

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation



NOVEL
9

Written by
Rifujin na
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Illustrated by
Shirotaka

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Badigadi

Linia

Cliff

Pursena

Fitz

Silent

Ariel

Luke

Rudeus

DRAMATIS
PERSONAE



"I can't take these off myself.
You do it for me."

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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*"There's always something to be gained from
persistence, even in the face of scorn and ridicule."*

—Putting in the effort sucks,
but at least you get something out of it.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:

The Prodigy's Secret

(Part 1)

CLIFF GRIMOIRE, the grandson of the Millis Church's reigning Pope, was a highly gifted young man with a particular talent for magic. Unfortunately, Cliff was also hot-tempered, egotistical, and a pompous braggart. As a result, he had no friends whatsoever. Cliff was sixteen years old at present; in other words, he'd come of age a little more than a year ago. But no one had celebrated that milestone with him.

Still, the young man did have his virtues. For all his boastful talk, he worked very hard to succeed, rather than leaning on his natural talents. There were some, at least, who noticed this and respected him for it.

Cliff had come to the Ranoa University of Magic for a simple reason: he'd gotten mixed up in an ugly power struggle back home. Following the attempted assassination of a Blessed Child near the city of Millishion several years ago, an internal conflict within the Millis Church had grown increasingly intense and violent. Cliff's grandfather, who happened to be the Pope, had shipped him off to the far side of the world for his own safety.

Cliff remembered his grandfather's parting words to him perfectly: "You have the potential to be a great man someday, Cliff. Don't let yourself grow self-satisfied; know your flaws, and work to overcome them."

The young man knew that much was expected of him. And at the time, he found that reasonable enough. He was a prodigy, after all. Perhaps not as talented as the brilliant young swordswoman Eris, whom he'd seen defeat a group of trained assassins in the blink of an eye; but a prodigy nonetheless. He'd always believed himself to possess special gifts.

The Kingdom of Ranoa, which Cliff reached following a long and difficult journey, proved to be a harsh land. The food didn't agree with him, the climate was severe, and many of the locals behaved in ways he found strange and off-

putting.

Still, he trusted that his sheer talent would see him through any challenge. He was a Special Student, the grandson of the pope, and the man who'd one day take charge of the entire Millis Church; surely that meant he was a cut above the rest.

To Cliff's surprise, however, he was embarrassed twice in his first year at the University.

The first humiliation came at the hands of a young man named Zanoba Shirone. Zanoba was a Blessed Child, bestowed with certain divine gifts at birth. He was a somewhat unstable individual, true. But his physical strength was genuinely astonishing. Cliff had once seen Zanoba seize a man three times his weight by the head, lift him off the ground, and effortlessly toss him to one side.

Despite his fearsome capabilities, Zanoba had enrolled at the University of Magic, where he studied spellcraft like all the others. By Cliff's standards, his progress was painfully slow, but it wasn't like a Blessed Child had much *need* of magic. In fact, some scholars theorized that magic had originally been developed by the ancients as a means to help common people imitate the divine powers. And, of course, a Blessed Child was a human manifestation of those very powers. There was hardly any reason for one of God's elected to trifle with casting spells.

Eventually, Cliff had approached Zanoba and pressed him for an explanation. "Why are you even bothering to learn magic, Zanoba?"

"That's simple enough," the young man had responded. "I'm pursuing a goal that means everything to me." Reaching into a box he carried with him, Zanoba retrieved a single figurine... which he then proceeded to speak about at *great* length. The majority of this monologue meant nothing to Cliff, but it was clear that Zanoba had nothing but praise for the quality of the little figure's design and manufacture.

"I wish to apprentice myself to the man who made this figurine, and to spread such wondrous figurines across the world. For this to happen, I'll have to learn to make figurines myself! Before I'm reunited with my master, I *must* master at

least the basic spells necessary for this purpose. I'd be too ashamed to face him otherwise! And of course, I have a few figurines I'm dying to create with my own two hands."

The man had a dream. This was something that Cliff himself lacked. He had given up on his own dream some time ago. Given his position in the world, there'd been no other choice but to do so. Still... Zanoba, too, was a person of some importance. As a Blessed Child, he carried the hopes of his countrymen on his shoulders. Once he returned to Shirone, he would surely have no real leeway to choose his own path in life. And yet, he still clung to some thread of hope—planning for the *possibility* that some day, he might be free. If he ever had the chance, he wouldn't hesitate to choose his own destiny.

Such were Cliff's impressions, at any rate. They were based on assumptions that were not entirely accurate. He knew nothing of the events that had taken place back in Shirone, or of Zanoba's actual standing there. Still, his interpretation left a deep impression on him. He found himself looking at Zanoba with real respect—even admiration.

"Who is this 'master' you keep talking about, anyway?"

"He is a magician known as Rudeus Greyrat."

Cliff found himself at a loss for words. *Rudeus Greyrat*. It was a name he'd filed away in a dark corner of his mind, ever since the day Eris had rejected him. He'd never expected to hear it again in this place, spoken by a man he'd just come to respect.

It was a harsh blow to his ego.

The second of Cliff's humiliations came at the hands of two older students.

As one might expect, Cliff believed himself to be the single most powerful mage enrolled in the University. There were plenty of people who could overwhelm him in a close-range brawl, of course, but he thought himself clearly superior as a magician at the very least. He was a genuine prodigy, while the others were merely students. Even the professors were often no match for his skills. In short, he thought himself essentially invincible.

It took all of two months for him to be rudely disabused of that notion. His defeat came at the hands of two beastfolk girls, said to be among the strongest students in the University. Their names were Linia and Pursena.

It was hard to say who exactly provoked the fight. Cliff was a sharp-tongued young man, and he'd spoken to them with open arrogance. Linia and Pursena were less aggressive than they'd once been, but they weren't about to let a cocky first-year talk down to them. Cliff didn't even recall exactly what he'd said to finally set them off. But the fight itself he remembered very clearly. He'd attempted to cast an Advanced spell; Pursena had quickly fired off Beginner-level magic, interrupting his incantation and restricting his movements. Linia then drew in close and beat him black and blue.

In the aftermath of this very public defeat, Cliff retreated to his room to cry in solitude. He told himself that it wasn't a fair fight. He'd been outnumbered, after all. He hadn't really lost.

But a few days later, he learned that another student named Fitz had previously defeated both Linia and Pursena in an instant. And that news came as a *real* shock.

There was always someone better out there. Obvious as it might sound, Cliff had never learned this lesson personally until now. The fact that he knew so much Advanced magic did not, in itself, make him powerful in combat. This, too, was something he had just begun to understand.

Cliff took all this very hard. Yet from that day he redoubled his efforts to improve himself. He was too proud to learn from his professors, let alone from other students. Instead, he tried finding his own ways to refine his craft. It proved a struggle, but he kept at it, doggedly seeking to eliminate his weaknesses.

In time, however, he entered his second year at the University... and received another pair of shocks in quick succession.

The first shock was the enrollment of Rudeus Greyrat.

The boy wore shabby grey robes, and the uncertainty on his face betrayed a

lack of confidence. He was servile and submissive to everyone he met, putting himself down at every opportunity; he also routinely leered at every nearby woman. There was nothing manly or appealing about him whatsoever.

He was, in other words, virtually the opposite of what Cliff had pictured when he heard Eris and Zanoba speak of “Rudeus.” Was this even really him? Could it be someone else with the same name? It seemed like a legitimate possibility.

But Zanoba acknowledged Rudeus as his “master,” and the boy knew about Eris as well. And so, Cliff concluded that he simply had to be a fraud. Somehow, he had deceived both Zanoba and Eris with a pack of lies and a few devious tricks.

The evidence seemed to support this theory. When challenged by Linia and Pursena, the boy instantly bent and scraped to avoid a conflict. If he was a truly powerful magician, he surely wouldn’t have hesitated to put them in their place.

In conclusion, Cliff reasoned that Rudeus would be exposed as the fraud he was soon enough. Linia and Pursena were fearsome fighters, and Zanoba was a diligent young man with divine powers at his disposal. Bluffing and trickery would only get you so far in an environment like this one. There were rumors flying around that Rudeus had defeated Fitz. But this was presumably either a misunderstanding of some sort, or a lie that Rudeus himself was spreading. If he had won somehow, he must have resorted to some underhanded trick. Cliff felt quite confident of this.

However, Rudeus soon demonstrated that his skills were real. He could cast magic freely without the need for incantations. In no time at all, he made Linia and Pursena his loyal subordinates, and somehow won even more admiration from Zanoba. Even Fitz seemed to recognize his skills: soon they were seen studying together at the library every other day. And despite Rudeus’ obvious abilities, Cliff had even seen him attending *classes*—lectures on elementary Divine and Barrier spells. He had no real need to learn such basic magic, surely, but he seemed to have an innate hunger for knowledge of all kinds.

Rudeus Greyrat was just as devoted as Cliff was, and considerably more talented. More importantly, his actual achievements were far more impressive.

This would normally have been very painful for Cliff to admit. But for some reason, he found himself readily able to accept the facts. Perhaps it was because he'd already met Zanoba, and lost to Linia and Pursena. He could admit, to himself at least, that this Rudeus was destined for greater things than he was.

This didn't mean he *liked* the boy, of course. That was a very different matter.

The next and final shock was of a somewhat different nature.

