

NOVEL  
**13**

Written by  
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Shirotaka



# Mushoku Tensei

Jobless reincarnation

# ***Table of Contents***

[Table of Contents](#)

[Color Inserts](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Roxy's New Job](#)

[Chapter 2: Year Three](#)

[Chapter 3: Training with Norn](#)

[Chapter 4: Can I Keep Him?](#)

[Chapter 5: Paternal Dignity](#)

[Chapter 6: A Water King is Born](#)

[Chapter 7: The Wedding Ceremony](#)

[Chapter 8: A Lucky Man](#)

[Chapter 9: The Party](#)

[Chapter 10: Workplace Drama](#)

[Chapter 11: Graduation Day](#)

[Chapter 12: Phase Four](#)

[Extra Chapter: Sharpening the Mad Dog's Sword](#)

[About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote](#)

[Newsletter](#)

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# Muskoku Tensei

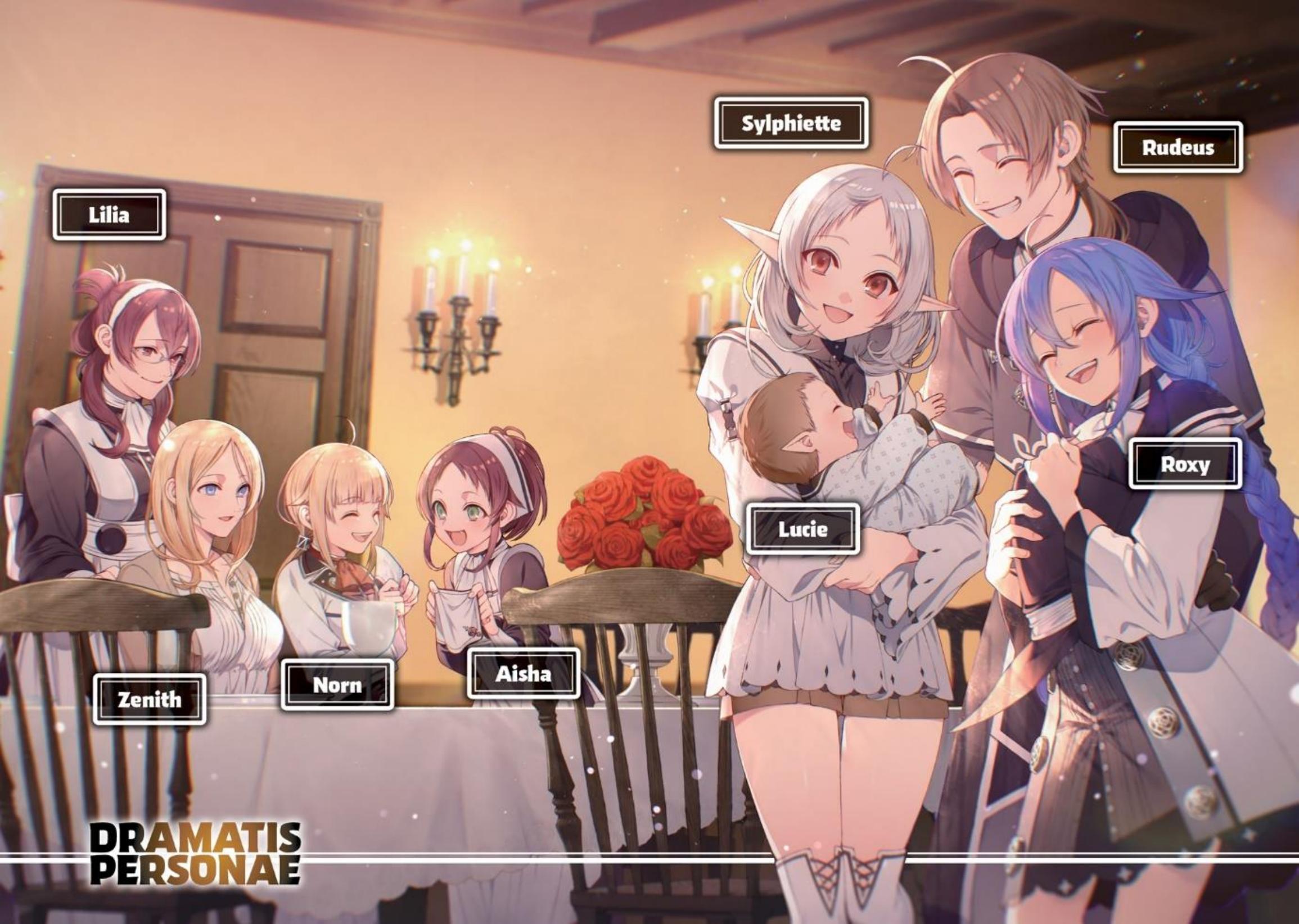
jobless reincarnation



13

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Lilia

Sylphiette

Rudeus

Zenith

Norn

Aisha

Lucie

Roxy

**“To tell you the truth,  
I was planning to come  
by your house while  
we were in town.”**



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*jobless reincarnation*

13

**WRITTEN BY**  
Rifujin na  
Magonote

**ILLUSTRATED BY**  
Shirotaka



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

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VOLUME 13: GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

# Contents

- CHAPTER 1:** Roxy's New Job
- CHAPTER 2:** Year Three
- CHAPTER 3:** Training with Norn
- CHAPTER 4:** Can I Keep Him?
- CHAPTER 5:** Paternal Dignity
- CHAPTER 6:** A Water King is Born
- CHAPTER 7:** The Wedding Ceremony
- CHAPTER 8:** A Lucky Man
- CHAPTER 9:** The Party
- CHAPTER 10:** Workplace Drama
- CHAPTER 11:** Graduation Day
- CHAPTER 12:** Phase Four
- EXTRA CHAPTER:** Sharpening the Mad Dog's Sword

*“You only realize the real value of something  
you discarded when you get the chance to  
pick it up again.”*

—For a guy who ditched one family,  
I got pretty lucky this time around.

*AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT  
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT*

## Chapter 1: Roxy's New Job

**O**NE MORNING, I was roused from slumber by the most delicious of smells. It had wafted into my nostrils as I slept, filling my heart with warm and wonderful emotions.

“Wha—?!”

Startled by this alluring aroma, I snapped my eyes open...and found a goddess in bed next to me, sound asleep. Her cherubic face was inches from my eyes. I could even hear her breathing softly through her charming little nose.

“Ooh...”

I slowly emerged from beneath the blanket, and then rose to my knees as quietly as I could. Putting my hands together, I offered her a brief gesture of supplication. There was a holy personage in my bed. It was only natural that I show her deference.

“Wait a minute. Could this mean...”

With shaking hands, I reached out to pull back the blanket from atop the goddess. It was just as I'd hoped! Astonishing as it may seem, her entire *body* had manifested next to me!

“Ooooh!”

Her figure was slender and deceptively youthful in appearance, lacking curves in certain places where they might usually be expected. It was too dark to see clearly, but...was that dot I saw on her chest a divine symbol, perhaps? An auspicious mark, meant to represent her third eye?

No, probably not. Still, it was something no less holy.

“Gulp...”

Would it be permissible for me to touch her? Surely I had the heavens' implicit blessing. The goddess had come to *me*, after all. I was the chosen one. The messiah. And surely a messiah is allowed to touch his god.

But was it permissible for me to do so while her spirit was roving elsewhere? There was a risk that I would burden my soul with sin, and bar myself from the gates of Nirvana. The moment I reached out my hand, she might flood the room with brilliant light, shout "Begone, foul Mara!", and purify me into nothingness.

What a cruel dilemma. I couldn't help it if my little apostle was feeling particularly fervent this morning!

"Mm... 'S cold..."

The goddess grabbed blindly for the blanket, pulled it back over her, and then turned on her other side.

"Oooh..."

How truly wondrous! I could see the white nape of her neck peeking from beneath her blue hair! I could see the hickeys I'd left there yesterday! Truly splendid. Surely I was the luckiest man in the world, to be offered such spectacular sights the very moment I awakened.

*...Oh, right. We don't have that much time in the morning, do we? Better get her up...*

"Roxy, wake up. It's morning."

"Hm...?"

My goddess opened her eyes and slowly sat up. The blanket slipped away as she did so, revealing her lovely, naked back. This was the dawn of a new age.

"...Good morning."

Sluggishly, she turned around to face me, eyes fogged with sleep. She had two auspicious marks on her chest, and a cute little

belly button down below them. And then there were her panties, which hid further spiritual delights.

My stupa was accumulating karma at a dangerous rate of speed. At this rate, I was going to reach enlightenment before too long.

“Oh...”

Perhaps noticing this state of affairs, she grabbed the blanket and pulled it up to hide her body. The goddess had abandoned me. All light faded from the world. A new dark age was upon us...

“Is there a reason you look so dejected?” she inquired dryly.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just wanted to take a nice long look at your body in the daylight, Teacher.”

“...I don’t think it’s much to look at, anyway.”

“Don’t be absurd! Come on, pull back that blanket. Let me bask in your radiance!”

“Good lord, you’re certainly energetic this morning... Well, whatever. I suppose there isn’t any reason to be bashful at this point...”

Slowly, Roxy pulled the blanket aside. Just like that, the light came flooding back into my world. Yeah, I saw the light, and it was good!

I saw the darkness, too; I named it *Eros*, and the light *Apollo*. Beside the darkness, I saw a belly button and thighs. I named them *Cupid* and *Amor*. That seemed like enough work for the first day.

“All right, I think that’s enough.”

Once again, that accursed blanket hid the glories of creation from my eyes. Another dark age was... Okay, even I was getting sick of this bit.

“Uhm, Rudy?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Thank you. For last night.”

Roxy ducked her head to me in an awkward little bow.

Last night had been something of a special one for us. It was something we’d built up to over a couple weeks. We’d agreed that Roxy would officially become my second wife once Sylphie gave birth. That had happened a while ago. But up until yesterday, Roxy and I hadn’t actually slept together since our arrival in Sharia. Part of it was that everyone was busy adjusting to Lucie’s arrival, but I could tell Roxy was also anxious about our new arrangement. That was understandable, but I wanted to do something about it.

And so, I put in some special effort to relieve her. I’d treated Roxy like a princess last night. My jaw was still a bit sore this morning—I’d put it through a real workout.

It was all worth it, though. She’d most definitely been satisfied.

“To be honest, I didn’t even know there were...techniques like those.” Her eyes darting away from mine, Roxy blushed a little.

“Heh heh. Well, it’s a wide world out there, you know?”

I’d used every trick I knew. Over the years, I’d developed a routine that always left Sylphie breathless from too much moaning. I wanted to overwhelm Roxy with pleasure, too, and I figured my “techniques” would be the quickest way to accomplish that.

It hadn’t gone *exactly* as expected, though. Mostly because Roxy kept asking me questions at every step of the process—usually something like “What should I be doing now?” It seemed she was just the studious type, even in bed. I’d indulged her with brief explanations and tips, followed by *extensive* hands-on demonstrations.

“Teach me more of the details next time, all right?”

“You could always just lie back and let me do my thing, Roxy. I’ll make sure you enjoy yourself.”

“No, thank you. I want to develop my *own* skills.”

To be honest, this wasn’t what I’d pictured when I was planning things out beforehand. But it wasn’t half bad, in its own way. Sylphie had her approach to sex, and Roxy had a different one. I found both of them very satisfying, so I wasn’t about to complain.

“Ugh. I’m going to be late for work...”

Her face still slightly flushed, Roxy turned her face away from me and clambered down out of the bed. I stayed right where I was—seated formally on the bed—and bathed in the radiance of her butt as she walked across the room.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.”

Sensing my gaze, Roxy looked back at me. I turned and pretended like I’d been getting dressed all along.

“...”

I felt Roxy’s eyes on me from behind. I was starting to consider flexing for her amusement when she walked over and touched my back.

“I’m sorry, Rudy. It looks like I scratched you. Does it hurt?”

“Hm?”

When I craned my head around to get a look, I could just see four long, thin welts on one side of my back. They stung a little when I touched them. Roxy had left them on me last night. They were a badge of honor, in other words.

*Gah, now she’s got me remembering the look on her face when she did that... Down, boy! Down! We don’t have time for your antics right now!*

“I’m fine, Roxy.”

“I hope they don’t leave a scar or anything...”

Roxy's face was bright red as she mumbled out those words. The fact that she didn't even think of healing them with magic made me feel like she was busy remembering last night as well. I looked up and met her gaze. I could see my face's reflection in her big blue eyes. After a moment, she closed them, clearly anticipating a kiss.

I couldn't take her up on that, though. We'd find ourselves right back in bed ten seconds later. And so, I restrained myself to stroking her cheek affectionately.

"...I think it's about time we got dressed, *Professor*."

"Oh. Right. O-of course!"

Roxy hopped back away from me, looking more than a little embarrassed, and started pulling on her underwear. I turned around and started getting dressed as well.

"Do I look all right, Rudy?"

Once she'd gotten her robes on, Roxy turned around in front of me so I could look things over for her.

"Yep."

"Really?"

"Of course, Roxy. You look great."

That was an understatement, in fact. If there was anyone stupid enough to imply that Roxy looked anything less than *perfect*, I'd ensure they saw the error of their ways.

"Well, all right. It's my first day on the job, you know? I can't mess this one up!"

Roxy squeezed her hand into a fist and nodded to herself. As of today, she was going to be commuting to the University of Magic as well...but as a member of the faculty. This would also be my first day as a third-year student there.

But before we get into all that, I should probably turn back the clock a little.

Let's talk about the day that Roxy got her new job.

### Several Months Earlier

A BOUT A WEEK had passed since I returned home from my journey. It had been hectic for a while there, but things were finally starting to calm down again.

I was relaxing on the sofa in the living room when Roxy walked in.

"Rudy, I think I'd like to work at the University of Magic. Would that be all right with you?"

"Huh?"

I wasn't sure what she meant at first. She looked down at me with her usual steady expression, fixing her eyes on mine.

"I feel like I've got a bit too much time on my hands, so I wanted to see about making myself more useful."

"Um, so...you're saying you want to become a professor or something?"

"That's the idea, yes." Roxy nodded, her face solemn and serious.

It did make sense. She'd seemed a little bit restless since our arrival here.

Roxy wasn't exactly the domestic housekeeper type. She'd spent most of her life as a solo adventurer on the road, so she could handle almost any job when she needed to...but when it came to housework, she wasn't nearly as efficient as Aisha, Sylphie, or Lilia.

Also, we had two dedicated maids living in the house already, so there wasn't much for her to do.

She was taking the place of my left hand sometimes, though. I wasn't used to being one-handed yet, and it did make some things really inconvenient. It was a help having Roxy around to assist me with getting dressed and eating my meals.

Still, it wasn't like I absolutely needed her around all day. I could bumble by on my own when I had to.

"Hmm..."

In any case... Roxy wanted to be a professor, did she? She was an amazing teacher, of course. I knew personally what a blessing it could be to learn magic from her.

Given her talents and wisdom, it would be criminal of me to keep her around as nothing more than a replacement for my missing hand. Keeping her all to myself did have a certain appeal, but for the sake of everyone *else* in the world, she should be out there enriching our society with her presence.

"I'm sure it sounds a little arrogant to you, since I'm nothing special as a mage...but I've always enjoyed teaching people what I know."

"What? That's not what I was thinking at all!"

I was actually kind of offended, in a way.

No matter how many parallel universes might exist, you'd never find one where I thought Roxy was *arrogant*. I was fated to respect her deeply in every possible world line. It was the choice of Stein's Gate!

"You should go for it, Roxy. Absolutely. You'll be a great professor!"

"Oh. Well, that's nice to hear...and a little embarrassing, I guess."

Now that the matter was settled, there was no point dilly-dallying around. “Okay then. Why don’t we go talk to Vice-Principal Jenius right now?”

Roxy started in surprise. “Jenius? Wait, Professor Jenius is the Vice-Principal now?”

“That’s right. Do you know him?”

For some reason, Roxy hesitated for a moment with something like a grimace on her face. “He was my master, actually.”

*Oh? Is Jenius a Saint-tier Water Mage, then? I thought Fire magic was his specialty... Maybe I’m misremembering?*

Then again, it wasn’t that unusual for a mage to study more than one element in depth. Presumably Jenius was a Water Mage as well, and had just neglected to mention it to me.

“I’m afraid I said some very harsh things the last time I saw him. I regret that now, but I was young and hot-headed...”

“Don’t worry about it, Roxy. The past is the past.”

From what she’d told me, Roxy’s master in magic was a pompous, prideful fool of a man. But the Jenius I knew was a diligent and polite guy who spent most of his time pushing paper around. He’d probably changed a lot himself over the years.

“What if he holds it against me, though?”

“I’ll make sure he puts it all behind him. Whether he wants to or not.”

I already owed Jenius a good deal for his help over the years, but for Roxy’s sake, I wouldn’t hesitate to add to the debt I owed him.

“Well, okay then. Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

With that settled, the two of us headed out for the University of Magic.

We found Jenius buried under a mountain of paperwork, as always.

“Well... My goodness.”

At the sight of Roxy, he offered us a smile that looked more like a grimace.

Awkward smiles were basically his default expression, but this one was definitely more awkward than usual.

“Sorry to interrupt, Vice-Principal Jenius. Could we have a bit of your time?”

“Of course, Rudeus. Why don’t we step into the other room?”

Still, despite the fact that he was obviously busy, Jenius readily agreed to speak with us. The man always had a lot on his plate, but he’d never shooed me away when I needed help. He wasn’t a bad guy at heart.

“Take a seat, please.”

After heading over into the reception room, Roxy and I settled down on a sofa across from Jenius.

When was the last time I’d been in here? After my duel with Badigadi, maybe? It had definitely been a while.

“First of all...it’s nice to see you again, Roxy.”

“...It’s been too long, Master Jenius.”

“Hm. Didn’t you say I, ah...wasn’t worthy of that title?”

Roxy let her gaze fall to the ground. “I’m sorry about all that. I was young and arrogant, I suppose.”

The conversation had begun tentatively. They clearly both thought one wrong word might lead to an explosion of anger.

“I think that goes for both of us. I was far too proud myself.”

Once they apologized to each other, though, they both visibly relaxed.

They'd thought of each other as obstacles for a long time, but at some point they'd probably developed a kind of mutual respect. And only now, years after the fact, were they able to admit that to themselves.

I had no way of knowing what they'd argued about in the past, but after all this time, it seemed like it was water under the bridge. A decade or two is enough to change most people.

After a few seconds, Jenius raised his head and cleared his throat. "In any case...what can I do for you two today?"

"Well, Master Jenius...in my travels after leaving the University, I eventually came to understand the joys and rewards of teaching. I was hoping to become an instructor here, if possible."

"Well, well," said Jenius with a slight grin. "Didn't you regard teachers as 'utterly useless' at one point? You certainly have changed, Roxy."

Was he going to give us trouble about this?

Feeling a little nervous, I shot a look over at Roxy, only to find she was smiling slightly as well. Maybe they'd both found something humorous about the situation. I found myself feeling a little bit left out.

If Jenius had rejected the idea, I'd been planning to get pretty pushy on Roxy's behalf, but it didn't look like that was going to be necessary. In fact, my presence here was probably unhelpful.

"Teacher, would it be all right if I left you two to work out the details?"

"...Huh? Um, okay. I don't mind if you stay around, though."

"Well, I was thinking I'd drop in on a friend of mine."

Roxy and Jenius were old acquaintances. They probably had a lot of catching up to do. And somehow, I felt like Roxy might be

reluctant to let me hear too many embarrassing stories from her younger days.

That made me just a little sad, but it seemed best for me to leave the room.

\*\*\*

I headed straight over to Zanoba's laboratory.

I'd told him I might be gone for two years, and I'd made it back in a mere six months. He'd probably be surprised to see me.

The outcome of my trip hadn't been especially positive, of course, but there was no need for me to get him depressed as well. I'd have to try and act as cheerfully as possible.

"Okay..."

I knocked on the door, then stepped inside without waiting for a reply.

"Breaking news, Zanoba! I'm back!"

"Wha—?!"

Inside, I found my friend straddling a life-sized mannequin with an ecstatic expression on his face.

"..."

"..."

The two of us stared at each other in silence for a few seconds.

What was Zanoba feeling right now, in this instant? What emotions were swirling through his mind?

I knew, of course. I knew all too well.

"..."

Averting my eyes, I closed the door without a word.

Immediately, there was a great deal of clattering from inside the room. I waited about ten minutes until the sounds finally stopped and a small voice called “I’m ready.”

I threw open the door vigorously for the second time.

“Breaking news, Zanoba! I’m back!”

“Ohhhh! How splendid! If it isn’t my beloved master, Rudeus!”

The two of us rejoiced in our reunion and embraced each other as if nothing at all had happened. There was no reason for either of us to feel awkward. The two of us were best friends. I didn’t see anything. Nothing even happened.

“You certainly have returned to us quickly, Master! I thought you were going to be gone for two years!”

“Well, it’s a long story, but we ended up coming back early.”

“Ah, so you accomplished a two-year quest in less than half the time! You never cease to amaze me!”

I took a look around the room. It was full of dolls and statues, many of which seemed to be folk art of some kind. I’d been in this room many times before, of course, but it felt almost nostalgic to be back. He’d certainly accumulated a lot of new toys while I was gone, though. In particular, Julie’s desk was virtually covered in clay dolls and figurines. She’d obviously been working hard in my absence.

“Where are Ginger and Julie?”

“The two of them are out shopping at present. Some of the things I asked them for won’t be available until evening, so they won’t be back for some time.”

I see. So that’s why he’d felt it safe to engage in a “date” with his beloved doll friend.

This was probably an uncommon opportunity for him. I almost felt bad about having interrupted.

“Oh? Master, your hand...”

At this point, Zanoba finally noticed that I'd come back without a left hand. He was staring at the stump of my wrist with a troubled look on his face.

"Yeah, it's gone. I got a little careless out there."

"...What opponent could be fearsome enough to harm you so grievously?"

"It was a hydra with an immunity to magic."

"A hydra? Hmm, I see. That's no small threat."

When I looked back on that battle, it was obvious we were lacking in the physical attack department. If Zanoba had been along with us, maybe we could have taken the hydra down more easily. Maybe we really should have turned back temporarily and recruited him, or someone else, to help us out.

There wasn't much point speculating about it now, though.

"If the beast was resistant to magic, I can see why even you would have struggled to defeat it."

"Yeah. Oh, and even when we managed to cut off one of its heads, they grew right back. It was no picnic, that's for sure."

"It was capable of regeneration, as well? How did you manage to slay it, then?"

"My— Our swordsman chopped off its heads, and then I seared the stumps with fire."

"Ah, now I see. The flesh itself was vulnerable, even if its hide was not! I presume you thought up this strategy yourself, Master?"

"I just remembered hearing someone say that was the way to do it."

Thinking about that battle wasn't doing wonders for my mood. I'd gone in knowing the way to kill that monster, but Paul still ended up dead. The more Zanoba complimented our victory, the more depressed it made me feel.

“I must say, Master, you look rather gloomy.”

“Well...we did win, but it came at a heavy price.”

“Ah, I see.” Glancing down at my hand, Zanoba nodded to himself. “On that note, I think I have an idea.”

With a smile, he trotted over to his own work desk and started rooting around through the bottom drawer. After a few moments, he pulled out a scale model of a hand.

Maybe that wasn’t the right way to describe it. It was a bit clunky looking for a “hand.” Maybe it was a prototype of some kind of glove.

“Take a look at this, please.”

“What is that thing, Zanoba?”

“Heh heh. It is the fruit of some six months’ labors!”

“Oh?”

“Indeed,” said Zanoba proudly, a meaningful smile on his face. “I wasn’t just sitting around in your absence, Master.”

*True enough. You’ve also been making love to inanimate objects... Whoops. No, I didn’t see that. I didn’t see anything!*

“Okay, then. So what is it, exactly?”

“Observe!”

His face full of confidence, Zanoba balled his free hand into a fist, then plunged it inside the model glove.

At this point, he shouted something that sounded like an incantation: “Earth, be thou my hand!”

All of a sudden, the model began to *move*. It had been fixed in the shape of a fist, but now its clay-like fingers slowly extended. It clenched again, then unclenched, and then folded down its fingers one by one.

All of these movements were startlingly smooth and natural-looking.

“It’s a magical implement in the shape of a hand. It moves exactly as its bearer wills.”

“...”

“I followed your advice, Master, and continued my study of that mysterious doll with Cliff’s assistance. This is my first practical implementation of my findings.”

“...”

“Master? Er...Master?”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry about that.”

I’d actually been speechless with surprise for a moment there. I did remember telling Zanoba to focus on studying the hands and arms of that doll, but I certainly hadn’t expected him to make something this impressive in a matter of months.

“That’s incredible, Zanoba. I’m honestly impressed.”

“Heh heh heh. Oh, but I haven’t even gotten to the best part yet. By using this device, I’m able to control my fearsome strength!”

“Wait, really?”

“Indeed.”

Zanoba nodded with a smile of genuine joy on his face. His happiness was obvious, and infectious.

If Zanoba could control his strength, that meant he could make figurines himself. He’d finally found a way that he could create the things he loved most. It was hard for me to even imagine how much that meant to him.

“My hand, return to earth.”

With Zanoba’s second incantation, the hand stopped moving. Apparently, you could turn it on and off at will.

“Now then...”

Pulling his hand out of the magical implement, Zanoba offered it to me.

“Please do give it a try yourself, Master. Simply command it with the words ‘*Earth, be thou my hand*,’ and it will become a part of you. When you wish to remove it, speak the words ‘*My hand, return to earth*.’”

“All right.”

Accepting the hand from Zanoba, I pushed it against my left wrist. The thing was made to have room for a balled-up hand inside it, of course; since I was missing a hand, it felt like it might fall off at any moment.

“I’m not sure if this thing’s going to stay on, though...”

“It won’t be a problem. Go ahead, try the incantation.”

“Okay, then... *Earth, be thou my hand*.”

The instant I spoke those words, I felt the device draining mana from my arm.

It didn’t take that much. But of course it wouldn’t, if Zanoba could use it.

“Whoa!”

As soon as it absorbed my mana, I felt the device press itself tightly against my stump.

The sense that I was “wearing” something quickly faded away. In its place, I could *feel* the artificial hand that was now connected to me.

“...What do you think?”

Gingerly, I tried moving my left hand. I opened and closed it, stretched out each finger starting from the thumb, and folded them

down starting from the pinky. The crude-looking clay responded as if it was just another part of my body.



“It’s moving! It’s really moving!”

“Ah, but there’s more to it than that. Try touching something, why don’t you?”

“Right...”

I reached out to take a small wood sculpture from the nearby table. It was a carving of a horse, about the size of my fist.

My artificial fingertips could “feel” its weight and texture. The sensation was a little dull and indistinct—almost as if I were wearing a thick pair of cotton gloves—but it was definitely there.

“You can even feel things through this? That’s incredible.”

“But of course. One could hardly hope to make a figurine without a sense of touch.”

True enough. You needed to be pretty precise with the amount of force you used when you were carving something. Since Zanoba made this with his own goals in mind, this sense of touch would have been an essential feature.

Just to see what might happen, I tried casting a small spell through my new “fingers.” A tiny ball of water appeared in front of them. It seemed like magic wasn’t going to be a problem, either.

Had Zanoba really created this thing in only half a year? That couldn’t have been easy. His passion for figurines must have kept him incredibly motivated.

“I wasn’t entirely sure if you’d be able to use it without a hand, but it seems there aren’t any major problems,” said Zanoba with a satisfied smile.

“Yeah, it moves just fine. I can feel the fingers, too. And use magic.”

“If you wish to increase its strength, simply feed it more of your mana. Its power will increase accordingly.”

“Oh really?”

“Of course, if you were to give it *all* of your mana, I would expect it to fall apart under the strain. It’s sturdier than a normal human hand, but do be cautious.”

“Well, let’s see...”

As we spoke, I fed the device a bit more mana. The weight of the sculpture in my hand seemed to disappear entirely.

“Wow, this is really—”

Before I could finish my sentence, there was a sharp *crack*.

“Oh.”

“Aaah!”

I’d snapped one of the legs clean off the little horse without even meaning to.

“Aaaagh... Master, how could you...?” Zanoba stared at me with a reproachful look on his face.

“Sorry, Zanoba... I’ll make it up to you.”

“Uggh...that was a traditional sculpture from the ancient principality of Giara... I doubt I’ll ever find its like again...”

“U-uh, well, maybe I can make you something new? It’d just be an Earth magic sculpture, but...”

At this offer, Zanoba’s face lit up. “Oooh! How splendid! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pressure you!”

Taking the sculpture from me, he carefully put it away inside his desk. Maybe he was planning to superglue it back together or something. Hopefully it would go well.

Zanoba turned back to face me. “That hand is yours to keep, Master Rudeus. It’s still only a prototype, of course, but I’m sure it’s better than nothing.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

"With you and Cliff to help me, I'm sure I can make another of comparable quality in no time at all."

That made sense. He was still actively working on his research, after all.

It would be nice to make the thing more sensitive. That way, I could use it for recreational fondling.

There were countless other possible improvements, of course. This thing had a *lot* of potential. For example, we could find a way to make it transform into various tools or weapons. How useful would it be to have fingers that turned into drills whenever you needed one? Or a hand that turned into a magic cannon on demand?

"...Zanoba, I think this might be a pretty amazing invention."

"I quite agree! Not to toot my proverbial horn, but I do think it's a rather splendid little item."

As useful as it might be in combat, or in making figurines, there were plenty of other applications. For one thing, it was a brilliant prosthetic.

In this world, it was possible to reattach a severed limb if you made your way to a magician with advanced skills in Healing. And wounds that would have landed you in a hospital back in my old world could be cured quickly with even elementary spells.

On the other hand, having a *missing* part of your body regenerated was extremely expensive. Unless you were very wealthy, it probably wasn't going to happen. And there weren't many magicians even capable of restoring an entire arm or leg. You could find some in the Holy Country of Millis, but even there they were very rare. A mere adventurer couldn't expect to employ their services.

When a common villager or adventurer lost a part of their body, for the most part they had to make do with crude replacement—something more like Captain Ahab's wooden peg-leg.

If we started selling magical prosthetics like this at a relatively affordable price, we'd be helping a lot of people. And making plenty of money in the process.

The Healers of Millis might not be too pleased about that, but fortunately, they were on the other side of the world from us. As long as we got the backing of a larger organization, like the University or the Magic Guild, it would probably work out just fine.

"Do you have a name for this thing, Zanoba?"

"I hadn't given it one as of yet, no. Neither Cliff nor I have much talent for naming things, I'm afraid."

"Oh yeah?" That wasn't much fun. Surely we could come up with something, right?

"Would you care to do the honors for us, Master Rudeus?"

"Huh? Uh, sure, I guess."

I didn't think of myself as especially great at naming things either, but I couldn't turn him down if he wanted my help.

Looking down at the thing that was now serving as my left hand, I took a moment to think.

When it came to removable, artificial hands, the first words that popped into my head were "Rocket Punch." But it wasn't like I could fire this thing off at my enemies or anything...although I could always throw it at them at in a pinch.

The second term that came to mind was "Hand of Glory." As in the severed, pickled hand of an executed criminal, which supposedly held magical powers—not the special move of a perverted, bandana-wearing anime character.

I didn't feel the need to reuse a name that already existed, though.

This thing was a brand-new invention—something this world had never seen before. Maybe the inventors deserved to get some credit.

“Why don’t we take a bit from ‘Zanoba’ and a bit from ‘Cliff’ and call it a Zaliff Prosthesis?”

“Shouldn’t there be part of your name in there as well, Master?”

“Nah, that’s all right. I didn’t really contribute to this or anything.”

“...I don’t believe that’s entirely true, but very well. From now on, we’ll call that device the Zaliff Prosthesis, Prototype One.” Zanoba smiled proudly as he spoke.

In any case, it seemed I now had a magical replacement for my missing hand. It wasn’t as precise or as sensitive as my old one, but it moved just fine, and I could at least feel things through it. It could also become very powerful with the addition of a little excess mana. I was going to need some practice to get the hang of using the correct amount of force, though.

My goal was to get to the point where I could gently squeeze Roxy and Sylphie’s breasts.

“There’s still quite a lot of room for improvement, of course, but we also need to continue our study of the automaton. What should we prioritize, Master Rudeus?”

“Hmm, let’s see...”

Apparently, there were some fundamental issues with this prototype. For one thing, its mana consumption wasn’t ideal. I could use it indefinitely, but it would suck Zanoba dry after only two or three hours.

The fingers were also a little on the thick side, which wasn’t aesthetically pleasing. And of course, its sense of touch wasn’t

perfect yet. If we managed to resolve all those problems, it would be an even more amazing invention.

That said, this prosthetic wasn't the main focus of our research. It was just a byproduct of it.

"Well, let's not lose our focus here."

Our goal was to make an automaton of our own, with our own hands. This prosthetic would definitely command a high price, and it made for a very convenient tool. We could probably put it on the market at some point. But I didn't want it taking up all of our research time.

"We're trying to make a fully automated doll here, right? We can't let ourselves forget that."

"Very true."

"For the moment, let's put improving the prosthetic on the backburner and get back to studying that automaton."

"Of course. I rather expected you might say as much, Master."

Zanoba and I seemed to be in agreement, fortunately. We could always work on the prosthetic on the side.

The two of us kept talking for a while afterwards. For the most part, our conversation focused on the various dolls and figurines I'd seen on the Begaritt Continent. When I told him about their glass sculptures, Zanoba's eyes lit up with excitement.

"Anyway, how's Julie been doing while I was gone?"

"Quite well. Just the other day, she finished a figurine of a certain gentleman. I believe she wanted to show it to you, Master Rudeus."

Hm? Had she finished the Ruijerd figurine already? I did want to see that as soon as possible, but...

"That's good to hear. But if she's not going to be back until evening, I guess I might not be able to see her today."

"Hrm. Do you have some other business to attend to?"

"My master's interviewing for a job at the moment. Once she's done, I was planning to go around and say hi to everyone."

"Your master?"

With impeccable timing, someone knocked at the door.

"Rudy? Are you in there? This is the place, isn't it?"

It was Roxy's voice. Apparently she'd finished with the vice-principal while Zanoba and I were catching up.

"Come on in. We were just talking about you, actually."

"Pardon me..."

Roxy stepped into the room tentatively. She paused to look around the room for a moment, then gingerly made her way over to my side.

"This is quite an impressive laboratory. Is it really all right for me to be in here? I feel like there're a few things I shouldn't really be seeing..."

"Don't be silly, Roxy. There's not a single place on this campus that you're not allowed to enter."

"I don't really think that's up to you, Rudy."

"Maybe not. But you're welcome here, at least."

As the two of us chatted, Zanoba stood frozen in place. After a moment, I noticed that he was trembling slightly.

"Zanoba, let me introduce you. This is Roxy M. Greyrat, my master in magic."

"It's nice to see you again, Prince Zanoba. I'm glad to find you looking so hale and healthy."

Roxy bowed her head deeply to Zanoba.

“Oh... Oh... Ohhh...”

Zanoba, for his part, just stared at her and trembled even more visibly than before. Finally, he raised his shaking arms up above his head. All of a sudden, he bellowed out a strange roar of some kind.

“Ohhhhhh!!!”

After leaping up into the air like a frog, he dropped flat to the ground, prostrating himself with his hands stretched out in front of him.

“Whoa!” Roxy flinched in surprise and stepped behind me, partially hiding herself from view.

“How wonderful to see you again, Lady Roxy! My deepest apologies for how rudely I treated you in the past! I had no idea at the time that you were the master of my master!”

“Um, please stop groveling! You’re the prince of an entire kingdom, and I’m just a magician. What if someone were to see this?”

Roxy was obviously flustered. Not that I could blame her.

This was probably my cue to step in and calm things down a little. “Not to worry, Teacher. If anyone tried to make an issue of it, I’d silence them myself.”

“Not you too, Rudy! Have you lost your mind?!”

*God, she’s so cute when she’s all worked up...*

There wasn’t really anything to be worried about, though.

“I think you just need to take a few deep breaths and calm down, Roxy. It’s perfectly natural that Zanoba would want to prostrate himself in front of you.”

“Uh, is it? Could you explain why?”

“Well, Zanoba? It’s perfectly natural, isn’t it?”

His face still pressed solidly into the ground, Zanoba nodded respectfully. “Indeed! She is the master of my master, after all!”

See? Perfectly reasonable all around.

“That’s not an explanation! I want an actual reason!”

“You don’t need a ‘reason’ to do what comes naturally, right? Just accept the gesture gracefully, why don’t you?”

“But...”

“Oh, very well then. Zanoba, would you mind standing up?”

It seemed like we weren’t making any progress in this conversation, so I decided to let Zanoba get back on his feet.

The man was on the tall side, so once he was standing again, he probably had a clear view of the top of Roxy’s adorable head.

That struck me as decidedly impudent, but I’d have to let it pass. He couldn’t control his own height, after all.

“In any case, Miss Roxy, how was your interview?” asked Zanoba politely. “Do you think you’ll be hired as a professor?”

“Yes. Master Jenius—the vice-principal, that is—seemed to think my skills as a magician were adequate.”

“Well, of course they are,” I interjected. “You’re the woman who taught me magic, after all!”

“You did most of your learning on your own, Rudy. I’m not sure how much that says about my potential as an educator.”

Apparently, Roxy would be starting her new job as an instructor here as soon as the next term got underway.

This clearly called for a celebration.

It wasn’t the only thing we had to celebrate, either. We’d be getting married soon, my sisters were going to be turning ten before too long, and we had another member of the family on the way.

It might be easiest to consolidate them all into one big party or something.

Apart from everything else, Paul's letter had suggested having a celebration once everyone made it back here. There wasn't any rush, though. We all had a lot on our plates right now. It would be better to wait until things were a little less crazy.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I was planning to go around and say hi to everyone else, too."

"Quite reasonable, Master. I'm sure they'll be overjoyed to see you back so soon."

Zanoba smiled so brightly that I couldn't help grinning as well.

More than anything else, I was excited to finally introduce Roxy to the others.

"All right then, Zanoba. Thanks again for the prosthetic. I'll come back soon."

"Please do stop by when you have the time, Master. Julie will be glad to see you."

"Of course."

"Ah, one last thing. If your new hand starts giving you any trouble, it might be faster for you to show it to Cliff directly, rather than coming to me."

"Got it."

With that, the two of us left Zanoba's rooms behind.

As we walked down the chilly corridors of the University, a creaking sound echoed off the walls.

It was coming from my new prosthesis; I was actively experimenting with how much magic I could safely feed it. Every time I opened and closed the hand, it emitted an audible squeak.

I suppose it wasn't reasonable to expect a prototype to be designed with silent operation in mind.

"Is that prosthesis a magical implement, Rudy?" asked Roxy, looking down at the clay-colored hand.

"That's right. It's apparently the product of some serious research and development on Zanoba's part."

"It's very impressive work, I have to say. It seems to be capable of very precise movements."

"Yeah, it's really something. Given how well it works, I think I'll be able to get by just fine from now on. Even without having you around all the time."

"Oh...r-right. I suppose so."

For some reason, Roxy's face took on a slightly downcast expression.

"I'm sorry, Rudy. I suppose I wasn't taking your situation into account. I was so eager to become a teacher, I didn't even think about the trouble it might cause you..."

"What, you mean with my missing hand? It's not that big a deal, really."

Having Roxy around had been a big help, but it wasn't like I'd asked her to take on a role as my personal assistant. Obviously, I wanted her to put her own plans first.

For one thing, there were plenty of other people in my life who were willing to help me out when necessary. Not that I was actually going to say that, since it would sound like I was calling Roxy replaceable.

"In any case, I'm certainly glad you have a left hand again."

"Yep. Now I can touch you twice as often."

I reached out and stroked Roxy's shoulders gently with my artificial hand.

I could feel her warmth and the softness of her body, even through her robe. Apparently this thing was sensitive to temperature, as well. It really was well-made.

I kept caressing Roxy for a lengthy period of time, but she accepted it without complaint.

“Anyway, I want to introduce you to everyone. Mind coming with me for a while?”

“Oh...oh! Of course.” Roxy nodded, looking a little nervous.

For the rest of the afternoon, I went around the campus introducing Roxy to my friends and acquaintances. We managed to see Linia, Pursena, Ariel, Luke, and Nanahoshi. I’d been planning to visit Cliff as well, but I heard passionate moans from inside his laboratory when we approached, and decided to come back some other time.

The reactions we got were widely varied.

Linia and Pursena responded in a particularly amusing way. The moment they got a whiff of Roxy’s scent, they both twitched to attention with looks of fear on their faces.

As they stood there meekly with their tails between their legs, I introduced Roxy as my beloved teacher. They promptly bowed their heads to her.

I guess beastfolk are quick to recognize people they really shouldn’t mess with. Their instincts were right on the money this time.

Ariel and Luke, on the other hand, were surprisingly oblivious.

When I showed up to say hello, the first words out of Ariel’s mouth were “I see you remembered to stop by *after* your trip, at least.”

She didn't seem genuinely upset, but she did explain that she could have offered me assistance if I'd come to see her before leaving. Considering that my inadequate preparations had ended up costing me dearly, hearing that left me a little shamefaced. I ended up apologizing for my oversight.

Putting that aside, though... When I got around to introducing Roxy, the two of them stared at her in blank surprise, then turned to look at each other. They were obviously surprised that such a "young" magician would be taking on a role in the faculty here.

Still, Ariel *was* a princess, with all the diplomatic skills that implied. She greeted Roxy very politely, without any hint of confusion in her voice. The woman's self-control was impressive.

We found Nanahoshi looking somewhat the worse for wear. She might have caught a cold or something, since she was coughing like crazy. When she saw my face, she smiled in relief and muttered "Now we can get the research back on track."

When I introduced Roxy, and explained that she would be teaching at the University from now on, her response was a disinterested "I see."

This struck me as a little too curt, so I took the time to elaborate on Roxy's many virtues and talents. Sadly, Nanahoshi just grimaced and called me a "cradle robber."

I suppose it was too much to expect that an ordinary high-school girl could grasp Roxy's greatness.

By this point, it was getting around to evening, and we'd stopped by everyone I wanted to visit.

Just as I was about to suggest we head home, though, Roxy spoke up with a slightly disgruntled expression on her face. "Rudy?"

"Yes, Roxy?"

“I’m very happy that you’re taking the time to introduce me to your friends, but I feel like you’re being...a bit *excessive* in your praise of me.”

“Really? It wasn’t intentional, I assure you.”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, no words I could offer would possibly be sufficient to really capture how wonderful you are. I thought I was selling you a little short, if anything.”

Frowning, Roxy jabbed a finger up at me. “Okay, there you go again! Are you teasing me or something, Rudy?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. My respect and admiration for you is as real as it gets.”

“Oh, for crying out loud... You know, whenever you start calling me *Teacher*, I can’t help feeling like you’re just messing with me.”

Roxy paused to let out a long sigh.

I honestly thought my opinion of her was perfectly justified, but it seemed she found it somewhat overblown.

“Putting all that aside, though... You introduced me to quite a few of your friends, and told them I was your teacher. But you didn’t once mention that I was your *wife*.”

“Oh!”

Just like that, I realized how badly I’d screwed this up.

This might not even be something I could fix at this point.

Roxy was perfectly right. She wasn’t Roxy Migurdia anymore. She was Roxy M. Greyrat now.

I’d introduced her that way to everyone, of course. And she’d repeated it when she made her greetings. I guess a part of me had assumed that was enough—that it was perfectly obvious we were married.

At the very least, I was confident someone as sharp as Ariel would have figured it out.

Still, that was no excuse. Roxy had every right to be furious.

I suppose I'd wanted to emphasize her greatness more than anything else. And a part of me still thought she was far too good to be married to the likes of me. But she'd clearly *wanted* me to introduce her as my wife.

This was an unforgiveable blunder on my part. Roxy was my second wife, yes, but that didn't make her any less my wife. We'd be spending the rest of our lives together. Maybe even having children.

"I'm so sorry, Roxy, sweetheart. But you know how much I love you, right? How can I make it up to you? Want me to go introduce myself to your parents?"

"Uh...n-no, I don't think that's necessary. It's a long trip, after all. We'll get to it eventually."

Eventually? Hmm.

Hopefully Rowin and Rokari were doing well over on the Demon Continent. Now that I was married to Roxy, they were my in-laws. I owed them for the assistance they'd given me many years ago, too. I kind of wanted to make the time to go and see them.

If we plotted a route through a couple of the teleportation circles, we might be able to make it there in two months or so, but...

"All right then. We'll have to make the time one of these days."

There was no need to rush things. Once everything settled down, maybe we could take the entire family out to say hello to them.

Pushing the thought to the back of my mind, I headed home with my new wife at my side.

*Legends of the University #1: The Boss can fire his hand like a rocket.*

## Chapter 2: Year Three

THE FIRST DAY of my third year in the University had arrived.

When I woke up and came down into the living room, I found Sylphie already there, breastfeeding Lucie.

