bit awkward. "Sorry. F-for causing you so much trouble."



“It’s give and take, right? Next time I’m in a bind, lend me a hand, okay?”

“I-I’d already planned on that.”

Suddenly I noticed Elinalise staring. “You two sure are close, huh?”

“You’re always quick to assume a love affair, Miss Elinalise,” I replied.

“Well, you are a man and a woman. But it’s not very appropriate.” Her eyes looked like those of a reproachful mother-in-law.

I had no intention of cheating. Plus, Sylphie knew what we were up to.

Nanahoshi voluntarily put some distance between us. “That’s right, you are newly married. Wouldn’t be good if your wife misunderstood.”

Elinalise laughed cheerfully, wrapping her arms around Nanahoshi’s shoulders. “Heh heh, there’s no need for you to worry over that. Ah, I know! Let’s go to the pub today! It’ll be your treat, of course!”

Nanahoshi smiled wryly at Elinalise’s proposal. “I guess I have no choice. But that makes me even with all of you, then.”

“Sounds wonderful, wouldn’t you agree, Cliff?”

Cliff, who’d been crumpling the plastic bottle in his hands, looked back at us. “Huh? Yeah, sure! That makes us even. But you’re pretty exceptional yourself, so I wouldn’t mind you helping me out with my own research next time!”

Elinalise giggled.

And so our group headed to the pub that afternoon. For some reason, Linia and Pursena joined us as we were making our way through the school building, saying things like, “We don’t want to be left out,” and “Take us along too, mew.” How in the world had they managed to sniff us out?

As our little congregation filed outside, Ariel stopped to ask what we were doing. When I explained the situation she said, “Then I should have someone chaperone you,” and sent Sylphie along. Clearly “chaperone” was an excuse and Ariel was just being considerate. By the time we made it out the school gate, Badigadi had joined us at some point and was hanging out at the very rear of our group. No, seriously, just when had he snuck in here?

On our way, we stopped by the Magicians’ Guild, where Nanahoshi went to withdraw some money. She was apparently using it as a bank, and had an impressive amount stashed there.

The pub we selected was one of Badigadi’s favorites. Despite the early afternoon hour, there were other patrons present. Nanahoshi didn’t pay that any mind, however. She went to the counter and slammed down her bagful of gold. “Reserve the whole place for us,” she said.

“Huh? Are you serious?”

Seeing the barkeep looking flustered, Badigadi cut in. “Hold on there.” He took out a bag of gold from his own pocket and slammed it down. Now there was twice the amount. “It’s a day of celebration! Let all those who come this day enjoy their alcohol free of charge!” he declared. The man sure had a dignified presence about him. Just as one would expect of a king.

He’s my idol! I want to be him! I thought inwardly, mimicking the lines of a certain pair that idolized an infamous, immortal blond vampire from a popular manga series.

Acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Badigadi planted himself at the biggest table in the pub. There he demanded, “Bring all the food you have on your menu!”

Once in my life, I wanted to try using that line myself. Since I wasn’t the one paying, I was fine with him ordering whatever he wanted, but were the twelve of us really going to be able to eat all that food? Ah well. I was sure it’d be fine.

When the first of the food was delivered, the Demon King stood and said, “Now then, what are we celebrating today?”

“The success of Silent’s research,” Elinalise helpfully cut in.

“All right. Well then, Silent, stand up. You must give your commencement speech.”

Coaxed to her feet, Nanahoshi rose. She looked reluctant. “Thanks for today.”

“Okay, now cheers!”

“Cheers!”

And thus the celebration began, not unlike that of the wedding celebration we’d had not so long ago.

It was an enjoyable party. When good things happened, people made merry and drank. I’d never participated in a gathering like this in my previous life, not even once. Even in this world, I’d only done it a couple of times. When I was an adventurer, I did occasionally drink alongside the parties I worked with, but I always had a sense of cynicism about it. I thought only fools got drunk, noisy and wild. I would tut inwardly at their lack of consideration for those around them. But now that I was in the fray myself, I finally understood how those people felt. *Sometimes, I thought, you just needed to let loose and have fun.*

My belief in that felt especially justified as I looked at Nanahoshi, who was stroking Linia’s ears as she sang anime theme songs in Japanese. If you didn’t occasionally cut loose and forget your troubles, you wouldn’t be able to go on. Life was full of pain, after all. If you didn’t try to find the good where you could, you’d crumble. Elinalise and Badigadi probably knew that better than any of us, given how long they’d lived.

Sylphie and I were going to drink to our hearts' content today. We never drank at home; it just wasn't something either of us was used to. And—although it had nothing to do with why we didn't drink at home—I finally understood just how bad a drunk Sylphie really was.

No, it wasn't that she was bad. She wasn't bad at all. She was just the clingy type of drunk.

"Hey, Rudy, pat my head."

"Okay, okay. Good girl."

"You can eat my ears too, you know?"

"Don't mind if I do."

"Ha ha, that tickles."

When drunk, she turned into an unbelievably adorable creature. It was phenomenal. I was going to have to approach her about drinking more often. Ah, but her behavior made me worry about her drinking by herself. Maybe I should tell her not to drink outside our house, but then I wondered if that would be too controlling of me.

No, that doesn't matter, I decided. She was mine. What was wrong with doing whatever I wanted to something that belonged to me?

"Rudy, hug me?"

"Yes, yes, I'm going to hug your hips tight."

"Hee hee. I'm so happy." The way she laughed sounded so naughty somehow. Ahh, just thinking about going home with her and making love to her made me feel like I understood why the world was so full of love songs.

"Rudy, um, you know what, lately, well, I've been feeling jealous."

"What, seriously? Of whom? I won't go near them anymore. I'll completely cut ties."

"Actually, it's Mister Ruijerd. You told me about him recently, remember? When you talk about him you just look so...you know?"

“Yeah, but I just really look up to him. Please try not to let it get to you.”

“I don’t like it. I only want you to only pay attention to me!”

That wasn’t what she’d said when I told her about Ruijerd. This must be how she really felt. I always thought it was scary how she seemed to accept everything with such perfect equanimity, but maybe it only seemed that way because she worked hard to make it so.

Just as I pulled Sylphie onto my lap and the two of us started to fool around, Nanahoshi came over. She was drunk and trying to pick a fight. “So sweet I could puke. Knock it off already. Do you even know how many years I’ve been without *my boyfriend*? ”

Was she already done singing? I’d be happy to sing a duet with her. As long as she picked a fairly mainstream song, I would probably be familiar with it. Then again, it might be that generational gap all over again.

“At least go somewhere people won’t have to look at you if you’re going to make out.”

“C’mon, don’t be like that. They’ve got alcohol here. Let’s have some fun together.”

“Besides, I’ve been wanting to say this to you for a while now. Even from inside my room—smooch smooch, creak creak. What the hell is marriage anyway? Huh? What is it? I mean it’s fine, whatever. But what the hell? There I was, totally down in the dumps, and you two were having sex. I could even hear your voices echo at night, god—eek!”

Badigadi suddenly lifted Nanahoshi into his arms. “Bwahaha! Come along! Today you will sing me your bizarre songs!”

“They’re not ‘bizarre;’ they’re popular in my world!”

“How very interesting! I know not what world it is you come from, but sing them for me! Go on then, sing as much as you can!”

“Hold on, I have something to say to Rudeus first!”

“Bwahaha! You are better off singing if you have nothing nice to say to the man who helped you! Now, sing!”

“I was just leading into what I really wanted to say!” Nanahoshi barked in protest.

She probably wanted to express her gratitude. Still, I only did what anyone would do for a friend in trouble. She didn’t need to thank me. Besides, she had to have quite the social status to warrant being kidnapped by a Demon King. It was almost as if she were the princess of some kingdom. That is, if said princess had been carried off to a pub instead of a cell. And there was always a stage in a pub.

After a bit, Nanahoshi began singing. An accompaniment joined in belatedly. At first, I thought maybe a troubadour was here, but it turned out to be Badigadi holding the instrument. I didn’t know he could play. Also, he’d asked her to sing for him and yet he was performing alongside her? I definitely didn’t understand him.

All that aside, it was a familiar song. I couldn’t quite place where it came from...ah, that’s what it was. “Gandhara,” the ending theme to the TV series *Monkey*. That definitely wasn’t something I’d expect her generation to know. Then again, it was pretty famous, though.

That said, she sucked. Badly. Horribly. Maybe it was because she wasn’t syncing with the accompaniment. Nah, they both sucked and that was why they couldn’t even sync up with one another.

Still, they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Besides, Nanahoshi was the star of our group today. It was fine if she was terrible. Even though her song was awful, it still conveyed her feelings.

Did she really want to go home that badly? That was something I couldn’t understand. My country of love was right here.

Even so, it was an enjoyable party. We should do it again sometime.

The party came to an end when its star, Nanahoshi, got completely tanked. Linia and Pursena carried her off to their dorm room, where they were apparently going to have a sleepover. The rest split off into groups. The heavy drinkers decided to visit a different pub for another round.

