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NOVEL
2
Mushoku
Tensei
jobless reincarnation

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Phillip
Paul
Sauros
Zenith
Rudeus
Eris
Roxy


"The color of the sky is changing? What's going on?"
The sky had turned a strange color. A disgusting one. A marbled mix of purple and brown.
"..."
Ghislaine silently removed her eyepatch. Beneath it was a deep green eye. Huh, so she actually did have more than one eye?
"What is that?"
"I don't know, but it's an incredible amount of mana!"

Mushoku Tensei

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Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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"One who obtains the wings of freedom loses both legs in exchange."

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Prologue

I ran.

My pursuer was a single wild animal, but all I could do was run. Terror flooded my heart. I took to the stairs running, zipped through the garden, and used magic to scale the roof, stumbling all the way.

“Where did he go?!”

The creature’s terrifying voice rang out as it chased me relentlessly.

I thought I had some stamina. After all, I had been running long distances and practicing swordplay for the past few years. Now that my confidence had been shattered, the creature seemed to be laughing at me, its crimson hair fluttering as it pursued me so closely that I couldn’t stop for air.

Don’t give up, I told myself. No matter how much distance I put between us, it would catch up the moment I started to lose focus.

Huff, huff. I was out of breath. I couldn’t run any further. I couldn’t escape it. The only option left was to hide. I groaned and ducked into the shadow of the stairs, behind a decorative plant.

The creature’s booming voice echoed throughout the manor. “I will never forgive you!”

Those words made my legs tremble.

My name is Rudeus Greyrat. I am seven years old. Currently a handsome boy with bright brown hair and rosy cheeks, in my previous life I was an unemployed thirty-four-year-old virgin. A shut-in.

In that life, I skipped my parents’ funeral, which got me kicked out of the house. Left in a state of despair, I was run over by a truck

and died. But by some trick of fate, I was reincarnated as a baby with my memories still intact.

I was little better than garbage before I died, but having seen the error of my ways, I've worked hard to live a proper life for the past seven years. I've learned the language here, studied magic, and practiced swordplay. I have a good relationship with my new parents, and even made a cute, childhood friend by the name of Sylphie. But in order for Sylphie and me to attend the same school, I said I would work to earn the money for our tuition, so my father shipped me here to the Citadel of Roa.

I'm supposed to spend five years here, attending to the studies of my employer, the Young Mistress, in return for her financial support.

And that's the story so far.

"Come out here! I'm going to pulverize you!"

The creature's words struck fear into me as I hid in the shadows. I was terrified of this personification of rage, manifested in the form of a tiny female body.

What happened, you ask?

Let's go back an hour ago to find the answer…

Chapter 1: The Young Mistress's Violence

It was evening when I arrived in the City of Roa.

Buena Village and the City of Roa are a day's coach ride apart, a journey of six to seven hours. Just the right distance, neither too near nor too far. Roa is a lively city, one of the largest in this area.

The first thing that caught my eye were the citadel's walls. Sturdy walls, seven to eight meters tall, that wrapped around the city. Horse-drawn carriages came and went through the gigantic gate. As our coach passed through it, I saw lines of merchant stalls.

The first thing that greeted me inside the city was a horse stable and an inn. A crowd of people bustled to and fro: merchants, townspeople, and even armor-clad warriors. It was truly like something out of a fantasy novel.

I glanced at what seemed like a waiting station, where people sat with large amounts of luggage. *What's that about?* I wondered.

"Ghislaine, do you know what that is?" I asked the person with me.

She had ears and a tail like an animal, with dark brown skin that her sparse leather armor showed in wide swathes. She was a tall and muscular swordswoman.

There were seven tiers in the Sword God Style and Ghislaine Dedoldia was third from the top, with such impressive skills that she was known as a Sword King. She would be the one teaching me the art of the sword.

She was like a second master to me.

"You…" She turned irritably toward me. "Are you trying to make fun of me?" She scowled ferociously, and I jumped.

"No, I was just… I wondered what that was. I didn't know so I hoped you would tell me."

“Oh, sorry. That’s what you meant.” She saw that I was on the verge of tears and hurried to explain. “That’s the waiting area for the stagecoach. It’s what people normally use to travel between cities. The other option is paying a peddler for a ride.”

As the coach went on, Ghislaine continued pointing out each place and explained it to me. *That’s the weapon smithy, that’s the pub, that’s one branch of the Adventurer’s Guild, and* that *place is better left unvisited.* Ghislaine had a stern face, but she was kind.

The atmosphere changed as we passed one street corner. There were lines of stores aimed at adventurers, a weapon smithy and an armor smithy, and farther within, lines of shops for the townspeople. Residential homes were nestled deep in the alleyways.

If you thought about it, intruders would have to attack the city from the outside in. It was obvious then that the city was constructed such that the deeper you went inward, the bigger the houses became and the more luxurious the goods shops offered. The closer you lived to the center, the richer you were.

A gigantic building was nestled right in the middle of the city. “That is the liege lord’s manor,” Ghislaine said.

“It looks more like a castle than a manor.”

“Well, this *is* a fortified city after all.”

Roa was an ancient city with a noble past. Four hundred years ago it was the last bastion of defense in the war against the demon race. That was why there was a castle in the city’s center. That said, despite its mighty origin story, the nobles of the imperial capital currently saw Roa as nothing more than a crude backwater full of adventurers.

“The fact that we came here must mean that the Young Mistress I’m to teach is of high social status.”

Ghislaine shook her head. “Not quite.”

“Huh?” There was the lord’s manor right before us. By my reckoning, the only people who lived here had to be people of high social rank. Was my theory wrong?

As soon as I began wondering, the coachman gave a small nod to the gatekeeper of the lord’s manor.

“So, she must be the Lord’s daughter.”

“No.”

“She’s not?”

“Not quite.”

I felt like there was some hidden meaning behind her words. What could it be?

The carriage came to a stop.

When we entered the manor, a butler led us to what looked to be a reception room. We were pointed to two sofas lined up together.

This would be my first interview ever. I had to play it cool.

“Please take a seat there.”

While I took a seat upon the sofa, Ghislaine silently drew away and stood watch in the corner of the room. *I bet she picked that spot so she could survey the entire room,* I thought. In my previous life, I would have pegged her for a middle school nerd that watched too much anime.

“The Young Master should be returning shortly. Please wait here until he does.”

The butler poured what I guessed to be tea into an expensive-looking cup. Then he retreated and stood by the entrance to the room.

I took a sip of the steaming drink. Not bad. I wasn't particularly well-versed in teas, but it seemed like the expensive sort. Since the man didn't pour any for Ghislaine, it was clear that I was the only one being treated like a guest.

"Where is he?!"

A voice boomed from outside the room, accompanied by angry, thunderous footsteps.

"In here?!"

The doors burst open violently, and a buff, muscular man entered the room. He had to be about fifty. Despite the peppering of white in his dark brown hair, he looked in the prime of his life.

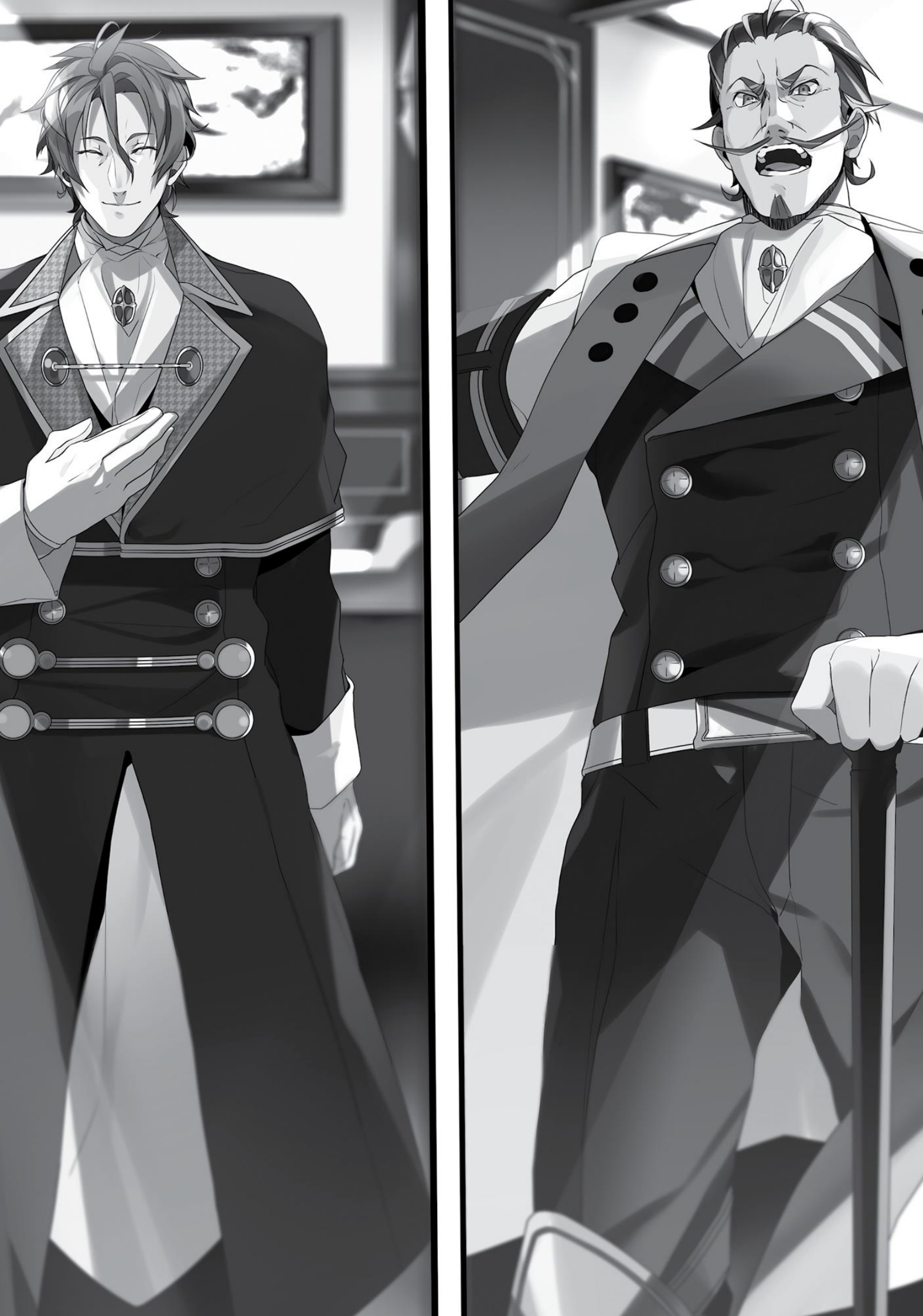
I put the cup down, stood, and bowed deeply. "It's nice to meet you. My name is Rudeus Greyrat."

His nostrils flared. "Hmph, you don't even know how to introduce yourself!"

"Master, Lord Rudeus has never been outside Buena Village. He is still young, I am sure he has not yet had the time to learn proper manners. Surely you can overlook a bit of his…"

"And you, shut up!"

That rebuke silenced the butler immediately.



If this were the master of the house, that meant he was my employer, right? He certainly was angry. There must have been something about me he found lacking. I'd tried to be as polite as I could when I introduced myself, but perhaps the etiquette of nobles was different here.

"Hmph. So I guess Paul didn't even see fit to teach his own son manners!"

"I've been told my father detests formality, which is why he left his father's house. I suspect that's also why he didn't teach me any of it."

"Already with the excuses! You're just like him!"

"Did my father really make *that* many excuses?"

"Yes! An excuse every time he opened his mouth. If he wet the bed, an excuse! If he got into a fight, an excuse! If he played hooky, an excuse!" He was really going off about this. "Even you! If you wanted to learn manners, you could have done it! The only reason you didn't is because you didn't put any effort in!"

Part of me agreed with him. I was so preoccupied with magic and swordplay that I hadn't tried learning anything else. Perhaps I had been too narrow-minded.

The best response was to concede my mistake. "You're right. It's my own failing that I lack the proper manners. I apologize for that."

As I lowered my head, he stomped his foot so hard the floor creaked. "However! I will acknowledge that you made a valiant effort instead of being defensive about your lack of education on etiquette! I will permit you to stay here!"

I wasn't sure what was going on, but at least he said I could stay.

With that, the master of the house turned and strode out of the room, his shoulders stiff and firm.

“He is the liege lord of the Fittoa Region, Sauros Boreas Greyrat. He is also Master Paul’s uncle,” said the butler.

So he was the liege lord. His intensity made me worry about how good he was at governing. Then again, there were many adventurers around these parts, so maybe you needed a forceful personality to be a proper liege lord.

Wait. Did the butler say Greyrat and uncle? In other words, that meant… “He’s my great uncle then?”

“Yes.”

I knew it.

So, Paul had used his connection to a family member, albeit one he was estranged from. I never dreamed he came from such a noble family. He had quite the privileged upbringing.

“What’s going on, Thomas? You left the door wide open.” Someone appeared in the doorway: a thin, lightweight man with sleek brown hair. “It seems like Father is in a cheery mood. Did something happen?”

Because he called the liege lord *father*, I guessed he was Paul’s cousin.

The butler said, “This is the Young Master. Pardon me. Just a moment ago, the Master met with Lord Rudeus. It seems he was pleased by him.”

“Ah-ha. If he’s the kind of person my father likes…perhaps I’ve chosen incorrectly?” He took a seat on the sofa across from me.

Oh, right, I should introduce myself, I remembered.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Rudeus Greyrat.” Just as I did a moment ago, I bowed deep and lowered my head.

“Ah yes, and I am Philip Boreas Greyrat. Nobles greet each other by putting their right hand on their chest and bowing the head

slightly. You must have angered my father with your incorrect approach, yes?"

"Like this?" I followed his example and bowed my head slightly.

"Yes, that's right. Although your attempt a moment ago wasn't bad. It was still polite. I'm sure if a worker greeted my father like that, he would be pleased. Now please, sit." He flounced back upon on the sofa with a loud thud.

I followed his example and took my seat. *And now the interview begins.*

"How much have you heard?"

"I was told that if I spent five years here teaching the Young Mistress, I would be given enough money to cover the tuition costs for attending the University of Magic."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"I see." He put his hand on his chin and gazed at the table as if lost in thought. "Do you like girls?"

"Not as much as my father."

"Oh really? Then you pass."

W-wait, what? Wasn't that a bit fast?

"Right now, the only people that girl likes is Edna, her etiquette tutor, and Ghislaine, her sword trainer. I have already dismissed more than five people. Among those was a man who taught in the imperial city." I understood he was implying that just because someone taught in the imperial city didn't mean they were any good at it.

"And how is that relevant to whether I like girls or not?"

“It’s not. It’s just that Paul was the type of man who would work as hard as he could if it was for a cute girl. So I figured you were probably the same.” He shrugged.

I should have been the one shrugging. *Please don’t lump us in the same category.*

“I’ll be honest, I don’t expect much from you. I just figured that since you’re Paul’s son, I may as well give you a try.”

“You’re right, that *was* very honest,” I said.

“What, you mean you’re confident you can do it?”

No, not at all. Though that wasn’t something I could say in this situation. “I won’t know until I actually meet her.”

Besides, I could just imagine Paul’s mocking laughter if I failed at this job and had to find another. *I knew it, you’re still just a kid,* he would say. This was no joke. I wouldn’t tolerate being looked down upon by someone who was technically younger than me.

Hmm…

“Look, I’ll go meet her and if it looks like she’s going to give me trouble…I can try using one of my tricks.” This was an opportunity to use some knowledge from my previous life. The perfect way to make a spoiled, bratty girl listen to me.

“A trick? What do you mean?”

I gave him a simple explanation. “We’ll have someone associated with your house kidnap us while I’m with the Young Mistress. Then I’ll use my reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, as well as my magic, so the two of us can escape and return safely back here. That’s the gist of it.”

Philip stared blankly for a moment, but realization dawned and he nodded. “In other words, you’re trying to get her to study of her own free will. Interesting. But are you sure this will work?”

“I think it has a better chance of working than adults forcing her into it.”

This was a frequent plot device in anime and manga: a child that hated studying who learned the importance of education after being caught up in something they needed their wits to escape. It didn’t really matter if the ones orchestrating it were her family, right?

“Is this something Paul taught you? As one of the ways to get a girl to fall for you?”

“No. My father doesn’t have to go that far to be popular with women.”

“Popular, huh… Pfft.” Philip burst into laughter. “That’s right. He’s always been popular. He doesn’t have to do anything and the girls come right to him anyway.”

“Every person he’s introduced me to has been one of his mistresses. Even Ghislaine.”

“Yes, I’m incredibly envious of him.”

“I’m worried he might even lay his hands on the childhood friend I left behind in Buena Village.”

Anxiety hit me the moment those words left my lips. Five years from now… Sylphie would have grown a lot in that time. I would hate to return home to find that she had become part of my father’s harem.

“Don’t worry. Paul is only interested in *adult* women.” As Philip said that, he gazed at Ghislaine in the corner of the room.

“Oh.” I realized what he meant. Ghislaine definitely had a very…developed figure. Come to think of it, so did Zenith and Lilia. What was so developed, you ask? Their breasts of course.

“You should be fine, it’s only five years. She may mature some, but I doubt she will get that big, since she has elf blood in her veins. Even Paul isn’t *that* much of a fiend.”

Could I trust that? Besides which, how did he know that Sylphie was part elf? Maybe I was better off assuming there were no secrets about the time I spent in Buena Village.

"I'm more worried about whether you'll seduce my daughter."

"Why are you worried about that when I'm only seven?" Jeez, what a rude thing to say. I wasn't going to do anything. And if she went and fell for me of her own accord, well, it wouldn't be my fault.

"In Paul's letter about you, he said he was sending you away because you spent too much time playing with women. I thought it was just a joke, but after hearing your plan, I'm starting to doubt that."

"That's only because I had no friends besides Sylphie." Whom I was trying to raise into my perfect, obedient woman. Also, it was none of his business.

"Well, we won't make any progress by talking. You need to meet my daughter. Thomas, bring him to her." Philip stood.

And so, I finally met her.

***

Arrogant. That was my first thought when I saw her. She was two years older than me, her eyes sharp and narrow, and her hair wavy. It was also such a pure shade of crimson it looked like someone threw a bucket of paint on her.

My first impression of her was that she was fierce. I had no doubt she would be a beauty one day, but I predicted that most men would find her too much to handle. Maybe if you were a serious masochist… Well, okay, perhaps not quite *that* bad.

Either way, she was a dangerous one. My instincts screamed warnings as I got close to her.

But it wasn't like I could just run away. So instead I greeted her just as Philip had instructed me. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Rudeus Greyrat."

"Hmph!" She took one look at me and her nostrils flared, just like her grandfather's. She had her arms crossed firmly over her chest as she glared down at me—both figuratively and literally, since she was taller than I was. Her expression turned sour as she said, "What's this, he's younger than I am! And yet he's supposed to teach me? Stop joking around!"



I knew it—she had a lot of pride. But I couldn't just back down. "I don't think age has anything to do with it," I said.

"Oh yeah?! Do you have some sort of problem with me?!" Her voice was so loud my ears rang.

"What I'm saying, Miss, is that there are things I can do that you can't."

The moment I said that, her hair appeared to stand straight up, like a physical manifestation of her anger.

It was terrifying.

Aww, crap, why do I have to be afraid of a girl that's not even ten yet!

"Certainly full of yourself, aren't you! Just who do you think I am?!"

I tamped my fear down and answered. "You're my second cousin, right?"

"Second…? What the heck is that?"

"It means my father is the cousin of your father. In other words, you're the granddaughter of my great uncle."

"What are you on about?! I don't understand!"

Maybe that wasn't the best way to word it? Perhaps I should just tell her that we were related. "You have heard of Paul, right?"

"Of course not!"

"Oh, all right." That was unexpected. Apparently, she didn't know who he was. Not that it really mattered how we were related. It was more important to get her talking. After all, when you first start a video game, the best way to build up a relationship with an NPC is to talk to them repeatedly.

Just as I thought that, she lifted her hand and slapped me.

“Huh…?” It was so abrupt. She just struck me across the face. Slightly confused, I asked her, “Why did you hit me?”

“Because you’re acting so full of yourself even though you’re younger than me!”

“So that’s it.” My cheek was still hot where she slapped me. It stung. *That hurt,* I thought.

My second impression of her was that she was violent.

I guess it looked like I had no other option. “All right, then I’ll return the gesture.”

“What?!”

I didn’t wait for her response, I just slapped her. *Smack!* It wasn’t a very pleasant sound.

Oh well, it was probably weak because I’m not used to slapping people. That’s fine. At least she felt the pain, I reassured myself. “Now do you understand—”

How it feels to be slapped, was what I was trying to say, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw her hair stand up as she drew back her fist. It was the exact same pose as a Nio statue, one of Buddha’s divine and wrathful guardians.

Just as I thought that, her fist made contact. Her leg caught mine the moment I began to stumble. Then her hand slammed against my chest, forcing me to the ground. Seconds later she was perched on top of me. By the time I realized what was going on, she had my arms pinned under her knees.

H-huh? I can’t move? I panicked. “Hey, wait!”

The sound of my dismay was drowned out by her howling. “Who do you think you just raised a hand against?! I’ll make you regret that!”

Her fist came down on me like a hammer. “Ouch, ow, that hurts! Wait, what, no, stop!”

I took five punches before I managed to use my magic to get away. Though my legs threatened to buckle under me, I forced myself upright and rounded on her for a counterattack. I smacked her in the face with a wave of wind magic.

"…You're not going to get away with that." My attack had thrown her, but it didn't stop her for even a moment. She came flying at me with the look of the devil on her face.

I realized my mistake the moment I saw her expression. Stumbling, I ran for it. She wasn't the kind of young mistress I was used to. She wasn't the whimsical, selfish type that made decisions based on their feelings in the moment. She was more like the delinquent protagonist of a manga!

Maybe I could have beaten her up with my magic, but I doubted it would make her listen to me. She would bide her time to recover, then come back for revenge. I could hit her with magic each time, but her resolve would never waver.

Unlike a manga protagonist, she seemed the type to fight dirty too. She might throw a vase at me from the top of the stairs or come at me from the shadows with a wooden sword. She would do anything to make sure she returned the damage she received tenfold. If the opportunity came, she would hold nothing back.

This was no joke. I couldn't use healing magic because I couldn't stop to chant the spell. But so long as we kept this up, there was no way she would listen to what I had to say. I was going to have to use brute force to make her listen to me.

That, however, was the one decision I couldn't make right now.

There, now we're all caught up.

***

Exhausted from her pursuit, the Young Mistress eventually gave up and returned to her room. She didn't manage to find me, but it was close.

I felt numb as that red-haired demon went by me. I'd never imagined I would experience being the protagonist of a horror movie in this way. Utterly exhausted, I returned to Philip, who was waiting for me with a bitter smile on his face.

"So, how did it go?"

"It didn't go at all," I answered, on the verge of tears.

When she was punching me, I thought she might actually kill me. When I ran away, I was nearly in tears.

It had been so long since I felt like this. Still, I *had* experienced this before. Not that I was carrying the trauma with me or anything.

"Well, going to give up then?"

"No, I'm not." How could I? I hadn't accomplished anything. If I backed down now, it meant I got punched for nothing. "I want your cooperation to do what we talked about before." I bowed my head to him, sharp and low. I was going to teach that beast what true fear really was.

"All right. Thomas, make the preparations." Right on cue, the butler took his leave. Philip said, "You really do have some interesting ideas."

"You think so?"

"I do. You are the only teacher to have come to me with such an ambitious plan."

"I think it will be effective though."

Still, I was a little nervous. Would my little trick really work on someone with her personality?

Phillip shrugged and said, “Depends on how hard you work.”

Naturally.

And so, we began working on our plan.

***

I entered the room they gave me. It was exquisitely furnished. It had a large bed and other heavily decorated furniture, beautiful curtains, and a brand-new bookcase. All it needed was an air-conditioner and a computer and it would be a shut-in’s paradise. It was a nice room.

This had to be a guest room, rather than servants’ quarters, given to me because I bore the name Greyrat. For some reason, most of their maids were beastfolk. I heard they discriminated against demons in this country, but it seemed the beastfolk were a different matter.

“Ah, Paul, you bastard. This is one hell of a place you shipped me off to.”

I sank onto the bed and put my throbbing head in my hands. Probably a lingering effect from the punching. I muttered a chant to heal my wounds.

“At least it’s better than what happened in my previous life.”

Sure, the part where I got punched and kicked out of the house was the same. But this time things would be different. I wouldn’t just be left out in the cold. There was a world of difference between my present and my past.

Paul would make sure of that. He had already prepared a job for me, as well as a place to sleep. He even gave me some spending money. That was more than enough.

If my old family had done that much for me, maybe I could have turned my life around. If they had found a job for me, a place for me to live, and watched over me to make sure I didn't run away…

No, that would have never happened. I was a thirty-four-year-old with no work history. They abandoned me because there was nothing they could do with me.

Anyway, I doubted I would have changed even if they did that for me. I probably wouldn't have even tried to get work at all. If they took my computer, my only love, away from me, I would have probably contemplated suicide.

Things were different now because *I* was different. Because I decided I would work and earn money this time. I may have been forced into this situation, but the timing was perfect. Perhaps I had misunderstood Paul.

"But he didn't have to send me here to deal with *that*."

What the hell was that rage-filled creature anyways? In all my forty years of life I had never seen something like that before. Terrifying wasn't the word for it. It was violent. Like a pressure cooker exploding. Bad enough to give you PTSD. I may have wet my pants a little.

Whereas most Japanese blades had a blunt side, she was like a double-edged sword. Like a bottle of poison that had been spilled all over the place.

Now I understand why she was kicked out of school.

There had been experience in the way she swung her fists at me. Those were fists that were used to punching people. Fists that had pummeled people regardless of whether they resisted or not.

She was only nine and yet so skilled at rendering her opponents powerless. Could I really teach someone like that?

I'd talked to Philip about our plan.

First, we would kidnap her and give her a taste of what it felt like to be powerless. That was when I would come in to help her. This way, she would learn to respect me and attend my lessons obediently. A simple plan, but I knew how it should go. So long as I got the right reaction from her, everything would go smoothly.

…But would it really? She was way more violent than I could have ever imagined. She would bellow and scream until her opponent took the bait, then beat them to a bloody pulp. Her belligerence made it clear just how strong her desire to win was.

Was it possible that, even after being abducted, she would be completely unaffected? And that when I went to help her, she would be completely unsurprised and say, “It took you long enough, dirtbag.”

It was possible. With her, it was definitely possible.

It was likely she would react in a way I couldn’t predict. So I needed to mentally prepare for that. Failure wasn’t an option.

I thought about it. I tried coming up with a plan that would definitely allow me to succeed. Yet the more I thought about it, the more muddied my thoughts became.

“Please, God, let this plan work.”

In the end, I prayed. I didn’t believe in God, and yet, like any other Japanese person, I turned to prayer when I was in trouble.

Please, somehow, some way, make this work, I prayed.

That was when I realized I had left my treasured panties behind in Buena Village, and I cried. There was no God (a.k.a. Roxy) here.

***

NAME: “Young Mistress”

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa’s liege lord

PERSONALITY: Fierce

DOESN’T: Listen to what people say

READING/WRITING: Can write her own name

ARITHMETIC: Can add single digit numbers

MAGIC: No clue

FENCING: Sword God Style – Beginner-tier

ETIQUETTE: Can do the Boreas-style greeting

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine

Chapter 2: All According to Plan?

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in the middle of a dingy storehouse. Sunlight filtered in through an iron-barred window.

I was in pain, but as far as I could tell no bones were broken, so I muttered a healing spell to recover.

"There we go."

I had fully recovered. My clothes weren't even torn. This was going exactly as I had planned.

My plan to ensnare the Young Mistress was exactly as follows:

1. Go to a clothing store in the city with the Young Mistress.
2. Let her ill-behaved nature do its work and have her want to go outside by herself.
3. Have Ghislaine escort her as usual, then "accidentally" look away and let the Young Mistress give her the slip.
4. I'd follow her, but since I was just the pipsqueak she beat the crap out of, she wouldn't care about me.
5. She'd treat me like a minion and drag me to the edge of the city (because apparently she has a deep interest in adventurers).
6. Have someone from the Greyrat household appear.
7. Have them knock us both unconscious, take us, and confine us somewhere in a neighboring town.
8. Use magic to stage an escape.
9. Once we were out, I'd tell her I thought we were in a neighboring town.
10. I'd use the money I hid in my underwear to get us on a stagecoach.

11. We'd arrive safely back home, and I'd get to hold my chin high as I lectured the Young Mistress.

Right now, my plan had reached step seven smoothly. All that remained was for me to use my magic, knowledge, wisdom, and courage to make a magnificent escape. To make things more realistic, I would be improvising a little from here. I was a little nervous about how well that would go.

"Hm…?"

However, things were a bit different from what I'd planned. This storehouse was covered in dust, and in one corner was a broken chair and a discarded suit of armor with a hole in it. My plan was to be somewhere a bit cleaner than this.

Then again, we did say we'd make this as believable as possible, so I guess this was the result.

"Mm…uungh…?"

The Young Mistress woke a few moments later. She opened her eyes, didn't recognize her surroundings, and tried jumping to her feet. But since her hands were tied behind her back, she fell over and squirmed like a caterpillar instead.

She lost her cool the moment she realized she couldn't move. "What the hell is this?! Stop messing around! Who the hell do you think I am?! Untie me immediately!"

Her voice was unbearably loud. I'd noted this back at the manor too. She really didn't dial down her volume in this small space at all. I'd thought maybe she raised her voice because the manor was so huge and she wanted people to hear her in every corner of the complex when she spoke.

But no, she was her grandfather's granddaughter. Sauros was also the type to shout down his opponent, even if he doted on his

granddaughter, and she must have seen how her grandfather intimidated the servants and Philip. Children loved to imitate what they saw, especially if it was something bad.

"Shut up already, you damn brat!" The door banged open and in came a man, probably because of her screaming.

His clothes were all ragged and a foul stench clung to him. He was bald and his face unshaven. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd pulled out a business card that said, "Hi, I'm a bandit!"

Nice choice, I thought. Now she would never figure out that we staged everything.

"Eww! You stink! Don't you dare come close to me! You smell awful! Who the hell do you think I am?! Any minute now, Ghislaine is going to come in here and split you in two—gah!"

Whack! She was sent flying with an audible *whoosh*. A loud cry left her mouth as she smacked into the wall.

"Damn brat! Think you can mouth off to me, huh?! We already know you're the liege lord's grandchildren!" The man didn't hold anything back as he began stomping on the Young Mistress, whose hands were still tied behind her back.

Th-that's going a little far, isn't it?

"Th-that hurts… Stop—guh! Stop, agh… Stop it…"

"Puh!" He continued kicking her for a while. When he finished, he spat on her face and glared at me. I turned my head to avoid his gaze, and a kick came flying at my face.

"…Argh!"

That hurt! We were supposed to be putting on an act, but he could have showed a little restraint. I did tell them that I could use healing magic, but…

"Tsk! That's for looking so damn happy!"

He exited the storehouse. I could hear voices beyond the door.

“Did they shut up?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t kill ’em, did you? Bang up the merch too bad and it’ll lose its value.”

There was something strange about the conversation. It was too realistic…which would have been fine if it were just an act. The problem was that it didn’t seem like one. Maybe, just maybe, this was the real deal.

“Oh? Eh, I’m sure it’ll be fine. At the very least, we should be fine as long as we still have the boy.”

Not good.

“…”

After the voices went away, I counted to 300 before I burned through the ropes tying my hands. I went over to where the Young Mistress was lying. Blood was pouring out of her nose. She stared blankly as she mumbled something to herself.

I realized she was muttering, “You won’t get away with this,” and, “I’m going to tell my grandpa,” among other more dangerous utterances that I couldn’t bear to listen to.

For now, I needed to assess her injuries.

“Eek!” It must have hurt, because her head snapped up as she looked at me, fear in her eyes.

I put a finger to my lips and monitored her reaction as I looked her over. She had two broken bones.

“O goddess of motherly affection, close up this one’s wounds and restore the vigor to their body—X-Healing!” I chanted a mid-level healing spell in a low voice, restoring the Young Mistress’s body to health. Unfortunately, just putting in more magical energy wouldn’t make healing spells more effective. Hopefully what I did

was enough to heal her wounds properly. She would be fine so long as her bones knitted back together the right way.

"H-huh? The pain is…?" She looked down at her body, puzzled.

I whispered in her ear, "Shh, be quiet. Your bones were broken so I used healing magic. Young Mistress, it appears we have been abducted by people that bear a grudge against the liege lord. Therefore…"

She wasn't listening.

"Ghislaine! Ghislaine, help! They're going to kill me! Save me, hurry!" Her bellowing voice echoed through the room.

I immediately hid the rope that had bound my hands beneath my clothes, scurried to the corner of the room and hid my hands between my back and the wall, pretending I was still restrained.

The power of the Young Mistress's voice was enough to draw the man back, and the door banged open viciously. "Shut the hell up!" This time he kicked her even harder than before.

She really doesn't learn, I thought.

"Little shit, next time you fuss, I'll kill you!"

And of course, I got kicked a second time too.

I didn't do anything, why did you have to kick me?! Now I feel like crying, I thought as I returned to the Young Mistress's side.

"Guhuh, guhuh…"

It was bad. I wasn't sure if it was a broken rib, but she was vomiting blood. One of her internal organs had probably ruptured. Her arms and legs were broken too. I didn't know much about medical treatment, but these wounds looked serious enough that she might die if I just left her like this.

"Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again—Healing!" For now, I decided to use a basic healing spell for a slight recovery.

The blood coming from her mouth stopped. At least now she wouldn't die…probably.

"Guhuh… I-It still hurts. H-heal…all of it."