It struck Cliff without warning one evening, as he was walking back to his dorm and happened to look upward.

He found himself gazing at a goddess. She was leaning on a windowsill with a listless expression, letting her luxuriant golden hair flutter in the breeze. The setting sun cast a red glow on her shapely face.

Cliff was instantly smitten. He'd fallen in love at first sight. He had always been drawn to beauty of this sort. Back in his more childish days, when he'd dreamed of living as an adventurer, he'd also pictured himself marrying a gorgeous woman. In fact, a pretty young Healer who sometimes paid visits to the orphanage where she grew up had been a big part of the reason Cliff developed such a strong interest in adventuring.

All of a sudden, the woman in the window glanced down at Cliff. With a small smile, she waved her hand.

It was all so... picturesque. So *perfect*. Cliff was deeply, deeply moved.

I was born to meet this woman, he thought. *And she was born to meet me*. In that instant, his first love Eris was demoted in his mind to the status of an acquaintance.

Rudeus

THE TIME HAD COME for my monthly appearance at homeroom. I was sitting at

my desk, closely surrounded by Zanoba, Julie, Linia, and Pursena. It felt kind of nice to be at the center of my own little group for once.

As usual, Linia was leaning back in her chair with her feet on the desk, flaunting her shapely thighs without a hint of shame. Another nice perk of my new position was getting to see those up close and personal on a regular basis.

“You never stop starin’ at my legs, Boss,” said Linia with a teasing smile. “Heheh. I guess you’re just another tomcat at heart, huh? Can’t blame ya, though. I’m criminally sexy... Ehehehe. Go on, take a little peek inside... Myaaaah! Get your hand outta there!”

I’d reached under her skirt without hesitation or embarrassment. But groping at her thighs just made me feel empty inside. Nothing makes a man more miserable than a frustrated libido.

“Mew?! Don’t look all *disappointed*! You’re the one who decided to grope me! What’s so bad about my legs, anyway?!”

To be perfectly honest, I found more pleasure in touching her ears or tail lately. At least petting something fuzzy was relaxing.

“You’re *such* a moron, Linia,” muttered Pursena, munching away on a slab of something just outside the range of my hands. That girl never seemed to stop eating meat. Sometimes it was jerky, sometimes it was grilled, and sometimes it was raw, but she was always eating in some form or another. She herself was a tough, cool-headed girl, but if you waved a little meat in her direction she’d come trotting over to you with her tail wagging wildly. Her fur was softer than Linia’s, and felt really nice under your hand. But unlike Linia, she wouldn’t let me pet her unless I offered her some food first.

On the other hand, if I *did* bring her some meat she’d let me do basically anything I wanted. She seemed to have some fairly old-fashioned views about chastity, but I was a little worried someone might take advantage of her.

“Hmm... Master, look here,” said Zanoba. “I’ve made the angle of this ankle worse, haven’t I?”

“Let me fix that for you, sir,” offered Julie, looking over at the figurine.

“I would rather that you called me *Master*, Julie. Take care to address Rudeus

as Grandmaster, also.”

“Okay, Master.”

Our resident prince seemed to be carrying on about the same as ever. Still, it did feel like he’d fallen to the bottom of our little group’s hierarchy. He’d tagged along for my fight with Linia and Pursena, but I basically ended up defeating them singlehandedly. Linia had compared him scornfully to a hyena skulking around in the shadow of a lion.

For his part, though, Zanoba seemed more concerned with his status as my “first student.” Of course, he was technically the fourth person I’d taught, after Sylphie, Eris, and Ghislaine. With Ghislaine there’d been a mutual exchange of information, so you could probably take her off the list... but that would still leave Zanoba at number three.

When I mentioned this to him, however, he looked so heartbroken that I instantly regretted it. To soften the blow a little, I told him he was my first student when it came to making figurines.

Julie, my second figurine-making student, always listened intently to Zanoba’s lengthy diatribes about his beloved Roxy figurine. He’d communicated enough of his passion to her that she sort of understood what he was talking about; I’d noticed her growing interest in making figurines on her own initiative. Still, it would be some time before she could discuss the finer points of design and technique the way Zanoba and I did.

Just as importantly, though, she’d started to take her first clumsy steps as a silent spellcaster. Master Fitz was right on the money when he suggested that learning magic at an early age was the best way to master that skill.

“...I couldn’t do it, Grandmaster.”

“That’s okay.”

For all of Julie’s progress, she was still young and made many mistakes. This time, the figurine’s legs had come out swollen like water balloons. She didn’t have the control necessary to use Earth magic precisely on such a small scale. I never got angry or frustrated with her, of course. I encouraged her to keep trying, telling her not to worry about her mistakes. Success never comes easily,

and giving up after one failure is a good way to turn yourself into a sulky shut-in loser.

“I guess you’re not quite ready to be fixing dolls yet, huh?”

“I’m sorry...”

No matter how kindly I spoke to Julie, there was always fear in her eyes when she looked at me. Apparently, I intimidated her.

“Meeew... I’m so sleepy...”

“Yeah. It’s getting warmer out and all.”

“Hey, Boss. We’ve got a great spot for midday naps, ya know? How about we show you sometime?”



“Hmm? Can I do naughty things to you while you sleep, Linia?”

“...Do you *ever* think about anything but sex, Boss?”

“Don’t be absurd. Figurines are always first in my master’s thoughts.”

“Ah, pipe down, Zanoba. No one asked you.”

“But I—”

“Put a sock in it. How’s about you go buy us some meat?”

“Ain’t much time till the teacher gets here, mew.”

“Guess he better run, then.”

“Master Zanoba, I can go instead...”

“I’m not going to let a little girl run errands for you. Why don’t I go instead?”

“Mew? Don’t be stupid, Boss! I’d rather go myself!”

“Oh yeah? Well, knock yourself out, then.”

“Meow?!”

The five of us were chattering pretty loudly. I imagine it was pretty annoying; we weren’t the only people in this room, after all. There was one other student in the classroom. Namely, Cliff Grimor, who’d been studying all by himself up front during our entire conversation.

All of a sudden, he jumped to his feet and turned back to us, his shoulders trembling with fury. “Will you people please shut up?! I can’t concentrate! If you’re just going to play around, go back to where you came from and do it there!”

I immediately shut my mouth. Zanoba also stopped chattering, and returned to quietly instructing Julie.

Our two ex-delinquents, however, chose to interpret Cliff’s outburst as a challenge.

“Who d’you think you’re mouthing off to, kid?”

“From now on, your money is my meat!”

You might expect them to be a little more hesitant to pick a fight, given that I'd beaten them solidly. But I'd heard they went a round with Cliff soon after he enrolled and had beaten him easily; after that, he'd devoted himself wholeheartedly to his studies.

I had to admire a guy who used his setbacks to motivate himself. It wouldn't be right to harass such a diligent student. "Sorry about that, Cliff," I said, interrupting. "Didn't mean to distract you from your studies. We'll keep it down from now on. Come on, you two. Down. Down!"

"...If mew say so, Boss."

"Fuck..."

Linia and Pursena flounced back into their seats, looking rather surly.

"Hmph," Cliff snorted. "Well, that's all I wanted. Honestly, you people are ridiculous... I can't believe you've roped Zanoba into your nonsense."

Linia and Pursena clicked their tongues, clearly irritated. Still, I didn't see any reason to mess with someone who was working hard to get ahead in life. I didn't think of myself as a slacker, either, but Cliff and I were clearly heading down very different roads. We'd never be anything more than acquaintances.

Or so I thought at the time, at least.

A week later, I was researching teleportation with Master Fitz at one of our regular library sessions.

Recently I'd begun to understand that teleportation bore certain similarities to Summoning magic. The magic circles used were very much alike, and the color of the magical energy they released when activated was almost identical.

They were totally different in one respect, though. It was totally impossible to summon a human being. There was simply no known way to do it, even with the most advanced and complex of techniques. You could call forth fiends, spirits, and even plants, yes. But not a person. I'd pored through countless records, myths, and ancient histories without finding a single reference to anyone summoning a person. There were many races in this world, including

the various tribes of Demonkind, but this rule seemed to apply to all of them equally.

This didn't have any direct relevance to what we wanted to know, of course. Maybe it wasn't a meaningful insight. But there was something about it that nagged at me. You couldn't summon a flesh and blood person. Fair enough. But what about their soul?

I didn't voice these thoughts, but I did file them away quietly. If I ever met a real expert in this field, I'd have to ask them about the possibility of summoning the spirit of a dead man from another world.

"Master Fitz, could you try to find out if there are any professors who know a lot about Summoning for me?"

"Huh? Well, sure. But they don't really teach that here, you know? Except for Enchantment, I guess. I'm not sure we'll find anyone who knows about the kind of stuff we're researching..."

Come to think of it, I'd noticed a distinct lack of Summoning classes on the list of courses offered here... although Enchantment was technically a subcategory, from the sound of things. Had I read something about that in one of my textbooks? "Well, it can't hurt to poke around and see what you find, at least."

To be honest, a small seed of uncertainty was growing inside me at this point. I didn't let it show, of course. I was probably mistaken. The Displacement Incident had occurred when I was ten—a whole decade after I was reincarnated in this world. Surely those two things weren't connected? Ten years had passed without anything happening, after all...