Sylphie and I opted to return home. In her drunken state, she giggled and clung to my arm. Her legs were a bit unstable, so I kept an arm around her waist to support her, suddenly gaining insight into how playboys felt when they went on group dates and knew they were going to score.

Of course, I had no such impure thoughts—though that would change once we got home.

“Rudy, isn’t it kind of noisy?” Sylphie said suddenly.

“Hm?” Now that she mentioned it...

I strained my ears. I could hear the sound of someone banging on something, and voices arguing. Sounded almost like when cats fought. As we approached our house, we saw a group standing at the door, noisily banging on it. From afar, all I could see were their silhouettes. Some neighborhood brats, maybe, or thieves of some sort.

My mind was still muddled from the alcohol, but I activated my demon eye to be safe. Sylphie slapped at her cheeks and, though still unsteady, stood on her own two feet. “Rudy, I’m going to detoxify us.”

“Got it.”

Sylphie voicelessly cast detoxification on me, and I could feel the alcohol inside me evaporate. It didn’t completely sober me up, but my head felt clearer. Careful to make sure our would-be thieves didn’t spot us, I crept quietly toward them. That’s when I heard their voices.

“The whole reason it got this late was because you got us lost, Norn!”

“Same goes for you, Aisha. You’re the one who said it was definitely that way.”

“Besides, we don’t even know if this is really the place or not! What are you going to do now? All the inns are already closed! Now we’re going to have to make camp outside in the cold!”

“I don’t like this either, but you’re the one who said we’d stay at his place, so we didn’t need a room today. I didn’t want to stay at his house, but you forced me to come along—”

“That’s because we told Ginger we’d be all right! Getting a room after that would be stupid!”

“You’re always like that, always acting like you’re better.”

Screeching voices. Children’s voices, ones that sounded a bit familiar to me. And in the midst of their exchange, I heard names that I knew. Then finally...

“Both of you, calm down. This is definitely the place. There’s a familiar presence here.” A composed man’s voice. The instant I heard it, a whirlpool of indescribable emotion rose within me.

I let out a sigh of relief and stepped in front of them.

“Ah!”

“Big brother!”

My two little sisters, who’d both grown considerably, stood dressed in matching arctic outfits in different colors, like the characters from Ice Climber. Norn Greyrat and Aisha Greyrat. The one with a complex expression on her face was probably Norn and the one with a look of fierce determination was probably Aisha.

“Big brother, I missed you!” Aisha came flying at me, wrapping both arms and legs around my torso like a little monkey. She rubbed her cheek against mine. Her skin felt cold, though I might just have been warm from the alcohol. “Ooh, you feel so warm! And you stink of alcohol!”

“And you’re making me cold. Please let go.” As I peeled Aisha off of me, I looked over at Norn, who had her lips firmly pursed. She dipped her chin in greeting.

“You drink alcohol?” she asked.

“Yeah, we had a bit of a celebration.”

She looked perturbed, and I didn’t think it was just because she was shy. Paul had mentioned she wasn’t my biggest fan...

Then, behind Norn was...

“It’s been a while, Rudeus,” said the bald man with a scar on his face. A proud warrior wielding a lance. Looking no different than I’d seen him last, three years ago.

“It has been a while, Mister Ruijerd.”

I was hit with a wave of nostalgia, remembering the days we traveled together, just the three of us. How we met, how we parted. What I should say? While I was searching for words, Ruijerd suddenly looked behind me. “I heard at the Adventurers’ Guild that you’d gotten married, but...I see it wasn’t to Eris.”

The person he was gazing at was Sylphie. Her expression turned to surprise, but she quickly bowed. “Um, Rudy, for the moment, why don’t we invite them inside?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Come on in.” I unlocked the door and gestured them in.

It had barely been a month since the letter arrived. They were here much, much earlier than I’d expected.

Chapter 12: Nostalgia and Frustration

I WAS CURRENTLY PERCHED on one of the living room couches. Seated across from me was Ruijerd. Sylphie had guided Aisha and Norn off to the bath. Sylphie and I had both sobered up. The smell of alcohol still probably lingered on our breath, but detoxification magic had at least lifted the inebriation.

As I looked at Ruijerd's face, illuminated by the crackling fire, I remembered the first time we'd met. Other memories flooded in: the time we'd traveled with Eris, just the three of us, and other things.

"It really has been a while," I said.

"Yeah." Ruijerd also narrowed his eyes and lifted the edges of his mouth. Just the way I remembered.

"First of all, I guess I should say thank you for escorting my little sisters here."

"No thanks needed. Protecting children is only natural."

Right—that was Ruijerd for you. I remembered jokingly calling him a lolicon when we were traveling together. Still, I was surprised to see the person Paul mentioned in his letter was Ruijerd, after all. I'd considered the possibility that it might be Ghislaine, but given that the task was escorting children, Ruijerd was the best man for the job. So much so, in fact, that I would have hired him on to be Aisha and Norn's bodyguards for life, if that were possible.

At any rate, it had been a long time since the two of us had talked. What had we even talked about, back then? Ruijerd was quiet, not the kind who went in for small talk.

"By the way, what happened to Eris?" Ruijerd asked, bluntly. It was a question I didn't really want to answer, but he deserved to know.

“A lot of things. Let me start from the beginning.”

I told him about what happened after we parted ways in front of the refugee camp. About how Eris and I slept together. How, immediately afterward, she disappeared and I fell into the depths of despair. How I couldn’t recover from it. How I spent the intervening two years searching for my mother. How I met Elinalise and heard about what was going on. How I followed the Man-God’s recommendation and enrolled in this school. How, in turn, that led me to reuniting with Sylphie and how she’d helped me recover. Then about our wedding.

“I see.” Ruijerd listened quietly the whole time without saying a word. Finally, he said, “That happens often.”

“It happens often?” I repeated.

He just nodded. “It’s an outlook warriors often get bogged down by. I’m sure Eris doesn’t hate you.”

“But she said the two of us weren’t ‘well-balanced’.”

“I have no idea whether she meant those words literally, or if you just misunderstood her meaning.”

“Misunderstood?”

“Yes. Eris was never very good with words.” Ruijerd would know—he wasn’t, either. “At the very least, she liked you when we were traveling together. If you have the opportunity to meet again, keep a cool head and talk to her about it.”

Had I gotten it all wrong? When she said we weren’t well-balanced, did she just mean that she wasn’t at my level? Had she left to get stronger, so she could achieve that balance and then return? In which case, maybe her meaning had been, *Wait for me*.

Even so, it was too late to be told that now. No matter what she’d meant, I’d still spent three years suffering. Three years in which I hadn’t heard a peep from her. The person who finally saved me was Sylphie, not Eris. What was I supposed to do now, toss Sylphie aside and make up with Eris? There was no way.

Besides, honestly, I was still a little terrified by the thought of meeting Eris again. It wasn't as if I didn't trust what Ruijerd was saying, but there was the possibility that she really had just gotten fed up with me. It would be a real blow to my feelings if I approached her with the intention of reconciling, only for her to punch me and refuse to look me in the eyes.

Let's stop thinking about it, I told myself. Whatever the truth was, I couldn't change the past. Dwelling on it wouldn't help.

I changed the topic. "What have you been doing all this time, Mister Ruijerd?"

"Ah, yeah." He looked like he still had something he wanted to say, but still nodded. "After I parted ways with you two, I headed for the forest area in the southern region."

Apparently Ruijerd had guessed that the Superd Tribe hiding in the Central Continent would be in a forest. He made his way to the dense forest to the south of the King Dragon Mountains, where he conducted an exhaustive search for two years. Ultimately, he found no trace of the Superd, though he did find several items belonging to people believed to have died during the Displacement Incident. He delivered those to the closest town.

His search of the forest yielding nothing, Ruijerd headed south along the coast and arrived at East Port. He'd planned to catch up on the information coming out of Millis there, then head north to search the Conflict Zone. However, as luck would have it, he ran into Paul. After that, everything happened just as Paul had written in his letter. When Paul hesitated over whether or not to send his two girls away, Ruijerd volunteered to act as an escort.

"Oh, I met your master too."

"Master Roxy?"

"Yeah." Ruijerd had a strained smile. "She was a little different from your description."

"Really? In what way?"

“The second I said my name and she saw the gem on my forehead, she was completely terrified.”

Come to think of it, Roxy was the one who’d told me that the Superd Tribe were terrifying killers. As a member of the Migurd, who lived in fear of the Superd, her reaction was probably inevitable. I wished I could have seen it, though—Roxy trembling in terror at the sight of Ruijerd.

“So I heard you traveled alongside Miss Ginger all the way here?”

“Yeah. We arrived in the evening and went to the university but couldn’t find you there.”