“Oh, good morning, Rudy.”

“Morning, Sylphie.”

Lucie was still only a few months old, but she seemed to be strong and healthy so far. Sylphie was doing well, too. The only difference was I felt like she’d grown more feminine somehow. Maybe it was the way she’d let her hair grow out? Or the whole “new mother” aura? Or just the fact that she’d gotten a little older?

Whatever the case might be, she was blossoming into a Hollywood-style beauty. She could sit silently on the sofa, doing nothing in particular, and it still felt like she was posing for a portrait. Sometimes I would even hesitate to speak to her, I was so awestruck.

Still, when I *did* get her attention, she was the same Sylphie I knew and loved—eager for attention and affection. That was always reassuring.

“Lucie’s full of energy again today,” she said, smiling up at me.

I looked down at our baby, who was currently sucking furiously away at my wife’s breast. She was going at it just as vigorously I did in bed. Like father, like daughter.

Lucie was a healthy baby, but she was a little bit on the quiet side. She didn’t cry much at all. For a while, I was anxious that she might be sick or have some sort of physical problem. Whenever I raised the subject, though, Sylphie just smiled and called me a “worrywart.” I didn’t remember being so jumpy back when my

siblings were born, but I guess it's different when the baby is your own child.

Despite my concerns, Lucie had been growing steadily and staying healthy. She was still on the quiet side for a baby her age, but her body seemed sturdy enough. Once, when Lilia was looking at my calm little daughter, she observed, "She reminds me of you at that age, Master Rudeus."

That gave me a start, obviously. The word "reincarnation" flashed through my mind.

I was a pretty crappy person in my previous life, to be honest. The idea made me worried. What if Lucie was the reincarnation of some good-for-nothing moron from Japan?

The idea kept gnawing away at me for a while. Ultimately, I resorted to speaking to my baby daughter in Japanese and English to see if she reacted.

Anyone who happened to walk by would have seen me muttering to my newborn child things like "You've figured it out by now, right? This is a parallel universe..." and "*You are my sunshine! I am a pen!*"

I'm sure it must have been a comical sight. I remember Aisha snickering at me from the shadows.

My methods weren't exactly the best, but I came away thinking that my daughter probably wasn't anyone's reincarnation. When I talked to her, all she'd do was smile and babble incoherently.

It was possible she was just hiding her true nature, of course, but I don't know how many grown-ups could keep up a perfect imitation of a baby for this long. And even if that was the case, it was kind of cute in its own way to imagine somebody desperately pretending to be an infant.

Yeah. One way or another, Lucie was *definitely* cute. I could sit next to her cradle all day without ever getting bored of watching her.

All in all, I didn't really care if she was somebody's reincarnation. I was going to take good care of her either way. Paul had done the same for me, after all.

"Our daughter's as adorable as ever, I see."

"No kidding. Why is she so cute, anyway?"

"Probably takes after her mom."

Slipping my arms over Sylphie's shoulders from behind, I hugged her gently to me. I lowered my head, as if to deliver a kiss to the back of her head...but then kept going, and buried my face in her hair.

She smelled faintly of milk. It was sort of like a natural perfume.

"Hee hee...thanks, Rudy."

Rubbing her face against my hand, Sylphie smiled shyly.

And then, she spotted Roxy standing behind me.

"Um...hello there, Roxy. How was Rudy last night?"

Roxy twitched in surprise. "Er...oh. Well, um, he was very attentive."

"Really? I know he can get pretty rough at times. He didn't scare you or anything?"

"No, not really. It was the second time, after all, and he was gentle with... Uh, sorry. Maybe I shouldn't be saying this..."

"You don't have anything to apologize for."

"...I don't?"

"Nope."

The two of them were still a little awkward with each other, but at least there wasn't any hostility between them. You could tell they were trying to be respectful and considerate. That told me they wanted to make this work.

A three-way relationship like this wasn't as simple as a monogamous one. It was probably going to take some effort on all of

our parts. In particular, we would be leaning on Sylphie a lot. Her open-mindedness was the only thing that had even made this arrangement possible.

I'd gone back on my word to her and taken on Roxy as a second wife. She would have been justified in slapping me in the face with my divorce papers.

"Breakfast, breakfast, time t'get some breakfast..."

At this point, Aisha strode into the living room singing to herself.

It was a crappy song, to be honest. Maybe she'd made it up on the spot. I guess even geniuses have their weak points.

"Good morning, Rudeus! Good morning, Miss Sylphie and Miss Roxy! Today's breakfast is pretty much the same as always!"

She was carrying white bread, green soup, and warm horse milk. In this regional, it was traditional for new mothers to drink plenty of that. Supposedly, it helped them breastfeed.

"That won't do, Aisha. Tell everyone what you're serving."

Lilia had entered the room behind her daughter. Apparently, she'd been in the kitchen as well.

"We have a potato and Yoko bean soup, served with white bread and highly nutritious horse milk!" Aisha rattled off obediently.

Of course, we knew this already, since it was what we ate more or less every morning. But I guess there's some value in keeping up the little formalities.

"Very good," said Lilia, nodding in satisfaction. "Please wait just a moment, everyone."

With that, she headed up to the second floor.

"Thank you for your patience." A few moments later, she returned with Zenith in tow.

My mother stepped into the living room, paused to stare at me, and then silently headed over to her usual seat at the table.

“...Good morning, Mom.”

Months had passed at this point, but Zenith’s memories hadn’t returned to her. However, she was changing in some small but noticeable ways. In particular, she acted very differently when Norn was around. She’d stroke her daughter’s head, or try to feed her from her own plate—that sort of thing. Almost like she thought the girl was only two or three years old.

Norn seemed unsettled by this at times, but she accepted Zenith’s attentions. I don’t know exactly what the girl was thinking. I had to assume she had very mixed feelings about it, though.

She was still at the age where it was natural for a girl to be attached to her mother...or getting ready to rebel against her. Either way, it’s a period of your life where your relationship with your parents feels very important.

Still, Norn understood Zenith’s condition, and she was clearly trying to put her mother’s feelings before her own. I never would have expected that kind of maturity from her a few years ago, but I guess people do change.

“...”

It was hard to know what any of it really meant on Zenith’s end, though. Did she just *feel* a connection to her daughter, on some instinctive level? Or was she slowly starting to regain pieces of her memory?

For the moment, it seemed best to just wait and see what happened.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s eat.”

We all ate our breakfast together. Sylphie was seated on my right, and Roxy on my left. On the other side of the table were Aisha,

Lilia, and Zenith, in that order. Norn would have been sitting next to her mother, but she wasn't here today.

I didn't remember anyone actively working it out, but we'd somehow arrived at this seating arrangement anyway.

"I'm sure you remember, but I'll be back at the University starting today. Take good care of Lucie for me, okay?"

"Of course, Miss Sylphiette. Leave everything to us."

Sylphie and I would be returning to our classes as students starting today. Lilia and Aisha would be taking care of our child while we were away from the house.

Lucie was still an infant, though. She couldn't survive without access to her mommy's breasts.

Wait. Did that make me an infant, too? Hmm.

Putting that aside for the moment, we'd decided to hire a wet nurse. It was a lady named Suzanne who lived in the neighborhood—a former adventurer and a mother of two. She was an old acquaintance of mine, but no need to get into that right now.

"Thanks for the food."

It was time for me to get my third year at the University started.

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"Yo!"

"Mornin', sir!"

"Good to see ya back at it!"

The moment we set foot inside the campus, students I didn't recognize started coming up to say their hellos to me. They were rough-looking types, but they were all oddly respectful.

Maybe I was projecting an aura of authority these days.

I guess I was a father and the head of a household now, come to think of it. Not that I felt any different.

“Hey, Boss!”

As I was reflecting on all this, the most dangerous-looking students of all appeared before us.

“Good mornin’, Boss!”

“Oh, morning to you too, Fitz and Miss Roxy.”

It was Linia and Pursena, of course. These two were in their final year as students now, but they hadn’t changed much at all.

Linia was still strutting around arrogantly, and Pursena was gnawing on something that looked like ham even as she spoke to us.

“Aren’t you a lucky guy, Boss? Struttin’ into school with a girl on either side!”

“Where d’you get off dumpin’ us and then pickin’ up a second wife anyway? Fuckin’ unfair is what it is.”

“We’re graduating this year, ya know. Guess we gotta grab ourselves someone too.”

“Yeah. It all comes down to this. Gotta get us a man before we head home!”

They seemed genuinely worked up. It felt they were envious of me—not my wives, mind you, but *me*.

Deep down, the two of them clearly wanted to be leading a “pack” of their own. It was that Decepticon mindset at work again.

“Good luck, you two,” offered Sylphie with a pleasant smile.

It was the teasing response of a woman who had some confidence in her own position. I was a little surprised, honestly.

Then again, Sylphie had known these two for longer than me. I guess it made sense that she’d be comfortable dealing with them.

Roxy, on the other hand, seemed to have taken their words at face value. She dipped her head to them with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry about this. I suppose I cut my place in line, didn’t I?”

“Mya?!”

“Huh?!”

Linia and Pursena were, naturally, taken aback by this.

“Uh, nah, that’s okay! We didn’t really mean it that way, ya know?”

“Yeah, we’re just mad at our lack of fuckin’ sex appeal. We’re not dissin’ you, Miss Roxy!”

All of a sudden, the two of them were apologizing frantically to Roxy. She was more than worthy of such deference, of course, but it was still almost creepy how desperate they were.

I’d sort of been expecting these two to say something like “We’re way sexier than that little shrimp, mew!” or “Ya fuckin’ married a demon?!” , to be honest. Not that I would have tolerated such disrespect.

After their apologies were over, the two of them sympathetically patted Sylphie on the shoulders.

“This must be tough for you too, right? Hang in there, Fitz!”

“Won’t be easy keepin’ up with her, but I know you can do it!”

Sylphie blinked, looking a little nonplussed. “Huh?”

“Better get yer second going ASAP.”

“Yeah. Gotta maintain that lead.”

“What...?”

Sylphie paused for a moment to think, then murmured “Oh,” her face taking on a slightly awkward expression. “Um...Rudy’s still showing me plenty of love, you know?”

Linia and Pursena reacted to this by sniffing loudly in exaggerated sympathy.

“Aw, the poor sweet kid!”

“I’m tearin’ up here! C’mon, Fitz! A quiet type like you is obviously gonna fade into the background once Boss picks up number three an’ four, right? This is so sad!”

*Wow. Listen to these jerks go...*

I wasn’t planning on adding any more wives to my family, as it happened. And even if I did, I wasn’t going to start neglecting Sylphie for any reason. She’d put her body on the line to help me out. I was never, ever going to forget that.

Not that I’d repaid her too well so far, what with the Roxy thing and all.

“Huh? That’s not true! Um...right, Rudy?”

I couldn’t make out Sylphie’s expression underneath her sunglasses, but her voice sounded anxious. I needed to step up and give her some reassurance.

“Of course it isn’t!”

I leaned over and pulled her into a big hug.

Rubbing her back affectionately, I took a deep breath and prepared to express my feelings. It was probably best to make things clear here and now, with lots of witnesses around.

“I LOVE YOU, SYLPHIE!”

This forceful declaration earned a round of applause from a number of random bystanders. Sylphie blushed furiously and wriggled around inside my arms. “Rudy, come on! This isn’t the place or the time!”

“Oh really? You’re the one who asked me for reassurance.”

"W-well, if you want to make a big gesture, you ought to do the same for Roxy, too!"

Fair enough. I glanced over at Roxy.

"...That's not really necessary. I'm all right."

She was looking up at me with something like expectation in her eyes.

Without any further hesitation, I embraced Roxy with my left arm, keeping Sylphie pressed against me with my right.

Ah, what bliss. I had a wife on *both* sides now.

"I LOVE BOTH OF YOU!"

This time, I got a chorus of boos from some of the onlooking students. They were probably members of the Millis Church or something.

*Whatever! Your laws don't apply to me! I am the law!*

In any case, all the public attention was getting to be a bit much for Sylphie. Her face was as red as a tomato. "Oh, good grief! I'm going to meet up with Princess Ariel now, all right?"

"Sure. See you at lunchtime, Sylphie."

"It's *Fitz* when we're at the University, remember?!"

Oh, right. That whole bit had slipped my mind entirely.

I hadn't attended classes here in nearly a year, so I guess I'd just forgotten. To be honest, though, it didn't feel like there was *that* much of a point in her continuing the charade. She was just too pretty these days to be convincing as a boy.

Well, whatever. She was cute either way, and it was her call how she wanted to present herself.

"I suppose I'll be heading to the faculty offices myself, then," said Roxy after we watched Sylphie trot away.

"Right. Good luck on your first day, Roxy."

“Oh, that reminds me. You should really call me Professor Roxy while we’re on school grounds.”

Hmm. True, we had to keep our personal and professional lives separate.

Fine with me, of course. But more importantly... Roxy really was a *professor* today, wasn’t she? That was kind of...spicy. I found myself thinking back to last night.

*I wonder how late they let you borrow the keys for the P.E. storage shed...*

At this point, I abruptly remembered something that felt important. “Uh, Professor Roxy?”

“Yes, Rudeus?” said Roxy, looking up at me with a calm, professional smile.

“This is the first day of the new term, right? Doesn’t the faculty have an early meeting or anything?”

“Gah!”

Hmm. All the color had drained from her face. That probably wasn’t a good sign.

“S-sorry, but I need to go! Now! Excuse me!”

Within seconds, she’d rushed off toward the faculty offices and disappeared into the crowd.

I guess we hadn’t thought through our timing. A faculty member wasn’t going to be operating on the same schedule as a mere student, of course.

“Well, okay then. Let’s get going too, guys.”

“Meow!”

“We’re with ya, Boss.”

For my part, I headed off to the special classroom with my loyal underlings in tow. We had a mandatory homeroom today.

Both my wives had disappeared for the day, but somehow I still had two cute girls at my sides. Maybe my popular days had come at last.

Not that I was going to lay a hand on Linia or Pursena or anything. Ah, it's tough being a man sometimes...

"Oh yeah, that reminds me. There's a rumor going around about you, Boss."

Linia turned to face me, her ears pricking straight up. I could see the curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

"Really?"

"Yep. They're sayin' ya fought a *really* epic battle. So epic ya lost yer left hand."

"Ah..."

Come to think of it, all I'd told these two was that I'd made it back from my journey, and that Roxy would be teaching at the University. Zanoba was the only friend I'd gone into any of the details with at this point.

Had he spread the word around, then? Or maybe it was Cliff. He'd probably heard the whole story from Elinalise, after all.

"That's our boss for you, mew! Flies off to the Demon Continent to fight one of the Seven Great Powers, and sacrifices his own hand to win!"

"Wha—?"

What? Where did the Seven Great Powers thing come from?!

"Yer opponent had to scuttle away in shame, am I right? Way to go!"

"Wait. Wait! Slow down for a second, Linia!"

This was just bizarre. How the hell had the rumor gotten *this* twisted around? I really didn't appreciate it. What if it circulated

enough that everyone started actually believing I'd beaten down one of the Seven Great Powers? What if one of the *Powers* heard that rumor?

What if it was number two on that list? A guy by the name of *Orsted*?

"Well, that was th' story I just came up with now, anyway. Don't worry, I'll make sure ta spread it all arou—myaaa!"

Before Linia could finish her sentence, I'd grabbed her by the tail and given it a ferocious yank. She lashed out at me with her claws extended, but I evaded her swipes using my Demon Eye. After a few failed attempts, she pressed her hands against her butt and glared up at me with tears in her eyes. "What was that for?! Don't yank on a lady's tail!"

I glared right back at her. "Don't spread any exaggerated rumors around, you got that? I'll pull that thing right off you!"

"Huh?! G-got it! I'm sorry!"

These two had a history of rumor-mongering. They'd spread word of my problems in bed all around campus, which I could forgive them for, since it was true at the time, after all. But this was a different case entirely. It could cause me real problems. I might even end up dead.

That was the kind of rumor you needed to nip in the bud.

At this point, Pursena butted into the conversation. "We heard about what happened from Zanoba. You fought a hydra that was immune to magic, right? He was sayin' he shoulda been there. Thought he coulda kept you from getting' hurt."

"That's right, mew. But we were just impressed ya managed to even beat that thing. So I was figurin' we could make sure everyone knows how badass you are..."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

I'd definitely gotten a bit stronger over the years. But when it really mattered, I still came up painfully short. I didn't want people getting an inflated opinion of me. I didn't deserve it.

"But ya know, Boss...even if we don't say nothin', people are already makin' stuff up. Everyone can see ya got an artificial hand now."

"She's right, mew. It won't make much of a difference if we throw our story out there, too."

"..."

I was apparently a semi-notorious figure around campus, so it was probably inevitable that people would speculate. Still, I wanted to keep the Seven Great Powers out of this. That was dangerous territory. I still had a very vivid memory of the day Orsted nearly killed me.

"What other rumors have you heard going around?"

"There's a whole bunch. Lemme see..."

Linia proceeded to rattle off a range of stories. Some people were saying I'd battled a Superd warrior to the death, others that I'd faced down a horde of a hundred monsters alone. Still others claimed that I'd successfully cast a forbidden ancient spell, but lost my hand in the process.

None of them sounded particularly credible, so I had to assume they'd disappear before too long.

"Hmm..."

Come to think of it, the Seven Great Powers were probably used to having people invent nonsensical stories about them, too. They were incredibly famous for their prowess in battle. Maybe they wouldn't pay any mind to some silly story bouncing around a university, even if they somehow caught wind of it.

"Well, all right. Sorry about the tail."

"You humanfolk can't begin to understand how much that friggin' hurts, mew. It's unforgivable to yank a lady's tail!"

"Fine, fine. I'll buy you some fish one of these days, okay?"

"Hee hee, sweet! I should try complainin' more often..."

"Make mine meat instead."

The three of us headed off down the hallway once again.

Our homeroom was the same as ever.

The other five sat in a loose group centered around my desk. Zanoba was playing with his figurines, his loyal assistant Julie at his side. Linia was busy filing her claws, Pursena was chomping on some meat, and Cliff was earnestly studying some thick book. There was also Ginger, who was standing quietly in the back of the room, although she wasn't really a student.

It had been a long time since I was in this classroom, but everything felt immediately familiar. It was hard to imagine we'd be losing two of our number in just a year. Assuming Linia and Pursena managed to graduate, of course.

"By the way, Rudeus..." Cliff looked up from his book and shot me a look. "Is there a reason you didn't stop by to say hello to me, along with all the others?"

I could understand the grumpiness. I hadn't gotten around to going to see him.

"Sorry about that, Cliff. I did stop by your place right after I got back, but it sounded like you and Elinalise were otherwise occupied."

"Uh...I see. I suppose I was with her that evening, yes. All right, never mind then. My apologies."

Cliff backed down quickly enough, fortunately. But even so, I was starting to get the sense that people in this spectrum of society

were really particular about these sorts of formalities. Ariel had been disgruntled about the way I left without a word, too.

Back when I was an adventurer, everyone was a lot more casual about this stuff.

“However, your first child’s been born, yes? You could have gotten in touch about that, at least. I’m still in training, but I could have offered her the blessing, at least.”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

“Ah, right. You don’t belong to the Millis Church, so I suppose that’s not necessary. Still, it almost feels like you’ve been avoiding me. I’m sure you’re busy with your child, but couldn’t you have found the time to drop by my laboratory at least once?”

He had a point. Maybe I had been avoiding him.

There was a reason for that, though. A reason named Roxy. I had two wives now, and Cliff was a devout member of the Millis Church. He probably wasn’t going to react too favorably to the news.

“Is there some reason you didn’t want to see me, maybe? If so, I’d like to hear it from you personally, if you don’t mind.”

He was being weirdly tenacious about this today. I got the feeling Elinalise had already filled him in. Knowing her, she’d probably worked him over a little, too. I could see her saying something like *“I know you’re passionate about your faith, Cliff, but if you forgive him for his trespasses, you’ll show everyone just how tolerant and kind you are!”*

Of course, I didn’t need Cliff’s forgiveness or permission to marry Roxy. But that didn’t mean I wanted to ruin our friendship, either. I was probably better off playing along here. I could confess the truth, let Cliff forgive me, and then compliment his open-mindedness at length. He’d get his ego stroked, and we’d put the matter behind us. It was a win-win, really.

*Okay then. I guess I'll dance on your strings, Elinalise...*

"Actually, Cliff—"

"Pardon me."

Before I could finish my sentence, though, someone had opened the door to our classroom.

Two people stepped inside. One of them was the professor in charge of our class, who usually ran our homerooms.

The other was an adorable young lady in a robe, with sleepy eyes and a serious expression, who looked slightly nervous. The sort of girl who obviously did her very best at all times, and you couldn't help wanting to hug. By which I mean...it was Roxy.

"Hello, everyone. I'd like to introduce you to the assistant professor who will be helping me with the Special Class."

"Nice to meet you," said Roxy, talking a step forward and bowing her head slightly. "I'm Roxy M. Greyrat."

Zanoba and the others just stared in surprise, but our professor forged right ahead. "Professor Roxy may look quite young, but that's simply a trait of her particular people. She's actually over fifty years old. It seems she already has personal connections to some of you, so we decided to place her here. For the moment she'll be acting as my assistant, but we intend to have her take over the class entirely as of next year."

"Mew?! What's gonna happen to you, Professor Samson?!"

The professor nodded at this question. Apparently, his name was Samson? That was news to me. The It was almost impressive what a non-entity he was.

"I'll be heading back to my homeland next year. I no longer have a relative to look after in this class, after all."

"Oh yeah. Where did Ren go after she graduated, anyway?"

“My little sister’s serving as a magic knight back in the Duchy of Neris. It sounds like she’s doing quite well for now, but there’s no telling what she’ll get up to if I’m not around to keep an eye on her.”

“Ooh. Gotcha.”

I would only learn about all this later, but apparently it was common for the special class advisor to be an instructor with some personal connection to one or more of the students. Probably had something to do with how unpredictable they were. You’d want someone who could control them a little, or at least serve as the voice of restraint.

Professor Samson, who’d been in charge of us up until now, was the brother of a student who’d graduated the year before Cliff enrolled here. She was part of the ducal family of Neris, one of the three Magic Nations, and supposedly had a remarkable talent for magic.

In any case, Roxy had personal connections to both me and Zanoba. She was essentially the perfect choice for the job.

Stepping forward again, Roxy looked around the room and then began to speak. “I know I’ve already been introduced to some of you, but once again, my name is Roxy M. Greyrat. I’m the second wife of Rudeus Greyrat over there. I’ll try not to let that influence my actions as a professor, but I hope you’ll be understanding.”

“...”

Cliff was pouting at this point.

He’d probably wanted to hear the “second wife” thing from me directly. That way, he could have accepted the situation gracefully, and earned my gratitude. But now his plans were ruined.

“Um, Cliff—”

“Hmm. A second wife, is it? Is the word *faithful* not part of your vocabulary, Rudeus?”

When I spoke to him, he immediately jumped into lecture mode.

“I know, I know. I admit I proved myself lacking in the loyalty department.”

“I blessed your marriage to Sylphie because you told me you’d love her, and only her. You do remember that, don’t you?”

“Of course. And I’m very grateful to you.”

“Well, I suppose I knew from the start that you don’t share my faith. I won’t press the point any further. For what it’s worth, you have my congratulations. I hope you’re happy together.”

“Thanks, Cliff.”

Cliff snorted at that. “You know, I’ve run into your sister Norn in the city several times. She told me that she hoped to have a happy marriage like yours someday. Did she say anything to you when you brought your *second* wife home, I wonder?”

“She was very upset with me.”

“I would expect so. She’d been praying at church nearly every day for your safe return, and your father’s. Ordinarily, your homecoming should have been a joyous occasion for her.”

“But in the end, she did forgive me.”

“Well, of course she did. She must have been afraid you’d kick her out of your house if she fought you too stubbornly.”

“...I wouldn’t do that to her, no matter what.”

“Of course, I know you wouldn’t. But put yourself in the shoes of the more vulnerable party here. The girl just lost her father. You’re the only person she can depend on now, you see? I think you really ought to try and be more considerate of her feelings, as a family.”

“You’re right.”

“Also, taking on new partners is only going to make your relationships more complicated. Women aren’t objects to be collected, you know.”

Man, he was hitting me where it hurt here. It felt like I was getting grilled by a stern old priest or something. The man could be intense when he wanted to.

“Right...um, Cliff?”

“What is it, Rudeus?”

Still, there had been one part of this story that was brand new to me, and I owed him some gratitude.

“You were keeping an eye on Norn while I was away, weren’t you? Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“I noticed her in the church one day, so we started talking a little, that’s all. Oh, and on that note, you shouldn’t be letting a girl that young wander around town so freely. This area is safe enough, but I’ve heard of kidnappers lurking in the back alleys.”

“You’re right. I’ll be more careful.”

“Very well then. It seems you’re appropriately repentant, so I suppose I’ll forgive you for your mistakes. Saint Millis taught us to be lenient, after all.”

“Appreciate it, Cliff.”

Well, I’d been forgiven. Maybe this *had* been a confession rather than a conversation.

Still, the man made a lot of good points. I was definitely feeling bad about how I’d treated Norn now. I’d have to be twice as kind to her from now on.

“It seems like we’re done with our personal discussions, yes? Let’s proceed to the notices from the University, then...”

With Cliff's lecture at an end, Professor Samson delicately got homeroom underway again. Roxy had been standing at his side the whole time, looking supremely uncomfortable.

I blew her a kiss, which earned me a small laugh, followed by a scowl of disapproval.

For the next little while, my life proceeded along the old familiar lines.

I checked in on Zanoba and Cliff regularly, dropped in to help Nanahoshi with her research, and used my free hours to work on my book or study the magic-absorbing stones I'd brought back from my last trip. As always, I had a lot to occupy my time with. I was kind of nostalgic for the days when I could devote an entire day to a single task, or maybe two.

One thing that did change was the way I used my time immediately after classes ended. Previously, I'd been helping Norn with her studies, but now I was training her to use a sword instead.

I was a little worried this change might have a negative effect on her academic results, but she'd promised me she'd work hard to stay on track, so I was willing to give her a chance. It felt best to let her pursue the things she was passionate about while she was most motivated.

For the moment, I'm not going to get too deeply into any of that.

Once I was ready to leave campus, I'd find both Sylphie and Roxy, and we'd head home together.

When Sylphie had a night shift, it was just me and Roxy. And when Roxy had a faculty meeting in the evening, it was sometimes just me. Now and then, Norn would come along, too.

On one particular evening, I found myself heading back with only Sylphie. We held hands as we strolled along and talked, mainly about recent events at the University of Magic. Apparently, the student council was going to be taking on a new member or two this term.

“You should really join too, Rudy!”

“Don’t think I have the spare time; sorry.”

It wasn’t much of a conversation, but we were enjoying each other’s company. Not *too* blatantly, of course. We were in public.

“We’re home.”

The moment I stepped inside the door, Aisha jumped forward and threw her arms around me.

“Welcome back, Rudeus! Would you like dinner? Or a bath? Or maybe...*me*?!”

Where did she learn that line? What a cliché. Oh wait, had I taught it to her? No...I remembered teaching it to Sylphie, but not my own little sister.

Declaring “You!”, I proceeded to mercilessly tickle Aisha’s armpits until she fled, cackling with laughter, and received a chop to the head from Lilia.

After this little interlude, I headed straight for the bath.

Aisha had included it on her list of options, but it wasn’t ready and waiting for me or anything. They were still working on dinner, too. In other words, “You” was the only actual option available.

Oh well, whatever. Fortunately, Aisha always cleaned the bath for us during the day, so all I had to do was get the water running.

I didn’t take many baths on my own these days. At some point, we’d started using it two at a time. It was almost an unspoken rule at this point. I’d never really heard of a custom like that before, but whatever.

Today, Aisha followed me into the bath. The girl was already eleven years old, but she still seemed to lack any sense of shame. If she ever got into a conversation with a hormonal young boy, the poor kid would probably get the wrong idea within minutes.

"I keep telling you to cover up with a towel when you're coming into the bath, Aisha."

"Why?"

"It's just polite."

"Okaaay."

In this respect, at least, I was starting to wish Aisha could learn from her sister.

Still, it was nice having a little sister. She liked to wriggle her way in between my legs and demand that I wash her back or rinse off her head, and it was always very cute. Good thing she was my sister—and also just a scrawny little kid—or I might have ended up with *another* wife on my hands.

If Sylphie or Roxy ever tried the same stunt, I was confident I'd lose my self-control within seconds. Not that I'd really *need* to control myself, in that situation.

Anyway. I settled in to enjoy some pleasant family bonding time with my sister. The two of us washed each other off while Aisha told me about the events of the day. These were mostly trivial little things. Lucie had done something adorable, Zenith had helped out with the weeding, Lilia had dozed off next to a window, she'd planted something new in our garden...that sort of stuff.

Oh, that reminded me. I'd entrusted that seed rice I got my hands on to Aisha, and asked her to see if she could manage to grow it. She'd promised me to give it a shot once the weather got a little warmer. The kid was a genius, so I was feeling optimistic that I'd have my own private supply of rice before too long. I was really looking forward to it.

By the time we got out of the bath, Roxy was just getting home, so we moved straight to dinner.

Today we had a freshwater fish stew, bread, beans, and potatoes. The same as always, more or less.

After the meal, I watched intently as Lucie suckled furiously at Sylphie's breast. Considering how quiet our baby was, she sure had a big appetite. It was hard to imagine Sylphie's daughter growing up too chubby, but I'd have to make sure she got some exercise once she was big enough.

For a while after dinner, we relaxed as a family. I taught Aisha a little magic, and Roxy headed up to her room to prepare for tomorrow's classes.

Sylphie was busy attending to Lucie, but sometimes she made the time to practice her own magic a little.

Dillo, our pet armadillo, wandered over to me, so I gave him some attention.

Incidentally, Aisha was responsible for taking care of him. She'd trained him thoroughly, and he was starting to act more like a loyal guard dog than anything else.

"All right then, I think it's time we got to bed. Good night, everyone."

Lilia and Zenith were usually the first to turn in for the night.

"Good night!"

Aisha went to bed early as well, though. Once I was done with her tutoring session, she usually went straight to sleep.

"Well then... You ready, Sylphie?"

And after the house fell silent, I invited my wife to our bedroom.

"Yes," she answered, blushing and lightly gripping the sleeve of my shirt.

Naturally, this was more than enough to spur me into action. Picking her up, I carried her princess-style up to bed.

After that, well...we enjoyed our private time.

Mentally and physically fulfilled, I fell into a solid sleep with my wife in my arms.

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Just a few minutes *before* that, though, I'd slipped quietly out of bed, careful not to wake Sylphie.

I tiptoed my way down to the basement as quietly as I possibly could. Once I was there, I glanced behind me cautiously several times before opening a certain hidden door.

Inside, I'd placed a small altar. My holy idols were enshrined there.

To the uninitiated, they might have looked like nothing more than small bundles of cloth. But I knew that the divine spirits of Roxy and Sylphie dwelt within them.

Tonight, like every other night, I offered up my prayers of gratitude.

*Legends of the University #2: The Boss can make his eyes light up.*

## Chapter 3: Training with Norn

**A**NOTHER MONTH had passed. It was still cold out, but the snow was starting to melt, and you could actually see patches of ground here and there.

One morning, I got out of bed as silently as possible, trying not to wake Sylphie. She liked to use my arm as a pillow, so it always took some finesse to extract myself. Heading over to a side room, I changed into my training wear, a lined outfit that looked a bit like a sweatsuit. Sylphie had picked it out for me. It was a little light for winter weather, but when you were exercising, that felt just about right.

Once I'd gotten dressed, I picked up a stone sword that I'd left lying in a corner of the room.

It was a thick, crude-looking thing. I'd made it myself with my earth magic. There was no actual edge to the blade, but it was unusually heavy. That made it a good way to practice with the strength of my new, artificial left hand.

I was actually starting to get a little attached to the thing. Maybe I'd give it a name one of these days. Something like "Tuna" or "Swordfish."

Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten anything like sashimi since my arrival in this world. Did nobody here eat fish raw, or what?

"..."

Once I was ready, I gently patted my sleeping wife on the head, silently mouthing the words "See you later."

"Hee hee..."

Her eyes still closed, Sylphie smiled happily and rubbed her head against my hand. I guess she was half-awake. It was pretty adorable, needless to say.

Glancing down, I noticed that the covers were a little tangled, leaving her underwear-clad bottom exposed. I gave that a gentle patting, too. You'd never think this girl was already a mother. But then again, Elinalise still had a good figure, too. Maybe it was genetic.

After a moment's hesitation, I pulled the sheets back over Sylphie.

We'd been getting back to our normal nighttime activities lately, but it felt a little early to be trying too hard for a *second* child, so I was trying to be a little more restrained. Even if there was no guarantee it wouldn't happen anyway.

As I left the room, Sylphie called out to me sleepily. "Nn... See y'later..."

*Be back soon.*

Next, I headed to Norn's room.

These days, she'd been joining me on my morning training. When she was staying at the house, we'd do it in the yard; when she was staying at the dorm, I'd meet her at the courtyard there. Today was one of her days at home.

"You ready, Norn?"

I knocked at the door, then started to open it.

"Gah! Rud—"

"Whoops. Pardon me."

She was still getting dressed, so I promptly closed it again.

Norn's body still hadn't developed much. I liked slim, diminutive girls just fine, of course, but my little sisters just didn't do anything for me. Sometimes I found that slightly regrettable, but it was for the best. It was nice that I could be affectionate with them without feeling dirty about it.

Still, the thought that Norn would probably get married someday did inspire a vaguely uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Maybe this was what a father felt watching his daughter grow up?

It wasn't so bad. I'd have to take Paul's place and berate her first boyfriend for her. *I'm not giving Norn to a bum like you! Get lost!*

"Honestly. What's the point of knocking if you don't wait for me to say something?"

As I was reflecting on all this, Norn emerged from her room in her exercise clothes, carrying a wooden sword in one hand. Her outfit was a plain, functional thing, with long sleeves on the top and bottom. It was the standard exercise gear from the University; I'd bought her a couple pairs from the school store.

Glancing briefly past Norn into her room, I saw Paul's sword mounted high up on the wall. In my old world, she probably would have set up an altar with a picture of his face, but there weren't any cameras here. It was possible somebody had created a magical tool capable of capturing an image, but if so, it wasn't in widespread use. Without photographs, people tended to use mementos to remember those they'd lost.

"Norn, would you mind if I came into your room for a second?"

"Huh? Uh, that's fine, I guess..."

I stepped inside. The bedroom smelled a bit like its occupant, the way they do first thing in the morning. If I'd dived into her bed and pressed my face against her wrinkled sheets, I could have filled my lungs with the scent of Norn. Not that I was going to.

Standing right in front of Paul's sword, I put my hands together. "Dad, Norn and I are going to be training again this morning. Keep an eye on us so we don't get hurt too badly, will you?"

Once I was done with my little prayer, I bowed my head slightly.

How would Paul have responded to this, anyway? Maybe something like "*You'll never improve without a few injuries, y'know.*" Or maybe just "*You better not let Norn get hurt, dammit.*"

Glancing over, I found Norn kneeling next to me with her hands together in the Millis style.

I had a good view of the cute little whorl of hair on top of her head.

"..."

It didn't matter what Paul would have said, really. He wasn't here anymore. I had to play his role now. I had a responsibility to take care of Norn to the best of my abilities. She didn't have anyone else to turn to, after all.

"Okay then. Want to get going?"

"Yes. I'm ready, Rudeus."

The two of us headed out to begin another session.

The regimen was simple enough: calisthenics, running, and practice swings.

I called this "sword training," but at the moment, we were really just working on the fundamentals. Over the last few months, I'd been driving Norn hard to build up her basic stamina.

When I say *hard*, though, I don't mean I had her doing the same routine as me. That would have been way too much for to handle. I'd started her off at one-fifth of my training regimen. Norn was only eleven years old, and she hadn't been too physically active prior to

this, so there was only so much I could reasonably expect her to endure.

While she did her practice swings in the yard, I finished up my own upper-body exercises.

“Twenty-five...twenty-six...!”

Swinging a sword at nothing in particular is a simple enough exercise, but that’s part of the reason it takes some real willpower to keep going with it. Norn never quit halfway, though.

I was proud of her for that. She was tougher than she looked.

“...Fifty!”

“Okay, that’s good. Nice work.”

“Haa...haa... Thanks, Rudeus!”

“Let’s wash ourselves off and head back, then.”

After training, the two of us headed into the bath together.

Norn had an unfortunate tendency to trip and fall during our running sessions, which sometimes left her with scrapes or bruises on her knees. I made a habit of looking her over and cleaning them up with healing magic afterward. Sort of like kissing it to make it better, except it actually worked.

Incidentally, Norn strongly objected to letting me see her naked, so she took these baths in her underwear and with a thin shirt on. I guess she was getting to that sensitive age. It was a pity she hadn’t split that sense of modesty with Aisha. Of course, I always wore underwear in, too, to make Norn more comfortable.

Still...sometimes I wondered how she’d react if I told her that some guys out there got *more* excited seeing a woman in a wet, semi-transparent shirt. It might be fun to see, but I was keeping the thought to myself. I didn’t want her to banish me from bathing with her entirely.

A big brother’s got to maintain his dignity, too.

As I was reflecting on this, Norn shot me a look and pouted slightly. “It was just running and practice swings *again* today. When are you going to teach me how to use my sword?”

“I already am.”

“I’m not talking about just swinging it. I mean, you know...the stances, the techniques.”

So far, I’d been instructing Norn on how to run and swing her sword. Running would build her stamina, and practice swings would build her strength. Until she’d worked on both of those for a while, there was really no point in her learning “techniques.” That was how I’d figured it, at least.

“Hmm, let’s see...”

The girl had been at it for months now, though. She’d probably made some progress.

I gave Norn a looking-over. She had the slender body of a growing kid, but compared to when we were just getting started, the muscles in her arms and legs were somewhat more defined. It was hard to say that she was “in shape” at this point, but a little exertion probably wasn’t going to cause her any injuries. Maybe it was about time I got around to teaching her the most basic stances.

“I guess you’re right. We’ll get started for real after school today, okay?”

“R-really? All right!”

Having rinsed off our sweat, the two of us left the bathroom together.

\*\*\*

That evening, I met Norn at the University of Magic's third external training field—an exercise ground located near the edge of campus. I'd already changed into my training wear.

My sister was in her exercise gear as well, and she already had her wooden sword in her hand. Her face was deadly serious.

We didn't have the area to ourselves. There were a few robed students training nearby, and others who looked to be out for a walk. We'd also attracted a few spectators, who were obviously curious as to why we were wearing our training clothes at this hour.

It didn't matter if we had a crowd, though.

"Norn, we're going to start your real training as a swordswoman today."

"Yes, sir!"

The girl's face was shining with energy and enthusiasm. It was obvious how eager she was to learn real "techniques." It had only been a few months since we started, but I guess the repetitive nature of our basic training had been wearing her down a little.

Still, swinging a sword around in battle wasn't a game. You've got to get the fundamentals down first.

"Just so you know, I'm planning to be tough on you."

"All right," Norn said, nodding seriously.

"If we keep at it, you might end up getting upset with me. You might even start thinking I hate you. That's how harsh I'm going to be."

"All right."

"To be honest, I don't want to make you hate me. But a half-hearted instructor gets his students hurt. If I took it easy on you in training, and then you ended up getting killed in your first real fight, I'd never be able to face our dad in heaven."

Norn had no real talent with the sword. Certainly not compared to Eris at the same age, at least. I wouldn't say she was any worse than the average eleven-year-old, but "strength" can only be measured in relative terms.

When you're fighting someone one on one, the stronger combatant wins, and the weaker one dies. Losing isn't a valid option.

For Norn to become capable of overcoming any actual threats, she'd need to put in a *lot* of effort. I needed to train her hard. And she needed to learn a few tricks, too.

"At some point, this might start making you miserable. You might get frustrated with your lack of progress. You might see someone with more talent quickly pass you by. There's going to come a day when you feel like quitting."

"..."

"I do know how that feels, for the record. And I couldn't really blame you, or anyone else, for giving up in the face of adversity."

"..."

Norn scowled a little at that.

Not surprising, really. From her perspective, it probably looked like I was supremely talented at anything I tried. And in this body, I really was very capable at all sorts of things. But even so, I'd lost many battles. More than once, I'd nearly died. In a sense, Paul had died because I wasn't strong enough.

I wanted more than anything to keep Norn safe from that sort of danger.

"That said, I don't want you to give up on the sword, no matter what. If you do, I'll never teach it to you again, and I'll never let you use Dad's sword."

"..."

“As long as you keep at it, though, I won’t give up on you either.”

Kind of a cheesy speech, I know. Was I even showing that kind of determination myself, come to think of it?

Well...I’d given up on getting much better with the sword, but I *had* kept up with my training every morning. I wanted to believe I wasn’t a total hypocrite.

“Do you understand, Norn?”

“Yes, sir! I understand completely!”

Norn’s response was quick and forceful. She was looking up at me with flushed cheeks and determination in her eyes. I found myself wondering if I’d looked something like this to Paul, back when I was little.



Maybe Norn would end up following a similar path...leaving me behind and finding some other master to train her. Once I got her up to the Beginner level, I could always send for Ghislaine or something. Assuming I found out where the woman was.

There was also that Sword Sanctum place off to the west. If I offered enough money, maybe I could lure a Sword Saint away to teach her for a while.

“Glad to hear it. We’ll start off with some running, then.”

“Huh?! Aren’t we training with the sword tonight?”

“Yeah, of course. You’re running with your sword in your hands this time. You have to carry it around everywhere on the battlefield, after all.”

“...”

“I’m waiting for a reply!”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

Today, our regimen would consist of running, a review of the three basic forms, and a brief sparring session. My intention was to give her a very hard time. She needed to understand this could be painful and scary stuff. I don’t think pain’s an essential part of the learning process or anything, but I felt like it was best for her to realize up front how tough this could be.

There was a chance I’d make her cry. There was a chance she’d hate my guts after tonight.

But even so, I needed to turn my heart to stone. Swordplay wasn’t the kind of thing you pursued as a fun hobby. That was a surefire way to end up dead the first time you faced an actual threat.

“All right, Norn! Follow me!”

“Yes, sir!”

Still feeling a bit anxious despite myself, I set off at a run.

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“Okay! That’s good enough for today!”

“Th-thank you, sir...”

As the setting sun shone down on us, Norn collapsed to the ground, gasping for air.

“I want you to practice the three basic forms I taught you today when you have the time! In the morning, at lunchtime, whenever! Even when I’m not around!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

For our first real training session, it had gone decently.

Once our running was over, I’d launched directly into reviewing the basic “forms,” or movements. After that, I’d thrown her right into a sparring match against me, using wooden swords. I’d corrected her stance and foot movements as we went. It probably wasn’t nearly as complex as the kind of training you’d get from a kendo instructor back in Japan, but this world didn’t have many “rules” for its swordsmen to learn.

Really, when you got down to it, learning how to fight with a sword is mostly about getting in a lot of practice. Paul had started smacking me around fairly early in our sessions, and Ghislaine had spent a great deal of time sparring with Eris, too. I felt like I had the right general idea.

Norn seemed to be very reluctant to actually take a swing at someone with a wooden sword, so I started off by letting her swing at me freely to help her get over that. I didn’t even defend myself, apart from moving my body so that she didn’t hurt me. She grimaced every time she felt her sword strike home, but I tried very hard to

keep a calm, composed look on my face. I wanted her to believe that I could take her blows just fine.

I think it worked. Probably. Since she'd spent the last several months doing lots of practice swings, her strikes had a decent amount of force behind them. I'd probably have some nasty bruises.

After that, we got to the actual sparring. I smacked Norn around with my sword for a while, then called an end to the session. I took it easy on her, of course, but her arms and legs would definitely be turning black and blue before too long.

In other words, I'd done harm to my sweet little sister. A part of me was already wondering if I'd made the right choice here. Still, Norn kept swinging back at me to the bitter end. She didn't surrender or complain, much less break down in tears.

As long as she had this level of motivation, basically any kind of training would be productive.

"What do you think, Norn? That hurt, didn't it?"

"...Yes."

"Was it too much to take? Do you want to quit?"

"No. I want...to train tomorrow, too."

"All right."

To be honest, I wasn't too confident in my own ability as a teacher.

But if magic was comparable to an academic subject, swordsmanship was more like a sport. There wasn't really one correct answer, and if you wanted to improve, you had to just keep at it.

"Come here, Norn. I'll heal you up."

I was intending to sit Norn down on the ground and use my magic to ease her pain. If she had any bruises under her clothes, I'd have to ask Sylphie to do the honors later.

Then again, Norn was going to be coming home to stay with us tonight, so maybe I could do it if we took another bath together.

I approached my sister and took off her jacket to get a better look at her arms. But then, I sensed that we were being watched.

“Hm?”

Turning around, I saw a group of male students staring at us, illuminated by the setting sun.