With a hint of anxiety still lingering in my mind, I left the library and headed for my dorm by the light of the setting sun. The latest snowfall had mostly melted away; patches of red-brown earth were visible across the courtyard, and the paved stone path was clear. As I followed it toward my destination, I heard a shout somewhere nearby.

"Get back here, you little shit!"

"You think we're gonna let you cast a spell?!"

In the next instant, a young man burst out from behind a school building,

followed by a group of six older men who were obviously chasing him. The young man was trying to gain enough distance from his pursuers to cast an Advanced spell, but they kept interrupting his incantation. He switched to Beginner-level magic, trying to slow them down, but it wasn't enough. The group of six closed in and knocked him to the ground, then kicked at him viciously as he curled into a ball.

I'd stumbled across a blatant case of schoolyard bullying, from the looks of things. It was painful just to watch; I couldn't stop myself from intervening. "Hey, c'mon. Give it a rest, guys," I called out as I trotted over. "No need to pick on that poor turtle."

The six bullies turned and glared fiercely in my direction. They were all a little taller than I was, so I guess they were trying to intimidate me. "Who the hell are you supposed to be?"

After a moment, though, one of them recognized me. "H-Hey, that's Quagmire..."

"Quagmire? Wait, you mean Rudeus?!"

"That Rudeus?! The guy who locked Linia and Pursena in a room and *trained* them?!"

Now, now. There wasn't any training involved, I assure you.

"That story's a load of bull."

"But I saw Pursena wag her tail and calling him Boss..."

"She wags her tail for anyone who gives her meat!"

"But they do what he tells them now, right?"

"Yeah. I saw them in class with that writing on their faces."

"What did it say again? 'We are Rudeus' love slaves,' right?"

"Well, I don't remember exactly how it went..."

"Damn. He beat them up and then *enslaved* them?"

"They're Doldia princesses, man!"

"The guy doesn't even think about the consequences..."

After loudly whispering these highly inaccurate rumors, the group of bullies swallowed in unison and stared at me in something like awe. They looked each other in the face, nodded, and then turned their attention to the boy lying at their feet. “All right, kid. We’ll let you off the hook for today.”

I quickly pounced on that comment. “For today? Are we going to have a repeat on our hands tomorrow, then? You planning to gang up on him again?”

The six bullies grimaced in irritation.

“Tch...”

“Look, uh... Mr. Greyrat. This doesn’t really have anything to do with you, does it?”

Guys like this *loved* trotting out that line. Yes, yes. This wasn’t any of my business. I knew that before I stuck my nose into it. “I don’t know what happened, but six-on-one just isn’t a fair fight.”

The group exchanged looks, then shook their heads. They were evidently pretty good friends, judging from their ability to communicate silently. “Okay. Fine. We’ll leave the kid alone,” said one of the group. “But just so you know, it’s not like he’s the victim here.”

With that, he turned and walked off, heading behind the building. The other five followed. Maybe they had a little base of operations set up back there or something.

Once they disappeared, I let out a small sigh of relief. It wasn’t easy keeping cool when six people were glaring at me like that. I’d worked out some strategies for fighting when I was outnumbered, but it still took some effort to keep myself from turning tail. I was fine staring someone down one-on-one at this point, though.

“Hey. You all right?” I walked over to the bullied boy as he struggled to his feet. He brushed the dust off his clothes, quickly murmuring the incantation for a Healing spell. In this place, even the kids who got picked on were apparently competent magicians...

The boy turned to face me. It was Cliff.

“...”

Honestly, most of my interactions with this guy had been pretty unpleasant. Whenever we bumped into each other, he was openly hostile toward me. He was probably going to say something like *“I didn’t ask for your help!”* and then stalk off angrily.

“I didn’t ask...” Halfway through the sentence, Cliff paused and frowned in thought. After a moment, he let out a small sigh. “...Sorry. I appreciate the help, Rudeus.”

“Oh. You’re welcome.”

The young mage bowed to me just a little, then walked briskly off. I stood there and watched him go, feeling a little startled. It was true that I’d come to his rescue, but that sudden change in attitude seemed very weird. It almost made me think he was plotting something.

Still, it was probably best to take things at face value for the moment. Cliff had been hostile to me for some time, but I’d never snapped back at him. Maybe he’d finally figured out that I wasn’t his enemy. Honestly, I didn’t understand why he’d decided to hate me in the first place, but...

“Well, whatever.” I shrugged, and walked off toward my dorm.

The next day, Cliff asked me to speak with him behind our school building.

He was angry. I didn’t have the first idea why, but it was written all over his face. It seemed like this might come to violence, so I’d activated my Eye of Foresight beforehand and was carefully monitoring my surroundings. I also had a good bit of mana gathered in my right hand waiting to be used.

Honestly, though. Turtles these days. Talk about ingratitude.

“Okay, we should be fine here.”

After checking that there was no one else in the area, Cliff turned to face me. His face was flushed an interesting shade of red.

I quickly realized that I’d misinterpreted the situation. He hadn’t called me here to fight me. If anything, this looked more like a classic love-confession

scene. This was a little awkward. True, I hadn't been able to perform with the ladies lately, but that didn't mean I was ready to start studying Male Anatomy 101.

It's tough being so sexy, heh heh.

"S-So here's the thing, Rudeus..."

"Yes?" I already knew how I'd reply, of course. It was important to give him a clear, definite answer. We were going to start off as friends. And also end that way.

"Well, I've fallen in love with someone," Cliff continued, scratching his cheek and bashfully studying the ground.

"N-no kidding?" Man, was I really going to have to shoot this poor guy down? The thought made my stomach hurt. I couldn't help thinking about how I might have reacted if he was a girl... but my sword had its preferences, and they weren't about to change.

To my surprise, however, Cliff looked up and pointed off to the side. "That's her, right there."

He was indicating a building a little way off in the distance. There was someone inside, looking out an open window. Her long blonde hair fluttered in the breeze as she gazed at the setting sun with a melancholy expression on her face.

"I saw you two talking this afternoon. You know her, right? Uhm... would you be willing to introduce us?"

"...Er, sure."

The person standing at that window was a woman I knew all too well. She was a notorious troublemaker, the subject of countless rumors—and a voracious predator who chewed through her fellow students with all the vigor of a succubus.

In other words, it was Elinalise Dragonroad.

Chapter 2:

The Prodigy's Secret

(Part 2)

HI THERE. Rudeus Greyrat speaking.

Uh, so here's my problem. Just the other day, my classmate Cliff Grimor confided in me about his love for Elinalise, and asked if I could introduce them.

Fair enough, right? I do know Elinalise relatively well. She was a member of the party that my parents belonged to, and we came to this city together. Also... I don't know much about how romance works in this world, but Cliff's obviously smitten, and wants very badly to express his feelings. I'd like to help him out if I can.

I mean that! Really. But let's remember what we've learned about Elinalise so far.

Elinalise Dragonroad is an S-ranked adventurer, a frontline warrior, and a first-year student at the Ranoa University of Magic. Her age is unclear. To my surprise, she's proven to be a diligent student and earns excellent grades. Lately she's started to integrate some Beginner-level Water spells into her combat style.

Most of her old adventuring acquaintances seem to hate her guts, but she's a highly skilled combatant, a kind-hearted person... and a monster in the sack.

Right. Therein lies the issue.

Elinalise is afflicted with a specific curse. It forces her to procure a regular daily dosage of male...bodily fluids. Because of this, she avoids settling down with any one specific man, preferring to get by on a steady diet of one-night stands and casual flings.

She says she's given birth to multiple children as well...although she's never told me much about where they are now. To be honest, I used to wonder if she just abandoned them by the roadside or sold them off to slave traders. But she

later explained that she raises them herself until they're ready to be independent, whatever that means. It's apparently relatively rare for her to get pregnant, anyway.

Let's get back to the main point here, though. Is it really a good idea for me to introduce this woman to Cliff as a potential romantic partner? He *obviously* has no idea that Elinalise is anything like this. Just listening to him talk about her makes me want to groan in despair.

"That vision of chaste beauty in the window *is* named Elinalise Dragonroad, correct? A strong and lovely name, well-suited to its bearer! I've heard she's an excellent student, but that's hardly a surprise. And since she was an adventurer until recently, she knows how to use magic effectively in real combat."

Until this bit, the only thing that's made me want to roll my eyes was that whole *vision of chaste beauty in the window* thing. For Elinalise, a window is just a convenient place to place her hands while offering her rear end to someone else. But Cliff clearly doesn't believe that his goddess is even sexually active.

"There are scurrilous rumors circulating about her taking countless male students as her lovers. I imagine some jealous rival of hers has been spreading this slander for some time now."

That is his interpretation of the situation, and he's sticking to it firmly. That fight he got into the other day was a direct result of this, actually. Those six students were bantering on about Elinalise—calling her a slut who'd put out for anyone who asked, and encouraging each other to take a turn. Cliff overheard this and got very upset. He chastised the older men for speaking ill of someone they didn't know based on nothing but rumors. Of course, those men probably had it on pretty good authority that Elinalise slept around, but Cliff had no way of knowing that.

All six of them were upperclassmen with some muscle on their bodies. They were also borderline delinquents who didn't like being lectured by some scrawny little pipsqueak. One of them harshly snapped back at him: "Look, man, I know someone who did her with *two other guys* the other day. Like, all at once. How about you just accept reality, huh? Maybe she'll take your virginity if you ask her really nicely."