"No. If I heal you, you'll just get yourself kicked again, right? Use your own magic."

"I-I can't…do that."

"You could if you learned how."

With that, I went to the storehouse entrance and pressed my ear to the door. I wanted to hear more of our captors' conversation. This was completely different from my plan. No matter the reason, they had gone too far.

"So, we gonna sell to that one guy?"

"No, let's use 'em for ransom."

"Won't they hunt us down?"

"I don't care. If that happens, we'll just go to a neighboring country."

So, they really did intend to sell us off. It seemed like we had entrusted the kidnapping scheme to someone close to the family but had instead gotten mixed up with real kidnappers.

I wondered where the plan went wrong. Was it the moment we were kidnapped? Or was Philip really trying to sell his daughter? No, the latter was unlikely. Oh well. Either way, my job was still the same. This just meant we had no safety net.

"We'd get more for ransoming 'em than we would for selling, right?"

"Let's decide by tonight."

"Yeah, sell or ransom."

They seemed to disagree whether they should sell us somewhere or demand ransom from the liege lord. Either way, they

would be moving us out of here tonight. We had to get moving while there was still light.

"All right." What to do?

I could smash the door and subdue our kidnappers with magic. Maybe if she saw me defeat the people who had beat her senseless, the Young Mistress would learn to respect…

No, that was unlikely. She was the type to think she could have done the same if they hadn't beat her up. Plus, that would just show her that violence brings results. I needed to teach her that violence earned you nothing, otherwise she would just keep punching me. I didn't want her to feel like she had that power.

There's also no guarantee you'd be able to beat those kidnappers, I realized. If they were as strong as Paul or Ghislaine, I was positive I would lose. And if I lost, they would definitely kill me.

All right, then let's get out of here without messing with the kidnappers.

I glanced back to check on the Young Mistress. *Yikes.* She was glaring at me, eyes full of anger.

Hmmm.

Let's just get started with the plan.

First, I used earth and fire magic to fill the cracks in the door. Then I melted the door knob so the handle couldn't be turned. Now it was just a door that couldn't be opened. Of course, that meant nothing if they smashed through it. Still, it would buy us some time.

Next, the window. It was a small hole with metal bars set in it. I considered focusing my fire magic on one spot to burn through the iron, but that would need temperatures too high to be practical. In the end, I used water magic to loosen the bricks framing the iron bars. Once I successfully pried them out, what was left was a hole just large enough for a single child to fit through.

Now we had an escape route.

“Young Mistress. It seems the people who kidnapped us have a grudge against the liege lord. Their friends are going to be here tonight. They were just talking about how they’re going to beat us to death.”

“Th-that has to be lie…right?”

Of course it was. But the Young Mistress’s face had turned pale anyway.

“I don’t want to die so…goodbye.”

I grabbed the ledge of the empty window frame and hoisted myself up. At the same time, a voice came through the door.

“Hey, this won’t open! What the hell is goin’ on!”

Bang, bang! They pounded on the door.

The Young Mistress eyed me and the door in despair. “D-don’t…leave me behind… Help.”

Oh wow. She caved quicker than I thought. I guess this situation was terrifying even for her.

I dropped to the floor, got close to her, and whispered, “Can you promise to listen to everything I say until we get back to the house?”

“I-I’ll listen, sure.”

“Can you also promise you won’t yell? Ghislaine isn’t here, okay?”

She nodded vigorously. “I-I’ll promise. So just hurry up…or they’ll come… They’ll come!”

Her demeanor had changed completely from when she punched me. She was filled with fear and unease. Good, now she understood.

I tried to sound calm and cool. “If you break your promise, I *will* leave you behind.”

I reinforced the door with earth magic. Then I used fire to remove her bindings and healing to restore her to full health.

Finally, I slipped out the window and pulled the Young Mistress out with me.

***

Once we escaped the storehouse, we were greeted by an unfamiliar town. There were no castle walls. This wasn't Roa. It wasn't small enough to be a village, but it was a very small town. I had to think fast, or they were going to find us.

"Hmph, this is far enough!" The Young Mistress declared loudly. She seemed to think we had already outrun our enemy.

"You promised you wouldn't shout until we got home."

"Hmph! Why do *I* have to keep any promises to you?" she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

This little brat!

"Oh really? Then this is where we part. Goodbye."

"Hmph!" She flared her nostrils and began walking away, but then we heard distant, angry shouts.

"Those damn brats! Where the hell did they go?!"

They must have busted the door down or seen that the window bars were missing. Either way, they knew we had fled and were looking for us.

"…Eek!" the Young Mistress yelped and scurried back to me. "Th-that was a lie a second ago. I won't shout anymore. Now take me home!"

"I'm not your servant, nor am I your slave." It irritated me how she changed her mind so easily.

“Wh-what are you saying? You’re my tutor, right?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Huh?”

“You said you didn’t like me, so I wasn’t hired.”

“W-well, I’ll hire you then,” she said reluctantly.

I needed a real promise this time. “Again with the promises. Once we get back to the manor, you’ll just break it just like you did a second ago, right?” I said, hoping I sounded unaffected and distant, yet confident that she wouldn’t keep her word.

“I-I won’t break my promise, so…I demand—no, I mean…help me.”

“You can come with me, as long as you keep your promise not to shout and listen to what I say.”

“G-got it.” She nodded meekly.

Very good, I thought. *Now let’s move on to the next step.*

First, I retrieved the five large copper coins I’d tucked into my underwear. This was all the money I owned. Ten large copper coins made up one silver coin, so this wasn’t much money, but it would be enough for our purposes.

“Now come with me please.”

We headed toward the town entrance, away from the distant sound of angry shouting. A sleepy guard stood on duty. I passed him one of my coins. “If anyone asks if you’ve seen us, please tell them that we left the city.”

“Huh? What? Children? Okay, I guess. You guys playing hide and seek or something? This is a lot of money. Jeez, just what wealthy family are you two from…”

“Please, just tell them what I said.”

“Yeah, I got it.” It was a rude reply, but we couldn’t afford to linger.

Next, I headed to the stagecoach’s waiting area. The fare and terms of use were written on the wall, but I had already read that information days ago. Instead, I was looking for the town’s location.

“It looks like we’re two cities away from Roa, in a town called Wieden,” I whispered to the Young Mistress.

Keeping to her promise, she replied in a hushed voice, “How can you tell?”

“It’s written right there.”

“I can’t read it.”

Here we go, I thought.

“Being able to read is really beneficial. The way the stagecoach works is also written here.”

Still, it was amazing that they’d managed to bring us this far in just a day’s time. It made me nervous being in a city I didn’t know, almost like I was reliving a previous trauma.

No, no, I thought. *This is completely different from that time when I didn’t know how to find the location for Hello Work.*

As I was lost in thought, the sound of shouting drew close. “Shit! Where the hell are they hiding?! Get out here!”

“Hide!” I grabbed the Young Mistress and ducked into the bathroom, locking the door behind us. Outside came the clamor of heavy footsteps.

“Where the hell are they?!”

“Don’t you dare think you got away from us!”

Whoa, scary.

Oh, just knock it off already. Acting all pissed off as you try to hunt us down… You could at least speak in a sweet voice like an

owner trying to draw out their cat. Maybe you would have some chance of deceiving us into coming out. It wouldn't work, of course, but at least you'd have a chance.

"Dammit, they're not here!"

Before long, their voices grew distant. We had a moment to relax a bit, though it was too soon to let our guard down. After all, when people were in a panic, they tended to circle around and search the same area repeatedly.

"A-are we okay?" She held a trembling hand over her mouth.

"Well, if they find us, let's put up a good fight."

"R-right… Okay!"

"Though I doubt we can win."

"R-really…?"

I said it because she looked like she was getting her fighting spirit back. I didn't want to get pummeled by them another time.

"I was looking at the fare for the stagecoach, and it looks like we'll have to change coaches twice to get back."

"Change coaches?" She seemed confused as to why that mattered.

"Only five stagecoaches leave here daily, one every two hours starting at eight in the morning. It's the same for every city. And it takes three hours to get to the next city from here. If we leave right now, we'll be on the fourth stagecoach for the day. In other words…"

"In other words…?"

"By the time we reach the neighboring city, the last stagecoach there will already have left for Roa. So we will have to spend one night in that town before we can leave."

"No wa… O-oh, I see. Hm." She looked like she was about the shout there for a moment, but she held herself back. *Yeah, please try to restrain that loud voice of yours.*

“I have four large copper coins left, but we have to go to the neighboring city, stay a night, then go to Roa. We’ll be cutting it close.”

“Cutting it close… But it will be enough, right?”

“It will.”

She looked relieved, but it was too early for us to relax yet.

“As long as no one tries to cheat us out of change, that is.”

“Out of change…?” She made a face like she didn’t know what I was talking about. Maybe she had never used money for herself before.

“When the people running the inn or stagecoaches see that we’re children, they’ll probably think we can’t calculate prices, right? That means they might try to cheat us by skimming off the top and only giving us a little change back. Now if you point out that it’s not the right amount of change, they’ll give the rest to you. But, if you don’t know how to calculate it, then…”

“Then what?”

“Then we won’t have enough for the last stagecoach. And those guys from before will catch up to us.”

She began trembling, as if she would pee herself at any minute.

“The bathroom is over there.”

“I-I know that.”

“All right, then I’ll go have a look outside.”

When I tried leaving, she grabbed the hem of my shirt.

“D-don’t go,” she said.

So I let her take a pee before we went back outside.

It seemed like our two pursuers had gone, but I wasn’t sure if they were still searching inside or outside the city. If we ran into them, I would have to overpower them with my magic.

As we hid in a corner of the wait area, I prayed they were opponents I could defeat. When it was time to leave, I handed my money to the coachman and we boarded.

***

We arrived in the neighboring city without any trouble.

For the night's stay, I chose a dilapidated-looking shack to teach the Young Mistress a lesson about how harsh the world could really be. Our beds were made of straw.

The Young Mistress was so wired she couldn't sleep. Every time she heard a sound, she would startle and glare, frightened, at the room's entrance. When nothing seemed to be amiss, she would breathe a sigh of relief. She did this over and over.

The next morning, we hopped on the first stagecoach to Roa. The Young Mistress must not have slept much at all, because her eyes were bloodshot. And yet, she didn't seem the least bit tired. Instead, she kept glancing out the back of the stagecoach, checking for possible pursuers. Several times we had a single horseman pass us on his mount, but none of them were our kidnappers.

We had covered quite a distance, so maybe they had given up. Or so I naively thought.

Hours passed. We arrived in Roa without any problems. Once we passed through those sturdy walls and saw the liege lord's manor in the distance, a sense of security settled in. Unconsciously, I let my guard down, thinking we were safe now that we had made it this far.

We disembarked and headed toward the manor on foot. Our steps felt light. After riding in a stagecoach for hours, on top of sleeping on hay for the first time, I was exhausted.

Then, as if they had been waiting for that exact moment, two men grabbed the Young Mistress and pulled her into a back alleyway.

“What?!” I had let my guard down; it took me two seconds to notice. In those two seconds that I’d taken my eyes off her, she was gone. I thought maybe she really had disappeared. But out the corner of my eye, I glimpsed clothing that matched what the Young Mistress was wearing, just before she was dragged around the corner of a building.

I pursued them immediately. When I darted into the alleyway, I caught sight of the two men, one of whom was carrying the Young Mistress in his arms, trying to make their escape.

I quickly used an earth spell to create a wall. The magic leapt from my fingertips and a barrier sprang up in front of them. Their pathway was cut off so suddenly that the men couldn’t stop themselves in time.

“What the?!”

“Nggh!” The Young Mistress bit down on her gag, tears beading in her eyes.

Amazing… They managed to gag her in just a few seconds? They must be well-practiced, I thought. It also looked like they had punched her, because her cheek was swollen and red.

My opponents were the two who had kidnapped us. One of them was the violent one who kicked me, and the other was probably the man I heard talking outside the storehouse. They both looked like bandits, and each had a sword sheathed at their side.

“Aha, so it’s that brat. You know you coulda gone back home safely if you woulda just kept your nose out of this.” Despite being caught off guard by the sudden appearance of my dirt wall, they grinned when they saw I was their opponent.

The violent one came toward me, his guard down. The other was carrying the Young Mistress. I wondered if they had any other comrades around. Regardless, I conjured a small ball of fire at my fingertips to intimidate him.

“Hngh! Bastard!” The moment he saw that, the violent man unsheathed his sword.

The other man immediately put up his guard and leveled the tip of his sword against the Young Mistress’s neck while backing up.

“You… You damn brat! I thought you seemed too calm! Looks like you’re a bodyguard, huh? No wonder you escaped so easily. Dammit, I was fooled by your appearance! You’re a demon!”

“I’m not a bodyguard. I haven’t even been hired yet,” I said. I wasn’t a demon either, but there was no need to correct him about that.

“What? Then why the hell are you getting in our way?!”

“Well, they plan to hire me after this, so…”

“Huh, so you’re after money?

After money, huh? He wasn’t necessarily wrong. I was doing this to earn enough money so Sylphie and I could go to university together. “I won’t deny that.”

As soon as I said that, the corners of his lips curved up. “Then you should join us. I have connections with a perverted noble that will pay a high price for a young girl from a noble family. I hear the liege lord dotes on his granddaughter, so we could also hold her to ransom. Either way we’d get a ton of money.”

“Oho.” I made a sound like I was impressed by their proposition, and the Young Mistress turned to look at me, her face pale. Maybe she knew I was seeking employment from her family to earn money for tuition. “And exactly how much money would that be?”

“This isn’t some piddling one-or-two-gold-coins-a-month job we’re talking about,” he said with a self-satisfied smirk. “It’s got to be a hundred gold coins, at least.”

It was almost as if he had no real grasp on the economy here and was trying to brag like a grade school kid saying, “It’s like a million yen! Can you believe it?!”

He asked, “What about you? You look like a kid, but I bet you’re much older than you look.”

“Why do you think that?”

“That magic you just used and how calm you’re acting? It’s obvious. I know there are demons out there like that. I bet you’ve been given a hard time because of your appearance, right? So you understand how important money is, don’t ya?”

“I see.”

So that was what I looked like from an outside perspective? Well, it was certainly true that I was over forty.

Ta-da! Congratulations, you guessed correctly! Good job.

“You’re right. After living as long as I have, you get a good sense of the importance of money. I know what it’s like to be thrown out into a world you don’t know much about with no money and only the clothes on your back.”

“Heh, yeah, you get us, right?”

Very much so, because until this point, I had never worried about money at all. Instead I’d spent almost twenty years as a shut-in. Half of my life had been spent on nothing but erotic sims and online games. I’d learned something thanks to all of that. I knew what it would mean if I betrayed her right here, as well as what would happen if I helped her.

“It’s exactly why I know there are things more important than money.”

“Don’t start spitting pretty words at us!”

“They’re not pretty words. You can’t buy ‘dere’ with money.” Crap, my inner nerd had slipped out. It wasn’t like these men knew what *tsundere* meant.

“*Dere*? What the heck is that?” The violent man looked dumbfounded, but at least he understood that our negotiation had broken down. His creepy smile was replaced by a grim look as he put his sword to the Young Mistress’s neck.

“Then she’ll be our hostage! First, launch that fire ball into the air.”

“You want me to fire it into the air?”

“That’s right. You better not aim it at us, not even on accident. No matter how fast you are, we’ll slit this little brat’s throat and use her as a human shield faster than you can hit us.”

Wouldn’t you ask someone to disperse their magic instead? Wait, maybe he doesn’t know. It did make sense: a chanted spell would keep going until it was released. If you didn’t learn magic properly, you probably wouldn’t understand the difference between using a chant and not using one.

“Roger that.” Before I discharged the Fireball at my fingertip, I used magic to insert another special Fireball inside it. Then I launched it into the air.

It made a ridiculous noise as it raced upward. A huge explosion flashed above us.

“Huh!

“Whoa?!

“Ngh?!”

The bang was thunderous enough to split eardrums. The light from it was blinding too. The heat it emitted was hot enough to burn you.

As everyone looked to the sky, I raced forward. I conjured magic as I ran. Out of habit, I summoned two different spells. In my right hand I had Intermediate-tier wind magic, Sonic Boom. In my left hand I had Intermediate-tier earth magic, Stone Cannon. I fired one spell each at the men in front of me.

“Gyaaaah!”

Sonic Boom cut the arm off the violent man who was distracted by the explosion. I caught the Young Mistress snugly in my arms, princess-style, as she fell screaming from his grasp.

“Tch! It’s not that easy!”

I glanced at the other bandit and realized he’d cut my Stone Cannon in two with his blade.

“Ugh…” This was bad. He actually managed to slice through it. I didn’t know what school of sword arts he was using, but this wasn’t good. If he were as strong as Paul, we were in trouble. This might not be someone I could beat.

“Wah, wah, wah!”

I used a mix of wind and fire magic to create an explosion that propelled me into the air. The force of it was so violent that I thought I broke something.

The sword came down just a moment too late, narrowly missing me. It cut through the air right in front of my nose, the whistle of it lingering in my ears.

That was close.

But he wasn’t nearly as fast as Paul, which meant I didn’t have to panic. I had done numerous practice drills against opponents with a sword before. So long as I performed just as well, I could cut my way out of here.

I prepared my next magical attack as I hovered mid-air. First, I sent a Fireball straight at his face. It shot slowly toward him.

“Is that all you’ve got!” He studied its trajectory, then readied his sword to counter it. While he was waiting for the Fireball to reach him, I used water and earth magic to turn the ground beneath him into a swirling mass of mud.

When he tried to cut through my Fireball, he sank up to his knees in thick, sticky mud. Now he couldn’t move.

“What?!”

Yes, I won! I had, I was sure of it. He couldn’t run now. He may have deflected my Fireball, but we were already beyond his attack range. With the Young Mistress in my arms, all I had to do was disappear into the confusion of the crowds and we would be safe. Or, if I needed to, I could yell for help.

Just as I thought that…

“You think I’m gonna let you get away!” He launched his sword at us.

It was then that I remembered what Paul had taught me. In the North God Style of swordplay, even if you cut off the opponent’s leg, they still had a technique for throwing their sword at you.

The blade flew toward me at a tremendous speed, but I watched it as if in slow motion. It was aimed right at my head.

Death.

Right as that word popped into my mind, there was a brown blur in front of me. I heard a sound like porcelain shattering, then the sword fell.

“Huh?”

Someone had come between me and the bandits. They stood with their broad, sturdy back to me. I recognized the ears on the back of their head. It was Ghislaine Dedoldia. She glanced back at me and nodded.

“Leave the rest to me,” she said.

The moment she put her hand to the sword at her waist, the tip of it cut through the air in a flash of red light.



“Huh…?”

The head of the man knee-deep in mud fell from his neck. This was despite the considerable distance between him and Ghislaine, too far for a sword’s reach.

“Hey, where the hell did you—“

Her tail flicked and in the next moment, the other man’s head fell. I imagined I heard it thump as it hit the ground.

My brain couldn’t catch up with what was happening. All I could do was watch, dumbfounded, as the two bodies crumbled to the ground meters away from where we were standing. It didn’t seem real. I had no idea what just happened. *Huh? They’re dead?* was all that came into my mind.

“Hm. Rudeus, were those two our only enemies?”

I snapped back to the moment. “Uh, yeah. Thank you. Miss…Ghislaine?”

“Drop the miss, just call me Ghislaine.” She looked back and nodded. “I saw a sudden explosion in the sky, so I came to check things out. Looks like I made the right choice.”

“Y-yeah, you were really fast. I mean, you defeated them in seconds.” Only a minute had passed since my first spell. She got here *way* too fast, no matter how you cut it.

“I was close by. Plus, it wasn’t that fast. Any warrior from the Dedoldia family can kill a person in seconds. By the way, Rudeus, was that your first time fighting with someone using the North God Style?”

“It was my first time being in a life-or-death battle,” I said.

“Then let me tell you, those kinds of people don’t give up until one side is dead. Be careful.”

Until one side is dead…

That was right, I almost died. I trembled as I remembered how the bandit's sword had come flying at me. It was a life-or-death battle. A *real* life-or-death battle.

"L-Let's go home."

If I had made even one mistake, I would have died. This really was a different world. A world with magic and swords.

What would happen if I died this time?

A chill of indescribable fear ran up my spine.

***

"Phew…"

When we finally reached the manor, the Young Mistress sank to the ground, completely exhausted. Her legs must have given out now that her nerves had settled.

The maids anxiously swarmed around her. When they reached out to help her, she batted their hands away and stood up by herself. Her legs were trembling like those of a newborn deer.

She stood imposingly, with her arms crossed over her chest. Maybe she had regained her spirits now that she was home. Seeing her this way, the maids seemed to realize something was odd, and stayed back.

The Young Mistress thrust her finger at me and bellowed, "I kept my promise and now we're back home! So I can talk now, right?!"

"Oh, yeah. You can talk now." Hearing how loud she was being again, I realized I had failed. What we had been through was obviously not enough to change this selfish and violent girl. In fact, she might have guessed that I'd been afraid during the battle. Maybe

she would point out how high and mighty I'd acted despite being so weak.

"I will grant you the special privilege of calling me by my name, Eris!"

Her words took me by surprise. "Huh?"

"Not just anybody gets to do that, okay?!"

So, did that mean…I passed? That I could work here as her tutor? *Oh, oh wow! Seriously? S-so, I succeeded?! Yes!*

"Thank you! Mistress Eris!"

"Drop the Mistress! Just call me Eris!" She was imitating Ghislaine. As soon as she finished, she collapsed.

That was how I became the tutor for Eris Boreas Greyrat.

***

NAME: Eris B. Greyrat

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa's liege lord

PERSONALITY: Fierce

DOESN'T: Always listen to what people say

READING/WRITING: She can write her own name

ARITHMETIC: Can use addition

MAGIC: Not interested

FENCING: Sword God Style – Beginner-tier

ETIQUETTE: Can do the Boreas-style greeting

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine

Side Story: The Aftermath and the Boreas Greeting Style

The one pulling the strings behind the kidnapping had been the butler, Thomas. He was the person with connections to a perverted noble that the hoodlums had referred to. The Young Mistress had apparently caught that noble's eye a while ago, and he wanted to beat her fierce and unyielding spirit out of her. Thomas, seduced by the money, added the two men the perverted noble had selected into my plan.

Jeez, there really were some shameless people out there in the world. If he was going to do that again, I wish he'd talk to me first.

He completely miscalculated by not considering two things. Firstly, that I possessed enough magical prowess to escape the two bandits, and secondly, that those two had no loyalty to him whatsoever.

As for the perverted noble, he played innocent and escaped punishment. Part of it was because Thomas's testimony was inadequate, and part of it was because the two bandits were dead, so we could find no proof of the noble's involvement. There were too many unknown variables. I suspected political machinations were involved.

The incident was considered resolved entirely because of Ghislaine's involvement. The Greyrat family could tout the fact that they had the Sword King Ghislaine staying with them, preventing possible future incidents while proclaiming the strength and wealth of their house.

I was ordered to give all the credit to Ghislaine, even after I told them what transpired. It seemed they didn't want others in the Greyrat family to know of my existence. Yet more political

bargaining, I assumed. The bigger surprise to me was that there were even *more* Greyrats.

"And that's how it is. Understood?"

"Yes…understood."

Philip explained all of this to me in the reception room. I thought he was just the son of the liege lord, but he was also the town's mayor. I wondered if he was the one who had settled the whole matter.

"You seem pretty relaxed for someone whose daughter was kidnapped."

"I am now. I would be panicking if she were still missing," he said.

"Certainly."

"Now, about you working as Eris's tutor…"

As we were about to begin discussing my future, the door flew open with a bang, and in waltzed Eris's incredibly exuberant grandfather.

"I heard it all," Sauros said. He barreled into the reception room and tousled my hair with a firm hand. "I heard you saved Eris!"

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about? Ghislaine is the one who did it. I didn't do anything!"

His eyes gleamed darkly, like a bird of prey.

Th-that's terrifying!

"You! You think you can lie to me!"

"N-no! But Lord Philip told me to say—"

"Philip!" He rounded on his son and without a moment of hesitation, swung his fist. It landed with a vicious crack.

“Ugh!” The young lord took the blow right to the face and tumbled over the back of the sofa. The liege lord’s fist had been so fast. Faster even than Eris, too quick for the eyes to follow.

“Bastard! This to the boy who saved your daughter! How dare you not offer even a word of gratitude! Just so you can partake in your foolish theater between nobles?!”

Philip, still splayed on the floor, responded without moving. “Father, Paul may have been disowned by our family, but he is still a Greyrat. That means his son Rudeus, who also carries our blood, is a part of our family as well. So rather than outwardly praise and reward him, I thought the best way to thank him was to treat him with kindness as a part of our family.” He spoke very matter-of-factly for someone laid out on the floor. Perhaps he was used to being punched by Sauros.

“Very well! Then go ahead and keep up that farce with the nobles!” The older man plopped himself on the empty sofa. It seemed he wasn’t going to apologize for punching Philip. That was just the kind of person he was. Physical punishment was as natural as breathing here.

Come to think of it, Eris never apologized to me either. She also never thanked me for saving her.

Ah well, it’s fine.

“Rudeus!” The liege lord folded his arms, lifted his chin, and glared at me.

This seemed familiar.

“I have a request!”

Is that really the kind of attitude you should have when asking someone for something? He was just like Eris! No, that was backwards—she was the one imitating him after all.

“I want you to teach Eris magic.”

“Why, might I ask?”

“She came to me to request it. She said your magic was so seared into her mind she couldn’t get it out of her head.”

It certainly was magic that seared the eyes anyway.

“Of cour…” I bit my tongue as I began to respond on instinct. The most likely reason for her horrible personality was Sauros always spoiling her like this. Maybe not the only reason, but she had certainly been influenced by him, based on how much of his personality she imitated.

If she was going to grow at all as a person, I had to stop her from being spoiled. It might not be my responsibility to see that she grew up properly, but if things continued like this, it would affect my ability to teach her.

It was best to deal with each problem as it appeared.

“That isn’t something for you to ask of me, Lord Sauros. Eris should ask me herself.”

“What did you say?!” Indignant, he raised his fist.

I panicked and covered my face with my hands. What was he, some sort of nuclear bomb waiting to explode? “D-do you really mean to raise Eris into an adult that can’t lower her head to ask for something when she wants it?”

“Oho! You make a fair point! You’re right!” He slammed his fist on his knee and nodded vigorously. In a great, loud voice he said, “Eriiiiis! Come to the reception room right now!”

I thought my eardrums were going to burst. What kind of lung capacity did a person need to be able to yell *that* loud…? Eris was the exact same way. Did no one in this manor understand the concept of asking people to deliver messages?

These savages, I thought.

Philip returned to his seat on the sofa while a butler (a different guy, apparently named Alphonse) closed the door that had been left open. I later learned that, because Sauros was like a storm that raged out of rooms just as quickly as he came in, they would wait for a while before closing a door. He was a selfish old man that loved to throw doors open but was not as fond of shutting them.

"Okaaaay!" A voice responded from somewhere else in the manor. After a while came the tapping of approaching footsteps. "Here I am, just as you asked!" She didn't have quite the force of her grandfather, but Eris still energetically threw the doors open and burst inside.

Every single action she took was made with her grandfather in mind. Children loved to mimic adults after all. If I hadn't gotten punched my first day here, I might have smiled at the resemblance. Instead, I could firmly say that this, too, had to stop.

"Oh…" As soon as she caught sight of me, she lifted her chin and glared. Was this intimidating pose passed down in the Boreas family? "Grandfather, did you tell him what we talked about?!"

He stood suddenly and folded his arms, glaring at her. It was the exact same pose. "Eris! If you want to ask something of someone, you need to bow your *own* head and ask!"

Her lips pushed out in a pout. "But you said you would ask him for me…"

"Enough! If you won't ask him yourself, then we won't hire him!"

Huh? Wh-what did he just say?! No no, wait, I mean, I guess that was right. That would be a bit problematic for me, but I guess this was what you'd call reaping what you sow?!

"Grr…" Eris glared at me, her cheeks flushed red. It wasn't a blush of embarrassment; she was pissed off and humiliated. Her face

said that if her grandfather wasn't there, she'd chase me all the way to the bowels of hell and turn me into minced meat.

Scary…

"P-please…"

"Is that the kind of attitude to take when you're asking someone for something?!" Sauros bellowed.

Like you have any room to talk, I thought.

"Grr…" Eris took a fistful of her long, red hair into each hand. She made a tail on either side of her temples; instant twin tails. Then, just like that, she winked at me. "Please teach me magic, mew ☆"

***

Wait. Was I dreaming? I blacked out for a minute there. It felt like I'd just had a really awful dream.

"Don't worry about teaching me reading or writing, mew ☆"

Well crap, it wasn't a dream! Wh-what the heck? What the heck was going on?

Did I just get transported to some weird alternate dimension? At least transport me to the two-dimensional world of anime, if you're going to go that far!

"I don't need arithmetic either, mew ☆"

A-anyway, this was abnormal. Terrifying even! Eris's pose should have been cute, but all it did was strike fear into me. Her lips were upturned, but her eyes weren't smiling. They were the eyes of a predator.

More importantly, was this really how you were supposed to act when you asked for a favor in this world?! *You have got to be kidding me!*

“Magic is all I need, mew ☆”

Stop messing with me! This is honestly worse than how she was before. Come on, just look at her face.

Her cheeks burned bright red, and her expression said*, If the circumstances were any different, I’d punch you so hard you’d fly from the depths of hell all the way to heaven.* She looked eight parts angry, two parts humiliated, and zero parts bashful. There was nothing cute about her, nothing at all.

C-come on, Sauros, let her have it, I begged mentally.

“O-ooh~ Our Eri is so cute. Rudeus, of course you’re going to teach her, right?”

He’d suddenly turned into a fond old man. *Who the hell are you?!* I thought. *Where did my strict and reliable great uncle go?!*

“The Master has a great fondness for beastfolk. He also had the final say when Lady Ghislaine was employed,” the butler explained politely.

Ah, now I understood. So those twin tails were supposed to be animal ears. They did look like drooping ears. Come to think of it, most of the maids were beasts as well.

Yeah, sure, now I get it. Yeah… My inner monologue trailed off.

“Eris.” Her father stepped in.

Oh yeah, I forgot he was here, I thought. *Okay, Mister Philip, it’s your time to shine, tell her off!*

“Stick your hips out a bit more to look more appealing.”

Great, this one is hopeless too.

Okay then. Now I understood. Now I understood what type of people the Greyrats were, Paul included. In fact, Paul was maybe a bit more normal than this lot.

“Um, Lord…Sauros. Could I ask you just one thing…?”

“Speak!”

“D-do men also ask for favors like that?”

“Fool! A man should ask like a man!”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I did understand the reprimand. Well, I was right. Compared to this lot, Paul’s proclivities were almost normal. He just liked women with big breasts.

Okay, calm down, I told myself. *Let’s just think about this. Is this a pass or a fail?*

I was being stared at. I composed myself and looked at Eris. Angry and humiliated, she looked on the verge of losing control. Like a lion with its teeth clamped around one of the iron bars of its cage.

Well, maybe I should just forget about what comes afterward and accept this.

No, I needed to think about it. I needed to anticipate the possible consequences.

That’s right, she doesn’t like this, I realized. *She’s against this weird custom they have going on!* If I ever requested she personally ask for a favor when it was just the two of us, she might rip me to shreds!

Okay, I changed my mind. I need to stop this weird custom of theirs.

“Is that the kind of attitude you have when asking someone for a favor?!” My voice was so loud it echoed throughout the manor.

I spent hours after that giving her a great, long speech. My passion seemed to get through, because after this the Boreas style of asking for favors was abandoned. Ghislaine praised my efforts once it was over, but Eris just glared coldly at me.

Chapter 3: Her Ferocity, Unabated

It had been a month since I became Eris's tutor.

From the moment I began giving her lessons, she wouldn't listen to me. As soon as it was time for reading, writing, and arithmetic she would vanish. She wouldn't show her face again until it was time for sword practice.

There were exceptions of course. Magic class was the only one she faithfully paid attention in. The first time she produced a Fireball, she was happy and enthusiastic. She watched as her fire roared, engulfing the curtain, and said, "Someday, I'm going to make fireworks in the sky just like you did." Of course, I immediately put the flames out and warned her not to use fire magic when I wasn't around.

Eris beamed at the half-burned curtain, satisfied with herself. She looked like a pyromaniac, but at least she was motivated. I felt assured that she could get through the rest of her curriculum.

…Or so I thought. I later realized my prediction was way off base. Eris refused to listen during reading, writing, and arithmetic lessons. If I tried to admonish her, she would just run away. When I tried to catch her, she would punch me and run off. If I caught up to her, she would come back only to punch me once more then run off again.

I thought she would understand the importance of arithmetic and literacy after we were kidnapped. She must have really hated those subjects.

When I went to Philip with my problem, he simply told me, "Making your student attend your lessons is also part of your job as a home tutor."

I didn't disagree. Ghislaine attended my lessons and took them seriously, but she was just an extra. I couldn't teach her alone. So I had to search for Eris.

Eris wasn't so easy to find. She had lived here her entire life, while I had only been here a month. There was a huge difference in our familiarity with the terrain, and that went for this hide-and-seek problem as well.

Apparently, other home tutors had struggled with the same issue. Sometimes they would eventually find her, since she might have a wide area to hide in, but it was still limited to the manor. Those that did find her, however, were beaten to a pulp. That was why her first tutor resigned.

One tutor tried to beat her up instead, fighting violence with violence. Eris stole into their room in the dead of night and attacked them with a wooden sword as they slept. Needless to say, they resigned after sustaining injuries that took months to fully recover from.

Ghislaine was the only one who had managed to beat Eris at her own game. I wasn't confident I could do the same. If finding her meant I was going to be sent to the hospital, I didn't want to. I wasn't keen on the idea of discovering her only to be left battered and bruised afterward.