*How long have those guys been there? Hmm...from the start, maybe?*

I’d assumed they were just curious onlookers, but if they’d stuck around this long, they probably had a reason for their loitering. Maybe they wanted something from me.

“Norn, get dressed and wait for me, okay? I’ll walk home with you today.”

“Huh? Uh, right. Okay, Rudeus.”

I cast a few quick healing spells on Norn, then hustled her off toward the changing room.

Once she was safely inside, I headed over to the group of boys. As I drew closer, I realized there were more than ten of them. None of them looked like the popular kind of kid. That was good—maybe we could understand each other.

They were staring at me with open hostility in their eyes, though. When I gazed right back at them, a few looked away awkwardly.

At this point, I was a “normie” with two wives and a kid. But that didn’t mean I felt any scorn for these guys. I wasn’t much different from them in my life, after all. Not that that stopped them from feeling intimidated.

“Do you need something, guys?” I asked.

They looked at each other for a moment, then started whispering and pushing each other on the back. Eventually, one member of the group stepped forward.

The boy looked to be maybe eighteen years old. He was about as tall as me, but looked gangly and out of shape. His cheeks were bony, and his eyes were kind of shifty. The classic “magician” type, I guess. If you put a pair of glasses on his head, he might look a bit like Zanoba.

Of course, Zanoba was always full of that bizarre confidence of his. This guy looked more like the self-loathing, resentful type.

“Why are you bullying Norn?” he spat out, glaring at me.

“...Hm?”

*Bullying?*

I could feel my brow furrowing at the sound of that word.

The young mage flinched at my reaction, but continued nonetheless. “Look, I know Norn’s clumsy and messes things up sometimes. Maybe she accidentally ticked you off somehow. But she tries her best at everything she does, okay? Did you really have to take it out on her like that?”

From behind him, the group muttered words of agreement.

“In the first place, Norn’s never even held a sword before. She didn’t even know how to defend herself! I don’t know what she did, but making her fight you was just too harsh.”

The group concurred again, a little more loudly this time.

“Hrm.”

From the sounds of things, they seemed to believe that I’d forced that sword into Norn’s hands, then beat her up for my own enjoyment under the pretense of “training” her. It was basically the opposite of the truth, but you could understand why they’d reached that conclusion. I wasn’t a very skilled instructor, for one thing.

In any case, I needed to clear up this misunderstanding. “Well, you see—”

“I know you’re the strongest mage in this entire school. But if you’re going to mistreat Norn like that, we’re still going to fight you for her sake.”

The guy was really working up a head of steam now. There was real determination in his voice. But the chorus of approval from his friends was a lot quieter this time.

In fact, I heard someone mutter “I don’t think I agreed to that” from the back.

It’s sad, but guys like us aren’t particularly tough in groups, either.

...Ah, right. Before I explained myself, there was one thing I needed to understand.

“Okay. Can I ask who you people are, exactly?”

“Huh?!”

His voice cracking, the young mage looked back to his friends for guidance. After a moment, he turned to face me again with an awkward look on his face.

“Uh...what do you mean, exactly?”

“I’m asking how you know my little sister. Are you her friends or something?”

“E-er, no, we just...noticed her last year, when she was a freshman... She always, uh, does her best at everything, so...we’re kind of rooting for her, I guess...”

The guy was stammering now, but once he got these words out, his friends started chiming in as well.

“I noticed her on campus about six months ago...”

“I’m in the same year as Norn. We had practical lessons together, and she kept messing up her fire spell over and over, but...”

“I saw her getting all teary-eyed while this instructor scolded her during magic training, and I just...”

They spoke clumsily, and never seemed to actually finish their sentences. But I still got the general idea. These guys had seen Norn in her classes or training sessions. They’d seen her tearing up as she failed repeatedly, but kept struggling nonetheless. And it had warmed their hearts.

At some point, they’d banded together to try and offer her a little subtle support from the sidelines. In other words...

Norn had a fan club.

Come to think of it, I felt like Sylphie had mentioned something about this to me at some point. It was understandable. Norn was adorable, after all. I could see where they were coming from. As Norn’s brother, I wanted to encourage their efforts.

“I think I understand the situation now. Thanks for looking out for Norn, everyone. I’m Rudeus Greyrat, her big brother.”

When I lowered my head in gratitude, a surprised murmur ran through the little crowd.

These guys were on Norn’s side. Some of them might be capable of taking things too far, but as a group, they seemed to have nothing but good intentions. It was only right for me to treat them with respect.

That said, I did still need to definitively clear up this misunderstanding.

“As for our training session just now... I know it looked like I was treating her harshly. However, learning the sword isn’t a game. It can be a matter of life and death.”

I proceeded to go over the entire situation in detail.

Firstly, I explained that the whole thing was Norn's idea. Secondly, I told them that it was dangerous to learn swordplay unless you took it very seriously. And finally, I emphasized that Norn needed to work much harder at it than most people would.

The fan club was a little taken aback at first, but after a while, they seemed to understand where I was coming from. Still, I did hear someone mutter "Did you really have to hit her *that* hard, though?"

It was a fair question. I wasn't sure that my methods were correct either. All I wanted them to understand was that I wasn't picking on Norn maliciously.

I continued my explanation at length, trying to convey my motivations. The faces of the fan club members slowly grew more serious as they listened, and by the end they were nodding reluctantly. These guys were still young, but by the standards of this world they were all adults. They were capable of understanding how deadly serious it was to go into actual battle.

"Rudeus? Is something the matter?"

Just as we were reaching an understanding, Norn had returned. She was wearing something like a poncho over her standard school uniform.

"Oh! It's Norn!"

"Hello, Norn! You look cute today! As always!"

"Nice job out there, Norn!"

The instant my sister arrived, everyone in her fan club got remarkably creepy.

Still, I could understand how they felt. She *was* adorable in that outfit. So adorable I found myself picturing her carrying around a leaf umbrella.

"Oh, h-hello there, everyone... Th-thank you."

Norn flinched in surprise at the sudden barrage of encouragement, then bowed her head respectfully. I noticed she wasn't getting too close to them, though. I guess she was picking up on the weird vibes here, too.

"U-um, Rudeus, I think I forgot something in my room. I'll go grab it now, so just wait for me at the school gates, okay?"

Just like that, Norn turned and rushed off toward the dorms. Before she got too far, though, she tripped and fell.

"Guh..."

Norn was a little slow getting up. And once she was back on her feet, she looked back at me for just a moment. Her eyes were glistening.

I suppressed a sigh. *Maybe you shouldn't be running right after you exercised, kid...*

Once we got back home, I'd have to give her a massage to help control the muscle pain. She'd need a nice long relaxing bath, too.

"Aw, she is so adorable..."

"Don't run so fast, Norn... You're wearing a skirt, remember?"

"I thought the school uniform was a stupid idea at first, but I think I understand the appeal now..."

"She's an awful slow runner, though."

"Yeah... If a kidnapper tried to snatch her, she might not get away..."

"If Norn went on the slave market, I'd buy her in a minute. Heh heh."

"Ooh...imagine *living* with Norn... Hee hee..."

*Hmm...yeah, I'd buy Norn too. Then I'd take her back home and make her a nice, big meal. I'd fill her up with good food, and insist she clean her plate... Oh, I can just see her struggling to finish it all off...*

*Gah. Wait, no!*

Norn was my little sister. I wasn't going to let anyone buy her on the damn slave market. If someone dared to kidnap her, I'd hunt them down and murder them painfully.

*Sound good, Dad?! Don't get mad at me!*

"Ahem!"

"Gah!"

I'd cleared my throat loudly, prompting the members of the fan club to snap out of their disturbing fantasies.

"Guys, I need you to not talk about enslaving my little sister, thanks."

"S-sorry..."

"It's all right, I know she's adorable. You can have your little daydreams, at least. As long as you keep a safe distance from her."

"Oh. Really?"

Everyone seemed to relax a little at that.

"Yeah. But if you lay so much as a finger on her, you're going to seriously regret it."

"Eek!"

It never hurt to be clear about these things. I didn't think anyone here was capable of getting up to real mischief, and groups like this tended to have a moderating effect on their members...but you never know what someone might do on impulse. The last thing I needed was one of them getting overheated and trying to snatch Norn off the street.

"On another note, what rules has your club agreed on so far?"

"Huh? Our club...?"

"Yeah. This *is* Norn's fan club, right? What's your policy on interacting with her?"

It was very important to have a clear set of guidelines. Generally, the fans agreed not to approach their idol directly, but I'd heard of some cases where people allowed themselves to ask for handshakes or autographs. The handshake thing was dicey territory, though. Sometimes guys would put weird stuff on their palms first. Like gum...or sea urchins. I wanted to make sure that sort of thing was officially forbidden.

"Norn's...what?"

"What's a fan club?"

"Huh...?"

To my surprise, though, the guys didn't seem to understand what I was talking about. It was almost like they'd never even heard of these concepts before. How strange.

"Wait a second, guys. Who's the person in charge of this group?"

"In charge...? Uh, we don't really have anyone in charge..."

"Seriously? I need you to explain in detail, please."

Strangely enough, it turned out that this group hadn't actually been formed by anyone in particular. They'd been drawn together naturally by their shared appreciation for Norn's cuteness. Many of them didn't even know each other's names.

"I see..."

This was a very dangerous situation.

What we had here was an unorganized mob of uncertain size, united only by an interest in my little sister. In mobs, people are capable of doing things they wouldn't have the guts to try on their own. For example, kidnapping my adorable little sister, and blaming her for being too cute to resist.

*Unacceptable! Outrageous! Scandalous!*

“This isn’t good, guys. At this rate, you’re going to turn into a bunch of criminals.”

“Criminals?! No, no, we just—”

“Sorry, but I know I’m right about this,” I said flatly. “One of you is going to cross the line eventually.”

Not surprisingly, this inspired a storm of denials and protests.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“None of us would ever lay a hand on Norn!”

“I mean, we like Norn a lot, but it’s more like she’s our little sister or something...”

*Say what, punk? She’s my little sister, and I’m not sharing!*

*Wait, wait. Let’s try to stay on topic.*

“I believe you guys mean well, but I think we need to set some clear rules here.”

When you wanted to keep a group of people from getting out of control, you had to establish some basic regulations. Once the rules were in place, the members of the group would start keeping an eye on each other. Once you give people a set of rules, even rules as meaningless as wearing the same clothes and the same scarf as you wait to see your idol, the general tendency is to follow them.

Rules arise naturally with time. They come into existence when they’re needed, and fade away when they aren’t. This fan club didn’t have much of a history yet. There hadn’t been enough time for its rules to develop organically.

But until they created some, Norn was in danger. I needed to speed up the process artificially. I wasn’t going to wait around for them to hurt her first.

Somebody needed to make some fundamental decisions right now. Fortunately, the issues themselves were relatively simple and clear-cut. They just needed to promise not to scare Norn or put her

at risk. The problem was finding someone to actually propose those rules. It would usually be the leader of the group, but these people didn't have one.

The guy who'd stepped forward to challenge me was probably the most strong-willed. Could I appoint him as the boss, and let him set the rules?

*Definitely not.*

The leader had to *understand* the responsibility they were taking on, and accept it willingly. Randomly dropping power in someone's lap was never a good idea.

Who understood the gravity of this situation best, then? Who here cared most deeply about Norn's well-being?

Me. Obviously.

"All right, then."

Norn was *my* little sister, too. My own flesh and blood.

In other words...I was the lawgiver here.

\*\*\*

In the year 425 of the Armored Dragon Era, a certain organization was founded in the Ranoa University of Magic.

Its name: The Norn Greyrat Official Fanclub.

This group, boasting some thirty members in total, would go on to leave an indelible mark on the history of the University.

The name of its first president, however, is lost to history.

*Legends of the University #3: The Boss can summon thirty flunkies with a single word.*

## Chapter 4: Can I Keep Him?

LET'S TALK ABOUT Aisha for a moment.

The girl was doing well. Despite the tragedies that had befallen our family, she seemed as bright and energetic as ever. I never caught her gazing sadly out the windows like her mother sometimes did. She didn't bite her lip when she looked at Paul's sword, the way Norn would. She did her housework cheerfully, as if nothing had changed. During the day, she tended her flowers in the garden and in her room; at night, she threw herself into my magic lessons, and cuddled up with me happily.

It almost seemed like she was *more* energetic than before. She was probably the single least melancholy person in our entire house.

Sometimes, it almost felt like she wasn't mourning Paul at all. I couldn't help wondering if he hadn't meant that much to her.

That said, Norn didn't remember much from our time at Buena Village, so it seemed possible that Aisha didn't have many memories of Paul or Zenith either. Just as Norn had spent many years on the road with Paul, Aisha had spent most of her childhood with Lilia.

All things considered, it wasn't fair for me to expect her to act all gloomy. Maybe her joy at Lilia's safe return outweighed her sadness at Paul's death. If so, it was probably for the best.

It wasn't like I *wanted* my sister moping around instead of enjoying life, after all.

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One day, I had nothing in particular to do.

My classes weren't meeting that day, but unfortunately Roxy and Sylphie both had to work. I was planning to look after Lucie and spend the day relaxing.

I felt a little guilty about lazing around the place while both my wives were hard at work...but grownups need to get their rest in when they can, right?

*Hmm. I'm not earning any money at the moment, though. Is that really okay? Considering I've got a baby and all? Well...getting my education is the best way to earn more money later, right? Yeah, it's all good.*

After seeing off my wives, I checked in on Lucie. She was still sound asleep, so I wandered out into the garden for no particular reason.

When we first moved in here, there was nothing out here but a barren, neglected patch of earth. But now, after only a few years, it had been transformed completely.

First of all, we now had three big evergreen trees back there. One of them flowered in spring, the second in summer, and the third in autumn. Not that I'd seen them blooming for myself yet.

When I'd asked Aisha where she got them, she explained that she'd placed a request with the Adventurers' Guild and had them brought here from the nearest forest.

Transporting full-grown trees sounded like a real hassle, so I asked her how much it had cost. She said Zanoba had helped out, so she only had to cover the cost of a few bodyguards.

In one corner of the garden, there was a section of soil separated from the rest by brick dividers. This was where Aisha had planted the rice seeds I'd brought back with me. None of us knew how to make a proper rice paddy, so we were trying to grow the rice on dry soil. So far, the first crop seemed to be sprouting nicely. It was

hard to say whether we'd get anything edible out of it in the end, though.

Aisha was squatting down by that small field at the moment. To my surprise, Zenith was sitting next to her.

"What are you two doing?" I called.

"Oh, hi, Rudeus!" said Aisha, looking back at me. "We're weeding the rice!"

For a second I thought she was joking, but then I walked over and realized it was true. Aisha was pulling weeds out from between the stalks of rice, and Zenith was quietly helping out as well.

Now that I thought about it, I had some vague memories of Zenith pulling weeds back in Buena Village. Maybe it was just a standard part of growing plants, even in a cold climate like this.

"Miss Zenith wanted to help out, too!"

"..."

Something about the *Miss Zenith* thing didn't sit quite right with me.

"Um, Aisha, you can call Mother Zenith 'Mom' if you want, you know?"

"Nah. Mother Lilia said I can't. She always says I have to call her *Miss Zenith or Madam*."

Ah, so it was another one of Lilia's commandments. She was sure strict about this stuff.

Then again, I felt like Aisha didn't really think of Zenith as a mother anyway. For the record, Zenith had treated her just like one of her own children back when she was a baby, but Aisha obviously couldn't remember that.

Well, whatever. It wasn't that big a deal either way.

"How long has Mother Zenith been helping you out like this?"

"For a while now, actually. Mother Lilia tried to stop her at first, but she always comes over to help when I start messing around in the garden. She's better at it than I am!"

Zenith had put a lot of effort into maintaining our garden back in Buena Village, too. Maybe that had something to do with this.

I wasn't going to discourage it either way. You never knew what might help her regain her memories. In any case, it was kind of nice seeing her and Aisha sitting side by side like this. They looked content in each other's company. Even if they weren't blood-related, I guess Zenith was still Aisha's mother.

"Oh, right. Rudeus, you're off today, right?"

As I watched them working, Aisha turned back to look at me. Her cheek was smudged with mud.

"Yeah. I'll be at home all day."

"Great! There's something I want to show you. Can you come by my room later?"

"Sure thing," I said, bending down to wipe her face. Aisha smiled dopily as I cleaned her off.

Zenith looked on from beside her, staring at us both intently.

*"There's something I want to show you. Can you come by my room later?"*

A very suggestive line, I'm sure you'll agree.

Aisha was a very precocious kid. There was a possibility she'd lift up her skirt and try to show me her private parts or something.

Well, maybe not, on second thought. We already took baths together on a regular basis. She didn't have anything under there I wasn't already familiar with.

Still, the kid was so shameless that I was starting to get a little worried about her future. Maybe I should be giving her some basic sex ed lessons at this point.

*Wait, didn't she say Lilia had gone over all that with her?*

*Okay...but what if she taught her a bunch of nonsense? I should really step up to the plate here...*

Frowning slightly as I considered the proper course of action, I stepped inside Aisha's room.

She'd told me to stop by "later," but she hadn't specified a time. It shouldn't be a problem if I waited for her here, then.

It's not like I just wanted to get a look around a young girl's room or anything. Although I *was* a little curious, maybe.

"Well, looks like she keeps the place clean, at least..."

Aisha's room was impressively tidy. Everything was put away in its proper place, and I couldn't see a single speck of dust anywhere. Her bed was neatly made, too.

Here and there, I noticed a few slightly girly touches. The stuffed toy on her bed was particularly conspicuous. It was a little guy, maybe twenty centimeters in height, with light brown hair, a robe, and a staff. He was supposed to be a magician, presumably.

They didn't sell toys like these in this city, as far as I knew. Had she bought it from a travelling peddler or something? I don't even think Zanoba had anything like this in his collection, and that meant it had to be a pretty rare find.

Maybe she'd made it herself? Nah, surely not.

Aisha also had quite a few potted plants by her windows—everything from tulip-like flowers to aloes and a little cactus. There were maybe ten of them lined up together in pots of various sizes. Compared to Norn's room, the place looked a bit more like what you'd expect from a young girl's room.

Wandering over to the corner, I opened up Aisha's closet and took a peek. There were three full maid outfits inside. All of them were obviously well-used, and had some conspicuous patches here and there. They looked more like the clothes of a veteran maid than those of an eleven-year-old kid. Aisha had been growing fast lately, so she'd presumably grow out of these entirely before too long. Unless Lilia could modify them somehow.

Glancing around again, I noticed a single cute, girly outfit hanging on the far side of the closet. It had lots of frills and everything. Maybe she was saving it for a special occasion?

Hopefully this wasn't what she'd been wanting to show me. I'd have to pretend I hadn't already seen it.

Closing the closet, I pulled open the drawer underneath it.

One side of it was packed with neatly folded panties. For any boy with a crush on her, this would have been a real treasure trove.

Next to her underwear were a number of shirts...and now that I got a closer look, a few bras, too. My little sister was well-developed for her age, and already capable of equipping "chest armor." Still, she was probably the equivalent of an A-cup at the moment. The Wise Old Hermit had already classified her as a rare gem in the making, but it was early days yet.

As I was contemplating my sister's clothes, a small *thump* from behind made my heart skip a beat. Activating my Demon Eye of Foresight, I channeled mana into both my hands and spun around, making sure to close the drawer behind me.

"Who's there?" I called, pointing my fingers toward the door.

There was nothing there. No one I could see.

Aisha and Zenith would still be occupied with the garden at the moment, and Lilia should be busy making lunch.

Was it our pet armadillo, then? No, he'd tagged along with Roxy when she headed to the University. He was probably taking a siesta in some stable over there.

Matsukaze, the horse I'd bought before leaving for Begaritt, was housed in a stable in the city. Sometimes I'd head over there to check up on him, but I doubted he could make it all the way over here on his own.

That just left Lucie, and she wasn't even crawling yet.

Was it someone totally unexpected, then? A burglar? A pervert looking to steal an innocent young girl's first bra?

Lowering myself cautiously into a crouch, I glanced all around the room.

I wasn't seeing anyone. And there weren't any good hiding places, either.

Still, *something* felt odd. My sharply honed intuition was telling me I wasn't alone in here.

Could it be an invisible enemy? Maybe someone with a magical implement that provided perfect camouflage? In that case, the effect would have to wear off sooner or later.

"...I guess we'll just have to see who blinks first, then," I muttered quietly.

*Hopefully it wasn't just the house creaking or anything. I'd feel like a real idiot.*

*No...there's definitely something off. I can feel it.*

*Look closer, Rudeus. What's changed in here? What's out of place?*

*...The stuffed toy? No, it's not that.*

*The door's still closed. The bed's still made. The ceiling's spotless as always.*

*That leaves...the potted plants. Yeah. Are there more of them than before?*

*I don't think so. But I feel like I'm getting warmer here...*

“...”

As I stared at the plants, trying to find something out of the ordinary, the sun emerged from behind a cloud. A ray of light poured through Aisha's window.

*Thump! Thump!*

“Gaaaah!”

The plant in the single smallest pot reacted instantly. It was *wriggling around* in there, trying to get more of itself in the sunbeam, twisting its leaves toward the window.

With its every movement, the pot thumped slightly against the wooden windowsill.

This was obviously what I'd heard a few moments ago, as well.

“What the heck *is* this thing?”

I gave the plant a cautious poke, and it jerked in something like surprise. After a moment, though, it leaned over to rub itself against my finger, and began to slowly twine a shoot around it.

A little taken aback, I pulled my finger away. The plant promptly went right back to bathing in the sun.

“A moving plant...?”

How very bizarre. Hopefully it wasn't going to start dancing around the room and burst into song or anything.

“...”

In all seriousness, though, I had some idea what this thing might be. I'd seen its kind many times before, after all.

This thing was a Treant.

\*\*\*

The creatures known as Treants could be found all over the world. They were one of the most common and well-known categories of monster. You might compare them to the slimes from Dragon Quest, in that sense.

I'd done a lot of travelling for my age, with journeys across the Demon Continent, the Millis Continent, the Central Continent, and the Begaritt Continent. I hadn't gotten a chance to visit the Divine Continent yet, unfortunately, but that was still four out of the major five.

On every one of the continents I'd seen so far, there were Treants of some kind.

You'd find them in basically any forest, and they weren't uncommon in the plains and deserts, either. Most of them were largely made of wood, but not all of them looked like walking trees.

The Stone Treants resembled big, lumpy potatoes. The Cactus Treants looked like spiky green plants. And there were many other species, too. I'd heard of Elder Treants capable of using water magic, for example.

Still, I'd never seen a Treant this *small* before. The thing was about fifteen centimeters in height. Maybe twenty, if you counted its roots. It had four large leaves and two tendril-like shoots. I didn't see any flowers or fruits yet. It looked like a very young sapling, maybe. Accordingly, I decided to refer to it as a Baby Treant.

Not that it really mattered. I just needed some way to refer to it.

Now then. My main question at the moment was what our Baby Treant was doing in Aisha's room.

"Okay, Aisha. What's the deal with this thing?"

"Um, well, it just started moving all of a sudden."

Aisha, who'd come running at my cry of alarm, didn't appear to feel particularly guilty about the situation.

"When did that happen?"

"Right after you came back from your trip, actually. What do you think? It's pretty cool, right?"

If anything, she seemed proud of her little...pet.

"Yeah, it's really something. Why didn't you tell me about this, though?"

"I wanted to! But you've been so busy lately, you know? I thought it could wait a while. And now you went and found it on your own!"

Aisha puffed out her cheeks sulkily. The effect was adorable, needless to say. Now I knew what she'd wanted to show me, at least.

"Well, anyway...I can't believe one of those seeds I brought back was actually a Treant. What are the odds of that?"

"Huh? No, no. I'm pretty sure it grew from some Vatirus seeds we got back in Asura."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah. It's got leaves and tendrils, see? It should get some nice purple flowers before too long."

I recognized the name of the plant. Its flowers were the primary ingredient in a powerful aphrodisiac, and it could also be used to make certain perfumes. They cultivated it in certain parts of the Kingdom of Asura.

That didn't explain why this one had turned into a Treant, though.

"What made it start moving, anyway? Was it like this from the start?"

"Nope; it was just a plant at first. It started moving when I moved it into this pot."

Aisha explained that she liked starting off her flowers in the garden outside before moving them into her pots. Once they grew big enough, she put them back into the yard. She was still experimenting at the moment, which was why the pots and the plants inside them were all so different.

"Hrm."

The pot itself was a perfectly ordinary thing that we'd purchased together at a general goods store a while ago. I found it very unlikely that it was a magic item, or otherwise enchanted.

"You didn't do anything weird to it, did you?"

"Nope; I treated it just like all the others. I'm using the soil you make for me. It seems to have more nutrients than the earth around here does."

That probably ruled out the soil, then. I always made her perfectly ordinary dirt with my magic. It wasn't something I put a lot of effort into. Maybe I threw a touch of affection for my little sister in there, but that didn't seem relevant.

"Oh, wait. Sometimes I gave it leftover water from the bath, I guess."

Leftover bathwater! Hmm. I wasn't around at the time, so it would have been infused with Sylphie and Aisha's sweat...maybe a bit of Nanahoshi's, too.

Intriguing. I could see how that might lead a plant to grow some gropey tentacles.

*Okay, Rudeus. Stop being an idiot.*

"Hmm..."

What could have caused this to happen, then? She'd planted a normal seed, and cultivated it normally, but somehow it had turned into a monster. Was that a thing that just...happened sometimes?

It felt more likely that a Treant seed had been accidentally mixed in with the normal ones somehow. Treants were natural mimics. Maybe it was just pretending to be a normal Vatirus plant at first to stay inconspicuous. It felt like a coherent theory, at least.

"Well, in any case, I guess we should kill the thing," I muttered to myself. "Maybe I could just burn it or something."

"Whaaat?!" shrieked Aisha. "Why?! I spent all this time raising the little guy! Why would you burn him?!"

I was a bit taken aback by how fiercely she objected. But then again, she'd brought me here to show off her Treant. I guess it made sense that she wouldn't be too happy about getting rid of it.

"...Aisha, you know what this thing is, right? It's a Treant. That's a kind of monster."

"But look how little it is! It's adorable!"

"Yeah, for the moment. But once it gets bigger, it might start attacking people. It's dangerous."

"I'll train him! I'll make sure he doesn't hurt anyone!"

She was clinging to my waist desperately now, and there were tears in her eyes. I was sorely tempted to just say *Oh, all right. I'm not cleaning up after it for you, though!*

Still, this wasn't a stray kitten we were talking about here. It was a monster.

"Come on, Rudeus. Can't I keep it? Please?"

"The puppy-dog eyes aren't going to work on me. We need to get rid of it."

"But he's a good boy, really! He's nice to everyone else, and he does whatever I tell him to!"

"Now you're just making stuff up, Aisha. How is a Treant going to do what you tell it? It doesn't even have ears."

"Look!"

Trotting over to the Baby Treant, Aisha reached out a hand toward it. The little creature reacted by slowly slipping one of its tendrils around her slender index finger. Without extracting herself from its "grip," she gently rubbed the underside of its leaves with her fingertips, and the Baby Treant twisted its body in something that looked like pleasure.

It was kind of a bizarre sight. The thing looked exactly like a plant, but it was reacting like an animal.

"Okay, let go," said Aisha.

The Treant immediately uncoiled its tendril from around her finger, letting it rest in the palm of her hand.

"Which one's the pinky finger?"

After a moment's hesitation, the tendril slipped around her pinky.

"Middle finger."

The tendril released her pinky and took hold of her middle finger.

"Don't let go, but grab my thumb, too."

Still wrapped around the middle finger, the tendril reached out further, obediently stretching toward Aisha's thumb. It wasn't long enough to grab it, but it just barely managed to touch her fingertip.

"Okay, let go." She kept playing with the Treant this way for a while longer, then turned back to face me. "See? He listens to what I tell him, right?"

"Yeah, it looks that way."

To my surprise, it was clearly possible to communicate with this thing. And from the looks of things, it was very attached to my little sister.

I needed to rethink things a little here.

Treants were monsters. That was just a fact. In my experience, they disguised themselves as trees or other plants, then launched vicious surprise attacks on any travelers who came by.

Still, I knew there were some species of monsters out there that could be domesticated.

Creatures like Dillo, our family pet; and the lizard I rode around on the Demon Continent weren't usually thought of as monsters—people usually just called them "beasts." But there was nothing that inherently separated them from monsters, other than their temperament.

This Baby Treant seemed tame enough, so maybe I didn't have to classify it as a monster.

It honestly wasn't that threatening, either. Dillo could surely do a lot more damage than this thing if he wanted to.

That said...Dillo had been domesticated by a professional beast trainer.

"Look, I'm a little worried this thing might try to strangle you in your sleep, honestly."

"I think it should be fine, Rudeus. Even full-grown Vatirus plants only get about twice this big."

"Hmm...okay, but—"

"If he hurts anyone, ever, I'll do what you say! I promise!"

"What if you get seriously injured the first time he attacks, though?"

"Grr..."

Aisha puffed out her cheeks sulkily at this, but then seemed to reconsider her strategy. Opening her eyes real wide, she laced her hands together in front of her chest and looked up at me with her most sweet and innocent expression.

*“Please, Rudeus? Can’t you give me a chance?”*

*Where the heck did she learn to plead like that? Not subtle, kid.*

I was tempted to pursue the point, but right now there were more pressing matters at hand.

*Okay, let’s see...*

I was positive I’d never heard of anyone domesticating a Treant before. I didn’t know much about their behavior, either, so it was hard to say what the best way to train one was. Most importantly, they *were* dangerous monsters, albeit fairly weak ones. If we messed this up even slightly, things might turn ugly very fast.

Then again, if it really was going to max out at thirty centimeters in height, there wasn’t that much it could do to hurt us.

Aisha had raised this thing herself from a seed, so it was accustomed to having people around. That made it less likely it would attack one of us... assuming it was like an ordinary animal in that respect.

*Hmm...*

Clearly irritated by my indecisiveness, Aisha began to pout. “All right then. If that’s how you’re going to be, maybe I should play my trump card.”

“Your trump card?”

“Why don’t I tell Sylphie and Roxy about your little secret?”

“What are you talking about?”

Was I keeping any terrible secrets from the two of them?  
Nothing really came to mind...

But then, smirking haughtily, Aisha dropped the bomb on me.  
“I’m talking about your secret room in the basement!”

“Gah!”

Everyone has a part of themselves they want to keep *private*. In my case, it was that little altar downstairs.

That room was a sacred place that I visited only in the night, offering my prayers as my family slumbered. My goddesses were now physically present in my house, true; but that didn’t make the ritual any less meaningful for me.

Faith has value in and of itself, you know? The act of prayer calms us and centers us, helping us live each day to the fullest. I’d been keeping up this routine for years now. It was a part of my life.

But what would happen if my altar was discovered? What would Sylphie think? What would Roxy say? I wanted to think that Lilia would understand, at least. Aisha had evidently been keeping quiet about it, but what about Norn? I had the feeling she’d react with open disgust.

The ultimate outcome would likely be the destruction of my altar. And with it, I would lose a crucial part of my daily routine.

“A-Aisha, listen. I’m just worried about your safety, okay? Treants are dangerous monsters, so raising one might put you at risk.”

“I don’t care if you’re a total pervert, Rudeus, but I wonder how Sylphie and Roxy will feel about it. Especially Roxy... You’ve been worshipping her panties for a loooong time now, haven’t you?”

*Agh! This girl is ruthless! I was just trying to watch out for her, and now she’s blackmailing me!*

*Dammit, what am I supposed to do? What’s the least bad option here?*

As I racked my brains for an answer, the door to Aisha's bedroom suddenly swung open behind us.

"Um, I think I heard my name just now. Did you need something?"

"Gah!"

"Guh!"

Aisha and I spun around to find Roxy standing in the doorway, looking a bit nonplussed.

"Wh-what are you doing here, Roxy?!" I sputtered. "Didn't you just leave a little while ago?"

"I came back to get something I forgot. Fortunately, I don't have a class at the moment."

*Classic Roxy! The forgetful little professor! How cute!*

*Wait, let's try to stay focused here.*

"Well, Roxy, Rudeus and I were just talking about his secre—  
mmph!"

Hmm. Now I'd gone and covered up my little sister's mouth midsentence. What now?

"..."

"..."

An awkward silence ensued. The only sounds were the soft *thumps* of the Baby Treant wriggling on the windowsill.

Roxy's eyes jumped over to it, and opened wide with surprise.

*Okay, maybe I can turn to this to my advantage. Roxy should take my side on this, right? I'm sure she knows how dangerous Treants are.*

"That's a Treant, isn't it?" asked Roxy curiously.

"Right, yeah!" I said. "Aisha just told me she wants to raise that thing as a pet! But Treants are monsters, you know? It could be dangerous. Can you help me convince her to get rid of it?"

Aisha grabbed at my hand, which was muffling her cries of protest, and tried to pry it away. *Foolish girl. You can't beat me in a contest of strength! Bite my fingers if you want, I won't let go!*

*Gah, wait. Don't lick them! Stop! That's fighting dirty!*

"I don't know, Rudy. I think it should be fine."

*Huh?! She's taking Aisha's side?!*

"Treants are loyal creatures if you raise them properly," Roxy continued. "And this one's rather small, too. There shouldn't be much danger to speak of."

"Wait, really? You can domesticate them?"

"Sure. It doesn't seem to be very common on this continent, but the Migurd tribe use Treants to scare birds away from their fields."

Did they really? Hmm...maybe. My memories of that visit were a little fuzzy at this point.

Oh, right! They had those things that looked like Piranha Plants out in the fields. I hadn't realized they were Treants, though.

In any case, it sounded like Aisha was right after all, so I released her from my clutches.

"Sorry, Aisha. Sounds like I was wrong about this one."

She looked up at me dubiously for a moment, but eventually smiled in relief. "That's okay, Rudeus. You were just worried about me, right?"

"Yeah, of course. You have to admit, raising a monster *sounds* like it could be dangerous."

"Okay then. I guess I'll keep quiet after all."

“Thanks, Aisha. Remind me to buy you a nice meal one of these days.”

“Will do!”

Spinning away from me, Aisha promptly ran over to Roxy and threw her arms around her.

“Thanks, big sis! I love you!”

“...Uh, you’re welcome, I suppose.”

Roxy accepted the hug, but looked as perplexed as ever.

From that forth, Aisha’s Baby Treant joined the household as our second pet. Naturally, I laid down some rules and conditions beforehand.

First and most importantly: If it ever hurt someone, we’d get rid of it immediately.

Second, Aisha needed to thoroughly train it not to attack anyone.

Third, she had to explain to everyone exactly what kind of a “plant” it was.

Fourth, she wasn’t going to let it near any babies, just to be on the safe side.

And so on, and so forth.

I delivered these rules to Aisha in the form of a strict lecture, but she nodded in agreement to every one of them without so much as a scowl. The girl kept her promises, fortunately, so this would probably work out fine.

Incidentally, I gave our little friend the name “Byt,” picking out a few letters from the words Baby Treant.

Hopefully he would develop into a trustworthy and helpful member of our family. I was already picturing him planted out in Aisha's fields, defending my precious rice crops from predators.

...How the hell had the girl found my secret altar, though? You really had to keep an eye on these maids.

*Legends of the University #4: The Boss has tamed monsters living in his house.*

## Chapter 5: Paternal Dignity

**B**EFORE I KNEW IT, three more months had slipped past.

It was summer now. The snow had melted completely, and we'd landed in the middle of a hot, dry stretch. So far, I'd spent most of this year mooning over Lucie. Whenever I had a little spare time, I'd use it looking at her. She was my first and only child, after all. It was only natural for me to adore her.

On this day, like many other days, I was hanging around in her bedroom, watching her quietly. Whenever I gazed down on that angelic, chubby-cheeked little face, it put a big goofy grin on mine.

However, I was technically the head of this household now. I didn't exactly exude authority, but I did want to act in a relatively dignified fashion around my wives and sisters. If I spent too much time cooing over my baby like an idiot, their opinion of me would surely be affected.

For this reason, I intended to be a *stern* father. You know—tough but fair. That sort of thing.

If I knew Paul, he'd probably had similar thoughts looking down on me as a baby. A father should inspire awe in his children. He should be an example to them, and a goal for them to reach.

At one point, I'd thought of Paul as pitiful, or even pathetic. But by now, I knew better. He'd been a magnificent father. He had his flaws, and plenty of them, but he was wonderful nonetheless.

To be sure, he wasn't the most faithful husband out there, but I didn't have much right to criticize him on that point. It was better to focus on the positives.

At this point, I could say with confidence that I wanted to follow in my father's—

“Aaah, aaah!”

*Uh-oh, she’s fussing again.*

I didn’t have Sylphie to rely on today, so I had to step up to the plate myself.

“Heeere we go, Lucie! It’s your daddy! Abluhbluhbluh!”

“Aahaah! Hyaa ha ha!”

*Oh lord, she is so cute. Is there anything in the world as adorable as this baby’s smile?*

*My wife somehow gave birth to a literal angel by mistake. There’s no other explanation for this!*

*Hmm, I got a little sidetracked there for a moment. Let’s get back to the “stern and dignified” thing.*

The way I saw it, the ideal father was close enough to his children to be caring, but distant enough to guide them forward. Normally, he should be kind and gentle with his kids. When necessary, however, he shouldn’t hesitate to give them a firm scolding. And when they really needed his support, he should always step up to the plate for them. That was the ideal father, as I saw it.

It sort of sounded like I was just describing my impressions of Paul. Was he my idea of a perfect dad, then?

Hmm. I didn’t want my children thinking of me as “pathetic,” to be honest. But then again, it was partially Paul’s weaknesses that endeared me to him. There were lots of lessons I could learn from his example. Also, though he might have looked pitiful to me sometimes, he had always been a wonderful dad to Norn. That much was obvious, considered how much she’d adored him.

In that case, maybe love and compassion was the most imp—

“Aaah. Aaabaa, baaa!”

*Oh no, she’s getting worked up again...*

“Hewwo, Lucie! Daddy’s back! I’m gonna pick you up, okay? Here we gooo!”

“Hyaa ha! Hyahahaha!”

As soon I picked Lucie up out of her cradle and began to rock her back and forth, she started cackling loudly. Judging from the cherubic smile on her face, she liked being cradled in my big, strong arms. My heart couldn’t take much more of this cuteness.

“Uh, Rudeus...”

“Yes, Suzanne?”

As I comforted Lucie, her wet nurse Suzanne had spoken up from across the room. Suzanne was a retired adventurer, and an old friend of mine.

“I don’t mind soothing the little lady when she fusses, you know? It’s part of the job.”

“Appreciate the offer, but I’d like to keep these blissful moments to myself, thank you very much.”

The two of us had gotten to know each other back when I was just starting off as a solo adventurer. We’d fallen out of contact for about four years, but then she’d seen my posting for the wet nurse job. It had been a real shock seeing her again.

“Huh. Well, if you really want to do it yourself, feel free.”

“Is there any man in the world who *doesn’t* want to soothe their newborn daughter?”

“Can’t say my husband’s too eager to deal with it.”

“How shameful. It sounds like he needs an education in the joys of fatherhood.”

I remembered the time I spent with Suzanne very clearly.

I’d been only twelve years old, newly dumped by Eris, and making my way to the Northern Territories alone, feeling *extremely*

sorry for myself. Words cannot describe how miserable it made me to have to dissolve our old party, “Dead End,” at the guild in Basherant. As a way of distracting myself from my feelings, I immediately tried to take on an extremely difficult and dangerous task all by myself.

That was when Suzanne and her party had stepped in.

Their group had two warriors, one archer, one healer, and one mage. They were a B-rank party, but all of them were experienced veterans. Suzanne was one of the front-line warriors. To be honest, she wasn’t that impressive a swordswoman or anything. In terms of combat skill, she was closer to the bottom of Rank B than the top.

However, she had a reputation for kindness, and she knew how to keep a party running smoothly. When she noticed me trying to take a suicide mission, she’d walked right over and said something like *“How about we do that job together?”*

I protested that I was trying to make a name for myself as a solo adventurer, but she argued that I needed to work with people to build a reputation. In the end, I let her talk me into working together.

At the time, Suzanne was alarmed by just how rough I looked. My eyes were dull and lifeless, and she could tell I wasn’t sleeping much at all. When I spoke to her in a carefully polite tone, she’d found it creepy rather than reassuring.

Nonetheless, she took me in and helped me out. Until the day I left that first city behind, her party took me along on all sorts of quests. They even invited me to join them on a permanent basis.

I ended up rejecting that offer, but they were always friendly to me when we bumped into each other. Sometimes they’d even pull me into a tavern for a meal.

Looking back on it now, it was obvious they were looking out for me in all sorts of ways. I was grateful to all of them.

After we went our separate ways, Suzanne had married Timothy, the mage and leader of their party. They'd moved back here together, since Sharia happened to be Timothy's hometown.

They had two kids together. Unfortunately, their third had been born prematurely and died soon after.

Suzanne's body was still producing milk, despite the death of her child, so she'd decided to sell her services as a wet nurse. She'd been looking through the job postings when she happened to see my name.

Incidentally, I'd stopped by to say hello to Timothy just a few days earlier. The man hadn't changed a bit.

"...Gotta say, though, you sure have changed."

"Hmm. Have I?"

"Uh, yeah. Back in the old days, you *never* would have insulted a woman's husband in front of her."

This was true. When I first met Suzanne, I was terrified of upsetting people.

I still didn't want to offend anyone if I could possibly avoid it, but I guess I wasn't walking on eggshells these days. A *lot* of things had happened since then.

"Sorry, Suzanne. Did I upset you?"

"Nah. A little teasing never hurt anyone, you know? As long as you're sayin' it to my face, it's all good. Makes me *more* comfortable, if anything."

It probably had something to do with the friends I'd made at the University. I had more people I could talk to casually these days.

Zanoba and Cliff both preferred it that way, and it was easier for me as well.

"Hell, you could stand to be a little more casual around me in general," Suzanne continued. "You're technically my employer, you know?"

"I suppose so, but that's no reason to treat you impolitely."

Suzanne rolled her eyes at that. "Whatever you say, kid."

I owed Suzanne a lot. At the end of the day, she was the one who'd taught me the ropes of adventuring in the Northern Territories. I couldn't bring myself to be too casual with her.

"Well, I guess it's all good with me as long as I get my paycheck."

"Of course. I'll tip handsomely, I assure you."

The woman talked like it was all about the money, but she'd been wonderful so far.

I'd been a little nervous at first, since I remembered some horror stories about sadistic babysitters from my previous life. But Suzanne was so tender with Lucie that you'd never have known she wasn't her mother.

Of course, we did have Lilia and Aisha hanging around the house to keep an eye on things. And I knew from the start she wasn't the kind of person who'd mistreat a child.

"How are your sons doing, by the way?"

"Ah, the boys are a real handful, as always. They're running Grandma and Grandpa ragged."

Suzanne and Timothy were living with Timothy's parents at the moment. It was the only reason she was able to work full-time as a wet nurse with two toddlers running around the house.

She regularly complained to Lilia about how tough it was to be living under the same roof as her mother-in-law. Lilia was probably more inclined to identify with the mother-in-law, but I guess she was about Suzanne's age. It seemed like they got along; I saw them drinking tea together every once in a while.

“...I’ve been wondering. Did you want a boy first, too?”

“Not really. Why would I?”

“Well, y’know...everybody wants an heir, right?”

“Ah. Sure.”

I’d had a few discussions like this after my daughter was born. Zanoba and Ariel had both brought it up as well. It was obviously an important issue to royal families and noble houses—back in Asura, I’d even heard stories of newborn boys being whisked away from distant relatives for adoption by the main Boreas family.

“The thing is, though, I’m not really a noble or a wealthy businessman. It doesn’t really bother me either way. I just want to see my kid grow up happy.”

If anything, I was pleased to have received the cuter option. I was seriously outnumbered in this house, true...but I can’t say I minded being surrounded by adorable girls and charming women. It wasn’t like they were bullying me, either. They were almost *too* nice.

“Hey, that’s the spirit. Wish my husband would take a page out of your book. The moment I got pregnant, he was talkin’ about all the stuff he wanted to do if it turned out to be a boy. Didn’t spare a minute’s thought for the alternative!”

“Well, you got your boys in the end, so I guess it turned out all right.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve got some mixed feelings about it, though. The third one was a girl, you know?”

“Ah, right...sorry. That was a dumb thing to say...”

For an instant, I found myself wondering how I would have felt if Lucie had been stillborn. Just the thought of it was horrible enough.

“It’s fine! We’ll just try again.”

Suzanne seemed almost nonchalant about it, though. Was losing a baby really something you could shrug off like that? At the very

least, I knew I would have taken it hard. It wasn't easy for Sylphie to get pregnant, so there was no telling how long it would take for us to get another shot.

And more importantly, Sylphie would have been devastated. It was easy to picture her crying her eyes out and apologizing to me for losing our child.