Outraged by this vulgar, sneering comment, Cliff charged forward in a blind rage, swinging his fists at the group of larger men. He considers himself a decent fighter. But this was a six-on-one fight against people well outside his weight class. He might have stood a chance in a magical duel, but not in a close-range scrap. Fortunately for him, this was when I happened to appear.

It's a nice little story, in a sense. Really makes you appreciate the importance of doing your research upfront—and with an open mind.

Still, uh... what am I supposed to do now?

It's not like I owe Cliff a warning, really. I could just introduce him to Elinalise, and let her shatter his delusions. It isn't my problem. But is it really *right* for me to just shrug my shoulders and walk away?

Elinalise might actually thank me. She tends to be very appreciative whenever I introduce her to a man. Lately she's been particularly hooked on hunting down virgins, too. The awkward, uncertain freshmen are apparently kind of charming, and the ones with lots of false bravado are "just adorable." She also loves watching how they learn new things and grow over time.

I guess I can understand the appeal. I played plenty of porn games with a "training" theme back in the day. Not to jump to any assumptions, but Cliff is almost certainly a virgin. Elinalise would probably be all too happy to pull him into bed.

What about Cliff, though?

He's operating with a seriously inaccurate image of Elinalise. If they start "dating," he'll realize the truth soon enough. What if he blames me? What if he decides I set him up to get hurt? From my perspective, he's got no one but himself to blame, no matter what. But if I just introduce them, knowing what I know, I feel like I might be at least slightly responsible for the consequences.

Refusing him outright doesn't seem like a great option either, though. Cliff might draw some ridiculous conclusions from that. He might even decide that I'm a rival for Elinalise's love. Honestly, I wouldn't mind having a fling with a woman like that if my illness was ever cured, but I'm definitely not pursuing her. And I definitely don't want him thinking that I am.

What the heck am I supposed to do here?

I couldn't think of any clever solutions to my dilemma...

"I was hoping to get your advice on something, Master Fitz. If you don't mind."

And so, during one of our regular afterschool library visits, I turned to my trusty friend Fitz.

"Okay. What kind of advice?"

"Well... I guess it's a relationship advice thing, actually."

"What?!" Fitz spun around and leaned over the table. There was something like a grimace on his face. "A-Are you in love with someone, Rudeus?!"

I was a little surprised by how interested he was. Despite his large, dark sunglasses, I felt like I could see his eyes gleaming with curiosity. Maybe it wasn't that strange, though. Most people Fitz's age *were* relatively interested in romance.

"No. This is actually about a friend of mine."

"A friend...?"

"That's right."

"Uhm, okay. G-Go ahead, then."

"Basically, this friend of mine fell deeply in love with someone at first sight, and—"

"At first sight? And you're coming to me...? Wait, don't tell me it's Princess Ariel! Th-That won't work, Rudeus. I mean, I know she's really pretty, but..."

Fitz seemed kind of flustered about this, for whatever reason. People probably fell head over heels for the princess on a regular basis. As her bodyguard, it made sense that he'd want to discourage that. "Don't worry. Princess Ariel isn't involved."

"O-Oh. Okay, well, that's good."

“Actually, I know this person my friend fell in love with, and they have some... issues that make me reluctant to introduce them to my friend as a romantic option. I’m not sure if I should go ahead with this or not.”

There was a peculiar expression on Fitz’s face now. He had one hand to his mouth, and watching me intently from behind his sunglasses. “Does your friend know about this woman’s issues?”

“No, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t.”

...Hm? Did I say it was a woman? Maybe the Princess Ariel thing had just gotten Fitz thinking along those lines? It didn’t really matter, since Elinalise really was a woman, but...

Wait, did he still think this was about me? “Sorry to repeat myself, but the friend in this story isn’t me. I’m only saying this because I trust you, but it’s Cliff from the special class.”

“Oh! Really? Sorry, I guess I got the wrong idea...”

Looking a bit embarrassed, Fitz scratched lightly at the back of his ears. You couldn’t really blame him. Asking about advice for “your friend” when you’re too bashful to admit the truth is kind of a cliché, after all. “Anyway, how do you think I should approach this?”

“Uhm, well... I guess you should probably tell him about this woman’s issues, right? Unless there’s some reason that you can’t...”

Fitz sounded oddly uncertain about this advice. Then again, he was a virgin himself, wasn’t he? Maybe he didn’t have much experience in this particular field.

“I wouldn’t hesitate to do that, but Cliff tends to get these ideas fixed in his head, you know? I really don’t think he’d believe me. He might even decide that I’m lying to him because I’m in love with this woman myself.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess that might happen.”

“Right. So, I was thinking I might not be the best messenger to deliver this news, maybe?”

This was actually helping a little. My thoughts were starting to come together.

Maybe I could have a girl deliver the news... someone Cliff trusted? It would probably be even better for Elinalise to tell him herself, honestly.

“Uhm... So you don’t actually love this woman, Rudeus?”

“Nah. She’s a friend, but I can’t imagine ever dating her.” Of course, Elinalise was apparently amazing in bed, so I wouldn’t turn down a night of fun with her... but starting a serious relationship with her wasn’t too appealing. For one thing, I had the feeling she’d cheat on me within a day or two.

“I see. But that might just be you, Rudeus. Cliff might end up loving her, warts and all.”

That seemed a bit unlikely. A guy who fantasized about marrying a pure, innocent angel didn’t strike me as a good match for Elinalise, of all people. “Hmmm...”

Was introducing them even a good idea? I couldn’t seem to make up my mind.

After a few moments of silence, Fitz spoke up again, his voice a low murmur. “Uhm... I’m in love with someone too, so I can understand how he feels. From what I hear, most people can’t imagine dating the person I’m interested in, either... but I still love them.”

Fitz was in love with someone? Who could that be?

Princess Ariel seemed like the most obvious possibility, especially given the way he’d reacted when I brought this topic up. And I guess most people would have a hard time imagining themselves “dating” a member of the Asuran royal family...

Not that it really mattered who it was.

“It’s... kind of tough to just sit there watching them, when you can’t tell them how you feel.” Fitz’s face had gone red at some point. His blush reached all the way to the tips of his ears. “So, uh, I think you ought to introduce them. Give him the chance to get it off his chest, at least.”

“That might lead to all sorts of trouble down the road, though.”

“Well, what can you do? Once you get them in a room together, the rest’s up

to them.”

Ooh. That was true enough. After I set up the initial meeting, it *was* up to them what happened next. In other words, I could wash my hands of the whole thing. If I could make that very clear beforehand, so much the better. “Okay then. I’ll try working out something along those lines. Thanks for the advice, Master Fitz.”

“Y-You’re welcome... I’m always happy to help...”

Fitz still seemed a little uncertain about all of this, but I’d made up my mind. As I left the library, I noticed Fitz slumping face-first onto the table out of the corner of my eye. It was probably a little embarrassing to be giving out advice like some wise old sage at his age, all things considered. But despite his lack of worldly experience, he always seemed to have something insightful to say. I was genuinely grateful to him.

The very next day, I called Cliff out for a private conversation. He came to meet me behind the school building right on time, expectation shining in his eyes.

“I’m willing to introduce you to her,” I said, “but there’s something I wanted to make very clear beforehand.”

“What’s that?”

“First of all...as an adventurer, I was in a party with Elinalise for some time. I think I know more about her than most people around here do.”

Cliff’s eye twitched a little at this fact, which I hadn’t mentioned previously.

I continued, “I’ve decided not to tell you what I think of her. That’s not because I’m trying to deceive you or anything. I just think you should meet her in person, talk to her, and then decide that for yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Basically, I don’t want this to become an issue down the road. Don’t come complaining to me later acting like I misled you or tried to trick you, okay?” Hopefully, this would offer me some insurance if things went really badly. It also

acted as a hint that he might run into some problems here.

“I wouldn’t do a thing like that! I’m a faithful member of the Millis Church, Rudeus. We show matchmakers the proper respect.”

Interesting. Did they think of setting people up as a virtuous deed? I wasn’t a believer myself, so the reference was kind of lost on me. Help me out here, God... “Well, I don’t belong to the Millis Church, so I don’t know what you expect of your matchmakers. Just don’t come yelling at me if I do it wrong.”

“Come on. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Okay then. Just remember, you’re doing this at your own risk, okay?”

Cliff nodded impatiently. “I’m perfectly prepared for her to reject me!”

That really wasn’t the worst-case scenario I had in mind, but okay.

We found Elinalise all alone in an empty classroom.

She was leaning over with her elbows resting on the windowsill, but for once there wasn’t someone naked standing right behind her. She was just looking out the window, evidently lost in thought.

I knew what was on her mind, of course. She was waiting impatiently for the sun to finish setting. Once night fell, the bars out in town would open their doors. And inside those bars, she’d find lots of men ready and willing to have some fun. That was the only sort of thing she ever thought about. Still, from the perspective of someone who didn’t know any better, I guess she *would* have looked a lot like an angel.

“Oh. Hello there, Rudeus. Did you actually come to see me for once?” Elinalise glanced over at me with an expression of mild surprise. To be sure, I hadn’t spoken to her very often since we enrolled at the University. Every once in a while, she’d come find me at lunchtime to see how I was doing, but that was about it. “Hm? And who’s this nice young man with you?”