They’d thought I lived in the dorms. Of course, I’d already left for the pub at that point, and I guess no one they asked knew where I’d gone, so they asked for my address instead. To make sure they didn’t somehow miss me, the three of them went looking for my house while Ginger split off to cover more ground. However, they got lost along the way, either because Aisha or Norn got the street wrong, or because the person who’d explained the house’s location had done so incorrectly. As they wandered the city, Ruijerd picked up my footprints and followed them to our house.

“So that’s what happened,” I said. “I must convey my gratitude. Thank you.”

“There’s no need to thank me.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his words. One of my greatest sources of pride was being recognized as a friend by this man.

“Anyway, you guys sure got here fast,” I said. The letter had only arrived last month. I’d thought it would take them two or three months to get here, at the earliest.

“Your little sister was eager.”

“Which one?”

“Aisha. It was thanks to her we were able to travel so quickly.”

According to Ruijerd, Aisha had proposed they accompany a merchant caravan so they could travel at night, too. Such caravans generally didn't accept outsiders, so Aisha offered them Ruijerd and Ginger's services as guards in exchange for letting her and Norn ride along. It was a good deal, though the negotiations hadn't been easy.

Every time their current caravan reached its destination, they would move to the nearest town in search of another one. It was through this rapid changing of caravans that they were able to travel so efficiently. They would gather information on the caravans' schedules and locations, sometimes even retracing their steps to a previous town to hop on a caravan that suited them better. When the three of them asked Aisha why they had to double back, she said, "Because this way is faster." Amazing.

"That must have been rough for you, though? If you were moving around in the daytime and acting as a bodyguard at night, that means you had to be awake all the time."

"It wasn't. I'm used to traveling continuously without rest, and have been for a while now. But..."

"But?"

"It was the first time in a while that I felt like I was being ordered around." He gave a thin smile as he said that. Perhaps he was recalling the time of the Laplace War.

Aisha, that little stinker. "Well, I'm not really sure what to say, but it seems my little sister caused you a great deal of ___"

"It's just a funny story." As usual, Ruijerd was soft when it came to children. But even if he didn't mind it, we couldn't raise Aisha to be the kind of person that ordered people around. I'd have to give her a piece of my mind later.

"But she just slept like a log while you worked nonstop, didn't she?" I argued.

"She wasn't sleeping. She was constantly calculating our route, planning for us to travel in the most efficient way possible."

Hm. Okay, so she hadn't been making Ruijerd do *all* the work. If that was the case, then I couldn't fault her.

"She's still a child, though," he added.

Aisha's gleeful no-breaks plan apparently didn't account for their stamina. Partway through the journey, she and Norn both collapsed from exhaustion. According to Aisha's internal schedule, she planned for them to arrive before winter, when the weather would make it difficult for them to travel. That was how they made it here faster than the letter suggested.

"Miss Ginger must have had a rough time of it as well. How was she?"

"She was actually quite happy with our pace. She said she wanted nothing more than to see His Majesty as quickly as possible."

There were a lot of people in this world with muscles for brains, it seemed. Ginger sure was a loyal one. She'd probably been reunited with Zanoba by now. How would she react when she saw Julie? I wished I could be there to see it.

"She intends to resume serving the Prince, apparently," Ruijerd confirmed.

"I see. By the way, how long do you plan to stay here?" I asked nonchalantly. I assumed the answer would be about a week. It wouldn't take that long for me to introduce him to all of my friends. I was sure Zanoba would be delighted. Linia and Pursena would probably also have something to say. Who knew what Cliff would think? Ruijerd and Badigadi might already be acquainted, actually.

Those thoughts came to a crashing halt when I heard Ruijerd's response: "I leave tomorrow."

"That's quite...soon."

"I heard someone saw a devil deep in the woods to the east. I plan to check that out."

Ruijerd had already sniffed out his next stop. I did think he could afford to stay a bit longer, but it would be insensitive of me to keep him.

“Besides,” he said, “I have no intention of getting in your way.”

“Of course not. You’d never be in my way.” I would never treat him like a nuisance.

“It’s also a bit...difficult to be here.”

There was a loneliness to his voice. Perhaps it came as a bit of a shock that Eris and I weren’t together. I didn’t know exactly how Ruijerd felt, but if I were in his position, I might also find it a bit difficult to watch me cozying up so lovingly to Sylphie. “I guess I can’t blame you for that.”

It felt like a rift had formed in our friendship. Maybe Eris was the foundation that kept us together.

“Rudeus.”

I lifted my head when he called my name. Apparently, I’d averted my eyes at some point. Ruijerd gave me a thin smile. “Don’t make that face. I’ll come back again.”

It was all I could do to force a smile in return. I didn’t regret the fact that I had married Sylphie. However, I did feel as if I’d made some kind of mistake, here.

“If I happen to meet Eris, I’ll see what she has to say.”

“Please do,” I replied, looking straight into his eyes. I found a gentle light burning within them.

Soon after, Sylphie emerged from the bath. Norn apparently fell asleep mid-bath, while Aisha had been quite rambunctious in the water, but collapsed into sleep the moment she got out. Such was the relaxing effect of a bath. Warm water did wonders for an exhausted body.

“Thanks for doing all that.”

“Aisha seemed to remember me. She guessed who I was right away. Quite unlike someone else we both know.”

“Your hair is longer, you’re not wearing sunglasses, and you’re not in boy’s clothes, so it doesn’t count.”

“But Norn didn’t seem to remember me.”

“It’s rare for a three- or four-year-old to remember other neighborhood kids.”

“I guess.”

Sylphie had changed the girls into pajamas and tucked them into the same bed. Talking to them would have to wait till tomorrow.

“Um, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Sylphiette Greyrat.”

“Yeah. I’m Ruijerd Superdia.”

Sylphie and Ruijerd awkwardly shook hands. They’d both suffered for their green hair in the past, though neither of them sported that color anymore. Ruijerd had shaved it all off, while Sylphie’s had turned white during the Displacement Incident.

“Umm, Mister Ruijerd, what would you prefer in terms of a room?”

“Anything is fine.”

“Rudy, should we have him use the big room? He’s an important guest, isn’t he?”

I didn’t think Ruijerd would be particularly concerned about the size of the room. Besides, he wouldn’t use the bed, anyway. “Sleep wherever you like. Think of our home as yours.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that then. Well, I’m off to sleep.” Ruijerd finished speaking, then stood up.

“All right, good night.”

Sylphie and I just stood there stiffly, listening as he moved through the house. Apparently, he’d entered the room where the children were sleeping. That lolicon bastard! Nah, just kidding. When we’d traveled together, he never took his eyes off of us even when we slept. That was just the kind of man he was. Besides, he’d let us hear his footsteps on purpose.

If he were up to something suspicious, he would have silenced them and moved with stealth.

“Did I do something to offend him?” Sylphie asked anxiously.

Ruijerd had been a bit curt. It seemed he had some conflicting feelings about my marriage to Sylphie, after all.

“No, you haven’t done anything wrong. He takes a bit to warm up to people he’s just met, that’s all.”

“If you’re sure that’s all it is.” Sylphie had a slightly wounded look.

“Let’s go to bed, okay?”

“Okay.”

I’d skipped dinner that night, but I wasn’t even hungry. *Oh, I should’ve at least provided Ruijerd something to snack on*, I thought as I put out the fireplace and checked the lock on the front door. We already had the most useful security system in the house, but I still wanted to be safe.

After turning off the lights, Sylphie and I headed up to the second floor together. Then we slipped into bed.

There, Sylphie said, “Let’s, um, just skip today, okay?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure.”

We held off on the sex that night—the first time we’d skipped for a reason other than her period.

The next morning, I woke up in bed just as I always did. Sylphie was still asleep. Normally she was curled into a ball, using my arm as a pillow, but today she was using her own pillow and had a tense look on her face. Ordinarily, my affection for her came unbidden, together with a pinch of sexual desire, and I would reach out to touch her chest. Then,

as I had that source of perfection nestled in the palm of my hand, a wave of bliss would wash over me.

But I didn't feel that sensation today. Instead, I felt under the weather. It wasn't a good day for my rising dragon. I should've been happy since Ruijerd was here, but it seemed Eris was really weighing on my mind. I felt gloomy and restless.

Though I didn't feel too motivated, I decided to start my daily training anyway. I was sure that five minutes—no, ten minutes—of exercise would perk me up. With that thought in mind, I stepped outside.

A chilling scene awaited me.

Someone else was already standing at our front entrance. Two towering figures, actually: one a bald warrior, a man who'd shaved his hair in order to hide its green hue. He wore none of the arctic clothing common in the region, but was dressed in civvies, bearing a lance. It was Ruijerd.

Then there was the other man. He had a large and brawny body, with skin as black as pitch, and purple hair. Badigadi had his six arms folded together over his chest, giving off an immensely imposing aura as he stood in front of Ruijerd.

The chill in the air was intense. Volatile. If someone lit a match, it might explode.

Badigadi wasn't smiling, which was rare. In fact, he wore no expression at all. Ruijerd had his back to me, so I couldn't see his face.