If magic were the only thing she was interested in, why not give up on the other lessons and just focus on that? But Philip insisted that I teach her reading, writing, and arithmetic as well. *Teach her as much of those as you teach her magic,* he'd said.

"Actually, those are more important than magic," he told me.

I agreed.

Maybe I needed to have her kidnapped one more time. Children that didn't learn needed to be punished.

Just as I thought that, I finally found her.

She was in the stables, hidden in a bundle of straw with her belly exposed, resting peacefully.

“Zzz…zzz…”

“She was sound asleep. Her unconscious face was almost like that of an angel. No, I couldn’t be deceived by appearances. She was the devil incarnate. And of course by devil incarnate, I meant the kind that would punch you until you vomited blood.

Even so, I needed to wake her up.

For the moment, I decided to pull down her shirt to cover her stomach, so she wouldn’t catch a cold. Then I started fondling her chest while my inner Wise Old Sage evaluated them.

“Hmm, still an AA cup. But I sense great potential for growth. As you age, you may yet achieve E cup, or even larger. I shall massage you daily to check your progress.This is also part of your training. Hohoho.”

Thank you, Wise Old Sage!

After I had my fill, I called out to her in a quiet voice. “Young Miss, wake up please. Miss Eris, it’s arithmetic funtime!”


HO
HO
HO

She wasn't waking up. I had no other choice.

Don't blame me if your panties get taken. It's your fault for being a bad girl, I thought.

But just as I tried to quietly slip my hands inside her long, loose skirt…

"…!" Eris's eyes snapped open. Her gaze moved from her legs,where my hands were, gradually up to my face. "Grrr!"

She no longer looked half-asleep.Instead, her teeth were grinding together and her face darkened with anger.

H-here it comes, I realized a moment too late. Her clenched fist came flying at me. *My face!* I hurriedly crossed my arms in front of me for protection.

"Agh!" The impact hit my stomach instead. Her fist struck deep. I swooned in agony, my knees buckling beneath me.

Well, I didn't vomit blood, but I did get punched.

"Hmph!" She sniffed once at me, then kicked me. Once she was done, she stepped over my collapsed form and walked right out of the stable.

***

There was nothing I could do. I finally went to Ghislaine for help. The woman who, according to Paul, had muscles for brains. If she talked about why she wanted to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, surely it would resonate with Eris. The girl was sure to listen to whatever Ghislaine had to say.

Or so I naively thought.

At first, Ghislaine told me to figure it out on my own, but when I used water magic to fake tears, she reluctantly agreed. Too easy.

Okay, now show me what you've got, I thought.

Ghislaine and I didn't work on a plan; I just left it up to her. She chose to start during the break period of our magic lesson.

"A long time ago, I thought I was fine as long as I had a sword… "

Unbidden, she began telling Eris about her past. About how her Master accepted her even though she was a bad kid… About her first friends when she became an adventurer…

The lengthy preamble turned out to be a simple story about her and her own personal struggles.

"When I was an adventurer the others did everything for me. The buying and selling of arms and armor, food, supplies, and daily necessities. As well as reading contracts, maps, and signs. After we parted I learned the importance of many things: the weight of a filled canteen, the necessity of getting coals to build a fire, and the inconvenience of being unable to use your left hand when you're carrying a torch."

Her party had disbanded seven years ago. They were forced to do so after Paul and Zenith got married and isolated themselves by moving out to the countryside. I had guessed as much; it seemed Paul and Ghislaine really had been in a party together.

"Those of us who remained talked about staying together, but Paul, our hit-and-run-attacker, and Zenith, our group's only healer, had left. Even if we didn't disband then, we would have eventually. It was obvious."

A six-person party.

A warrior, a swordsman, a swordswoman, a magician, a priest, and a thief. That was probably the makeup of their group if I broke it down by occupation. Even though Ghislaine was only a Holy-tier

swordswoman at the time, her attack strength would have been pretty high.

Warrior (Unknown Person): Tank

Swordsman (Paul): Secondary tank and DPS

Swordswoman (Ghislaine): DPS

Magician (Unknown Person): DPS

Priest (Zenith): Healer

They sounded like a balanced group.

It seemed like "thief" was a general term for someone who did odd jobs, from picking locks, spotting traps, and constructing a tent, to making deals with merchants. It was a position reserved for someone who could read well, had a sharp mind, and was agile. Most came from merchant families.

"You could at least call them treasure hunters or something," I said without thinking.

Ghislaine's nostrils flared. "*Thief* is fitting for someone who always swiped our money and gambled it away."

"Didn't you guys gang up on them when you found out?"

"Nope. They were skilled at gambling, so most of the time they came back with more than they took. They rarely came back with less than half. And they restrained themselves when we didn't have much coin."

Or so she said. Still, no matter how much profit they managed make from their gambling, why did everyone let them get away with it? I struggled to comprehend. Not to brag, but gambling was at least one thing I never touched. Although I *did* spend over 100,000 yen on online games…

Then again, they had a womanizer like Paul in their party, so they probably weren't that concerned about the morality of their members. Everyone drew the line somewhere. There were as many rules as there were people.

"What exactly is the difference between a warrior and a swordsman?" I asked curiously. If both professions were part of the vanguard, there didn't seem to be a reason to distinguish between them.

"If you use a sword and one of the three primary styles, then you are a swordsman. If you use a different style but still use a sword, you are a warrior. If you use one of the styles but don't use a sword, then you're also a warrior."

"Ooh, so that means swordsman is a special title."

More accurately, it was the three primary sword styles that made their skills special. The technique Ghislaine used when she defeated our kidnappers was quite amazing. I didn't even catch her unsheathing her sword. She barely moved and their heads just fell off. I found out afterward that the technique was called *Sword of Light*, a secret technique of the Sword God Style.

"So what about a knight?"

"A knight is a knight. Knights are appointed by the King or liege lords. They are educated in reading and arithmetic. Some among them can even use simple magic. Since many of them are nobles, they're also full of pride."

They were probably so educated because they attended school.

"Back then, my father wasn't a knight yet, was he?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but he called himself a swordsman at the time."

"How about magic knights or magic warriors? I heard those exist too."

“There are some people who use offensive magic who call themselves that. You are free to call yourself what you want, no matter your profession.”

“Aha.”

Eris’s eyes lit up as she listened to the conversation. I hoped she wasn’t about to decide to drag either Ghislaine or me out to the closest labyrinth. It made me anxious. That wasn’t the kind of adventure I wanted. Spending each day surrounded by beautiful women? Now that was more like it.

Ah, crap. I was supposed to have Ghislaine talk about the importance of learning to read and write, not this, I lamented internally. *I screwed up.*

There was one small mercy.

The following day Eris attended all her lessons: reading, writing, and arithmetic. It was all thanks to Ghislaine. After that, any time something happened, Ghislaine would begin recounting her struggles as an adventurer. I got a stomachache each time it happened, but thanks to that, Eris finally understood the importance of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Or maybe her main reason for attending was because she found Ghislaine’s stories so interesting. Either way, a good result for me.

Part of me wished I had thought of doing this at the beginning…but of course, if we hadn’t been kidnapped, she probably would have never listened to me in the first place. Back then, she’d looked at me like I was a worm. So my plan wasn’t pointless.

In any case, things had turned out well.

***

Our first lessons involved teaching Eris the four basic arithmetic operations. Since she had attended school and previously been instructed by tutors, she already knew how to do simple addition.

“Rudeus!” My pupil energetically thrust her hand into the air.

“Yes, Eris?”

“Why is division necessary?”

She didn’t understand the importance of multiplication and division. On top of that, she was terrible at subtraction. If anything went above single digits, she’d give up.

“Rather than worry about the necessity, just think of it as doing the opposite of multiplication,” I explained.

“I’m asking when I am ever going to use this!”

“Okay, so for example, say you have a hundred silver coins and you have to split them evenly across five people.”

“My last tutor said the same thing!” She slammed her fist against the table. “So why! Do I have to! Split it evenly!” She was quibbling like a defiant child.

To be honest, there was no necessity for it. “Who knows? That’s something you would have to ask those five people. It’s just that if you want to split it evenly, it’s more convenient if you know how to use division.”

“More convenient? So that means I don’t really need to use it, right?!”

“If you don’t want to use it, then no, you don’t have to. Although there is a big difference between *not* using something and being *unable* to use something.”

“Ugh…” Asking whether they could do something or not was a good way of shutting up someone with as much pride as Eris, though it did little to solve the root of the problem. She was trying to argue that she didn’t need to learn arithmetic.

In times like these, it was best to look for Ghislaine for help.

“Ghislaine, have you ever had any problems that related to dividing things evenly?”

“Yes. I once lost my food supplies in a labyrinth, so I tried to retrace my way back. But I messed up when I tried to ration my food to last me until I made it out. I went three days without eating or drinking. I thought I was going to die. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I ate some demon feces that I found on the ground, but it tore up my insides. I managed to make it through the stomach pain, nausea, and diarrhea, but then I noticed a cluster of…”

The story went on for almost five minutes, making me sick to my stomach. I listened with a sickly tinge to my face. But to Eris, it was a heroic tale. Her eyes were lit up the whole time.

“And that’s why I want to learn division. Continue the lesson.”

As soon as Ghislaine said that, Eris ceased her quibbling.

The whole Greyrat family seemed to have an affinity for beastpeople, although maybe not as much as Sauros. Eris was clearly attached to Ghislaine. She would always listen quietly when Ghislaine began one of her tales. It was like a little brother clinging to his older sister, eager to imitate her.

“Okay then, let’s do some more boring practice reps today. Bring me these problems once you have them all solved. If there’s anything you don’t understand, ask me.”

With that, things gradually progressed.

***

Ghislaine made for an excellent teacher. She pointed out each of my faults in explicit detail and gave me advice. Paul would tell you

which parts you had messed up on, but he wouldn't tell you how to improve.

Today she gave both Eris and I a sword and made us practice fighting while giving us guidance.

"Remember your attack stance, watch your opponent closely."

Eris repelled my wooden sword with a dull *thunk*.

"If you can move faster than your opponent, then read their movements and aim your sword. If you're slower than they are, then shift your body to avoid the trajectory of their blade."

Unable to do either, I took a hard smack from Eris's sword. The impact was strong enough I felt it through the cotton padding of my tanned leather protector.

"Watch the tips of your opponent's toes and predict their movement!"

I took another blow.

"Rudeus! Stop using your head! Just focus on moving in before your opponent and swinging your sword!"

But focusing requires using my head, so which is it?!

"Eris! Don't stop your attacks! Your opponent hasn't surrendered yet!"

"Yes!"

The difference between us was obvious. Eris had the freedom to respond to Ghislaine where I didn't. That freedom also allowed her to keep smacking me until Ghislaine finally told her to stop. She held nothing back, as though she were releasing all the pent-up anger she felt during our arithmetic lessons.

Dammit.

Within a month, however, I saw a dramatic improvement. I was glad to have a partner like Eris, who had similar abilities as me. Just like in any other field, being around someone of equal skill spurred your own growth.

Though Eris was really a little better than me. But it was nothing like the gap between me and Paul or Ghislaine. At least she was still at a level where I knew what she was doing. If I could understand it, I could learn from it. Like if she beat me using a certain technique, I would become more cautious so it wouldn't happen again. That sort of thinking was possible when you were on even footing with your opponent.

Paul, on the other hand, was so skilled that it was impossible to counter him. If you couldn't understand what your opponent was doing, then they would beat you before you had a clue what was happening.

Even receiving guidance from someone more skilled could be difficult because of the fundamental difference in their abilities versus yours. It would just make you doubt what you were doing.

Ghislaine was good at teaching, so she was a different story. However, she would also teach you how to respond to attacks and counter them at the same time, so when you found yourself on the receiving end of one, you would end up hesitating because you were anticipating how to counter.

With Eris as an opponent, however, small tricks or the slightest change in movement brought about an entirely different result. Sometimes something that worked the day before wouldn't work the following day, or Eris would do something completely different. Sometimes the things I couldn't do yesterday I could do today, and the same went for my opponent. Because there was almost no gap in our abilities, it worked out. It was those little changes and discoveries that accumulated and fostered growth.

It was good having a rival. Sometimes she got ahead of me, and sometimes I surpassed her. Even if our progress came little by little, we took turns getting ahead of one another, and by the end there were huge improvements. Before we knew it, that progress built up, and we became much stronger.

Still, Eris learned quicker than I did. Even if a lion and a deer trained the same way, it was obvious the lion would become stronger. That was a bitter pill to swallow since I had been training with Paul since I was little.

"Rudeus has a long way to go, huh?!" Eris crossed her arms and looked down at me, collapsed on the ground.

Ghislaine scolded her. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Eris. You have been holding a sword for longer than he has, and you're older." Ghislaine only dropped the "Miss" when we were practicing the sword. She said it was necessary.

"I know that! Besides, he has magic!"

"That's right."

My magic abilities were the only thing she gave me credit for.

"Though it *is* strange that he only slows down when he's being attacked," Ghislaine noted.

"That's because it's scary facing an opponent who's attacking you for real."

As soon as I said that, Eris bonked me on the head. "What the heck was that?! How pathetic! That's why people look down on you!"

"No, he's simply a magician. And that's fine."

As soon as Ghislaine said that, Eris nodded arrogantly. "Oh really? Then I guess I can't blame him!"

So why did I get punched again?

“Sorry, but I don’t know how to fix your cowering. You’ll have to do it yourself,” Ghislaine said.

“Okay.” Right now, it didn’t matter who my opponent was; I just froze up. I had a long road ahead still. “But I do at least feel like I have gotten a lot stronger since you started teaching me.”

“That’s because Paul is the instinctive type. Doesn’t make for a good teacher.”

The instinctive type! Ah, I guess there were those types in this world too.

“What’s that, ‘instinctive type’?” Eris asked.

“The type of person who can just do things without being able to explain how they learned to do it.”

She pouted when I explained, probably because she was the same type of person. “Is there something wrong with that?” Eris asked.

I wasn’t sure how to answer. Since we were in the middle of a lesson, I decided to let Ghislaine pick up the slack. I directed my gaze at her.

“There isn’t. But it doesn’t matter how much talent you have. You won’t get stronger if you don’t use your head, and you won’t be able to teach people well either.”

“Why won’t you be able to teach people well?”

“Because you don’t even understand what you’re doing. Besides, if you can’t understand the entirety of it, then you won’t be able to improve.”

It seemed, to a Sword King like Ghislaine, that the key to reaching an advanced skill level was being able to apply the basics in practice. If you mastered the essentials, you would be able to use them in any given situation. Only then would you be considered a Holy-tier swordsman.

But more important were diligent work and talent.

Of course, in the end, it all comes down to talent, I thought.

"I used to be the instinctive type as well, but once I started using my head and thinking logically, I became King-tier," Ghislaine said.

"That's amazing." I was honestly impressed. She changed her ways so she could succeed. That was incredible.

"You're a Saint-tier water magician yourself, Rudeus."

"I'm the instinctive type as well. But magic is different from swordplay. You can do anything as long as you have enough magical power," I said.

"Hm. If you say so… But either way, the basics are important, you understand?" Ghislaine pressed on.

"I understand. In this case, however, it was because my teacher was so good at what she did that I achieved Saint-tier."

But now that we were talking about the importance of the basics, I had focused purely on performing magic without chanting spells. What did it mean to lack in the basics of magic? Roxy's lessons had focused less on mastering the basics than on progression. Maybe she, being a prodigy herself, didn't worry as much about the foundations.

Hmm.

"Well I'm not worried about becoming *that* strong, so it has nothing to do with me!" Eris proudly declared as I was lost in thought.

I smiled wryly at her words. As a junior high student in my previous life, I'd said something similar. "It's not like I'm trying to be number one," I would say, excusing my lack of effort.

I was about to reprimand her for her attitude, but she continued. "But I will do my best to be as good as the two of you!"

So much for that. She had a goal. She was different from my past self.

***

We had free time after our morning lessons and afternoon sword practice. Today, I was headed toward the library. Ghislaine and Eris both possessed magical textbooks, so I thought there might be a grimoire there. I had a maid with dog ears guide me, since I didn't know the way.

"Ah!"

We passed by Hilda, Philip's wife. She had the same deep crimson hair as Eris, with an ample bosom. I expected Eris would take after her as she grew older. I had been introduced to her, but the two of us had little contact. *Uh, let's see, I think I'm supposed to put one hand on my chest…*

"My lady, it seems today is my lucky…"

"Tch," she clicked her tongue at me and ignored my greeting.

I stood there frozen, my hand still pressed to my chest.

"Lord Rudeus…"

"No, it's fine," I said, raising a hand to cut off the maid's attempt to soothe me. It was a bit of a shock though. Did she hate me? I didn't think I had done anything wrong.

Come to think of it, she didn't have any other children besides Eris, did she? No, let's not ask that question. If I did, I felt like someone even worse than Eris would appear and increase my workload three- or fourfold. That was a possibility best left unconsidered.

When I arrived at the library, Philip was there.

“Oh, you’re interested in the library, are you?” Philip had an excited twinkle in his eye.

Excited about what? I wondered.

“Yes, a bit.”

“Then you should take your time looking around.”

I took him up on that and perused the library. Unfortunately, I didn’t find what I was looking for. I was hoping to get a grimoire like Roxy had, but all I found were expensive volumes that couldn’t be taken out of the library. It seemed there were only a limited amount of grimoires in the world, and people didn’t leave them lying around.

Guess I couldn’t be so lucky. In the end I got some books about the history of this world. I could at least study those when I was free.

***

At the end of each day, I spent time in my room preparing for the next day’s lessons. Most of that entailed creating practice sheets for reading, writing, and arithmetic. Finally, I would review my magical textbook.

There was no class curriculum. I kept the pace easy so I wouldn’t run out of things to teach over five years. My main principle was repetitive practice to make sure Eris and Ghislaine fully understood the material. I did the same thing when I taught Sylphie.

Reviewing magic was important too. I didn’t normally chant spells to perform magic, so I would often forget the words. The only spells I had truly memorized were those for healing and basic poison magic. I never thought to bother memorizing offensive spells.

This magic textbook was the same one I had back home. Eris and Ghislaine also had their own copies. It was first published almost a

thousand years ago and was a bestseller with numerous reprints. Before it existed, you had to find a master to teach you magic. Most of them only knew the basics of each school, so many people became students only to learn next to nothing.

Though the book was now considered a bestseller, there weren't very many copies made at the time it was written. Even with enough copies for it to circulate well, those without an interest in magic would have simply ignored it. It wasn't until 500 years later that it finally started being distributed en masse.

Suddenly, anyone could get their hands on a magical textbook cheaply, so the number of magicians increased greatly. It wasn't as though the world suddenly boomed with magicians, but in the Kingdom of Asura at least, magic became a part of the curriculum for many noble families.

Still, why did the number of magical textbooks suddenly increase? As I wondered, I looked at the back of the book. Printed there was the line: *Published by Ranoa University of Magic*. Aha, what a clever marketing scheme.

In this way, my days as a tutor passed in the blink of an eye.

***

NAME: Eris B. Greyrat

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa's liege lord

PERSONALITY: Fierce

DOESN'T: Mind listening to what people have to say

READING/WRITING: Can write the names of her family members

ARITHMETIC: Subtraction skills are unreliable

MAGIC: Figures she'll try her best at it

FENCING: Sword God Style – Beginner-tier

ETIQUETTE: Can do a normal greeting

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine

Chapter 4: Staff Meeting and Sunday

Half a year passed. Eris, who I thought had finally cooled down, began returning to her violent ways.

Why, how, who did this?! I panicked, until I realized something. She had been given no breaks.

***

It was after dinner when I called Ghislaine and the etiquette teacher to my room. The etiquette teacher didn't actually live with us; she lived in the city, so I had a butler send a message to her.

"First, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Rudeus Greyrat," I said.

"Edna Leylune. I teach Lady Eris about proper etiquette."

I touched my hand to my chest and gave a light nod. She responded in kind, her movements more polished. Unsurprising, coming from an etiquette teacher.

Edna had the face of a middle-aged woman whose wrinkles were just beginning to show. Her features were soft, and she had a kind smile that emanated warmth.

"Please, have a seat," I said, motioning to nearby chairs. Once they settled in, I offered them tea that I had the butler prepare. "The reason I called you here today is to talk about Eris's lesson schedule."

"Lesson schedule?" Edna asked.

"That's right. I hear that she currently has sword practice in the morning, free time in the afternoon, and etiquette in the evening. Is that correct?"

"Indeed."

Eris was currently learning six subjects. Reading and writing, arithmetic, magic, history, swordplay, and etiquette.

In modern terms that would be language, math, home economics, social studies, physical education, and well, etiquette. There were no clocks, so lessons stretched on, separated only by meals and snack time. The subjects were split over three time periods, like this:

Breakfast → Studying → Lunch → Studying → Snack time → Studying → Dinner → Free time

There was no history instructor, so Philip apparently taught her in his free time.

“Since I came on, she began having evening lessons as well, so her entire day has been filled up,” I said.

That’s right,” Edna responded. “Her studies have been progressing smoothly. The Master is quite impressed.”

No doubt he was.

“It may look like it’s going smoothly, but there’s a problem here.”

Edna looked confused. “A problem, you say?”

“Yes. Her stress has been building since she studies every day without any breaks.” Remarkably so during arithmetic lessons. She was irritable the entire time. If she ran into difficult problems, she would take it out on me. It was dangerous. There was no telling when she might come after me for real. It was *very* dangerous.

“We manage to get through it for now, but she might eventually snap and run from her lessons again.”

“Oh dear…” Edna pressed her hand to her lips. Her expression said that she acknowledged that possibility. I had never seen one of

her etiquette lessons before, but Eris seemed to take them seriously. It was a mystery to me why Eris seemed to like her.

I continued. “So I would like to give her a day free of lessons every seven days.”

They had a calendar in this world, so they had a concept of what month and what day it was. They did not, however, have the concept of a week. There were rest days allotted throughout the year, but there was no such thing as a Sunday.

Seven. I used the number because I could remember it easily. Plus, it seemed that number was special in this world as well. It was said to be a good omen, which was why there were also seven tiers in swordplay.

“In the remaining six days, we’ll continue teaching her reading and writing, arithmetic, magic, history, swordplay and etiquette.”

Edna raised her voice. “May I ask one thing?”

“Please do.”

“If things are divided that way, then my lessons would be reduced. So then would my salary also…”

I cut her off before she could finish. “You don’t have to worry about that.” I couldn’t blame her for being concerned about money, and I hoped no one else would either. After all, I was in this for the money as well. Anyway, I had already spoken to Philip and it wasn’t a problem. We had monthly salaries, so we’d get paid regardless of whether we gave lessons or not.

Granted, we’d be fired if we didn’t. That part should go without saying. If you didn’t understand something that simple, you deserved to be fired.

“Of course, with that in mind we will divide things differently. There should be no problem having just two lessons on reading, writing, and arithmetic in a seven-day period. Sword practice will

remain a daily affair, as there is no point otherwise. Magic must be practiced daily as well, but there is a limit to how much mana a person has, so each lesson won't take too long. I intend to dedicate any extra time that leaves to reading, writing, and arithmetic."

That last bit we had been doing from the beginning. Such as, "Today you've used Water Bullet X amount of times and Water Splash Y amount. So how many more times can you use Water Bullet today?" I changed the values of X and Y in keeping with the number of times Eris and Ghislaine could perform those spells respectively. Apparently, this was easier for Eris than sitting in a room staring at the digits on paper.

It was difficult to find a precise answer because mana usage wasn't something tangible, even to the practitioner. The important part was performing mental arithmetic, because the more they did it, the better they would get. The whole point was for them to use their heads.

I wanted to do lessons on voiceless casting and home economics eventually, but that could wait until they had finished reading, writing, and arithmetic.

"My apologies in advance, Miss Edna, but I would like to reduce your lessons with Eris to three or four times a month."

"All right." She nodded quickly.

Six days, eighteen periods. I split them thus: etiquette – five periods; swordplay – six periods; reading and writing – two periods; arithmetic – two periods; and magic – three periods. Lesson periods were a bit short for my taste, but most of it was repetition, so it should be fine.

"Also," I added, "at any point you can't teach a lesson, I would like you to contact me."

"To what end?" Edna asked.

“I’m always here at the manor, so I can fit my lessons into your time slot. If you need an extended period off, there’ll be no problem.”

“All right then.” Edna smiled the entire time. Did she really understand?

“Also, I would like to have these meetings every first of the month,” I said.

“And why is that?”

“If we work together, we can come up with a quick response to any issues that may occur. It’s not strictly necessary, but it will make our teaching more effective and help us deal with emergencies. Do you have any issues with it?”

“No.” Edna smiled softly. “You are still so young, Lord Rudeus, yet you are so considerate to Miss Eris.” Her eyes shone as though she had seen something particularly endearing.

Well, whatever.

That was how I managed to get myself a day off.

***

Finally, my first day off arrived.

After greeting Philip briefly, I decided to head into the city. But I found Ghislaine and Eris lying in wait for me at the exit.

“Where do you think you’re going?!” Eris seemed restless, perhaps because it was her first day off. Her first ever day with an empty schedule. No wonder she was curious what my plans were for the day.

“I’m going sightseeing around Roa,” I said, striking a pose.

“Sightseeing… So you’re going to go see the city? By yourself?”

“Do I look like I have someone else with me?”

“That’s not fair! I haven’t ever been able to go out by myself, not even once!” She stomped her feet in frustration.

“Isn’t that because you’ll get kidnapped if you go out on your own?”

“Well, *you* got kidnapped too,” she snapped back.

Ah, she was right. I was kidnapped because I had been accompanying Eris, but it was also true that I was seen as a part of the Greyrat family. It was possible someone might try it again to demand a ransom for me.

“But if I get kidnapped, I can get back home on my own.” I cackled in triumph, only for her to raise her fist like she was going to hit me. I quickly moved to protect myself, but the punch never came. That was unusual.

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. “I’m going too!”

She would usually make such a declaration only after hitting me, but apparently, she decided not to use violence this time. That meant she had matured some. A small, almost insignificant amount, but at least there was some progress.

“All right, then let’s go!”

“Really?!”

Of course, I had no reason to refuse her. Plus, safety in numbers and all that. “Ghislaine’s coming too, right?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s my duty to protect the Young Mistress.”

Even during our meeting, Ghislaine didn’t seem to understand the concept of having a day off. I suggested she just stick to Eris like she always did. She was originally hired to be a bodyguard, after all, so there should be no problems with that.

“Wait! I’ll be ready in just a sec! Alphonse! Alphonse!!!” I watched as Eris ran off, dashing noisily through the manor. Her voice was just as loud as ever.

“Rudeus,” Ghislaine said.

I turned my head and she was right there beside me. I had to crane my neck to look up at her. She was almost two meters tall, so even as a full-grown adult I would probably still be looking up at her.

“Don’t overestimate your abilities,” she warned. This was probably about me saying I could escape getting kidnapped on my own.

“I know. I was just trying to motivate her a little.”

“All right, but if something happens, call me. I’ll help you.”

“Yeah. If I need something, I’ll give you a big firework show again.” Talking about it stirred a memory. “Did you tell the Young Mistress to do the same thing? Call for you?”

“Mm? I did, what of it?”

“Next time, you might want to clarify that she should only do it when she’s somewhere you can hear her,” I said.

“Okay, but why?”

“Because when we got kidnapped, she almost got killed because she kept screaming for you.”

“If I had heard her, I would have rescued her.”

Hmm. Well, she had been ridiculously fast when she came to save us. She was there within a minute of me shooting off those fireworks.

So long as we were in earshot, I was sure she would come, no matter where that was. Her hearing seemed pretty good too. After all, it was Ghislaine who Eris called out to, not Philip or Sauros. She was reliable.

“You need to teach her that there are times when you can’t scream.”

Eris returned and the conversation ended there. I wasn’t sure if she was dressing up to go out or not, but she was wearing an outfit I had never seen before.

“You look lovely today.”

“Hmph!” She punched me in the head when I complimented her. What the hell was that about?

***

The Fittoa region’s Citadel of Roa was one of the biggest cities in the area, but “big” was a relative term. It was still smaller than the expanse of countryside that made up Buena Village. If you walked the perimeter of the outer wall, you could probably circle the entire thing in two hours. Still, it was of considerable size for a city. The walls themselves were about seven to eight meters tall and wrapped around the entirety of Roa.

That said, the city wasn’t a perfect circle. It bent with the terrain, so I wasn’t sure of its exact dimensions, but it probably covered about thirty square meters. Not that big from a Japanese person’s perspective, yet I could tell creating walls this size was no simple feat.

There had to be some sort of magic to build walls like this. Probably King-tier or Imperial-tier. Or perhaps they made a broad outline with stone and filled in the rest with manual labor?

I considered all this as we made our way through the upper-class residential area and into the crowded plaza. From here, we were headed to the mercantile district. All the shops near the noble

district were posh, and even the street stalls here and there were peddling expensive wares.

"Hey, Young Master and Miss, take your time and look around." An old man running a shop selling second-hand wares called out to us, using a line lifted straight out of an RPG.

I peered at what he had on display, taking notes on the products and their prices. Frankly, he was selling some rather questionable things. *Who would even buy this stuff?* I thought. *Wait, an aphrodisiac is ten gold coins. Gotta write this down.*

"What are these weird letters?! I can't read them!" My eardrums rang as Eris's voice blasted them.

I turned and found her face awfully close to mine. She had been reading over my shoulder. Up close, I realized how cute she was. Her features were very evenly set.

My memo, by the way, was written in Japanese.

"Tell me what you're writing down!"

She was being overbearing, but I had no reason not to tell her. "I'm writing down the product names and prices."

"And what are you going to do with that information?!"

"Comparing market prices is one of the fundamentals of online games," I replied.

"Online… What the heck?"

She wouldn't be able to understand even if I explained, so I instead pointed to one of the wares on display. It was a small accessory. "Okay, look at that. The last stall was selling that piece for five gold coins. This place is selling it for four gold coins and five silver ones."

The owner chimed in, "Oh, Young Master, you have a good eye! Our stuff is cheap, yeah!"

I ignored the old man and turned back to Eris. “So, if you talked down this shop into selling this to you for three coins and took it back to that other shop and sold it for four, how much would you make?”

“Huh! Uh, five minus three plus four… Six gold coins!”

What the heck kind of math was that?

“Bzzt, incorrect. The correct answer is one gold coin.”

“Y-yeah, I knew that!” She turned away with a pout on her lips.

“Really?”

“S-so if you had ten gold coins from the start, now you would have eleven, right?”

Oh, hey! She actually did it for once! Wait…no, she just added more in there. Oh well. It was better to just praise and encourage her, especially with how much pride she had. “Oh, this time you’re correct! Wow, very smart, Eris.”

“Hmph, as if there were ever any doubt.”

The old man listened in our conversation with a bitter look on his face. “Young Master, that’s called reselling. Not somethin’ people look too kindly upon, so you’d better not try it.”

“Of course. If I were looking to make money, I would go to that other store and tell them you’re selling for four gold pieces. That kind of information should be enough to net me one large copper, right?”

His expression soured. He looked behind us to Ghislaine for help, but she was listening in with interest. The old man slumped and sighed as if he realized that anything he said would be pointless.

Sorry, I apologized, but only in my head. I hoped he wouldn’t linger on it too much. I was only teasing.

“Anyway,” I said, “even if you don’t plan to buy anything, it’s still important to know the prices of things.”

“And what are you going to with that knowledge?!”

“For example, you can calculate how much you will spend without even going to a shop.”

“And how is that supposed to be useful!”

How is that supposed to be… Well, if you’re going to resell it then you can figure out about how much… Wait.

No, in times like this, it was best just to leave things to Ghislaine. “Why do you think it would be useful, Ghislaine?”

“No idea.”

Wait, seriously? She didn’t know? I thought she would. Well, whatever. It wasn’t like this was a lesson anyways.

“All right then, maybe it’s not useful after all.” The information was for my own use anyway. It was fine if they didn’t understand. Whenever I was in a marketplace, the first thing I did was compare prices. That was how I always did things in online games, and there was no reason to change that now. This despite the fact that I’d never done it before in this life and didn’t know for sure if there were actually any value in it.

“If you don’t know if it’s useful or not, why do it!”

“Because I think it *will* be useful.”

Her face made it clear that she didn’t like my answer.

It’s not like I can answer every single question you have. Try to think for yourself a little bit.

“Give it some thought,” I said. “If you think it’s useful, then you should do it too. If you think it’s useless, then point and laugh.”

“Then I pick laugh!”

“Ahahaha.”

“And why the heck are *you* laughing!”

She punched me. *Sadface…*

***

We looped around the area and I finished taking inventory of all the stalls. I skipped the posher shops since I knew everything would be too expensive. Instead, we headed toward the outer part of the city. Just a short walk away the shop wares changed completely. The prices were dramatically lower too, down from five gold coins to one.

Still expensive. Not something I can afford, I thought.

There were more people here, ranging from nobles to adventurers based on their appearances. Even the shop owners seemed livelier as they hawked their wares. Perhaps because one gold coin was just on the high end of affordability.

A store caught my eye as I was taking notes; a bookstore, to be exact. I decided to wander inside.

It was deserted, like the general section of an adult bookstore. There were two bookcases, volumes of the same title lined up in twos and threes. Each book cost around one gold coin.

In the remaining space was a locked case with rows of books inside. These were about eight gold pieces a volume, the most expensive being ten gold pieces. The store's featured products, I assumed.

"Hmpf." The store owner took one look at me and yawned as though dismissing my potential as a customer. Their gaze turned suspicious as I began noting down all the titles I saw on their shelves. They were probably concerned I was trying to copy the contents of the books. I stepped away from the bookshelves, hoping it would send a message: *Don't worry! I'm not touching your books! I'm not going to copy anything!*

I glanced inside the locked case and noticed a book I had seen before. “Plant Dictionary, ten gold coins,” I read out loud.