Gah. Just thinking about this was making my stomach hurt.

There wasn't any point in dwelling on it, right? Lucie had come out fine, and Sylphie was okay too. Enough time had passed that I felt *relatively* confident it wasn't just a dream.

Rather than thinking about how things could have gone wrong, I should be enjoying my good fortune.

"So anyway...I'm assuming you guys dissolved your party at some point, right?"

"Yeah, not long after you left town. When you're as mediocre as we were, it gets pretty tough when you lose a core party member, you know? Patrice said he was goin' back to Asura to become a soldier, and we sorta fell apart on the spot."

"...Do you know what happened to Sara?"

"You curious?"

"Yeah, a little."

Sara was the name of an archer who'd belonged to Suzanne's party. It was rare for an adventurer to rely on a bow and arrows, but she had a real talent for landing timely, accurate shots in battle, which made her quite effective at her role. We were relatively close in age, and she'd been openly hostile to me at first...but over time, we'd gotten increasingly friendly.

In the end, our budding relationship imploded thanks to my "performance" issues, but I was still a bit interested in how she was doing now.

“Well, she’s still out there making a living as an adventurer. You don’t see many archers around, since it’s a lot easier to learn how to fling a fireball, but she’s got the skills and experience now. She’ll be just fine anywhere she goes.”

“Ah. Okay.”

“If there’s anything you left unsaid, you should probably go find her sooner rather than later. Never know when an adventurer might get themselves killed.”

“I don’t think that’s really necessary.”

Our little fling was in the past now. Finding her to talk about it wasn’t going to do me any good.

It was hard to imagine that Sara would enjoy remembering that whole mess, either.

“Well, if you say so... Hmm?”

Suddenly, Suzanne’s eyes flicked away from me and toward the door.

When I turned around, I saw Zenith standing there quietly. Lilia was lurking just behind her.

“Mom?”

Zenith made no reply, of course, but Lilia nodded. “Pardon the intrusion, Master Rudeus.”

Her eyes a bit unfocused, Zenith slowly stepped forward, then sat down next to me—positioning herself so she could get a good look at Lucie’s face.

“Don’t worry, Mom. Lucie’s doing just fine today.”

This got no reaction whatsoever. Zenith just stared at the baby so intently she seemed to have forgotten anyone else was even in the room.

After her arrival at my house, I felt like she'd become noticeably more active. When Norn was around, she tried to feed her at the dinner table; when she spotted Aisha, they'd go out to the garden and pull weeds together. And when I was watching Lucie, she'd stop by like this to check in on us. There were subtle differences in how she reacted to Roxy and Sylphie, too.

Her facial expression never seemed to change, and she still hadn't spoken a word. But she *was* moving. She *was* changing. Maybe she was inching her way back to something like a recovery.

"..."

"Kyaa hah! Gaa!"

Zenith had reached out her hands. Smiling from ear to ear, Lucie grabbed at them playfully.

"Aw, little Lucie sure does love her grandma, doesn't she?"

At first, I'd been nervous about this. Zenith's symptoms were comparable to something like dementia; I'd worried she might harm Lucie for no reason at all, without even meaning to. By this point, though, it was obvious that we had nothing to worry about. All she ever did was watch Lucie quietly. I'd never gotten a hint of a negative emotion from her. If anything, she seemed like a normal woman gazing peacefully down at her grandchild.

I felt a bit guilty for having doubted her in the first place. It wasn't like she'd ever gotten violent with *anyone* before.

"Ahaha! Gyaaaah!"

On some level, it seemed like Lucie understood that she meant well, too. The kid was all smiles whenever Zenith visited. It was honestly pretty heartwarming.



But of course, there was a lot we didn't know about Zenith's condition and how it might develop. It was hard to imagine anything bad coming of these visits, but given how much was still uncertain, it was probably best for them to stay supervised.

After all, accidents *can* happen, even when your intentions are good.

“...”

Suddenly, Zenith looked up at me. It almost looked like she was trying to send me a message with her eyes...not that I had any idea what it might be.

“Waaah! Waaaaah!”

Seconds later, Lucie started fussing loudly.

“Pardon me, Miss Zenith...”

Lilia reached down and gently took Lucie away from me and Zenith. Suzanne came over and received the baby. She started soothing her while simultaneously checking her diaper and looking for rashes.

After a moment, though, she nodded. “Looks like somebody’s hungry.”

Was it that time already? Sylphie had breastfed her before leaving, but somehow a couple hours must have slipped by since then. Huh.

“Well then, I guess I’ll step out of the room.”

“I don’t mind if you want to watch, you know.”

It was kind of Suzanne to offer, but I declined politely. We were old friends and all, but that didn’t make it okay for me to see the breasts of a married woman. She was just as well-endowed as Zenith or Lilia, too. They actually seemed a little bigger than before. Maybe it was all the milk in there?

If I got a glimpse of those things, the Wise Old Hermit inside me might be roused from his slumber. That in itself might not be such a big deal. But what if Lilia, say, were to mention it to the others? Sylphie and Roxy might be disheartened. It was an undeniable fact that they were more on the flat-chested side of the spectrum, but I didn't choose women based on their bodies. I didn't want them feeling self-conscious about it.

In any case...was it just me, or had Zenith noticed that Lucie was ready to be fed? Maybe you pick up a sixth sense for that kind of thing after raising three children of your own.

\*\*\*

I walked out into the hallway and glanced through the nearest window. Unfortunately, it was a grey and rainy day. It was hard to guess exactly what the time might be, but since Lucie had gotten hungry, it was probably close to noon.

Somehow, I'd managed to spend my entire morning hanging out with the baby. But it was time well spent, in my opinion. Nothing was more important than spending time with your kid.

For the moment, though, I headed to my study—a small room on the first floor that I'd reserved for my research.

The desk inside was covered in handwritten reports and a few magic stones.

I hadn't spent the last six months playing with my daughter and my sisters to the exclusion of anything else. I'd also been studying the prizes I brought back from the Begaritt Continent.

It was these stones that had lent the hydra its ability to shrug off my spells, forcing us into dangerous close-range combat. They absorbed any magic that came in contact with them. At a glance,

they looked like ordinary light-green scales. If not for their transparency, they wouldn't even have been identifiable as stones.

I'd managed to learn a few basic facts about these from the library at the University of Magic.

First of all, they were usually referred to as "stones of absorption." Manatite Hydras produced them naturally within their bodies. Since that species of monster had gone extinct thousands of years ago during the continental sundering, they were now incredibly rare and valuable.

Many dragons produced magical stones or crystals inside their bodies. This was just one particularly unusual case in point. The stone in my staff, for example, had been retrieved from a draconic species of sea serpent.

The effects of these stones varied widely, but many of them had direct magical applications of some sort. Some could increase your magical capacity, or reduce the amount of mana it took to cast spells; others made your spells twice as powerful without increasing their mana cost. It wasn't that surprising that there was one capable of absorbing magic entirely.

The tricky part was figuring out how exactly these stones were doing that.

When you just left them sitting on a desk like this, the stones of absorption didn't actively suck the mana out of everything around them. Clearly, something had to happen first. After a bit of experimentation, I soon realized that the stones had a "front" and a "back." It was very hard to tell one side from the other, but they definitely existed.

When I placed my hand on the back of a stone and fed it some mana, the front side would begin absorbing magic while emitting a high-pitched whine.

In other words, these things didn't work automatically. You had to turn them on and off yourself. It was a little bit like the suction pads on the tentacles of an octopus.

It seemed that the hydra we fought had been activating its magic-absorbing "armor" as it saw the spells fly, rendering my attacks useless at the last second.

I had a hard time imagining many people could react as quickly, but wild animals can often have much better dynamic vision and reflexes than any human being.

Experimenting further, I also realized that the stone didn't exactly "absorb" magic in the way I'd been expecting. When I held it in my right hand and cast a spell at it with the other, the spell would disappear, but I didn't regain the mana that I'd spent. In fact, I was pretty sure it was *costing* me some mana—the same amount I'd used to cast the original spell.

It would take more focused experiments to be sure what this meant, but I did have a working hypothesis. Basically, I suspected that the stone was converting the mana I fed it into waves that could instantly disintegrate anything *else* made of mana. The results were similar to the spell Disturb Magic, but I felt like these stones were even more thorough at obliterating the spells they interacted with.

There were still many things this theory alone couldn't explain, of course. For example, figurines I'd created with magic were completely unaffected by the stones, even at point-blank range.

Earthen figurines were immune to the waves, but the projectile from my Stone Cannon wasn't. I had no idea why that would be the case. Maybe the mana in the figurines had stabilized over time, making them immune to disruption? Hmm.

There wasn't much point going down these rabbit holes, though. I didn't even have a good grasp of what "mana" really was. Rather than groping around for a comprehensive explanation, I wanted to

focus on how I could *use* these things. And how I could counteract them in the future.

With that thought in mind, I'd carried out another experiment.

I had the feeling that I could use these stones to destroy some things Disturb Magic couldn't. Magic circles, for example.

Cliff had helped me out with this experiment. As I'd hoped, I managed to destroy both a Barrier spell and the magic circle he'd used to cast it. The design on his original scroll was unaffected, but as long as the spell was in active use, the stones of absorption could erase the circle itself.

However, they weren't able to affect a magic circle on the inside of a magical implement. Maybe it was because that circle was carved into the implement itself, rather than drawn on its surface.

That would make sense. Thinking back on our battle with the hydra, I realized that it never deactivated the magic circle in its lair despite thrashing around all over the place.

In any case, the most important takeaway was that these scales couldn't destroy *everything* of a magical nature.

That said, they were probably more than effective enough to deal with most threats I might encounter. With one of these in my back pocket, I could break myself out the next time I blundered into a trap and landed on the inside of a Barrier spell. Ideally I would avoid blundering into traps in the first place, but it never hurt to have an insurance policy.

At the moment, I was thinking about incorporating one of the stones into my prosthetic hand somewhere. Maybe in the palm.

It might be tricky to use that hand for both activating the stone and casting magic, but hopefully I'd get the hang of it with some practice.

“Hello, brother dear. You have a guest.”

I’d been tinkering around in my study for some time when Aisha popped her head in to announce that we had visitors. Her face was calm and composed; she’d snapped into professional maid mode.

“Who is it?”

“Prince Zanoba. He’s waiting for you in the living room.”

*Hmm. Wonder if he needs something?*

*Not that I’d mind if he just came over on a whim, of course...  
Maybe he just wanted some company.*

“Got it. Thanks, Aisha.”

I pushed myself up off my seat casually.

Zanoba had been making progress on his own research into the automaton recently. My Zaliff Prosthesis had been a product of those efforts. And as it turned out, the automaton’s legs and feet worked similarly to the hands and arms. I’d helped make the prototype this time. Zanoba drew up the plans, I created the model section by section with my magic, and Cliff inscribed it with the necessary magic circles.

It was a slow, delicate process. We’d spent nearly a month making a single leg. Someday, we’d hopefully be selling them alongside our artificial hands, but we were a *long* way from mass-producing these things.

Anyway. Now that we’d gotten a good grasp of the limbs, Zanoba was finally starting to investigate the automaton’s body. This involved locating the fine seams between its sections, and then carefully cutting them apart to study the “innards.”

Right at the center of its chest, he’d found a magic stone. It was a pretty red crystalline thing of unusual size. After studying it, however, he realized that it wasn’t actually just a single stone. It was

a combination of numerous smaller ones, each *covered* in tiny magic circles.

This was clearly the automaton’s “core.” If we managed to decipher all the patterns etched onto it, we would theoretically be capable of making the same thing ourselves.

And then, once we took our research to even greater heights, the Robo-Maid dream would finally become a reality!

Unfortunately, Zanoba was struggling in the face of this new challenge.

The circles on the core were unbelievably strange and complex. What’s more, the patterns were full of snatches of ancient writing—notes, warnings, passages from obscure books—and preliminary, scratched-out designs. Basically, it was clear that the creator of the automaton had still been perfecting the design for the core even as they built it.

It seemed that the masterpiece we’d found was in fact a failure or prototype. There was no telling what its creator had actually been going for.

Making sense of all this was going to be much harder than any challenge we’d faced so far. But Zanoba was undaunted. He seemed, if anything, even more determined than before to carry out his “life’s mission.”

For whatever it was worth, he had my moral support.

“Hey, Zanoba. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

When I walked into the living room, Zanoba jumped up from the sofa where he’d been sipping tea a moment earlier. “Ah, Master Rudeus! My apologies for intruding on you like this!”

Julie and Ginger, who were standing in the corner of the room, followed his example and lowered their heads silently.

“So, what can I do for you today?”

“I was simply in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d drop by and say hello.”

*Huh. So it really was just a social call.*

“Got it. Well, make yourself at home.”

This was unusual behavior for Zanoba, but I wasn’t going to turn him away or anything.

As I settled down onto a chair, Julie trotted over to my side.  
“Look, Grandmaster Rudeus. I finished another one.”

She held out a figurine for my examination. It was her latest attempt at a Ruijerd figure that I had her reproducing as an assignment.

“Nice work,” I said, studying it from multiple angles. “You’re improving quickly. Keep churning them out for me, all right?”

“Okay!” Julie said with a cheerful bow.

While I was off journeying across the Begaritt Continent, Julie had finished her original Ruijerd figurine. I’d been genuinely surprised by how good it looked. It was clear she’d used my own version as a model, but in all honesty, hers was just better.

For one thing, the stance was *perfect*. Even a total amateur was going to realize they were looking at a total badass.

When I showed it to Norn, she couldn’t help murmuring “I want one” under her breath, so I gave the original to her as a present. She had it on a shelf in her dorm room at the moment.

Recognizing Julie’s success for what it was, I tasked her with producing as many copies of the figurine as she could. It still took her quite a while to make a single one, but that wasn’t really a big deal. The job was a good way to work on stretching her mana capacity, and hopefully we’d have a nice pile of them ready to go by the time we were ready to sell Norn’s book.

“Yesterday, I saw Miss Norn at school.”

“Oh yeah? You bumped into each other? Did she say anything?”

“She thanked me. So I thanked her too.”

“Aw, that’s nice. Good for you, Julie.”

I reached out and patted Julie on the head affectionately. She stiffened up a little at my touch, but didn’t flinch away.

As it happened, Norn had recently finished her book about Ruijerd. Even after she started learning the sword from me, she’d kept up with her writing. The book was short, and the prose was a bit clumsy and awkward. It only covered one part of Ruijerd’s life, too: the story of those cursed spears, beginning with Ruijerd’s loyal service to his lord and ending with his revenge.

But despite all its flaws, she’d managed to capture Ruijerd’s personality perfectly. His pride, his grief, and his boldness came across with startling clarity. With a bit of careful editing, I was confident we could sell it as a children’s book.

In order to test that theory, I’d read the draft to Julie, who absolutely loved it. She’d made me read it three times in a row, and probably would have kept going if Ginger hadn’t intervened.

From the sound of things, nobody had ever read Julie stories like that when she was little. Perhaps it was a cultural thing. The dwarves apparently had traditional fairy tales of some kind, but maybe they didn’t write books for children. Or maybe her parents were just too busy to spend much time entertaining her. Not that it really mattered either way.

Anyway, since Julie had enjoyed the book so much, I’d been planning to introduce her to Norn one of these days, but it seemed they’d beat me to the punch. Norn had probably been a little embarrassed to learn she had a fan already. It was nice to hear they’d gotten off on the right foot, though. Recognizing each other’s talents is a good first step toward building a good working relationship.

All of this meant we were making excellent progress on the preparations for our Superd PR campaign. I was keeping up with my research and my training, too. Overall, I felt good about how I was using my time. If I pushed myself to take on anything more than I was already handling, I'd probably be overloading myself.

Maybe it would have been optimal to focus on a single specific area in which to specialize, but my feeling was that I'd never be the *best* at anything I tried. That was true in my first try at life, and it was probably true in this one too.

There's always going to be someone better than you out there. Maybe I was the best mage at the University right now, but the world was full of unbelievably powerful people.

There's such a thing as genuine talent—the kind of talent you can't compete with, no matter how hard you try.

I didn't feel any need to push myself to be the very best at any one thing, though. My goal was to be flexible enough to compete on multiple fronts. If I couldn't beat someone in a one-on-one fight, I'd just find a way to slip around them.

It sounded good in theory. But of course, sometimes you might find yourself staring down a Manatite Hydra. I wanted to become powerful enough to defend my family, if nothing else. Fighting wasn't really my specialty, but I'd have to find ways to get stronger.

“Oh, right. You want to take a look at Lucie, Zanoba?”

“Ooh! You’re willing to show me your daughter?! Are you sure?!”

“I mean...yeah. Is there some reason why I wouldn’t?”

“I suppose not! However, I believe there are certain countries where it’s traditional to wait until a child turns five before letting anyone outside the family see them.”

"Really? Huh. I'd rather show her off to everyone I can, personally..."

In any case, there was no reason to think too hard about all this right now. I just had to keep moving slowly, steadily forward.

I was keeping up with my daily training and magic exercises, chipping away at my research projects, and making lots of interesting friends. Compared to my last try at life, I'd been putting in a lot more effort, and getting a lot more out of every day. It was fair to say I was doing a good job so far—by my standards, at least.

In other words, there was no need to rush things. If I pushed myself too hard, I'd eventually break down physically or mentally. My haste might make me careless, too. I didn't want to blunder into another disaster, like I had with that hydra.

So for now, I was going to keep moving at my own pace. One step at a time.

I wanted to make my efforts at self-improvement a part of my daily routine. Hopefully, that effort would pay off the next time I found myself facing a real challenge.

Hmm. What was the next step I should take at this point, though?

I'd replaced my hand with a prosthetic. My research was coming along nicely. My relationships with my wives were excellent, my sisters and daughter were doing well, and our family had a solid financial safety net.

Maybe it was about time I had Roxy teach me some King-tier water magic.

*Legends of the University #5: The Boss has a soft spot for little kids.*

## Chapter 6: A Water King is Born

**I**N A NORMALLY QUIET CORNER of the University of Magic, a *suggestive* conversation was taking place.

“No. I said no!”

The place: a small building known to certain students as the “P.E. storage shed.”

In front of its door, a young man had seized a blue-haired girl by the arm.

“Come on, what’s the big deal? I’m begging you here, teach—”

“No means no!”

The girl’s attitude was one of curt rejection. Her face was turned to one side, and she was pouting in displeasure.

But the young man wasn’t backing down. “Just this one time? Please?”

“I’ve already given you my answer. Let go of me, please! Lunch is ending soon.”

“Hey! Don’t be like that!”

It was clear he had no intention of releasing her. The girl looked around the area, her expression troubled.

This was a quiet corner of the campus, but that didn’t mean it was deserted. There were several people in the area.

But when the girl shot them pleading glances, everyone simply looked away.

There was a simple reason for this: They were afraid of the young man harassing her. He was the most infamous delinquent in this entire city.

It wasn't that they didn't *want* to help the girl. But they all knew that any attempt at intervention would likely be pointless, and might well cost them dearly. None were brave enough to risk it.

"Think it over for a minute, okay? This is a win-win arrangement we're talking about. You might not like the idea right now, but in the long run, we're both going to benefit."

"Well...I suppose, yes..."

"Hey, how about this? If you do this for me, I'll do anything *you* want in return."

"Ugh... Look, I...I just..."

As the girl's resolve faltered, the young man pressed his advantage ruthlessly. He moved in closer, nearly pressing his mouth to her ear, as he whispered honeyed words.

The girl's face was growing redder by the moment. Fiddling with her long, braided hair, she looked down at the ground in embarrassment.

"Hey! It's the student council!"

But at that very moment, the most handsome man in the University arrived on the scene. A conspicuous white-haired girl in sunglasses followed close behind him.

"Ooooh! It's Sir Luke!"

"Silent Fitz is here, too!"

The relieved onlookers recognized these new arrivals immediately. They were Luke and Fitz of the student council.

"Sir Luke is so *dashing!* What perfect timing!"

"Take me now, Luke!"

"Is it just me, or has Fitz gotten a lot cuter lately?"

"Man, I never would have guessed she was a girl..."

Ignoring the shrill cries of their audience, the two of them strode up to the young man and the girl.

“Well, Rudeus...we’re here because someone reported you were assaulting a female student, but...”

Luke trailed off mid-sentence to heave a heavy sigh. He knew both of the participants in this little farce: Rudeus Greyrat and his second wife, Roxy.

The “girl” wasn’t a student, in other words. And Rudeus hadn’t been assaulting her.

Having confirmed these facts, Luke turned around and started walking back the way he’d came.

“Fitz, you deal with this, please.”

Scratching at her ears awkwardly, Fitz nodded. “Right.”

As the young knight left the scene, Roxy let out a long sigh of her own. “A female *student*? Really?”

“You can’t blame them, Teacher,” said Rudeus, nodding indulgently. “Most of the students aren’t aware that you’re a professor yet.” At this point, he looked over at Silent Fitz for support—and found her looking displeased, puffing her cheeks out slightly. “Hm? What’s the matter, Sylphie?”

“Look, Rudy. I know Roxy is your wife, but that doesn’t mean you can force her to do something she doesn’t want to. Sometimes a girl just isn’t in the mood, you know?”

“Huh? Uh, right. Absolutely,” said Rudeus, looking a bit nonplussed.

“Honestly...” Fitz muttered. “Maybe she’s better at this stuff, but you *could* try asking me instead...”

“Wait. Hold on. Could this be—”

Suddenly, Rudeus' eyes lit up. Stepping quickly over to Fitz, he poked at her cheek with his finger; she responded by turning her head the other way, and puffing out her cheeks even further.

"It is! It is! You're *jealous*, Sylphie!"

With this exclamation, he threw his arms around Fitz and squeezed her tightly. Fitz didn't seem entirely displeased, but she didn't stop scowling either.

"I-I wouldn't say I'm jealous, really. More like disappointed!"

"Don't worry, honey! I won't leave you out! We'll do this together!"

"Wha— A-are you serious? You mean...all three of us?"

Rudeus brought his mouth to Fitz's ear and murmured his reply. "Yeah, that's right. We can have Roxy teach *both* of us at once."

"Uhh...Roxy's going to teach us...?"

"Well, of course she is. She's the expert, after all."

Fitz glanced over at Roxy, who turned her face to the side sulkily. "I still didn't say I'm willing yet, you know."

"Come on, don't say that. Sylphie wants to learn, too. Isn't that right, Sylphie?"

"I-I don't know... It sounds kind of embarrassing..." Still wrapped up in Rudeus' arms, Fitz squirmed around uncertainly. The sunglasses she'd once worn as a disguise hid her eyes from view, but it was obvious they were shining with emotion. "But I guess I'll do it...for you, Rudy..."

"Oh, Sylphie!"

Overcome with affection, Rudeus buried his face in Fitz's hair. Its pleasant scent and softness left him even more excited, and his hug grew more intense by the second. Fitz, for her part, was entranced by this powerful embrace, and soon stopped resisting it entirely.

Roxy looked on with envy in her eyes.

This was exactly what Rudeus needed. It was time to press the attack once more.

"Why don't you want to teach me, Roxy? Don't you like me anymore?"

This time, he took a deeply wounded tone. It was enough to make Roxy flinch.

"Of course I still *like* you, Rudy! I... I love you very much!"

"Then why are you being like this?"

"Well...if I teach you this, I won't have anything left that I'm better at than you..."

"What? Don't be ridiculous, Roxy! You're on a higher plane of *existence* than me!"

Roxy sighed at this. "Okay, look. I've been meaning to say this for a while, but I think your opinion of me is a little overblown. I'm a petty person, really...the sort of woman who gets upset about her student surpassing her."

"That's not a problem, I assure you! You're perfect just the way you are, pettiness and all!"

"Anyway, I spent *months* of my life learning this, you know? You and Sylphie are more talented than I ever was, so you'll probably master it much more quickly..."

At this point, Fitz finally realized that she'd misunderstood the situation, and her dreamy smile gave way to a confused expression. "Um, sorry, Rudy...what exactly are we talking about here?"

"Oh, right. I was asking Roxy to teach me a King-tier Water spell."

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Are you familiar with the concept of a romantic bike ride?

Allow me to elaborate. I'm referring specifically to a youthful couple sharing a single bicycle.

Most typically, a boy will be pedaling up in front, with a girl seated behind him. She sits sideways on the luggage rack—perhaps with her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, perhaps keeping a slight distance instead. The boy might be doing the steering and pedaling, but in many cases, the bike itself belongs to the girl.

The natural habitat for an event of this kind is a riverbank in the early evening. The warm red glow of the setting sun conveniently disguises any mild blushing that might be going on.

At the moment, I found myself in a very comparable situation. The sun was still high in the sky, but the nape of Sylphie's neck was sitting right in front of me. By moving my nose forward, I could easily fill my nostrils with the sweet scent of her skin.

I also had my arms around her waist, with my hands crossed right around her navel. My upper body was pressed closely against hers; I could feel the beating of her heart through my chest.

It was truly splendid.

Just as a side note, I should mention that I was keeping my *lower* body a bit separated from hers, for reasons that don't need to be stated. She was my wife and all, but I still needed to treat her with respect.

Also, I'd seen several news stories about car crashes caused by a passenger groping their driver. We were on a horse at the moment, which wasn't quite the same thing, but it still wasn't a good idea to distract the person holding the reins.

“Matsukaze really is a good horse,” said a voice from just beyond Sylphie. “He’s calm and does what he’s told, but he’s also very strong.”

I leaned to look over Sylphie’s shoulder, and the back of a blue-haired girl came into view. It was Roxy; she was sitting just in front of Sylphie.

“Yep. You don’t see a horse like this every day, that’s for sure.”

The three of us had squeezed onto the back of a single horse.

Matsukaze, the most neglected of our household’s pets, didn’t seem to mind this excessive burden one bit. He was trotting along as if we weren’t even there.

“Didn’t Ginger pick her out for you, Rudy?” asked Sylphie. “She’s got a good eye for horses.”

“Do you know a lot about horses yourself, Sylphie?” said Roxy.

“Huh? Um, I wouldn’t go that far...but I did get to see some of the best horses in the Kingdom of Asura a couple times. Like the one the captain of the royal knights rides.”

“I see. I’m sure that must be a splendid animal...”

At this, Matsukaze whinnied as if to object.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Matsukaze!” said Roxy hurriedly. “You’re quite splendid too. After all, you’re the one and only steed of the Greyrat family.”

Hmm. Did certain animals understand human languages in this world? Or maybe Roxy was just a horse whisperer?

Probably not. Pets start responding to your voice when you talk to them enough, that’s all. Aisha was always chattering at Byt and Dillo, too.

“In any case... I have to admit, it’s a bit embarrassing riding in front at my age.”

Every time we met someone coming the opposite direction, Roxy would blush and pull her hat down over her face. I suppose sitting in front of the person holding the reins was comparable to riding in the baby seat in a car.

“I wouldn’t have minded following you two on Dillo or something, you know.”

“Nice try, Roxy,” Sylphie said with a smile. “I bet you were planning to run off the instant we took our eyes off you.”

“I’m not a *child*. I wasn’t going to run away.”

Enjoying the sound of my wives chatting, I took some time to gaze at the scenery around us.

At the moment, we were on the outskirts of the city. There was a small, beautiful stream running to our right; on our left, there was a large plain with a forest in the distance. The Northern Territories weren’t the most fertile part of the world, but at this time of the year there was lots of green.

Up until a few minutes ago, we’d been passing fields of wheat and potatoes, but now we were surrounded by empty, undeveloped country. I wasn’t entirely sure how many hours we’d been riding now, but we’d clearly come far enough to get some privacy.

Watching the water on our right, I caught glimpses of fish as the sunlight reflected off their scales. This was one of several smaller streams that fed into the river which ran past the city of Sharia.

It might be nice to come out of the city to fish on a sunny day, even if I didn’t travel this far. Not that I’d ever fished before.

“I told you two I was going to teach you, and I intend to do a proper job of it.”

The reason we’d come all the way out here was simple enough: Roxy had folded. My repeated pleas and badgering had finally worn her down.

"I'll teach you the only King-tier Water spell I've mastered: Lightning Storm."

Roxy still sounded disappointed about this turn of events, so I reached past Sylphie's side and stroked her shoulders affectionately.

In any case... *Lightning Storm*, huh? Just based on the name, it sounded like a standard electricity-based spell. Now that I thought about it, though, lightning wasn't one of the standard magical disciplines in this world. I'd never even seen anyone use an electric-type spell before.

And on top of that, this was a King-tier spell. I had to assume it was going to be dramatic.

"Hmm, all right. I think we've come far enough."

After a bit more time on the road, Roxy called us to a halt and hopped down off Matsukaze. She proceeded to tie him to a small tree about as thick as her leg.

"Hey, Teacher...do you remember Caravaggio?"

"Oh, yes. That was the name of Paul's horse, wasn't it? That really brings me back..." Roxy smiled, looking a bit nostalgic.

It had been twelve years since she helped me become a Water Saint. I'd picked up a bunch of other skills in the meantime, but only now was I finally moving up to King-tier. It felt like I'd taken a lot of detours on the road to this moment.

But on the topic of the horse...poor Caravaggio had very nearly died back then. Roxy had just managed to save his life, but he could have been killed instantly. It was possible she'd forgotten about that after all this time, so I felt the need to bring it up.

"Is there any risk of another accident like the one we had back then?"

“I don’t think so, no. But we wouldn’t want Matsukaze catching cold in the rain, so you should make an Earth Fortress to shelter him.”

“Got it.”

I promptly turned and enclosed our horse in an earthen igloo of sorts. He accepted this with admirable aplomb.

“Um, should I be waiting at a distance or anything?” said Sylphie, pulling on her rain jacket.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” replied Roxy, doing the same.

Even a Saint-tier spell was enough to leave you drenched, so I’d proposed that we bring these along as a precautionary measure. I pulled mine on as well.

“Is everyone ready?”

“Yep.”

“Whenever you are.”

Roxy nodded and pointed at a tree far off in the distance. It was an enormous thing. Even from far away, I could tell that its trunk was incredibly thick.

“I’ll be using that tree as my target. I can only use this once today, so watch very carefully.”

“Got it.”

With another small nod at my reply, Roxy closed her eyes and began breathing deeply. Her hands clutched her staff tightly as she focused intently on the task at hand.

This went on for longer than I’d expected. She could fire off a Saint-tier spell quickly, but apparently this wasn’t so easy for her. Although I didn’t have an Eye of Magical Power or anything, I felt pretty confident that she was using this time to gather up a huge amount of mana for the spell.

After a few long minutes, Roxy's eyes snapped open, and she murmured "All right, then. Let's begin."

With those words, she stabbed her staff down into the ground.

With her left hand, she held it steady. With her right, she clutched the magic stone on top of it.

And finally, she began to chant—slowly and carefully, as if reviewing every word before she spoke it.

*"Oh, spirits of the magnificent waters, I beseech the Prince of Thunder! Grant me my wish, bless me with thy savagery, and reveal to this insignificant servant a glimpse of thy power! Let fear strike the heart of man as thy divine hammer strikes its anvil and cover the land with water!"*

A few sentences in, I recognized the words and blinked in confusion.

*"Come, oh rain, and wash everything away in thy flood of destruction!"*

Black clouds rapidly filled the sky above us. Simultaneously, a harsh and pelting rain began to fall. Wind whipped across the plain, driving the water up and under my coat. My robe was soaked instantly. Lightning flickered up above us, threatening to strike the ground at any moment.

It was all very impressive, but I'd seen it before. This was just the Saint-tier spell Cumulonimbus.

*"I call upon you, mighty spirit of light, shining lord of the heavens!"*

But when I expected the chant to end, Roxy kept right on going.

*"Do you see the impudent foe towering before us? Do you see your sworn enemy, in all his arrogance? I would be the holy blade that strikes him down! Let your radiant power teach him that the Emperor yet reigns supreme!"*

With every word that left her mouth, the sky above us was compressed. The black clouds that had stretched across the horizon collapsed in on themselves, forming a circle that drew smaller and denser by the second. Crackling electricity arced all around the dark mass.

And finally, when the ring of cloud had shrunk to a mere dot in the sky...

*“Lightning!”*

A pillar of pure light fell to the earth.

It was a bolt of lightning, yes. But it was nothing like any I had seen before.

The sound wave reached us a split second later.

The roar was deafening, even at this range. Sylphie clapped her hands over her ears and grimaced.

I, on the other hand, was too busy staring slack-jawed out into the distance. I couldn’t find anything to say. Not a single word.

After a few moments, I managed to swallow. At some point, I’d clutched my hands into fists; they were trembling.

Once the roar had swept past us, nothing remained. The massive jet-black clouds were gone. The sheets of torrential rain were gone. The blinding pillar of lighting was gone. And that massive tree was gone, too.

There was simply nothing left.

The sky above us was clear and blue. The earth around us was wet, but that was the only hint remaining of what had just transpired.

When I strained my eyes, I could just barely make out a black clump of carbonized wood where the tree had once stood.

“Ugh...”

Releasing her grip on her staff, Roxy staggered to one side. I hurried to catch her before she could fall.

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, I’m glad I pulled that off. With my mana capacity, I can only use it once, even with my staff... Did you get a good look at the spell, Rudy?”

“Absolutely, Teacher.”

I hadn’t been able to tear my eyes away from that for a single second. I remembered every word of the incantation, too.

“Do you think you’re ready to try it?”

“I’ll give it a shot!”

After handing Roxy off to Sylphie, I turned away, held out my own staff, and tightened my grip on its shaft.

Aqua Heartia had been with me since the day I turned ten, supporting me through all the turbulence of my life. I felt confident I could cast this spell without its help, but I wanted to use it anyway.

Trying to remember what I’d just seen as precisely as possible, I looked up at the sky and began to chant.

*“Oh, spirits of the magnificent waters, I beseech the Prince of Thunder! Grant me my wish, bless me with thy savagery, and reveal to this insignificant servant a glimpse of thy power! Let fear strike the heart of man as thy divine hammer strikes its anvil and cover the land with water! Come, oh rain, and wash everything away in thy flood of destruction!”*

A huge amount of mana poured from my hands into the staff, then shot up to the heavens.

As the storm clouds gathered, I felt the magic raging all around me, ready to be harnessed and unleashed. If I had chanted the word “Cumulonimbus” next, the spell would have completed itself.

I wasn't going to do that, though. And I thought I understood why. If I gave the spell a coherent form, it would probably be impossible to achieve that compression of the clouds. I needed to move on to the next stage *without* stabilizing the spell.

*"I call upon you, mighty spirit of light, shining lord of the heavens! Do you see the impudent foe towering before us? Do you see your sworn enemy, in all his arrogance? I would be the holy blade that strikes him down! Let your radiant power teach him that the Emperor yet reigns supreme!"*

With every phrase I spoke, the magic in the air raged more and more intensely. I had no choice but to pour more mana into the spell to keep it from spinning out of control entirely. I was *forcing* the clouds to compress, squeezing them together with all my might.

This spell demanded power. Raw, brute power. That was the only thing that made it possible. I'd never cast anything that demanded such ferocious force before.

No...that wasn't entirely true. Something about this was familiar to me. It wasn't so different from what I felt when I was pushing my Stone Cannon to the very limit of its potential.

The moment I realized that, the spell suddenly felt much easier to control.

*"Lightning!"*

When I spoke the final word, I could sense something like an empty hole open up underneath my compressed ball of mana.

I pushed everything down through it, all at once.

**KRA-KOOM!**

Once again, a great pillar of lightning hit the earth, and its roar swept past us. I hadn't used any particular target, but the spell had struck the ground exactly where I wanted it to.

Once again, there was nothing left in its wake. There were no black clouds above us, only clear blue sky. But the ground was a bit more sodden than before, and our coats were dripping with water.

The afterimage of the lightning was still flashing before my eyes. My ears were still ringing from its roar.

I'd pulled it off.

Sylphie was the first to speak. All she managed, though, was a startled "Oh, wow."

Just like that, I was a King-tier Water Mage.

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"That was a little frustrating..."

On our way back home, Sylphie's expression was slightly downcast.

After my successful attempt, she'd given the spell a shot as well. Roxy started her off with Cumulonimbus. She failed the first time, but pulled it off on her second try.

Unfortunately, she hadn't managed to cast Lightning. Her first attempt had failed, and it had also drained her dry. Compressing the mana was the hardest part of the spell by far; I'd probably only succeeded because I had experience doing something similar.

Still, Sylphie was a quick learner. I had a feeling she'd figure it out if she gave it a couple more tries.

"Don't feel bad, Sylphie," said Roxy with a smile. "I still mess it up once every five times or so."

In a way, I was a little glad Sylphie had failed this time. If both of us had pulled it off on our first try, Roxy might have taken a hit to her pride.

This was interesting, though. Based on what I saw today, Sylphie seemed to have a larger mana capacity than Roxy did. And Roxy's wasn't small at all, from what I understood.

"Well, *somebody* succeeded on their very first try. You're incredible, Rudy."

"Yes, that was certainly impressive. I have to admit I was expecting it to happen, but it was a bit depressing that you pulled it off that easily."

"..."

I couldn't find anything to say to the two of them.

Sure, I'd started using magic around the age of two, and I put some effort into expanding my mana capacity. But given how much I ended up with, I'd probably been born with an unnaturally large supply in the first place. I'd put in the effort, but I'd also just gotten lucky. That made it tricky to say much of anything about my abilities as a mage.

In any case, I needed to stay focused for now. We weren't home yet, and my wives were exhausted.

Once we were safely back, I'd have to give them both shoulder massages. We'd be skipping the nocturnal activities tonight, also. We were *all* worn out.

"Oh, look, Rudy," called Sylphie. "Isn't that a pretty sunset?"

I looked over to the west, where the sun was starting to sink below the horizon. The sky all around it was a brilliant shade of crimson.

Nature was just as beautiful here as it was back in my old world. That was one thing that hadn't changed.

"Yeah, it's gorgeous."

*Hmm...was I supposed to tack on "but not as gorgeous as you" there?*

With a small sigh, Sylphie leaned against me slightly. She looked just about ready to doze off on the spot.

We would probably be making it home before it got dark out, but I'd have to stay alert until we reached the city limits. These two couldn't use magic right now, so if any monsters popped out, I needed to deal with them.

"...You know, sometimes I find myself wondering if this is all a dream," murmured Roxy as she gazed at the sunset.

Sylphie tilted her head quizzically. "A dream?"

"That's right. Maybe I'm still trapped in that labyrinth, and this is a happy little delusion I'm seeing right before I die."

I kept my eyes scanning the area around us for threats, half-listening to the conversation.

Sylphie and Roxy were speaking slowly, fatigue evident in their voices.

"I'm a lot happier right now than I was six months ago. I got married, for one thing, and I was hired as a professor at the University. I suppose I seem like something of an interloper to you, Sylphie...but I'm happy I'm here, riding this horse with both of you."

I'd felt Sylphie flinch a little when Roxy spoke the word *interloper*. Now she shook her head in denial.

"You're not an interloper, Roxy. And I'm glad you've been so kind and considerate about all this. I don't think I'd win if you turned it into some sort of competition..."

Sylphie's voice was so uncertain that I felt the need to interrupt with a hug at this point. She took one hand off the reins to pat my arm; it was her way of saying "*I know.*"

“I mean, I just got lucky, really,” she continued after a moment. “I got to know Rudy when we were little, and then I ran into him again when he was really desperate for help. I never would have caught his attention otherwise.”

“I think you’re being a bit too modest...” said Roxy, her voice slightly troubled.

“Well, I probably wouldn’t even be here today if I hadn’t met Rudy as a kid.”

“What do you mean?”

“He taught me magic when I was young, you know? It’s the only thing that kept me alive.”

Sylphie began to recount the story of her life after the Displacement Incident.

She’d been unlucky enough to emerge high in the sky above the royal palace in Asura. By quickly casting a spell, she’d just barely managed to land safely. But at that moment, her hair lost its original color—possibly a side effect of spending too much mana in her terror.

Princess Ariel had taken a personal liking to her, but it was her rare ability to cast spells silently that had earned her a place in the royal court. And when Ariel was outmaneuvered by her political rivals, that same ability had allowed Sylphie to fight off dozens of assassins as they fled.

In the picture she painted, my magic was the only thing that had kept her alive through all of this.

“Back when I was working as Princess Ariel’s guardian mage, this one thought kept popping into my head: *If I didn’t know how to use magic, I’d probably be a slave right now.*”

As she spoke, I found myself wondering how different my own life would have been if I hadn't met Roxy or Sylphie when I was young.

If not for Roxy, I wouldn't have found the courage to leave that house for years. I was confident of that much. If I'd never taken a step outside—never met Sylphie—could I have survived the Displacement Incident? Could I have made my way across the Demon Continent?

Well, if I'd never met Sylphie, I wouldn't have ended up getting sent to the city of Roa. Which meant I wouldn't have met Eris or Ghislaine. Maybe my parents would have shipped me off to school eventually. I would have hit a wall with my magic at some point, so I might have ended up asking them to send me to the Ranoa University of Magic anyway.

Under different circumstances, Paul might have approved instead of telling me to wait until I was twelve. But of course, I wouldn't have found Sylphie waiting for me in Ranoa. She wouldn't have followed me up here, either.

Maybe I would have ended up in the same class as Linia and Pursena and fallen in love with one of them. When we graduated, I'd head back to the Great Forest and live among the beastfolk.

Well, no...the Displacement Incident would have taken place eventually, so I probably would have rushed back home to Asura.

In any case, my life would have looked completely different.

Still...I couldn't help feeling like I would have run into Sylphie *somewhere*. And fallen in love with her, of course.

Yes, surely that was predestined by the laws of causality!

Or just "fate," if you prefer. Whatever.

"My life changed completely the day I met Rudy," Sylphie concluded, with her story at an end. "I mean...I did put in a lot of

effort, too, but I think I was lucky more than anything else. So when I see someone like you, who changed *Rudy*'s life for the better, and I know you both love each other, well...I don't really want him to lose that just because I'm around, I guess? I probably don't have the right to object, when I just got here first... Sorry, I don't know how to put this."

"That's all right," said Roxy quietly. "I understand what you're trying to say. And I'm...very happy you have such a high opinion of me."

I couldn't see Roxy's face, since she was sitting up in front. But I could see that her shoulders were trembling slightly.

I stretched my arms out and pulled both her and Sylphie into a hug.

"Rudy..."

Back in my old world, choosing Roxy would have meant losing Sylphie. And it could have worked out that way here, if not for Sylphie's decision to forgive me.

The only lucky person here was me.

Given my less-than-ideal track record as a husband, promising that I'd cherish them forever would probably ring hollow.

I'd just have to speak with my actions instead.

Once we made it home that evening, I took some time to go over what I'd learned from the day's lesson on King-tier magic.

Lightning was a tricky spell, but the basic concept was simple: You spread a huge amount of mana all across the sky, then concentrated it in one location, and dropped it down on your target.

Physically speaking, you created the storm clouds, then fired off a bolt of lightning. Simple as that.

In retrospect, Cumulonimbus and Lightning were essentially two parts of a single spell.

Its destructive power was the greatest of any spell I'd seen so far. That was only natural, though. I didn't know of any magic that demanded more raw mana than Cumulonimbus, and Lightning concentrated all of that energy into a single spot.

Up until now, my fully charged Stone Cannon had been the most lethal spell in my arsenal, but this one might have surpassed it. With this many gigawatts at my fingertips, I could launch myself into the future if I wanted to.

But seriously, though.

Although the name of this spell was Lightning, the real secret behind its power lay in the mana-compression step. I was curious if any King-tier spells in other disciplines might be applications of the same basic technique.

In any case, now that I'd gotten through casting the spell once, I'd be able to use it silently in the future.

The next time I used it, I was fairly sure I could speed up both the cloud formation and compression phases and drop the bolt of lightning much more quickly than before. But although I was planning to practice with it, I wasn't sure I'd get many chances to put this spell to practical use. After all, if I was up against a single target, my Stone Cannon was usually more than enough.

Lightning was kind of an overkill spell, on the whole. It would be more useful if I could find a way to *reduce* its power.

With this thought in mind, I started playing around a little on a much smaller scale. And after several failed experiments, I stumbled across a way to generate a strong electric current.

The method involved silently casting a tiny Cumulonimbus spell, compressing it, and firing off a Lightning spell in the direction of my target. This resulted in a small, crackling bolt of electricity that could

be directed with considerable accuracy. Its voltage seemed to be fairly low, too, so the damage it did wasn't too excessive.

I wasn't sure exactly how this worked, but it seemed like it might come in handy. It probably wasn't suitable for extremely close-range combat. You'd end up shocking yourself along with your target. On the bright side, it wasn't going to do any lasting damage. At worst, you'd be incapacitated for a time. But there were lots of other attack magic spells that *didn't* run the risk of hurting their own caster.

Still, it felt worth trying to refine this. I could use a spell designed to stun someone instead of killing them. Lightning branches through the air to reach its target, so it would be impossible to avoid. And the shock might even be effective at disabling someone protected by a battle aura. I didn't have anyone to test that on at the moment, but if Badigadi came back, I could ask him to be my guinea pig.