Did this mean they knew each other, after all? They'd both been alive since about the time of the Laplace war: one the captain of Laplace's imperial guard, the other in the moderate faction on the opposite side. Ruijerd currently despised Laplace with all his heart, but back then, their circumstances had probably been quite different.

"Hm." Badigadi gave me a glance. Then he looked at Ruijerd once more. "So that's it." He nodded, apparently having satisfied his curiosity. Then, without saying anything

more, he turned on his heel. The snow crunched beneath his feet as he disappeared into the distance.

Ruijerd silently glanced over his shoulder at me. He looked a bit anxious. It was a rare thing to see him in a cold sweat.

“Did something happen between you and King Badi?”

“A long time ago.”

I could infer the rest from his short reply. I’d heard the madness of the Superd Tribe had led them to attack any who crossed their path, be they friend or foe, and that had to have included some of Badigadi’s people. Regardless of how uncommitted he was to ruling, he was still a king.

I wondered what their relationship had been like after the war? I couldn’t picture someone as optimistic as Badigadi seeking revenge on the Superd. If anything, he’d probably championed the powerless citizens the Superd had hurt. Even if Laplace had been the cause of the Superd’s destructive tendencies, Ruijerd had still killed people, and Badigadi had gotten his revenge for it. I was sure that was it.

No, wait. It was possible Badigadi didn’t know how or why what went down with the Superd Tribe was Laplace’s fault. I should talk to him about it next time we met.

Come to think of it, how would he react if I told him that I planned to mass-produce and sell Ruijerd figurines in the future?

“Mister Ruijerd, just to be clear, that man has been good to me ever since he came to this city. I can only imagine what must’ve happened in the past, but...”

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of fighting him.”

Ruijerd smiled stiffly as he said that. Yet he’d clearly exhibited the intent to kill moments ago. If I hadn’t come out when I did... “Still, I never thought I’d see him here of all places.”

“Apparently, he came here to see me,” I said.

“Ahh, well, that does fit his character.” Ruijerd forced another smile before returning to the house.

The whole encounter had thrown me for a loop. I would have thought cheerful, easy-going Badigadi could get along with anyone.

When I returned to the house, Sylphie was awake and preparing breakfast. Aisha, who had donned a maid outfit for some reason, was helping out as well. Norn appeared to still be asleep. Intending to rouse her, I headed upstairs. I knocked on the door and immediately began reaching for the doorknob, but a sense of foreboding stopped me from opening it. Instead, I called out to her. “It’s about time for breakfast, so please come downstairs.”

There was no answer, but when I strained to listen, I heard the rustling of clothes. Apparently, she was in the midst of changing. I’d avoided triggering a surprise naked scene! I wasn’t a dull-witted protagonist anymore, after all.

“...Okay.” Once I heard her voice from behind the door, I felt relieved and returned to the first floor.

The five of us ate breakfast together. Aisha seemed to have good table manners for her age and ate beautifully. As usual, Ruijerd only used a fork. Norn, still looking half asleep, didn’t eat very gracefully. Well, at least I could say she was using a fork. That was a step up from Eris, who just stabbed her meat with a knife and put it in her mouth.

“Well then, it’s time for me to be off.”

As soon as our meal was finished, Ruijerd prepared to depart. He had very little in the way of baggage, so he wasn’t carrying much. The five of us set out for the city exit to see him off. Ruijerd claimed that wasn’t necessary, but it wasn’t a problem of necessity. It was only natural to see a friend off.

There wasn’t much conversation as we walked. Eventually Norn grabbed onto the hem of Ruijerd’s shirt, quiet enough it could almost go unnoticed. Ruijerd, however, did notice and slowed his pace a bit. I eased up to match them.

Norn didn’t seem to want to part with Ruijerd, and I understood the feeling. Perhaps I should beseech him to stay,

after all? One night just wasn't enough to catch up, and there were people I wanted to introduce him to, and a mountain of things I wanted him to see.

But the thought of Eris held me back, as expected. I didn't want to cause Ruijerd discomfort. It wasn't any fault of Sylphie's; it was just that I felt like I couldn't really talk to Ruijerd until I'd cleared the air with Eris. Yet, right now, I didn't even know where she was.

As I debated these things, we arrived at the city entrance. "Well then, stay safe," Ruijerd told me.

"You as well," I said.

Our goodbyes were short. There was so much I wanted to say. I just couldn't find the words in the moment. Well, it wasn't as if this was goodbye forever. I just had to talk to him again once things had calmed down more. As for Ginger, she had apparently already said her farewells to him yesterday.

"Thank you for taking care of us!" Aisha cheerfully bowed. She surely understood her fast travel schemes would never have worked without Ruijerd. That I was sure Ruijerd had protected them from dangers unbeknownst to them, too.

"Aisha, don't demand too much of Rudeus."

"Yes, I know!"

Ruijerd smiled stiffly and patted her on the head.

"U-um, uh, Mister Ruijerd..." Norn still hadn't let go of Ruijerd's shirt. She had an anxious look that clearly said she didn't want him to go.

"Don't worry, we'll meet again." Ruijerd offered her a small smile as he rested his hand on her head. Seeing the two of them stirred up old memories. Back when I made that same anxious expression, Ruijerd would also stroke my head.

Norn looked down, then lifted her face. She tried to say something, then pursed her lips. Her face contorted into several different expressions until she finally made up her mind. "I-I want to go with you!" she declared.

Ruijerd looked troubled as he stroked her head, saying nothing. However, as the seconds passed, Norn's eyes quickly filled with tears.

"Rely on Rudeus from now on, not me," he said.

"But I can't! He and Father—"

"That's in the past. He's already reflected on his actions. Your father did as well. I told you about the hardship he'd been through as we traveled. Even you accepted that."

"But yesterday he was drunk! And he's with a different girl this time than he was last time! I can't trust him!"

The air around us seemed to grow chill when she said that, though maybe it was just my imagination. After all, I had already told Sylphie about Eris. It wasn't cheating, and it wasn't as if I were trying to be a playboy—though that probably wasn't how it looked to Norn.

Ruijerd looked at me and then Sylphie before forcing a smile. "That's just the way of things between men and women. It happens. It absolutely doesn't mean your brother is disloyal." He took his hand away from her head. "Over there, you. Will you tell me your name one more time?"

"Oh, yes. I'm Sylphiette."

"Sylphiette. I leave these two and Rudeus in your care."

"Of course!"

Ruijerd finally exchanged words with Sylphie at the very end. His feelings toward her were surely complicated, but I prayed he held no ill will.

"Well then, let's meet again."

I watched him go until I couldn't see him anymore. There was a time when I'd watched as his figure receded into the distance, filled with gratitude toward him. I was sure that right now, Aisha and Norn felt the same.

Side Story: The Sharpening of Fangs

ON A NAMELESS CAPE, just an hour's journey on foot north of the Sword Sanctum, a lone girl was swinging her sword—a simple swing with no technique that belonged to the Sword God Style or anything else. The girl's name was Eris Greyrat.

Eris Greyrat mindlessly swung her sword. There in that space, all by herself, with no other soul around. Just mindlessly, mindlessly swinging. A swing weighed down by idle thoughts was a meaningless one. A swing that merely mimicked the motions of others was meaningless, too. But if your sword was pure, empty of thought, then each swing would sharpen your skills.

She would keep honing her abilities, cutting away slice by thin slice until the way before her was clear enough that she could see through to the other side. Each slash made her that much stronger. How much more repetition was required? Just how long would she have to continue before she'd reach Orsted's level?

Eris didn't know. No one did. Perhaps she would never be able to reach that level, no matter how hard she worked.

Such thoughts were exactly the meaningless kind she was supposed to avoid. "Tsk." Eris clicked her tongue. She shook her head and sat down to think.

It was annoying. She wanted to defeat Orsted, but the more she thought about it, the further he seemed to get from her. At one point, her master Ghislaine had told her, "Think." Eris, however, was bad at thinking. No matter how much she wracked her brain, she couldn't produce an answer that satisfied her.

Compared to that, her second teacher, Ruijerd, had been much better. "Do you understand?" he would ask. He would knock her down, then just ask whether she understood or not.

Over and over again, he would keep going until she finally got it. Without her having to use her head, as if they were equals.

Eris respected Ghislaine. She also respected Ruijerd. Frustratingly, the Sword God's teachings combined the good parts of both of the people she respected. He had ordered her thusly: "Just swing your sword without thinking. Don't think, just swing, and when you get tired, then think. When you're tired of thinking, stand back up and swing again." So she did just that. She swung, sat, swung, sat. When she got hungry, she ate. Then she repeated the process of swinging her blade and sitting all over again.

At first, she did this at the training hall. When she did that, however, someone would inevitably get in her way. The usual culprits were other girls from the training hall. They would say, "Hey, we're doing fighting practice this morning, join us," or, "Hey, food is ready, so come eat," or, "Hey, can you train with me a bit?" or, "Hey, you stink, go take a bath." Things of that sort.