It was the same book Zenith had given to me on my fifth birthday.

Expensive, I thought. If one gold coin was 10,000 yen, that meant this book was 70,000 yen! My mom must have gone really overboard to buy that.

“Hm.”

It seemed dictionaries really were expensive. I would have loved to read *Sig’s Summoning Magic*, but it was ten gold coins. On a salary of two silver coins a month, there was no way I could afford that.

The most expensive book was *Ceremonies of Asura’s Royal Palace’s Imperial Court*. Definitely didn’t need that.

“What are you looking at so eagerly?” It was Eris’s voice. She had apparently followed me inside at some point. She must have noticed me looking at the book titles without taking any notes.

“Oh, nothing, just thinking that there wasn’t much here of interest.”

“Oh, that’s right, I heard you like books, don’t you?” Eris asked.

“Who did you hear that from?”

“My father!”

Philip, huh? Well, I did ask him to show me his library after all.

“I-If you really want one that bad, I could buy it for you,” she offered.

“You say that so easily, but you don’t have any money, do you?”

“Grandfather will pay for it!”

That’s what I figured. She was just going to let him spoil her again. I needed to make her understand that money was a limited resource.

But I want that book… I really want that book, I thought.

"I don't need it."

"And why not!" She was pouting again. It was the expression she wore whenever she was in a bad mood. If that mood got any worse, her face would turn demonic and she would punch me. Right now, I was still safe, as she still had some reason left.

"That's not money you can use for whatever you want."

"What are you saying?" Her brows knitted. She was growing increasingly irritable because she didn't understand. I could almost see her anger bar as it filled up.

How best to explain this? Was there even any point in teaching the daughter of a noble family how to use money? Well, why not.

"Do you know how much I earn every month for teaching you?"

"About five gold pieces?"

"Two silver pieces," I said.

"That's too little!" she yelled.

The shop owner's face puckered in annoyance at the noise.

Sorry, I thought.

"No, that's fair pay considering I'm young and I don't have any qualifications." Besides, they were also going to foot the tuition for me to attend the University of Magic.

"B-but Ghislaine gets five gold coins! And you're teaching me a lot of things too!"

"But Ghislaine has qualifications, and she has the title of Sword King. She also doubles as your bodyguard. It makes sense that her pay would be higher." Plus, a part of her high pay was probably thanks to the Boreas Greyrat family's unsavory traditions. They seemed like they'd give preferential treatment to female beastfolk.

"Th-then what about me?"

“You can’t do magic or swordplay, you have no qualifications, so no matter how inflated your pay was, one gold coin would be the limit.” More to the point, she wasn’t given any spending money in the first place.

“Grr…”

“If you want to buy something for someone, please do it once you have earned the money to pay for it yourself.”

“Okay, I understand.” She wore a rare look of utter defeat on her face. This sort of lecture usually meant nothing to her.

“Well, I’ll see if I can talk Philip into at least giving you some money to spend when we get back.”

“Really?!” Her head jerked up. I could almost feel her affection meter rising.

Well, buying her whatever she wanted without letting her handle the money was just spoiling her. It was better for them to give her a little money and let her learn how to use it.

I noted down the name of that book that caught my eye and we left the store. After today, I had a good understanding of what I wanted to buy and how much things cost.

***

The sky was a beautiful mix of red and orange as we headed back home. It seemed the sunset didn’t change, no matter what world I was in. Just as I thought that, I looked up, only to see a floating castle. It hung among the clouds, faint but present.

“Whoa!” Surprised, I pointed upward. Those around me briefly peered up, only to immediately lose interest.

Huh? Couldn't they see it? Was it just me? Was I the only one who could see Laputa, the Castle in the Sky?

Was my dad a liar?

"Is it your first time seeing it? That's the Armored Dragon King Perugius's floating fortress," Ghislaine explained.

Little late with the information but better late than never, Ryuk…I mean, Ghislaine!

Anyway, a floating fortress, huh? That's pretty awesome.

"And Perugius is…?"

"You know that, don't you?"

I felt like I had heard the name before, but I couldn't remember. "Who is he again?"

Ghislaine looked slightly surprised as she tried finding the words to explain. But Eris didn't give her the opportunity. She darted in front of me and crossed her arms over her chest, legs a hip's width apart. "Allow me to teach you!"

"Please, do teach me."

"Very well!" She puffed up with pride. "Perugius is one of the three legendary heroes who defeated the Demon God Laplace!"

The Demon God Laplace. Now where had I heard that name before…?

"He's incredibly strong. He took command of twelve men, and with his floating fortress marched into Laplace's stronghold!"

"Oh yeah? That's amazing," I said.

"Isn't it?!"

"You're quite knowledgeable about this, Young Mistress. Thank you."

"Eheheh," she cackled. "You still have a long way to go, Rudeus!"

I knew better than to question her and get myself punched again.

Instead, I looked it up after we got back to the manor. When I asked Philip about it, he said they had a book on the subject lying around somewhere. Before I could ask him for it, he had already directed a butler to retrieve the volume for me.

I was sorry for making him go through all that trouble, because the book was one I had seen at my house back in Buena Village: *The Legend of Perugius*. I had passed it off as nothing more than a fairy tale, but it seemed it was historical fact.

Its contents could be summarized as thus:

The Armored Dragon King Perugius. No one knew where he was born or raised. The oldest record of him came from his younger days before he was famous, when the Dragon God Urupen dragged him along to the Adventurer's Guild.

He showed such strength that in no time, the Dragon God Urupen, the North God Kalman, and the Twin Emperors Migus and Gumis formed a party with him. They crushed every opponent they faced.

Thanks in part to his brotherly bond with Urupen, Perugius was written into history as the Armored Dragon and as one of the five dragon commanders of the Dragon God.

He displayed the magnificence of his powers in the battle against Laplace. Perugius made use of his greatest strength, summoning magic, to call forth twelve familiars: Void, Dark, Bright, Surge, Life, Violent Earthquake, Time, Roaring Thunder, Destruction, Insight, Insanity, and Atonement. These were the aliases of the strongest familiars, the ones he manipulated. With them, Perugius restored the old floating fortress Chaos Breaker and headed into the final battle against Laplace.

Yet all that power was not enough to completely destroy the Demon God, forcing Perugius to settle for sealing him away instead.

Still, the strength and imposing appearance of Chaos Breaker in the sky was enough for people to call him the Armored Dragon King.

The Kingdom of Asura praised him for his achievements, and with the end of that war, proclaimed the start of a new era. This was the current era, the Armored Dragon Era. (Right now it was year 414 of the Armored Dragon Era.)

The Armored Dragon King Perugius did not rule or reign over anything, he simply hovered over the world in his floating fortress Chaos Beaker. No one knew his true intentions.

More importantly, it had been 400 years. Was the guy even still alive? Wasn't it just an empty castle floating around in the sky now? That said, if the opportunity ever presented itself, I would be eager to check it out myself.

***

The next day found Eris in an absolutely horrendous mood. Perhaps it was because she'd had her first taste of an entire day of freedom, or perhaps because she had never been allowed outside the posh shops until now. Either way, letting her have a rest day was definitely a good idea.

"I demand you take me again!" Her arms were folded, legs planted firmly apart.

It was the same pose she always used, but this time her cheeks were tinged red. What kind of blush was it this time? An angry one or an embarrassed one…? Hm? Maybe she was feeling shy? No, there was no way that was possible. This was Eris we were talking about.

"Um…" I hesitated to answer.

She gritted her teeth. Then she took fistfuls of hair in both hands and thrust her hips back. “Please take me with you, meew…”

“Yes, I will! I will take you with me, so stop that!” I demanded in a panic. It was certainly cute, I admit, but not good for my heart. It felt like bad karma was building up every time she did that. Bad karma that would resolve itself with a fist to my face.

“Hmph! As long as you understand!” Eris sent her hair fluttering and plonked back into her seat before the hip-length locks had time to settle. “Now! Continue your lesson!”

“Looks like you’re feeling motivated today.”

“Because I know you’ll say you won’t take me if I don’t behave myself!”

S-since when had she gotten this smart?!

“Th-that’s right, I’ll take you as long as you behave yourself!” Impressed, I started on the last lesson for the day.

***

NAME: Eris B. Greyrat

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa’s liege lord

PERSONALITY: A little violent

DOES: Listen to what people have to say

READING/WRITING: Quite adept at reading

ARITHMETIC: Can subtract higher numbers

MAGIC: Studying the basics

FENCING: Sword God Style - Beginner-tier

ETIQUETTE: Can do a normal greeting

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine

Chapter 5: The Young Miss Turns Ten

Another year passed.

Eris's education was progressing smoothly. Her swordplay was so impressive that she became Intermediate-tier before her tenth birthday. That meant she could contend with the average swordsman.

Ghislaine said that, even though she was just nine, she might rise to Advanced-tier in a few more years. Our Young Mistress was quite the genius.

As for me? If asked directly, I would avoid your gaze. It seemed that I was no genius at swordplay.

Eris's ability to read and write was, well, functional at least. Ghislaine, who had been deceived numerous times and even sold as a slave because she couldn't read, tried desperately to memorize everything.

Unfortunately, Eris lagged when it came to arithmetic. It was her weak spot. There was no point in panicking though. I had no idea what she would grow up to do, but highly advanced math wasn't necessary in this world. She just had to master the four principles in five years. That was enough.

Magic lessons had been proceeding apace, but it felt like we had hit a slight impasse. Through chanting, the two could perform most of the basic spells. Eris had mastered just about every school of magic besides earth, but Ghislaine could only do fire spells. I wondered about the difference in their abilities, even though they were both taking the same class. Was Ghislaine just poor at water, wind, and earth spells? What I observed seemed to indicate so, but I couldn't be sure.

At any rate, it was clear that just chanting spells out of the magic textbook wasn't enough for them to overcome this issue. Casting different schools of magic had come quite naturally to me so I didn't know how to help them. I'd been making them practice silent casting recently, but the results were less than satisfactory. Sylphie was able to do it easily, so I wondered if it was an issue of age. Or perhaps Sylphie was just especially skilled.

Maybe it was just a futile endeavor. It might be best to just move on to intermediate spells. But Eris and Ghislaine were both swordswomen, so it would better to have them master basic spells because they were more versatile. In the end, I decided to keep my lessons as they were. I wanted to believe they would be able to cast without chanting someday.

***

Eris's tenth birthday was drawing close. A person's tenth birthday was a special one. It was customary for the nobility to host large parties for a child on their fifth, tenth, and fifteenth birthdays.

On Eris's birthday, the large reception hall and conjoining courtyard were opened to the party. Presents poured in from all over, and all the nobles of Roa were invited to attend. Since Sauros was the boorish military type, the initial plan was for a self-service, standing buffet, until Philip intervened and turned it into a dance party to make it easier for the local, less wealthy nobles to attend.

The manor was bustling with frantic movement. Maids with dog ears rushed to-and-fro in the hallways. Maids weren't supposed to run in general, but apparently this household let them do so when things got busy. Some were full-on sprinting even, fast enough that

they could hit a transfer student as they were rounding the corner and send them rocketing to the moon.

I kept to the edge of the hallway where I wouldn't get in their way. I had no real destination in mind, I was just going for a walk. That was right, a walk.

I had nothing to do with the frantic bustle. Right now, Eris was preparing for her leading role in the party by taking special etiquette lessons, so our classes had been cancelled. Philip had requested that Eris "at least make sure she act like a ten-year-old child without causing any shame to herself." Apparently she didn't meet that standard, because Edna, with a look of exhaustion, requested a drastic increase in the number of lessons with Eris.

I honored Edna's request, and thus came days of Edna keeping Eris from morning till night for her special lessons. That left me completely unoccupied.

Of course, I was attending the party as a house guest, as it was really Eris's celebration. There was nothing for me to do except stand in a corner and eat. Nothing special was required of me.

I thought I should perhaps practice etiquette with my newfound freedom, but if I spent every day training, I would just wear myself out. Plus, I wanted to look around the manor while everyone was busy with preparations. This would be the first big event I'd attended. Surely there was someone around who could use my help. Although the only thing I could really do was taste test.

"Come to think of it, do birthdays here come with cakes?" They didn't in Buena Village, but cakes apparently existed here. I had never seen one, but sometimes a person wanted to eat something sweet.

With these thoughts in my mind, I headed for the kitchen. I could have asked about the existence of cake, but I really wanted to

take a walk. If my fortune was good, I might also find some food samples for the party.

Yeah. Also, I was hungry. Was it still not time for lunch?

“No more!” Right then, the door in front of me banged open, and Eris came flying out. Her shoulders were hunched as she dashed down the hall at an impressive speed and disappeared around the corner.

Edna came chasing after her. “Young Mistress!” She looked both ways and sighed when she saw no trace of Eris. She began yawning, only seeing me halfway through.

She offered me a weak smile. “Well hello there, Lord Rudeus.” It was a smile that begged for me to listen. Such an expression was rare for Edna.

“You must be exhausted, Miss Edna.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

I raised a hand as I approached her, and Edna bowed in a graceful movement. I put my hand to my chest and returned the bow. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Well, this is a bit embarrassing, but the Young Mistress ran off.”

Well, yes, I knew that since I watched it happen. It was pretty incredible. She was gone in mere seconds. I was pretty good at running away myself, but I was nothing compared to Eris.

Edna looked troubled as she put a hand to her cheek. “You see, I have been teaching her dancing lately, but she just can’t seem to get it right. Now every time I try to teach her, she runs off.”

“I see, that is troubling. I understand how you feel.” Mostly because she used to run from me too. Eris was the type who refused to do something she didn’t like. Edna had it rough. Catching Eris was no easy feat.

“There’s less than a month until her birthday. If things continue like this, she’ll shame herself in front of her guests.”

Edna said it like that was such a terrible thing. But wasn’t it a bit late for that? Eris already had a healthy reputation for being a violent little thing. Being unable to dance at a dance party seemed pretty far down the potential shame list.

“This is her tenth birthday. It’s special. Becoming a laughingstock on that day seems far too cruel, don’t you think, Lord Rudeus?” She kept glancing over at me.

If she wanted something from me, I wanted her to say it explicitly. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Could, I mean, if you wouldn’t mind, Lord Rudeus, couldn’t you persuade her for me? To come back for her dance lessons.”

There it was.

***

Why did I agree to her request? Because I had nothing else to do, I suppose, and because of something Edna said: “Becoming a laughingstock on that day seems far too cruel.”

In this world there was a custom of large celebrations on your fifth, tenth, and fifteenth birthdays; only those three times. It was tragic to imagine such a joyous day yielding nothing but painful memories. With a little effort from me the day could be truly enjoyable; without it there would be nothing but sadness.

If I had just studied a little harder back in my previous life, I could have gotten into a different middle school, then those horrible things might never have happened. I might not have closed myself off from the world. Not that I thought Eris would do that, but she might end up with awful memories that would linger long after.

With that in mind, I began looking for her.

Fortunately, I found her immediately. She was behind the stables, lying her back atop a pile of hay.

“Hmph.” She exhaled with a foul look when she saw me.

I climbed up and sat beside her. “I heard you can’t dance very well… Whooooa!”

She shoved me off the haystack with a kick. I managed to land safely and turned to guard myself. Eris was the type to always launch a follow-up attack. If I wasn’t prepared, I’d have a drop kick coming at the back of my unprotected head.

Or so I thought, but the follow-up never came. She just remained sprawled on the hay, staring up at the sky.

“…”

I climbed back up and sat beside her. This time I grabbed onto the hay so I wouldn’t be sent flying. Rather, that was my plan until I felt an impact on top of my head. “Ouch!”

Her heel was perched on the crown of my head. There wasn’t enough power behind it to be an axe kick, so it seemed she was just resting it there. She was in a foul mood but didn’t seem to have much energy.



“Won’t you…go back to practice?”

“I don’t need to know how to dance.”

I glanced at her. She was still looking up at the sky. “But…”

“I won’t dance on my birthday either,” she proclaimed frankly.

But there was no way the star of a dance party could forego dancing. I had never participated in one, but I knew she’d somehow be dragged into dancing in front of everyone when the day came.

“Why do I have to do something I’m not good at?” she groused, lips pushing into a pout.

I understood how she felt. But running away just made things worse for the future.

“Yeah, when you put it like that, it’s kind of difficult to answer.”

What did I have to say to get her to understand? I knew she wouldn’t listen if I just told her she would regret it. That was the logic of an adult with regrets. You had to experience the emotion yourself to understand it.

“You don’t get it. You can do anything,” she said.

“No, there are certainly things I can’t do.”

“There are?”

“Of course.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t ask me what they were. Instead she just looked at me with an expression that said she didn’t believe me at all.

“But I do think that when you put in maximum effort toward something you’re not good at, you’ll feel that much more accomplished when you finally succeed.”

“You think so?” She continued staring at the sky, not looking the least bit convinced.

“I’ll help out too. Why don’t you give dance practice one more chance?”

“I won’t.”

That killed the conversation right there. I couldn’t find any other words to say. It looked like it was impossible after all.

Maybe I was better off asking Ghislaine for help. Of course, she probably wouldn’t see the need to learn dancing either; even I didn’t see it. The only people who did were probably Edna and Philip. Maybe I should ask Philip?

As I thought that, Eris removed her foot from my head. Then she kicked her leg hard, using the recoil to propel herself off the hay and onto the ground.

“Rudeus.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going back to my dance lessons. Come with me.”

Did what I said work? Or was she just being her usual, whimsical self? Whichever it was, she seemed to have found some motivation, so I was glad.

“Very well, Young Mistress.”

I followed her back to the dance hall.

***

Helping with her lessons meant I was learning to dance myself. For things like this, you improved faster by having a partner.

That said, I had never danced a day in either of my lives. My experience, at best, was limited to playing dancing games at the arcade during middle school, so I was a bit worried.

“Wonderful. You are truly skilled at this.”

Contrary to my expectations, I had already mastered some of the beginner steps. Dance was all about remembering the routine and matching your movements to the rhythm. My previous self may have struggled from utter lack of exercise, but my current self was pretty fit. The simplest of the steps didn't require much getting used to.

"Hmph." Eris sulked when Edna complimented me.

She had spent months working on this only to fail, so of course she felt bitter watching me master it so easily. I wasn't just learning to dance however. I was observing Eris so I could figure out why she was struggling.

There were two reasons for this. The first was that Edna was a terrible teacher. Well, not a *terrible* teacher exactly; she was probably average. It was her method of saying, "Do it this way," "Do it that way," and "Just memorize what I'm telling you" that was the problem. She never touched on why those things were necessary.

The second reason was Eris's failing. Her steps were too fast and too sharp. Her personality and movements were well suited to the Sword God Style, but they were a drawback when it came to dancing. Where she should have been lightly moving her feet to the rhythm of the music, she instead rigidly maneuvered her body at top speed, falling out of sync with her partner. Eris had her own rhythm and instinctively disliked being interrupted. She maintained it protectively no matter the circumstance, so no one could disrupt her flow. It was an incredible ability on the battlefield, but it only held her back in dance. Dance was all about matching your partner.

According to Edna, this was the first time she had ever encountered a student with absolutely no skill for dance. That wasn't the case though. Moving so quickly meant that there was a sharpness to her movements. In a dance routine that required that, she could dance beautifully.

So that was why her teaching style wasn't working. Though blaming Edna would not fix Eris's movements. Still, there was something that could be done.

As I watched Eris clumsily move through her dance steps, I decided to try something. "Eris, please close your eyes and try swinging your body to your own rhythm."

She looked doubtfully at me. "What are you planning, making me close my eyes?!"

"Lord Rudeus…?" Edna's gentle smile wavered.

Uh, no, this isn't what you think? I'm not trying to kiss her, I thought defensively. *How rude of you guys, accusing a gentleman like me!*

"I'm going to use magic to help you dance."

"What! A spell for that exists?!"

"No, I said magic. There's no spell. It's more of a miraculous phenomenon."

She tilted her head but did as I asked.

Her dancing followed the same rhythm I had seen so many times during our sword lessons: quick, detailed, precise, but always irregular. Her movements were unreadable and naturally disrupted the rhythm of her opponent. I could never imitate them, not even if I wanted to. The rhythm of a natural egotist.

"I'm going to clap my hands now. Try to match that rhythm with your steps as if you're dodging an incoming attack." As I said that, I began smacking my hands together in a regular beat.

Eris matched the rhythm in quick, precise movements. I repeated that for a bit, calling out to her at certain intervals. "Yes! Yes!" It was always right before I clapped. Eris would wait for a moment then react as soon as she heard my hands come together.

"Th-this is!" Edna raised her voice in amazement.

Eris had danced the steps correctly. She was still a bit too fast, but at least she matched the rhythm.

Edna balled her hands into fists and with an unusually excited smile, yelled, “You did it! You did it, Young Mistress!”

Eris opened her eyes, all smiles and joy, and said, “Really?!”

I continued my instruction, essentially raining on their parade. “Okay, okay, keep your eyes closed. You need to remember what you did just now.”

“Remember it? I’m just watching for an opponent’s feints and dodging them!”

That’s right. This was the same thing we did during our sword lessons when we dodged Ghislaine’s attacks. Each time she made a feint she would call out ‘yes’ so we would learn to dodge only the real attacks.

Even Ghislaine’s feints were full of murderous intent. In comparison, it was easy to tell by my voice when I was feinting or not. Incidentally, I had better results during that lesson than Eris did. Eris was too gullible, so she fell for the feints easily.

“Eris. You can use things you learn in one lesson in others. When you struggle with something, try to think about whether you have done anything similar in any of your other lessons.”

“O-okay.” In contrast to her usual demeanor, Eris didn’t say anything else and just nodded, eyes still wide open.

Looks like the problem was solved.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. You have given the Young Mistress arithmetic lessons for more than a year now after all,” Edna said. She seemed thoroughly impressed, her eyes full of emotion as she looked at me.

Shouldn’t be surprised, huh? So that was the level of hopelessness associated with teaching Eris arithmetic. Well, I *did*

struggle quite a bit. I owed half of the credit to Ghislaine. I couldn't let it go to my head.

"This was an incredible learning experience for me. It seems swordplay and dance have something in common after all." Edna looked like she had seen something unbelievable. Like, *Oh, Father in Heaven, I have witnessed a miracle,* or something like that. Totally over the top.

"Well, there are dances that use the sword after all. Dance and swordplay are strongly related," I said.

"A dance that uses swords? Does something like that really exist?" she asked with wonder.

Sword dancing seemed like common knowledge to my inner middle school nerd, but maybe it didn't exist in this world. "Uh, yeah, but I've only read about it in books," I said.

"Well then, in the literature you read…where did it say that dance comes from?"

"U-uh, well, it seemed like it was from a desert country."

"Desert… The Begaritt Continent then?"

"I don't know. As unlikely as it sounds, it could be that demon races in the Demon Continent dance that way. I hear they have lots of small clans, so maybe someone from there dances using swords," I responded uncertainly.

"I see, so it's that collection of knowledge of various things that gives you such wisdom, Lord Rudeus," she said, smiling kindly as she complimented me. Looks like she convinced herself of the fact.

"That's right, Rudeus is amazing!" Eris interjected proudly, for some odd reason.

That's right, praise me some more, I thought. *I'm the type that feeds off praise. Bwahahaha!*

***

The day of the dance party.

Eris was all dolled up and seated like a princess when Sauros roared for the festivities to begin. I hunkered down in a corner and observed from there.

During the party's opening ceremony, Philip and his wife deftly handled the poorer and lesser nobles that swarmed around the family. They conducted themselves so impressively that no one could find an opening to slip through them.

If someone did happen to get through, they would be faced with Sauros himself. They would quickly look for ways to make their escape once they found themselves on the receiving end of his booming voice and irrationally one-sided way of talking.

If they happened to get by him, they would be where they desired at last, in front of the star herself: Eris. Eris, who had no authority whatsoever and didn't understand anything about politics. She turned into a robot that parroted the words, "Please tell my father," whenever anything was brought up.

Some brought their sons along to introduce to her; young and middle-aged men with good upbringings. Some were our age, but almost all of them were loud and obnoxious. They had probably lived their entire lives at home, without a care in the world. It was like looking at my past self.

Just as I began feeling some kinship with them, it was time to dance.

Like we planned from the beginning, I took up my role as Eris's first dance partner. It was the simplest, most childish dance, but because Eris was the star we took to the center of the room. We just needed to do as we practiced.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing!”

As the music began playing, Eris turned rigid with nervousness. There was no way we could dance properly like this. Forget that, she might actually knock me on my ass and take off running.

Hmm.

I used my gaze and my steps to add some feints into our routine. When I did, she immediately set her lips into a pout.

“What’s that for?” she mumbled again, but this time she sounded less nervous and more like her usual self. After that, she stepped on my foot a few times, but we managed to end the dance without falling.

“You did well, Lord Rudeus,” Edna called out as it finished. Apparently, she could tell I had calmed the Young Mistress’s nerves even from afar.

When she asked me how I did it, I simply replied that I did the same thing we did in practice. Edna wore a look of amazement, but when I told her it was the same as swordplay, she let a giggle slip.

My duties were done, so it was time to binge on food. There was an unusually large selection today, including some sort of weird sweet and sour fruit pie, a meat dish that used a whole cow’s head, and a beautifully arranged cake.

As I was stuffing my face, I caught sight of Ghislaine, who was standing guard. Her eyes weren’t exactly begging for food, but she did have some drool dripping off her chin.

Fortunately, I was a man who could read the room. I wrapped some food in a napkin and instructed a maid to take it to my quarters. The guards and the servants would have a luxurious feast themselves after this, I heard, but nothing like the food that was being offered here.

As I was almost done having the food carried off, my eyes fell upon a cute little girl in front of me.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," she said, before offering me her name. She was the daughter of one of the minor nobles. Her name was so long I couldn't remember the whole thing.

"Won't you share a dance with me?" she asked.

I explained that I only knew the basics before we headed onto the dance floor. I thought I actually danced pretty well. When it was over, another girl came, and again I was asked to dance.

What the hell is this? I'm pretty popular, huh? They came one after the other, among them a woman over thirty and a girl younger than I was. I turned them down if our height difference presented a problem, but in general I said yes to anyone who asked.

It wasn't like I was a Japanese person who couldn't say no. It was just that after telling the first girl yes, it was difficult to refuse the rest. Maybe I had an ulterior motive, but there were so many of them I couldn't remember their names or faces, so I just exhausted myself.

Once my popularity waned enough, Philip approached me and explained, "That was my father's doing." Apparently, when people asked Sauros who the boy was who danced with Eris at the beginning, he boastfully told them I was a member of the Greyrat family. In other words, everything was old man Sauros' fault.

Not that I could really blame him. He'd been asked about me: "That boy who danced with the Young Mistress at first, he did a splendid job calming her nerves. Could he be one of your illegitimate children, Lord Sauros?" That was apparently enough to get him in good spirits. We'd planned to keep my surname a secret, but maybe it was inevitable since alcohol was in the mix. But now that they knew my last name, they could assume that I was a member of the branch family or the child of a mistress. I was going to be somebody

of note in either case, so the nobles sent their daughters and granddaughters after me.

I asked him, “Wouldn’t it have made more sense to approach me right after the first dance?” He said he noticed me wrapping sweets up in napkins and found it so endearing that he decided to wait until I was finished. People who paid attention really noticed every detail.

When I asked him what I should do about the women who approached me, he told me to engage with them freely. It seemed no matter how things played out in the future, he didn’t intend for me to get involved with politics. Or perhaps he thought it might be a political benefit if I ended up with one of those girls. I hadn’t the least bit of interest in wielding political power, so for me, today’s short brush with fame was like a transient dream.

But wait, maybe if I become more powerful, I can have all the cute girls I want, I thought for a moment.

“I do ask that you refrain from following Paul’s example by not sleeping with every single woman you meet, lest you stain the noble name of our house.” Well. Philip nipped that right in the bud then.

Eris was the last girl to approach me. Her usual vivid and energetic aesthetic was replaced with a blue dress. Her hair was arranged in an up-do with a floral ornament tucked into it. She looked lovely.

It seemed even she was exhausted after attending her first-ever dance party and being approached by unfamiliar adults, one after the other. Yet she still seemed excited, perhaps because she was the star of a party that was going so well.

“Won’t you have a dance with me?”

Gone was the usual loud voice, wide-legged stance, and untamed expression of the ill-mannered Eris I knew. She held herself just as gracefully as any of the other girls who had approached me.

“Gladly.”

I took her hand and we headed into the hall. As we moved to the center of the dance floor, Eris looked around and giggled lightly, all prim and proper.

Suddenly, a song with an irregular, fast-paced rhythm began playing, one we had never practiced before. Maybe the musician was trying to be mindful of the guests.

“Uh, what…” That one metaphorical punch was enough to throw Eris off. All because she was putting on her weird act.

She looked pleadingly at me, and I began inserting feints to the rhythm of the music. It had an irregular beat, but that fit Eris’s style better, although her steps were rather disorganized. If Edna saw, she would probably get angry or exasperated.

I held her hand and moved in and out, just as we did during sword practice. We matched our movements to the music, but they were still erratic. We probably looked quite peculiar to the onlookers.

Eris was enjoying herself. She was finally laughing like a girl her age should, rather than being sullen and pouty as she usually was. Just seeing that was enough to make me feel like it was worth it attending this party.



Applause erupted when the dance finished. Sauros came running over, lifted the both of us onto his shoulders, and ran around the courtyard laughing the whole way.

It was an enjoyable party.

***

When the party was over, I invited Ghislaine and Eris to my room. In truth I only intended to invite Ghislaine, but Eris was with her, so I extended the offer to Eris as well.

Eris's stomach growled when she saw the table full of food. She must have been too excited and nervous during the party to eat much of anything.

I let out a wry laugh before pulling out some cheap wine I had purchased in the city and hidden in the depths of my dresser. It was meant for Ghislaine, but Eris wanted to drink as well, so I poured three cups. We clinked glasses and drank. The legal drinking age in this country was fifteen, but we were ignoring that today. It was okay to do something wild occasionally.

After swallowing the last of my glass, something occurred to me. I stood. "This timing is perfect for my gift," I announced, retrieving two wands from a shelf beside my bed.

"What? What's that?"

"I guess you could call it a birthday present."

"Seriously? I'd rather have one of those." Eris pointed to the various miniature replicas I had recently made while practicing my earth magic. There was a dragon, a ship, and even a figurine of Sylphie all lined up.

Not to brag, but in my previous life I had been really into figures and plastic models in my twenties. I even made a homemade booth

out of cardboard so I could paint them at one point. Unfortunately, materials cost a lot in this world, and there was no such thing as spray paint, so they weren't painted. Still, it was fun, and I loved making the parts and putting them together, so they were quite detailed, even if they were the creations of an amateur.

I did sell my first 1/8 scale Roxy figurine to a peddler for one gold coin. He was probably off traveling the world right now. Well, that aside.

"According to my master, a magic teacher should present their apprentice with a wand. I didn't know how to make one, nor did I have the money to buy the materials, so it's a little late, but I hope you'll take it."

As soon as Ghislaine heard that she stood and took a respectful knee before me. Ah, I knew what this was. This was the pose used by a disciple of the Sword God Style to pay respect to their teacher.

"Yes, Master Rudeus. I will gladly accept this."

"Indeed." She presented herself so humbly that I had to pass it to her as respectfully as possible.

She gazed at it happily. "Now I can call myself a magician, right?"

Ah, so that was what it was about? She was going to call herself a magician? Roxy and I never discussed that, but… No. This was just an object to show you had started on lessons and nothing more. Could you really call yourself a magician if you had only begun learning magic? Hmm. It seemed my master had not explained enough to me.

"Uh, so Eris, is this the one you want?" I tried lightening the mood by presenting the Sylphie figurine to her, but she just shook her head.

"No! That, I want that wand!"

“All right, here you are.”

She snatched it from my hands. Then, as if remembering how humbly Ghislaine had presented herself, she corrected herself and respectfully took it with both hands. “Th-thank you, Master Rudeus.”

“Yes, be sure to take care of it.”

Eris glanced meaningfully at Ghislaine.

What’s that about? I wondered.

Ghislaine froze for a moment before looking away. “I’m sorry, but there is no such custom in my race. I don’t have anything.” So that’s what it was about, Eris was hoping for a birthday gift.

Eris retreated to the sofa, looking disappointed. Maybe there was no custom for employees offering their employers gifts, but I still felt bad that Eris didn’t get anything. She loved Ghislaine and saw her almost like an older sister. I could at least help out.

“Ghislaine. You don’t have to give her anything special. Just something you usually wear on your person, something she could think of as a charm. Anything like that.”

“Hm.” She thought for a moment, then slipped off one of the rings on her finger. It was a wooden ring, quite worn with scratches all over it. It reflected a slight greenish light. I wasn’t sure if it was due to some magic cast upon it, or simply the material it was made from.

“This ring is a talisman passed down in my clan. They say it protects the bearer from being attacked by bad wolves at night.”

“C-can I really have it?”

“Yes. It’s only superstition.”

Eris nervously took it from her. After slipping it onto her right middle finger, she squeezed both hands to her chest. “I-I’ll take good care of it.” She looked even happier than she did when I gave her that wand.

Now I felt like I lost to Ghislaine. Oh well, it was a ring. Eris was a girl, right? So it made sense.

Something nagged at me, so I voiced my suspicion. "Superstition? So does that mean you've been attacked by wolves?"

Ghislaine wore a troubled expression. "Yes. It was so hot I couldn't sleep that night. So Paul invited me to take a shower and—"

"Changed my mind, that's enough. I already know what happens after that."

No more. If we continued that conversation, it would just worsen my reputation. Damn that Paul. He was always getting in my way.