If nothing else, it might be a nice surprise to pull out of my sleeve against a more powerful opponent.

Incidentally, although this spell was just a tiny form of Lightning, I decided to call it Electric so I could distinguish between the two.

What a productive day this had been!

*Legends of the University #6: The Boss has an electric personality.*

## Chapter 7: The Wedding Ceremony

I'D BEEN PLANNING to sleep alone the night I became a Water King. This was mainly because Roxy and Sylphie were both tuckered out, so it didn't feel like the time for romance. I was pleasantly tired myself, but I knew I wouldn't be able to keep my hands to myself if I got into bed with either of them, so I'd decided we would all sleep in different rooms.

When I mentioned this to Aisha, though, she insisted on sleeping with me herself. This sort of thing had happened plenty of times before. I never actively invited her, but when she asked to sleep with me, I never turned her down. There was no real reason to refuse, so I gave her my permission.

Of course, this was going to be the strictly platonic kind of sleeping. As Aisha celebrated, though, I noticed that Norn was looking on with something that looked like envy in her eyes. Norn was already supposed to be staying over here tonight. Knowing her, though, there probably wasn't much point in suggesting that she join us.

That was my assumption, at least. But when I threw the offer out there just to be polite, Norn actually took me up on it.

I ended up sandwiched in between my sisters that night. Aisha was lying on my right, and Norn took my left. Before long, they were snoring away with their heads resting on my arms.

Aisha was one thing, but I was a bit perplexed that Norn had gone along with this. Her peaceful little face wasn't giving me any clues, either. Maybe it was her way of telling me that she'd accepted me as a kind of substitute father. *I trust you enough to sleep cuddled up against you*, or something like that. Maybe.

I was pinned in place with my arms outstretched, but I felt profoundly happy in that moment.

It was almost if I'd found a part of me that had been missing. Just as a bird needs two wings, perhaps a man *needs* two sisters on his arms.

This thought gave rise to an idea that sent a jolt running down my spine.

*Man, I want to have a threesome with Sylphie and Roxy.*

It was the voice of the devil, no doubt, whispering these words into my ear. Some evil snake, its tongue flickering around suggestively, was trying its best to lead me astray.

I couldn't let myself continue thinking about this.

In theory, it was something I'd been interested in for many years. But in practice, I had no idea how I'd even begin the conversation. They both loved me, but that didn't mean they'd be comfortable with a request like that.

I could take "no" for an answer, of course, but what if even *asking* them destroyed our relationship?

I didn't think that was likely, but I couldn't help worrying about it.

It wasn't like I was dissatisfied with our current arrangement. I was spending alternate nights with two very beautiful women, after all.

What's more, I was in love with both of them. One had already given me a child. What did I have to complain about? Nothing, that's what.

That said...I did *want* to try sleeping with both of them at once.

Part of it was that they both approached it so differently.

Sylphie was a bit on the submissive side. As a general rule, she did anything I asked her to in bed. When I suggested we try

something new, she'd often lower her eyes anxiously, but she never objected.

That's not to say she was a dead fish, though. Once we actually got started, she always enjoyed herself. Within a couple minutes she'd be gasping for air and clinging to me desperately. It was obvious how much she wanted to please me, and it was adorable.

Roxy, on the other hand, was something of a technician. She was constantly making use of the things she learned from Elinalise, trying to increase her skills. When I asked her to try something, she'd give some thought to the best way to do it. When I offered to do something myself, she'd make all sorts of suggestions. Given the difference in our sizes, we had some physical challenges to overcome, but she was creative and hard-working enough to find ways around them. And that was just as adorable, in its own way.

Sylphie was the indulgent type, and Roxy was an experimenter. They were both wonderful. I didn't prefer one over the other.

It was possible I'd eventually start enjoying my time with one of them more, but even then, I wasn't planning to neglect the other. My intention was to treat them as equally as I possibly could.

Right. I loved both of them equally. So was it really *that* wrong to think about sleeping with both of them at once?

Surely the answer was no. Any red-blooded man has some interest in such things. It's simply in our nature!

However, that didn't mean I was going to voice these thoughts. Sometimes it's wisest to keep your more extreme desires to yourself if you want to maintain healthy relationships.

This was the very reason I'd never let myself bring this up before.

As of this moment, at least, I was confident that wasn't going to change.

The next morning, I headed over to Cliff's laboratory.

Cliff's research was focused on the development of magical implements—specifically, ones capable of counteracting curses.

He'd insisted that I was welcome to drop in on him at any time, but whenever I dropped by, I made sure to listen carefully at the door. Depending on the noises I heard from inside, I sometimes had to turn around and leave.

Today, there didn't seem to be anything problematic going on in there, so I knocked on the door.

"Come in. The door's open," called a voice from within.

I stepped into the laboratory to find Elinalise sitting by the far window. She was resting her cheek on her hand and gazing out at the street, her long curly hair glimmering in the sun.

The woman sure was picturesque when she wasn't talking. But I knew her too well to be impressed—she was probably thinking unspeakably dirty thoughts.

"Are you the only one home, Elinalise?"

"That's right."

Cliff was very busy these days, and hadn't been making much progress on his research. We'd been talking for months about finding the time to improve his existing prototypes using the stones of absorption, but it still hadn't happened yet.

"Cliff's off working on the wedding preparations again."

That right there was one of the major reasons. Cliff and Elinalise were getting married soon.

"I keep *offering* to help out," she continued, "But he's determined to do it all himself."

"Try not to hold it against him. Men can be prideful about these things, you know?"

Before we left for the Begaritt Continent, Cliff had promised Elinalise he'd marry her when we returned. When we made it back, though, he hadn't even begun to prepare yet. That wasn't his fault by any means. We'd told him we might be gone for two years, but we ended up making it back in six months. It would have been odd to find him ready and waiting.

However, Cliff was the kind of guy who took his promises seriously. With remarkable focus and stubbornness, he'd gotten *everything* arranged over the last few months. First and foremost, he'd found them a place to live, bought the furniture, and planned out everything they needed to move in. For the most part, he handled all of this on his own, although I'd helped out a bit with the real estate hunt. Unlike me, he wasn't interested in buying a house; he'd eventually settled on renting an apartment in the Student District. If it ever got too cramped for them, he figured they could just move to a bigger place.

I was a bit surprised by that attitude, considering Cliff was something of a show-off by nature. But on the other hand, he wasn't swimming in cash at the moment, so it was perfectly reasonable. He couldn't have purchased a pricey home. Not without financial help from Elinalise, at least. I knew she was pretty well-off.

"Oh, and on that note... Congratulations, Elinalise."

They were in the final stages now. The wedding was scheduled for next month. Something about Elinalise wearing a pure white dress felt slightly out of character, but as long as the two of them were happy, that was all that really mattered.

"You mind if I wait around until Cliff comes back?"

"Not at all."

Elinalise was keeping up her side of the conversation, but she hadn't even looked in my direction yet. And now, still gazing out the window, she let out a long, deep sigh.

It was the kind of sigh that came with its own subtitles: *I'm so very troubled. Won't anyone ask me what's wrong?*

"Are you having second thoughts about the marriage or anything?" I ventured.

"Oh, of course not. Cliff's so sweet and devoted that I almost feel like I don't deserve him. I couldn't be happier that we're getting married."

Fair enough. I was only a spectator here, but as fair as I could tell, Cliff was nothing but loving and loyal to Elinalise. That's not to say that he was a perfect person. He had plenty of flaws. But he was still a young man—not even twenty years old yet, in fact. When you took his potential for future growth into consideration, the guy was a real catch.

"So why do you keep sighing, then?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Ah. I see."

That meant it was a sex thing, presumably.

"Cliff's been so busy that he only sleeps with me *twice a week!*"

Yeah. Figured as much.

"That's too bad, but what can you do? He's doing it all for you, Elinalise."

"Yes, yes. I understand all that, believe me."

"And once you finally move into your love nest, you probably won't emerge for a solid week, right?"

I was speaking from experience. The moment we got back from the Begaritt Continent, Elinalise and Cliff had shut themselves up in

here for days. It was enough to make you wonder if all they really cared about was the sex. Not that I had any right to say so, given my own healthy libido.

“Sigh...I can’t help being jealous of you, Rudeus.”

“Why? Sometimes I go without for a couple days myself.”

“Yes, but you get to fool around with Sylphie and Roxy at once, don’t you? I’m satisfied with Cliff, of course, but I’m sure you three have a *lot* of fun together.”

“Wait, what? No! We don’t have threesomes or anything.”

“What, really? That’s a pity. It’s quite a good time, I assure you. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

*Oh no! The devil’s tempting me again! Don’t listen to her, Rudeus. Begone, Mara! Amen!*

“Scandalous! Disgraceful! I’m going to get you banned from the library, Elinalise!”

“I don’t think Sylphie or Roxy would mind, you know.”

“Easy for you to say, woman! What if I destroy my marriages?!”

“Hmm. I suppose Roxy can be a bit uptight sometimes. She might not react too well if you dropped the idea on her all of a sudden.”

“Yeah! That’s what I’m saying!”

Sylphie tended to go along with anything I proposed. It was hard to know how she *felt* about things, and sometimes I wondered if she was sacrificing her own desires to please me...but if I told her I wanted to try this, I was confident she’d agree.

Things were different with Roxy, though. Despite her no-nonsense personality, she had a surprisingly innocent side to her. For all I knew, the moment I proposed a threesome she’d start packing her bags to go home to her parents.

"Now that you mention it, though," Elinalise murmured, "I could speak to them about this. You know...lay the groundwork for you."

*My god! Of course! It's brilliant!*

Roxy might not react well if I brought this up out of nowhere, but she was actively learning new bedroom techniques from Elinalise. Elinalise could easily start dropping a few lessons about threesomes into the curriculum. And Sylphie trusted her advice completely, too.

This was perfect. Almost too perfect! We'd be wrestling around in bed together in no time, and I wouldn't even have to feel awkward about it!

"Elinalise! You're a goddess!"

Was that a halo I saw above her head? Overcome with emotion, I bowed deeply before my savior.

Elinalise replied in an amused tone of voice, "Well, well. Such flattery. I'm not so sure I actually want to help you, though. It's not like I'm getting anything out of the bargain."

"Guh!"

She'd brought up the idea, and now she was refusing to help me? What a terrible woman.

But I couldn't fight back now. She had me in the palm of her hand, and she knew it. I had all the willpower of a horse with a carrot dangling in front of its nose.

"Is there...anything at all...I can do for you, Elinalise?"

As I looked up anxiously at her face, Elinalise grinned wickedly.

The woman really was a villain. Even *my* smiles didn't look this evil. Probably.

"Well, I seem to remember hearing something about a rare aphrodisiac from the Kingdom of Asura."

"Right. I've still got that. Never got around to using it."

"Would you mind giving that to me? As a present?"

She had to be talking about that little bottle of potion I'd received from Luke.

To be honest, I'd never felt the need to rely on that stuff. I had more stamina than either of my wives, so I was afraid I might end up harming them if I took it. The idea of making *them* take it felt a little wrong, too. I'd never figured out a good way to use it.

"How do you want to use it?"

"To spice up my wedding night."

"Is that even going to be necessary?"

"It's a special occasion, dear. I'd rather like to have Cliff on me like a wild beast all night long."

Sometimes it amazed me how freely Elinalise embraced her own horniness. I mean, it wasn't like Cliff was constantly walking around in a state of excitement.

"Delicate question, Elinalise, but do you ever get worried that you'll drive Cliff away with your, uh...appetite?"

"Not at all. We wouldn't have ended up together in the first place if he couldn't handle it."

"Ever considered trying to tone things DOWN for his sake?"

"I could try to restrain myself, but I'd explode eventually. I'd rather be consistently honest about my feelings."

That was Elinalise for you, all right.

Now that I thought about it, though, Cliff didn't seem to be forcing himself to keep up with her either. He did his best to please her, but I felt like he knew his own limits.

They both loved each other intensely, in their own distinct ways. That seemed like a fun dynamic for a relationship. I kind of envied them.

"Well, all right then. You've got a deal. I'll bring it over next time I stop by."

"You're too kind, dear. Oh, I can't *wait* to see what Cliff's like when he can't control his passion anymore..."

Elinalise began to drool, her eyes glassy with passion. I was starting to feel a bit worried for my friend, but hopefully the two of them would emerge from this even closer than before.

A month later, I found myself in the only Millis Church in the city of Sharia.

It was a majestic, solemn place; not unlike a Christian cathedral. Rows of simple benches filled most of the space. Up in front, the holy symbol of the Millis faith stood in a pool of sunlight pouring through a huge glass window. And in front of that symbol, a priest was offering a litany of praise to God.

"Saint Millis will always guide you and watch over you."

A man and a woman stood facing the priest, wearing pure white clothing. Behind them, twenty-odd spectators looked on quietly.

"Should anyone seek to divide you, his holy shield will protect you. Should anyone seek to harm you, his holy sword will judge them. And should your love prove a lie, his fiery sorrow will pierce the heavens."

I was one of those spectators. Standing in the very first row, in fact, all dressed up in Asuran-style finery.

Sylphie stood on my right, and Roxy on my left. Both of them wore modest, formal dresses. We hadn't owned any of these clothes beforehand, so we'd gone out and bought them for the occasion. I

wasn't sure when we'd need to wear them again, but it couldn't hurt to have them around.

Ariel and Luke stood on Sylphie's other side, wearing what looked to be some *very* expensive clothes of their own. Behind us was another row of VIPS, including Zanoba, Linia, and Pursena. And behind them, there was a row of miscellaneous guests—Ginger, Julie, and two girls who were apparently Ariel's attendants, among others. I couldn't see them from where I stood, but Norn and Aisha were somewhere back there, too.

They were both wearing nice dresses today too, but I'd opted to rent those. They were both growing girls, so it felt premature to buy anything. They hadn't been too pleased about that, of course.

There were some guests I didn't recognize as well. But unsurprisingly, Nanahoshi hadn't shown.

In Millis Church weddings, the rows of guests were apparently divided by rank. The very front row was reserved for the highest-ranking spectators, as well as the closest family members of the bride and groom.

Princess Ariel's presence in the very front was only natural, in other words. And Sylphie was Elinalise's only relative in the room, which earned her a spot. On the other hand, I was only up here because I was Sylphie's husband. That made me feel slightly out of place.

Roxy had it worse than me, though. She was up here as my second wife, and the Millis Church didn't think too highly of bigamy. I think she found the situation a little awkward, since she'd been standing stiffly in place since the ceremony began.

Luke had said there was no need to be self-conscious, since many Asuran nobles took multiple wives despite the doctrines of their church.

I didn't think Roxy had anything to feel guilty about either, for the record.

As the ceremony moved steadily along, one exchange caught my attention.

"Cliff Grimor. Do you swear to love Elinalise Dragonroad, and only her, so long as you both do live?"

"I swear to love her until my death."

Apparently, the Millis Church had marriage vows, too. And Cliff's choice of words struck me as really heavy. Knowing him, he'd keep his word on this quite literally. Elinalise would be the only woman he touched for the rest of his life.

I admired that kind of faithfulness...although I apparently wasn't capable of it myself.

"Elinalise Dragonroad. Do you swear to love Cliff Grimor, and only him, so long as you both do live?"

"I swear to love him all my life."

I wasn't sure what to think about Elinalise's vow, though.

I knew she'd *try* to keep her word. But she had her curse to contend with, and there was also the matter of her lifespan. Cliff was probably going to die before her, and I felt like she'd eventually go looking for someone new to love. And no one could blame her for it, surely.

Still...it was kind of bizarre to see her getting married, considering the whole reason she'd enrolled at the University was to sleep around with a bunch of vigorous young men. Life's just full of surprises, isn't it?

"In that case, the groom may place the Necklace of Millis on his bride."

Cliff carefully accepted a large, heavily ornamented necklace from the priest. It was a standard ceremonial prop, supposedly made

in the image of a necklace Saint Millis himself had once worn. Every church had their own copy.

“Bend over a little, Lise,” Cliff whispered under his breath.

“Ah, right. Sorry.”

Elinalise lowered her head slightly, and Cliff got up on tiptoe to place the necklace around her neck. It wasn’t the most graceful moment. Poor guy didn’t seem to be getting any taller.

“And now, the bride may give her groom the promissory kiss,” said the priest.

“Of course.”

Slowly bending over, Elinalise kissed Cliff on his forehead, rather than his lips.



This part of the ceremony was based on a story from the life of Saint Millis.

On the day of his departure for the battlefield, Millis had bestowed his necklace on his “Most Beloved.” In return, she kissed him on the forehead, praying as she did so for his safe return.

Later, when Millis was in grave danger, his Most Beloved held up her necklace to the heavens. Moved by its beauty and the depths of her love, God then interceded to save Millis.

The story was said to be based on real historical events, but it was hard to say how much of it was literally true.

“God in heaven, hear my plea! Grant these two the gift of everlasting love and happiness!”

As he spoke these words, the priest’s wooden staff let out a brilliant burst of light that illuminated the entire church. The newlyweds were silhouetted against the radiance; with their pure-white clothing, it almost looked as if they were melting into it.

It was a lovely, dreamlike moment that seemed to last much longer than it did. Even after the light faded away, Elinalise and Cliff stayed as they were, smiling into each other’s faces. They looked truly happy. And it was obvious they were going to stay that way.

I almost felt guilty for thinking *“Huh. So that staff’s a magic implement, right?”* instead of cooing at the spectacle. Maybe I was getting a little too pragmatic.

With the ceremony at an end, the guests filed out of the church while the newlyweds looked on. It was a fairly short event, all things considered. Its purpose was solely to prove their mutual love to God, with us serving as witnesses. There wasn’t a reception afterward or anything. Members of the nobility would probably take the opportunity for an afterparty, but unfortunately Cliff was just a student.

Still, if Badigadi had been here, I had a feeling he would've loudly demanded that we throw a feast. And I was kind of in the mood to celebrate myself for once. It was a happy occasion, after all.

"That was *amazing*!"

"The bride looked so beautiful!"

Aisha and Norn were in high spirits as well. They'd been chattering excitedly about the ceremony ever since we left the church. You'd never have guessed that there was any tension between them.

Come to think of it, though, I hadn't seen them fighting lately. If anything, they were getting along nicely.

"Millis weddings are so romantic, aren't they?"

"Yeah! I want to wear a dress like that!"

As my two sisters chirped away, I glanced over at them furtively.

I could see Norn falling in love with someone and putting on her own pure white dress someday. It wasn't the most pleasant of thoughts. I'd have to give the lucky man a punch to the face as his wedding present.

Aisha, though... I wasn't so sure about her. It was difficult to imagine her running off to get married. Maybe she'd spend her whole life as the family maid.

"I guess girls do dream about that sort of ceremony, huh?" I said, turning to Sylphie.

"Well, sure. I'm not complaining, though!" she answered with a smile. "Ours was nice in its own way. I liked how intimate it was."

Of course, if she wanted her own proper wedding ceremony, we could manage something similar. We weren't members of the Millis Church, though, so it would be more of an imitation than anything else. Cliff would probably agree to officiate if I got down on my knees and begged him.

I wouldn't hesitate to grovel for Sylphie's sake, either. A good man puts his wife before his dignity.

"..."

Someone had tugged silently at my left sleeve. I turned to find Roxy looking up at me.

She'd put on some makeup for the occasion, which only enhanced her beauty. The blush on her cheeks looked to be purely natural, though.

"...Do you want to have a wedding ceremony of your own, Roxy?"

The two of us had never gotten around to formally celebrating our marriage. The timing had a lot to do with it—we'd just delivered the news of Paul's death, after all. But in addition to that, the Migurd had no tradition of matrimonial ceremonies. Roxy had told me upfront that it wouldn't be necessary.

Still, it wouldn't have surprised me if she'd changed her mind after today.

"No, that won't be necessary. But, uh...try to read between the lines, will you?"

With that, Roxy closed her eyes and puckered up.

I wasn't entirely sure what had prompted this, but I wasn't about to pass up on such a delightful invitation. Taking Roxy by the shoulders, I pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead.

"Wha—"

"Sorry about that. Your forehead's particularly adorable today."

"I-Is it...? Hee hee."

Roxy seemed a bit confused at first, probably because of where I'd planted my kiss. But once I complimented her, a big goofy smile spread across her face.

The woman was truly easy to manipulate. But that was just another part of what made her charming.

*Okay, I think I've made up my mind. It has to be Roxy tonight...*

"Oh! Rudy, give me one too!"

Clinging to my right arm, Sylphie pushed her head toward me expectantly.

Naturally, I wasn't about to disappoint her. Why would I hesitate to plant a kiss on a beautiful woman's forehead?

"Hee hee hee..."

Despite the fact that she'd initiated the kiss, Sylphie pressed a hand to her forehead and giggled bashfully.

*Does she have to be so cute all the time? Gah. Now I want to sleep with her tonight! But also Roxy...*

*Hmm. What about both of them at once?*

I wasn't sure if Elinalise had finished laying the groundwork for me yet. It had been a while since I asked her, though, and I'd given her the aphrodisiac some time ago.

Maybe it was safe to give this a shot...

"Rudeus, could you try to control yourself?" said Norn, interrupting my leering session. "We're in public."

The look on her face clearly conveyed the unspoken part of her message: *I just saw a very nice wedding, but your degeneracy is kind of killing the mood.* I understood how she felt. It's not much fun watching your brother seducing a woman, let alone two of them at once.

"Aw, is somebody a widdle jealous?"

"What the— Gah! Quit it!"

By ways of an apology, I gave Norn a big hug and planted a kiss on *her* forehead. Blushing, she pulled herself away and started rubbing furiously at the spot where my lips had touched her.

*What a splendid sight.*

“...”

Aisha took all of this in with an extremely envious look on her face. It was obvious she wanted to be included, but feared that I might turn her down. Not that she had any reason to be worried, of course.

“Aisha!”

With my best attempt at a warm, loving smile, I turned to her and spread my arms wide.

“Rudeus!”

Her face shining with joy, Aisha leapt toward me. After receiving her forehead kiss, she snuggled against me like a happy cat.

*Fwahaha! Come. Suffer in my embrace!*

Still, I couldn’t say I approved of her twining her legs around mine like this in public. She was wearing a dress and all, so she was probably exposing her underwear.

“Aisha, cut it out with your legs. You’ve got a dress on, remember? I’m assuming you don’t want to flash everyone on the street.”

“Okay! Got it!”

Hopping away from me with a satisfied grin, Aisha got right back to trotting down the street.

What was I going to do with her? True, she was only eleven years old, which made her a child. But sadly, there are some *gentlemen* out there who regard anyone over the age of ten as fair game. I needed her to be more careful.

“...”

As I set off after my sister, a stray thought popped into my head.

In a letter he wrote some time ago, Paul had suggested that we celebrate once our family was reunited. I'd been meaning to do something along those lines, but somehow six months had slipped past without it happening.

We hadn't held a party for Aisha and Norn on their fifth or tenth birthdays, either. I felt guilty about that, especially since I'd been treated to a big bash at their age.

It's always nice to have someone celebrate for you, right?

*Yeah, okay. Let's have us a party.*

*Legends of the University #7: The Boss is a big shot.*

## Chapter 8: A Lucky Man

ONE DAY, about two weeks after Cliff's marriage to Elinalise, I headed out into town with both Sylphie and Roxy.

Our goal for the day was to purchase birthday presents for Norn and Aisha. I'd decided to make their party a surprise, which meant we needed to make all the preparations as stealthily as possible.

There was another reason why I'd dragged both my wives along on this trip, but we'll get to that later.

We were in the middle of the harvest season by now, and the city was bustling with activity. Horse-drawn carriages were rumbling along the streets in all directions, and the vendors selling fruits and vegetables were all smiles. The food was cheaper at this time of year, but also fresher and tastier.

The harvest festival was coming up soon, too, as evidenced by the big wooden stage that had gone up in the middle of the city's central square.

This wasn't the most elaborate of events. It involved campfires in the streets, big pots of stew with all sorts of ingredients, and a lot of cheap booze. People would gather around the fires to eat, drink, and express their gratitude for the earth's blessings. There weren't any other major events that I knew of. No singing or dancing, even.

Still, as long as you brought your own pot, you could get a big helping of the stew for free. Aisha had apparently taken advantage of this last year, while I was away. She hadn't been too impressed, though. They sort of threw things in there at random, so the flavor wasn't anything to write home about.

Hopefully I'd get the chance to try it for myself this year. If it was gross, that might be interesting in its own way.

"It's certainly lively these days," said Roxy, looking around curiously.

"Yeah, it always is," said Sylphie. "Lots of people come into town this time of year."

Apart from the merchants moving in all directions, there were plenty of students out on the streets, peering into the booths and stalls. Sometimes we passed farmers pushing wheelbarrows full of vegetables, or adventurers squabbling about who'd bumped whose shoulder. Sharia was the largest city in this region, but it was only *this* noisy around this time of year.

Also, I was noticing an unusual number of beastfolk out in the streets. Most of them were tough-looking guys carrying broad, machete-like swords. They had a "festival" of their own going on at the moment, as it happened. Linia and Pursena were both going into heat around the same time, so their bravest young fighters had travelled here from all around the world to compete for them. This year, Linia and Pursena were going to be facing them head-on. I guess they thought it was about time to find themselves husbands.

In a break with beastfolk traditions, however, they'd declared that they would be choosing their mates personally from among those who bested them. At a bare minimum, they wanted a Sword Saint, Advanced-tier mage, or A-rank adventurer. Furthermore, his fur needed to be glossy, his ears erect, and his tail straight. Oh, and he had to be both a savage warrior *and* a considerate gentleman. Their standards seemed a little unrealistic to me, to be perfectly honest.

Hopefully they'd find someone nice...just like me.

On my right, I had Sylphie. On my left, I had Roxy. A woman on both sides—every man's dream!

"Hey there, Miss Sylphiette, Miss Roxy. I've got a proposal for you."

"And what would that be, Mister Rudeus?"

"Go right ahead."

"How about we walk arm in arm?"

The idea had popped into my head suddenly, but it was sort of an extension of my previous thought. The real "dream" was to strut around with two women clinging to your arms, showing off how popular you were.

I'd seen a few men like that in my previous life, and it always made me want to puke. But deep down inside, I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to do what they could do!

"Okay."

"...Sure."

Sylphie immediately grabbed my right arm. Roxy hesitated slightly, then took my left.

The day had come at last. I was risen! Now it was *my* turn to endure the people's jealous gazes. And how wonderful it felt!

Looking around the area, though, I realized that the merchants were busy with their own affairs, and the beastfolk warriors were hurrying off to the University. Some of the students in the crowd were looking our way, but they averted their eyes quickly. I might have gotten a few jeers from the local adventurers if we were in a tavern or something, but even they didn't seem bored enough to harass me on the street. Overall, I was getting much less attention than I'd anticipated.

Still, I was deeply satisfied by the experience.

Why, you might ask? Well, my right arm was currently experiencing some pleasant sensations. Sylphie was pressing a

certain something against it, in a way she wasn't capable of before. No need to be coy, right? I'm referring to her chest.

I, Rudeus Greyrat, was walking through the town with a woman's breasts pushed up against my arm. This simple fact was enough to fill me with joy. The once-barren soil of my heart, bleached dry by a miserable adolescence, was blooming with life!

I couldn't stay in this oasis forever. Soon enough, these pillow-like clouds of pleasure would return to their rightful and more modest size. But that didn't make them any less real. They were the legendary treasure islands, and I had found them!

And it wasn't just Sylphie offering me this joy. Roxy, on my left, was also pressing her meager chest against me. Her breasts were small, but they *did* exist. I could feel their distinct softness against the muscles of my arm. They were meek enough to inherit the Earth!

This was truly splendid. I said a few silent words of thanks to the muscles of my own arms; if not for their hardness, I couldn't have appreciated this softness so fully.

*Ha ha, don't be jealous, Heracles the Bicep! You're truly wonderful as well!*

"Gnuh huh huh."

Hmm. I hadn't meant to laugh like that, but it had happened anyway.

As I've already mentioned, the purpose of our outing today was to choose presents for my dear little sisters. However, that wasn't my only goal.

Just the other day, Elinalise had finally delivered the news I'd been waiting to hear.

*"I've softened them both up for you, Rudeus. You just take them both out on a date, get a nice mood going, and then take them to a classy inn."*

That's right, my friends. Today was the day. I was going to sleep with both my wives at once!

I was boiling with anticipation. Would I be able to satisfy them both? I couldn't wait to try!

"Rudy? Uh, Rudy?"

Sylphie's voice snapped me back to reality.

*Whoops. Guess I was zoning out a bit there...*

"You're drooling," said Roxy, wiping at my face with a handkerchief. "Are you ready to eat already?"

I clearly needed to be a bit more attentive. I was hoping today would *end* with a threesome, yes, but I wasn't going to get sloppy about the date itself.

We'd pick out Norn and Aisha's presents carefully. And after that, I was going to make sure they both enjoyed their day out.

All of this was equally important.

"Sorry about that," I said with a smile, renewing my focus on the tasks at hand. "I guess I was just lost in thought."

Picking the presents was our main activity for the day. We decided to look all around the city and take our time with the decision.

Our search got underway in the Workshop District. You could find all sorts of magical tools and implements in this area of the city. Of course, there were plenty of enchanted objects for sale in the Commerce District as well, but those were largely tested, refined products that commanded very high prices. In the Workshop District, you got a more eclectic mix, including prototypes and experiments produced by fledgling creators.

For the most part, their effects weren't too remarkable—they were more like toys than anything else. But sometimes you'd dig

through a pile of junk and find a masterpiece from an inventor who'd soon be famous.

Or so Roxy told me, at least. One of her old classmates from the University had joined a workshop here as an apprentice, so she knew a few things about the area. Unfortunately, they'd moved to a different city at some point.

Roxy didn't seem too optimistic about our mission. "To be honest, I don't think we'll find anything those two would like here," she'd said, but she was browsing through the magical implements on display with great interest.

Naturally, I wasn't expecting to find a suitable present for Norn or Aisha either. The reason I'd brought us here was to find a gift for *Roxy*.

Although we were formally married, I'd never really celebrated that with her. She wasn't interested in a wedding ceremony, but we could still have a belated party. My plan was to combine that event with Aisha and Norn's birthday celebration.

Roxy didn't know about that part, of course. It was *also* a surprise.

She thought she was in on the game, but I was playing five-dimensional chess here! If she expressed interest in anything on sale here, I planned to sneak back out and buy it a few days later.

Of course, magical implements could get very expensive. Right now, our family's funding was coming from four main sources: Sylphie and Roxy's salaries, the royalties from that scroll Nanahoshi gave me, and the money we'd earned from that Labyrinth.

In particular, the Labyrinth money—my inheritance from Paul, in a sense—could have kept me comfortable for a solid thirty years or so all on its own. It wasn't enough to let me lounge around for the rest of my life, but it *was* a very nice cushion.

There was no telling when we might need to spend a whole lot of money all at once, so I was doing my best not to spend our cash carelessly. For a wedding present, though, I was more than willing to dip into my savings.

Hell, if Roxy muttered “I wanna drive a Porsche,” I’d get her one. There didn’t seem to be any luxury car dealers in the Magic City of Sharia, though, so I might have to settle for drawing their logo on Dillo’s forehead.

“This pot that freezes its contents when you feed it mana seems handy. Maybe Aisha would appreciate it.”

“Hmm. I get the feeling Aisha prefers cute things, honestly.”

“Oh, you’re right. I guess we shouldn’t give her something she’d use at work...”

I watched Roxy like a hawk as she chatted with Sylphie.

So far, I hadn’t noticed her yearning for anything in particular. She seemed totally focused on picking a present for my sisters, rather than finding something for herself.

“What do you think, Rudy?”

“I think it would be delightful to lick your face like a dog, Roxy.”

“Can you try to take this seriously? You’re the one who suggested the trip, you know.”

Of course, I *was* thinking about Aisha and Norn’s presents as well. But the stuff for sale around here just wasn’t their style.

After a while, we moved to the Commerce District. Our destination was Sylphie’s favorite clothing store. I’d bought my current robe here, and it was my go-to place for finding presents, also.

“Wow. You shop at some very fancy stores, I see...”

Roxy hesitated a little outside the shop, then looked down at her own robe with an uncertain expression. Should I be telling her there wasn't a dress code, maybe?

"Huh?" said Sylphie. "Is it really that fancy?"

She seemed genuinely nonplussed. As a general rule, she only bought her clothes at fairly expensive establishments. It wasn't like Sylphie was careless with her money or anything. She'd just spent many years accompanying Ariel. You tend to pick up the shopping habits of your closest friends, I guess.

I was sure she understood this place was expensive in some sense. It probably just seemed like the best option among the stores she was familiar with. *Fancy* is a relative term, after all.

"Well, no. I suppose the Greyrat family can afford to shop here. It's just...I don't usually visit stores this nice myself, personally."

"O-oh... huh. I guess it *is* kind of fancy, then," Sylphie said in a crestfallen tone, her ears drooping slightly. "Um, Rudy? I'm not spending too much money, am I?"

"Don't worry, Sylphie. You're fine."

Apart from anything else, she paid for the clothes she bought out of her own salary. I didn't have any right to complain about how she spent her money.

"I really wasn't trying to imply that!" said Roxy. "I shopped at stores like this myself, back when I was a royal magician in Shirone. And it seems like a perfect place to find something special for a birthday present."

"Oh, yeah. Right. It *is* a special occasion, so...yeah..."

*That's my teacher for you. She knows when to switch to the offensive. Better follow that up...*

"You know, I don't think there's anything wrong with buying yourself some pricey clothes, really," I said with a smile.

Sylphie pouted at this. “So you *do* think they’re pricey after all!”

“U-uh, slip of the tongue. I meant stylish. Stylish clothes.”

“Ugh. Should we go somewhere else after all...? The only other stores I know are even more expensive, though...”

“That won’t be necessary. Let’s buy something here.”

Originally, Sylphie had barely owned any personal outfits at all. She’d started dressing up for me. I had no reason to complain about that, to say the least.

This place was kind of pricey by my personal standards, yes. But that was just because I’d gotten used to buying cheap stuff in my years as a wandering adventurer.

I was willing to adjust my standards upward. As long as we could still afford it, at least.

The moment we stepped inside the store, an employee trotted over to greet us. I guess they made a habit of remembering their regulars in places like this.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Greyrats! It’s so very nice to have you back in our establishment! What can we do for you today?”

“Oh, we’re just browsing,” I said. “Looking to buy presents for two children, both about ten years old.”

“I see! Why don’t you come this way, then?”

Instantly, the clerk led us to a section of the store totally occupied by children’s clothing. They trained their employees well here, from the looks of things.

The kids’ section wasn’t any less fancy than the rest of the place. They had a wide range of outfits on display, including everything from casual wear to robes and dresses.

Your tenth birthday was considered a very big deal, so people probably bought a lot of formal wear for kids around that age.

"My goodness, there're a lot of different styles. I'm not even sure how to start."

"Well, it's going to be winter soon, right? Maybe something warm would be good?"

Roxy and Sylphie started looking through the outfits immediately. It sounded like they were enjoying themselves. Quite a contrast with a certain redhead whose entire attitude toward clothing was "*Ugh, anything's fine!*"

"What do you think, Rudy?" asked Sylphie, turning back to me.

"Well, Norn's winter coat's getting a little small on her. She might be looking for a new one," I offered.

The two of them nodded thoughtfully.

"Okay, maybe a coat for her, then... But what should we do for Aisha?"

"Oh. She was complaining the other day that her shoes are getting tight," said Roxy.

"New shoes! That sounds good. Let's see what we can find!"

Having narrowed our focus down considerably, we started browsing through the goods in earnest. Thanks to all the different options on offer, it didn't take long to find gifts that fit my sisters' personal styles.

For Norn, we settled on a brightly colored coat. For Aisha, we picked out a pair of boots with a nicely stitched flower pattern. They were both sized a bit large, but it didn't seem like a problem. My sisters were both growing girls, after all.

With our main job accomplished, we took some time to wander aimlessly around the store. It wasn't like we had to limit ourselves to a single present. And more importantly, I was still looking for a perfect gift for Roxy—although I kept that part to myself, of course.

"These cloth corsages are nice. I wonder if Aisha would like them?" I said, studying a basket of intricate little bouquets.

"Maybe. She does love flowers," said Sylphie.

"Yeah...I'm not sure if a kid would appreciate that sort of thing, though."

"Come to think of it, I don't really know what sort of things *Norn* likes..."

"Hmm, good question. She doesn't talk about her tastes that often. Not around me, at least."

"Norn has somewhat boyish tastes, I think," said Roxy. "She likes swords, armor, horses...that sort of thing."

"Wait, really? How do you know that?"

"Well, I've been trying to get to know her better, so..."

Roxy abruptly stopped in her tracks, trailing off mid-sentence.

Her eyes were fixed on a certain outfit. It was a magician's robe, complete with hat, displayed prominently on a nearby stand. The robe was in an adult male's size, so there was no chance it would fit her. Still, she stared intently at it. More specifically, at the hat.

After a moment, she took off her own hat and began to study it with a conflicted expression.

It was clearly an old hat at this point. I had a feeling it was the very same one she'd worn as my tutor back in Buena Village. It wasn't exactly falling apart at the seams, and its black coloring hid some of the wear and tear, but you could tell it had been through its share of battles.

After putting her hat back on, Roxy gingerly stretched up to her full height and took the other one from its stand. She spun it around, found a price tag, and grimaced; an instant later, she'd put it right back where it came from.

Apparently, it wasn't cheap.

With an audible sigh, she turned to rejoin us. It was clear she'd already pushed the matter out of her mind.

"Hey, Rudy..."

Sylphie had sidled up to me at some point.

"Let's go with that."

"Sounds good."

It seemed we'd both had the same thought. We'd found Roxy's present.

A little while later, we ordered Norn's coat and Aisha's boots and left the store. I'd also secretly bought the hat for Roxy.

We'd be picking up the goods on the day of the party itself. The store promised to wrap everything up for us, fortunately.

I was starting to really look forward to it.

Finally, the three of us headed to the Lodging District, where many of the local adventurers congregated.

We'd been wandering across the city at a leisurely pace, so it was already early evening.

This was about the time of day when adventurers would return from their labyrinth explorations, bearing new prizes. It was also the time of day when parties running low on funds would start selling off their goods to replenish their cash reserves. Sometimes you could stumble onto a great deal, if you knew what you were doing.

Still, magic items were always on the pricey side, and we honestly didn't have much need for them. This was more of a window-shopping expedition.

...Or so I'd thought going in, at least.

"See, Sylphie? This is the kind of thing adventurers wear. Most people buy stuff like this when they need an outfit."

“Okay, okay! I get it! But I don’t wear stuff like this too often, you know? I’m not sure if it’s going to work for me.”

“Hmm. I think this one would suit you, Sylphie. You’re quite slender, so capes look good on you.”

Carried away by our conversation, we ended up buying Sylphie a whole new set of clothes.

It was the kind of outfit a mage knight might wear, complete with elbow guards. It wasn’t exactly elegant, but it made her look like a novice adventurer, which I found painfully adorable. Now Sylphie could go off on an adventure any time she wanted!

Not that she really needed to. Or could, given her job.

When she was working, Sylphie usually wore a set of powerful magic items. She probably wouldn’t get many chances to wear this.

“Hee hee hee... Thanks, guys.”

Still, she looked very pleased with the gift.

By the time we were finished with our purchases, the stores in the area were starting to close. Shops didn’t stay open all night, as a general rule. We spontaneously headed toward the nearest taverns and restaurants.

Well...it felt spontaneous to Sylphie and Roxy, at least. This was all going according to plan.

I’d actually made reservations in advance, anticipating this situation.

We’d be eating at an inn targeted at S-rank adventurers. Elinalise had recommended it to me as the perfect place to finish off a date. The food was good, the atmosphere was nice, the beds were big, and the rooms were nearly soundproof.

“Oh, I know this place. Grandma told me to take you here if we ever needed to make up after a fight.”

“You too, Sylphie? She said the same thing to me.”

To my surprise, both of my wives recognized the name of the place. At the end of the day, it seemed we were all just pawns in Elinalise's game.

*Well, whatever. It's no big deal if they've heard of it.*

"Elinalise mentioned something else to me, actually," continued Roxy. "She said Rudy might take both of us here at some point. With the intention of, well... you know."

"Yeah, she said that to me too... So *that's* what this is all about."

"Honestly. What are we going to do with you, Rudy?"

Sylphie and Roxy looked over at me with narrowed eyes.

However, I didn't see any real disgust or shock on their faces. Elinalise had done her job well; they seemed receptive to my plan.

I owed that woman big time. *Thank you, Elinalise! You're the best, Elinalise!*

"Still, you didn't mention we'd be spending the night. I'm a little worried about Lucie..."

The objection was reasonable enough, but of course, I hadn't overlooked that little detail either.

"Don't worry, Sylphie. I entrusted her to Lilia for tonight."

When I'd explained the situation, she'd nodded seriously and promised me her full support. It was always nice to have dependable allies.

"It still feels a little wrong of us... But at least she's in good hands, I guess."

Sylphie seemed to think at least one of us should be with our child every night. A very understandable perspective, but...nah, I won't make any excuses for myself.

*Sorry, Lucie. I do love you, okay? Forgive your wicked, lustful father!*

Roxy piped up next: "I do have school tomorrow, you know."

Her job was important, of course. But this wouldn't be an issue either.

"We'll just wake up early and head back to the house before you need to leave."

"Do you think we'll be *able* to wake up early? I'm not sure I will. This is always exhausting for me."

"Don't worry, Roxy. I've got it."

"Well, if you say so, Rudy..."

*Phew.*

It had taken a bit more convincing than I expected, but I'd gotten both of their approval!

"All right then, dear. Be gentle with us, please."

"We'll do our best."

Seeing my adorable wives bowing their heads to me, I was ready to get right down to business.

Of course, heading *straight* to bed wouldn't have been proper.

We needed to have a nice meal, get a bit tipsy, and whisper some loving words to each other first. You've got to set the mood, you know?

Accordingly, we started things off with dinner at the restaurant that occupied the first floor of the inn. The food here was very good in its own right, after all.

I wanted to make sure they both understood that lust wasn't the only thing I felt toward them. It was there, of course. But I also loved just spending time with them.

When both of them were in the room at once, each of them could only get half the love that I could show them individually. I intended to compensate for that through sheer effort.

“Wow, this looks incredible!”

“I don’t think I’ve seen a meal like this too often...”

As plate after plate of food was delivered to our table, Roxy and Sylphie’s eyes went wide with amazement.

In the Northern Territories, raw ingredients were expensive and hard to buy in bulk, which meant ordinary meals tended to be a little meager. But this was the season where food was most plentiful, and we were also in a very expensive restaurant.

Among other things, we had a huge bowl of salad full of fresh, juicy vegetables; a spicy soup packed with freshwater fish; and a glistening, well-seasoned black and blue steak. None of it was the sort of stuff you got to eat very often in these parts.

In addition, the meal had come with a bottle of whisky-like liquor with a rich aroma.

“This soup is *delicious*. I wonder how they seasoned it?”

“Hmm. Maybe oil infused with mustard...?”

Sylphie wasn’t touching the alcohol, probably because of Lucie. She was entranced by the soup, though, and kept taking additional servings.

“I should see if I can find a recipe. Rudy, would you try it if I made some?”

She tilted her head at me in a particularly adorable way as she asked this question. It really stoked my appetite, if you know what I mean.

“I’ll gobble it all down. And then have you as a side dish.”

“Oh, come on, Rudy!”

Finally, we had dessert. It was actually a standard part of the meal at this place.

Still, their offering wasn't exactly comparable to the more complex cakes and sweets you'd find in a place like the Holy Country of Millis. It mainly consisted of fruits that looked a lot like apples. I'd eaten these before, but they were much sourer than the apples from my old world.

At this restaurant, however, they chopped them up into bite-size chunks for you and immersed them in a gooey, honey-like syrup. It tasted something like a candied apple, or maybe a thicker variety of fruit punch.

I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. I would have expected apples and honey to taste more like sweet Japanese curry, but apparently, I was mistaken.

"This is incredible!"

Roxy was particularly pleased by the treat, though. Her eyes shining with excitement, she shoveled it rapidly into her mouth.

It seemed my dear teacher had something of a sweet tooth. Either that, or the Migurd people had an ingrained preference for sugar.

"It's so good... I didn't know you could get anything like this in the Northern Territories!"

Either way, the joy on her face was very real. I was starting to worry she might have an explosive foodgasm in the middle of the restaurant.

"Oh..."

All too quickly, her dessert had disappeared. She stared down at her empty plate regretfully.

"Here, Roxy. You can have mine."

As I pushed my share over to her, Roxy looked at me in shock.  
“Really?! Are you sure?!”

I’d been enjoying the dessert myself, of course. But I enjoyed seeing that look of pure delight on her face even more.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Here, say ‘aah’.”

“Hmph. I’m not a child, you know... Aaaah.”