It had become so annoying that Eris just left the training hall. She left and continued walking until she found an unoccupied bit of land and started practicing there. She ate what she'd brought with her from the training hall's kitchen, or whatever monster occasionally tried to attack her. When it was cold outside, she fetched logs from the training hall and used magic to light them for warmth. When she got tired, she would return to the training hall and sleep as much as she wanted.

This had been her daily life for the past six months.

There was one thing that Eris did understand. Mastering the sword was difficult. When she was younger, she'd thought swordplay so much simpler and more suited to her than studying. Well, that part was still true: Swordplay suited her far better than book learning ever had. But it definitely wasn't simple at all. In fact, you might even say book learning was simpler, as long as you had someone else teaching you.

All she did was raise her sword and bring it back down again. Yet for some reason, she couldn't get good at it. She should be able to raise it faster. She should be able to strike

faster. But she hadn't managed to achieve her desired speed. She had to be faster now than she had been six months ago, but Ghislaine was still faster. Ruijerd was faster. The Sword God was faster. And Orsted, of course, was faster.

She tried to recall the way they fought—the Sword God, Ruijerd, and Orsted. How had they each moved? She tried to imitate their movements, from the tips of their fingers to their shoulders, all the cells in their body. Then she tried to go beyond that, to transcend them.

Except she didn't know how. There was no way she could.

Eris was bad at thinking.

Once she was exhausted by the endless cycle of thoughts running through her head, she stood back up and started practicing her swings again. She swung without thinking about anything. Up, down. Faster. Up, down. Faster. She went through ten repetitions, a hundred, then a thousand. When she did, idle thoughts began to filter in again. That happened when she got tired.

“Tch.” She clicked her tongue once, then took a seat. Her hands hurt. Blisters had broken open on them. She produced cloth from her pocket and disinterestedly wrapped it around her hands.

It hurt, but it wasn't painful. She could always recall what happened three years ago at the Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw. Compared to that, she felt like she could withstand anything. Pain meant nothing to her; not the ache in her hand, not her frustration. Not even the fact that she was by herself right now, without him by her side.

“Rudeus.” She breathed out his name.

Eris didn't think about it any further. She was bad at thinking. She also wasn't very good at staying positive. The more she thought, the more she realized she could break.

“Phew.”

Three years. She thought she'd gotten stronger, but it still wasn't enough.

Eris stood up and started swinging her sword again.

Tamping down her drowsiness, Eris headed back to the training hall. At its entrance stood a man she didn't recognize—a striking man, at that. His robes were dyed in rainbow hues, and below them, he wore only knee-length boots, with four swords at his waist. On his cheek was a peacock tattoo, and his hair was gathered up in a style that fanned open at the top, like a parabola. When he spotted Eris, he bowed his head slightly and attempted to greet her.

“I am the North—”

“Move.” Eris spoke a single word to the man standing between her and the training hall. She did not care to say anything more. She'd sharpened herself to her very limits with all the swinging she'd done. The glint in her eye as she glared was that of an aggressive beast. Murderous intent swelled from her like an all-consuming blaze. She was a wild animal that wouldn't let anyone come close.

“What...?!” The man immediately drew his sword.

“You're in my way.” Eris took a step forward as she spoke. To her, the man before her was nothing but an obstacle. One standing between her and her nest.

“Wh-what in the world is this creature...?” At first, the man didn't even understand that words had come out of her mouth. For a moment, all he saw was a starved beast looking for a meal. Then Eris drew a blade of her own, and he finally realized she was human, and a swordfighter at that.

“You may refer to me as Auber, the Peacock Blade,” he said. “I see that you are a student of the Sword God Style. Might I request that you guide me to meet with the Sword God
___”

“I told you to move.” Irritated, Eris took another step forward.

She was telling him to get out of her way. However, those words didn't register with the man called Auber. The only thing that did was Eris' murderous intent. That and the

realization that talking was pointless. With that, Auber—with one sword in his right hand—reached for the shorter sword at his waist with his left. However, he wielded his weapon in reverse, brandishing the flat side of the blade at her.

At striking distance, Eris decided she would remove the obstacle in her path by force. *Shkt!* Her blade whizzed through the air. She was using Sword of Light, an ability honed through all of her practice. A normal opponent had no hope of countering the Sword God Style's most lethal technique.



“Hmph!”

That was only *if* they were a normal opponent, however. Auber gripped both swords in his hands and used them to brush off the attack. Eris had perceptively anticipated his reaction and was now swinging her blade back in the opposite direction.

“Ah...!”

Eris’ sword was stopped by the one in Auber’s left hand. She was using two hands to wield hers, where he was using only one, but he easily deflected her attack. Her blade slid off to the side, merely clipping the edge of his hair. Eris’ body followed the momentum of her blade, causing her to stumble on her pivoting foot. At that exact second, Auber’s right hand flew toward her exposed neck.

“Tch!” Eris discarded her sword and dropped to the ground in a crouch. Auber’s weapon plowed through the empty space where she’d just been. Eris moved like a cat, flipping herself back over. She was trying to retrieve her sword.

Auber kicked her weapon away and it vanished into the snow. Normally, that would be the end of the match. But Eris didn’t stop. The moment she realized her sword was lost, she flew at Auber with her fists instead. Auber slammed the center of his blade against her cheek with enough force to shatter her cheekbone. It left a single cut on her face.

However, even after that, Eris still didn’t stop.
“Graaaah!” She swung at his jaw.

Auber tried to stop her by using the weapon in his left hand. “Mrgh!” Her hand tangled with his. Her fingers hooked around the hilt. Auber felt a chill run down his spine as he realized she was trying to steal his sword from him. This beast wouldn’t stop until he killed it.

He gave the woman coiled around him a hard kick, sending her hurtling through the air. Then he readjusted his grip on his weapon, so the blade was now facing her.

Luckily for Eris, when he launched her through the air, she fell right where her sword had landed earlier. Her breathing was uneven as she took up the weapon. She had to kill him.

It was then, as Auber wielded his blade in earnest and began emitting a murderous intent of his own, that a voice suddenly cut in. “That’s enough.”

The bloodlust ended. Eris was already frozen in place, having sensed the change in demeanor from her opponent. The Sword God had appeared without them realizing and was now standing at the entrance of the training hall. Auber put away his sword, and Eris flopped down on her back. She stared at the sky, still breathing hard. Her face was twisted in frustration.

Auber put his right hand to his chest and bowed his head. “It has been too long, Master Sword God.”

“So you came, North Emperor.”

“I read your letter. And then that girl attacked.”

“Ahh, incredible, isn’t she?”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen a swordfighter that relentless. She was almost like a beast. Ahh, so this is the child they refer to as the Mad Dog.”

Eris listened to their conversation as she stood up. The way she drifted unsteadily forward made her look unearthly. Seeing her, Auber readied his sword again. But Eris just glowered at him and entered the training hall, vanishing into the building without a second glance at the man who was left dumbfounded in her wake.

She wiped at the wound on her cheek as she headed down the hall toward her room, not bothering to brush off the snow clinging to her body. Then, when she got to her destination, she threw her sword at the base of her pillow and sagged down onto the hard bed. Just like that, she fell fast asleep. She was frustrated at her loss, but right now that was a trivial matter.

That evening, Ghislaine visited the Ephemeral Hall. Seated within were the Sword God Gall Farion and his guest, the North Emperor Auber. Ghislaine's brows were slightly furrowed, but she showed no outward sign of paying Auber any attention as she tromped over to the Sword God and bluntly asked: "Master, why aren't you teaching Eris anything?"

The Sword God listened and chuckled. "Already did, didn't I?"

"How to swing her sword, you mean?"

"No. How to temper herself," he answered as if it were obvious. The normal roughness in his voice was absent. A quiet response.

Ghislaine didn't care much for that side of him. That was why she rounded up what smarts she had and chose her words carefully. "You always said it yourself: 'Do everything logically.'"

"I did."

"So what are you doing with Eris? She's out there swinging her sword every day like an idiot who doesn't know anything else. What part of that is logical?"

"Hm?" He looked annoyed. "Since when did you become such a nag?"

"Since before I came back here!"

"So you ain't gonna listen to what your master tells you anymore?"

"But—ugh!"

Ghislaine suddenly had a sword thrust at her. To an ordinary person it would have seemed as if the weapon just magically appeared in the Sword God's hand. Ghislaine, however, could see him unsheathe it. She just wasn't able to

react in time. In the face of the fastest man in the world, no one could, not even a Sword King.

“Ghislaine. Y’know, I kinda regret the way I taught you.”

“...”

“You used to be like a starved tiger, but now you’re like a kitten that’s lost its fangs. If you’d have stayed the way you were, you’d be a Sword Emperor by now.”

Ghislaine swallowed hard at his words. She did feel she’d gotten weaker recently, though she didn’t think it was all bad. It was true that her growth with the sword had stagnated. Still, she’d gained important things in exchange: intelligence and wisdom. Things she wouldn’t have been able to get from mastering the sword.