"All right. Well, I don't want to ask details about you and your father."

"Sounds good to me. All right then, let's eat. The food's cold, but let's dig in anyway. And let's forget about the whole teacher-apprentice relationship for now."

And that was how Eris's tenth birthday came safely to an end.

***

When I woke the next day, Eris was right beside me. She had such a fierce personality, but her sleeping face was so relaxed and adorable.

"Wow."

Oh no, did I just lose my v-card?!

Of course not! I could still remember what happened clearly. In the middle of the party last night Eris got sleepy, so she passed out on my bed. That was when Ghislaine said she was going back and left Eris there, returning to her own room.

Well, they did say a man was a fool not to eat a meal set in front of him. *Gehehe, let's play a trick on her,* I thought, licking my lips as I approached her.

But Eris was sleeping happily, hugging the wand I had given her to her chest with Ghislaine's trinket on her finger.

The bad wolf, with its face full of lust, retreated.

"Looks like your little talisman does have some effect after all," I whispered. I slipped out of bed without disturbing her rest.

It was still early in the morning. If you peeked outside you would see the sky just beginning to light, but everything was still dark. I could have stayed and watched Eris as she slept, but she would probably punch me when she woke up. Instead, I decided to go for a walk. So I left my bed and tip-toed my way out of the room.

"Now then." I began debating where to go as I traversed the chilly hallways. The manor gates didn't open until later in the morning, so I couldn't go outside. There weren't many options.

I had learned the general layout of the manor in the year that I had been here, but there were still many places I had never been. For instance, the single looming tower that I was told never to approach; that piqued my interest. Maybe I could get my hands on something good there, like someone's underwear drying in the shade.

With that thought, I took the stairs to the manor's top floor. There I wandered aimlessly until I finally came upon some interesting spiral stairs. This had to be the entrance to that tower. I was told not to go near it, but yesterday was Eris's birthday. I decided that meant I could flout the rules for today and started climbing.

The tower's external height matched the number of steps winding inside it. Around and around and around I went as I

ascended more of them than I could count. That was when I heard a voice from above.

"Meow, meow." A seductive voice that almost sounded like a cat in heat. I tried to silence my footsteps by tip-toeing up the rest of the stairs.

At the top, I found Sauros. He was inside a room so small barely a single person could fit, getting busy with one of the cat-eared maids.

Aha, so this was why they told me not to come here.

"Mm?" Sauros noticed I was there after I had gotten a good look at them.

The maid had noticed me before him. It even seemed to excite her. Once the deed was finished, the cat-eared girl brushed past me on her way down the stairs.

"Rudeus, huh?" Sauros' voice was quiet, calm. Different from his usual demeanor.

The wise old man mode.

"Yes, Lord Sauros. Good morning."

He stopped me with a gesture when I moved my hand to my chest and tried to bow. "That's enough. What did you come here for?"

"There were stairs, so I climbed them."

"You like tall places?" He asked.

"Yes." Although if I looked out of a window here my legs would probably freeze up. Liking tall places and being okay with them were two very different things. Even if I conquered the entire world and built the tallest tower ever, I would still have my room on the bottom floor.

"So, what were you doing here?" I asked.

“I was praying to that gem there.”

Huh.

This house had an awfully degenerate way of praying, but I wasn’t going to say that. Even though Sauros normally seemed so strict, he was still a member of the Greyrat family. Still an apple from the same tree.

“What gem?” I peered out of the bay window and saw a single red gem hovering in the sky. Perhaps it was the light, but it looked like something was moving inside it. It was amazing. Was it floating there by magic? “What is that?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I found it three years ago. But it’s nothing bad.”

“How can you say that?”

“It’s better to think of it that way.”

I understood; he was right. The gem was out of reach. Convincing yourself it was something bad would only have a negative impact on your mental health. Better instead to think it was something good and pray to it.

I prayed too.

“Rudeus, I’m going to go out on a long ride. Will you come?”

“I would be honored.”

The old man had just fired his gun, so to speak, yet he was still energetic. He was apparently willing to spend time with me today since he had no other plans. “Yay!” was probably what I should have said, but the whole thing just sounded exhausting.

“By the way,” I started to ask.

“What?”

“Do you not have a wife?”

I heard a crunching noise. When I realized it was Sauros grinding his teeth, a chill ran down my spine.

“She’s dead.”

“Oh, I see. I’m very sorry to hear that.” He’d had such a good time with the cat-eared girl and now I made him remember something unpleasant.

In that case, it was best I not ask about whether Eris had any siblings either.

“All right, then let’s go.”

“All right.”

Today was one of our days off. Tomorrow, Eris would have to work hard again.

***

NAME: Eris B. Greyrat

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa’s liege lord

PERSONALITY: A little violent

DOES: Listen properly

READING/WRITING: Almost perfect at reading

ARITHMETIC: Can do numbers up to 99

MAGIC: Can chant almost all the basic spells

FENCING: Sword God Style - Intermediate-tier

ETIQUETTE: Skilled enough not to embarrass herself at a party

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine, Rudeus

Chapter 6: Learning A Foreign Language

Eris became better behaved after her tenth birthday. She took her lessons seriously and punched me less frequently than before. More relaxed after being released from the fear of domestic violence, I decided to focus more on my own studies.

I started getting an overview of this world's history with the book I borrowed from the library. It showed that this world had existed for at least 10,000 years. Its history was truly fantastical. The gist of that history was as follows:

More Than 100,000 Years Ago

The world was split into seven smaller worlds, each with its own god to rule over it. This was called the Ancient Age of the Gods. These seven worlds and their respective gods were:

The world of humans, Human God.

The world of demons, Demon God.

The world of dragons, Dragon God.

The world of beasts, Beast God.

The ocean world, Sea God.

The sky world, Sky God.

The barren world, Barren God.

These worlds were separated by barriers, so coming and going was no easy task. Someone who lived in one world had no idea there were other ones. Only the gods and those strong enough to cross those barriers knew of the other worlds.

Twenty Thousand to Ten Thousand Years Ago

In the dragon world, an incorrigibly evil Dragon God was born. With his incredible and dreadful power, he destroyed the barriers separating the worlds. With his followers, known as the Five Dragon Commanders, he began destroying the other worlds. Survivors from each destroyed world fled to other worlds seeking shelter.

When there was only one other world left, the Dragon God's commanders finally turned on him. The head of the Five Dragon Commanders, the Dragon Emperor, and the other four Dragon Kings fought the Dragon God and his overwhelming power. Five versus one in a battle to the death.

It ended in a draw. The dragon world crumbled in the aftermath, leaving only the human world. That was this world.

Ten Thousand to Eight Thousand Years Ago

Known as the Chaotic Period. A period where the ancestors of modern humans and the refugees from other worlds, after being thrown together, began clashing.

There exists almost no literature from this period, but according to scholars, after many years of strife, the races slowly became segregated. The beastfolk began living in the woods, the waterfolk controlled the oceans, and the skyfolk secured the highest places they could find. There were nearly no dragonfolk left, but they avoided attention and lived secretly, while the voidfolk, who could live anywhere, spread themselves out.

That left the humans and the demons to fight between themselves on the plains. At the time, the Central Continent and the Demon Continent were still joined by land and called the Great Continent.

Approximately 7,000 Years Ago

Martial arts and magic were developed, and the population increased. This was also when The First Great Human-Demon War occurred. As the name implies, it was a head-on collision between the humans and the demons. Something like a World War in the world of my previous life. It was a long battle that involved not only the humans and demons, but other races as well.

Approximately 6,000 Years Ago

A thousand years passed as the Great War raged on, with fierce battles and lulls interspersed between. The hero Arus led his six comrades into battle, continuing the hostilities until he defeated the Five Great Demon Kings and the Great Emperor of the Demon World, Kishirika.

Based on the Great Emperor's name, I guessed they were probably a woman. In my head, I pictured Eris in a leather outfit, cackling loudly.

Wait a second…Arus? What the heck was this, Dragon Quest 7?

Approximately 5,500 Years Ago

Being the fools they were, the humans got drunk off power from defeating the demons and began warring against the other races, as well as among themselves. Demons were reportedly used as slaves during this time. This period of constant war continued for almost 500 years.

Five Thousand Years Ago

The Second Great Human-Demon War broke out. Seeking vengeance for a thousand-year grudge, Kishirika, the Great Emperor of the Demon World, stirred the demons into action.

I thought Kishirika was some sort of name each emperor received as they took the throne, but apparently the Emperor was immortal. Even if they died, they would revive hundreds of years later. Perhaps the reason they were called the Great Emperor of the Demon World was because they were a rank above the other Dragon Emperors.

Either way, the demons made allies of the beastfolk and seafolk, overwhelming the humans. The humans were driven into a corner.

Four Thousand Two Hundred Years Ago

The Second Great Human-Demon War came to an end.

The warmongering humans fought for 800 years without admitting defeat and finally forced their enemy back. This was thanks to the efforts of the legendary hero, Golden Knight Aldebaran.

This guy was a total cheater. He routed over 10,000 men by himself. He defeated all the powerful demons he encountered and fought one-on-one with the Great Demon Emperor. His final attack was so powerful it created a hole in the Great Continent, splitting it into the Central Continent and the Demon Continent, with the Ringus Sea in between.

One passage wrote that he was the Human God himself. The only Aldebaran I knew was the one who would die if he used his own lethal technique. So it seemed this world's Golden Saint was made of tougher stuff. The whole bit about him splitting the continent sounded like a load of garbage, but it was true that the continent separated into two, forming a new ocean.

A long-sought peace finally settled over the land once the continents split.

Four Thousand Two Hundred to One Thousand Years Ago

Time passed quickly after that. The world was at peace, but the demons were being driven from the Central Continent. The humans were a clever bunch, using diplomacy to corral all the demons onto the Demon Continent.

The Central Continent's land was naturally lush and easy to live on, whereas the Demon Continent's land was barren and prone to magic accumulating in certain areas. By forcing the last of those foul demons onto the Demon Continent and blockading it, the humans were metaphorically slipping a silk cord around their necks and strangling them with it. This was all done with the cooperation of the other races, in the hopes there would never be another Great Human-Demon War ever again.

The demons most likely resisted this in some way. They were, after all, on the receiving end of a concerted attack. But whatever their reaction was, no war broke out. As a result, they soon became desensitized to the way they had been restricted from leaving their continent.

In that harsh environment with scarce resources being fought over, civil war naturally broke out. This forged them into fierce warriors, but their numbers dwindled.

One Thousand Years Ago

The Demon God Laplace came into being.

In the long history of demons, there were many Demon Kings and Demon Emperors, but there was only one who people referred to as the Demon God.

In a relative blink of the eye, Laplace rallied the demons and conquered the Demon Continent. The records from battles at that

time turned into war chronicles that were passed down. Even now on the Demon Continent, Laplace is still treated like an idol.

Laplace spent many years cultivating his empire, grooming his race to be tough and fierce.

Five Hundred Years Ago

The start of Laplace's military campaign.

After many long years spent winning over the seafolk and beastfolk, Laplace finally made his assault on the Central Continent. The humans were forced into a war far more brutal than any they had fought before.

Laplace launched his invasion from the south, drawing all the humans' military power there. Then he set his wyrms upon the land, making passage through the mountains impossible. After that he took the humans by storm, attacking with a separate unit from the north, scattering his enemies.

In a short time, he had gained total control of the north and the south. Then, from both directions, he pressed his assault on the western region.

Four Hundred Years Ago

Forced into a corner, the humans took their last gamble. The seven heroes convinced the seafolk to lift their blockade, then set out on the seas for the Millis Continent.

Millis had escaped the invasion for many reasons, such as the barrier around Holy Millis, its robust army of holy knights, and the topography that made it difficult for a large army to disembark. Part of the reason they were so isolated was also due to a great forest that covered the north.

Now allied with the demons, the beastfolk had taken control of the Holy City of Millis. So the seven heroes set about persuading them to their side. Or rather, the seven went to the head of each clan, took their children hostage, and threatened them into cooperation. In the book it was written that the children cooperated willingly, but I wasn't deceived by such an obvious spin.

It came to the day of the decisive battle. The last remaining kingdom of humans on the Central Continent, the Kingdom of Asura, mounted all their effort for the final battle. Soon the seven heroes came, leading the holy knights of Millis and the beastfolk in an assault on Laplace's main stronghold.

After a violent confrontation, four of the seven heroes were dead, but they successfully sealed Laplace away and destroyed his closest companions. Three heroes survived: the Dragon King Urupen, the Northern God Kalman, and the Armored Dragon King Perugius. They were referred to as the Three Legendary Demon God Slayers, but…they didn't slay anything!

Though Laplace was defeated, the humans were greatly exhausted from the battle and couldn't keep up the fight anymore. Instead, they signed a treaty with one of the demon kings back on the Demon Continent, one that wasn't allied with Laplace and led a more moderate faction of the demons.

The blockade on the Demon Continent was lifted. The demons could now freely travel to the other continents. According to the terms of the treaty, racial discrimination against demons was prohibited. It was like the United Declaration of Human Rights in my previous world.

Present Day

The deep-seated trend of discrimination against the demons continued, but things were mostly peaceful.

From all of this, I understood a couple of things:

1. Cutting things off at the number seven was done for historical reasons. There were seven legendary heroes, and seven worlds. Thus the lucky number was seven. Six was unlucky, since there were the Five Dragon Generals and Five Great Demon Kings, each of which made six when counted with their respective leaders.
2. The various races like the elves, dwarves, and halflings were like subspecies, but they were counted among the demons. It was possible they were new races that had developed during the Chaotic Period. Or perhaps they had something to do with the barrenfolk that first came over.

Incidentally, part of the reason so much knowledge about this long history existed was because some species were immortal. This was the case for the Great Demon Emperor Kishirika as well as a few other Demon Kings. Perhaps there was some sort of magic that made them live forever.

***

By learning about the history of this world, I also turned up some information about the other languages that existed here. The most commonly used ones were:

The Human tongue: used on the Central Continent.

The Beast God tongue: used in the northern part of the Millis Continent.

The Fighting God tongue: used on the Begaritt Continent.

The Sky God tongue: used on the Divine Continent.

The Demon God tongue: used on the Demon Continent.

The Sea God tongue: used throughout the seas.

To distinguish them, the languages were named after the Gods of the various races residing on different continents. Only the Human language didn't use that convention, a decision that might incur their god's wrath.

The humans who spoke the Human tongue on the Central Continent were divided into three regions: north, west, and south. Each region's language had minor differences from the others, something like the difference between American and British English.

My native tongue was the western dialect of the Human tongue. Apparently that dialect was mutually intelligible to those in the north, but in other regions it was best not to use it. Men from the western region were thought to be wealthy, and wealth only attracted unwanted— sometimes unfortunate—attention.

The Millis Continent was also split between the north and the south. The north spoke the Beast God tongue while the south spoke the Human tongue.

As for the sea, seafolk lived all over the waters of the world. I had heard the term "fish people" before, but never seen them in the city.

***

On top of my regular monthly income, I made and sold figures, assisted Philip in managing the daily hiring of part-time workers, and sometime resold wares I had bought several months prior. With these little bits here and there, I managed to earn a small amount of coin.

Unfortunately, that book I had wanted sold while I wasn't paying attention. I couldn't buy what wasn't for sale. I began thinking

about using the money I had saved to buy something else. What could you buy with four gold coins? *No, there's no need to spend it all at once,* I reasoned.

That was when a book in a language I didn't know caught my eye. After reading about the world's history and learning about its languages, I remembered how important it was to learn them.

Which was how I began learning a foreign language. I decided to start with Ghislaine's native language, the Beast God tongue. I also wanted to learn the Demon God Tongue. I decided to send Roxy a letter in hopes that she might teach me, even if just a little.

***

I turned nine. That meant two years had passed since I first became Eris's home tutor.

I'd spent a year learning the Beast God tongue. I had Ghislaine's assistance but acquiring the language didn't take much time. There weren't many letters to memorize, and so long as you knew its grammatical pattern, it was easy to speak. I was terrible at foreign languages in my previous life, but this body seemed to be good at remembering things.

Now, I was going to learn the Demon God tongue. I bought a cheap book on the language. The owner of the bookstore prefaced the sale by telling me, "I have no clue what's written in here, just so you know." It was seven gold coins, but I haggled the price down to six.

***

Three months passed. My study of the Demon God tongue wasn't making much progress. Translation itself was difficult; in fact, to be honest, I had no idea what was written in this book. If I at least knew its title, maybe I could have guessed at its contents from context and dug my way through. But I *didn't* know them, nor did I know the language, so I gave up.

The reason the Beast God tongue had been so easy for me to learn was partly because of Ghislaine, and partly because the book I was using told the tale of one of the beastfolk heroes from the Legend of Perugius. It was a side story, but so long as I had *Legend of Perugius* with me, I could pick out vocabulary easily.

For the book in the Demon God tongue, I had no idea whatsoever. How did archaeologists manage to decode languages anyway? They began with vocabulary, I thought. First, they sought out similar vocabulary words, then began hypothesizing meanings for those words. Probably.

Anyway, right now I had no idea what parts were even vocabulary. Not a clue.

Just as I was lost as to what to do next, Roxy's reply finally arrived. I had heard nothing in over a year. I was beginning to wonder if something had happened to my letter or if she no longer resided at Shirone's Royal Palace. But finally, a reply.

"Heheh…" I was happy enough just getting a letter from Roxy. I hoped she was doing well. I restrained myself as I took the letter from the maid. A letter? It was more like a small package. A fairly heavy wooden box. Not quite that large, but around the size of a phone book at least.

Inside the box was a letter and a thick book. The book had no title, but the cover was made of animal hide. It was like a phone book with a jacket on it.

I decided to start with the letter. I smelled it before I opened it, and it was almost like inhaling Roxy's scent.

To Lord Rudeus,

I received your letter.

I am sure you have grown greatly in this short time. My jaw dropped when I read that you became the home tutor for the grandchild of Fittoa's liege lord. If you must know, I failed the interview for that job. You must have some powerful connections to have landed that.

If I weren't currently the home tutor for the king's son, I might be jealous. Still, you even became acquainted with Sword King Ghislaine, and became her pupil on top of that. Sword King Ghislaine is very famous. After all, she's the fourth strongest person in the Sword God Style.

Ahh, just where did the five-year-old who peeked at me while I was bathing go? You feel so far away now.

Now, let's get down to business. You said you want to learn the Demon God tongue, yes? Each sub-race possesses some unique magic unknown to humans. I doubt any literature remains, but if you learned the language, you could visit those sub-races' settlements and have them teach you. Of course, that is IF you establish a good rapport with them first. This would be impossible for the average magician, but maybe not for you.

It's with these great expectations that I created this textbook for you. I wrote it myself. It took me a long time, so I hope you'll use and treasure it and not sell it or throw it away. If I see it for sale in a store I might cry.

Speaking of stores, the prince snuck out of the castle the other day and bought a small statuette that looks just like me. The robe is detachable, and even the blemishes on its skin are perfectly placed. Creepy. Maybe I'm going to be cursed. I have no idea what to expect, but…so long as it seems safe, I'll send this letter to you.

From Roxy.

P.S. - You'll be recognized among adventurers as a magician if you carry a staff.

I see.

First, the whole thing about me peeking at her bathing was a misunderstanding. I wasn't peeking; I just happened to glance in. Total coincidence. I mean it. Okay, I *did* know when she showered, but my peeking in was a fluke. There were times I deliberately took walks around the house, but the time it happened was a pure accident!

That aside, was Ghislaine really the fourth strongest person in the Sword God Style? There was the Divine-tier, Imperial-tier, and the King-tier… Wait, what?

Ah, maybe there were two people at the Imperial-tier. Did that mean there was only one person at the King-tier? I heard that most of the swordfighters in the world used the Sword God Style, so I thought there would be around ten people with King-tier proficiency, but perhaps that was harder to achieve than I thought.

Also, it appeared the Roxy figurine I made had accidentally found its way to its subject. That prince had good taste.

More importantly, the book included in her package was something she wrote herself. I didn't know when my letter reached her, but she must have written that book in less than half a year. She worked so hard to write it for me, so I was sure it would be instrumental in deciphering the Demon God tongue. I would do my best to accomplish that.

With that in mind, I sat down and opened the book. It was like a bar popped up over my head that said, NOW READING.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise when I looked inside. It was a textbook, but it was also a dictionary. There were translations for every word in the Demon God tongue.

Roxy most likely took a dictionary from the royal palace and copied all the words down. She covered vocabulary, specific turns of phrase, and even described the pronunciation extensively.

That was only the first of the surprises.

In the latter half of the book, she also wrote what she knew about the various demon races. The descriptions of each race were accompanied by her personal commentary. Don’t do this with this race, don’t do that with this other race. There were even (poorly-drawn) illustrations annotated with the peculiar traits of each of the races.

There was an especially long portion, spanning five pages, where she wrote about the Migurd Race in minute detail. It made me happy to think she did that because she really wanted me to know more about her and her people.

People of the Migurd race tend to like sweet things, she wrote. I wondered if it were true. If it were, I wanted to prepare something sweet for her the next time we met.

That said, the fact that she wrote this whole thing in less than a year made me feel like I was nothing compared to her. If we did meet again, I would have to kiss her feet.

That aside, this book was the best textbook I could have asked for. My grades hadn’t been particularly good in my previous life, but I was incredibly good at learning things in this one. I was sure that in six months I could perfectly master the contents of this book. At the very least, I wanted to be able to master basic conversation. It was time to put my nose to the grindstone.

Ghislaine

Rudeus had shut himself in his room. He was up to something again. He had a habit of surprising Ghislaine like that sometimes. When she first met him, she thought he was just a kid, and not at all dependable. She thought Paul was being an over-confident, too-proud parent when he forced this kid on her.

Ghislaine owed Paul. She had no feelings for him other than a sense of obligation. On the off-chance that Rudeus failed to be appointed Eris's tutor, she still planned to propose that he stay here.

In the end, he won over Eris's trust in record time and secured a place in the house as her tutor.

The kidnapping was something he'd proposed. Ghislaine heard that the butler took advantage of the situation out of greed, but when she arrived on the scene to help Rudeus and Eris, he was already dealing with the two people hired by the butler on even footing.

He managed to manipulate two different schools of magic in a unique fighting style—albeit an imperfect one—that overwhelmed his opponent, an Advanced-tier North God Style swordsman. He did drop his guard at the end, perhaps because he was still a child, but his combat instincts were genius-level for someone of his age. Even for Ghislaine, initiating battle with an opponent over a hundred meters away would likely mean defeat.

Beyond his fighting instinct, he was exceptional at organizing effective lessons for Eris that were easy to follow. Ghislaine never thought she would be able to learn reading, writing, arithmetic or receive a wand. She, the village nuisance, who had been entrusted to some wandering swordsman before she had even turned ten. She who had been turned away from adventuring parties despite becoming a Saint-tier swordswoman. When she finally managed to

join one, she was continuously told by some not-too-bright, frivolous man that she had muscles for brains, so there was no point in wasting time thinking. What would those people say if she went home now? Just thinking about it brought her to the brink of a smile.

Ghislaine never thought the day would come when thinking about people from her village would make her feel triumphant. And all this, unprecedented, from a boy who would be the same age as her son if she'd had one.

After her party disbanded, Ghislaine was swindled almost every day. The defrauding left her penniless, but the strict discipline her master instilled in her against touching the belongings of others meant she couldn't turn to thievery. She was on the brink of starvation. That was when Sauros and Eris took her in.

Ghislaine paid Rudeus the same respect as she paid the two of them. If she went as far as calling him "master," her sword master would probably fume at her. *"Don't you dare put me and that brat on the same level!"* It was probably best to call him her teacher instead.

And Rudeus deserved respect for his skills as a teacher. He was truly patient when he taught her arithmetic and magic. Ghislaine tried her best, but she wasn't good at picking up new things. She made the same mistakes over and over. Despite that, Rudeus never showed the least bit of annoyance as he carefully explained things to her. He would change his phrasing each time to help her understand better.

Thanks to his efforts, in two short years Ghislaine had mastered the basics of fire and water magic. And now, according to Rudeus's curriculum, she was not moving on to intermediate-tier spells, but instead learning to cast spells without chanting.

It was sound logic—if she could master that, she could use magic even when both hands were occupied. She understood that

logic and was working hard to accomplish it. Granted, working hard at something didn't necessarily mean she *would* accomplish it.

Ghislaine's sword master, who was a Divine-tier swordsman, was always preaching about logic to her. He'd say things like, "In other words, logic is the foundation." That his style of swordplay, cultivated over many years, was founded on rationality. Ghislaine's younger self detested the simplicity of the foundations, so her master went to great lengths to drill them into her. She was forced to practice them repeatedly.

Rudeus's teaching style was very similar. When he wasn't around, Eris would often complain, "I want to use fancier magic." But Ghislaine was fine with how things were. In a real battle, the most reliable fighter wasn't the advanced magician who took forever to cast a powerful spell. It was the magician who could adapt to the situation and had full mastery of basic and intermediate-level magic.

In the past, she thought magicians were completely useless in battle. But after seeing Rudeus fighting, Ghislaine had changed her mind. An opponent who moved swiftly while using offensive magic to restrict his opponent's movements would be a formidable enemy for any swordfighter.

She heard his only real match back in his village was Paul. Paul, who was immature, and surely came at Rudeus without holding anything back. If the result of that were Rudeus gaining the ability to move strategically in a swordfight…then that was a happy coincidence.

So, Paul was good for something after all. Had he made one misstep, Rudeus might have quit fighting altogether and wasted his potential. Rudeus must have inherited that refusal to quit from his father.

Ghislaine eventually wanted to teach him a technique to defeat Paul. Unfortunately, Rudeus had no talent for the Sword God Style.

He overthought everything. He took the logical foundations of the style, tried performing them even more logically, only for the results to be completely illogical.

It wasn't a bad thing, given his personality. He was most likely using magic as a basis for his swordplay. That was not, however, appropriate in the Sword God Style, where a single step decided everything, and a battle ended within a split second of swords crossing. He was more suited to the North God Style or the Water God Style, but it seemed Paul hadn't taught him either. Unfortunately, Ghislaine only knew the Sword God Style. She couldn't teach him herself, but she knew someone who could. If he still wanted to learn swordplay in three years, she would introduce him to someone who used the North God Style.

Right now, she could only continue teaching him the foundations of the Sword God Style. If he mastered them, he would see rapid improvement when he began learning the North God Style. If he still wanted to learn swordplay by then of course.

He currently seemed at an impasse with magic since he had no master to teach him, but he would surely become an accomplished magician someday. Rudeus might not reach the Divine tier, which seemed an almost inhuman feat, but he might reach the Imperial tier.

Ghislaine wondered how to guide him. Surely Roxy, his magic instructor, had struggled with the same question. She thought it a bit pathetic that the girl ran from the problem, but Ghislaine couldn't blame Roxy for doing that. In fact, she should probably thank Roxy. After all, it was through Roxy's instruction by proxy that Ghislaine learned to use magic herself.

Learning from a stupid teacher only held a pupil back. She might get a taste of that bitterness while teaching someone else the sword someday.

Her thoughts had veered off-track. Ah, yes. She wondered what Rudeus was doing in that room. Unlike the Young Mistress, who seemed overwhelmed with the free time her day off provided her, Rudeus was always sticking his fingers into something new. Most recently he came to Ghislaine's room after dinner with a book in one hand, telling her that he wanted to learn the Beast God tongue.

She wasn't sure what he planned to do with a language that was only used in a large forest village, but he spent the next six months learning it. The Beast God tongue didn't have any difficult expressions in it, so he could probably engage in a daily conversation fluently.

"Now I can go to the large forest village whenever I want," he said afterward, joy absent from his expression.

And what did he plan to do in such an isolated place? He became flustered when Ghislaine asked.

"Huh? Nothing in particular… Oh, there might be some cute girls there though. With cat ears."

That convinced her. He was definitely Paul's son and had most certainly inherited the Greyrat blood.

Her certainty came from the fact that everyone in the Greyrat household seemed to stare at her with an odd look in their eyes. If they were just ogling her because she was a woman, it wouldn't have bothered her as much. Their gazes were peculiar. Other men might look at her breasts. First her face, then pretending to look somewhere else while they ogled at her chest. After that they would go lower, to her stomach, then her crotch, then her thighs. When they were behind her, she knew they were checking out her butt.

The Greyrat men, however, were different. At first Ghislaine thought they were the same, looking at her face and her butt. It was fine, so long as they weren't expecting anything more. Aside from Paul and his strange tastes.

But she realized their eyes focused on odd places. Not on her face, but just above it. It wasn't exactly her butt they were eyeing either. She discovered they were staring at her ears and tail. Eris, Sauros, and Philip were all the same in this. Before Ghislaine went to fetch Rudeus from his house, she asked, for the first time, why they kept staring at her ears.

When she did, Philip replied, not looking the least bit abashed by it, "Because the Boreas family likes beastpeople." He stared at her ears as he said it.

Rudeus, she was told, was a different case. While he had not inherited the noble name of Notos, he was still part of the family. "As Paul's son, I have no doubt he shares his father's fondness for women though," Philip added.

Ghislaine had little doubt about that at the time. When she actually met him, however, Rudeus was such a gentleman it was hard to believe he was Paul's son. Unlike his father, he worked extremely hard, was very serious about studying, and showed great self-control when it came to sex… Well, it might be too early to tell for that last part. But she did suspect he might not be Paul's child.

She had since revised that stance. There was no doubt about it: Rudeus Greyrat was Paul's biological son.

"So, you really are Paul's son. Can't be satisfied with women of the same race, eh?"

"I was only joking. Please don't put it like that."

It definitely wasn't just a joke. This boy was going to be a womanizer someday.

Lately, a sparkle had started to form in Lady Eris's eyes when she looked at Rudeus. Ghislaine may have been ignorant in the affairs of love, but even she could see it. Eris looked just like Zenith had when she began falling in love with Paul.

Rudeus had apparently begun learning the Demon God tongue lately. First the Beast God tongue, now the Demon God tongue. In the future, he seemed likely to set out on a quest to meet all the women in the world.

Paul once said something similar about traveling around the entire Central Continent so he could create a harem. He abandoned that on the Millis Continent when Zenith caught hold of him, but perhaps Rudeus had inherited that idea. Honestly, what a worthless father-son pair…

No. Ghislaine respected Rudeus. That wasn't a lie. Paul was the only one she held contempt for. Rudeus may have shown glimpses of the same disposition, but he had yet to act on it. *Yet*.

He was still a boy worthy of respect. Yes. At least for now.

"What's wrong, Ghislaine?" Eris appeared before her as she was lost in thought.

Eris had grown a lot in this past two years. Ghislaine had first met her five years ago. At that time, Ghislaine thought she was an utterly hopeless, selfish little girl. On Eris's first day of sword lessons, Ghislaine trained her until she could barely stand. Then at night Eris came at Ghislaine with a wooden sword. Ghislaine put a quick end to that by turning the tables on her, but for months afterward Eris's fiery gaze tracked Ghislaine, waiting for Ghislaine to drop her guard.

Ghislaine used to be a troublesome child herself, so she felt a fondness for Eris. She was just like that when she was younger after all.

In the beginning, Eris would always complain about this or that during training. That finally abated recently. And after her birthday last year Eris stopped yelling and sullying her clothes. Rather than attributing it to her etiquette lessons, Ghislaine was inclined to think it was because Eris wanted to look good in front of Rudeus.

Maybe he'd said something to Eris on her birthday. Something he had learned from Paul, Ghislaine was sure; the kind of words that would make a woman's very womb tremble.

Come to think of it, Eris had stayed the night in Rudeus's room. Could it be… No, it wasn't possible, both were still far too young. Still, Ghislaine wouldn't be surprised if the two of them became a couple eventually. There weren't many men that could handle Eris.

"I was thinking about Rudeus."

"Hmm, how come?" Eris tilted her head, a shade of jealousy in her eyes.

Don't worry, Ghislaine thought, *I'm not going to steal him from you.*

"I was wondering, why is he trying to learn the language of the Demon Continent?"

"He's explained it before."

Did he? Ghislaine thought she paid attention to his lessons, but she had no idea what spurred his sudden interest in foreign languages. "What was it?"

"'It might be useful someday,' he said."

Right, he said that when they were wandering around the stores and he was writing down the names and prices of different wares. Did that actually ever prove to be of any use?

Now that Ghislaine thought about it, that thief in her party a long time ago was very knowledgeable about the market value of consumables. One time that thief found a shop with healing remedies which were half the usual price and proposed that the group buy them in bulk, only to later discover the goods were all of inferior quality. It was an unpleasant memory.

If you didn't know the market value of goods, you might be sold poor-quality goods at two or three times the price and not even

know it. At the time, Ghislaine told Rudeus that she didn't understand his reasoning, but in hindsight it seemed a good idea after all.

Thanks to Rudeus's arithmetic lessons, she would no longer be cheated out of change. But it was still possible she might be deceived if a shop owner tampered with prices to begin with. She couldn't become a trader just because she had learned some math skills, but such skills certainly had many uses.

"Forget about Rudeus for now. You can think about him all you want and you won't understand him," Eris said. "More importantly, Ghislaine, if you're free, accompany me in sword practice,"

She had really been devoting herself to the sword lately. Ghislaine wasn't sure why, but perhaps she was feeling some pressure. Rudeus was nine. Eris had been the same age when the two of them first met. It was clear he was much more mature now than Eris had been at that age. Not just in reading, writing, arithmetic, and magic, but also in his social skills and conversational prowess. He may have lacked etiquette, but he had manners. He was polite as a trader, and had a sense of humor too. There was a glint of mischief that made him seem much older than his nine years. If you interacted with him only in writing, you would probably believe him if he said he was forty.