With every bite I fed her, Roxy’s face lit up, and she held a hand to her cheek in bliss.

It made me want to keep going indefinitely, but sadly, my share of the dessert had disappeared as well. We’d have to continue this the next time we came here.

*Okay then. We’ve had a nice dinner, and I’ve softened them up with sweets... I think it’s about time.*

“You know, ladies...”

“What is it, Rudy?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve actually reserved a room here, as it happens.”

*Ah, this feels good. That was another line I wanted to say at least once!*

“...Right. Um, Roxy, I know we talked about this a bit, but...are you sure you’re okay doing this with me?”

“Yes, I think I’m ready for this. Let’s do it.”

Roxy and Sylphie nodded to each other, blushing slightly.

This was going to be a night to remember.

*Legends of the University #8: The Boss is loaded.*

## **Chapter 9: The Party**

**W**E'D SCHEDULED the surprise birthday party for a day when Norn would be staying at home and Roxy wasn't working. Sylphie would usually have been at work as a bodyguard, but Ariel had given her a special day off.

All the preparations were complete; it was just a question of execution now.

I got things started by calling Norn, Aisha, and Roxy to the living room.

"Hey, I've got something in mind for today. How about you three come along?"

"Come along...for what?"

My sisters tilted their heads curiously.

The main purpose of this outing, of course, was to get them out of the house for a few hours so that my accomplices could pick up the presents and get all the food ready.

"Of course, Rudy. I'd be happy to come."

We'd planned all this out beforehand, so Roxy wasted no time in agreeing to the proposal.

Little did she know that she was going to be surprised herself! Mwahaha!

"Hey Mom, can I go?" asked Aisha, turning to her mother. "I've still got some work left to do."

"You were invited by Master Rudeus himself. Of course you can go," answered Lilia. Aisha nodded happily.

Norn, on the other hand, didn't respond immediately. She was looking over at Sylphie with an anxious expression on her face. After

a moment, she turned back to me and spoke up. “You’re inviting Roxy, but not Sylphie?”

“Huh?!” said Sylphie, jerking her head toward us. She seemed a bit flustered by this sudden turn in the conversation. “Uh, well, you know...I have to look after Lucie!”

“Didn’t you both go out with Rudeus the other day? Are you really all right with this?”

“Uhhh...” Sylphie glanced over to me uncertainly. But then she looked over at Roxy, and seemed to hit on an idea of some kind. “A-actually, this whole thing was *my* idea.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, Norn...you haven’t really warmed up to Roxy yet, right?”

“I guess not, no.”

“Yeah. And it’s not much fun having that sort of tension in the house. I thought it might help if you spent some time together, you know? It can’t hurt to get to know each other better.”

“...Oh, I see now. All right then.”

Norn seemed convinced by this, but Aisha looked a little dubious. After all, *she* already got along with Roxy. I’d seen her bringing Roxy tea and snacks when she was up late preparing for the next day’s classes.

After a few moments, though, Aisha seemed to decide these details weren’t too important. She shrugged her shoulders slightly and then smirked to herself.

*Please don’t tell me she’s figured it out already...*

“So that’s that,” said Sylphie with a satisfied smile. “You guys go have fun, okay?”

“Okay!” chorused my sisters.

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” added Roxy.

It had been a bit of a close call, but we'd gotten over the first hurdle.

The preparations for this party were going to take some time.

There were only two people to pick up the presents, cook the food, and set up all the decorations. To give them some breathing room, my goal was to kill time with the girls until early afternoon.

However, I couldn't risk taking them to the Commerce District. There was a chance they'd bump into Sylphie as she was picking up the presents.

That still left the Lodging District, Workshop District, and the University itself, but I had a different idea in mind.

"Fishing, huh...?"

The four of us were outside the city entirely. Out here, it was quiet enough to hear the little stream below us gurgling softly. And the water was clear enough to see the fishes darting around beneath the surface.

"Yep. Seems like a good family bonding activity, don't you think?"

"I see. So Sylphie wasn't *completely* making all that up earlier..."

Chatting quietly with Roxy, I started to unpack the fishing gear I'd prepared for this expedition. We didn't have anything as convenient as a reel or lure on offer, unfortunately. Our rods were simple wooden things, with lines made of braided Giant Spider silk. We also had floats made from Radiata Frog sacs, iron hooks, and earthworms for our bait.

"I've never fished before, you know," said Norn a little nervously.

"Me either!" said Aisha. "I always wanted to give it a try, though."

Despite their inexperience, the two of them didn't hesitate to grab their share of the gear. Aisha quickly put the float and hook on her line, jammed an earthworm right on there, and went running off toward the stream. Within seconds, she'd tossed her line into the water with an exaggerated motion.

I was a little impressed despite myself. Was this really her first time doing this?

"Um, Rudeus? How do I put these on properly?"

Norn, on the other hand, was staring at her float and hook with an uncertain expression.

"Heh heh. I don't know either! I've never fished in my life, you see."

In my *previous* incarnation, I'd been a strictly indoors type of guy. I'd never gone fishing, and I'd never felt any interest in doing so. And of course, I'd never felt the need to try it in this world, either. When I wanted fish, I could get them easily enough by freezing the water solid.

"Would you like me to teach you, Norn?" offered Roxy hesitantly.

It sounded like she had some actual experience. That was a stroke of luck. We could always have fumbled our way around by trial and error, but it was always faster to learn from someone who knew what they were doing.

"Yes, please."

Norn ultimately took Roxy up on the offer, but she looked a bit conflicted. The kid was a faithful member of the Millis Church. I had to assume she felt a little awkward around Roxy, since she was my second wife.

Still, it didn't seem like she actively hated her. Not on a personal level, at least.

“...All right, now you try.”

“Like this?”

“That’s right. You’re good at this.”

“...Thank you.”

Roxy showed Norn the ropes patiently and politely. Norn returned the favor by listening carefully.

It seemed like a good sign. I really wanted them to get along, at least.

Soon, all four of us had taken our places along the stream.

Roxy’s experience was immediately obvious. Perched on a little “chair” I’d made with my Earth magic, she squinted carefully down at the water, holding her rod firmly in one hand. When she sensed the slightest vibration, she pulled the rod up with remarkable speed.

I hadn’t seen her catch anything particularly huge yet, but she’d caught more fish than anyone else so far.

Her pose and total concentration reminded me of a monk meditating on the mysteries of the universe.

“You’re certainly good at this, Miss Roxy.”

“Well, yes. Back when I was on the road alone, it was important to find my own food whenever I could.”

“Come to think of it...Ruijerd used to catch us lots of fish when we were travelling together.”

“Oh, was he a fisherman as well?”

“No, he used his spear. He would just thrust it into the water, and then pull it back out with a fish on all three prongs...”

Norn had taken a seat next to her, and they’d been chatting on and off for a while. The conversation was still a little hesitant, but it seemed like progress.

“Oh! Norn, you’ve got a bite. Pull up on it.”

“Huh? Wha— O-okay! Ah...”

“Don’t worry; it happens all the time. Let’s put a new bait on.”

Norn was having some trouble staying focused on her task, though. This wasn’t the first fish that had slipped away from her.

Still, her expression was cheerful enough. She seemed to be enjoying her conversation with Roxy in itself.

“Hee hee hee. What’s the matter, Rudeus? You haven’t been hooking *anything*.”

On the other hand, Aisha was already producing impressive results. She’d lost a few pieces of bait, but she’d also brought home three fishes.

“Don’t forget our little bet! The loser has to do anything the winner says, no matter what!”

A little while earlier, I’d foolishly agreed to compete with her on who would catch the most fish. At present, my score was a big fat zero. This wasn’t looking promising.

We were both first-timers, right? Why was she this much better than me?

“Okay, kiddo. Just try to make it something I can actually do.”

“Hmm, whatever shall I choose? Maybe I’ll make you hug me all night long while whispering how cute I am. Oh, or you could teach me some of the stuff you do with Roxy and Sylphie...”

“Yeah, nothing too *adult*, please. I don’t want Dad getting angry at me.”

“Hey! It’s no fair bringing Dad up!”

I wasn’t too worried, really. For all her outrageous teasing, she’d probably settle on asking me for a slightly expensive little trinket.

That said...wasn’t losing to my little sister a problem in its own right? Wasn’t it a bit too early for her to be surpassing me like this?

Indeed it was. I had my dignity as the head of this household, and I needed to defend it!

It was good to be a *beloved* big brother, yes. But it was better to be a *feared* big brother!

“All right, Aisha. I’m taking the kid gloves off now.”

“What? Were you taking it easy on me or something?”

“That’s right. From now on, I’m going to use my Demon Eye!”

“Heeeeey! That’s not fair!”

*Complain all you want. This is what I’m really capable of! By peeking a second into the future, I’ll obliterate every fish in this stream!*

With a little smirk, I activated my Demon Eye of Foresight and stared down at my float.

*No movement.*

*No movement.*

*The float twitches slightly.*

“Fiiiiish!”

Thanks to my regular practice menu, my arms were strong—and accustomed to swinging things up and down. And now I had the added power of my artificial hand to work with. No fish known to man could hope to resist me.

With one quick, violent motion, I yanked my prey up out of the water.

“Yees! It’s a *big*—”

My prey being, in this case, a large boot.

“...”

Almost everyone in this world wore shoes and boots, of course. And this stream was connected to a river that flowed past the bustling Magic City of Sharia.

The inhabitants of the area used that river regularly to wash their clothes or fill their water buckets. Adventurers made use of it all along its length, as well. Someone probably fell into it and lost their footwear every once in a while.

All that said...

“Rudeus...”

Aisha was looking at me with pity in her eyes.

Hmm. Perhaps I needed to change the way I looked at this. This thing wasn’t a boot. It wasn’t a boot at all!

Yes, it was starting to look like something else entirely now. Perhaps even a fish? Perhaps! It sort of looked like one, in a way. And wasn’t that good enough? Didn’t that *make* it a fish, in some sense?

Indeed it did. This right here was a fish!

Nodding to myself, I tossed the boot into my bucket.

“All right, Aisha, that’s one. I’ll catch up to you in no time!”

“What?! That was a *boot*, Rudeus!”

“I’m sure it looked that way to you, but it’s actually a boot-like organism that lives in the water. I call it...the Bootfish.”

“Not even creative! That doesn’t count, okay? That *really* doesn’t count!”

Reaching down into the bucket, Aisha grabbed my prize and hurled it back into the water.

“Nooo!” *You’re not supposed to throw trash in the river!*

*Well, so be it. We’ll just say that was a catch and release. That boot was still a baby, right? Now that we’ve returned it to its natural habitat, it’ll swim out to the ocean and come back nice and plump.*

*Yeah. Let’s go with that.*

“Ah! Hngh...yes! That’s number four!”

As I was pondering these matters, however, Aisha caught her fourth fish of the day.

Maybe I wasn't going to win this battle after all.

*I'm sorry, Sylphie, Roxy... I guess I'll be my little sister's plaything tonight...*

"That's it, Norn! That's the way! Pull it in! Pull it in!"

"Ugh...hnng... Ah!"

"Keep going! Carefully, now!"

Things were getting noisy off to my other side. I looked over just in time to see Norn pull home a fish.

It was a big one, too—about the size of a colored carp.

"Yes! I did it! I caught my first fish!"

"Wow, look at it! That's a big one, too!"

Norn celebrated with a big smile on her face, and Roxy clapped her hands in delight.

It was a heartwarming moment. Putting everything else aside, I was glad we'd come.

We kept it up for a couple hours longer, but once the sun started to sink, it was time to call an end to our expedition.

"Okay, everybody. I think it's time we went home."

My sisters didn't take this announcement too well, though.

"Whaaat? Already?"

"...I was hoping to catch just one more."

Time flies when you're having fun and all that. I could understand how they felt. Still, the *real* fun was coming up a little later.

“Sorry, girls. Monsters might start sniffing around once it gets dark.”

“You could just blast them for us!”

“We’ve got Miss Roxy here, too...”

It was a fair point. The monsters in this area weren’t much of a threat, even in groups. With both myself and Roxy here, it was hard to imagine a scenario where Norn or Aisha could get hurt.

That was no reason to give in to their demands, though. We’d be out here all night.

Even if I hadn’t planned something for this evening, I would have dragged them home about now.

“Sorry, but the answer’s no. We can always come back another day.”

“Hmph. You’re just mad cause you didn’t catch any yourself.”

“Hey, c’mon. If I got *serious*, I could catch all the fish I wanted...”

This was true, in a sense. Maybe I wasn’t the best with a rod, but I could always electrify the water or set off an underwater explosion!

I definitely wasn’t just being a sore loser.

“Anyway, the decision’s final. Let’s get going.”

“All riiight...”

“Okay.”

Before we left, I took a moment to freeze the fish we’d caught with my magic. We could bring them home for later. I’d thought about grilling them for a snack on our way back, but you’re supposed to show up to a party hungry, right? The fish could wait a day or two.

As we made our way back home, Norn and Aisha chattered happily, bragging about how many fish they'd caught and how big they were. Roxy and I followed just behind them.

Roxy had a look of quiet satisfaction on her face as well. Things had been awkward between her and Norn for a long time now, but today felt like a big step in the right direction.

"We're home!"

"Congratulations!"

The instant we set foot inside the house, we were greeted by a burst of applause. It was a sparse but enthusiastic ovation. Sylphie, Lilia, and Zenith had all been standing in the foyer, waiting for us.

Zenith didn't join the clapping itself, of course, but I thought I saw a hint of a smile on her face.

"Huh?!"

Norn let out a little yelp, and Aisha froze up completely.

Taking that as our cue, Roxy and I joined in on the applause from behind.

Norn turned back to look at us, her eyes wide with surprise, and murmured "Huh?" a second time.

She clearly hadn't figured out what was going on just yet.

"All right, everyone! Let's go to the dining room!"

Stepping forward with a smile, I pushed a confused Norn and a dubious Aisha forward.

The dining room was full of simple but attractive decorations. There weren't any big banners hanging across the room or anything, but we did have some very nice flowers on the walls, and there were candles gleaming all around the place.

The table was covered in a very nice white cloth, with plates and vases of flowers sitting on top of it. The drinks had already been

poured, but there wasn't any food yet. They'd presumably be carrying that out a little later.

At the far end of the table—the customary seat of honor—two chairs sat snugly next to each other. I brought Aisha and Norn there and offered them their seats.

"Wait, but... Huh? What's going on?"

Norn still looked completely nonplussed.

"Ahaha. So *that's* what this was all about..."

Aisha, on the other hand, was smirking knowingly. The girl was sharp, all right. She must have sensed that we were up to something.

After my sisters took their seats, Lilia helped Zenith into hers. Sylphie and Roxy followed suit.

Once they'd all settled into their places, I cleared my throat loudly, and then began to speak.

"It's been seven years now since the Displacement Incident. It wasn't easy by any means, but our family's finally back together again. We lost our father, yes, and our mother's memories might never return. But I don't think Dad would be too pleased if we moped around forever." I paused for a moment to look around the room. "And that's why I want us to try to smile again. When we can, at least. It might almost seem disrespectful, in a way...but Dad wanted us to have a party once we made it home, you know? I think we owe it to him to have a good time tonight."

This whole thing had been Paul's idea, in a sense. He'd even put it down in a letter for us.

It was sad that he wasn't here with us to see it happen. It made my chest ache to think about it. But for his sake, as well as ours, I really wanted us to enjoy ourselves.

Norn and Aisha had their whole lives ahead of them. I didn't want them to be hung up on the past forever. Of course, giving a

long sentimental lecture wasn't the right way to set the mood that I was going for. We could save our memories of the painful, difficult times we'd gone through for the darker moments we'd run into down the line. If nothing else, it can help to know: *I've been through worse before.*

Right now, though, it was time to look forward to the future. And so, I cut myself off and lifted my glass.

"Cheers, everyone!"

"Cheers!"

Everyone except Norn—who was still staring wide-eyed at me—quietly raised their glasses as well. Aisha was smirking even more widely than before. She'd obviously figured the whole thing out.

In any case, I wasn't sure how well that toast had gone. My *goal* was to set a cheerful tone, but it ended up sounding a little...emotional.

That was no good at all. I needed everyone smiling.

"Sylphie!"

"Oh! Right."

I simply called Sylphie's name, and she bent down to retrieve something from under the table. That felt kind of nice. We were operating on the same wavelength!

A moment later, Sylphie re-emerged with two large boxes, both beautifully wrapped. She passed one of them to Roxy. They promptly rose from their seats, walked up to the head of the table, and handed the boxes over—Roxy to Norn, and Sylphie to Aisha.

"Happy tenth birthday, Norn and Aisha!"

"Happy birthday."

Neither of them seemed to understand at first. Not even Aisha.  
"Um, but...we're already eleven, you know?"

This had to be the first time I'd ever seen that clever little girl look so totally bewildered. She might have figured out the general plan, but she clearly hadn't been expecting a present.

This was exactly the expression I'd hoping to see.

"Yeah. We couldn't be there with you on your actual tenth birthday, right? I know it's a little late to celebrate now, but Rudy said a year or so is no big deal."

"He did...?"

Tearing up a little, Aisha clutched the box tightly in her arms. After a moment, she looked over to Lilia, who smiled and nodded gently.

A big happy grin spread across her face as she turned back to Sylphie. "Can we open these?!"

"Of course you can."

Aisha was moving before Sylphie even finished the sentence. Norn, who'd been looking from her box to me and back again with a stunned expression on her face, quickly followed suit.

At first, they went at it vigorously, ready to tear the wrapping paper off. But then they both stopped, reconsidered, and took things more slowly. They untied the ribbons and opened up the paper carefully, trying not to rip it.

It was a little eerie how synchronized their movements were. They didn't look that much alike, but sometimes you could really tell they were sisters.

"Oooh! It's a new pair of boots! What did you get, Norn?!"

"Look, Aisha! I got a coat!"

The two of them compared their presents gleefully. It was nice to see we'd done a decent job picking out the gifts.

"My goodness. You both got very nice gifts, didn't you?"

Lilia, who'd been watching from the sidelines with a smile, approached the two of them with Zenith at her side.

"Oh, Mom! Look at this!"

Norn spread out her coat to show Zenith, grinning from ear to ear. She didn't react in any obvious way, of course. That made me feel a little down despite myself.

Zenith had always been the type to get all worked up about this sort of thing. I still remembered how enthusiastic she'd been at my fifth birthday party, and how proudly she'd presented me with her gift of a carefully selected book. If not for her condition, she'd probably be yelping with excitement with her daughter right now. Seeing her so expressionless made me sad.

Of course, if she recovered and learned that Paul was dead, there was no guarantee she'd ever smile the way she used to. Still, it was painful seeing her like this—not sad, not happy, just emotionless.

But just as this thought crossed my mind...

Zenith smiled.

"Wha—?"

The expression vanished quickly. It had only been there for an instant. Were my eyes just playing tricks on me?

"Did she just...smile?"

No. Everyone had seen it.

Lilia, Aisha, Sylphie, and Roxy were all looking at Zenith in surprise.

"...Mom?"

And Norn, at whom the smile had been directed, was about ready to break down in tears.

"..."

Zenith reached down and stroked Norn on the head, then did the same to Aisha. Her movements were even more gentle than usual. She was happy—happy to see her girls growing up.

“Oh, Madam...I’m so glad...”

Lilia softly wrapped her arms around Zenith’s shoulders. Her face was as emotional as I’d ever seen it. With her usual blank expression, Zenith reached up and stroked her hands. Lilia had to bite her lip to keep herself from crying.

After bringing Zenith to her seat, Lilia came back to offer Norn and Aisha another present.

“This...is for the two of you, from myself and Miss Zenith.”

It was a set of handkerchiefs, beautifully embroidered with floral designs—one for each of them.

“Thank you very much, Miss Lilia,” said Norn, accepting hers. “It’s beautiful.”

Aisha, on the other hand, hesitated. It probably had something to do with getting the same present as her sister.

“Um, Mom? Are you sure I can have one too?”

“Yes, I’m quite sure. You’re Paul’s daughter too, you know.”

This seemed like...a change. Hadn’t Lilia spent years drumming the words *you’re only a maid* into her daughter’s head?

“Of course, I still expect you to show Madam Norn and Master Rudeus the respect that they deserve. Understood?”

“...Okay, Mom.”

*Hmm. I guess she’s still Lilia after all.*

Still...despite what she was saying, I hadn’t seen her badgering her daughter much lately. Not even about her tone of speech.

I had to assume she’d been thinking things over a little herself these last few months.

When Lilia returned to her seat, Zenith reached over to place a hand on her shoulder.

“Madam...”

“...”

Lilia squeezed that hand in her own, and softly spoke the words “Thank you.”

It almost looked as if they’d just held a wordless conversation of some kind.

Roxy seemed particularly moved by that.

As I was studying her face, though, someone tugged on my sleeve from behind. “Hm?”

I glanced back to find that it was Sylphie. She was carrying a third box—the one that wasn’t for my sisters. *Right, can’t forget the next part...*

“Roxy.”

When I called her name, Roxy turned... and blinked in surprise at the sight of Sylphie standing next to me with the box. “Uh...yes?”

Sylphie spoke up before I could. “This one’s from us for you, Roxy.”

“Wha— Uh, why? For what?”

“It’s a wedding present. Congratulations!” said Sylphie, handing the box over to Roxy before she could object. “Go on, open it.”

Roxy did as she was told. And when she retrieved the hat from inside her present, her eyes went wide as saucers. “Um...Sylphie? Rudy? Is this...”

“Welcome to the family, Roxy. Let’s try our best to be like Zenith and Lilia, okay?”

The smile on Sylphie’s face as she delivered that line could only be described as angelic.

In the face of its overwhelming power, Roxy bit her lip, looked down slightly, and squeezed the hat to her chest. After a moment, she managed to squeak out the words “Th...thank you, Sylphie.”

I could see tears glimmering in her eyes.



I wouldn't hear about it for some time, but according to Roxy, this was the moment she felt that Sylphie had truly accepted her into our lives.

With the main event behind us, the rest of the party went off smoothly.

First of all, Lilia carried out a big cake. It was a fluffy sponge cake type of thing, although there wasn't any cream involved. Instead, there was dried fruit on the inside. The batter itself was on the slightly bitter side, but the sweetness of the fruit balanced that out beautifully.

I'd eaten cakes like this before, back in the Kingdom of Asura. They'd made one for my fifth birthday, and I seemed to remember it being served at the party for my tenth as well.

*Ah, that brings me back... I wonder how Eris is doing these days?*

Wherever she was, I had to assume she was merrily chopping her way through life. Maybe she'd even gotten married, like me?

Nah, probably not. There wasn't a man in the world who could handle *that* girl.

When I asked Lilia about the cake, she explained that it was a traditional Asuran treat. Many families had one every time there was something worth celebrating. Paul hated the taste, though, so we'd almost never made one. It was a little amusing to hear the man had been a picky eater at his age, but it did seem in character.

Sylphie had helped out with this cake, and seemed confident she could make one by herself next time. Norn seemed to be really enjoying it, and I kind of liked it myself.

Aisha was less of a fan, though. I could see her picking around the chunks of fruit as she ate her slice. Lilia scolded her a little, but

undermined herself by murmuring “That reminds me of Master Paul” with a smile on her face.

After a while, Aisha started cuddling up to me and begging me to eat the rest for her. But I decided to hand the job off to Roxy, who apparently had a sweet tooth. I was sort of hoping they might end up feeding bites of it to each other or something.

Unfortunately, Roxy took her assignment somewhat more seriously. I think she might have misunderstood what I was looking for.

“Listen carefully, Aisha. You’re a very fortunate girl, so it might be hard for you to understand this...but sometimes, when you’re truly desperate, you might need to eat *anything* you can. Even a poisonous scorpion.”

“Ick! Uh...right.”

My poor sister found herself on the receiving end of a lecture.

I seemed to remember getting a similar talk from Ghislaine at some point, actually. Maybe this was just something adventurers felt strongly about.

I’d put up with some lousy food myself in my journey across the Demon Continent, of course, but I was fairly sure I’d never resorted to eating poisonous monsters. Maybe I was “fortunate,” too.

“This cake, on the other hand, is sweet and delicious. It would be *wrong* to leave it unfinished. Eat it, please.”

“Okay.”

Roxy’s tone hadn’t been too harsh, but her arguments were intense enough that Aisha actually looked a little freaked out for once. True to her word, she started eating her cake in solemn silence.

It felt like the first time I’d ever seen her just do what she was told.

Well, no. That wasn't fair. She did listen to me...for the most part.

Anyway. Now that I thought about it, getting past the picky-eater thing probably *was* important. Maybe I was the one who'd mishandled the situation.

Good thing I had someone around to set things straight. Well done, Teacher!

"That said, you don't have to force yourself to finish if you're so full you can't take another bite. I'll eat the rest if necessary."

Incidentally, Roxy had already finished all of *her* cake. Well done, Teacher.

"I'm so full I can't take another bite!"

Aisha's reply had come quickly. Too quickly.

"Were you even listening to me? Eat your cake!"

*Hmm. Maybe this is a good thing...*

Sylphie and I didn't scold Aisha very often, and I felt like Lilia was taking it easy on her because of that. Aisha was a very clever girl, but she was only eleven years old. She probably needed someone to lecture her from time to time.

In any case. Roxy seemed to be getting friendlier with my sisters. The two of them weren't fighting with each other anymore, either. And we'd just seen proof that Zenith's condition was improving. I felt like our family had grown closer in general.

The celebration was a success, in other words. And I'd enjoyed every minute of it.

I made a mental note to throw an even more elaborate party when the girls turned fifteen.

*Legends of the University #9: The Boss is merciful to fish.*

## Chapter 10: Workplace Drama

**T**HE TEMPERATURE was dropping steadily week by week, and I started to see the occasional flurry of snow outside the window. It would soon be winter in the Kingdom of Ranoa.

The winters in this region were long, cold, and lean. A typical household needed to start preparing right about now, or risk freezing to death. My family was relatively well off, so we didn't really have to worry about that. But just to be on the safe side, I made sure to stockpile a mountain of firewood in our backyard and piles of preserved food in our basement.

We were ready for anything at this point. All we had to do now was lock ourselves up in the house to wait out the snows. I could pass the time by enjoying the company of my wives.

But just as I was getting ready to hibernate...a certain someone from my past came back to haunt me.

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One morning, as we were eating breakfast, Roxy offered me a surprising proposal.

“Rudy, Sylphie and I are going out on a job tomorrow. We might be away for several days. I was wondering if you'd like to come along.”

“To watch you do your thing?”

Roxy gave me a quizzical look. “Uh, no. We'd all be working the job. There might be a bonus in it for us if we perform well.”

Hmm. I would have relished the chance to cheer her on from the sidelines, but apparently that wasn't the idea here...

"What kind of a job?"

"Well, it seems that a member of the Ranoan royal family's currently on a pilgrimage..."

Evidently this was a local tradition. When a Ranoan royal approached the age of majority, they were required to make a journey around the country as a sort of training exercise.

The journey itself wasn't anything too strenuous. They just spent six months or so going around and visiting a laundry list of specific places inside the country. However, they weren't permitted many guards, and were expected to make their own preparations and arrangements.

It forced them to hire their own people, find their own way around, and see the country with their own eyes. Theoretically, this would help them grow into better rulers. The tradition was well known throughout the country as "The Coming-of-Age Pilgrimage."

Of course, since it was so well known, the local mayors and governors were perfectly aware they'd have royalty travelling through their towns from time to time. In fact, they kept careful tabs on the age of every royal prince and princess, and made sure to anticipate the timing and itinerary of their journeys.

It sounded a little creepy in a way, but they obviously didn't want a member of the royal family getting badly injured in their territory. No matter what the circumstances, such an incident would hurt their reputation badly.

The local authorities would have gladly surrounded the royal kids with a hundred bodyguards if they could, but they weren't permitted to do so. It would have defeated the whole point of the pilgrimage. However, when the royal family itself requested guards, they were allowed to provide them. This time around, a party of

adventurers had been hired as an escort, but their mage and healer had both fallen ill simultaneously. They were expected to recover fairly soon, but winter was fast approaching. It was basically impossible to travel in this region once the snows got going, so they needed to finish up the pilgrimage *now* and hurry back to the capital.

It just so happened that the party had been stopped in its tracks right here, in the Magic City of Sharia. As a result, the royal family had formally requested a handful of bodyguards from the city.

Our mayor had held a conference with the leaders of the Magic Guild and the University to choose the most suitable candidates for the job. One such candidate had stood out at the head of the list. This individual was a well-travelled former adventurer, with practical skill in offensive magic—and a brand-new member of the University's faculty, with few responsibilities to be reassigned.

It was Roxy, in other words. The group had quickly decided she was the best option they had. It sounded like a reasonable conclusion to me, given her many talents.

“...Wait a second, though. How did Sylphie end up getting this job too?”

“Well, Princess Ariel’s coming along. She was very eager to establish a connection with a member of the royal family.”

Ariel had an excellent information network. She must have heard about the situation and marked it as an opportunity. It was hard to say how much of a connection she stood to gain here, but the princess always took what she could get.

“Ah, okay. So basically, you two will be guarding both Ariel and this kid?”

“That’s right. Oh, and Luke’s helping too.”

I wasn’t sure if he really counted, but decided not to say so.

“I think we should be all right, since Sylphie’s coming along...but we need to guard *two* very important people, and the shrine we’re visiting is deep inside a forest. Also, I’ve been known to make some silly mistakes at the worst times...I suppose I’m a little anxious.”

“I think you’re really underestimating yourself, Roxy.”

“Well, maybe so. But I had a talk with Sylphie about how we could *ensure* this job went off smoothly, and she suggested we ask for your help. You’re the single most powerful mage in this city at the moment, after all...”

Putting aside the question of whether I deserved that title, I could understand why Roxy was nervous. They needed to protect both Princess Ariel and this member of the Ranoan royal family. And their core party was fairly small: one Ranoan knight, Sylphie, Luke, and Roxy.

There was also the band of adventurers, of course. But they were down two people, and it was hard to know if they’d be much use at all.

In terms of actually *competent* allies, Sylphie was the only person Roxy could definitely rely on...and come to think of it, Roxy hadn’t seen her in combat before. I could understand her uncertainty.

“Is it okay for all three of us to leave the house, though? What about Lucie?”

“She’ll be fine,” said Sylphie, who’d been listening quietly until now. “We have Suzanne, and I’m sure Lilia will take good care of her.”

It was true enough. It wasn’t like I’d be that much use hanging around here without these two, anyway. Lilia and Aisha would be stepping up either way. It was more important to get Sylphie back to Lucie as soon as possible. Which meant the best thing I could do was join the party and make sure the job went off without a hitch.

“Okay then. I’m up for it.”

Having reached my conclusion, I agreed without further delay.

Aside from anything else, Roxy would get a nice boost to her reputation if we pulled this off perfectly. Maybe it would help her move up the career ladder a little faster.

The next day, Roxy and I made our way to a certain inn that mostly catered to S-rank adventurers. It was a very nice place—even nicer than the one I’d taken Roxy and Sylphie to a little earlier.

As training exercises went, this pilgrimage seemed to be a bit on the...luxurious side. Not that I’d expected anything less from royalty.

“Really? They have gardens inside the palace walls in Asura, too?”

“Oh yes. So you have them in Ranoa as well, then?”

“We do! It sounds like they’re rather similar, really! How very interesting.”

By the time Roxy and I arrived, Ariel and her party were already in the inn, having tea with the Ranoans.

A girl who looked maybe twelve years old was sitting across from Princess Ariel. This pilgrimage was supposed to be a coming-of-age thing, so she was presumably fifteen, but she definitely looked younger.

Sylphie was standing behind the two of them, looking poised and intimidating in her work clothes. Luke was there too. There was also an older female knight I didn’t recognize—probably the Ranoan princess’ personal bodyguard.

“Who are you people? State your names at once.”

The instant she laid eyes on us, she stepped forward to place herself between us and her charge. Her gaze was challenging, if not openly hostile.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Roxy M. Greyrat, and I’m here to serve as a bodyguard for the princess.”

“I’m Rudeus Greyrat, and I’ll also be helping out. Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Oh, I see...I heard you would be coming. My name is Grace, and I’m a royal knight. We appreciate your assistance.”

For a moment, the knight studied Roxy dubiously. In the end, though, she stepped back without making any further comments.

She’d probably wanted to say something like “*You’re obviously too young for this. What was the University thinking?*” I appreciated that she’d kept that thought to herself, but I wasn’t sure why. Maybe she was just a surprisingly tactful person?

No...judging by that creepy little smile on Ariel’s face, she’d probably given her a warning beforehand.

It was a good thing, too. If the woman had burst out laughing and called my beloved teacher a “child,” I might have exploded on the spot...or *caused* an explosion. That would have ended Roxy’s career prospects.

“We were told you’d hired a party of adventurers, as well?”

“Yes. They’re out preparing for the journey at the moment. Please wait here for the moment.”

“All right.”

I started to move toward an empty chair, but Roxy headed over to join Sylphie and Luke. The knight returned to her former position, where she stood ramrod straight and perfectly still.

It seemed like the princesses were the only ones permitted to take a seat at the moment. I’d have to stay on my feet as well.

“By the way, Princess Ariel, how long have you been staying in our kingdom?”

"Well, let me see...not counting my journey, it's been a little less than six years. This country is essentially a second home to me by now."

"Oh...doesn't that mean you'll be graduating next year, then? What a shame... I only just got to know you, and you'll be leaving so soon..."

"I suppose so, yes. But as long as our countries stay in contact, I'm sure we'll meet again."

Hmm. On another note, this Ranoan princess was certainly a cutie.

I did remember hearing that the royal family of this country was full of beautiful people. Apparently, it was true. She was almost a match for Ariel—not quite, but almost.

Ariel sure worked fast, though. It seemed like they were *already* buddies somehow.

For a while, I waited idly, letting the princess' conversation wash over me without really listening.

"How many times do I have to repeat myself, dammit?!"

The sound of voices at the entrance snapped me abruptly back to reality.

"Look, just deal with it!"

"Are you serious?! Did you forget what happened last time?! Those morons screwed up so badly, they nearly got Tina and Melanie killed! I'm *not* okay with this!"

"What do you want me to do? We're not calling the shots here."

"That's not good enough! Are you really okay with this? Do you really trust some random stranger to watch your back out there?"

"It's not like I *want* to, okay?"

The new arrivals stomped into the room, arguing loudly with each other. There were four of them, and they were all women.

The one at the front of the group was a big, muscular lady. She reminded me of Ghislaine, but she was even more solidly built. Her body looked like it was chiseled out of rock.

The second was a leaner woman who wore her dark brown hair in a swept-back style, exposing a cross-shaped scar on her forehead. She seemed agile and alert, and her sunken eyes suggested she'd seen her share of battles.

They were both maybe thirty years old, and they both wore swords at their hips. It felt safe to say they were the party's front-line fighters.

Appearances can sometimes be deceiving, but they sure looked like a pair of wily, skillful veterans. That made sense, given that they'd been chosen to guard a princess.

Incidentally, neither of them were taking part in the ongoing argument. That was coming from the two who followed them in.

"I know, right?! I'd rather do this by myself than with people I can't even trust!"

The angry one was a younger woman with a sullen look on her face. She was more of a girl, really—maybe fifteen years old.

Compared to the first two, she looked like a fledgling. But if they'd taken her into their party, she had to be good at what she did. The staff she carried suggested she was a mage or a healer, or possibly both.

"Look, you can't be the only one on the backline. I don't want to let anything get past me, but it's going to happen sometimes..."

And then there was the fourth member of the party.

"But more importantly, you've got to learn how to work with *anyone* if you want people to respect you. Adventurers just don't get the luxury of staying in the same party forever, you know?"

She carried a bow. Not a typical weapon for an adventurer—arrows couldn't match the power of a sword or spell. I'd spent years as a travelling adventurer, and I'd only met one dedicated archer.

"Gah."

She was probably the only one in the entire region, come to think of it.

I recognized her immediately, of course.

The instant she stepped into the room and saw my face, she stopped in her tracks and stared at me with her eyes wide open.

"Oh. It's you."

She muttered the words softly, to herself more than me.

The sullen girl she'd been arguing with turned back and spoke to her dubiously. "Uh, Sara? Do you know that guy?"

"Well...yeah."

It was the same adventurer I'd very nearly slept with some time ago.

\*\*\*

I hadn't forgotten Sara, of course. I'm not sure I could have if I tried.

When I met her not long after Eris dumped me, she was the youngest member of the party Counter Arrow. She was a strong-willed, combative girl with a sharp tongue, but a good head on her shoulders.

Suzanne, the leader of her party, took a liking to me and started inviting me along on some of their jobs. Among other things, we'd fought a horde of monsters together, and later ventured into an ancient underground fortress to gather Snow Drake scales.

It took some time, but Sara ended up falling for me. I was fairly sure of that, at least.

It was harder to say exactly how I felt about her.

Things escalated before I could really figure that out, and then my performance issues got in the way. I got drunk, acted like an idiot, and ran off to the nearest brothel for the night. And *then* I started badmouthing Sara in public. Which she overheard, of course! She dumped me on the spot.

I was fairly confident it was a traumatic experience for both of us. Still, it had been quite a while since then. We'd gone our separate ways and lived our own lives for years now. I'd told myself it was in the past, and that we'd never see each other again anyway. But it turned out fate had different plans.

So now, I found myself in the *interesting* position of working a job with my ex-girlfriend. At least we were both professionals, right? Hopefully we could just focus on the task at hand. It wasn't like dredging up the past was going to do either of us much good now, surely.

"All right then! Why don't we get the food ready before the princess comes back out?"

After some slightly awkward introductions, we'd formed ourselves into a party and headed out to a nearby forest where the shrine was located.

"Phew. Nicely done, girls. This was an *easy* one!"

“Looks like those rumors about the professor who made it through the Teleportation Labyrinth were true, huh?”

“Sorry, but I *have* to apologize! I really underestimated you at first... That lesson you gave me about splitting your focus between healing and offensive magic was so amazing, though! It’s such a clean, simple theory, and you actually put it into practice!”

Thanks to my careful efforts, we’d gotten through the job without any uncomfortable incidents to speak of. It was going very, very well, in fact.

The members of “The Amazons,” an all-female S-ranked party, had been openly dubious about Roxy at first. Understandable, perhaps, given her appearance. The brat of the party had gone so far as to declare “I don’t want to work with a *kid!*” with us right there in the room.

However, once we left the city and got through our first few battles, their opinion of her did a complete 180. Despite the slapdash nature of our temporary party, Roxy played her role as a backliner to perfection. She cast her offensive spells with impeccable timing, and healed her allies just as efficiently.

Thanks to the time she’d spent exploring labyrinths all on her own, she was far more alert and skillful than your average mage. In fact, it sounded like she’d outdone their two missing party members all by herself.

Understandably, they’d been barraging her with compliments for some time now. That made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Sometimes I had to resist the urge to puff out my chest and say *That’s my teacher, you know!*

“Uh, hey, Rud—”

“Oh, sorry! I’ll get the food going! I wasn’t much use in those battles, but I can handle this. I’m actually pretty good at cooking!”

“...”

The only downside was that I had to dodge Sara from time to time.

She kept glaring at me as I was working on the meal, but it felt pretty clear that striking up a conversation would only make things worse.

Sometimes it's best to avoid your troubles entirely, right?

Right. I was just doing my part to keep the mood positive. My discretion was the only reason everything had gone so smoothly!

All right, that wasn't *exactly* true.

I hadn't contributed much of anything to the group. The Amazons were all highly skilled, and Roxy had snapped into their party perfectly. That hadn't left much for me or Sylphie to do on our way to the shrine.

The Ranoan princess was currently inside the building itself with her personal knight, offering up some sort of formal prayer. Once she was finished, we just had to make it back to the city and our job was done. Everyone would go home happy, and Roxy's reputation would take a big jump up, pushing her closer to her first promotion at the University of Magic.

“...”

“...”

Of course, Sara wasn't too pleased about this situation. She'd been staring at me silently for what felt like ten straight minutes now.

I couldn't blame her. People do tend to get a little surly when you completely ignore them. But I had to assume that dredging up the past would only make things worse.

I was about ready to ask Sylphie, who was sitting next to me, for help...but she'd been awfully quiet for a while as well. In fact, it kind of looked like she was *also* glaring at me.

Maybe she was just worried about me. Maybe she was worried I was going to cheat on her again.

Or maybe she didn't approve of the way I was deliberately ignoring Sara.

One way or the other, the silence was starting to get heavy. Like, painfully heavy. Black-hole heavy. My skin was starting to itch.

Finally, Sylphie leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Why don't you at least talk to her, Rudy?"

*Well, uh...it's not like I'd mind having a normal conversation with her. I mean, her attitude seemed pretty casual at first, and I'd love to put the past behind us...*

I wasn't sure I could just laugh off those memories, though. The wounds still felt kind of raw. Maybe I should have just introduced her to Sylphie and Roxy right from the get-go. But at this point, she wasn't even trying to speak to me anymore.

I should have done something before things got this bad. Now I had a hole to climb out of.

*Hmm...maybe I do need to say something.*

The more I thought about it, the more my policy of completely ignoring Sara seemed like a mistake. All I'd accomplished was to piss her off. I could always have kept the conversation completely businesslike.

That said, it was a little tough for me to try and change my approach now.

The biggest problem was that I basically had nothing I wanted to say to her. The only topics that came to mind were related to our past together, which would inevitably lead to a discussion of our ugly breakup. That would just put us both in a lousy mood. It might not be too pleasant for Sylphie to hear, either.

Staying silent seemed preferable to that.

I could always apologize to her for making things awkward once we made it back to the city. I was willing to endure some suffering for the sake of Roxy's promotion.

"Miss Roxy, would you mind teaching me a little more about magic before we leave this city? Please? Pretty please?"

"It would be my pleasure."

"Thank you so much! Hey, is it okay if I call you Elder Sister?!"

"Huh? Er, I...suppose so. If you want to."

"Yesss! Thank you, Elder Sister!"

Things seemed so nice and happy on the other side of the group. I wanted to be a part of *that* conversation. Maybe I could convince Roxy to try a little royal roleplay the next time we spent the night together...

"Aah...you know, my throat's getting awfully dry."

All of a sudden, Ariel had broken the silence on our side of the group.

I looked over at her, a little confused. We had plenty of water to go around, after all. She stared back at me meaningfully.

"There were some nice yellow fruits growing a little way back, weren't there? I hate to be a bother, but I'd like to try those," Ariel continued, turning her gaze to Sara. "Would you mind picking some for me?"

Sara looked a little suspicious about why this request had come to her, but shrugged and got to her feet. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you. I suppose it wouldn't be safe for you to walk through the forest all by yourself, though. Rudeus, Fitz...would you escort her, please?"

*Oh man. So that's what this is really about, huh...* I suppose the Princess had gotten fed up with our awkwardness. This was her way of saying "go talk it out among yourselves already."

"I think Rudy can handle it by himself. I'll stay here with you, Princess Ariel."

To my surprise, Sylphie had opted out.

"Oh? You think he'll be all right alone?"

"It's fine. He's not the kind of man who hides from danger."

Was that what I was doing? Hiding?

Yeah, it was true. I *had* been hiding—both from Sara, and from our past together.

But there was no need to keep doing so. I had Sylphie and Roxy in my life now. My performance issues were a thing of the past. I had a family now—a daughter, even.

"All right."

It was time to stop acting like a coward.

Sara and I made our way back through the forest to the spot where we'd passed those yellow fruits. We found them easily enough, and picked a few from the low bushes they were growing on.

It was time to find a way to start the conversation. Sylphie had sent me out here with her blessing; I couldn't chicken out now.

*Okay, let's reframe the situation. We're old friends who bumped into each other by random chance. Wouldn't it be kind of sad if we just did the job without even talking to each other?*

*Yeah, that works.*

"So...you kept going as an adventurer, huh?"

It wasn't the world's greatest opening line, to be honest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sara’s response was understandably curt. I couldn’t let myself get intimidated, though.

*Deep breaths, Rudeus.*

It wasn’t like I’d meant to imply anything about her abilities as an adventurer. She knew that much herself. This was just the way she was, really.

“Well, Counter Arrow dissolved when Suzanne and Timothy got married, right? I’ve been wondering what you and Patrice were doing with yourselves, that’s all. Do you know what happened to him?”

“He joined a different party when we broke up. Dunno where he is now. He’s probably still an adventurer, assuming he’s not dead or crippled.”

Patrice had been a frontline warrior in Counter Arrow. He was an easy-going guy, but that was basically the only thing I remembered about him.

“What about you, Sara?”

“I bounced around a whole bunch of parties for a while. This group scooped me up right after I hit A-rank, and I’ve been with them ever since.”

She’d spent some time now with the Amazons, from the sound of things.

Now that I thought about it, they were probably the single *prettiest* party I’d ever encountered. Their muscular leader had a beautiful face, and the subleader made that scar look good. The young mage was kind of a brat, but she was definitely on the cute side.

But none of them could compare to Sylphie or Roxy, of course!