“I’m not going to let Eris lose her fangs too.” Gall put his sword away as if to say, *Now you understand, don’t you?*

Ghislaine sulked as she responded, “I don’t understand. Why won’t you have her train?”

The Sword God heaved a sigh, recalling that Ghislaine was the kind of child who needed thorough explanations to understand. “Listen. If someone wants to get better than me, they gotta be able to figure stuff out for themselves. That was how I got to where I am, after all. Of course, they’ll need the requisite amount of talent and hard work to deserve the title ‘Sword God,’ but let’s leave that aside. Eris’ objective is the Dragon God Orsted. His existence defies logic. He’s a monster beyond imagination. She cannot beat him with my teachings alone.”

The man had a nostalgic look on his face as he finished speaking. He had actually fought the Dragon God himself, back before he was called the Sword God, back when he was just a strong, yet arrogant Sword Saint. He lost miserably—to the point where he still wasn’t sure why his life had been spared, or more importantly, why all of his limbs were still intact.

Having had his ego beat out of him, he'd made surpassing Orsted his goal, and had trained to that effect ever since. That was how he became the Sword God. That was also exactly why he didn't want anyone else butting their head into this matter.

"Hey, Ghislaine, doing drills isn't the same thing as training, you know? Especially if you have something you're aiming for. There's no point in acting like an obedient dog and doing whatever someone else tells you. You get it?"

"Master, you always say such complicated things. I don't understand."

"Hah." He snorted in laughter at her response. *That's right, this idiot won't understand if I don't explain it all clearly.* "In other words, it means just learning from me won't do her any good. That's why I've prepared a bunch of stuff for her, beginning with him."

The Sword God gestured at Auber, who in turn dipped his chin in greeting. "I am North Emperor Auber Corbett. On the streets, they refer to me as the Peacock Blade."

Ghislaine screwed up her face. There was an indescribable stench wafting off of the man. It wasn't body odor, but something powerfully citrus-y. Most likely cologne. An unpleasant scent for beastfolk like Ghislaine. "And what is someone from the North God Style doing here?"

"Responding to the Sword God's request that I instruct one of his pupils."

Her expression turned more suspicious as she questioned the Sword God. "Why someone from the North God Style? I don't see how their underhanded tricks would suit Eris."

"Because the Dragon God will use them against her."

The doubt on Ghislaine's face only deepened. She had never heard anything about the Dragon God being a swordsman of the North God Style. "Just who is this Dragon God?" she asked.

“Hell if I know. What I do know is that he’s got every move from the Sword God Style, North God Style—all those schools of swordfighting—in his arsenal. Naturally that means he can use them, and will be able to counter any used against him. You gotta learn them as well, ’cause if you don’t, you won’t be fighting on even footing.”

Ghislaine’s expression lost its sharp edge. Learning the techniques that your opponent would use against you—that was logical. “I see. Then eventually you’ll be summoning someone from the Water God Style as well?”

“Yep, already sent a letter.”

“Is that right?” Her tail wagged happily.

The Sword God smiled wryly at that. Ghislaine would be satisfied as long as the answer was something she could easily understand. That part of her never changed.

“Well then, Master North Emperor, I hope you have a relaxing stay here.” Now that Ghislaine’s doubts had been dispelled, she stood up and paid her respects to the North Emperor. She got down on one knee, as was the unique etiquette of the Sword God Style.

“Indeed, Master Sword King. I hope that we can have an amicable relationship during my time here.” Auber also put a hand to his chest and returned the gesture.

With that, Eris’ training moved on to the next stage. A year later, she would be recognized as a North Saint.

Extra Chapter: The Master Babysitter

Approximately one year before Rudeus received the letter from his father.

PAUL'S GROUP HAD ARRIVED in East Port, with Roxy and Talhand accompanying them. They had already discovered that Zenith was in the Labyrinth City of Rapan on the Begaritt Continent. They would have to take a ship from East Port in order to get there, but there was one thing weighing on Paul's mind: his daughters, Norn and Aisha. Beasts roamed the Begaritt Continent in vast numbers, and it was said to be as dangerous a land as the Demon Continent.

Paul was a former adventurer. While he had spent a transient period as a drunkard, he had continued training even after his retirement. Throw experienced adventurers like Talhand and Roxy in the mix, and they'd have no trouble traversing the Begaritt Continent—if was just him and the other adults. Bringing along two young children along would be an entirely different kettle of fish.

Thus, Paul chose to send his two girls to stay with Rudeus. This had its own dangers, but he determined it was preferable to dragging them to a beast-infested continent.

Four girls occupied a table in the dining hall of an inn: Lilia, Norn, Aisha and Roxy. One of them was an adult, while two were young children. The last of their group looked like a child herself, but was actually a full-fledged adult.

“I don’t want to.” One among their number, Norn, was sulking. She carved up the food on her plate with her fork, but

refused to carry it to her mouth. “I’m going with Father.”

The reason for this dour mood was obvious. During breakfast, her father had announced, “Aisha and Norn will be going to live with Rudeus.” Norn had been unable to disguise her displeasure ever since, even as they ate lunch, cheeks puffed up in a pout.

“I’m telling you once again, you’ll just be in Father’s way if you go with him.”

“No, I won’t.”

Aisha was the one bumping heads with her. Unlike Norn, Aisha had pumped her fist in celebration when she heard they were going to stay with Rudeus, which was also why she couldn’t stand Norn’s discontented grumbling putting a damper on things. As a result, she’d had been relentlessly criticizing Norn while trying to make herself sound reasonable and convincing.

Aisha had no problems with selfish demands, but if her sister wanted those selfish demands to be met, she should go about it more intelligently. She had to do it in a way that made those around her think they had actually won. Instead, she grew irritable watching Norn pointlessly quibble by repeating the same line over and over. *“I don’t want to.”* It was disgraceful.

“You just don’t want to go stay with our big brother, isn’t it? You’re treating him like he’s some awful person just because he had a little fight with our father a long time ago. Even Father himself said that he was in the wrong.”

“He wasn’t!” Norn suddenly burst out. There was no doubt in her mind that the fight between Rudeus and Paul had been Rudeus’ fault. Norn wouldn’t accept anything else.

“You’re always like that. As soon as things aren’t going your way, you start pouting and whining. You wait for everyone else around you to give in, and if anyone says anything you don’t like, you yell at them. How idiotic.”

Norn clenched her teeth. She could do nothing but glare at her younger sister as tears sprang to her eyes.

However, it wasn't just Norn glaring at Aisha. So was the grown woman beside her. "Aisha, how dare you speak that way? Apologize immediately!"

The woman in question was Lilia, currently in charge of watching the two girls while Paul searched for a ship and a knowledgeable guide. These sisterly arguments were a daily occurrence. Paul had more or less given up on mediation, looking exasperated as he acknowledged, "Well, they are sisters, so they're going to fight." He did still step in and scold Aisha when she began spouting too many foul words.

Roxy sat beside them, looking a bit uncomfortable at the exchange. In the past, she'd worked as a live-in tutor for the Greyrat family. She also knew Lilia well, but that didn't make this an easy place for her to be right now.

"Yes, ma'am. I am sorry, Miss Norn, for getting carried away."

Aisha looked entirely unconcerned as she recited her apology. Her words were polite, as was her tone, but it was an apology in name only. Even Lilia understood that Aisha hadn't truly reflected on her actions at all. If she had, then she wouldn't lash out at Norn at every opportunity.

She wanted to tell her daughter that she should be paying more respect to the daughter of Paul's legitimate wife, but didn't know to convey the sentiment in words. But that wasn't the only reason why Lilia refrained from pressing Aisha further. Her daughter was right, this time.

"Miss Norn, the Begaritt Continent is an incredibly dangerous land," Lilia said. "Of course, the master will act cautiously and do as much as he can to ensure your safety. However, mistakes do happen. If you were to get injured as a result, I am sure it would cause him immeasurable grief."

Even Norn understood that meant she would be in the way. But that just didn't matter to her. As far as she was concerned, being with her father was the safest and securest place for her to be. No one else would protect her. She couldn't leave his side. "I don't want to."

“Miss Norn. Don’t say that. Please try to understand.”

“I’m saying it because I don’t want to! I want to go with him, to where my mother is!” She slammed her hands down on the table and stood up. Her plate fell and shattered, scattering her uneaten food across the wooden floor. “You’re going with him too, Miss Lilia! That’s not fair!”

“Miss Norn! Enough is enough. Be reasonable!” Lilia’s voice grew louder. She knew her place in the master-servant relationship, and she cared deeply for Norn, but she knew when to discipline her, too.

Norn flinched, but soon fixed the woman with a glare, balled her fists and yelled, “I’ve had enough!” She kicked her chair over and dashed out of the dining hall.

“Ah, Miss Norn! Please wait!” Lilia chased after the girl as she disappeared outside. Roxy also scrambled after the two, but it was too late. By the time they emerged from the inn, the petite Norn had already disappeared into the crowd.