That was apparently a popular scam in the Dragon Kingdom. A literate bandit would pretend to be the son of some noble family and write a letter to the daughter of another noble family. They would spend weeks earning her trust, then draw her beyond the safe confines of her home. Then they would capture her and sell her off to slavers.

Perhaps Eris wanted to beat Rudeus at one thing. If that thing was swordplay, Ghislaine was more than happy to help.

"All right, Eris. To the courtyard."

“Okay!” She nodded enthusiastically.

If Eris continued training in earnest, she might one day surpass Ghislaine. Right now, her skill level was just Intermediate-tier, but after three years of working on the foundations, her potential was beginning to show. Her steps were sharp, fast. Her fighting spirit was beginning to drive her movements. If she learned how to use that consciously, she would definitely reach the Advanced tier in the Sword God Style. If she mastered it completely, she could be Saint-tier.

That future surely wasn’t too far off. Ghislaine didn’t know how much Eris would grow, but if she managed to attain Saint-tier skills while Ghislaine was still teaching her, then Ghislaine would let Eris meet her master. If possible, Ghislaine would take Rudeus along as well.

Ghislaine wondered how her master would react to that. She was looking forward to it.

***

NAME: Eris B. Greyrat

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa’s liege lord

PERSONALITY: A little violent

DOES: Listen properly

READING/WRITING: Improving with writing as well

ARITHMETIC: Still bad with division

MAGIC: Can’t do any spells without chanting them

FENCING: Sword God Style - Intermediate-tier (soon to be Advanced-tier)

ETIQUETTE: Can imitate ladylike manners

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine, Rudeus

Chapter 7: Absolute Promise

After all of that, I finally turned ten.

I dedicated most of the last two years to language studies. Besides the Beast God tongue and the Demon God tongue, I also learned the Fighting God tongue. It was extremely close to the Human tongue, so it was easy. Somewhat like the similarity between the German and English languages. The basics of grammar were the same as the Human tongue; the only differences were expressions and vocabulary.

The languages in this world weren't that difficult. Once you learned one, you could use it as a basis for learning the others. Probably a side-effect of all the warring between the races.

However, there was no literature in either the Sky God tongue or the Sea God tongue, nor any people who used those languages around here, so I was unable to learn them. Oh well, speaking four languages was more than enough for me.

As for swordplay, my skills were approaching the Intermediate tier. In just two years Eris had gone from Intermediate-tier to Advanced-tier, so I was no longer any match for her. You could really feel the gap in our abilities.

Ah well, I thought. *It seems she spent her days off training really hard, so that's how it goes.* While I spent my free time learning languages, she spent hers with the sword. The gap between us was only natural.

As for magic, I only practiced through making figurines. I was able to make them more and more detailed, which probably meant I was improving. It was true that I had hit a wall though. Of course, that would be solved once I began learning at the Magic University. There was no use in being impatient.

Ten years had passed since I came into this world, huh? The thought made me a bit emotional.

***

As my birthday was about a month away, the people in the manor began growing restless, Eris especially so.

What is it, I wondered. Was someone important supposed to be coming? Like someone else from the Greyrat family, or perhaps Eris's fiancée? No way, it couldn't be. Eris with a fiancée? I felt like a fit of strange laughter might burst out of me. But the restlessness made me anxious, so I decided to investigate.

After doing a magnificent job of tailing Eris, I spotted her chatting happily with a maid in the kitchen. Ghislaine was there too, but she hadn't noticed me. The brawny, animal-eared swordswoman was distracted by the meat that had been set out for our next meal.

"I can't wait to see the look of surprise on Rudeus's face! He might even weep with joy!"

"I'm not certain about that. It is Lord Rudeus we're talking about. Even if he felt surprised, he might not let it show."

"But you do think he'll be happy, right?" Eris asked.

"Yes, of course. As part of the branch family, I'm sure he's had a rough time of it."

I hadn't really had a rough time of anything. But what exactly were they talking about? Were people gossiping about me? I was fairly confident I had done a fine job of being good, but perhaps I was the only one who thought so and the other people of this house actually found me unpleasant.

If that were the case, I was confident I *would* weep. Specifically, confident I would create more work for the maids by using my pillow as a tissue to soak up all my tears.

"I have to make sure it's ready in time!" Eris said.

"Being impatient won't make things go well."

"If I can't make it well, you think he won't eat it?"

"No, Lord Rudeus would eat anything you made for him," the maid responded.

"Really?"

"Yes, as long as Lord Sauros is present."

Ah. I knew what this had to be. Preparations for a surprise party, huh?

"If only Rudeus hadn't been born to that house." There was pity in Eris's voice as she said that.

Now that I knew what the conversation was about, I decided to take my leave.

It turned out that I was someone who had to be kept from the public eye. In the past, I might have thought they wanted to hide me because of who my father was, but now I knew it wasn't that.

This was something I had learned in the past couple of years. Paul's real name was Paul Notos Greyrat. Notos was the name of Paul's noble family. A long, long time ago, Paul was disowned by the Notos household, and his cousin or younger brother became the head of the household in his place.

That was fine, it was the past. Except that there were those who wouldn't, or rather, *didn't*, want to leave things in the past. Those in power were full of paranoia. Worst case scenario, they might send assassins after me. That was why it was necessary to hide me.

Ordinarily, I should have been treated as more important than Eris since I was a boy, but instead I was being treated like a servant.

Even the tenth birthday celebration, one of the most important noble customs, had to be limited in scale for me. That's why everyone kept saying, "Poor thing, how awful."

That was why Eris had gone to her grandfather for the first time in a long while to request a secret party for me. One just for the people in the manor. A modest home party especially for me.

Still, that was close. I was glad I eavesdropped, because although I knew about the customs here, a tenth birthday was nothing special to me. In fact, my own idea of a party *was* a house party, not that gigantic celebration that Eris had for her birthday. If someone had told me they were going to throw me a birthday party, my reaction would be pretty flat. Like, "Oh, really? Thanks," or similar.

But this was Eris's idea. I was the only one her age around here, so this was the first time she'd done something like this. If I didn't act excited about it, she would be disappointed.

I decided to practice making fake tears with water magic. Because I was a man who knew how to read the situation.

***

My birthday.

I pretended I didn't notice how anxious everyone in the manor was. Once afternoon lessons ended and we had our break, Ghislaine came to my room. She was unusually nervous, her tail standing sharp and rigid.

"Th-there's some magic I want you to teach me." Her gaze, which was usually unwavering, was suddenly shifty. Apparently, she wanted to keep me in this room.

Okay, okay. I would board this train.

“Ohh? Like what?” I asked, knowing whatever answer she gave was surely planned.

She looked me dead in the eyes and in a very serious voice replied, “Will you show me what Saint-tier magic looks like?”

“Sure, but it will damage the city.”

“What? Just what kind of magic is it?”

“Saint-tier water magic involves gale force winds and a lightning storm. If I try hard enough, I can probably submerge the entire city.”

“That’s amazing… I would like you to show me that next time then.” She was oddly excited about it. That must have been part of the plan.

All right then, let’s tease her a little.

“If you’re that interested, let’s do it. If we ride out about two hours, we should get a safe distance away. Let’s leave now.”

Her cheek twitched. “Two hours?! N-no, wait. If we leave now, we’ll get back late. Monsters come out at night. Even the plains aren’t safe.”

“Really? But we should be fine so long as you’re there. You said before that beastfolk are sensitive to sound, so you’re just as vigilant at night as you are during the day, right?”

“That’s true, but it’s never good to overestimate yourself.”

“True. Plus, I do use an awful lot of magic when casting Saint-tier spells. Let’s do it on our next day off then.”

“Yes, all right. That’s good. Let’s do that.”

I found a good spot to drop that conversation. Normally, nothing could fluster Ghislaine, so teasing her like this was pretty entertaining. Her tail went rigid when she lost her composure too. Just one word from me made it twitch. That alone was enough to amuse me.

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry, I didn’t pour you any tea. Let me go get some hot water.”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Don’t move. I’m not thirsty.”

“All right then.”

I could actually make the hot water myself, but she didn’t seem to realize that, so I kept it to myself.

I could see she would do whatever she could to keep me in here. Maybe it was time for a little sexual harassment.

“By the way, this is one of the figures I made recently.” From my shelf I took a 1/10 scale figure of Ghislaine that I was still working on. I was confident I had improved a lot since I first started making them. The sculpting of the musculature alone was professional work.

Ghislaine let out a small breath as she looked at it. “Is this me? You’ve gotten pretty good at this. You did a nice job before when you were making one of Lady Eris, but this one is… Hm? There’s no tail.”

“Unfortunately, I only have a vague understanding about tails. I usually create these from my imagination, but this time I’m being very picky because I want it to look as close to the real thing as possible.”

“Hm.” Her tail twitched as if she were deep in thought.

Heh, I’m looking forward to seeing just what kind of face you’ll make, I thought.

“Would you let me see yours? The base of your tail that is.”

“No problem,” she said. She turned around and pulled her pants off. She didn’t even hesitate. Right in front of me was her firm, muscular behind and the base where her tail attached.

Amazing! I knew it would be! She’s so fearless! There’s no winning against her, I silently gushed.

No! I couldn't falter, not here. Ghislaine always had her guard up, but right now my curiosity overcame me. "C-could I touch it for just a moment?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

It's hard, I thought. *Huh?! Wait a second, this is her ass, right? Right?*

It was as hard as steel. Yet at the same time, there was a certain softness to it. The ideal balance, the perfect amount of muscle. A perfect marriage of the properties of both red and white muscle! Any man, no matter who he was, would admire this. It was a little bit difficult to find this sexy though.

Lord of Muscles, God of Sex, how grateful I am for your existence, however much the polar opposite of me you are, I thought. *So grateful, so grateful. Please, bless unto me muscles such as these.*

"All right, that's enough." I lifted my hands away from her butt, feeling mentally battered.

Ghislaine adjusted her pants then turned back to face me. "I once saw an artist painting a portrait of Lady Eris. Seeing that made me want something similar, something that could capture the current state of my body. I look forward to seeing the finished product." She looked genuinely happy as she confided this to me.

It felt like I had lost as a man in a battle of masculinity. Was there no way I could win against someone as handsome as Ghislaine?

"It's about time for dinner, isn't it?"

"H-hm, I think there's still a bit of time left?"

I made her tail flinch one last time before the maid came to call us for dinner.

“All right, Rudeus. It’s time to eat, let’s go.” She stood quickly, as if trying to hurry me along. Apparently, the real show was about to start.

***

I entered the dining hall to a burst of applause. I had previously met every person gathered here at least once. Of course, Sauros and Philip and Hilda, whose presences were typically scarce, were also in attendance.

The party was being held in the same dining hall we always used. It was beautifully decorated for the occasion, with an assortment of fancy food I had never seen before lining the tables. Of course, not to the extent of what I saw at Eris’s party, but while the spread was not as pretentious, there was a warmth to it.

I made a face like I didn’t know what was happening and looked around the room. “Wh-what’s this…?” Behind me, Ghislaine was clapping. “Eh? Huh?” I acted flustered.

“Rudeus! Happy birthday!” Eris wore a bright red dress and had a large bouquet of flowers in her arms.

I kept the dumbfounded look on my face as I accepted them from her. “Oh, that’s right. I turn ten today.” I recited the lines just as I had practiced them, as if I had only just realized it was my birthday.

Then, just as I had planned, I scrunched my face up and covered my eyes with my sleeve. At the same time, I used water magic to make tears well from my eyes. After a few moments I sniffed.

“I-I’m sorry. I-I just, this is… This is the first time since I came here… I kept thinking I couldn’t screw up, that I wasn’t welcome here… That if I screwed up, it would just cause issues for my father… I never thought you all would celebrate like this for me. *Sniff…*”

I lifted my sleeve to check out their reactions, only to see Eris looking gobsmacked. Philip and Sauros and all the others in the room had ceased clapping. They all stood with their mouths agape.

Crap. Was my acting too corny, I wondered.

No, that wasn't it. It was the opposite. It was *too* good.

I screwed up, I should have acted with moderation. *Sigh.* I really was a terrible adult for concocting this plan in the first place. Ah well, too late, best to continue as I had planned.

Flustered, Eris turned to the butler asking, "What should I do??"

Were my tears that big a deal? Her reaction was so cute that I put my arms around her. Then, in a nasally voice, I whispered words of gratitude in her ear. "Eris, thank you."

"N-no big deal! Y-you're family after all! It's obvious I'd do this! Th-this is nothing to the Greyrat family, r-right, father! Grandfather!"

Normally, she'd say something like, "You better be grateful!" But instead she was making excuses and looking to Philip for backup.

That was when Sauros rose up, barking: "W-war! We'll go to war with Notos! We'll kill Pilemon and install Rudeus as the head of the family! Philip! Alphoooonse!!! Ghislaaaaine! Follow me! Let's gather the troops!"

And thus dawned the inter-family war between the Boreas Greyrat and Notos Greyrat households. It was a bloody feud that enveloped the remaining two Greyrat branch families as well, pulling the whole of the Asura Kingdom into what would become a long, drawn-out civil war.

No, of course not. That didn't happen.

"F-Father, restrain yourself! Please, restrain yourself!"

"Philiiiip! Do you plan to stand in my way?! You bastard! Surely you, too, think Rudeus would be a more fitting head of household than that ridiculous buffoon?!"

“Yes, of course I do, but calm down! Today is a day of celebration! Plus, war isn’t a good thing, we would be making enemies of both Zephyros and Euros!”

“You fool! I’ll defeat everyone by myself! Release me, release meeeee!” Sauros left the room, dragging Philip behind him. Even after he was gone, I could still hear his voice.

I was dumbfounded.

“A-ahem,” Eris cleared her throat once. “Leaving Grandfather aside for the moment, I prepared something for today that will surprise you, Rudeus!” She flushed red as she giggled and puffed out her chest in pride.

It was adorable. She recently began wearing bras now that her breasts had started growing. Right now, they were just cute, but some day they would grow into something incredible. Or so said the Wise Old Hermit. Thanks, Wise Old Hermit.

“Something that will surprise me?” I echoed back.

“What do you think it is?!”

Something that would surprise me… What could it be? Something that I would enjoy… A laptop and an erotic game? No, no. I had to think of something that Eris seemed likely to come up with.

I considered my current situation. I was away from my parents and had been alone for several years. She probably thought I was lonely, especially since it was my birthday.

If it were Eris, what would she want? For Ghislaine or her grandfather to come celebrate with her, right? If I applied that to me, then…

“Don’t tell me, my father’s here…?”

Her face clouded over as soon as I said that. Not just hers, but the maids’ and butlers’ faces as well. It was a look of pity. An incorrect guess.

“M-Mister Paul…couldn’t come because monsters have become more active in the forest lately, he said. B-but he said you didn’t need him here anyway. As for Miss Zenith, she said the two young ones suddenly fell ill with a fever so she couldn’t come either.” Eris gave a choppy explanation.

Ahh. So, they did invite them. Well, it couldn’t be helped. The village relied on Paul quite a bit, and if both the girls were sick, Zenith couldn’t leave their care solely to Lilia. It would have been nice to see them again, since it had been so long, but oh well.

“U-uh, um, Rudeus. You know, um…” Eris started stumbling over her words again. It was cute, like a cat that got itself into trouble after acting so tough all the time.

But don’t worry, I thought. *It’s better if Paul’s not here.*

“Oh, I see. So my father and mother didn’t come then.” I meant to sound like I didn’t mind, but since I had just stopped crying, my voice was all nasally. I probably sounded completely dejected instead.

One of the maids sniffled.

I’d screwed up big time. I hadn’t meant to make the atmosphere so glum. *Sorry, guys, looks like I can’t read the atmosphere after all.*

Just as I thought that, Hilda dashed over and took me in her arms. I dropped the bouquet of flowers I was holding by accident. “Argh!”

I barely spoke with Hilda. She had the same red hair as Eris and had the aura of a widow still at the prime of her youth, radiating raw sexuality. Someone who might appear in an erotic game with “young wife” or “widow” in the title. Of course, she wasn’t a widow so long as Philip was alive.

She shouted as she squeezed me tightly. “It’s all right, Rudeus, you can calm down. You’re part of our family now!”

Huh? Didn't she hate me?

"I won't hear any complaints! You'll be our adopted… No, marry Eris! That's right! That's a great idea! Do that!"

"M-Mother?!"

Hilda had taken leave of her senses. Marriage, she said. Even Eris was surprised.

"Eris! Do you have a problem with our Rudeus?!"

"He's only ten!"

"Age has nothing to do with it! Now stop making excuses and spend that time refining yourself as a lady!"

"That's what I'm doing!"

Hilda was on a rampage, with Eris firing back. I was told she married into the family, but I guess she was still a Greyrat through and through. She had the same wild presence as Sauros.

"Okay, okay, let's do this some other time."

"Argh! Darling! What are you doing! Unhand me! That poor child, I have to save him!"

Philip gracefully escorted his wife from the scene after he returned from restraining Sauros. Whenever a situation developed, he would address it with glacial composure while everyone else stood dumbfounded. He was cool, like a master magician. A man you could rely on, someone you could consult with about anything.

"So, what is it? The surprise you were talking about," I inquired, after picking the bouquet off the floor.

Eris folded her arms, puffed out her chest, and stuck out her chin. It had been a while since I last saw this pose.

"Hmph! Alphonse! Bring it here!" She snapped her fingers as if to make a sharp, assertive sound, but it came out dull and flat. Her

cheeks flushed, but Alphonse seemed unperturbed as he produced a staff from the shadows of a sculpture.

A staff, the same one that Roxy had used. A magician's staff. One made of gnarled, knobby wood. At its tip was a large, costly-looking magical crystal. The moment I saw it I knew. That staff was *expensive*. I knew because I had made two wands myself.

The rank of a staff was determined by the wood and the stone at its tip. Each type of magic had a certain affinity with different types of wood. Fire and earth spells matched best with persimmon wood, while water and wind matched best with pagoda wood.

But even if the affinities didn't match, it didn't mean the power of a spell was diminished. The important thing wasn't the wood, but the magical crystal. Channeling magic through the crystal increased the potency of a spell. There were many grades of crystal, but the larger and more transparent, the more effective it was. A crystal's price increased astronomically with its effectiveness.

The crystals I used to make Eris and Ghislaine's wands were worth a silver coin apiece. There were cheaper ones, but I remembered the approximate size of the wand Roxy gave me and selected something similar. They were about as big as the tip of my smallest finger.

This one was as big as a fist and was easily worth over a hundred gold coins. Especially with its ultramarine hue. A crystal with color to it greatly increased the potency of its magic.

Just how much did she spend on that thing? I wondered.

Incidentally, the magic-imbued crystals found in labyrinths didn't have an amplifying effect. Instead, they carried magic power of their own, so they were either used in magical items or used to supplement a person's mana cost when using a powerful spell.

"It seems you've taken a liking to it!" Eris said with a nod of satisfaction as I examined it. "Alphonse, explain!"

“Yes, my lady. The wood for this cane comes from the branch of a living elder treant in the eastern part of the great forest on the Millis Continent. I’m sure you are already aware of this from your extensive learning, Lord Rudeus, but it is said that an elder treant is a higher subspecies of the lesser treant, born from the nourishment of the fairy spring. It’s an A-rank magical creature that can manipulate water magic. The crystal comes from the northern part of the Begaritt Continent, from a wayward sea dragon. Another A-rank item. The crafter is Chein Procyon, the greatest staff craftsman, the Rod Director in the Asuran Royal Palace’s Mage Guild.”

Incredible. It seemed to be especially made for water magic. But it was expensive, right?

“Please, accept the staff from the Young Mistress.” The staff was passed to Eris, and Eris offered it to me.

I wasn’t going to worry about its cost right now. I told Eris not to spend money frivolously, but it was fine on a day like this. It seemed she ordered it especially for me, so I hadn’t the heart to refuse her. Money existed for things like this.

“Its name is Aqua Heartia—Arrogant Water Dragon King.”

I paused; I felt like I’d just heard something really nerdy.

“Take it! This is a present from the Greyrat family! My father and grandfather requested it! You’re a great magician, Rudeus, so it’s strange for you not to have a staff of your own!”

Eris’s voice brought me back to my senses and I accepted Aqua Heartia.

Contrary to its appearance, it was quite lightweight. I took it in both hands and swung it around. It was easy to lift and flip. Despite the large crystal at its tip, it was balanced well. No surprise there, given how expensive it was. Though the name was a bit…special.

“Thank you. For the party, and for giving me such an expensive gift.”



“Don’t worry about the price! Now quickly, let’s resume the party or the feast we prepared will get cold!” Eris was in a good mood as she tugged at me, guiding me to the birthday seat that had been installed in front of a gigantic cake. “I helped too!”

Other than Eris’s first home-cooked dishes, which were atrocious, the rest of the food was delicious.

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Once the party started, Eris’s mouth went off like a machine gun, talking about the cooking and the staff. I gave short responses as I listened, but midway through her words began to slow. Perhaps it was the exhaustion. She spoke less and less, beginning to mumble until she finally dozed off.

I wasn’t sure if it was because she was exhausted from the excitement, or because her nervousness had finally lifted. Either way, Ghislaine carried Eris off like a princess so she could sleep in her own room.

Sleep well, I thought.

Sauros and Hilda returned partway through the party. Sauros turned sullen after Philip intervened when he tried giving me alcohol. Hilda poured the old man some instead, and eventually he got utterly smashed. He left for his own room with a drunken smile and red tinge to his cheeks, laughing merrily.

Hilda leaned over and gave me a final kiss goodnight before retiring to her own quarters. Most of the food had been polished off by that point. The maids cleared the last of the empty plates with sleepy looks on their faces.

That left only Philip and me. For a while Philip just quietly knocked back his drink. Wine, I guessed. I learned during Eris’s

birthday that each region of the Asura Kingdom had its own form of alcohol. In this area it was largely made from wheat, but wine from grapes would be prepared for special occasions.

Philip hadn't talked much during the party. He had admonished Sauros and Hilda, but otherwise spent most of the time watching over us with a smile on his face. It was now, when the two of us were left alone, that he let the words flow. "I lost the battle to become head of the family. Right now, Eris is my only child."

So, it was going to be a serious conversation. I adjusted my posture and gazed intently at him.

"Don't you wonder why it is that Eris has no brothers or sisters?"

I nodded quietly. "A little." I was curious, but I was never able to ask about it.

"The truth is, it's not that she doesn't have any. She has an older brother and a younger brother. Her younger brother is probably about the same age as you, I think?"

"Was he killed in the battle to become head of the family?"

Philip looked at me, shocked; I'd asked the question a little too directly. "No, of course not. He's not dead. He was taken to the imperial capital by my elder brother as soon as he was born."

"Taken? What do you mean?" I pressed.

"On the surface, he took him there as an adopted son to let him study. The truth is…it's a tradition, I suppose."

Philip explained the Boreas family's tradition, one that was connected to the battle to become the head of family.

Sauros had ten sons. Among them only three were exceptional: Philip, Gordon, and finally, James. It sounded like the name of a certain locomotive.

To decide who would be the head of family among these three, they were made to compete. The result was that James would become the next head of the family. Philip and Gordon had lost.

During the first half of the power struggle, James first secretly pulled Gordon and the daughter of the Euros Greyrat family together. He maneuvered things so neither one would know the other's background then fanned the flames of their love. Gordon became too focused on that romance, and just as James had planned, married into the Euros branch of the family. That effectively cut off his path to becoming head of the Boreas family.

In the latter half of the struggle, Philip and James were evenly matched. They continued to fight by manipulating people from behind the scenes.

But it wasn't like some dramatic development occurred. The battle simply ended with Philip's defeat. It was a matter of influence. James was six years older than Philip, widely known throughout the capital, and had served as a minister's aide. He had connections, money, and, more than anything, political power.

Philip was an excellent candidate, but that six-year gap was nearly impossible to overcome. Once James became the head of the household, he made Philip the mayor of Roa. At that time, Philip had yet to give up. He tried to formulate a comeback strategy, but the lands in Fittoa were largely rural, making it difficult to build political power.

While Philip was breaking his back trying to do what he could, James stayed in the capital and built himself a rock-solid position as minister. That made the gap between them impossible to bridge. Then, when Philip's son was born, James claimed him as an adopted son.

"Isn't it a bit tyrannical of him to take all of your sons from you?"

“No, it’s fine. That’s the tradition.”

In the Boreas Greyrat line, all sons born into the family were raised under the care of the head of the household. This prevented those who had lost in previous power struggles from participating in future ones. It ensured they would not involve themselves to boost their own son’s influence in the next struggle for power.

This was a common issue, a problem that occurred all over Asura Kingdom. Apparently, the Euros family which Gordon married into had a different tradition, but Philip obeyed the Boreas tradition and surrendered all his sons to James while they were still young and had no awareness of the world. The only father they would recognize was James.

“The situation would have been reversed if I had won.” The way Philip calmly accepted the situation made me think he may not have been Sauros’s true-born child after all.

The same could not be said for his wife. Hilda was from a normal noble family. Having her newborn baby taken from her wasn’t something she could so calmly accept. In the aftermath of losing her oldest son, she fell into depression for quite a while. Once Eris was born, she seemed to recover, but when Eris’s younger brother was taken, she became unstable again.

“She hated you. After all, why did the son of an outsider get to parade around here as if he owned the place, when her own sons couldn’t even do that?”

I had already figured out that she hated me. At least now I knew she had a reason for it.

“Plus, our only remaining child, Eris, turned out to be a tomboy instead of a lady. I thought all hope was lost.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It would be difficult to try to use Eris to overthrow James.”

By overthrow did he mean…? Ah, he still hadn't given up on becoming the head of the family.

"But lately, after seeing you, I've started to feel a little bit of hope."

"Huh?"

"Your acting is good enough to deceive even Hilda and my father."

So, he noticed I was putting on a show. But the word "deceive" didn't have a very nice ring to it. I just tried to act in a way that wouldn't make things unpleasant.

Philip continued, "You understand the importance of money, and you know how to be diplomatic. And you don't balk at the necessity of putting yourself in harm's way to win over people's hearts."

He was probably referring to the kidnapping incident. Or the fact that I stuck around even though someone my age (Eris) was punching me all the time.

"But most of all, Eris has grown tremendously under your supervision." Philip sounded like he never could never imagined this.

He had heard how exceptional I was from Paul, but as the son of someone who spent all his time flipping skirts at my age, he probably thought I would be the same type of delinquent. He figured something interesting might happen by pitting his unruly daughter against me, like observing the chemical reactions of a science experiment. Apparently, that was about as far as he'd imagined it.

"I can still remember the day when Paul came running here crying," Philip muttered to himself.

I asked Philip to explain, who said Paul came crying because he was going to get married but didn't have the money to afford a place and needed a stable job. Yet at the same time Paul didn't want to

return to his noble family. Apparently, he got on his knees for my sake, something he didn't do even when the incident with Lilia happened. Well, that was in the past, anyway.

"Wouldn't Eris have found a way even without me here?"

"Found a way? Of course not. Even I thought Eris was hopeless. I thought she had no future as a member of a noble family. That was why I hired Ghislaine to teach her swordplay so that she might at least become an adventurer." After he said that, Philip recounted several of his past episodes with Eris, every single one painful to listen to.

"So how about it? Will you marry Eris and help me seize control of the Boreas family? If so, I'll tie her hands and put her in your bed right now."

That was a tantalizing offer… My mind conjured the image of getting a pop-up screen like in a game, saying, "Are you sure you sure you want to dispose of this (your virginity)? Once it's gone, it will be gone forever!"

No, no, wait, wait, wait! This is no joke. Read the previous line again, I commanded myself. *Seize control of the Boreas family?*

"What are you trying to make me do? I'm ten!"

"You're also Paul's child, are you not?"

"I'm not talking about that!"

"I will be the one to seize control of the family. All you must do is take the seat. If you want women, I'll give them to you."

Did he really think I would listen just because he said he'd give me women? Paul's bad reputation truly was loathsome.

"I'll pretend you said all this because you're drunk."

Philip laughed quietly when I said that. "That's right, go ahead and do that. All that stuff about the Boreas family aside, you're free to pursue whatever relationship you want with Eris, you know? I

have no responsibility for her. Even if I did marry her off, she would surely come right back. I would prefer to hand her over to you instead." Another muted laugh.

If he married Eris off, she would probably punch her husband to death within a couple of days. I could picture it easily. Just as easily as I could picture myself dancing to Philip's tune if I took him up on that offer.

"All right, it's about time to sleep then."

"Yes, good night," I responded.

So ended the birthday party that Eris had staged for me.

***

When I returned to my room, Eris, who should have been asleep, was sitting on my bed.

"Oh, w-welcome back!" She was wearing a red negligee. Extremely sexy.

I was sure she had never worn anything like this before. What was going on? Also, wasn't she supposed to be asleep?

"What are you doing here at this hour?"

When I asked, her cheeks burned red and she averted her eyes. "I-I thought you would be lonely by yourself, so I was going to sleep with you tonight!"

Apparently, she was still worried about what I said during the party, about whether my parents were coming. After all, she was still clinging to her parents at age twelve. Maybe imagining being without them for three years spurred her into coming here.

No. Unlikely as it seemed, it was possible this was Hilda's idea. Maybe she roused Eris, forced her to change, and sent her over here.

"…"

I took a second, hard look at Eris. Her body had not yet fully matured, but it was beginning to. Probably because of all the sword practice, her arms and legs were well toned. Whether it was because she was taller than the average girl or the negligee she was wearing, she also looked more grown-up than usual.

Eris was already twelve after all. She was barely entering my strike zone.

My body was still immature as well. I had yet to hit puberty, though it would surely be upon me in a few years. Maybe then I would welcome the opportunity to pop my cherry with this spoiled, tsundere loli.

The moment that thought crossed my mind I felt like that thirty-four-year-old, homeless, jobless pervert again. I saw an image of him with his face covered in acne and lips set in a disgusting smile, swooping down on Eris.

I snapped back to my senses. No, I couldn't. I couldn't touch her. That would be playing right into Philip's hand. I would be planting my foot right in the middle of an intense power struggle. The same one Philip had already lost and Paul had run away from.

I didn't want to get involved in something that seemed to have so few payoffs. So I just prayed I could get out of this peacefully.

She loathed my habitual sexual harassment, so maybe I could say something to that effect to scare her off? "Th-that's right! I'm feeling pretty lonely, so if you don't leave I might do something perverted to you!"

Or so I thought, but then I received an unlikely response.

"Y-you can do it. J-just a little bit!"

Seriously?!

You're really being bold today, Eris! You're really being bold today, Eris! How's an old man like me supposed to resist when you put it like that? What to do…

I debated internally and finally decided to take her up on her offer. Just a little.

"…"

I sat beside her. The bed let out a small creak. If I were still my previous self, it would've surely let out a much larger groan, effectively killing the mood.

I wasn't thinking anymore, not about any of that complicated stuff. This was playing into Philip's hands? Fine then. Three years ago, Eris had been so tsun, but now she was finally showing me her dere side. How could I refuse when she was offering herself willingly? At times like these it was best to just accept the risk and take the plunge, right?

"You're stuttering," I said.

"Th-that's just your imagination."

"Really?"

I petted her head. Her hair was so smooth. Even though this was a high noble family, there was no bath in the manor, so it wasn't as if you could wash your hair every day. Her hair was normally coarse and rough from spending every day outside practicing swordplay from morning until dusk. She must have cleaned it up today for me. For *me*.

"You look so cute."

"Wh-what are you talking about all of a sudden?"

She looked away, her face red to her ears. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Hngh!" Her body went stiff, but she didn't try to run.

Ah, so she really is okay with this? I thought. She was definitely the type to run if she didn't like something.

"I'm going to touch you now." Unable to hold myself back, I reached for her chest. The lumps were still small, but they were definitely breasts. Being able to touch these was proof she had given me permission. Not like all the times before when I had reached out in trepidation, fully prepared to be punched as I groped them. It was through a layer of clothing, but there was no doubt that I had true loli breasts in my small hands right now.

"Mm…"

It wasn't pleasure that made her hum, I was sure. She was just realizing how embarrassing what we were doing really was. I knew that. She was watching me with her lips clamped tightly together, tears in her eyes as she struggled to tamp down her embarrassment and confusion.

I stroked her back comfortingly. Thanks to all her sword training, it was firm with muscle. Not as much as Ghislaine's, of course, but well-toned and smooth.

Eris snapped her eyes shut and grabbed my shoulders like she was clinging to me. Did this, perhaps, mean she was giving me the okay? She was, right? If so, I was going to go the whole way. Right now.

O-okay, let's d-do it then, I thought.

I reached my hand toward the inside of her thigh. This would be my first time ever touching a girl there. It was warm and soft, of course, but firm with muscle.

"Nooo!"

She shoved me away. Then slapped me across the cheek, loud and hard. I landed on the floor with a thump after being kicked. She continued her attack, the sounds of her blows filling the room.

Rendered completely defenseless by my own confusion, I took the full force of her attack. Once it was over, I looked up at her, flat on my back.

Eris was standing over me. Her cheeks were red. She was glaring at me. “I told you just a little, didn’t I?! You moron!” The door was left hanging wide open after she kicked it and marched out.

***

I stared blankly at the ceiling. The feverish heat that had taken over had dissipated completely.

“This is why you’re a virgin.”

I was filled with self-loathing. I completely misread the atmosphere. I went way too fast. Halfway through, I forgot that she was still a child.

I completely forgot myself.

“Ah, dammit, what were you thinking?!”

After playing so many erotic games, I thought maybe I understood how the heroines felt. In my previous life I used to watch thickheaded protagonists be oblivious, and I would think to myself, *Just hurry up and make your move, then it’ll be over.*

What I’d just done was the result of that thinking. As a player, you could see the heroine’s internal dialogue. The protagonist, meanwhile, had no idea what she was thinking. That was why most protagonists were aware something like this could happen, even if they knew the other person liked them. So they took their time and slowly developed the relationship instead.