“You know, I don’t think I’ve seen an all-female party before.”

“Yeah, well, there’re a lot of them in the lower ranks, I guess. But once you get past Rank C or so, everyone’s looking for skill more than anything else, so it’s not too common.”

“Huh...”

I didn’t remember seeing any gender-based parties on the Demon Continent, even in the lower ranks. But that place was kind of a special case, given how strong the monsters were there.

“This is my first time in one myself, but it definitely has its plusses, let me tell you. Gets you priority access to some clients, for one thing. Like this one.”

“Ah, yeah. I can see why you’d want a female party to guard a princess.”

It might be a bit risky to entrust a pretty young thing like that to a gang of smelly, aggressive men. A lot of adventurers were one step removed from being street thugs. People did tend to be more professional at the higher ranks, but an all-female party offered some reassurance that things couldn’t go *too* badly. Not that women are always kind to each other, of course...

“It’s also just less stressful in general. Don’t have to worry about all the romantic drama, you know?”

I smiled awkwardly at that one. If I’d ended up formally joining Counter Arrow and pairing off with Sara, it would have been us making things awkward for the others.

I also found myself thinking about the youngest member of the Amazons, though. Whenever we stopped for a break, she’d throw herself at the party’s leader or subleader with squeals of affection. And once she realized how talented Roxy was, she’d been *all over* her. She had a habit of sticking her tongue out at me while squeezing my wife in her arms.

“...No romance, huh? Really?”

"Huh? Oh, her. Well, you do get girls like that, but it's just less of a problem," said Sara with a shrug of her shoulders. "It helps that nobody gets pregnant or anything, you know?"

Huh. Good to hear the party got along, at least.

The two of us did have some painful memories in our past, but from the sound of things, Sara was enjoying her life just fine.

I was happy for her. And a bit relieved, maybe.

"So anyway, what about you?"

"Um...what *about* me?"

"I heard you're married with a kid now, right? Sounds like you're enjoying yourself."

"Oh. Who told you that?"

"Suzanne. She sent me a letter a little while back, you know?"  
Sara's tone was starting to sound a bit accusatory.

The whole reason that we'd broken up was my total inability to perform in bed with her. And here I was, married to two different women whose company I enjoyed on a regular basis. I could see how that would sour someone's mood.

I'd been suffering from a serious case of erectile dysfunction back then, but I wasn't sure Sara even knew that. I didn't think I'd gone into that much detail with Suzanne. Also, it wasn't an excuse for my behavior. Whatever the cause, I'd ended up comparing the girl unfavorably to a prostitute in public. That was a hell of a way to treat someone who had feelings for you.

Bumping into a jerk like that on the job would make the nicest person on earth kind of cranky. Especially if they tried to pretend you didn't exist.

"Well, uh...I'm sorry, Sara."

"What? I'm not asking you to *apologize!*"

With those words, Sara jumped to her feet. Her face was flushed; her lips were pursed and trembling.

*Crap, now I pissed her off. Maybe this was a bad idea after all... Okay, stop. Too late for that now. What am I supposed to do?*

“Err...”

Before I could find anything to say, Sara spun around and sat back down with her back turned to me.

I got up slowly, trying not to provoke her, and stepped forward so I could see her face.

She was staring down at the ground with a sullen expression. To my surprise, she looked more depressed than angry.

“...Sara?”

“Yeah? What?”

“I know you don’t want me to apologize, but I’m going to anyway. The way we broke up wasn’t, uh...it wasn’t the best, right? So...I didn’t know what to say to you, I guess. That’s no excuse for ignoring you, though. I’m really sorry.”

Sighing wearily, Sara looked up at me. “Look, I just told you I didn’t want an apology, okay?”

If she didn’t want an apology, what *did* she want? I was starting to regret not asking Sylphie for some advice back there.

“Mind if I sit next to you?”

“Oh? Won’t your wife get mad at you?”

“Nah. I’ll tell her what happened once we bring the fruit back.”

“...Wait, so that’s her? The sunglasses girl?”

“Didn’t Suzanne describe her in the letter?”

“Nah, just mentioned her name was Sylphiette. And I mean...I didn’t think she’d be a royal bodyguard, you know?”

So Suzanne had neglected to describe her beauty? Sheer negligence, really.

"I guess that explains why you two seemed so friendly, though," Sara continued.

"It's not just her, either. The blue-haired demon girl's my other wife."

"What, her too?! Hmm. Isn't *that* interesting...?"

While Sara pondered this, I gingerly took a seat next to her. As I settled down, I caught a whiff of her scent, still familiar from the brief time we'd spent together years ago.

Neither of us said anything for a moment. This time, it was Sara who broke the silence.

"To tell you the truth, I was planning to come by your house while we were in town."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah. I mean, I've been...meaning to apologize to you. For a really long time."

"You wanted to apologize? To *me*?"

"Yep. After you ran off, I found out about your, uh...condition. And I realized what a jerk I'd been. I made you into the bad guy, right? Got all mad and pitched a big fit. Didn't even stop to think you might be hurting, too...even worse than I was."

The memories were still uncomfortably fresh. I could hear myself, hopelessly drunk, shouting a bunch of stupid nonsense. I could see the rage and humiliation on Sara's face as she confronted me.

Those events had hurt me deeply. But I knew I'd hurt her too.

"So when Suzanne wrote me, and I learned you were in Sharia...I told myself I'd go see you. I knew this job was gonna take us here, so

I figured...I'd take some time off to apologize. Y'know...for the way I acted back then."

"..."

"But here I am snapping at you again, right? God. Can't stand myself sometimes..."

Sara paused for a moment, then pressed her face against her knees. When she continued, her voice was barely audible.

"Sorry."

I wanted to put an arm around her shoulders or something, but somehow it didn't feel appropriate right now. Instead, I hugged my knees to my chest.

"It's been a while now," I said, "so I'm going to be honest with you."

"Hm?"

"I don't think I was really in love with you back then or anything."

"Uh. Excuse me?"

"The cause of my condition was...this girl named Eris. We'd travelled across the Demon Continent together, but then she vanished on me all of a sudden. And that's when I met you, Sara. I could tell you liked me. I didn't feel that strongly about you, but I guess I wanted to move on. You know...put the past behind me. To be honest, I was just using you." I paused to swallow, then continued. "So...yeah. You really don't owe me any apologies."

I assumed Sara would be angry with me. I was fine with that. She'd told me the whole truth. She'd been as honest as she could. I felt like it was only fair to return the favor.

For some reason, though, she wasn't angry. She was just staring at me with a look of surprise on her face.

"Wow. You've really changed."

“Uh...have I?”

“Yeah. Back in the day, you *never* opened up to me like that. Never even pretended to.”

“I guess not.”

“You never talked to anyone this casually, either. Or if you did, it was kind of forced and awkward.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah. You seem so much more...natural now.”

Come to think of it, I wasn’t speaking to her as formally as I used to. That probably had something to do with the way my mindset had changed. Back then, convinced that Eris had abandoned me, I was terrified of conflict and rejection. I was careful to speak as politely as possible. That way, I wouldn’t offend anyone—and I’d keep them at a distance, too.

It was simple enough. I didn’t want to risk getting hurt.

But now I wasn’t afraid anymore.

“...Someone gave me a bit of confidence, I guess.”

“Your wife, you mean?”

“Yeah. After that night with you, I, uh...had that same problem for a couple years. Consistently.”

“...”

“Sylphie was the one who cured me. It was her first time, but...she did everything she could. Even used an aphrodisiac on me. And she got it working again.”

I went into some specific detail. Sara’s face went red, but she listened to every word, even leaning forward slightly. It got a little embarrassing after a while. Maybe there was such a thing as being *too open*.

“So if she did all that for you, why’d you go and grab a second one?”

“Well...Roxy did just as much for me, in her own way.”

As I proceeded to tell *that* story, Sara listened with open curiosity, holding a hand over her mouth. From time to time, I thought I saw her nostrils flaring.

When I got to the end, though, she looked a little sad.

“You know...I don’t think I could have done anything like that for you. Even if you’d told me everything back then.”

“...”

“Maybe that’s the reason you never really fell for me.”

Maybe it was. Sylphie and Roxy both loved me. But I loved *them* even more. They’d changed my life for the better, and I’d fallen for them because of it.

On the face of it, that sounded almost transactional. It was just a fact, though—they’d won me over by being there for me when I needed them. Maybe that was what distinguished them from Sara.

“Gah!”

All of a sudden, Sara jumped to her feet with a yelp of aggravation. Putting both hands on her hips, she glared down at me.

“Look, let’s get one thing straight right now. I might have loved you back then, but that ended the day you ran off! I mean, I *did* want to apologize for being such a jerk to you, but that’s all. I’m not remotely interested in giving it another shot after all this time!”

Having spit all that out with some real vigor, she snorted and turned her head to one side before continuing.

“And on *that* note, stop looking at me all apologetically! We’re just old adventuring buddies, right? Try acting like it!”

There was a hint of embarrassment on her face. But at the same time, she looked relieved. It had taken quite a while, but we'd finally gotten some closure. It was a little bittersweet, but I found myself smiling anyway.

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After our talk, I managed to interact normally with Sara.

My approach was a mixture of my "Linia and Pursena" mode with my "Nanahoshi" mode, with the overall intensity dialed down a bit. It seemed just about right. Sara's performance also improved noticeably. She supported the party with remarkable skill, firing off arrows exactly where they were needed most.

In general, her role was to stand slightly back from the action and calmly direct the flow of battle. It reminded me of the way Suzanne used to shout out friendly orders to the members of Counter Arrow; Sara had a different style, but she always kept their young mage on target and in the right position.

It was quite a contrast with the impulsive but talented kid I remembered from the old days. Maybe having someone younger to look after had helped her grow more mature? Whatever the case, she was the very picture of a veteran adventurer by now.

In the end, the princess' pilgrimage went off without a hitch. We had to fight off groups of monsters several times along the way, but none of them gave us any trouble. We made it back to Sharia without any injuries to speak of.

Just like that, our job was complete.

The Ranoan Princess and her guards stayed overnight at their inn in Sharia, picked up the two recuperating adventurers, and then

departed for the capital in the morning. They needed to make it back before the snows started to fall in earnest, so they couldn't afford to waste any time.

The rest of us went out to the city wall to see them off.

"I don't wanna goooo! I still have *so* much to learn about magic from my dear Miss Roxy!"

"Control yourself, kid."

"Oh, I know! Why don't you just join our party, Miss Roxy? Don't worry, I'm sure everyone would be thrilled to have you!"

"It's very kind of you to offer, but I'm happy with my job here. And I'm a married woman..."

"That's no big deal! If you wander off for a while, he'll treat you like a goddess when you show up again!"

"That's enough, Alisa! Put a sock in it."

"Awww. Okay..."

Before they left, the Amazons made a half-serious effort to recruit Roxy, but she gently declined. It was a good thing, too. If she'd showed any interest at all, I would have launched straight into my patented "clinging and blubbering" defense. Dignity was a secondary concern here. I needed my Roxy right where she was.

"All right, Rudeus. Guess this is goodbye."

Sara was leaving too, of course. At first, I'd been horrified to see her here, but by now I was glad she'd come. I thought that talk had done both of us some good.

"Yeah. Stay safe out there."

"You take care of yourself too. Don't make your wives cry, all right?"

"Well, I'll do my best."

"It seems like they get along okay, but don't you ever start comparing them out loud. If you put one of them down to compliment the other, they'll remember it *forever*."

"Oh. Yeah, okay. I'll make a mental note of that..."

"You better. See you around!"

With that, Sara punched me lightly in the chest and walked off. Pretty casual, as farewells go.

Sylphie, Roxy and I stood just outside the city walls for a while, watching as the party made its way down the road.

Just as they disappeared from view, Sylphie finally spoke up.

"Um, Rudy. Are you sure you want to let her go like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...you used to be in love with her, right?"

*Oh my. It seems there's been a slight misunderstanding here, Miss Sylphiette...*

"Nah, we weren't in love. We were a little awkward and confused together, that's all."

"Hmm. Okay..." Looking somewhat less than convinced, Sylphie leaned over to study my face. "Tell me something, Rudy. What *is* your type, anyway?"

Roxy's ears perked up at this, and she drew in close as well. It seemed they were both rather interested in the question. Would they be happy if I just said *girls with small breasts*? I felt like that might backfire badly...

"Hmm, good question. I used to have all these details worked out...like, a girl *this* tall, with *that* haircut, and *this* body. I don't think I had it right, though."

I paused for a moment to study Sylphie, then Roxy. It took a moment, but then an answer popped into my head.

"It seems like girls who help me out when I'm in trouble get a special place in my heart."

That put a big, goofy smile on Sylphie's face. "Ooh. Does that mean *I'm* special, Rudy?"

"Obviously. You cured me of something I'd been suffering for years. I'm very happy right now, and I think you're the one who made that possible."

"Oh yeah? Hee hee hee... Good thing I worked up the courage back then."

Roxy was looking up at me a bit uncertainly. Her expression read: *What about me?*

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her in for a hug. *Of course you're special too, Roxy.* She'd pulled me out of that house that I was hiding in, and she'd pieced me back together when Paul's death left me broken. I owed *everything* to her.

"Anyway, I guess that means there aren't many special girls out there for me. No need to get too anxious, Sylphie. I won't be picking up any more wives, I promise."

At this, Sylphie reached out to take my hand. "Okay...but I'm just going to repeat myself for a second, Rudy. As long as they're special to you, and you're special to them, I'm all right with it. I guess Sara wasn't quite in that category, though."

All of a sudden, I found myself remembering a red-headed girl who *had* been special to me once. I remembered her smile. How we'd struggled our way home from a far-off land. How she'd wept when I nearly died. And I remembered that last night we'd spent together.

Eris had abandoned me. Or so I'd thought for years.

But a man who I'd traveled with, and who I trusted deeply, was convinced I was mistaken.

What if he was right? What would happen then?

“Uh, Sylphie?”

“Yes?”

“I’m not entirely sure about this, but...I might end up breaking that promise again.”

“...That’s all right. I didn’t accept it in the first place, remember? Just make sure you bring her to meet me first. I’m not going to tie you down, but I’m not about to let you marry some girl who doesn’t even love you, either.”

“Got it.”

“That *is* a promise, okay? No mistresses or secret children. Don’t hide things from me...unless you want to make me mad.”

“U-uh... Right.”

“Okay, then! I’ll be very interested to see what number three is like, assuming you manage to catch her.”

Hmm. My sweet little Sylphie was starting to develop something of a commanding aura. Not so long ago, she was modestly claiming that she’d “just been lucky,” but it seemed she’d found some self-confidence.

That was a good sign. The girl had seemed a little anxious ever since she married me, and it worried me at times.

*All right then. I’ll have to make damn sure I keep that second promise, at the very least...*

*Legends of the University #10: The Boss is a hopeless womanizer.*

## Chapter 11: Graduation Day

**N**OT LONG AFTER Sara left the city of Sharia, winter began in earnest, and I turned eighteen. My research was coming along steadily, and I'd managed to complete my requirements for the year at the University. I'd be a fourth-year student soon. Everything was going well.

Elinalise, on the other hand, was going to have to repeat the year. Unlike me, she was a general student, and her six-month leave of absence had left her hopelessly behind. This didn't seem to bother her at all, but I felt a little guilty about it. She'd been helping my family out, after all.

Incidentally, Sylphie also hadn't met her attendance quota for the year. But her grades were still excellent, and they took her role as Princess Ariel's bodyguard into consideration, so she ended up getting special permission to move forward. Sometimes it's all about who you know.

Things were good at home as well. Lucie was growing fast. She'd already lost interest in breastfeeding; lately she'd been eating baby food instead of nursing. And just the other day, she'd spoken to me for the very first time! She'd looked right at me and said "Wudee."

Apparently, I was "Rudy" to her, not "Dada" or "Papa" or "Mr. Bubbles." But nobody in the house called me any of those things, so I couldn't blame her. She was calling Sylphie "Mama," but that was because Sylphie had deliberately taught the word to her. Perhaps I could do the same and change my name to "Papa."

*Nah, there's no need to rush things.*

She was still a baby. Once she got a little bigger, I'd teach her to call me "Father Dearest." Anyway, wasn't it a little crazy that she was talking already? Maybe we had a little genius on our hands!

I know, I know. It's perfectly normal. Some kids start early, some take a little longer. Sylphie and Lilia had been speaking to her constantly, too. That probably had something to do with it.

But look...when you see *your* kid start to talk, it just feels amazing, okay?

There were some downsides, of course. Once she got even bigger, she might start saying stuff like "Don't wash my underwear with Dad's!"

Hmm, no. I was actually looking forward to that one, for some reason!

As our daughter was no longer nursing, Sylphie's breasts had stopped producing milk. That was a real downer. I'd lost my chance to enjoy that sweet, exciting treat. They'd also returned to their normal, smaller size. I liked them just fine that way, of course, but...it felt a little like that moment when the timer runs out on the bonus stage.

On a different note, we'd also ended our contract with Suzanne, since we didn't need a wet nurse anymore. Still, I was going to try to stay in touch with her. She'd taken good care of my baby, and she'd helped me out back in the day. I wanted to repay her kindness if I could. Maybe I could look out for her kids if they enrolled at the University. It did seem likely that I'd graduate before that happened, but I could always ask Norn to keep an eye on them for me.

Norn and Aisha were in good spirits lately as well. They were always checking in on Lucie and cooing about how cute she was. The kid probably felt more like a little sister to them than anything else.

At one point, I overhead them talking by the stairs. From the sound of things, they'd decided not to fight in front of Lucie. They seemed to have several other little plans worked out as well. They probably wanted her to look up to them.

Lately, I hadn't seen them squabbling the way they used to. I guess some kids try to act more "grown-up" when they've got someone younger than them in the house. It was a nice, and unexpected, side effect of Lucie's arrival.

Roxy's first year as a faculty member seemed to be going smoothly, too.

I'd noticed a few general students looking at her in awe recently. Perhaps they were starting to understand her greatness, at least partially. My intention was to forcibly re-educate anyone who dared to mock her...but it sounded like the kids in her classes were listening respectfully. Hopefully it would stay that way.

Zenith's routine was the same as always. When Norn was around, they'd eat meals together. And when Aisha was in the garden, they'd pull weeds together. Sometimes she'd squeeze Lucie's fingers gently and smile at her.

That was the one big change—after Norn and Aisha's birthday party, Zenith had started smiling on a regular basis. Her smiles were small and subtle, but everyone recognized them for what they were.

She still wasn't speaking, and her facial expressions remained very limited. But I wanted to believe she was making progress toward a recovery.

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Today was graduation day.

The University held its entrance ceremonies out on the campus, but the graduation ones were held inside. They installed a big stage in some massive auditorium I'd never set foot in before, where the seventh-year students would receive their diplomas one by one.

In total, there were only about five hundred people graduating today. The University had over ten thousand students, so that number seemed oddly low. This class had probably started about two thousand strong; most of them must have dropped out over the years.

It was easy to enroll at this school, but it wasn't so simple to graduate. In particular, Advanced-tier spells and combined magic were challenging to master. For those with smaller mana capacities, they could even be impossible.

There were also plenty of people who had *some* talent, but decided that mastering the Beginner-tier spells was good enough for them. And then there were those who dropped out for various personal or financial reasons. Those of us in the Special Class had it easy, comparatively speaking.

While most of the stage was occupied with rows of graduating students, the entire faculty was lined up on the other side of it. There had to be two or three hundred of them in total.

I hadn't realized just how many professors this place employed. That did explain why they had a whole separate building for the faculty offices, though.

It was easy to spot Roxy in the crowd—she was the single shortest faculty member. Even at a distance, I could see that her eyes were shining with excitement.

Incidentally, the general student body had today off. Kids in the other years weren't obligated to show up for this event, or the entrance ceremony for the freshmen. In fact, they needed special permission to attend. Participating in these was supposed to be an honor that you had to earn.

I was sitting on the edge of the Student Council's reserved seating area. All of the Council's members were here—Ariel, Luke,

the two royal attendants, and four other people whose faces I recognized. And Sylphie too, of course.

It was always nice seeing her in her “poised professional” mode. Not too long ago, she’d been indistinguishable from a boy in this outfit. But her hair was down to her shoulders now, and her body had grown subtly more feminine after her pregnancy.

Somehow, she managed to be cute *and* cool at the same time. I had to fight the urge to brag to strangers about her being my wife.

On another note, though... For some reason, Norn was sitting in the last seat in the Student Council section. Was she a member now or something? I hadn’t heard anything about that. She hadn’t been working for them this year, but maybe she was joining up at the start of the new term.

I didn’t want to pry or anything, but hopefully she would tell me what the deal was before the year got underway.

“Representatives of the graduating class...Linia Dedoldia and Pursena Adoldia! Step forward to receive your diplomas, and your credentials as D-rank members of the Magic Guild!”

Linia and Pursena had been chosen as the representatives of their year. They’d run wild for a while, true, but they’d ended up achieving an impressive academic record here. Of course, they were *also* princesses of the Doldia tribe—rulers of the beastfolk. And it seemed like the University preferred to bestow this honor on students of noble birth. When they had a commoner and a noble with comparable records, they’d pick the noble as the representative. It was a way to curry favor with powerful people without causing any real problems.

I assumed things would go differently if a commoner were the best student of the year by far, but it was hard to say. Roxy had been an excellent student in her day, and they hadn’t given her this honor. I had no way of knowing just how skilled she was back then, but it

sounded like she was already capable of using Saint-tier magic...and they still handed the role to someone else.

The University of Magic made a big deal about accepting anyone who wanted to enroll there, regardless of their background. But the people running it were only human, and they clearly had their biases.

“Thank you, Sir!”

“Thank you, Sir!”

“Congratulations. May you walk the path of magic all your days!”

Linia and Pursena received their diplomas with poise and dignity. It was really something seeing them stride up onto that stage. They'd declared their intention to find boyfriends during the mating season. But when their many suitors had surged forward, they beat them down and tossed them aside one by one. In the end, they'd stood together on top of a mountain of bodies, muttering “*What the heck? We got too strong,*” and “*What a downer.*”

Those memories flashed back through my mind now. In those glorious moments, they were royalty—two Queens of the jungle, invincible and untouchable.

I also had some memories of them heading to a tavern afterward and shouting “*Mrrrow! I'm done with men forever!*” and “*Me too! Guys are fuckin' losers!*” in a drunken stupor. But I'd do my best to forget those.

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After the graduation ceremony concluded, I stopped by Nanahoshi's laboratory, where I found her wrapped up in something like a thick bathrobe, coughing and wheezing constantly.

“Did you catch another cold, Nanahoshi?”

*“Cough, cough... I guess so.”*

For the last year or so, the girl had been getting sick on a regular basis. It usually involved a hacking cough or sudden fever. I did clear them up for her with Detoxification spells whenever it happened, but they always came right back before too long.

“Have you considered taking *slightly* better care of yourself? You know, getting out a little?”

In general, Nanahoshi almost never left her rooms. She’d emerge when something major happened, but other than that she spent the entire year holed up in this place, only popping out for lunch. For breakfast and dinner, she relied on her stockpiles of preserved food.

The vast majority of her time was spent alone in these rooms where the sunlight couldn’t reach her. It was no surprise that her immune system wasn’t doing too well. I understood she had her priorities, but I felt like she needed to start taking her health more seriously.

“Why don’t you at least rest up until that nasty cough goes away?”

“I can’t stop working *now*. I’m making so much progress with the research lately...”

And with that, she turned back to her magic circles.

She wasn’t wrong—the research was coming along nicely. She’d completed the second phase of her plan several months ago, successfully summoning a cap that fit the bottle she’d obtained in phase one.

At the present, we were on phase three: summoning a living thing, like a plant or animal. That was a big, and exciting, step forward. We weren’t far from bringing vegetables from our old world into this one, and we were getting closer every day.

"We're going to keep working on the stage three experiments today."

"Shouldn't we wait until Cliff and Zanoba are available?"

"I suppose. Why don't you go find them, then?"

I shook my head. "Unfortunately, they're not on campus today."

"What, they're *both* off? That's unusual. Do you know why?"

"Today's graduation day. No one has any classes."

"Graduation day...? Ah. Is it that time of year already?"

Nanahoshi grimaced as she spoke the words. For her, they only signified the passing of a year—another year she'd spent trapped in this world.

"Yeah. Linia and Pursena got their diplomas and everything. It sounds like they're heading back home, so I was thinking we could throw a farewell party soon. You'll be there, right?"

"...I suppose, yes."

I don't know if Linia and Pursena qualified as friends to Nanahoshi, but it was nice to know she was willing to come say goodbye. The girl was still a shut-in by nature, but she'd grown *slightly* more social than she used to be.

"I guess they'll be princesses again once they get back home... Weird, right?"

"They certainly don't look the part."

"Can't disagree with that."

I was a bit worried about the future of the Doldia tribe, to be perfectly honest. Hopefully they had enough competent people to keep things running if they ended up with a moron for a leader.

Just as I was pondering this, though, there was a knock at the door.

"Hm? Uh, come in."

“Pardon me!”

“Comin’ in.”

Our new visitors were a spunky cat and a sleepy-eyed dog. The very ones we’d just been talking about, as it happened.

Linia and Pursena strode into the room, still wearing their school uniforms.

“We’ve been lookin’ all over for you, Boss.”

“Ya got some time?”

Something seemed a little different about them, but it was hard to put my finger on it. Was it the way Linia seemed a little bit on edge? Or maybe the fact that Pursena *didn’t* have a hunk of meat in her mouth? I thought I sensed something like hostility in the air. It reminded me of the day we’d first met.

Normally, they would be saying something like “*Meooow! The boss is hanging out in a single woman’s room again! Maybe I’ll tell Fitz or Roxy!*” right about now, but this time they were all business.

Was it time for another duel, then? Did they want to settle the score before they left town?

“Please, Boss?”

“We need this, man.”

They weren’t saying much, but I could feel the weight behind their words. Their eyes were shining with determination.

Maybe they didn’t want to head back home as “losers.” They had their pride, after all.

*Well, all right then. I don’t like fighting, but I’ll make an exception for you two. It wouldn’t feel right to turn tail now...*

“Okay then. Sorry, Nanahoshi. Sounds like I’m needed elsewhere.”

“Excuse me? What about our experiments?”

Nanahoshi looked none too pleased about this turn of events. But before she could object further, Linia walked up and grabbed her by the arm.

“You come too. This here’s a special occasion.”

“Yeah, we’ll allow it.”

“Wha— Hey! What’s this all about?!”

It seemed they wanted Nanahoshi to serve as a witness to our duel or something. Not the best choice, considering she rarely talked to anyone... but these two weren’t the kind to think stuff through that thoroughly.

Then again, the name Silent Sevenstar was relatively well-known in the world at large. Her testimony would have some credibility, at least.

The four of us made our way to a spot midway between the dorms and Nanahoshi’s building. There was a forest on one side of the road, and piles of snow everywhere. It was unlikely we’d be spotted from a distance.

“Let’s do it here,” said Linia, coming to a halt.

“Really takes me back, man,” murmured Pursena with a nod.

This was the very spot where Zanoba and I had ambushed and kidnapped the two of them several years ago. It was the place where I’d fought them for the first time, in other words. Felt like an appropriate choice of venue.

Linia and Pursena were standing in front of me now.

They were facing each other, about ten paces apart. For some reason, they weren’t looking in my direction.

...Huh?

“Boss, Nanahoshi... We want the two of you to watch this carefully.”

“Uh...what are we watching?”

“Linia and I are gonna find out which of us is stronger.”

Oh. They were dueling *each other*?

“And why are you doing that?” Nanahoshi asked, a bit exasperated.

“The one who wins will be the next leader of the Dedoldia.”

“Is that really necessary? Don’t your people have two tribes—the Dedoldia and the Adoldia?”

The place I’d stayed at back in the day belonged to the Dedoldia, but I thought I remembered hearing something about an Adoldia village as well. Did they not have a second leader running that place?

Hmm. Maybe the leader of the Dedoldia was automatically the ruler of their entire tribe or something...

“Mew... We *were* planning to go back together at first, Boss.”

“Kinda reconsidered. It’s a big fuckin’ world out there, right? And there’s more ta life than bossin’ people around.”

“We’ve both got little sisters back home. One of us can just go back and teach ‘em the stuff we learned here.”

“Whichever of us is stronger gets to go back to be th’ boss. The other gets to live the way they want.”

Interesting plan. And by “interesting,” I meant “ridiculous.”

They’d certainly changed their worldview, though. What happened to all that lust for power?

“We were gonna ending up dueling anyway if we both went back, mew.”

“And if we fought in th’ Great Forest, the loser would end up with a fuckin’ boring life. They’d make her marry the best warrior in the village or whatever.”

“We’re better off settling this here and now, then goin’ our separate ways.”

“Yeah. No hard feelings either way, ya know?”

Ah. Now it was starting to make more sense.

They both wanted to be number one in the Great Forest. But if they fell short of that goal, they’d rather live somewhere else entirely. Maybe they could make it to the top there, if not back home.

The plan had some holes in it, to say the least. I was dying to ask a few basic questions, such as: *Do you guys really get to make this decision yourselves? Without talking to your folks back home?* At the end of the day, though, it wasn’t my place to dissuade them. They’d clearly put a lot of thought into this, and I could understand their desire to control their own destinies.

“Okay, I get it. I won’t interfere or anything. Have it, girls.”

“What, you’re going to help them with their fight? Are you sure about this?” said Nanahoshi, her tone disapproving.

“It’s fine. They’re going to fight anyway, whether I’m watching or not.”

From what I could tell, Linia and Pursena were evenly matched. Unless they had someone to judge the outcome of the fight, there was a chance it might not produce a clear victor. Worse, they might overdo it and get themselves hurt. Our presence as spectators was a necessary precaution.

Also, though I wasn’t going to make a big deal about it, this was a *duel*, not a fight. They weren’t angry with each other—they were competing for supremacy.

“We appreciate it, mew.”

“Thanks, Boss.”

Linia and Pursena offered a few words of gratitude before returning their focus to the task at hand.

They took a few long, deep breaths...and then glared fiercely at each other.

“Hisss!”

“Grrrrrrr!”

All of a sudden, they were emitting harsh sounds of a less-than-ladylike nature.

The air was thick with tension. It felt like the battle might begin at any moment.

I activated my Demon Eye, and noticed Nanahoshi slipping on one of the magic rings she used for self-defensive purposes. We were about to witness a deadly serious battle between two beastfolk, after all. There was no telling what might come flying our way.

“Pursena, there’s something I’ve meanin’ to tell you for a while. I’m sick of your crap, mew!”

“Oh yeah? Well I’m fuckin’ sick of you. You used ta toddle after me like my baby sister, and now yer actin’ like some kinda big shot!”

“Mew?! I was practically your babysitter! Don’t you remember that time I covered for you when you wet the bed?! What happened to ‘An Adoldia never forgets those who help them out’, huh?!”

“I paid you back for that when I pulled you out of the river! How pathetic was that, anyway? So much for the Dedoldia tribe an’ their legendary swimming skills!”

“That whole thing was your fault to begin with! You dropped that toy Grandpa gave you in the water like a moron!”

“You’re the one who *made* me drop it!”

Well, this was interesting. I’d never heard an argument so fiery, but so completely lacking in real malice. They were getting themselves worked up well enough, but I didn’t hear the slightest hint of hatred in their words.

“You’re a big dopey doofus, Pursena!”

“You’re a stupid fuckin’ idiot, Linia!”

...And now they were resorting to childish insults.

“You’re a smelly jerk!”

“You’ve got stubby legs!”

“Wha— Well, you’re a *fatty*!”

“I am *not*!”

In the end, Pursena snapped first. That single word, “fatty,” had pushed her over the line.

“Grrrrah!”

She leapt forward at Linia, pulling back her fist to strike a mighty blow.

“Hissss!”

Linia reacted with all the agility of a panther, lashing out with her own fist...

“Guh...”

“Ngh...”

And they ended up hitting each other with a double cross-counter.



The two of them staggered back... and then the duel began in earnest.

"Oh my! Pursena charges fiercely forward! But Linia sidesteps it cleanly! Pursena's driving at her like a tank, but...she wards her off! Linia's keeping up the hit-and-run tactics, folks. Pursena's hot on her tail! Pursena has the edge in power, and her opponent's just a *little* faster! If it comes down to a slugging match, Linia's got no chance. But power isn't the only thing that counts! You've got to catch her first, or your strength is useless!"

"Look at that footwork! A beautiful jab! And another! And a straight! Wow, Pursena just shrugs them off! Linia can't get in close enough. She's one step too far out! Ohhh my! What a brutal right straight from Pursena! Lord have mercy!

"Linia staggers back! She felt that one, ladies and gentlemen! And Pursena won't let up! What now, Linia? Do you run for it? No! No, she stands her ground! A left jab! And another! Oh, that's a sharp one! Pursena's taking some hits here! Linia's a tenacious boxer in her own right! She might not have Pursena's power, but she's done running!

"Pursena flinches back. And yet, her eyes are glimmering. She's a bloodhound, folks, and she's got her prey on the ropes! Linia lashes out with her right as Pursena steps forward...

"Oh my god! Will you look at all that blood?! Did Linia just slash her with a knife?!

"No! No, it was her claws! She extended her claws and *scratched* Pursena as that punch landed! It's the deadly kitty-punch, honed to perfection! And it's legal, folks. There're no holds barred in this brawl!

"Linia punches and slashes! Punches and slashes! It's a barrage from both sides! She's got Pursena grimacing now! This is a whole new kind of pain, and she wasn't expecting it! Good lord! Linia just

tore a big rip in her uniform! We're in wardrobe malfunction territory here! We might have to cut to commercial, folks!

"Oh my, Pursena's going for it anyway! She doesn't care! She's a boxer now, not a bashful teenager! Bam! She *slams* a right hook into Linia's body! You can see the agony on her face. Is this it? Is Pursena going to finish it?!"

"If this is no holds barred, why aren't they using any magic?" Nanahoshi asked.

"Ah, good question. When Pursena turned this into a melee brawl at the very start, it made their magic all but irrelevant. They're not giving each other the time they'd need to complete an incantation. Sylphie or I could still throw in a few silent spells in this situation, but these two are fighters by nature. And what with all this strenuous exercise, it would be hard for them to say a single word right now. Can a marathon runner hope to recite a poem as they jog along the road? No, it would be—"

"Okay, I get it. Sorry for interrupting you like that. You can keep going now."

"...Linia's stopped moving entirely! It's an in-fight now, folks! They're trading blow for blow! Is all hope lost? Pursena's punches have neutralized Linia's speed! She can't play the hit-and-run game anymore! Has the butterfly lost her wings? Has she fallen helplessly into the jaws of her foe?"

"No! It's not over yet! She's dodging the punches, folks! She's actually dodging them! With her cat-like reflexes, she ducks and weaves! With her finely-honed technique, she slips and rolls! She hasn't taken a solid hit yet! And now, the counter! A brutal kitty-punch! A spray of blood! She caught Pursena's cheek and sent her leaping backward!

"Linia steps forward to press her advantage. Oh my, a Brazilian high kick! She wants to knock that girl *out*! Ohh! Pursena...Pursena

lunges forward! She throws herself *into* the attack! My god, she bit Linia's leg! She bit it as it swung toward her neck! She's an attack dog, folks! She's a beast! She's a wolf! Her fists aren't her only weapon!

"Pursena presses forward, and...drags her prey to the ground! Did Linia get too close?! But Pursena isn't the only one with killer teeth! She's biting right back! Just look at those chompers! It's a wrestling match now, and it's only going to get more vicious!""

"To be honest, it just looks like they're tumbling around and smacking each other to me..."

"Well, yeah. You could put it that way, too."

"Look, I hate to be a killjoy, but can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"They seem to be taking this fight very seriously. Why are you making it into a big joke?"

"...Sorry."

The duel raged on for quite some time.

In a sense, it had begun with their exchange of insults, and then proceeded to the punching phase. At first this had resembled a high-level boxing match, but by the end it had devolved into something more like a nasty playground brawl—complete with scratching and biting.

For what felt like hours, the two of them rolled around in the snow, grappling with each other...but then, at long last, they came to a stop.

Only one of them rose to her feet.

"I fuckin' did it..."

It was Pursena.

She was covered from head to toe in scratches, bites, and bruises. Her clothes were ragged, wet with snow, and stained with blood. Some of her injuries were still bleeding.

It was an awe-inspiring sight.

This was a woman who'd fought for her life...and emerged triumphant.

“...”

Pursena glanced down at her fallen foe, and looked conflicted for a moment. But then she turned her face aside haughtily.

A moment later, she staggered her way over to us.

“I’m the winner, Boss.”

“Uh, yeah. Congratulations... Sit down for a second, all right? I’ll heal you up.”

I reached out to touch an open wound on her shoulder, but she slapped my hand away. “Thanks, but no thanks. These are scars of honor. I’d rather keep ‘em.”

“Oh...right.”

Scars of honor, huh?

They really had been deadly serious about this. I felt a little ashamed for casually assuming nobody would get hurt here.

“I dunno if I’ll ever see Linia again, y’know? Least I’ll have these to remember her by.”

“Uh, well...aren’t you going to stick together until you leave town, at least?”

“Nope, we’re goin’ our separate ways right here and now. Got our bags all packed and everything.”

They must have agreed on that beforehand. This was where their paths would diverge, so it might as well be the place where they said goodbye. There was some poetry to that.

Seemed like I'd have to cancel my plans for a farewell party. It would ruin the whole thing.

"...Make sure you get someone to patch you up, all right? Even if it's not a mage."

"Yeah, I know."

With that, Pursena staggered off in the direction of the dorms.

As I looked, Nanahoshi ran up to join her. She draped her jacket over Pursena's shoulders, and they set off together with Pursena leaning on her for support. The girl did have a kind side.

*Now then...*

I walked over to where Linia was lying and studied her from above. "You alive?"

She wasn't unconscious or anything—just staring up at the sky with an absentminded look on her face.

"Yeah," she said after a moment. "I guess so."

The girl looked just as bad as Pursena, if not worse. Her clothes were ripped and ragged; one of her shoulders was bleeding profusely, staining the snow red; and her face was swelling up from all the punches she'd taken. There was some blood trickling from her mouth as well. I felt like it was probably from a cut inside it, rather than any internal injuries.

"You don't look so hot, you know."

"Don't *feel* too hot, either."

On closer examination, I realized that Linia's clothing was no longer adequately hiding certain parts of her anatomy. I took off my coat and placed it over her. Didn't want myself getting distracted here. It was a bit chilly out here without it. Hopefully Nanahoshi wasn't going to make her cold worse.

"Thanks, Boss."

Linia slowly, shakily moved her arms upward and joined her hands behind her head. She crossed her legs, as well. It almost looked like she was lounging on a sofa, instead of a dirty pile of snow.

“Man...guess I lost, mew.”

Her words floated up into the air as a cloud of vapor, then dissipated.

“It was a hell of a fight, though,” I offered.

“Gimme a break, Boss. I heard yer whole running commentary. Sounded like you were really enjoyin’ yourself.”

Fair enough. Maybe I hadn’t taken this too seriously.

Still, their match *was* exciting to watch. It was kind of like...a really vicious catfight, maybe? Or a passionate struggle between two desperate title contenders?

*Uh, let’s try to avoid the boxing metaphors, actually. It would probably just piss her off...*

“At least I gave ya some laughs to remember me by, huh?”

“Sorry. I feel kind of bad now.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure it just looked like a crazy brawl from the sidelines, yeah? And havin’ fun is what life’s all about.”

As she spoke those words, Linia grimaced. She turned to lick at a nasty cut on her arm.

“You want to pass on the healing magic too?” I asked cautiously.

“Well, I don’t like carryin’ around reminders of my defeats, to be honest...but yeah, I guess I’ll make an exception fer these. Maybe I’ll be able to brag about ‘em a couple years down the line.”

I’d left a few scars on beastfolk warriors myself over the years. I wondered if any of them showed those off proudly.

“...”

Linia fell silent and stared up at the sky.

I looked up as well. It was a grey one today—a typical Northern Territories sky. We'd be getting more snow tonight, no doubt.

"What are you planning to do with yourself now, Linia?"

"Hmm. Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, you said something about living the way you want to. Do you have something in mind?"

"Yeah, sure. Figure I'll travel around fer a while, then start up my own store."

It was...very hard to imagine Linia running a small business successfully. I could see her as an adventurer, maybe, but...

"I hope you have an actual plan worked out."

"Course I do!"

Well, she sounded confident, at least. Maybe she'd be okay if she had a plan?

I still wasn't feeling too reassured. I had this gut feeling she was going to blunder along with a bunch of half-assed ideas and land herself in deep trouble.

"Way I figure, I'll be rollin' in money in five years or so."

"...Hmm. Well, okay. You can always come to me for help if you need to, just so you know."

"Myahaha. Once I hit it big, I'll let ya borrow money from me!"

Despite the fact that she'd just lost the most important duel of her life, Linia didn't seem too depressed. Maybe she was happy to be free of her responsibilities to the Doldia tribe, at least for now. Or maybe she was just putting on a brave face on things.

Either way, it looked she'd accepted that one chapter of her life had reached its end.

Linia and Pursena didn't say their farewells to the others.

They headed straight back to their dorm after the duel, one a bit later than the other. There, they disinfected and bandaged their wounds, grabbed their bags, and left the campus at different times.

I saw Linia off, and Nanahoshi did the same for Pursena.

Neither of them were particularly chatty. They asked us to say goodbye to Zanoba and Cliff for them, but that was about it. Our friends would probably be a bit sad that they'd missed their chance to return the favor.

Pursena was presumably headed straight back to the Great Forest, where she'd train thoroughly to assume the leadership of the tribe. Linia's future was more uncertain, but I wanted to believe she'd find our own path forward.

It seemed like they were resigned to never see each other again. That was a real shame, considering how close they'd been. Still, I couldn't help admiring their resolve and determination.

Bit of a digression here, but: That same evening, I happened to overhear someone talking in the street.

To quote: "Yeah, so I saw these two beastfolk women covered in bandages arguing about something in the back of a passenger carriage."

They'd probably neglected to check the timetables for the carriages out of town, and ended up stuck on the same one.

So much for their dramatic parting of ways.

*Legends of the University #11: The Boss always settles his scores.*

## Chapter 12: Phase Four

**S**EVERAL DAYS after the graduation ceremony, I was back at work.

There was a large magic circle spread out before my eyes. At a glance, it almost looked like it was printed on a slab of stone.

The “slab,” however, was actually composed of over a hundred sheets of oversized paper stacked on top of each other. Each individual page was covered with another portion of the overall design. A wooden frame kept everything fixed snugly in place. There were magic circles carved into *its* surface, as well.

It was no exaggeration to call this thing a full-fledged magic implement. Obviously, its creation had taken a significant amount of time. I’d helped out when I could, but for the most part it was entirely Nanahoshi’s work.

“All right, then. Please begin.”

Nanahoshi was crouching across from me, looking down at her creation. Cliff and Zanoba flanked her on either side.

They’d been helping us out with this research for some time now, so I’d asked them to come observe whenever we were on the verge of a major breakthrough.

Nanahoshi had disliked the idea, but ultimately gave in when I argued that they’d earned the right to be here.

Of course, their presence wasn’t *really* a reward. They were here in case the experiment failed and Nanahoshi started thrashing around again. I wanted someone here to restrain her...and help me console her afterward, for that matter.

It was pretty effective to have someone of a different gender comfort you. Might not be a universal rule, but it was true in my

experience, at least. We could take her out to a nice tavern and give her lots of attention. Bring out the expensive champagne, that sort of thing. The three of us weren't exactly host club material, but it's the thought that counts, right?

All that said, I was feeling confident about this one.

Cliff had given the design sketches his stamp of approval. And thanks to the Zaliff Prosthesis, Zanoba was growing increasingly good at executing this sort of detail work. I didn't see any reason why we'd fail.

*Here goes nothing...*

"I'm beginning the mana feed...now."

I placed my hand on the edge of the multi-layered magic circle.

"..."

As soon as I pushed a little mana into it, I felt the thing begin to suck more and more out of me.

It was no real surprise, but this thing was seriously greedy for power. I wasn't sure anyone other than me could have satisfied it.

That did make sense, though. Sylphie had once told me that activating a single magic circle used about as much mana as casting an Advanced spell. This thing was composed of over a hundred of those circles.

Thanks to Cliff's assistance, we'd managed to make our design significantly more efficient, so it wasn't quite as thirsty as that might suggest...but it was still eating at least twenty times more mana than a normal magic circle would.

"It certainly takes a while," muttered Cliff. "Maybe we can find a way to speed the—"

"Shh!" hissed Nanahoshi.

My mana pulsed steadily into the "tablet," like blood pumping from a heart. And as I fed it more, it began to emit a noticeable glow.

Nothing felt off. The mana was flowing smoothly through our creation. Slowly, the glowing, intricate circles began to change in color. Yellow, orange, blue, white...the pattern was distinctive. And familiar.