“Hmph.” Left behind, Aisha snorted in displeasure.

Norn ran through an undulating mass of people, her eyes full of tears threatening to spill at any moment. She was frustrated, irritated, and she felt pathetic. This wasn’t the first time that things hadn’t gone the way she’d wanted them. Quite the opposite: Things rarely ever went her way.

Even so, despite all that, she still wanted to remain with Paul. It was the only thing she wanted. She’d withstood every outrageous thing that had happened to them all this time just for that reason. Of course, she would make selfish demands at times, but generally she abstained from doing so. Ever since the Displacement Incident, this entire time, she thought that being with Paul was her absolute right. Now they were trying to steal even that from her.

“Hic...” Norn couldn’t help but cry. As she wiped her tears, she turned the corner and collided with someone. “Ah!”

“What?!” The person she’d run into cried out as something fell out of their hand.

Norn peered up to find a stout, bearded man with a dumbfounded look on his face. Beside him was a slender fellow whose eyes were wide in astonishment. Sauce stained the bearded man’s chest. At Norn’s feet was the skewer he must have dropped.

As the man took in the scene before him, his face grew red, while Norn’s grew pale. “Hey, you little brat! Where do you think you’re walking!”

“Eek!”

He grabbed her by her shirt collar and hoisted her in the air. His scruffy face pressed in close, his breath washing over her. It smelled of alcohol. He was drunk.

“Uh, um, uh...” Norn trembled in fear. She knew well what drunk people did. She’d seen Paul drunk often enough when he was running from his problems. Although his anger was never directed at her, it was still enough for a young Norn to understand. *Drunk people are terrifying; drinking is bad.* She’d accepted the fact that Paul couldn’t function without his liquor, but her father was the only exception.

“What’re you gonna do to make up for this, huh?! Pay up!!”

“Yeah! That was Boss’ favorite snack!!”

“You moron! I’m talking about my clothes! And this stain! I’m not gonna be able to get it out!”

“Uhhhh...hic...hic...” Norn could only tremble and sob when faced with their intimidation. Struggling to tamp down the overwhelming terror that threatened to make her wet her pants, she cast a pleading gaze around in hopes that someone would help. Heartlessly, no one stopped to look at her. None were eager to involve themselves with a quarrelsome drunkard, and they were all quick to distance themselves from the scene.

“Now tell me where your mom or dad is!”

“...”

“You gotta speak so I can get an answer! You aren’t even going to apologize?! Were you raised by animals?!”

“I-I’m s-sorry!”

Wait. There was someone. A person who met her desperate gaze, heard her apology, and stopped moving. His expression contorted in anger as he stomped up to the bearded man.

“Who the hell are you?”

“...”

The passerby grabbed the man’s arm, the one keeping Norn suspended in the air. He had such strength in his grip. The bearded man’s arm was almost as thick as a normal person’s torso, and yet the passerby twisted it back like there was no resistance at all.

“Ow, ouch, ouch, ouch!” Unable to withstand the pressure, the bearded man relinquished his grip on Norn. She landed on her butt, looking up at the man who had saved her.

“Explain. Just what did this girl do to you?” The passerby was wearing a forehead protector. A scar ran diagonally across his face, which was now twisted in anger.

Had his hair and gem been visible, he would have been instantly recognizable as Ruijerd Superdia. Norn, of course, had no idea who he was. However, the moment she saw his face, she instantly stood and ducked behind him.

“Th-that brat just ran into me out of nowhere and now my shirt—”

“She apologized.”

“That apology isn’t going to get this stain out—ouch!”

Ruijerd strengthened his grip on the man’s arm, which strained audibly under the pressure.

“You bastard! Let go of the boss!” The thin man tried to grab Ruijerd’s face, but the latter easily sidestepped him and the man’s fingers just barely grazed his headband.

“Give up on the stain or give up on living. Which will it be?”

“Ow, ow, ow! I’m sorry, it’s my fault! I’m the one in the wrong!”

Ruijerd released him. The smaller man quickly ran to the bearded one’s side asking, “Are you all right?!”

“You, apologize again,” said Ruijerd, peering down at Norn.

Norn looked shocked for a moment, then quickly nodded and bowed at her accuser. “I-I’m sorry.”

“Tch. It’s fine; it was my fault for bothering with you. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“R-roger that, Boss!”

The two men disappeared into the crowd. Norn slowly slid to the ground. All the strength in her body fled when the cloud of fear finally lifted and a wave of relief swept in.

“You all right?”

“Oh, yes.” Norn looked up at Ruijerd. Her gaze was a mixture of surprise and familiarity. She remembered him. Back when she lived in Millishion, before either Aisha or Lilia had joined them, she’d almost tripped and he had extended his hand to help her. He’d patted her head so gently and even given her an apple. There was no way she could forget him—the bald man with a forehead protector and large scar on his face.

The relief broke the flood gates, and though it was shameful for someone of her age, she burst into tears.

Ruijerd panicked when he saw her crying. Other passersby were staring, and because of his frightening appearance, no one would approach them. After hesitating, Ruijerd crouched down and put a hand on Norn’s head and softly stroked it. The warmth of his hand and the way he

handled her as gently as porcelain brought Norn such comfort that her sobbing began to quiet.

“They were so cruel. All of them. Telling me no, that I’d be in the way.”

For a short while after that, Norn went quiet, though she continued to sniffle. Ruijerd thought it best to return her to her father as quickly as possible, but when he mentioned it, she shook her head firmly. Ruijerd thought that there might be some issue between her and Paul, so he decided instead to hear out her side of the story.

“I see.” After hearing all of the details, Ruijerd tightened his grip on his spear.

Norn’s story was one-sided and lacked adequate explanation. As a result, there were several things that required further clarification. The main points, however, were clear enough that Ruijerd could infer the rest. And he could understand Norn’s desire to be with her father.

“That must be tough.”

Ruijerd knew what it was like to be a father. At one point he’d had a child and wife of his own. Back then, serving in Laplace’s imperial guard, he’d traveled across the Demon Continent. He left them both behind to fight, driven by a mix of ambition and loyalty. He hadn’t left them behind because they’d get in the way of satisfying those desires, but because they were so precious to him that he wanted them to stay somewhere safe.

However...

When he’d first left his village, his son still had a tail attached to his body. That was at the beginning of the war, though. Ruijerd fought in Laplace’s personal guard for many years. As he won battles and they began to unify the Demon Continent, his son grew up. His tail became a spear, his body

became muscular, and he became a magnificent young man. He'd grown enough that when Ruijerd returned to his village for the last time, his son approached him and arrogantly insisted, "I'm an adult now. Take me with you to your next battle!"

Back then, his son hadn't the mind to heed anything his father said to him. So Ruijerd instead used his strength to force his son to back down. "If this is all you are capable of, then you're not a warrior yet in my eyes," he'd told his son before he left.

It was a common mindset among warriors. They tried to keep their loved ones far from battle to protect them. But ultimately, Ruijerd was the one who had been unworthy as a warrior. His son had been the true warrior. It was his son, after all, who defeated Ruijerd when the demonic spear he wielded made him go berserk. It was his son who saved the other warriors.

Ruijerd still didn't know how his son had been able to defeat him back then. He roamed the whole of the Demon Continent carrying that question, but he'd never found a satisfying answer. Now, however, he had an idea. His son had surely worked hard to become stronger in ways his father never knew about. He'd followed his father's instructions, and had trained himself with purpose and determination in order to protect both his mother and his village. Ruijerd felt such pride.

If Norn felt the same way, then she wouldn't listen no matter how much Paul told her that he was worried or that she was precious to him.

If only she were a little bit older. A little bit stronger. If only she had that same sense of purpose and determination and had spent her days training. If she were as capable as Rudeus, then Ruijerd would have tried to persuade Paul to take her. Presently, though, Norn was just young and frail.

"Norn."

"Yes?"

Ruijerd looked into the eyes of the girl sitting beside him. “You need to get stronger.”

“Huh...?”

“If you want to be with someone, you have to get bigger, stronger, more impressive. In order to get there, you’re going to have to bear with your circumstances right now.” His words were clumsy. He wasn’t conveying what he wanted to very clearly.

But Norn understood. Strange as it was, she found meaning in his words. They resonated differently from what Lilia, Aisha, and the other adults had said to her before, perhaps because Ruijerd’s came from a place of positivity rather than negativity.

“Ugh.” Norn pursed her lips and looked downwards.

In response, Ruijerd just smiled and reached his hand out. He stroked her head softly. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you in your father’s stead until you get there.”

The way he touched her was so gentle that it was more than enough to reassure her. After a long silence she spoke up in a thin voice, “Okay.”

Satisfied, Ruijerd started to lift his hand away.

“Ah!”

He stopped when Norn exclaimed. “What is it?”

“Please pet my head a little longer.”