I was being completely short-sighted compared to them. Especially after I’d had that conversation with Philip. What was I thinking, saying I would pretend he only said all that because he was

drunk? The things I said and the things I did were in complete contradiction.

I knew what would happen if I had sex with Eris. We would sleep together, she would get pregnant, we would get married. A grand series of events that would make me an official member of the Boreas household. Or, after all that, would I come to hate the ugly power struggle that followed so much that I would run away? Would I plan not to take responsibility for my actions? Was I just going to pass it off as a one-night stand?

Foolish. I would no doubt end up going after Eris every night. My sex drive was quite strong in my previous life, and I had a feeling, without even looking at Paul as an example, that it might be the same for my current body. There was no way I would be satisfied by a one-time thing. She may have come to me today, but the next time I would be the one going to her.

Philip and Hilda surely hoped for that. No one would stop me. I would take the bait of temporary gratification and fall into the filthy trap that was the Boreas household's inner power struggle.

"Ah!" The staff standing in the corner of the room caught my eye.

I couldn't forget Eris's feelings either. The money may have come from Philip and Sauros, but she was the one who planned the party for me and came up with the idea of giving me that staff. She was the one who worried over our conversation at the party and came here to comfort me tonight before I fell asleep. She thought about me all day long today.

Yet a moment ago, I'd been about to violate her out of lust. There was a girl who genuinely considered my feelings as a person, and I tried to have my way with her.

Remember how happy she looked when she was talking with that maid before? You just tried to trample all over that.

“Haha…”

I was a piece of crap. I had no right to judge Paul. I had no right to lecture anyone. I was a piece of crap in my previous life and nothing had changed in coming to another world. Tomorrow I would gather my things and leave. I would go die on the roadside like the garbage I was.

“Ah!”

I suddenly realized that Eris was standing in the doorway. Only part of her body was visible, her face peeking out from behind the frame.

I panicked and tried sitting up, no stand… No! Should I just prostrate myself!

“I-I’m sorry about what just happened.” I balled up like a turtle, prostrating myself before her.

“…”

I peeked up.

Eris’s gaze was drifting as she fidgeted, her legs brushing against each other with the motion. Then she slowly whispered, “T-today’s a special day, so I’ll make an exception and forgive you.”

Sh-she forgave me!

“Besides, I already know you’re a pervert.”

Who the hell told her that!

No, it was true though. I was the one. I was the pervert. It was my fault. *Everyone look over here. It’s me, the pervert*.

“But, i-it’s still too early for us to do *that*, so…five years! In five years, once you’ve grown up properly, then…*mumblemumble*…b-but until then, hold it in!”

“Hahah!” I slumped forward.

“W-well then, I’m going back to bed. Bye, Rudeus. Good night. I’ll see you again tomorrow.” After that choppy, disordered farewell, Eris vanished from view. I could hear the rhythm of her footsteps as she took off.

I waited until the sound faded completely before I shut the door. “Pheeeeeew.” I slumped against the door and slid down. “Thank God!”

I was glad today was my birthday. I was glad today was a special day. I was glad I didn’t do something worse than what I did.

“And yeeeees!”

Five years from now. A definite promise! From Eris! A promise!

All right, no more insincere advances until then, I told myself.

Five years. I would be fifteen. It was still a long time away, but I could hold out. If there was a guaranteed prize at the end, I could work hard. Until then, I would be a gentleman. Not a pervert, but a gentleman. I would stop all the sexual advances.

Wine only had a depth to its taste after you let it sit for years. A charged attack had more power behind it the longer let it build up after all. I would become the kind of man that wouldn’t yield no matter what kind of temptation I encountered. This time, I would aim to be that thick-headed protagonist. I would hold down the A button and not release it until those five years had passed. That was the promise I made to myself.

Lolita good, touching bad.

Wait, five years from now…? The thick-headed protagonist? An image of Sylphie’s pale, angelic face and sweet smile suddenly popped into the back of my head.

***

The next morning, I woke up to crusty underwear. Apparently, I had accidentally released the A button. Oh well, I would just have to start again tomorrow.

I had a word with the maid who came to collect our laundry and asked her to keep quiet about this so Eris didn't find out. She giggled with a look of mirth in her eyes. It was a little embarrassing.

***

NAME: Eris B. Greyrat

OCCUPATION: Granddaughter of Fittoa's liege lord

PERSONALITY: Sometimes violent, sometimes meek, depending on the situation

DOES: Listen properly

READING/WRITING: Almost perfect

ARITHMETIC: Capable of doing division

MAGIC: Can't do any spells without chanting them, Intermediate-tier spells also a challenge

FENCING: Sword God Style - Advanced-tier

ETIQUETTE: Currently studying difficult imperial court etiquette

PEOPLE SHE LIKES: Grandfather, Ghislaine

PERSON SHE LOVES: Rudeus

Chapter 8: The Turning Point

Shirone Kingdom.

Roxy Migurdia looked out the window with her brows knitted. The color of the sky was strange. Brown, black, purple, and yellow; a change of colors one didn't usually see. And yet, she had seen these colors somewhere before.

"What is it, I wonder?"

The hues were familiar to her, but she had never seen the sky like this before. The only thing clear was that this wasn't a natural phenomenon.

The most likely explanation was magic that, for whatever reason, had gone out of control. The scale of it was such that she could see it whirling even from a distance.

Then she remembered. The way it shone—she had seen this before at the University of Magic. The light looked like summoning magic.

"That direction… In the east. Asura Kingdom? Don't tell me it's Rudeus?" She remembered the boy she had once taken as a pupil. That boy who, at the tender age of five, produced a storm while utterly composed. Now he would be ten. At half his age he had complete control of his bottomless pool of mana, so it was possible he might do something like this.

In his most recent letter, he wrote of his difficulties studying summoning magic. Maybe he had somehow obtained a book on it, or perhaps found a teacher.

"You're wide open!"

As she was deep in thought someone threw their arms around her from behind. As her breasts were grabbed, she felt something hard press against her thighs.

“Hnnngh…”

Roxy was fed up. No matter how he groped her, the thickness of her robes masked everything. Besides, even if he got pleasure out of doing this, the only thing *she* felt was displeasure.

“Raging flames consume my body—Burn in Place!”

“Gyaah!”

The force of the flames that covered her body sent the person behind her flying. She still couldn’t cast spells without chanting them at all, but she had shortened the length of her spells greatly in these past five years. When she learned that Rudeus was teaching his own pupils to cast spells without chanting, she decided to practice shortening her own incantations. It hadn’t been easy. Just how much was that boy genius expecting from his pupils? Not everyone was as blessed with talent as he was.

Roxy turned and gazed at the boy collapsed on the floor. “Your Highness, you can’t come up behind a woman and just start groping her chest.”

“Roxy! Were you trying to kill me?! I’ll have you thrown in prison!”

Shirone Kingdom’s seventh prince, Pax Shirone, was a kid with a bad attitude who had just turned fifteen. His bad behavior was endearing at first, but lately he had developed a real interest in sex and would make sexual advances toward Roxy every afternoon.

“My apologies. I didn’t realize such a weak attack would be fatal. You must have the constitution of an insect.”

“Grrr! Criminal disrespect! I won’t forgive this! If you want my forgiveness, then roll up your robes and let me see your panties!”

“I’ll pass.”

He had already put his hands on multiple maids, leaving the king troubled over how to handle the situation. Now it seemed he had turned his attention to his curt household tutor.

Just what about a rude girl like her did he find appealing? Roxy didn’t understand. Still, no matter how much he came at her, she had no reason to obey his commands. According to the contract she made with the country’s governing party, no matter what selfish demands the prince made, it was up to her discretion on how to handle him.

There weren’t many living in this castle that would obey his orders directly. Besides, he was the seventh prince. He was low in the line of succession, so he had next to no authority. In fact, if you looked at the privileges afforded to them, Roxy was in a much higher position as an imperial court magician.

The prince tried a different approach. “Roxy, I already know. I know that you have a lover!”

“I see, and just when did I manage to do something as incredible as finding a lover?” she replied to his sudden gibberish, tilting her head. A lover? She did want one at some point, but she had yet to meet her ideal match. Even if she did, with the way she looked as a member of the Migurd race, he surely wouldn’t reciprocate. She had already given up.

The prince was odd himself, which was probably why he wanted a taste of her body, even if just once. But Roxy had no intention of being so easily seduced.

“Eheheh, I slipped into your room and found all those letters you had piled up in the back of your shelf! I don’t know what kind of backwoods peasant he is, but with my power I could have him crushed! If you don’t want to see him face a cruel execution, you better become my woman!”

So *this* was his other method. He would take hostage the lover of the person he was interested in, then demand the object of his affection submit to him to keep their lover safe. After that he would take her in front of her lover just so he could feel empowered by dominating another person.

He had no such authority. Yet he was still the prince of a country. He had some troops of his own that he could do what he wanted with, and there was a rumor that he had taken one maid's lover hostage before.

Such poor taste. All he does is creep me out, Roxy thought. *I'm glad I don't have a lover.* All those letters were from Rudeus. Rudeus, who was a respected pupil and *not* her lover.

"Feel free to do so," she told him.

"What?! I really will do it, you know?! If you want to apologize, you better do it now! If you do it now, all you'll have to give me is your body!"

The prince clearly wasn't thinking. He didn't even know Rudeus's location in the first place. Based on his attitude, he hadn't read the contents of any of those letters either.

"If you can actually succeed in doing something to Rudeus, then you can have your way with my body."

"What are you acting so confident for? You should know what kind of power I have!"

Of course she knew. She knew that the little bit of power afforded to him as a prince of the royal family was barely worth snorting at.

"Rudeus is under the protection of the Boreas family, an elite noble family in Asura Kingdom."

"Boreas…? As if nobles could stand up to the authority of a member of the royal family!"

He didn't even know the names of the elite royal families in Asura Kingdom. That realization prompted a sigh from Roxy. Had the other tutors even taught him anything?

As the four great regional liege lords, the Notos, Euros, Zepiroth, and Boreas families were of great renown. When the Asura Kingdom entered battle, they were the ones standing on the front lines. They had been military men for generations upon generations. Besides, members of those elite noble families might occasionally travel to Shirone on diplomatic engagements. Those names were definitely worth remembering.

"The country of Asura is ten times the size of Shirone. To take the child of an elite noble family on some baseless suspicion and escort them to the gallows, you would have to possess a tremendous amount of political power and strategic skills. That's impossible for you, Your Highness."

"I-I'll have him assassinated! I'll send my imperial guards!"

Imperial guards? Roxy sighed inwardly. He really wasn't thinking this through at all. "There's no way your guards could cross the country's border. Even if they could, and the chance would be one in a million, the Boreas family has invited Sword King Ghislaine to their house as a guest. You truly think they could sneak into the Citadel of Roa, into the Boreas manor, slip past Ghislaine's watchful eye, and assassinate a master magician?"

"G-grrr!" The prince ground his teeth together and stomped his feet.

Roxy let yet another sigh slip past her lips. *Ah, I can't believe this. He's already fifteen and he doesn't even know the first thing about distinguishing between what's possible and what's not.*

Roxy heard that Rudeus's pupil, Eris, had been an uncontainable wild animal three years ago, but had recently become more refined. Meanwhile, her student was in this sorry state.

Years ago, she had found him endearing and even recognized his talent for magic. Unfortunately, as soon as he realized what kind of power he had, his will to improve vanished and he spent the better part of his lessons sleeping. Now she saw no potential in him.

“Anyway, I’ll be quitting my position as your tutor soon, so you wouldn’t make it in time even if you sent assassins out right this very minute.”

As soon as she said that, he raised his voice in shock. “Wh-whaaat?! I haven’t heard a word about this!”

“You must not remember then.”

The agreement from the beginning was that she would work as his tutor until he reached maturity. At the time she had considered requesting to stay beyond her contract. However, there were many in the royal palace who resented her presence. Leaving was the wisest course of action.

“It’s a good opportunity as well,” she added.

“A good opportunity for what?”

“There’s something strange about the western sky. Now I can go see it for myself.”

“Wh-what the heck…”

She didn’t say it was because she wanted to see Rudeus’s face after all this time. It would only enrage the prince if she did.

“I-I still need you! We’re still in the middle of our lessons, right!”

“Irrelevant. You sleep through them anyway.”

“That’s your fault for not waking me up then!”

“Oh really? Then as a bad teacher, I should take my leave quickly. Please be sure to hire someone who will wake you next time. I’m not interested.”

This prince is impossible for me, Roxy thought. *I can't stop comparing him to Rudeus. All I had to do was teach Rudeus one thing and he would take that, study it, and learn ten or twenty new things. Maybe I can't be a teacher again after meeting a student like that.*

And thus, Roxy left Shirone and set out on her journey. She was accosted by the seventh prince and his personal guards on her way out but swiftly repelled them.

Afterward, the seventh prince obstinately insisted that she should be apprehended and brought before him to answer for the unforgivable act of violence she committed against him. However, the king refused to pay his claims any heed. Instead, the prince was rebuked and severely punished for being unable to convince the Water King-tier magician Roxy Migurdia to stay.

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Roxy was not the only one to notice the change in the sky. Every person in every part of the world took notice both of its abnormality and the abruptness of its appearance. Even those of wide renown took note.

The Red Wyrm Mountains

The Dragon God Orsted gazed up at the western sky.

"Mana is pooling there? What is it, what's caused this madness?" he scowled with suspicion. "No matter. I'll know once I see it for myself."

He headed straight west, passing over the corpse of the red wyrm he had just slain with a single attack. Other red wyrms were

swarming the area like a drove of insects, but not a single one tried to involve themselves. They knew what manner of being walked the ground below them. They knew that even if they banded together to attack, they would only be killed. They also knew that if they stayed clear, they would be safe.

That being was the Dragon God, a being that existed outside the rules of this world. A being they could not touch.

Full of pride, another young wyrm that didn't understand its place in the world descended upon Orsted. In a split second it was rendered into nothing more than a lump of meat.

Red wyrms were dreadfully strong creatures that resided on the Central Continent. It was not just their battle prowess that made them fearsome, but also their intelligence. That was why they knew he was the man rumored to be the strongest in the world, and an opponent they could not hope to defeat no matter how much their numbers favored them.

Orsted moved slowly down the mountain as the red wyrms watched, his intentions a secret that only he was privy to.

The Floating Fortress

The Armored Dragon Perugius, one of the three legendary heroes, looked down at the northern sky.

"What is that? It looks like the light emitted when the Great Emperor of the Demon World revives."

Standing nearby was a woman with a white crow's mask over her face, a member of the skyfolk who possessed black wings. She whispered, "The mana level is different."

"Indeed. If anything, it resembles the color of a summoning."

“Yes, but that said, I’ve never seen that much light from a summoning before.”

“It’s similar to when we created Chaos Breaker.”

Perugius had to act.

He had spent today just like any other, seated atop his throne in Chaos Breaker, attended by his twelve followers, continuing to monitor the surface. He had only one objective, to vanquish his loathsome enemy, the Demon God Laplace, as soon as they revived. He waited in the sky for that moment when the seal would come undone.

“Could it be that the Great Emperor of the Demon World is trying to unseal Laplace?”

“It’s possible. The Emperor has been unsettlingly quiet in the 300 years since their revival,” she responded.

“All right. Arumanfi!”

“I am here.” A man swathed in white and wearing a yellow mask appeared and kneeled before Perugius.

“Search immediately and—hmm, I’m certain whoever is behind this must be up to something. If you see anyone suspicious that seems to be involved with this, kill them.”

“Understood.”

The Armored Dragon Perugius made his move, his twelve retainers behind him. All to avenge the four friends that he had lost. This time, for certain, he would deal the Demon God Laplace a finishing blow.

The Sword Sanctum

The Sword God Gall Falion gazed up at the southern sky.

“What’s wrong with the sky? Also…” The moment his focus shifted to something else, two of his beloved pupils launched an attack on him at the same time. “Don’t come at me while I’ve got my attention on other things.”

His composure was relaxed. In comparison, both of his beloved pupils were short of breath.

As usual the two had no sense, he thought. They were overconfident from having earned the title of Sword Emperor, yet this was all it amounted to. What a load of crap. Fame had no place in swordplay. All you needed to do was get stronger. The only thing fame brought you was money and political power. There was no value in that. Anyone could obtain those things. Being as great as he was, he could cut right through that garbage in a single stroke. If you were strong, you could have things your way. Having things your way was how you stayed alive.

Ghislaine understood that best, but she had grown soft. That was why she was stuck at the level of Sword King. Those with a powerful lust for life were innately strong, no matter how physically weak or incapable of wielding a sword they might be. But those who had become strong could lose that driving force. That was why Ghislaine lost her way. She wasn’t selfish enough.

It wasn’t as though the pupils before him were especially gifted. It was their obscene greed that made them strong. The insatiable appetite of a pair that lived on a life-or-death battlefield.

“Hey, hey, come at me already. Defeat me then battle each other to the death so one of you can call yourself the Sword God! You’ll have enough money to play around for a hundred lifetimes! You’ll be able to line up women, from slave girls to princesses, and have your way with them! Your name alone will bring people to their knees in fear! One step forward and crowds of people will part to make way for you!”

“I didn’t start learning the sword for something like that!”

“Master! Please don’t insult us like that!”

This was it. They were going to learn to be more honest with themselves. For if they did, they would easily be able to crush someone like him and call themselves Sword Gods.

The Sword God Gall Falion had already forgotten about the southern sky.

Somewhere in the Demon Continent

The Great Emperor of the Demon World, Kishirika Kishirisu, gazed up at the eastern sky. “Hmph, when you become as great as I am, you can see things even if you face the opposite direction! How’s that?! Amazing, isn’t it?”

There was no one there to answer her. Not a single person was present.

“So you’re ignoring me! Mwahaha! Very well, very well! I’ll forgive you, humans! Or rather, no one will come near me because of the peace treaty, so I have no choice but to forgive you! Mwahahaha, mwahahaha, mwaha—gurgh…”

Kishirika was lonely.

The moment she had revived from death, she had cried out, “I, the Demon World’s Great Emperor Kishirika, have revived! I must have kept you all waiting! Mwahahaha!” But no one was there. She decided she would go to the city and repeat her declaration, only for people to look at her as if she were a pitiful child. Since then, no one paid her any attention.

She tried visiting one of her old friends, but they simply told her, “Things are peaceful right now, so behave yourself.”

“What are those human diviners even doing? When I revived in the past, they would start trembling in sudden fear, babble weird things, then leap from their windows. Without that opening act, it feels like there’s no value to my revival. Hah, honestly, youngsters these days…”

She kicked at a stone and looked up at the magic pooling in the western sky. Another name of the Great Emperor of the Demon World was the Demon Emperor of Demon Eyes. She possessed more than ten, and in a single glance she could tell what was happening, no matter how far away. With those eyes she saw powerful mana, the familiar light of summoning magic, and the person controlling it.

Or at least, she should have been able to.

“What’s this? I can’t see the one doing this? I wonder if there’s a barrier. You must be a shy one, hiding your face after causing such mayhem.”

Kishirika’s eyes were not all-powerful. That was why she was merely the Great Emperor of the Demon World, and would never be called a Demon God, no matter how much time passed. Not that she was particularly bothered by that.

“It’d be nice if they could at least summon a hero. But lately everyone is all Laplace this and Laplace that. ‘Kishirika? Who’s that?’ So it’s not like it matters. I guess even heroes would rather go for young men with good looks like Laplace. I want some time in the spotlight too. I want to be showered with attention and put on parade!”

She sighed as she set out on her journey. A journey with no particular destination in mind.

At the Same Time - Rudeus’s Perspective

We went to a hill on the outskirts of the Citadel of Roa. As I had promised on my birthday, I was going to show Ghislaine what Saint-tier water magic looked like. Eris, of course, tagged along.

I took out Aqua Heartia and removed the cloth I had wrapped around the crystal just in case. As awkward as it looked, it was better than showing off to potential thieves what an expensive item I had. I had wrapped it to look like a mana-filled cloth for amplifying the magic of the staff. It was at least better than people thinking I was hiding an enormous gem.

I decided to test the staff with a practice shot before trying out Saint-tier water magic. I focused the same amount of mana I always did to create a Waterball, but the result was immense, bigger than I'd ever seen it before.

"Whoa, this is huge!"

When I tried compressing the ball, it instead became so small that you couldn't even see it. I slowly made adjustments. After thirty minutes of testing things out, I figured out that this staff increased the effects of my water magic fivefold. This meant my offensive magic was more potent, and I could produce the same power level with a reduced mana cost.

To represent this with numbers:

Without the Staff: Mana Cost 10, Power 5

With the Staff: Mana Cost 10, Power 25

With the Staff: Mana Cost 2, Power 5

Something like that. In other words, it worked like a magnifying glass or a microscope. Elaborate adjustments were difficult right now, but I would probably be fine once I got accustomed to using the staff.

"H-how is it?" Eris had a nervous look on her face.

Don't worry, I'm officially obsessed with my new toy, I thought. "It's difficult to make adjustments, but it's really amazing."

"R-really! I'm glad!"

I continued testing and discovered that fire magic was amplified twofold while earth and wind were each amplified thrice. Using the staff to combine different types of magic, however, seemed difficult. Or was that also a matter of getting used to it?

"All right then, what you have all been waiting for. I, Rudeus Greyrat, will show you my great, all powerful hidden technique!"

"Yay!" Eris clapped in joy. Ghislaine also seemed deeply interested. I was also feeling excited. Time to show them how cool I was!

"Bwahaha!" I raised my staff toward the sky as I chanted my Saint-tier water magic spell. "Mana, gather to me! Magnificent Spirit of Water, lift to the heavens… Huh?" That was when I noticed it.

"Hm?"

"What's that?"

The other two followed my gaze and looked up as well.

"I don't know, but it's an incredible amount of mana!"

So she could see mana with that eye. After three years I finally knew her true power…a demon eye.

Ghislaine quickly replaced her eyepatch.

"Shall we go back to the city for now?" I didn't know what this abnormal sky heralded, but if something happened, I wanted to have a roof to take refuge under. We'd be in trouble if spears began raining upon us.

"No, the closer you get to the city the more concentrated the mana. It might be better to distance ourselves instead."

“But we have to go back to the manor and warn everyone at least!” Surely it would be better to inform Philip and the others and get the townspeople to safety.

“In that case, I’ll go—Rudeus! Duck!”

I crouched reflexively. Something whooshed by, slicing through the air at top speed right where my head had been. A chill ran down my spine.

What…was that? What just happened?

“You!”

Beside me, Ghislaine put her hand on her sword and her silhouette blurred. The next moment she was in a pose as if she had just struck with her sword. She’d demonstrated this to me many times before. The Sword God Style’s Saint-tier technique, the Longsword of Light. A secret technique of the Sword God Style, it was said that if you performed it perfectly, the tip of your sword reached the speed of light. Ghislaine told me it was this technique that made Sword God Style the strongest of the three styles.

“Hm.” Ghislaine’s brows knitted. She must have missed her target. Her opponent dodged that deathblow of an attack that was too fast to be seen with the naked eye. Ghislaine’s face went hard with caution as she glared at something behind me.

“…”

I slowly turned around to see who had tried to attack me and dodged Ghislaine’s counter slash.

“Who…?”

A man stood there. He had blond hair and was wearing something that looked like a pure white school uniform, fastened in the front. He probably had a handsome face, but it was hidden behind a yellow mask that looked like a fox. In his right hand was a dagger.

That must have been it. That was what came for my head.

“Who are you? Tell us your name!”

“…”

The moment after Ghislaine shouted, his face gleamed. It was a brilliant light so bright it blinded us all for a moment. I immediately shut my eyes. “Gaah!”

I heard Ghislaine howl. Then a clang as metal clashed against metal. Then the sound of rapid movement.

Their blades met, twice, then a third time. By the time my vision recovered, Ghislaine was in front of me with her eyepatch pulled back.

So that was how she did it. The moment that light took our vision, she pulled her eyepatch aside so she could see with her other eye.

“Bastard, who are you? Are you an enemy of the Greyrat family?!”

“Arumanfi the Bright. That is my name.”

“Arumanfi?”

“I came to put a stop to this strange phenomenon, on Lord Perugius’ orders.”

Perugius. Now that was a name I had heard before. One of the three legendary heroes who slew the Demon God, and one of the survivors of that battle. A summoner with twelve familiars. Then, like a chain reaction, I remembered the name Arumanfi. He was one of those twelve familiars. Arumanfi the Bright.

“Be careful, Ghislaine. According to the literature I read, this guy can move at the speed of light.”

“Rudeus, take the Young Mistress and fall back.”



Just as Ghislaine asked, I used my back as a shield and escorted Eris a safe distance away so we wouldn't be embroiled in the battle. I was careful not to go too far, staying within Ghislaine's protective reach.

If that really were Arumanfi the Bright, a sword couldn't touch him. I was sure I'd read something like that in the *Legend of Perugius*.

That said, where had he come from? No wait, Arumanfi the Bright was said to be the governing spirit of light. It was said that he could travel any distance instantaneously if it were within line of sight. Back when I read that, I thought it was a load of rubbish, but he had appeared behind me in the blink of an eye. Ghislaine would never let her guard down, and he had no reason to be lurking in this area beforehand. He must have flown here, at the literal speed of light. That was one of his abilities after all.

"Woman, move. This strange occurrence might cease if I slay that boy."

Wait, what was he talking about? Strange occurrence; did he mean that thing in the sky? What kind of misunderstanding was he under?

"I am the Sword King Ghislaine Dedoldia. That thing in the sky has nothing to do with us. Withdraw!"

"Sword King? How can I believe that? Show me proof."

"Look! This is one of the famous blades of the Seven Original Sword Gods, Hiramune—Flat Core. Will you still not believe after seeing it?" She thrust her sword toward Arumanfi while still gripping it firmly by the hilt.

I didn't know her sword had that kind of inscription on it. Flat core… Core as in chest? Certainly not a word I'd associate with Ghislaine's chest.

"Swear on the names of your master and your household."

“I swear on the name of my master, Sword God Gall Falion and the honor of the Dedoldia people!”

“Dedoldia, was it? Very well. If we later discover you’re not as innocent as you claim, Lord Perugius will decide your fate.”

“Fine with me.

Arumanfi stowed his dagger. I wasn’t really sure what was going on, but the issue was apparently settled. To me, it seemed obvious that swearing something was true didn’t mean someone was being honest, but apparently that was how things worked in this world.

That said, did swearing on the names of those people really lend her words that much credibility? The same level as, say, the Roman-Catholic Pope swearing on the name of God?

“It’s fine, as long as you aren’t the ones responsible.”

“And you won’t even apologize for attacking us out of nowhere?”

“It was your fault for doing something suspicious here,” he said, turning on his heel.

Let’s just calm down and think about this rationally, I thought. First, something strange was happening in the sky. Then this guy showed up, the familiar of a legendary and storied hero. This person of legend attacked me. He thought I was the one who caused the phenomenon in the sky. That wasn’t true, of course, but maybe he knew something about what was going on up there? No, he couldn’t have, or he wouldn’t have attacked me in the first place.

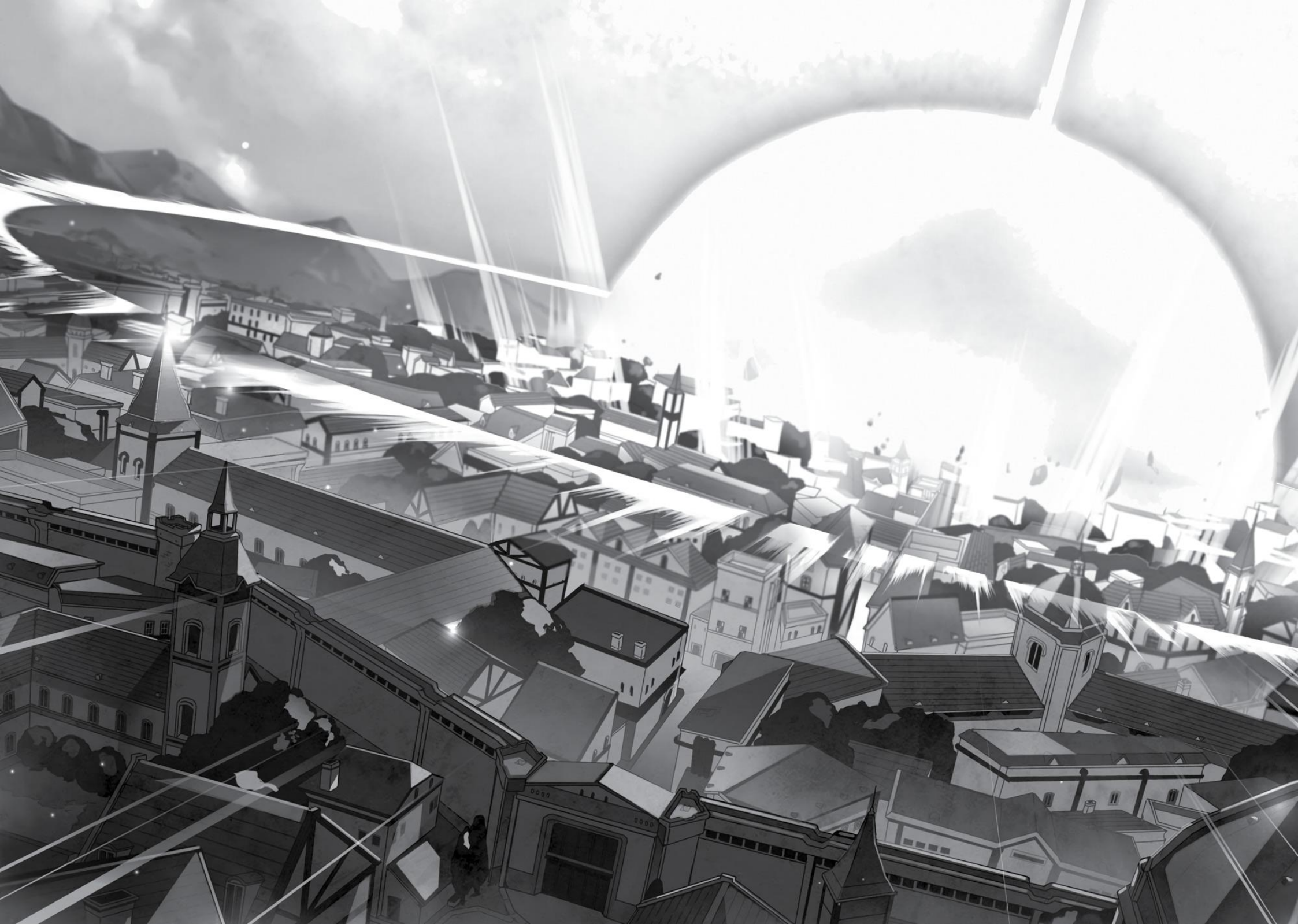
“Um…” I started to say.

“Hm?”

“Ah!”

Right as I called out to Arumanfi, the sky turned white and a finger of light sped toward the ground. The instant it reached the earth the light ballooned at incredible speed, violently swallowing

everything in its path like a tidal wave. The manor, the city, the citadel, the flowers and the trees. Everything was devoured as it expanded.



As soon as Arumanfi saw what was happening, he disappeared in a burst of gold light. Ghislaine ran toward us but was swallowed before she could reach us. Eris froze in confusion, and I wrapped my body around hers to shield her.

That was the day the Fittoa Region vanished.

Epilogue

It was six months after the Fittoa Region vanished. Roxy had finally reached the area, only to be greeted by nothing but grass-covered plains. She took in the sight wide-eyed and dumbfounded.

She was standing on the main highway, a stone-paved road. No other country had a road so magnificent that far from its capital. Asura Kingdom had developed it and laid it out, stretching from one end of the kingdom to the other.

But that was how the road had been when she last traversed it. Now it was gone, abruptly cut off in front of her. There was nothing else as far as the eye could see. Nothing but grass, spread far and wide.

"…"

Something had happened. She knew that. But she wasn't sure what. All she knew was that the Fittoa Region had disappeared, Buena Village was gone, and Rudeus, his kind family who had accepted her despite her race, and everyone else, had disappeared.

Roxy caught wind of the story several times during her journey here. She was sure it couldn't be true, sure that people were just trying to deceive her. At any rate, she chose not to believe what she heard. She believed that Rudeus and his family were definitely alive. They were just fine and nothing had happened to them. She staked everything on that one sliver of hope.

At least until now, when she finally saw the reality spread out before her.

Roxy's knees gave out from under her.

"So, you lost someone too, eh?" the driver of the coach she took said from behind her.

"An exceptional apprentice," she answered.

“An apprentice, huh? Being a magician’s apprentice, he must’ve been prepared for the possibility of losing his life anyway, yeah?”

“He was only ten.”

“Well…that is too soon.” He patted her on the shoulder as if to soothe her.

For a while, Roxy could do nothing but stare at the earth at her feet. She didn’t want to think about anything; she couldn’t. She wasn’t even sure what she should do from here.

The driver watched her silently before he spoke again, his words measured. “Actually, there’s a Fittoa Region refugee camp. Want to go see? Well, it’d be difficult for a ten-year old kid to survive what happened, but you never know.”

Roxy’s head jerked up. “I’ll go!” This was Rudeus after all. Surely he was all right. No doubt he’d used his quick wits to survive. He was surely in perfect health, living in that settlement.

Once again, she clutched firmly at a sliver of hope.

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The refugee camp comprised numerous wooden buildings and was roughly the size of a village. A great number of people bustled about. They were anything but carefree; a dark, heavy mood hung over them.

I never thought I would see something like this in Asura Kingdom, Roxy thought.

The Asura Kingdom Roxy knew was the wealthiest country in the world. The people there had faces full of optimism, and there were smiles everywhere you looked. Food was plentiful and monsters were few. It was the easiest place to live.

There were no smiles to be found here.