Cliff appeared from behind me, pressed one fist against his stomach, and brought his feet neatly together. Presumably this was some formal greeting from Millishion.

“Elinalise, this is Cliff Grimor. He’s a special student in his second year here.”

“Indeed! My name is Cliff, madam,” said Cliff with a bow. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you!”

“Goodness, what a polite young gentleman. I’m Elinalise Dragonroad. If you don’t mind my asking, is there something I can do for you?”

“He wanted me to introduce you to him, actually,” I butted in. “That’s why we’re here.”

“This is true,” said Cliff, nodding firmly. “Miss Elinalise, I’ve seen your face on several occasions, and your beauty always leaves me captivated! I would very much appreciate the chance to become better acquainted with you!”

Silence settled over the room. Elinalise looked somewhat taken aback. After a long moment, she slowly straightened up, took me by the arm, and pulled me over to one side of the classroom.

“All right, Rudeus,” she whispered in my ear. “How much do you want?”

It took a few seconds for me to process what she meant by this. Did she think I was going to *charge* her for bringing her a new boy-toy? Ugh. Now I just felt gross. “I don’t want any money.”

“What is this, then? What *do* you want?”

“Nothing. He just fell in love with you, that’s all.”

“Oh, please. Rudeus, you know what I’m like. Why would you bring a naïve little choirboy like that to meet me? You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Huh. I didn’t even know you were familiar with the concept of shame. You learn something new every day... “I didn’t lie to him or anything, Elinalise. I’m just introducing you, because he asked me to.”

“Seriously?”

“It really is that simple. I’ll swear it on Master Roxy’s name, if you want.”

Elinalise paused to think it over for a few seconds, then frowned. “Okay, well... if that’s true, Rudeus, this is a problem. I don’t want to deal with anyone who’s serious about me.”

I'll admit I was a little surprised. I'd expected her to smile and say she had a room at the inn for exactly this sort of situation.

"You know about my curse, don't you? I can't have an exclusive relationship with anyone. It just wouldn't work."

It wasn't that she just *preferred* casual sex and frequenting brothels. She didn't really have the option of pursuing a dedicated romance, given the nature of her curse. That was why she never let things get too serious with anyone. She'd explained all this to me before, hadn't she? She put more thought into this than I'd given her credit for. It sounded like Cliff was probably going to leave disappointed.

"That's a shame. Go ahead and turn him down, then."

"Are you sure? Isn't he going to resent you if I do?"

"It's fine." It's not like I had to worry about my reputation so much anymore. If he went right back to hating me, I could live with that. "Still," I added, "Try to tell him the truth, if you can. Don't use me as an excuse or anything."

"All right then. If you say so."

"Appreciate it."

With our little conference at an end, Elinalise turned back to Cliff. She was taller by a few inches. Cliff was a bit on the short side, really. They would have made a slightly unusual couple... not that it would have mattered, if they'd hit it off. It was starting to hurt just being in this room.

"Rudeus," said Elinalise. "I think you ought to give us some privacy."

"Right, of course. Pardon me..."

I walked promptly toward the exit. I couldn't help feeling sorry for Cliff, but this was probably the best outcome he could have hoped for. Elinalise's curse was the biggest obstacle, but she *liked* playing around at this point. And Cliff was a pious member of the Millis Church, which preferred things boring and monogamous. They were basically oil and water from the start.

"Uhm... thank you, Rudeus!" Cliff called as I left the room.

The gratitude in his voice made my chest ache.

A week later, I showed up at my monthly homeroom to find a certain couple engaging in a brazenly public display of affection. A tall woman sat on her boyfriend's lap, gazing lovingly into his eyes.

"Combined magic isn't too hard once you've memorized all the fundamental physical phenomena. Even if you can't use two schools of magic yet, you can imitate the effects of one by taking advantage of natural forces."

"How clever! You really do know *everything*, Cliff."

"Well, I wouldn't say that..."

I knew both of the people involved. They were Cliff and Elinalise. I slowly walked over and simply stared at them, head tilted.

"Hm? Oh, Rudeus! Thank you again for the other day!" Cliff tried to stand up in greeting, but thanks to the woman on top of him, was forced to settle for bowing his head in gratitude.

"You're welcome, Cliff. Elinalise, would you mind explaining the situation?"

Elinalise smiled gently up at me from her new seat. "Well, the two of us are dating now."

Okaaay. But why, though? This definitely wasn't how this was supposed to go... "Uh, that's not...what you decided beforehand, is it?"

"What do you want from me, Rudeus? His proposal was so bold and passionate! He dethawed my heart instantly!"

Wait, his proposal? Did we skip a few dozen steps at some point, or is it just me?

"Come on, Elinalise. You're embarrassing me."

"I quote: I'll lift your curse, no matter what! So please... please marry me!"

"Hey, cut it out!"

"Oh, you should have seen him in the inn that night, too. So innocent, so eager... Oh no, I'm getting horny just remembering it..."

"Come on, seriously... W-We're in public, Elinalise..."

Cliff's face was bright red. For all his protestations, he didn't seem to be particularly upset.

Well, congrats on losing your virginity, I guess. This was all mildly obnoxious, but it didn't bother me that much, maybe because I'd had at least some experience myself now. Or maybe because I knew about Elinalise's habits. Still... it was clear that she'd told him about the curse. It was a pretty solid reason not to start an exclusive relationship with anyone, and it was definitely real, but...

Why the heck would Cliff have reacted by asking for her hand in *marriage*?

"From now on, I'll be restraining myself as much as I possibly can. For Cliff's sake, of course."

"I told you, don't force yourself. It's a curse, not something you can control. A-As long as your heart belongs to me, nothing else matters..."

"Oh, Cliff... you know it does. It was always purely physical, with the others... but I'm yours in body and in soul..." Elinalise snuggled against Cliff, enraptured, as he gently stroked her hair. A moment later, they were staring into each other's eyes. At making-out range, naturally.

"Elinalise..."

"Cliff..."

Great. Now they're kissing. They apparently forgot that I even existed as they proceeded to make out shamelessly.

Was this what Cliff had wanted? To be this guy? The 'kissing in the classroom' guy? I felt like he should rethink that one. Elinalise was saying all the right things, but I couldn't help feeling like she was keeping him around as a convenient backup snack. Had love left the poor guy blind or what?

I sucked in a breath, about to speak my mind, but forced myself to stop. I'd agreed to introduce them on the condition that nobody got to complain about the outcome. It would be ridiculous for me to object now.

I glanced at the back of the classroom and I found the other three totally disinterested. Pursena was chewing on a strip of jerky, and Zanoba was talking to Julie about some figure he'd spotted in the marketplace the other day. Julie

was listening earnestly, not even glancing at the couple in front.

Linia was the only one who seemed to be bothered at all. She wore an irritable scowl. I walked over to speak with her first. “Boss, what’s the deal with that woman? I made one little comment and she called me some frickin’ nasty names...”

“I’m not sure either, to be honest.”

This was definitely a weird situation, but I gave myself a moment to try make some sense of it. When I left the other day, Elinalise was determined to reject Cliff firmly and completely. And from the sound of things, she’d started off the conversation on that note. Whatever else you could say about her, she was an honest person. She’d probably given Cliff all the details about her curse, and explained that the rumors about her were in fact true.

And yet, he’d responded by proposing to her. By vowing to lift her curse and asking for her hand in marriage, he’d apparently won her over... somehow. I had no idea how this plan had even popped into Cliff’s head. His thought process here was seriously a mystery.

If I looked at it from Elinalise’s perspective, though? This young man had promised to devote his life to her, and to helping her escape her curse. If someone just threw a fastball like that at you out of nowhere... might it actually work? Would you really fall in love with them, just like that?

I could see that line hitting hard, at least. This curse had afflicted Elinalise for many, many years. There was no telling if Cliff could really lift it, but he’d promised to do his best to make that happen. That probably meant a lot to her. Even if she mostly enjoyed her nightly escapades, the curse had probably caused her plenty of sadness and pain.

Maybe it really was that simple. Maybe his promises were enough to win her over. But there was more to it than that, right? Cliff had shown her some real bravery and passion.

“Hey, Boss! I just had a great idea!”

“What’s that, Linia?”

“We should start dating, too! Mew! Let’s give those dorks a taste of their own

medicine!”

This was clearly not an idea Linia had given any serious thought to, but I found myself tempted to try a small experiment. “I might be willing to give it a shot,” I said slowly. “Tell me something, though. If I took you up on that, would you help find me a cure for my impotence?”

“Huh?!” said Linia... and everyone else in the room, with the exception of Elinalise.

Every head turned in my direction. Five very confused-looking people stared at me in silence for a few long seconds.

What? Would it be that weird for me to date Linia?

“B-B-Boss... D-Did you, uh... overhear us earlier, or something...?” asked Linia, her voice hesitant and nervous.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, at lunch, uh... me and Pursena were talkin’ about the way you tied us up, and stripped us down, but didn’t even mate with us, you know? Mew... We were saying that your sausage probs don’t even work right.”

Little jerks. I oughta teach them both a lesson...

When I glanced over at Pursena, she averted her eyes immediately. “W-We weren’t making fun of you or nothing, Boss. It’s just... you didn’t smell that interested when you were touchin’ us, ya know? We sorta figured there might be something wrong.”