Ruijerd obliged her. Norn curled in on herself to hold her body perfectly still as he caressed her hair softly, as if he were stroking a baby chick.

“It feels kind of comforting,” she explained.

“I see.”

Ruijerd continued rubbing her head for a short while after that. It was a pleasant sight for anyone who looked upon the two of them. Even Norn’s puffy, tear-covered face finally lit into a smile.

“Ah! There she is! Miss Lilia, I found her!” From the side of the plaza came a voice. They spotted a young girl with blue hair trying to hold down the hat on her head as she ran toward them.

“Looks like they’re here for you,” Ruijerd mumbled. He dropped his hand to his side and stood up.

Norn felt a bit sad as his warmth disappeared. She followed him and stood as well. “Um...” He had already turned his back toward her, but she called out to him in a loud voice. “Please tell me your name!”

He glanced over his shoulder. The knot in his headband had loosened during their exchange with the two men earlier and now came completely undone. As it fell away, it revealed a ruby-like gem on his forehead. “Ruijerd. Ruijerd Superdia.”

It was a scene straight from a fantasy novel. A man with a beautiful jewel on his forehead, illuminated by sunlight from behind, a smile on his face as he looked directly at her. In that moment, Norn felt like a fairytale princess whose knight had come to rescue her.

In the same moment, Ruijerd made another, completely different impact on another girl who’d heard him state his name. Roxy Migurdia.

To describe the gravity of this impact will require a bit of explanation.

There were three things Roxy hated as a child, the first of which was green peppers. It was the first vegetable she ate when she arrived on the Millis Continent. Back then she’d thought that the human world was heaven, full of only sweet confections! And that green peppers had been a messenger from hell, sent to drag her to the abyss. She could still remember the unique scent and bitter taste that spread through her mouth when she ate it. How she’d immediately spat it out, only to still feel nauseous. *The green pepper is poison to the*

Migurd Tribe, she'd once seriously thought. She'd conquered that fear during her time as Rudeus' home tutor, however, embarrassed by the thought of being picky about her food in front of him.

The second thing she hated was children. Human children between five to fifteen years of age, specifically. Especially males. They didn't listen. They acted hastily, based on their whims, and wouldn't heed logic. Upon meeting Rudeus, she'd begun to think maybe she actually did like kids after all. Eventually, she realized the problem wasn't that she hated children. Rather, she hated people who didn't listen. In a way, she'd conquered her hatred of children as well.

The third thing she hated was the Superd Tribe. She'd heard stories of them countless times from the time she was still a baby. They were a devilish tribe, involved in a war long before she was born, that had betrayed its allies. It was said they'd had connections with the Migurd Tribe long ago, but were persecuted as traitors and driven to ruin. The Superd held a strong grudge against those who'd turned against them, and as soon as they spotted a demon from another tribe, they would attack and kill them without question.

Of all the Superd, Dead End was the one best known among children. As legend had it, when he found a child who'd misbehaved, he would come in and steal them while everyone was sleeping and carry them off to his lair. Then he would eat their legs so they couldn't run, eat their arms so they couldn't resist, and then slowly start eating their stomachs, saving their heads for last to keep them fresh. That was why you had to be well-behaved. Such were the stories she'd been raised on.

Back when she'd first left her village and became a novice adventurer, she'd seriously thought she was in danger because she'd been so ill-behaved. Gradually that anxiety had faded as she grew into an adult, but her fear of the Superd Tribe remained. That was why she was on such high alert when she discovered someone was calling themselves Dead End in Wind Port.

Now, several years later, she'd run into someone from the Superd Tribe, just as she'd been running around the city looking for Norn and finally thought she'd found the girl. The person before her was the same bald man she'd spotted at Wind Port. He had a chalk-white, three-pronged spear in his hand. In the next second, his headband fell away, exposing the red jewel lying beneath.

"Ruijerd. Ruijerd Superdia."

And he called himself Superdia. For some reason he didn't have any hair, but there was no doubt in her mind that he was a Superd—*the Dead End*. And he was moments away from sinking his teeth into Norn.

"Ah...uh..."

Fear gripped Roxy, starting at the base of her feet and rising upward. Shivers raced through her body, and she felt like she might release her grip on consciousness right then and there. However, she had been entrusted with the task of protecting Norn. Lilia was sprinting up behind her. There was also Aisha back at the inn as well. No...it wasn't just them. *Everyone* in this plaza was in danger. Roxy's heart screamed at her, forcing her to steel herself and hold her staff at the ready.

"L-Let that girl go! If you refuse, I shall be your opponent!"

Silence fell. Ruijerd grew stiff, and Lilia froze. Norn actually clung to Ruijerd, glaring with hostility in Roxy's direction. Roxy realized something was off, but her extreme anxiety stopped her from figuring out what it was. Still, she got a distinct sense that she was making a mistake right now. She'd made many up until this point, so she knew the feeling well.

"Lord Ruijerd, it has been a while," said Lilia, bowing as she strode up from behind Roxy.

Shaken by how casually Lilia had greeted him, Roxy asked her, "Uh? Um, you know him?"

"Haven't you heard? Lord Ruijerd is the one who escorted Lord Rudeus back to the Asura Kingdom..."

“Oh.” She had heard. In fact, she’d even heard that the Dead End she saw in Wind Port was the very same one who’d escorted Rudeus. But she’d never honestly believed that he was an actual Superd.

“I have no intention of hurting her,” Ruijerd said, warily gazing over at Roxy as she brandished her staff.

Roxy realized she’d completely misunderstood the situation. Her face turned bright red as she averted her gaze to her feet.

She really did hate the Superd Tribe.

Ruijerd would escort the girls to Rudeus. When Paul’s group heard the news, their reactions were mixed. Lilia and Ginger, who knew his true strength and character, gave the plan their seal of approval, saying they could be assured that the girls would arrive safely if Ruijerd was the one escorting them.

Vierra and Sherra both exchanged looks and nodded as if to say, *Why not?* They knew Ruijerd was the one who had protected Rudeus as he traversed the Demon Continent. He was strong enough to be reliable as well, so they saw no problems with it.

Talhand was against the plan. Just like Roxy, he had grown up with scary stories about the Superd Tribe, and heard anecdotes about how their atrocities when he traveled the Demon Continent. There was no smoke without a fire. Talhand had no doubt in his mind that Ruijerd had done something terrible in the past. Even if he were on the path to redemption now, that didn’t mean he could be trusted with a complete stranger’s loved ones.

Roxy was partially against it. She knew she shouldn’t judge people based on appearances or preconceived notions. It was just that... this was the Superd Tribe they were talking

about. Even after she understood that Ruijerd didn't present them any danger, she still remained cautious.

No, "cautious" wasn't the right word. She was afraid. The Superd Tribe was the embodiment of the fear she felt as a child, hearing all those stories. Even though her village no longer told such stories about the Superd Tribe, they'd been the best common way of disciplining children when she was young. That was why she couldn't fully mask her terror. Although she intellectually understood that it was safe, the fear that had been instilled in her as a child still froze her in place and made her wary.

So she said, "If you really think you can trust him, then go ahead."

So there were four opinions: strongly for, partially for, against, and partially against. Paul considered them all. He didn't know Ruijerd that well. The only time he'd had any contact with the man was when Ruijerd appeared alongside Rudeus, and even then, they'd hardly talked.

At the time, he'd gotten the impression that Ruijerd was trustworthy. However, it'd been several years since then, enough to change a person. Paul knew this from personal experience. Heck, it didn't require several years—a single day was all it might take. Thus the question: Could Paul really trust Ruijerd? Could he entrust him with the girls?

As he weighed the decision in his head, he looked downwards. There, clinging to Ruijerd's leg, was Norn. For a moment it was as if he were seeing double—an image of himself with Norn clinging to his leg superimposed over his vision. Norn was so shy with people that she hadn't warmed up to any adults other than him. Despite that, there she was, leaning against Ruijerd as if he were her father instead.

Then again, Ruijerd was the one who saved her. When that drunk came at her and she was crying, desperate for help, Ruijerd had stepped in as if it were his duty. No doubt it was much the same when he stepped in to save Rudeus as well. He moved without consideration for the consequences. Most likely, he hadn't changed at all.

“Can I trust you with them?” The words left Paul’s mouth before he even realized he was speaking.

Ruijerd immediately returned his gaze. “Even if it costs me my life, I will deliver them to Rudeus.” His reply was both sincere and encouraging. Reflected in Ruijerd’s eyes was a sense of duty and determination. He had the face of a warrior, one earned over many moons, something that Paul didn’t possess. If this was deception, then Paul didn’t know what was real anymore.

“Then I’ll leave it to you.” Paul extended a hand. Ruijerd took it and they exchanged a firm handshake.

That was how Ruijerd became Norn and Aisha’s bodyguard.

About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained readers' support, and within one year of publishing on the website, became #1 on the site's combined popularity rankings. "If you want to get married and be happy, it's important to put in effort even after you get married," said the author.



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