The settlement didn't seem to lack for food. This was a fairly bountiful area. They wouldn't starve, not so long as they could pull up the grass and eat it. As long as they weren't in danger of starving, they should have been smiling. Even if a disaster had taken place, things weren't nearly as dire as they were on the Demon Continent. Or so she thought, but she couldn't help frowning at the sight before her.

The refugee camp had a temporary adventurer's guild. It was there, in front of the bulletin board that normally had various requests pinned to it, that the melancholy dwelled the thickest.

A man who had lost his house and family stood there wailing. "What the hell, what the hell is this! Six whole months, it took six whole months for me to get back here, dammit! Laura, Francis, why are all of you dead?!" He lost his family, and not just them, but his house, his land, the tools of his trade, everything he had. His heart-wrenching screams were difficult to hear, but no one could stop him from lamenting.

"God! Is this all your fault?!" A priest threw the tools of his trade, the symbol of a Millis religious organization, onto the ground. "I won't believe anymore! You're not gods—you just ridicule and kill us! You're cruel demons!" Face full of hatred, he looked up at the heavens and cursed. There were other Millis believers present, but none of them were praying to the gods.

A merchant was trying to slit his own throat, only to be stopped by the people around him. "Don't stop me!"

"Hey, knock it off! What good does dying do? Good things can still happen to you if you're alive!"

"I-If I live?! Do you seriously believe that? Dammit, I-I lost something more important than…than my own life! Please, just…let me die! Dammit, dammit, dammit!" The man squatted and began crying, his face contorted in despair. His entire body trembled.

This was a horrible place. Everyone's faces were grief-stricken.

Roxy had never known a place so dominated by sadness before. She had watched many people die, had even escaped scenes of carnage herself numerous times. This was the first time she had ever seen a place of such pure anguish.

This might be a pointless endeavor, she thought.

Pulled in by the heavy atmosphere, she felt close to tears, but she pressed on and began her hunt for information.

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An hour passed.

Roxy learned the gist of what happened. After the sky turned strange, a large-scale mana calamity occurred over the Fittoa Region.

It was not an explosion exactly, but it did spread far and wide. Everything in the Fittoa Region was enveloped by it and teleported randomly to locations all over the world. The buildings and trees disappeared entirely, scattering only the people that had been there. Some of them had managed to return to the region, but realized nothing was left of their hometowns and lost all hope.

"Truly terrible," Roxy muttered as she looked at the bulletin board. There were rows of names listed as either deceased or missing. Posted beside them were messages to family members and requests such as, *If you see this person in your travels, please bring them here*.

The most eye-catching part of the notice board was a request that was pinned under the name of Fittoa's liege lord, asking for information on the missing and deceased, an unprecedented number of people.

As an adventurer, Roxy had done her fair share of work. Never in her life had she seen a bulletin board this full of requests, nor one that was so desperate and so heart-wrenching. It was clear just how widespread the damage of this calamity really was.

Perhaps she had run across someone on the list of the deceased and the missing on the way here. She heard rumors about people suddenly reappearing. Of course she hadn't paid it any mind at the time; there was always idle gossip like that. If only she could remember something, she might be of some help to the people here.

"No…" She shook her head, stopping her train of thought right there. She'd taken the biggest highway across the Central Continent to get here. Any information she had, someone else had probably already reported by now.

"…"

Roxy instead turned her gaze to the list of the deceased and began going through the names in order. Despite the scale of the disaster, the list of deceased was relatively short, and she didn't recognize any of the names.

By comparison, the list of missing people was so long it was painful to look at. It made sense given they had all been transported elsewhere. Surely some of them had been attacked and killed by monsters, leaving behind no remains by which to identify them. There were many places that could kill one instantly: mountaintops, mid-air, or in the sea. It was incredible that some of the deaths were even confirmed.

"There it is."

Roxy furrowed her brows. She found the names of Rudeus and the others in the missing persons column.

Rudeus Greyrat. Zenith Greyrat. Lilia Greyrat. Aisha Greyrat.

She knew that Lilia had become one of Paul's wives; Rudeus had written as much in one of his letters. Paul and Norn's names had a

line drawn through them. She took another look at the list of deceased just in case. They weren't there; that meant they had to be alive. Then again, it could have also meant there was no information on them. A short-lived moment of relief. "At least I can rejoice in the fact that they're not dead for now."

Absentmindedly she looked over the message board again. The desperation of the writers was so clear.

Roxy wondered if her own parents were doing well back home. Quite some time had passed since she fought with them and left her village. Until recently, she hadn't paid much attention to the flow of time, in part because she was a member of the Migurd race. The months passed quickly. Perhaps she should at least send a letter.

"That's…"

She found a message on the board. The writer was Paul Greyrat.

To Rudeus,

Zenith, Lilia and Aisha are missing. Norn is safe in my custody. I don't know where you are right now, but I'm sure that even if you're alone, you'll make it back here. So I'll search for you last.

For now, I'm headed to Millis Continent. That's where Zenith was born and raised. I've sent a message to Lilia's hometown and house as well. I want you to search the northern part of the Central Continent. If you find any of them, contact me with the info below.

Zenith, Lilia, if either of you see this, please contact me as well.

For anyone that might know me or my family, or former members of the Fang of the Black Wolf, please help me search. I'm sure the members of the Fang of the Black Wolf may have mixed feelings about me. I won't ask you to sweep it under the rug. You can scream at me all you want. If you ask me to lick your boots, I'll do it. All my assets are gone, so I can't pay you, but please. Help me search for my family.

Contact information:

Millis Continent, Holy Country of Millis's Capital Millishion, Adventurer's Guild. Party Name: Search Squadron for Buena Village Residents. Clan Name: Roa Region's Search for Missing Persons Association.

—From Paul Greyrat

Paul was alive. Knowing that brought her relief. Rudeus had griped about Paul in his letters, but it seemed Paul was especially reliable in situations like this.

Roxy stopped to think. The best course of action would be to help with the search. She was indebted to their family after all. Even now she thought fondly of the two years she spent with them, for many reasons. She was more than willing to help.

All right, let's do this, she decided. The moment she made up her mind, her thoughts started churning. *But who should I search for, and how?*

Fang of the Black Wolf was likely the name of Paul's adventuring party. Those people probably weren't acquainted with Rudeus, or Lilia, for that matter. But since Paul had left Rudeus for last, she decided to search for him instead. It seemed Paul thought Rudeus would return to Fittoa, but that boy was highly adaptable. It was just as likely that he would settle in whatever place he had been teleported off to. If that were the case, she needed to tell him what had happened and bring him back.

I'll search for Rudeus then. Now, where to start?

Paul had gone to the capital of the Holy Millis Country. That meant he probably left similar messages along the way, specifically in three places: the Asura Kingdom's borders, the Dragon King Kingdom's eastern port, and the Holy Country of Millis's western port.

In that case, she should search beyond those places. That would be the northern part of the Central Continent, the Begaritt Continent, and the Demon Continent. One of those three. She had never been to Begaritt before, but she heard it was full of labyrinths and monsters. And while she had some familiarity with the geography of the Demon Continent, it was dangerous to journey there alone.

If she wanted a safe route, then the northern region would be the best. But that was exactly why she had to go to one of the other two. She could find a party and journey to one of those two regions instead.

Good. Now that she had made up her mind, there was no point in lingering here. She would head for the Dragon King's eastern port. From there, she would look for a party heading for either the Begaritt Continent or the Demon Continent.

Once that was settled Roxy moved swiftly. She finished the preparations for her journey and set out from the refugee camp.

Strangely, just getting a move on was enough to lift the veil of sadness. Not just that, but her belief that Rudeus was still alive strengthened with each step.

I want to sit at the table with all of them again, even just once more, she thought as her feet took her south.

That was the beginning of Roxy Migurdia's long journey.



Extra Chapter: The Forest Goddess

Directly east of Asura Kingdom and just over the mountains, right in the middle of the Central Continent, was a sphere of many tiny nations fighting each other for dominion over the region. This place, where countries were built only to meet their demise shortly thereafter and be rebuilt once more, was called the Conflict Zone by the locals.

One of the small countries in the Conflict Zone was the Markien Mercenary Country. Established by the great mercenary whose name it bore, it became a warlike nation that based its economy on dispatching mercenaries to neighboring countries.

There was a pub nestled in one of Markien's corners. There, one mercenary was bragging to another about one of the scars atop his shoulder.

"Heheh, look at this scar! I got this during the defense of Rudomin."

"Ohh, that battle! That was hard fought, huh?"

"Where were you stationed?"

"Arus Fort's eastern gate. That place was hell. I was damn close to losing my wonderful, beloved right arm here."

"Hell doesn't even begin to describe what happened there. I heard you guys were flanked and had your forces devastated!"

"Not much different from what happened to you guys in the Defensive Battle of Rudomin. I heard you guys had your supply routes cut off so you didn't even have food."

The Markien Mercenary Country supported all other nations equally and without discrimination. The mercenaries they dispatched were incredibly feared. Their troops were great warriors, their commanders calm and collected, and their tacticians excelled at

military tactics. Once they entered battle, they led their allies to victory without fail. They were a symbol of triumph and fear on the battlefield. That was what it meant to be a Markien mercenary.

"It's incredible we made it out of there alive."

"Well, that's what you call the grace of the Forest Goddess."

One of the mercenaries retrieved a pendant from his breast pocket. There was a relief carved into the wood, the profile of a woman with animal-like ears.

Seeing this, the other mercenary unsheathed the short sword at his side. The blade was dyed red with paint. "Then a toast, to the Forest Goddess Laine!"

"May we be the victors in the coming battles as well! Cheers!"

With their items in one hand and wine cups in the other, the two mercenaries drank every last drop of alcohol. That was their way of praying.

"Ahh, that's some good stuff!"

"Yeah, gotta have some alcohol after battle. Markien's stuff is the best around."

"And women too!"

"Shall we hit up the brothel after this then?"

"Let's keep that part a secret from the Goddess."

"Ahahaha!"

The night wore on as the two merrily shared drinks.

The Forrest Goddess Laine was the god of the Markien mercenaries. According to legend, she was the Goddess of Salvation who appeared a hundred years ago when the Markien Mercenary Country was on the verge of collapse. Her guidance of one of the

country's legendary commander-in-chiefs rescued the country from disaster.

Thanks to that legend, many of Markien's mercenaries believed that when they were on the verge of death, the Forest Goddess would appear out of nowhere and save them. That was why they prayed to her.

However, strangely enough, there was only one country in the entire world that believed in the Forest Goddess Laine, and that was the Markien Mercenary Country. Why was it only this particular country that had such a custom?

The answer was one interesting story indeed.

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Year Four Hundred and Seventeen of the Armored Dragon.

It was the year of the Displacement Incident in Asura Kingdom. Not two years had passed since the Mercenary King Markien proclaimed the establishment of the fledgling Markien Mercenary Country. The country was on the verge of collapse and facing a crisis.

This wasn't a rare occurrence. In the Conflict Zone, small countries were established and destroyed all the time. People would wait for an opportune chance to build their own country, with the ambition of taking over the whole region and creating an even greater country, only for that dream to be shattered and fragmented. Markien Mercenary Country was just another casualty of that cycle, a disorganized nation about to meet the same fate; nothing more, nothing less.

Still, nothing happened without a cause. Their first step down the path of their destruction was diplomacy. The country, whose economy was based around deploying mercenaries, possessed a

national and military power beyond what was expected of a developing country. Yet that was the very cause of their problem.

The two countries in closest contact to Markien, Dikuto Kingdom and the Broze Empire, were deeply wary of the mercenary country. They schemed against it, and when diplomatic relations broke down, both countries proclaimed war upon Markien simultaneously.

Although it was a mercenary country, it was powerless against the combined might of two other nations. Markien made a show of fierce resistance, but it lost half its territory after the sudden surrender of an important fortress and the loss of numerous large battles.

There was no future for the country. Those mercenaries who thought as much fled to other countries or turned traitor. What was to become the decisive battle, which would afterward become known as The Site of Markien's Final Battle, took place in a large basin.

Markien gathered its military strength and took position against the two allied countries. Up till that point the two countries had launched their attacks separately, but the basin was an important landmark with forests infested with monsters on either side. This restricted their ability to maneuver through it. They had to band together.

That was also why the basin was such a key point. Once Markien fell, the other two countries would need to control this point to seize power over the area around the capital. Additionally, once that was over, it was easy to imagine the conflict that would then break out between the Dikuto Kingdom and the Broze Empire.

Markien had already tried to capitalize on the fraught nature of the relationship between those two countries, but their military strength was reduced to the point where they had little ability to put

up any meaningful opposition. They had their hands full just trying to keep the country from collapsing.

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Bigott Mercenal, the Captain of the third unit of Markien's Mercenary Company, led ten of his men into the depths of the forest. Ejin Forest, as it was called, was infested with monsters. Since time immemorial, the ruler of this area had forbidden passage through it, or so those who lived nearby unanimously declared. Woodcutters even refused to enter Ejin Forest. This meant passing through with troops was impossible. Even in the current battle, Markien's two enemy countries avoided approaching the forest.

King Markien decided to take advantage of that. Their troops would break through the forest and launch a surprise attack on one of their two enemies. A simple but effective plan.

That said, Markien's military strength was not what it used to be. Just the act of invading the forest would reduce their numbers greatly when they were accosted by various beasts. Forget launching a strong surprise attack—it seemed they would only be squandering resources.

That was where their strategy came into play. In the previous battle they had secured several Broze Empire suits of armor. They would have some of their soldiers don these then attack the Dikuto Empire from behind.

The two countries had formed a temporary alliance until Markien was vanquished. Once that was over, the two would inevitably begin fighting for control over the land they had conquered. Even now tensions ran high as both countries began considering what methods would be most beneficial to them. It

would only take one small push for their alliance to snap, creating conflict between them. That was Markien's aim.

Bigott Mercenal, known for being daring and resolute, was put in charge of the operation. He would pass through the forest and launch a powerful sneak attack with a small company of mercenaries.

It was an incredibly dangerous endeavor. They would not come back alive even if they succeeded. In fact, they might have to take their own lives to avoid capture. They couldn't bring anything that may give away their identity. No one could know who they were or where they came from. There was no honor to be had from this mission. Instead, they would die as traitors.

Despite that, Bigott said to Markien, "Do not worry, for tales of us shall be passed on. We will live on as the heroes that led this country to victory during one of its great battles, just like the legendary Twin Gods Migus and Gumis. Is that not an honor by itself?" Bigott took on this duty, seeing the similarity between himself and the legendary heroes of 400 years ago who died in battle against Laplace.

He had ten men under his command. Three were Intermediate-tier North God Style swordfighters, while the other seven were mercenaries unassociated with the three sword styles. Bigott himself was an Advanced-tier Sword God Style swordsman, but their group had no healer and none among them were particularly skilled.

In these parts, magicians were valuable assets to parties, but since they were preparing for the final battle Markien couldn't afford to assign any to a team of throwaway pawns. True victory meant the country had to both trigger warfare between its enemies then capitalize on that opportunity and come out triumphant.

Hmph, never thought I would be doing something like this, Bigott thought, laughing in self-derision.

Bigott was destined to be a mercenary. He was born into a mercenary band. His father died in battle while his mother was pregnant with him, and his mother died in battle not long after he was born. He was sold as a slave and bought by what would eventually become the Markien Mercenary Company. That was where he learned about swordplay and battle. Ever since then he had lived only for money and survival. He never dreamed that at the end of it all, he would be battling for honor.

As if I'm a knight from some kingdom, he thought. Everyone knew knights were the only ones who died for honor. But then it occurred to Bigott. *Maybe I am a knight. A knight of Markien.*

It made him proud to think that way. For the longest time, he hadn't belonged anywhere. It was only through great hardship that he had come to be able to call Markien his home. Now he would fight to protect it. He'd mocked those ideals in the past for being sappy, but now that he was in a similar position, they didn't seem so bad after all.

"Commander, just a little farther."

"Don't let your guard down. Now that we've come this far, we don't want to be killed by humans."

"Haha, true enough."

Until that point, they had encountered few monsters. They had been walking the entire day and only had two run-ins. It was like a miracle.

Despite that, he had lost one of his men. They had been moving as carefully as possible, but hidden in the overgrowth was a Red Leaf Tiger. It attacked, unseen, and one soldier died. But the beast was already heavily injured and seemed to be running from someone. The Red Leaf Tiger was the most fearsome of the beasts in this forest. Just who in the world could have done that?

Could it be the person who rules over this forest? Bigott wondered.

He had heard rumors of the forest's ruler before. Karentosaurus, an A-class beast with a giant, lizard-like body over five meters in length. He didn't know if it really existed or not, but if it did, it would surely be capable of leaving a B-class Red Leaf Tiger in critical condition.

That also meant that if they were attacked by such a creature, neither he nor his nine remaining men would get out unscathed. So he pressed on even more cautiously than before.

Fortunately, he had experience maneuvering through a forest, enough to avoid encountering any monsters. If he happened to encounter any, he at least had the strength to kill it before it called for help. So long as they managed that, they would be fine.

Sadly, Bigott and his men weren't the only ones who thought so.

"What?!"

"Huh!"

Before Bigott realized what was happening, he and his men had run into another group. This party numbered ten as well. Together, they made a group of twenty men, all of them clad in armor of the Broze Empire. The only difference was that Bigott and his men were fakes.

"You there, give us the name of your unit!" A man clad in lustrous, striking armor stood before Bigott, demanding he identify himself.

"Draw your swords! Let none return alive!" Bigott ignored the question and instead shouted at his men, who drew their swords and leaped at the enemy.

"Deserters, huh?! Die!" The Broze Empire Commander labeled them thus after they launched their attack. He was mistaken, but

that didn't change what had to be done. "Kill them! Broze doesn't need cowards who run from battle!"

The Broze soldiers were swift.

"Gah!"

"D-dammit!"

In the blink of an eye, two of Bigott's men had been cut down. In mere moments they were on the defensive. The Broze Empire's soldiers were incredibly skilled. He didn't know it at the time, but they were actually fighting against the Emperor's personal bodyguards.

What were bodyguards doing here in the forest, away from the Emperor? It was because of something that happened an hour ago. The Broze Emperor was personally walking through their military camp to inspire his soldiers when a beast suddenlt sprang out of the forest and attacked. The creature was quickly dispatched, but the Emperor sustained a small scratch from the struggle and was given medical treatment afterward. Still, the fact remained that he had been attacked right before his soldiers' very eyes.

Sensing a drop in morale, the Emperor ordered his bodyguards to march. Go forth and fetch the hide of a great, fierce beast, he commanded. Then he could claim that he fought the felled creature and that was how he had sustained such a wound.

The bodyguards immediately set out into the forest. Mysteriously enough, they didn't encounter any beasts, but instead came upon Bigott and his party.

"Wh-why here…?"

The strongest of Bigott's men was easily slain by the Broze bodyguards.

“I’m sure you already know, but I am the captain of the Emperor’s Guard, Klein Dinoltas! Water Saint Klein! Do you seriously think you can win?!”

“Dammit!”

“Cease your resistance and surrender, then you may at least have your lives!”

Bigott panicked. There was no way they could surrender. If they were caught and investigated, they would be exposed as pretenders. Markien would fall. After that, the Broze Empire and Dikuto Kingdom would fight. He didn’t know who would win, but either way the country he had such fond memories of would disappear.

On the other hand, he had no other options. They were clearly outmatched, and if this continued any longer, their destruction would be inevitable.

I’m sorry, Markien. Bigott apologized to the comrades he held in esteem within his heart. That was when it happened.

“Graaaagghhh!”

A gigantic lizard came flying at them. Its body, all five meters of it, was a vivid green, and its majestic form was riddled with open wounds, blood pouring out of them. Red bubbles came foaming out of its mouth as it moved between the two opposing groups and collapsed. Then, just a moment after that…

“Aaah!”

A wild beast came leaping out after it. This beast let out a fierce war cry as it landed upon the lizard’s head and drove its sword through it. The lizard let out a final, anguished cry before it died.

“Gah!”

There was no time for them to process what had just happened. Even after slaying the lizard the wild beast didn’t stop moving. It

sprang to the ground and, in the blink of an eye, cut down two of the Emperor's bodyguards.

"What are you doing?!"

For a moment Bigott thought this had to be the ruler of the forest. However, this wild beast had the form of a human. Warm brown skin, fiery red hair, and two fully erect beastfolk ears. It also held a sword. A sword that had a thin, one-sided blade, which gleamed an eerie red color, and had an inscription on it.

"Who are you?!" yelled Klein, the captain of the bodyguards, as he stepped forward.

"Grrrr!" The beast didn't answer. It merely responded to the presence of an enemy wielding a sword in front of it.

"Aaah!"

"Gah, fight back!"

With a battle cry, the beast slashed at Klein. Klein was a Water Saint. The Water God Style was a school of swordplay that allowed one to fend off any attack and launch a deadly counter in return.

At least, that was supposed to be the case.

"Th-the Longsword of Light… S-so, this is the Sword God Style…?"

When the beast's sword met Klein's, Klein's blade broke in two. Then a split formed in Klein's armor as the attack sundered his clothing, skin, muscle, and finally bone in succession. That was when Klein's lower and upper half separated. The Broze bodyguards didn't even flinch as their commander's torso fell in front of them with a wet thud.

"How dare you!"

"Our commander!"

"We'll avenge him!"

They were all swordfighters of Intermediate-tier in either the Water God or Sword God Style. There were undeniably strong. And yet…

“Gaaah!” The beast howled. With each swing of its blood red blade, one by one those men were vivisected. The beast moved like a flash of light. Its voice was enough to make one recoil. No one was any match for it. In moments, the entire guard was wiped out.

“…”

Bigott and his men couldn’t even move. They had no idea what had just happened. The beast had appeared out of nowhere and, in an overwhelming show of strength, destroyed everything in its path. But why? For what purpose?

“Grrrr!”

It was looking their way. Reason had fled from its eyes. Eyes that now fixated on Bigott and his men, full of bloodlust, amplifying their fear. The clothes it wore were revealing, but terror overwhelmed any sense of attraction they may have felt.

That was right—this beast was a woman. It had a woman’s form. As soon as he realized that, the gears turned in the back of Bigott’s mind.

It was the story of the Sword Saint that taught him swordplay. That Sword Saint was a just and honorable warrior of the Sword God Style who had trained in the Holy Land of Swords. They wouldn’t tell him why they decided to become a mercenary, but they did talk about their prior training experience.

One of the other people there was violent, wouldn’t listen to anyone. She was almost like a mad dog. She surpassed me and became a Sword King, but she wasn’t a bad person. Just an idiot. Everyone hated her because she lost control in extreme situations and went mad, attacking everyone, whether they be friend or foe.

The swordfighter in that tale was the woman in front of him now. That description fit exactly.

“By any chance,” he called out to her as he slipped into the God Sword Style bow his teacher had taught him, bending to one knee and tucking his head forward, showing respect and submission. “Are you the Sword King, Lady Ghislaine Dedoldia?!”

The moment he said that the beast stilled. After a short time, Ghislaine regained her sense of reason.

“I have often heard rumors, but I never dreamed I would meet you in a place like this.”

She didn’t respond to his words. Instead she glared at him with her bloodshot eyes and questioned him very matter-of-factly. “You there, have you seen a girl around twelve years old with pure red hair? Or a boy of about ten who’s a proficient mage?”

“No, I haven’t.” He shook his head, thinking her words over. A red-haired girl of approximately twelve. A magician boy of approximately ten. He had seen many slaves like that in his life, but none of them around this area. Besides, this was the Ejin Forest. It was a place filled with beasts. Why did she think there would be children in a place like this?

“I see. Sorry to get in your way.” Ghislaine began walking away. After a few steps she suddenly stopped and looked back, her head cocked. “By the way, where is this?”

Bigott, too, cocked his head. He told her she was in the Conflict Zone, located on the northernmost part of the southern half of the Central Continent. He then explained they were in a forest within the northern part of Markien Mercenary Country.

Bigott and his men were in the middle of an operation. They didn’t really have the luxury of time to explain, but she had just spared their lives, and if they upset her, they might be next. This was his attempt at crisis management.

“Impossible.” Ghislaine was in disbelief. She didn’t understand how she had ended up here.

Bigott asked for the details of her situation. She had been acting as the bodyguard for a young girl in Asura Kingdom’s Fittoa Region when they were attacked. Before she knew what was happening, she had been swallowed by some light and had ended up in this forest. As she fought hordes of monsters, she lost herself to the excitement of battle and turned into a berserker that killed anything that came near her.

“In any case, this is the Conflict Zone’s Markien Mercenary Country. Make no mistake about it.”

“So it is.” Ghislaine stopped to think.

Bigott had no idea what she was thinking about. After five long seconds, she finally looked up at the sky.

“Then I have to go south to return to Asura.”

Using the sun to guide her, she turned straight south. That was the same direction that Bigott and his men were heading.

“Please wait. There’s an enemy camp set up in that direction.”

“And what about it?”

“‘What about it’? I mean, what are you planning to do?”

“Anyone who gets in my way gets cut down. That’s all.” There was a ferocity in her eyes that made him doubt if she was still in possession of reason. Bigott had no words. Just what had her so stirred up?

“Hopefully Rudeus is with Lady Eris, but there’s a chance they were both transported somewhere else just like I was. I have to hurry.”

After hearing that, he understood. *We’re not that different,* he thought. Those two children, particularly the red-haired girl, were

more important than anything to the Sword King. She was desperate to protect that which was precious to her.

“In that case, why don’t we travel part of the way together? We also have something to take care of in that direction.”

“Very well.”

For some reason Bigott felt particularly proud. Although their objectives differed, he felt like he was standing side-by-side with this Sword King, fighting for something he wanted to protect.

Bigott, his men, and Ghislaine slipped out from the forest and attacked the Dikuto Kingdom from behind. Their luck was good. As soon as the battle with Markien began, all the troops were focused on what was in front of them.

The Broze Emperor found it suspicious that his bodyguards had failed to return. He suspected the Dikuto Kingdom was planning an ambush for his troops, and that his bodyguards had been killed after discovering their plot. After all, the Dikuto king’s main army was close to the forest. It seemed likely they had troops hiding further within.

In truth, the Dikuto king was a coward and had camped with his back to the forest so he wouldn’t be caught in a surprise attack by the Broze Empire. The combination of these factors would later lead to Bigott’s success.

Ghislaine howled and Bigott let out a fierce cry as he led his men into battle. They charged right into the enemy camp where the Dikuto king’s tent was set up.

The king was startled by their surprise attack. Seeing their armor, he immediately thought the Broze Emperor had launched a sneak attack from the forest. He hailed a nearby attendant and commanded an assault on the Broze Empire. Then he tried to take shelter from the chaos.

It was only ten seconds later when Ghislaine tore the Dikuto king asunder with her blade, killing him. If he had lived, he might have realized Bigott and his men were not of the Broze Empire and retracted his orders, but an imperial edict had absolute power. The Dikuto Kingdom surged into battle against the Broze Empire.

The Broze Empire had predicted such an attack would come, so while they were caught off guard by its timing, they were able to put up a fight. That was when the Markien Mercenary Country took up arms. It was a three-pronged free-for-all.

Bigott found himself surrounded by enemies, but he was still alive. It was his mission to die deceiving the Dikuto Kingdom into thinking his attack was the work of the Broze Empire, yet still he clung to life. He and his men had already been separated, and the only ally close to him was a single fighter.

There, right in front of him. He followed in the shadow of her tanned back as the light of her sword flashed, cutting through the enemy. He had never seen such a reliable figure before. He felt so proud to be protecting her flank.

At last they could no longer see the armor of the Dikuto Kingdom around them. Instead, they were surrounded by soldiers of the Broze Empire. While the Empire was surprised by the intrusion of a woman with a blood-red blade, they had watched her cut down the Dikuto Kingdom's men and noticed Bigott protecting her flank in his Broze armor. They mistook Bigott and Ghislaine for allies.

That was when Markien surged in. The two allied countries were shaken as the battle started up behind them. Not only had their bond alliance broken, but their formations as well. Markien, which should have been at a disadvantage, broke through their front lines.

A chaotic battle ensued. Amidst the violent fighting, Bigott became separated from Ghislaine, but managed to rejoin his comrades. Shouts of joy rang out from the Markien mercenaries as

they recognized Bigott and took up a firm position around him. Instead of falling back, Bigott remained on the front lines and kept fighting.

The battle raged on, the soldiers covered in mud and blood, not fully aware of what was happening around them.

Bigott took an arrow in his left eye. Anguished, he searched for the bowman responsible. That was when he saw it.

He watched as it happened. Below an eye-catching banner, dressed in luxurious Broze armor, was a man with a black beard. Bigott saw the flash of red as that man, the Emperor of Broze, had his head sliced off by a brown-skinned woman.

“Ha, hah, hahaha!” He laughed, and as he laughed, the battle wore on. And he lived.

The final battle ended in victory for the Markien Mercenary Country.

***

Thanks to his achievements, Bigott Mercenal earned the position of general. He was celebrated as a legendary hero for having succeeded in a suicide mission and for executing Dikuto’s king.

After that, Bigott Mercenal continued to do spectacular work that resulted in him being known as one of the most outstanding Great Generals of the Markien Mercenary Country. That, however, is a story for another time.

Once that decisive battle was over, the Great General Bigott started doing something strange. He started wearing a necklace that had the profile of a female beastfolk chiseled into it, and began painting the blade of his sword red. “It’s a good luck charm.”

His men began to imitate him, and those who heard their tales followed suit. These customs continued spreading until they took their modern-day shape.

When asked what kind of good luck charm it was, Bigott responded thus: “I was helped by a goddess during that battle. I’m following her example.”

It was from his words that the Forest Goddess Laine was created. The name Ghislaine was difficult for those in the southern part of the Central Continent to pronounce, and so her name, altered by their accents, became Laine. She appeared from the forest, rescuing the life of the great general, becoming the Goddess of Salvation. Forest Goddess Laine.

For the next hundred years she was worshipped as Markien’s Goddess of Protection, providing support to the hearts of many soldiers. Of course, the real Ghislaine had no knowledge of this designation.

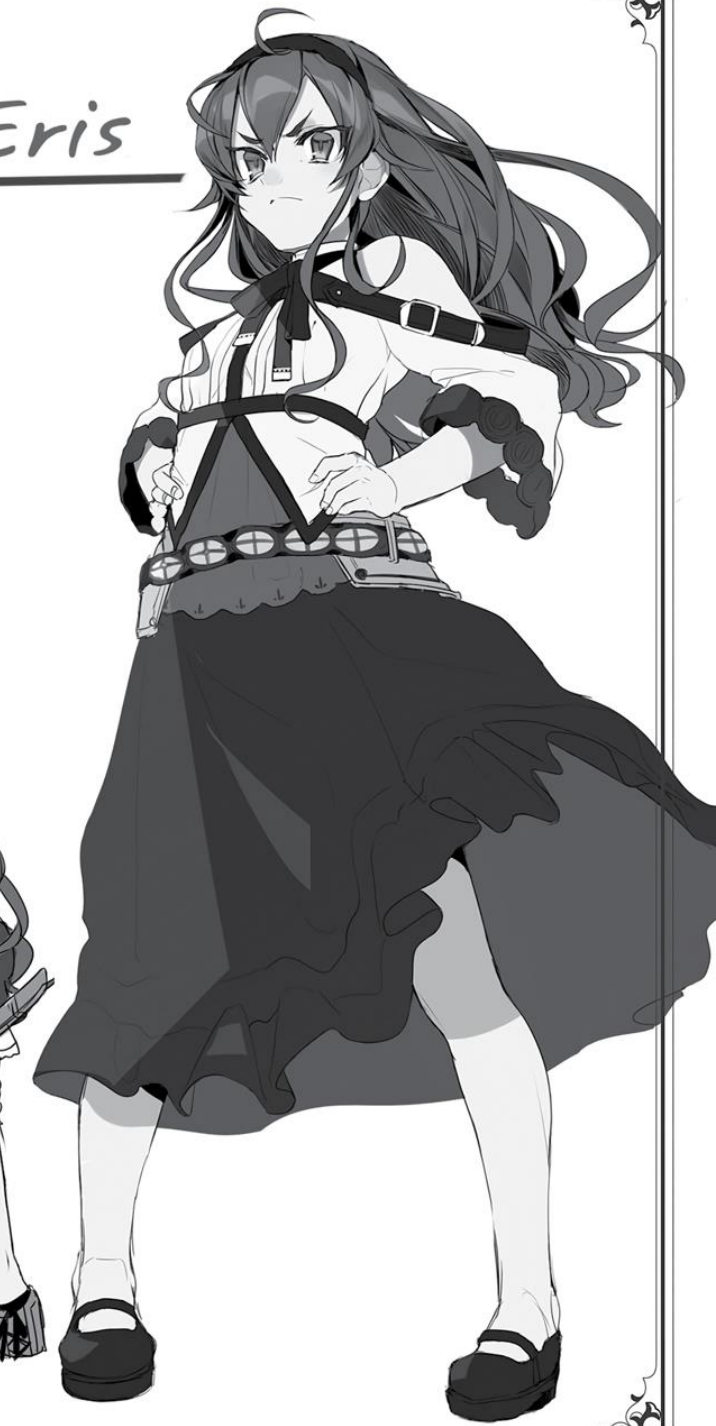
Where did Ghislaine go after that? Was she still alive? Did she survive that battle and go on home to Asura Kingdom? Was she able to meet that precious Young Mistress of hers again?

Bigott Mercenal had no way of knowing.

CHARACTER DESIGN
Concept Gallery



Eris









CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Eris

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 Become Novelists,* they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei.* They instantly gained readers' support, and within one year of publishing on the website, achieved rank 1 on the site's combined popularity rankings.

"Mixed among the things in our lives that we discard, thinking them unnecessary, may be that which is truly precious to us," the author said.



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