All of a sudden, everyone in the classroom was looking at me with pity instead of confusion. Apparently, they’d reacted to the impotence thing, not the part about me dating Linia. Was a little erectile dysfunction really that unusual around here?

“We weren’t gonna spread it around, Boss. Honest. Linia’s the one who made the sausage joke. She’s a moron sometimes.”

“Shut up, Pursena! You said he’s just a harmless wimp who doesn’t have the guts to make a move on us!”

“That was a compliment, stupid.”

“Mew?!”

I shook my head as the two of them broke into their usual back-and-forth, and walked over to take my seat. “It’s fine, really. I’m not trying to keep it a secret or anything.”

“Y-Yeah! Who cares if you’re impotent, Boss? It’s not like we’re gonna think any less of you! Mew!”

“Right. Ya might be impotent, but you’re still the boss, Boss!”

Great, very touching. Could you stop repeating the word “impotent” now? It’s starting to get to me a little. Maybe I should have kept this a secret after all...

“There’s no need to let this get to you, Master!” said Zanoba cheerfully, thumping me on the shoulder. “We have our figurines! Let us live for their sake!”

Julie tilted her head uncertainly. “Master, what does impotent mean?”

“Well, I suppose it means that you can’t perform the role expected of a man... but it’s hardly important. It has no relevance to the creation of figurines.”

“Hmm...”

Was Zanoba actually trying to cheer me up? I could tell he was choosing his words very carefully...

“And here I thought you were just a total perv, Boss... I guess you were just searching for a cure to your condition, huh? Brings a tear to my eye, it does... meow.”

“I’ll help out any way I can, Boss. As long as ya gimme some meat first.”

The cat and dog also offered some forced expressions of sympathy. It wasn’t doing much for me, though. I definitely wasn’t falling in love with them, at least.

“For what it’s worth, Rudeus, I learned how to hear confessions as part of my training. They said I don’t have much talent in that area, but maybe I could talk things through with you, at least. Let me know if you ever need someone to lend an ear, okay?”

On the other hand, Cliff’s words seemed warm and genuine. Now this was the

sort of thing that could win a man's heart. Too bad I wasn't gay. I could kind of understand how Elinalise must have felt the other day, though.

So, anyway. Cliff and Elinalise were now officially dating. I had a hard time believing that Elinalise would be able to resist the urge to sleep around. And I was positive that Cliff wouldn't be able to put up with that for long. It was all good for now, but the relationship was obviously going to fall apart eventually.

Not that I was going to say so, of course.

On a different note, the other special students were now aware of my condition. The conversation had been extremely awkward, but at least they'd offered me their cooperation.

Maybe I'd taken my first actual step forward here. Maybe. I just really wanted to get this thing taken care of so I could swap spit with someone, too.

Interlude: Sylphiette (Part 3)

TODAY, AS I FOLLOWED the *Princess* through a hallway, I overheard someone speaking nearby.

“Really, Cliff, you’ve got to lighten up a little!”

“Look, I understand the nature of your curse. And I do enjoy, uh... being intimate with you. But we came here to study, remember? If we spend every day in bed, we’ll end up totally depraved.”

“I know, I know. First we study, and *then*...”

It was Cliff and Elinalise—walking along together, looking very ‘intimate’ indeed. Rumors had been flying that the two of them were dating, which most people found odd, since Cliff was a very sober young man and Elinalise supposedly slept around a lot. People said that she was only playing with him, and Cliff was just too naïve to realize it... but watching them in person, it sure seemed like their feelings were mutual.

“I can’t say I was expecting those two to fall for each other,” murmured the *Princess* softly, following my gaze. “Cliff always seemed like such an obstinate, serious person. He refused every attempt we made to win him over, for one thing. It’s hard to believe he ended up with an elf with such an infamous reputation.”

The *Princess* then turned her gaze to Rudy. “He really is impressive, isn’t he?”

Rudy was speaking to the new couple with an awkward little smile on his face. Elinalise was smiling warmly back. Cliff’s expression was less warm, but there was something like respect in his eyes when he looked at Rudy.

I seemed to remember Cliff despising Rudy. But now that Rudy had helped him win over Elinalise, his attitude had apparently changed completely.

Come to think of it... was Rudy getting up to anything himself? He’d met quite

a few pretty girls by this point. And he did seem to be friendly with a few of them. According to the *Princess's* knight, every man of the Notos Greyrat line was a born womanizer. Still, I hadn't heard anything about Rudy dating, or even making a move on someone. And I hadn't seen him flirting with anyone, either.

It was hard to think he wouldn't be interested in that sort of thing, though. That was the weird part. Back in Buena Village, he'd sure treated me differently after realizing I was a girl.

Was he trying to restrain himself or something?

As I was thinking this, Rudy happened to glance in my direction, and waved with a little smile on his face. It reminded me so much of the boy I'd known years before. It felt like my heart skipped a beat.

But he wasn't waving at me. I knew that all too well. He was waving at *Fitz*, one of the *Princess's* attendants. Rudy had gotten very friendly with Fitz over the last few months. He'd asked him for all sorts of advice, and Fitz had gradually earned his trust and friendship in return.

He wasn't waving at me, in other words. He didn't even know I was here.

Trying not to feel too sad about that fact, I followed after the *Princess* as she set off down the hall.

Chapter 3:

The Impervious Fiance

(Part 1)

HALF A YEAR had passed since I enrolled at the Ranoa University of Magic. It was autumn now—the harvest season. Fall never lasted for very long up in the Northern Territories, but it was a very important time of year, when food was prepared, harvested, and laid in storage for the painful winter ahead. There were even a few festivals held across the different towns and cities.

For the beastfolk, it was also mating season... a lengthy cultural event that came with a complicated set of rules and rituals. All of them were noticeably restless as it approached, men and women alike.

There weren't that many of their kind enrolled in the University, relatively speaking. I'd guess they made up 5% of the student body, which numbered roughly 10,000 in total. That would put their numbers at 500 or so—a large group in a sense, but not that impressive given the size of our campus. Still, once autumn began, they seemed to be everywhere, fighting one-on-one duels that typically pitted a man against a woman. For several months after their duel, the couple would be glued to each other. Eventually, they'd get married. Whoever won the initial duel would take on the role of boss in the new "pack" they were forming.

These rules weren't set in stone, or anything. It was just an old tradition that some of them respected more than others. Still, some beastfolk actually travelled here from distant lands to challenge our students to one of these romantic duels.

In other words, we had outsiders wandering onto our campus. This was something the administration would normally have tried to prevent, but the mating season was a very delicate subject because of its importance in beastfolk culture. Any attempt to ban their traditions would probably result in actual riots. As a compromise, the school allowed non-student beastfolk to enter its grounds under the pretense of "auditing classes," as long as they

applied for permission beforehand.

Anyway... this brings us to Linia and Pursena.

The two of them were basically unattainable to your average beastfolk guy. For one thing, they were probably the two strongest beastfolk fighters in the entire school. And just as importantly, they were Doldia princesses. If you proposed to one of them, fought her, and won, you'd become a candidate for leader of the entire tribe. You wouldn't be handed power immediately, of course. But when the time came to choose the next leader, there was no doubt that you'd be seriously considered for the role.

Of course, Linia and Pursena had come to this far-off land to study, not to find a husband. They couldn't very well pick out a partner here without talking to their family first, and thus, they'd flatly rejected all of the proposals they were bombarded with after turning fifteen.

Yet despite their very public disinterest in marriage, there had been even more suitors the following year. The two of them were *very* popular. Apparently, some beastman had even launched sneak attacks on them, trying to win their compliance by force. They'd beaten off these attackers easily enough...but when fall rolled around again this year, they decided to shut themselves in their dorm. It wasn't like the girls' dormitory was an impenetrable fortress, but any man who tried to sneak in would be piled on by all the residents. So Linia and Pursena stayed put in their rooms, even skipping homeroom.

I guess it was medical leave, in a sense. They were presumably in heat themselves at the moment, after all. The thought of them writhing around in their rooms meowing and woofing passionately was kind of exciting. Not that it got *me* ready to mate or anything.

The two of them had sent me a letter, the gist of which was "Sorry for the hassle, Boss, but we'll leave things to you for now." I wasn't sure exactly how I was supposed to be helping out, though. Maybe they just wanted me to answer for them when the professor did roll call or something.

In any case, it wasn't just the beastfolk who were "in heat" around this time

of year. Fall coincided with a rise in sexual assault cases around campus, as some people took advantage of all the chaos. Those strict rules about who could enter what dorm made a little more sense to me now. When it was two beastfolk in heat, you could sort of write off some aggression as a natural or cultural phenomenon... but apparently, some of the victims were human first-years who didn't even know what the hell was going on.

The school rules strictly forbid this sort of thing, of course. To keep things under control, the administration had security guards patrolling the campus. Consensual duels were permitted, but you couldn't just attack someone who refused to fight you. That was the line they drew. Our homeroom professor even gave us an explicit warning about the situation, telling us not to casually accept any duels this time of year. He also encouraged those who weren't confident in their self-defense skills to travel in groups at all times.

Master Fitz also told me to be careful, actually. He seemed to think some girls might challenge me to a duel under false pretenses, claiming that they just wanted to practice against a powerful magician. His advice was to turn them down flatly, ignore their attempts to provoke me, and leave the area quickly without letting down my guard for a second.