I'd seen flashes of light exactly like these right before the Displacement Incident.

*Crap. Should I stop? This thing might teleport all four of us to the middle of nowhere.*

*And what if it's a bigger-scale effect? Sylphie and Norn are on campus today, aren't they? Wait, it might even take the entire city...and Lucie along with it...*

On the other hand, it didn't *feel* like anything too dramatic was about to happen. And the magic circles we'd designed weren't capable of producing any such effects, anyway.

We'd done our homework here. I was positive we hadn't screwed it up *that* badly. It just wasn't possible.

Everything was going to be fine. This was going to work!

“...!”

The light grew stronger and stronger...and then collapsed into a single point.

In that moment, I heard a small *thunk*.

My mana abruptly stopped flowing into the magic circle, and the circle stopped glowing as well.

“...”

There was something green sitting at the circle's very center. Something green and black and round—about the size of a globe, but much juicier-looking.

It was a watermelon.

“Looks like it worked.”

“Yesssss!!!”

Nanahoshi leapt to her feet and clutched her fists in triumph.



“Congratulations, Master Rudeus!”

“Well done, Nanahoshi!”

Zanoba and Cliff applauded. They looked *almost* as jubilant as she did.

“I must say, however...”

Zanoba approached the watermelon curiously and gave it a few pokes.

“This green-and-black pattern strikes me as rather ominous. Would it be safe for me to hold the thing? It won’t bite, will it?”

“You’ll be fine, Zanoba. Just don’t drop it, please. They break more easily than you’d think.”

“All right... Oh! It’s rather heavy, I see.”

Picking up the watermelon, he proceeded to study it from many different angles.

Personally, I didn’t see anything “ominous” about it. Maybe green and black just wasn’t an appetizing color combination for the natives of this world. It would be bright red on the inside, but that might seem creepy in its own way.

Now that I thought about it, though...this world had plenty of oddly colored, strangely shaped vegetables in its own right. You could find a variety of gourds in any market. It wouldn’t surprise me if there were watermelons *somewhere* out there.

“Hey, Nanahoshi, I just had a thought...”

“Yes?”

“I know it’s a little late now, but shouldn’t we have summoned something like a Yubari melon instead? They had to selectively breed those things, so they definitely don’t exist in this world.”

“...Tell me something, Rudeus. Could you actually tell the difference between a normal melon and a specially bred one?”

Okay, she had a point there. I knew a Prince melon from a muskmelon, but that was about the extent of my expertise.

“In any case, we can’t be quite that selective yet,” Nanahoshi continued with a slight frown. “I was actually trying to summon a cabbage this time.”

This world did have a leafy vegetable very similar to cabbage. I had to wonder if we could have told a summoned cabbage apart from that local variety. I wasn’t a farmer or anything, and neither was Nanahoshi. Maybe the concept of summoning a vegetable had been flawed from the start.

“...”

*Nah, it’s fine. We did an experiment based on a theoretical design, and we got the result we were expecting. This thing’s an authentic watermelon. We can’t prove where it came from exactly, but it’s here because we summoned it. A watermelon’s a watermelon, right? I’m willing to call that a success.*

“Hrm. Well, given that the experiment succeeded, I suppose we should celebrate tonight.”

Zanoba seemed to have already lost interest in the melon itself. No surprise there, since it wasn’t a figurine.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Badigadi, Linia, and Pursena weren’t around anymore. Our parties had gotten a bit less lively in their absence. Couldn’t let that stop us from enjoying ourselves, though.

That evening, we held a nice little celebration. We’d lost Linia and Pursena since last time, but this time Roxy and Norn joined in. In a net numbers sense, we were only down one six-armed Demon King.

It wasn't exactly the same, of course. There were fewer people squawking loudly, and more members of my family. Not that it was really a problem.

Nanahoshi was drinking like a fish. Before long, she started squeezing Julie in her arms like a doll, while chatting with Elinalise about something or other. For once, her expression was cheerful, and she was speaking loudly.

That was definitely unusual. The girl's standard mode of communication was a sullen murmur, after all. The success of today's experiment had her in a *very* good mood.

Elinalise listened to her chattering with a benevolent smile on her face. Zanoba and Cliff had struck up a separate conversation with Roxy. Judging from their serious expressions, it was probably about their research. Those three were workaholics, after all.

"Here you go, Rudy."

"Ah. Thanks."

Sylphie had parked herself next to me, and was mostly just refilling my glass every time it got low.

"Are you not drinking tonight, Sylphie?"

"Well, I get a little silly when I'm tipsy, you know? I was thinking I'd abstain."

"...Oh. Gotcha."

"We're not staying out tonight, after all. I want to make sure I can put Lucie to bed."

"Yeah, I totally understand."

That was kind of a shame, though. Sylphie was *really* cute when she got drunk. She got incredibly affectionate when her inhibitions came down. On the other hand, the whole "being responsible" thing was appealing in its own way. I had a good wife on my hands here.

The two of us proceeded to engage in some mild public displays of affection. And after a while, Roxy came over to join us.

“Would you mind letting me participate as well, Rudy?”

“In what?”

“Just pull back your chair a little, please.”

When I did so, she hopped right into my lap. All of a sudden, I had the back of Roxy’s neck right before my eyes, and her bottom pressing on my thighs. How splendid! What bliss!

It did feel a little...over the line, though.

“Are you drunk, Roxy?” asked Sylphie with a small, amused smile.

“Just a little.”

On closer examination, Roxy’s face was a bit flushed. This was strange. As a general rule, she didn’t drink much alcohol. Hmm. Was this my chance to see her lose her self-control?

“Phew...”

Roxy leaned back to rest on my chest. I could feel the weight of her body, and hear the beating of her heart.

*Oh wow. I could totally see down her robe if I pulled it out a little...*

*Okay, I really want to. Should I go for it? Wait, maybe I should wait until she’s even drunker.*

“Oh, that looks kind of nice... Hmm. Rudy, let me try it later, okay?”

“Of course, Sylphie.”

In fact, I was more than willing to let them both on my lap at once. Let’s see... I could give my left knee to Roxy and my right to Sylphie. Those were the sides they’d taken in bed the other night, as I recalled.

Man, it was so nice when I got to put my arms around both of them at once. Made me feel like I was drowning in happiness.

“...Rudeus?”

Hmm. Norn appeared to be glaring at me from the other side of the table.

Right, right. I shouldn’t have been neglecting her like this. She didn’t know most of the people in this group very well. None of them were strangers to her, but holding a conversation would probably be hard. She’d just been sitting quietly across from me for some time now.

“Sorry, Norn. Is this too awkward for you?”

“No, I’m fine. There’s something I wanted to discuss with you, though. If you don’t mind.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

I deposited Roxy on the empty chair next to me, then turned my attention back to my little sister.

“Well...it’s about the Student Council.”

“Oh, right. I was wondering about that.”

On the day of the graduation ceremony, Norn had been sitting in the last seat of the Council’s section. And when our eyes met, she’d looked away uncomfortably.

“Miss Ariel invited me to join. She knows my grades aren’t particularly good, but she thinks I have ‘natural charisma,’ I guess.”

“No kidding... Did you know about this, Sylphie?”

“Yeah, I’d heard,” Sylphie said with a small nod.

I glanced over at Roxy as well, but she avoided my gaze. Apparently I was the only one who hadn’t heard about this yet.

“Sorry about that. Norn said she wanted to tell you herself, so we kept it to ourselves.”

“Ah, okay.”

It wasn’t that big a deal, but Sylphie looked genuinely apologetic. Maybe part of the reason she’d stayed sober was to help Norn out with this conversation.

Her expression a bit uncertain, Norn picked up where she’d left off. “Um, Rudeus? Would it be all right if I officially joined the Student Council?”

I reflexively wanted to say “Of course,” but stopped myself at the last moment. Right now, Norn had two major projects on her plate: our training with the sword, and her work on that book.

The latter wasn’t an urgent priority. It was the sort of thing she could chip away at once a week or so, and I wouldn’t have minded if she decided to just put it on hold for a couple years. But her training was something she needed to keep at every single day.

At a bare minimum, she needed to do her schoolwork and practice with the sword on a daily basis. If we added Student Council activities to that list, would she be capable of keeping up?

Norn wasn’t a bad student by any means, but she wasn’t particularly gifted, either. I wasn’t sure how well she’d do with juggling three or four distinct responsibilities.

“Tell me something, Norn.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think you can handle doing all these different things at once?”

Norn bit her lip and fell silent. It was probably something she’d been worrying about herself.

“I’m not opposed to you joining the Student Council or anything. I’m just wondering if you’ll be able to give it enough of your attention.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Okay. But you’ve got your sword practice and your book to work on too, right? And those were both things *you* wanted to do. I mean, the book was originally my job, so it’s not that big a deal...but what about your training? Your classes will be getting tougher as a third-year, too.”

“I’ll keep up with my classes. And my training. I promise.”

Well, she talked a good game, at least. But I knew from experience that it was difficult to focus on too many things at once. When you tried to do two tasks simultaneously, one of them inevitably wound up being neglected.

At this point, Sylphie intervened, looking a bit concerned. “Um, Rudy...Norn’s been handling things very well so far.”

That was definitely good to hear. But what was going to happen if she kept this up for months? What if the pressure got to be too much for her?

“How long has she been helping out at the Council, anyway?”

“It’s been...over a year now, actually. I think it started while you were away on your journey.”

“Wait, really? Huh. That’s a pretty long time...” That would mean she’d started this before we began our sword training together, even.

“It’s going be okay, Rudy. I’ll vouch for that. Norn will be just fine as a member of the Student Council, and she won’t neglect any of her other responsibilities, either.”

I was surprised by the firmness of Sylphie’s tone. But then again, she had good justification for her confidence. Norn was *already* managing to do all of this at once. I didn’t see any reason to keep playing the devil’s advocate.

“Well, wow... Sure sounds like you’ve been working hard, Norn.”

It made me really happy to know that she was out there trying her best, even when I wasn't around to keep an eye on her. There was this...feeling in my chest that I couldn't find the words to describe. *Warm* and *fuzzy*, maybe?

"Okay then. I'm not sure you really needed my permission in the first place, but for what it's worth, you've got it. Good luck with the Student Council, Norn."

"Thank you, Rudeus!" said Norn cheerfully. "I really appreciate it!"

In the end, it was all up to her how this turned out. Still, the grown-ups in her life had the responsibility to support her and cheer her on. I was more than willing to break out the pom-poms for her.

Just as our conversation came to an end, Nanahoshi raised her voice from the other end of the table. "Let's split the watermelon!"

We proceeded to divide up the watermelon we'd summoned, and served a big slice to everyone at the party. It was slightly less sweet and juicy than those I remembered from my last life. Probably one of those California ones.

Putting its taste aside, we did discover something interesting in the process of splitting it: It was a *seedless* variety.

Agricultural techniques in this world weren't sophisticated enough to produce anything like that. In other words, the experiment had been a success beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The party had reached its climax...or maybe passed it, actually.

Nanahoshi was singing. Norn was dancing. Zanoba was blathering at Julie about figurines. Sylphie was looking after Roxy, who'd gotten *very* drunk. And Cliff was making out with Elinalise in a corner.

Everyone was feeling some fatigue, but it was the pleasant kind you get near the end of a fun night out. For my part, I was leaning back in my chair and smiling drunkenly at the others.

“...Hey, Rudeus.”

Nanahoshi had wandered over to me, having finished up her song. She started to say something to me, but then broke down coughing.

The girl didn’t look too hot in general. Probably because she’d been drinking heavily while nursing a nasty cold.

“Want me to detox you?”

“...Yes, please.”

After I threw a few Detoxification and Healing spells on her, Nanahoshi got a little color back in her cheeks. Looking a bit relieved, she let out a little sigh.

“Anyway, I wanted to thank you again. Now we can finally move on to the next phase.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I’d started Nanahoshi with this project for a good three years ago, come to think of it. Almost felt like it was yesterday.

Compared to phase one, we’d pushed through phrase two and three relatively easily.

That was partially because Zanoba and Cliff were helping out now. But even so, things were going much better than I’d expected at the start.

“Phase four was...summoning a living thing that meets specific criteria, right?”

“That’s correct. I know someone who’s very knowledgeable about this part, so I’m planning to ask him for guidance.”

Ah, right. It had to be that “authority” on Summoning magic she mentioned every once in a while...

“It’s not *Orsted*, is it?”

“No, it isn’t. He can use Summoning magic as well, but this is someone else entirely.”

That was a relief.

It figured that Orsted could use Summoning magic, though. Was there anything that guy couldn’t do?

Oh, right. The Man-God did say he was capable of using every known technique in the world, didn’t he...?

Still, there was presumably a difference between being “capable” of using a spell and being an expert on an entire field of magic. To invent new things, you needed a different set of skills.

“On that note, I have a proposal for you.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“Well...I haven’t given you a reward for helping out with the bottle-cap experiment yet, right?”

“Yeah, I guess not.”

It had slipped my mind to ask her for something, actually. I’d been very busy looking after Lucie back then.

I guess people get a little less greedy when they’re feeling content with life.

“I was thinking I could introduce you to the man I’m talking about, as a combined reward for both phases.”

“Oh. Hmm...”

“I know you want to learn a different kind of Summoning magic. To be honest, I think you’re better off learning from someone like him directly.”

Well, yeah. I didn't really need to learn how to summon things from another world, which was the focus of Nanahoshi's research.

It might be convenient at times, of course. I wouldn't mind summoning a baby bottle or a stroller for my kid. But stuff like that was more of a luxury than something I really needed. I was satisfied with my life the way it was.

I did have some interest in learning more conventional Summoning spells. I couldn't imagine myself needing those very often either, so it was mostly a matter of personal curiosity.

I was also interested in figuring out why the Displacement Incident had taken place. But again, I didn't feel a burning *need* to find those answers.

"This would count as two rewards, though? Is this guy that incredible at what he does?"

"Absolutely. He might even be capable of fixing your mother's memory, for that matter."

"Wait, what?" I reflexively leaned forward in my chair at that one.

Norn drew in closer as well. She must have overheard.

"Is that true, Nanahoshi?" I asked.

"I can't say for sure, but the man's been alive for a very long time. There's a good chance he knows something useful."

I felt like Zenith's condition had been steadily improving, but it was very hard to tell if her memories were ever going to fully return.

I didn't want to get my hopes up for a quick fix. Still, there was a chance this man could give us a name for her condition, or describe some similar cases. In combination with my knowledge from my previous life, it might point us toward some new possibilities.

It wasn't like I'd learned much about this sort of thing back in my old world, but there was still a *chance* I'd recall something useful.

“Ah, are we discussing Lady Nanahoshi’s master?”

“I’d love to meet the man myself, if you’re open to the idea...”

At some point, Cliff and Zanoba had also approached to listen in on our conversation.

Elinalise was standing from just behind Cliff, as well. However, she was busy playing with his ears. I wasn’t sure what the appeal was, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Well...you two did help out as well, so I suppose it’s fine.”

Nanahoshi looked a little conflicted about this development. I seemed to remember that she wasn’t too comfortable even saying the man’s name, so that made sense.

“Oh, I’m kind of interested too,” said Sylphie, leaning over to join in.

Roxy didn’t follow, but only because she was lying across a couple chairs and snoring.

Norn was sitting next to her, a bit away from the rest of us, but she was looking this way. It was hard to tell if she was interested in this outing or not.

If everyone decided to join in, we’d be looking at a group of seven, including Nanahoshi.

“Is it okay for us to show up with a big group, Nanahoshi? Won’t we be a nuisance?”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” she replied in a resigned tone of voice. “The old man said he can accommodate up to twelve guests at any time. It shouldn’t be a problem for everyone to come along.”

At the very least, it sounded like Cliff and Zanoba were in. Nanahoshi was obviously willing. But I wasn’t so sure about the idea just yet.

“Isn’t it going to take some time to go see this guy, though?”

How many months of travelling were we talking about here? Maybe we could shave some time off the journey with those ancient teleportation circles...but even getting out to the nearest one required five days on the road.

At bare minimum, that was a ten-day round trip, and there was probably more travel waiting on the other side, so I had to assume we were looking at a month or more. I didn't want to leave Lucie on her own for that long.

"Not particularly. It won't take more than a single day of travel, in fact."

"Whoa, he's right in the neighborhood, huh? Do you drop in on him sometimes or what?"

That was a two-day round trip, then. We could stay over for a few days and still make it back in a week. Given how short the trip was, maybe we could even bring Lucie along.

"He's not in the neighborhood, and I haven't seen him in some time. But there's a way for us to get to him."

Interesting. Did she communicate with him using a magic item or something? I'd never seen the magical equivalent of a telephone, but given that teleporters existed, there was probably some method of long-distance communication as well.

I got the sense that sending messages would take a fair amount of time, but maybe they'd worked out some sort of basic signaling system in advance—something like a magical flare gun.

"Okay, then. So what's the man's name, anyway?"

Nanahoshi furrowed her brow and looked around the tavern. There were plenty of other customers in the place, so she signaled to us to bring our heads in close. We all gathered in a tight little circle, and leaned in curiously to listen.

“I’d like you all to keep this to yourselves, please. Is that all right?”

Nanahoshi waited until all of us had nodded, and then continued quietly.

“It’s Perugius. The Armored Dragon King.”

She’d spoken the name of a legendary hero—one of the three Godslayers, and the man who’d guided humanity to victory in the Laplace War four hundred years ago.

## Extra Chapter: Sharpening the Mad Dog's Sword

**T**HE SWORD SANCTUM, in the far west of the Northern Territories, stood on land that had known many battles. At present, it was the home of the Sword God Style, but there had been a time when the Water God Style held sway here.

A mere century ago, the leaders of the two styles had dueled here, and the Water God had won the Sanctum from its owner. That Water God was later defeated by a different Sword God, and lost the Sanctum in turn; but ever since, it had belonged to the single strongest swordsman of each successive generation, who earned the right to teach those of their school here.

The students who secured a place at the Sanctum were tutored by the greatest possible teacher, and had a chance to supplant them as the strongest. This was a fact that drew many ambitious young swordsmen and women to this cold, isolated place, if only to see it with their own eyes.

At present, however, two visitors of a more unusual sort were approaching its main hall.

One was an elderly woman, perhaps in her early sixties. The expression on her face suggested she was something of a curmudgeon; otherwise, she was the picture of a gentle, harmless old lady. At present she was dressed for the road, but it was easy to imagine her in more casual clothes, leaning back in an easy chair while knitting something out of yarn.

Only one detail seemed incongruous: The old woman wore a slightly shortened sword at her hip. In addition, a swordsman of particular skill could have seen that her relaxed bearing was only a façade, and that even their swiftest attacks would fail to touch her.

But enough beating around the bush. The woman's name was Reida Lia, and she was the reigning Water God. She had perfected her style's ultimate technique, the Blade of Deprivation, and ranked among this generation's strongest warriors.

Accompanying Reida was a youthful woman, perhaps twenty years of age, whose face bore a certain resemblance to hers. She was also dressed for the road, and also carried a sword at her hip.

"Is this the Sanctum proper now, Master Reida?"

"That it is, my dear. Take a good long look—this here's the den of beasts you've been so eager to visit all these years."

"Oh, now I'm getting nervous..."

"Have some confidence in your skills. Unless they put you up against the Sword God, you'll manage just fine."

"Thank you, Master Reida."

Speaking quietly to each other, the two of them set foot in the Sword Sanctum.

At a glance, this "holy" place resembled an ordinary town. There was an inn, a weapon shop, and an adventurers' guild. In the streets were the usual adventurers and merchants, bustling along on their own private errands.

There was one unusual thing about this town, however. Virtually everyone who resided here was a trained member of the Sword God Style. In this place, a slender village girl was sometimes stronger than the burliest of adventurers.

"Should we take a room at the inn first?"

"Won't be necessary. We'll just stay at Gal's place."

Reida trudged forward steadily, making a beeline for the far end of the town.

After a certain point, the adventurers and merchants grew less common, and they began to pass more people in martial arts

uniforms who carried wooden swords. At the same time, the shops gave way to training halls.

Reida's young companion looked around at all this with obvious curiosity. In particular, she seemed intrigued by the thin uniforms so many wore, despite the biting cold.

"Master Reida...everyone's dressed rather lightly here, considering how chilly it is."

"Well, the Sword God Style folks have to zip around in combat, or they're sitting ducks. They don't like wearing anything that slows them down, no matter how cold it gets."

"That's the exact opposite of us! We bundle up even when it's warm, don't we? How curious!"

"Nothin' curious about it, if you ask me."

Without sparing so much as a glance for the various training halls, Reida pressed onward.

Before long, the houses, training halls, and uniformed novices all disappeared entirely.

The only thing ahead of them now was a vast plain of snow with a single road running through it like a valley. At the end of that road was a single sizable building surrounded by a wall.

This was the core of the Sword Sanctum, and the headquarters of the Sword God Style—the great hall where the Sword God himself held court.

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Just as Reida and her young companion reached the entrance to the compound, a young woman happened to emerge from within.

The woman had a strong, dignified face, and wore her long dark-blue hair in a ponytail. Judging from the bucket in her hand, she was heading out to draw water from a well.

At the sight of Reida, however, she instantly tossed the bucket aside and reached down for the hilt of her sword. “Do you have some business with our hall, madam?” she asked, her tone openly wary.

Reida studied the young woman’s face closely. And after a moment, the grumpy expression on her face softened significantly. “Oh my. Is that you, Nina? Look how big you’ve gotten.”

The young woman just looked at her dubiously, keeping her hand where it was.

“Ah, you don’t remember me, do you? Well, I guess it figures. You were awfully little the last time I was here...”

There was a nostalgic light in Reida’s eyes, but the young woman—Nina Falion—had no memory of her whatsoever. The only thing she was *sure* of was that this little old lady was a fearsome threat.

The girl at her side was no slouch either. Nina sensed that she was at *least* on her own level.

“Well, I’m here because your boss called for me, dear. Mind taking me to him?”

“My boss?”

“Yep. Gall Falion.”

Nina hesitated at these words.

Many came to this place seeking to meet Gall Falion. But the majority were cocksure fools who had convinced themselves they could strip his title from him. Driving such people off was one of the responsibilities assigned to Nina and her fellow pupils.

“First, would you be so kind as to tell me your name?”

“I’m Reida. Reida Lia. Don’t *think* I need to elaborate, do I?”

“M-my apologies. Please come this way.”

The instant she heard the old woman’s name, however, Nina bowed to her respectfully and invited her inside the compound.

Only one person in their world could introduce themselves as *Reida Lia*. It was a name reserved for the leader of the Water God Style. No one else was permitted to claim it.

For the briefest of moments, Nina entertained the possibility that this woman was an impostor. But she had sensed, on an instinctive level, that the old lady’s placid surface hid unfathomable depths, so she pushed the thought from her mind. Even if the woman wasn’t who she claimed to be, she was no doubt a force to be reckoned with.

Reida and her companion followed Nina inside the Sword God Style compound. Nina led them straight to the main hall, which they had to step up to enter—a feature common to most buildings in this snowy region.

In the entryway, they paused to brush the snow off their clothes, then proceeded along the creaking wooden hallway.

Watching Nina from behind as she walked, Reida spoke up in a thoughtful voice. “I must say, dear, you’re quite sharp for your age. And polite, for that matter! Have you made it to Sword King already?”

“No. I’ve still got quite a way to go, I’m afraid.”

“Do you, now? I’m sure you’re the strongest of the young ‘uns, at least. No need to be too modest.”

“Well, I might be the fastest, I suppose. But not the strongest.”

“Oho! That’s a good attitude you’ve got there, dear. It’s a pity the other youngsters of your style aren’t more like you.”

As they spoke, the three of them had arrived at the Ephemeral Hall.

A single man was sitting within it. His eyes were closed, as if in meditation. The mere sight of him, however, made Reida feel as if a naked blade was at her throat.

Reida was the Water God, and the leader of a Great Style—one of only three such people in the world. Despite her advanced age, she felt herself no less powerful than she'd been in her heyday. She could turn any sword aside effortlessly.

But this man was the one and only exception to that rule. His name was Gall Falion, and he was the reigning Sword God.

"Master, I've brought Reida Lia here to see you."

"Ah. You're here." Opening his eyes slightly, Gall Falion studied Reida's face. He also glanced briefly at the girl beside her, but seemed to lose interest in her quickly. "Thanks for trudging out all this way, Reida. Can't have been easy with those tired old bones of yours, I'm sure."

"It certainly wasn't. Still, it isn't everyday you come asking me for a favor, right? You piqued my curiosity, I suppose. Whoof..."

Reida approached the Sword God and sat down in front of him. Despite the undignified *whoof* she emitted as she did so, her movements were as clear and natural as the flow of a mountain stream.

Nina, as well as Reida's travelling companion, sat slightly further back in a gesture of humility.

"So, who will I be teaching what to? You want me to teach that girl the secret Water God techniques or something?" As she spoke these words, Reida jerked her chin back to indicate Nina Falion. "Seems like a kid who knows how to listen. She might be a natural Sword God type, but I'm sure I could beat a few Water God skills into her head as well."

The letter that brought Reida to this land had been brief.

In essence, it read only: *I want you to come train one of my students.*

Reida had very nearly torn the thing to shreds the moment she read those words. And yet, she'd found it intriguing that Gall Falion had bothered to write her a letter of any kind. The man hated asking anyone for anything.

That wasn't the only reason she'd come, however. Mere curiosity wouldn't have been enough to make her walk up here from the capital of the Kingdom of Asura.

"In any case, I've got one condition."

"What's that?"

"You want me to teach one of your pupils a few things, yes? Well, I want you to show one of *mine* the Sword God Style. No need to actually teach her, though."

Reida had been worrying for some time that her star student had grown too self-satisfied. The Water God Style was the official style taught in the Kingdom of Asura, meaning it boasted many pupils. But it was rare for them to refine their talents past a certain point.

The girl Reida had brought along today was one of the exceptions, but she had no students of comparable skill to test herself against, and her confidence had grown excessive. She kept at her training earnestly enough, but with no true rival to drive her forward, she'd failed to make *real* progress over the last year or so.

Reida had brought her to this place to give her a taste of defeat, convinced that this would benefit her enormously in the long run. Even if the youngsters of the Sword God Style proved to be inadequate to the task, if she had the chance to spar with Gall Falion himself, the experience would still be a deeply valuable one. The

nature of the Water God Style was such that the stronger your opponent, the more you would improve by training with them.

Reida thought it likely that Gall Falion had called here for the very same reason—for her to crush some uppity pupil with the Water God Style’s most vicious counterattacks, motivating them to improve further.

“Oh, is that all? Sure thing.”

“Heh heh. You know, we could even have my pupil face off against yours, if you’d like.”

This wasn’t a spontaneous proposal, of course. Reida was hoping to have Nina teach her pupil a lesson in humility. Throwing her straight against the Sword God was one idea, but she figured it would be more humiliating to lose to a girl her own age.

“Why not? Nina, go get Eris for me.”

“Yes, Master.”

At these words, however, Reida tilted her head curiously. From the moment she’d met the girl at the entrance to the compound, she’d assumed Nina was the student she was here to teach.

“Um, Master...” Nina said.

“What is it? Hurry up, kid.”

“I was...hoping you’d give me the opportunity to spar with our visitor as well. I’m very interested in seeing what the Water God Style can do.”

“Huh? That was always part of the plan.”

“O—oh! Thank you! I’ll go get Eris at once!”

A happy, relieved expression flashed briefly across Nina’s face before she hurried out of the hall.

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The instant she saw the girl, Reida felt goosebumps on her back. It felt a bit like she'd just encountered a wild monster on the roadside. She very nearly reached for her sword on sheer reflex. The only reason she avoided that particular embarrassment was that her pupil beat her to the punch.

Practitioners of the Water God Style were supposed to stay calm and collected at all times. Getting this jumpy was a failure in and of itself.

"Hey there, Eris. This old lady's the one who's gonna teach you all about the Water God Style."

"...Nice to meet you."

Eris made no effort to hide the scowl on her face, but still bowed her head.

*Good lord, the girl's some kind of wildcat...*

Intense emotion smoldered deep inside Eris' eyes. She had all the spirit and fury of a starving animal. The Water God Style was a passive, pliant approach to combat. Even the best of teachers couldn't hope to teach it to a girl with eyes like this. No one like her ever sought out their style to begin with.

"Hate to disappoint, Gall, but this girl's not cut out for the Water God Style. It'd be a waste of time for her to try."

"You think I don't know that?" said Gall Falion with an emphatic nod.

"What am I supposed to teach her, then?"

"You don't have to *teach* her anything. Just spar with her using your style."

"Hmm..."

This brief exchange was sufficient for Reida to discern the Sword God's intentions. He wanted this Eris girl to learn how to fight the

Water God Style in the most hands-on possible way. Reida didn't understand *why*, however. It couldn't hurt for the girl to get a bit of experience against a different style, but calling Reida here for that was just excessive.

A talented, seasoned student of the Sword God Style could launch an attack too swift for your average Water God practitioner to deflect. Compared to learning the intricacies of Reida's style, the girl would be better off simply mastering her own.

Unlike the Water God Style, which required an opponent even to practice, the Sword God Style was all about landing the first blow with overwhelming speed and power. There was no need to know your enemy if you cut them down before they could react.

The way Reida saw it, the only reason Falion would want the girl to gain experience against the Water God specifically was if he expected her to face a truly powerful practitioner of the style—one too skilled to be overwhelmed by speed alone.

And there was only one such practitioner who came to mind.

"Bit confused here, Gall. You planning to have this little beast assassinate me, or what?"

"Oh, please! You've got one foot in the grave already. Why would I even bother?"

"Well, enlighten me, then. Why do you need *me* to teach her how the Water God Style works? Who are you planning to throw her at?"

A ferocious smile spread across Gall Falion's face. "Our girl Eris here wants to take down the Dragon God."

"What? You mean *Orsted*...?"

Reida was genuinely shaken by the mere thought. She, too, was very familiar with Orsted of the Great Powers. She knew of his strength—and that he used the Water God Style freely.

“The Dragon God, is it? Well, well...somebody’s certainly, er, ambitious. You think she can do it?”

“Yeah, I do. And so does Eris.”

“Ah. Well, that’s nice. Glad you’re confident, at least.”

It was hard to say if any of this was true. The Dragon God ranked second among the Seven Great Powers. The idea of trying to defeat him struck Reida as totally ridiculous. And yet, there was confidence on the Sword God’s face, and the girl Eris looked as if she had no doubts whatsoever. That was strangely compelling in itself.

Reida found herself thinking this might be *entertaining*, at least—assuming they were serious.

“But here’s the thing, Gall. I’m not interested in spending time on someone who doesn’t have the talent. Let’s start her off against my pupil here, all right? I’ll play with her once she manages to overwhelm the kid. And if she holds her own with me, then I’ll think about teaching her a few things.”

It was a “three birds, one stone” kind of plan.

Her star pupil’s pride would take a hit, but she’d also get plenty of practice against the Sword God Style. And Reida would get to take part in something very...interesting.

For the first time in a long time, she could feel her heart dancing with excitement. She was a master of the Water God Style, yes—but she was also an ordinary swordswoman at heart.

“You heard all that, Isolde? Go ahead and fight these two.”

At the sound of her name, Reida’s disciple rose to her feet. “I believe I understand the situation. My name is Isolde Cluel, and I’m a Water King. Pleased to make your acquaintances.”

“I’m Nina Falion, a Sword Saint. Nice to meet you.”

“...I’m Eris Greyrat.”

With these brief introductions complete, the three young women walked silently to the corner of the room where the wooden swords were located.

As they took their weapons, Isolde put a hand to her mouth and whispered so that only Eris and Nina could hear. “I’ll play along since my master asked me to...but if you’re only Saint-ranked, I’m afraid this won’t be much of a fight.”

“Maybe not. I guess we’ll have to see what happens.”

“Hmph...”

It was a cheap attempt at provocation, granted...but it never took much to get the young prodigies of the Sword God Style fired up.

An hour later, Eris was lying on her back in the middle of the hall.

“Haa...haa...”

Her eyes were open, and she was gasping loudly for air.

Isolde had beaten her down completely. Her sword hadn’t so much as grazed her opponent.

At present, Eris’ blade was among the ten fastest in this entire hall. Her strikes, honed by years of solitary practice swings, boasted speed and power approaching that of Ghislaine’s, and the peculiar rhythm of her attacks made them particularly difficult to avoid. She also threw in a few tricks from the North God Style, making her all the more unpredictable. All in all, she’d grown far more fearsome than your average Sword Saint.

However, Isolde had warded off everything Eris threw at her, and answered them with sharp counters. In the course of their bout, which had lasted less than thirty minutes, Eris had “died” nearly a hundred times.

“...”

And yet, Isolde was *also* lying on the ground, right alongside her.

Her delight at crushing Eris had been short-lived. Nina Falion had defeated her in turn.

Isolde had always believed that the Sword God Style was nothing more than a brutish, thoughtless reliance on speed and momentum. She'd thought it posed no real threat to an expert practitioner of the Water God's refined techniques.

Nina had exposed these thoughts for the arrogant nonsense that they were. Isolde had been *unable* to react to her very first attack, and it had struck the side of her head with enough force to knock her unconscious.

The fight had ended before it even began.

“Well, isn't that an interesting outcome!” said Gall Falion, seated in the hall's place of honor.

Without responding, Nina bowed deeply to the Sword God.

The word he'd used was *interesting*. That suggested he hadn't expected Nina to be the last one standing. She felt some disappointment at this, but it was outweighed by her pleasure at demonstrating to her master the progress she had made. She lived for the thrill of victory, no less than any other in this hall.

“Can't say I agree, Gall,” said Reida in an indifferent tone of voice.

She had anticipated this very outcome from the start. A raging beast incapable of concealing its emotions was the easiest possible prey for an expert of the Water God Style.

Eris was strong, to be sure, and she held enormous potential for growth. But strength wasn't enough. A ball of pure fury stood no chance whatsoever against the Water God's approach.

Reida had expected Nina's victory as well, with no less certainty. The girl was profoundly skilled for her age, but she hadn't let it go to her head. Most likely, the presence of this Eris child had kept her pride in check. Nina, in her humility, had devoted herself to her training. And Isolde, in her pride, had neglected hers. That was why she'd lost the fight.

Nina's attacks hadn't been particularly fast compared to those of Eris. In fact, they were very slightly slower. And the force behind Eris' swings had been *far* greater.

However, there was no emotion in Nina's strikes. There was no hatred in her eyes, no hostility on her face, not even a reflexive movement of her cheeks. To Isolde, it was like a bolt from the blue. She'd probably been unconscious before she even sensed the girl was coming at her.

"Still, it seems like a favorable start. What d'you say, dear? Want to learn a few Water God tricks from me?"

Nina considered the offer for a moment, but eventually shook her head. "No. I want to keep my focus on mastering the Sword God Style."

"Good, good. You've got the right idea," said Reida with a pleased smile. "All right then, Gall. How's about we have these three train as a group for a while? That ought to sharpen them up a bit."

"Yeah, sounds about right. No point wasting your time if Eris can't handle the likes of a Water King."

"Yep. Should do wonders for my pupil's motivation, too. The girl's been needing someone to chase after."

The Sword God and Water God discussed the matter for a little longer, and arrived at an agreement: Eris would be tasked with defeating Isolde, and Isolde with defeating Nina.

Until that happened, the three of them would train together as equals, pointing out each other's deficiencies. In theory, it would prove beneficial to all of them.

"...You all right with that, Nina?"

Nina nodded easily at her master's proposal. "I don't mind."

To be sure, she'd joined in this session out of nothing more than curiosity. Still, the opportunity to practice extensively with a talented Water God student sounded valuable indeed. Nina had defeated Isolde decisively. But she didn't think of her, or Eris, as beneath her level. And she'd learned from first-hand experience the value of competing closely with her peers.

If not for Eris' presence in the Sword Sanctum, Nina was certain she would have fallen short against Isolde.

"All right. Let's go with that, then. You'll work with your usual teachers in the morning, but in the afternoon you three can group and train each other."

Nina nodded quietly. And Eris, too, responded from the floor.

"Yes, Master."

"...Got it."

Isolde was still unconscious, but Reida had no intention of allowing her to decline.

From that day forward, Eris began her lessons in fighting against the Water God Style.

A month later, the three of them had settled into a peculiar three-way deadlock. Eris consistently beat Nina. Nina beat Isolde. And Isolde beat Eris.

The three of them kept up with their individual training schedules, of course, but also took the time for several practice matches every single day, and exchanged their opinions afterward.

It hadn't taken long for Isolde to identify Eris' weaknesses.

"Eris, you just *radiate* hostility. The practitioners of my style are quite good at picking up on that sort of thing. It tells us exactly when you're going to attack, which makes it trivial to react."

"Okay, right. But what am I supposed to do about it?"

To Isolde's mild surprise, Eris readily accepted her criticisms. Most people seemed to think of the girl as a violent, obstinate maniac, but she was genuinely hungry for ways to improve.

"Let's see... Nina, you don't give much of anything away before you attack. How do you control your hostility so well?"

"I'm not sure what to tell you. A duel's just a matter of moving your sword faster than your opponent, right? I can't see what hostility has to do with that."

In all honesty, Nina had always found it strange that Eris' default mood was "furious." Was there some point to staying constantly agitated, even when you had no real enemy to fight? Relaxing when you had the chance felt like the smarter move.

"Well, I don't know either," grumbled Eris.

"Okay. Why don't you try changing your daily routine, for starters? Take a long bath, eat a good meal, get in a nice warm bed, and think about that beloved boyfriend of yours until you fall soundly asleep."

"Excuse me? What does Rudeus have to do with anything?"

"Oh, come on...that part was just a joke. Try the rest of it, though, seriously. It doesn't look like you take that good care of yourself, to be honest. Sometimes it's kind of alarming."

"...All right."

Eris would have preferred to maintain her current state of constant tension. There was a reason for this: The more she trained

here, the more she came to understand just how *unbelievably* powerful the Dragon God Orsted was.

He had used the very same techniques that Isolde did, but his were far more precise and skillfully executed. And she was a Water King, while he wasn't even a member of their school.

Nina let out an exaggerated sigh. "Honestly, why can't I ever beat this ridiculous girl? It's starting to hurt my self-confidence..."

She spent every single day following an efficient, logical system of training devised by the Sword God himself. She strengthened her body in the most efficient possible way, ate carefully calculated meals, and maintained a well-regimented schedule.

And yet, she couldn't beat Eris—whose routine was decidedly *not* rational.

"...It's because I'm making you move after me."

"Huh?!"

Nina hadn't been expecting the girl to actually answer her question. The Eris she knew was the definition of selfish. She'd never shown any interest at all in helping anyone but herself improve.

"Ruijerd taught me how. You can use stuff like eye contact to make people jump first, or hesitate just a little."

"Ruijerd...? Who's that?"

"My teacher."

Nina was mainly just puzzled by Eris' words. She didn't understand what the girl was talking about, but the technique was, in fact, a highly advanced skill Eris had learned from Ruijerd. It had been developed by the warriors of Demonkind as a conscious application of certain subtle actions that truly seasoned swordsmen performed reflexively.

Of course, this meant Eris couldn't begin to explain how it worked.

“In other words, Eris, you’re deliberately guiding your opponents’ actions?”

“That’s right.”

“...”

Isolde’s clarification helped Nina get her head around the basic concept. She understood the idea now, but that only made it harder to believe. She found herself glaring at Eris dubiously. From all appearances, the girl had been raised by a pack of wolves in the forest. Nina never would have suspected she was capable of using such a sophisticated skill.

Isolde, on the other hand, found the idea much more comprehensible. The Water God Style was primarily focused on counterattacking, so it had its own set of techniques meant to encourage an opponent to attack first.

“I see. And have you been using the same techniques when facing me?”

“Well, yeah. But you never move.”

“Yes, that’s how I was trained. Next time we face off, perhaps you should stop bothering with that, and focus on suppressing your hostility instead. That might change things somewhat.”

Eris furrowed her brow, but nodded. “I’ll give it a shot.”

She was willing enough to attempt this, but she still didn’t know how to “suppress” her hostility. Controlling her feelings wasn’t something she’d ever really done before.

Of course, she’d heard comments like this plenty of times before. However, Ruijerd had encouraged her to make use of her natural aggression, and his training methods had taken it into consideration. As a result, she’d never felt the need to change.

While her hostility might ordinarily be a handicap, she had more of it than most people. She preferred to use it as a resource, rather than pretend it wasn't there.

"I wonder what I should try, then," muttered Nina. "Isolde, how do you deal with her?"

"Let me see. In the Water God Style, we train for this sort of thing by covering our eyes and learning to sense when an attack is really coming, but...I believe Eris' technique is fairly common among the warriors of Demonkind, so I imagine the Sword God Style has its own way of coping with it. Why don't you ask your master about this?"

Isolde was both talented and profoundly clever. The Water God Style tended to attract patient and studious types like her.

"I'll try. This does get frustrating sometimes... Oh. Looks like the sun's about to set."

At these words from Nina, the day's review session came to an end.

"I suppose I'll see you both tomorrow, then," said Isolde with a smile. "You know, I've been enjoying myself very much recently. This is the first time I've ever had the chance to talk things through with anyone *close* to my own age."

"The feeling's mutual, Isolde," Nina replied.

She meant it, too. Now that Eris was actually *speaking* to her, Nina had come to realize that the girl had a vast and varied knowledge of combat. Apart from her practical experience, she evidently had a smattering of North God and Demonkind techniques at her disposal.

It was hard to shake her overall impression of Eris as a wild dog in human clothing, but she'd gained a grudging respect for her abilities. The girl wasn't resorting to "cheap tricks"—she was simply using skills from other schools of combat.

“...Hmph.”

Eris’ attitude hadn’t particularly changed. Normally, she wouldn’t have even offered her opinions in a group like this, even when forced to attend it. But this evening, she’d found herself remembering the period when she was learning the sword with Rudeus as a child. The two of them had often talked about their progress and figured out new ways to improve, just as Nina and Isolde were doing now.

*This can’t be a bad idea if Rudeus used to do it.*

The logic was very simple, almost childish. But for Eris, it was powerful enough to convince her to actually communicate for once.

“Well then, I’ll be on my way now. I have more training with my master tonight.”

“Thanks for your help today, Isolde.”

“Don’t mention it, Nina. You’re helping me as well. I can feel myself improving day by day.”

As the three of them approached the point where the path to the guest rooms diverged from the one leading to the lodging house, Isolde and Nina paused for some final pleasantries.

Eris, on the other hand, kept right on walking down the path to the lodging house.

“Thank you as well, Eris,” called Isolde.

“...I’ll land one on you tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Hmph.”

Without even turning around, Eris marched on forward. With one final nod to Isolde, Nina hurried after her.

“Eris? I’m assuming you’re going to keep training for a while, but once you’re done, remember to at least rinse yourself off.”

Normally, these words would have passed through one of Eris' ears and out the other. Nina wasn't expecting her to listen, but she said this nearly every day regardless. The girl did get terribly smelly, after all.

Today, however, Eris didn't just ignore her. Instead, she turned back to glare at Nina with a slightly irritated expression on her face.

"...Is what you said before really true?"

"Hm? What are you talking about?"

"You said I could hide my hostility if I took a long bath, ate a good meal, and thought about Rudeus in bed every day."

"Uh..."

Nina found herself at a loss for words. In all honesty, she'd mostly said that in an attempt to trick Eris into acting a bit more civilized. But in *theory*, the ability to relax was a crucial part of controlling your emotions. And so, she decided to double down.

"Y-yes, that's right! And for another thing, that boyfriend of yours won't stay interested in you for long if you're constantly this smelly."

"That won't be a problem. I used to catch Rudeus hugging my sweaty old shirts all the time."

"Uh, what...?"

Remembering the young man she'd briefly met once before, Nina tried to picture him burying his face in this strange girl's stinky clothing. It was an appalling mental image. However, she saw that Eris was growing increasingly irritated at her reaction, and wisely opted not to comment further.

"Look, forget it. All I know is men don't like filthy women, all right?"

"Hmm. Well, I guess Rudeus was kind of fussy about keeping things clean..."

"There you go! And that's why you should pay more attention to your hygiene."

Eris paused to think for a moment. Memories of Rudeus flooded through her mind. She usually made a conscious effort *not* to reminisce about the past...but when she let down her guard, she'd always end up thinking about him. And when she thought about him, her lips would quirk into a smile all on their own.

As she considered this, Eris realized something interesting.

*I'm probably not emitting any hostility right now, am I?*

"All right, then. Guess I'll go wash myself off."

"Yes, I wasn't expecting any better from you. Don't worry, I've nearly given up at this— Wait. What did you just say?"

Eris strode off toward her room without responding to the question.

And Nina just watched her go, a look of stunned disbelief frozen on her face.

It took another year for Eris to reach equal footing with the Water King Isolde.

**About the Author:**  
**Rifujin na Magonote**

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

Young people said, “I wish people like this were real, and relationships like this were real, and this kind of thinking was accepted all over.”



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