Girls in heat, huh...?

Back in the old days, I might have been tempted to duel every single one of them and make myself a harem. But in my current condition, I'd basically just be rubbing salt in my own wounds. Mating season was one event I wouldn't be participating in any time soon.

I'll leave it to those youngsters over there. See? The human boy and his elf girlfriend, who's "studying" while sitting in his lap? That woman's in heat all year long.

Honestly, those two never gave it a rest. I could practically see the hearts floating over their heads. Still... Cliff was obviously a whole new man, but it seemed to me like Elinalise was treating him the same way she treated all her other lovers. I wasn't going to say anything, of course, but this whole thing still kind of looked like a sham to me. Was this actually going to work out for them?

At some point while I was watching Cliff and Elinalise enjoy themselves,

Zanoba had walked up to my desk. “Master, don’t you think it’s about time to start in on a new creation?”

“A new creation, huh...?” Up until a few days ago, I’d been working on a 1/8 scale figurine of Eris as sort of a therapy exercise, but I ended up blubbering so much that I had to quit halfway through. Since then, I hadn’t been able to motivate myself to make anything. I’d fallen into a bit of a slump without even noticing. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Any ideas?”

“Perhaps making some sort of an animal or monster would be a nice change of pace.”

“Hmm, sure. I think a Red Wyrms might be fun, then.”

“Oh! Indeed! The very monster that you once slew single-handedly, yes?”

“Yeah. That wasn’t easy, by the way. I thought I was dead for sure.”

“Hahaha. You’re far too modest.”

“Master Zanoba, what are you talking about?”

Julie seemed to be a little curious, so I told her the story of my battle against a Red Wyrms straggler from back in my adventuring days. Before long, her eyes were sparkling, and her face flushed with excitement. Kids in this world seemed to love stories like these. It was easy to forget sometimes, but she was still only six.

“Hm, okay then. Why don’t I make a Red Wyrms figurine for you, Julie?”

“What...? M-Master, what about me? Won’t you make anything for me?!”

“Zanoba, you’re supposed to be my student, right? How about you offer to *help* me make this?”

“Oh! Of course, Master! I’ll assist you in any way that I can.”

This life wasn’t so bad, really. I wasn’t in peak condition lately, but at least I’d settled into a decent routine here. My Beginner-level Divine and Barrier magic classes would be wrapping up soon, and I had to decide what to take next. Perhaps Intermediate Detoxification? I’d gotten by just fine with only the Beginner-level spells so far, though. It didn’t seem like there was a need to learn anything more advanced than that.

I could always try Advanced Healing instead. But again, I felt relatively satisfied with my current level of expertise there. The Intermediate spells were enough to deal with most situations.

There was always Enchantment, which I'd never dabbled in before. It was technically a form of Summoning magic, so maybe it would be more relevant to my research. From what I heard, though, it mainly involved learning how to create various magical implements. I still wasn't sure what that had to with Summoning...but at least it would be something new.

Of course, I was free to not take any new classes at all. I could just spend more time in the library instead. I started to feel like I'd hit a dead end researching the Displacement Incident, but it might be interesting to try and teach myself more languages. If I did go that route, I could try asking Cliff to tutor me in Divine magic on the side... He'd been spending all his time with Elinalise lately, though. It was probably smart to leave them alone for a while. Didn't want to make a nuisance of myself.

Maybe I could try going in a completely different direction and learning something unrelated to magic. It might be fun to learn how to ride a horse, for one thing...

The days slipped by peacefully as I tried to make up my mind.

And then, things suddenly weren't so peaceful anymore.

"I take you to be Quagmire Rudeus, the A-ranked adventurer who cut down a stray Wyrms single-handedly! I challenge you to a matrimonial duel, sir!"

On my way to the library, I found myself on the receiving end of a challenge.

I turned around and found myself looking at a beautiful girl. Her skin was tanned, and her silky dark-blue hair was tied in a neat ponytail. She looked maybe 17 or 18. She had a strong, dignified face, and her lips were pursed tightly together; you could tell at a glance that she was the "lady warrior" type. Instead of a school uniform, she wore a light swordfighter's outfit in a striking shade of deep blue.

She had a modest bust, but her muscles were impressive. She didn't look like

a bodybuilder or anything, but she was clearly in very good shape. By her side was a long, curved sword—the kind commonly used by swordfighters of the Sword God Style.

The girl was staring in my direction.

To be more precise, she was staring in surprise at the person standing just in front of me—the big, hairy beastman who'd just loudly challenged me to a duel.

Yeah. I neglected to mention the muscular, canine beastman, but that was him who'd shouted at me. He didn't look the slightest bit like a magician, either. The girl with the sword had probably just been passing by. Given the time of year, she might have thought he was talking to her.

"Uhm..."

Well, anyway. Let's forget the pretty girl for now.

There was a pretty fundamental problem here. I was a guy, and this guy was also a guy, and he'd just challenged me to a duel. That was slightly awkward. "A matrimonial duel? Like... one of those things where you get married later?"

"Indeed!"

Gaah... "I'm sorry... I don't know if there are rumors going around or something, but I'm actually straight. Not really interested in experimenting, either. I'm going to have to decline your offer."

The beastman's ears twitched. "You seem to be misunderstanding the situation."

"Oh no, is it this late already? You know, I've actually got piano practice today. I'm going to have to leave now, sorry..."

Now that I'd declined his offer, I turned around and started to walk away, totally ignoring his attempt to continue the conversation. Following Fitz's advice to the letter, in other words.

"Hold on there!"

But to my surprise, my hairy new friend leapt up, soared several feet over my head, and landed with a loud thump right in front of me. The guy jumped like a Reverse-Joint mech. He would have made a solid Dragoon.

“You have no right to refuse me. My name is Brook Adoldia! I’ve come to duel for Miss Pursena’s hand in marriage, so that I might one day become the leader of my tribe!”

“Uh, Pursena’s resting up in her dorm room until this whole mating season thing blows over. Maybe you could head over there instead?”

“I sent Miss Pursena a letter in advance, informing her of my intentions! She explained that you are now the boss of her pack. I learned of your prowess as a warrior from Sir Gyes, and I’ve heard that you cut down a stray dragon by yourself. Clearly, you are the strongest man in this University. You ought to make a worthy opponent for me!”

Okay, I didn’t really cut down anything, though... I’m a magician, not a swordsman... “What happens if I refuse?”

“As leader of the pack, you are obligated to fight me!”

I took a moment to try and piece all of this together.

After I managed to beat Linia and Pursena in a fight some time ago, they started calling me their boss. Apparently, you had to defeat the boss of a “pack” if you wanted to marry someone who belonged to it. So if this guy beat me in a fight... he’d be able to claim Pursena as a prize?

I hadn’t intended to become the leader of any packs, but I felt like this guy wasn’t going to care about that. This was some primal, animal-kingdom stuff. If I threw this fight, I’d be removed from my position as the boss, and Pursena would get married off to this random hairy guy.

“Now then... to battle!”

Brook didn’t wait for me to say anything in response. Howling ferociously, he charged forward at me.

“Quagmire.”

Since he was coming at me in a straight line, he promptly ran right into my swamp...

“Stone Cannon.”

And one well-placed stone projectile knocked him out.

Slightly anti-climactic. It seemed his bark was worse than his bite. I'd basically taken him out on reflex rather than thinking it through, but in retrospect, it wasn't like I had much reason to let him win. Pursena didn't seem interested in getting married to anyone at the moment, for one thing.

This did explain that letter they'd sent me, at least. I wasn't super happy about them dumping this whole thing on my shoulders, but I could deal with a few guys like this, no sweat. It probably wasn't that big a deal.

My feelings on the subject changed over the course of the next few minutes, as I came under attack five different times on my way over to the library.

It felt like half of the Doldia tribe had been waiting eagerly for this day to come. Linia and Pursena were in *seriously* high demand. What was so appealing about those two, anyway? Their bodies, maybe? That didn't make much sense, though. Lots of these men had probably never even seen them in person. It had to be the whole "princess" thing. That first guy had said something about becoming the leader of his tribe, after all.

Was being number one really that important to them? What was this, a whole tribe of Starscreams?

From the looks of things, they'd even worked out an order to challenge me in. One guy tried to barge in halfway through and got yelled at for "cutting in line." Maybe it was another one of those beastfolk traditions or something.

Fortunately, they didn't go so far as to pursue me inside the library itself. I guess the administration had made it clear to them that they weren't allowed to barge into any of the school's facilities... or the beastfolk had some ancient rule about that, too.

I didn't care either way. At least I could take refuge here for a little while.

A few hours later, in the early evening, Fitz showed up at the library as well. His gaze was a little bit reproachful. "It's quite a scene out there, Rudeus. What did you do to upset all those people?"

“Nothing. They just want to beat me in a fight so they can marry Linia or Pursena.”

“Wait, what?”

As Fitz blinked in confusion, I proceeded to explain all the ugly details about my status as the “boss” and the way the beastfolk traditions apparently worked. By the time I was done, Fitz was frowning sourly. “That makes no sense at all. You’re not the leader of the Doldia tribe or anything. Who cares if you beat them in a fight once? That doesn’t mean you have any right to hand them out as prizes to random strangers.”

True enough. If I had that much power over them, they wouldn’t be scratching me in the face every time I touched their legs. “You’re right. But how do I convince the people out there?”

Fitz put a hand to his chin, and nodded slowly. “You have every right to just ignore them, really... but it might be easier to just beat them in a fight. They’ll probably give up and go home.”

“...so at the end of the day, I should duel them after all?”

“That’s probably for the best.”

Easy for him to say. I wasn’t sure how many people were waiting out there for me, but from the sound of things it was probably in the dozens. And of course, this was a crowd of big, smelly macho men who wanted to rule their tribe. I’d have to knock every one of them unconscious. “I’d really prefer not to make violence a part of my daily routine, you know.”

“I know that, Rudeus. But unless you do something about them, you’ll be stuck in here forever. Oh, and they might just lose their patience and charge in here, too. We don’t want them making a mess of the library, do we?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Ugh... just what I needed, a fighting tournament against a horde of sweaty, furry men...” I couldn’t find anything to look forward to there, no matter how hard I tried. It just sounded like a pain in the butt.

“Uhm, it’s not *just* men, actually. I did see one girl out there too.”

“Seriously? Was she cute?”

“Rudeus... Please don’t tell me you’re going to accept that duel?”

“No, no. Of course not. Uh...”

I shook my head, mainly so that Fitz would stop glaring at me. Still, I *was* a little intrigued. I wanted to know what she looked like, at least. And where she’d even heard about me. “I’m just curious, that’s all.”

When someone expresses interest in you, it’s perfectly natural to be a little intrigued in return. Not that things could move too far forward until my condition was cured, of course.

“Oh? You’re *curious*, huh? Hmm.” For some reason, Fitz sounded displeased with me. He had warned me against dueling girls at great length just the other day, to be fair...

Oh, maybe Luke had gotten himself into trouble that way at some point? Yeah, that made sense. Fitz had probably been forced to clean up the mess afterward, so he was irritated to see me treating the situation so casually.

“Well, never mind that,” I said. “It sounds like this causes a lot of chaos every year, huh? Can’t the student council do anything?”

“We don’t intervene in anything related to the mating season. If we tried to ban it, things would probably just get worse.”

From what Fitz told me, the student council had their hands full this time of year as it was. They focused most of their energy on protecting less combat-proficient students during this chaotic season, doing things like patrolling the campus in small groups, stopping any misconduct they found before it got out of hand. Fitz was scheduled to participate in one of those patrols that very night, in fact.

“So you’re trying to protect the peace, right? You could totally help me out, then!”

“Oh, please. Why don’t you just take care of it yourself, Rudeus? I don’t think you need *our* help.”

For some reason, Fitz’s voice wasn’t very friendly today. Had I said something to upset him? Wait...maybe he was thinking about what happened during my

entrance exam. He claimed my victory didn't bother him, but if I started running from fights like this, people might start to think that he'd lost to a coward. That wouldn't be good for his reputation, either.

Fitz had been helping me out a lot recently. I still wasn't thrilled about any of this, but I owed it to him to make an effort. "All right then. For the sake of your good name, Master Fitz, I'll go slaughter all of them."

"What?! Don't *kill* them, Rudeus!"

"It was just a joke. Sorry."

People did take these duels seriously, but there was an unwritten rule that nobody was supposed to die as a result. Still, there might be some powerful fighters waiting for me among that crowd. I couldn't let myself get careless.

Finally resigned to my fate, I stepped outside the library for the first time in hours.

"...What the hell?"

I was greeted by a mildly surprising scene. Dozens of bodies lay scattered across the ground, limp and motionless. It felt like I'd wandered onto a battlefield or something.

All of them were male beastfolk of various races, shapes, and sizes. Some of them wore school uniforms, but many didn't.

Oh, wait. There's one girl, too.

It was the swordswoman I'd seen earlier. Had she gotten mixed up in this somehow? Or maaaaybe... she was in *wuv* with me all along?

As I pondered this extremely important question, a burst of laughter boomed through the air. "Bwahahahaha!"

One man stood tall amidst the fallen, holding the last of his foes up in one hand.

"I give you credit for challenging me, my young friends! It was a truly bad decision on your part, yes, but a brave one! The students of this 'University of

Magic' clearly have some guts!"

Fitz and I stood frozen in place, gawking in astonishment. After a few seconds, I finally managed to offer a tentative "Uhm..."

Tossing aside the last beastman warrior, the man turned to face us. "Ohoh! Those young men told me to beat them if I didn't want to wait my turn, and so I did! And now you've come out to meet me, right on schedule! Excellent, excellent. I like a man who keeps his promises!"

It was obvious at a glance that this man was a demon. His skin was as black as obsidian, and he had *six* arms. The top set was folded, the middle pair were pointing at us, and the bottom two were resting on his hips. His long hair, which reached all the way down to his waist, was an interesting shade of purple.

"I am the immortal Demon King Badigadi!"

Did he just call himself a Demon King? Were we talking about the same kind of Demon King here? Like, the guy who kidnaps young ladies from the nearest village to satisfy his wicked appetites? The guy who gets to do anything he wants, as long as he fights off the occasional "hero" who comes around to slay him?

Yeah, probably not.

The more important question right now was: what the hell was a Demon King doing here?



“I see you have the Eye of Foresight, boy! You must be Rudeus Greyrat, then! I’ve heard tell of you from my fiancée, the Demon Empress Kishirika!”

Well, at the moment he was stomping up to me...

“I challenge you to a duel!”

Okay. Well, he knew how to get to the point, at least. Unfortunately, I still had no idea what the hell was going on here. Maybe he’d let me off the hook if I offered him two slightly furry young maidens as a sacrifice...?

Chapter 4:

The Impervious Fiance

(Part 2)

WORD SPREAD throughout the countries near the Ranoa University of Magic with remarkable speed: *A Demon King had appeared.*

Normally, news of a Demon King would have reached them well before his actual arrival. But this particular Demon King had moved so quickly that they only found out in the moment he was crossing through their territory. The rulers of these nations were thrown into a state of confusion and panic.

This was understandable. As a basic rule, Demon Kings never ventured off the Demon Continent. There had been warlike, aggressive Demon Kings long ago, of course, but virtually all of them were exterminated in the Laplace War centuries ago. The survivors who now ruled over the Demon Continent were peaceful or cautious by nature, and largely disinterested in conflict.

Yet regardless of their personalities, these kings were still powerful enough to take control of a piece of the terrifying Demon Continent. If one of them decided to go on a rampage in humanity's territory, the damage would be incalculable. Ranoa, Neris, and Basherant all reacted instantly to Badigadi's arrival, dispatching all the knights at their disposal to intercept him; they also called upon the Adventurers' Guild for emergency assistance. But their forces were still some distance from the University of Magic.

As an emergency stopgap, the small units of Magic Nations soldiers already garrisoned in the city of Sharia joined all the local adventurers and members of the Magic Guild and surrounded the campus. If it came to the worst, they were ordered to slow down the Demon King until the main forces could arrive.

However, the Demon King's purpose in coming here remained a total mystery. It wasn't difficult to identify him. There was only one Demon King with jet-black skin and six arms: Badigadi the Immortal. He was one of the ancient kings who'd lived since before the Laplace War. His most notable power, as his

name suggested, was literal indestructibility. Thanks to his peaceful nature, little was known of his capabilities in battle, but some historians believed he'd once fought against Laplace himself. That would mean even the fearsome Demon God had failed to totally destroy him.

Why had such a person suddenly appeared in the Ranoa University of Magic? And why had he wandered around its campus, knocking both innocent students and visiting beastfolk unconscious as he went?

It would be a while before anyone learned the answers to these questions.

Rudeus

AT THE MOMENT, I was standing at the center of the University's Advanced Magical Training Ground... which was their fancy name for this flat, empty courtyard. Facing me was the Demon King Badigadi. I held my head high and folded my arms in an attempt to project some confidence, but to be perfectly honest, I was freaking out a little. Can you really blame me, though? How calm would *you* be if you had a massive six-armed tank of a demon glaring at you like that?

Okay, fine. I'd started to feel like I was pretty powerful lately. I have to admit that much. But we were talking about a Demon King here. That was a couple levels above what *pretty powerful* could deal with. It felt like the universe was punishing me for getting cocky. I wanted to run screaming for the hills, honestly.

I looked behind us and saw that we'd attracted a huge crowd of rubberneckers. It seemed like an even mix of male and female students, with a good number of professors as well. If I turned tail and ran here, what were they going to think of me?

On reflection, I didn't give a crap about that, actually. But it felt like I'd lost my chance to escape.

All of a sudden, someone broke through the crowd of spectators and trotted

toward me at a brisk jog. It was an older man who wore a *slightly* conspicuous wig. The look worked on him, though. “I’ve heard about the situation from Jenius. My apologies, but could you please buy us some time? We’re gathering our forces as quickly as we can.”

With that said, he turned around and returned to the crowd.

Who was that guy supposed to be, anyway? I felt like I’d seen him somewhere before. It wasn’t coming back to me right now, but I understood what he was trying to tell me, at least. Vice-Principal Jenius was aware of the situation, and he was going to get me out of this mess if I managed to stall for long enough. It was nice to have people with pull on your side sometimes.

“Hrm,” said Badigadi, watching me with all of his arms folded. “The boy’s certainly taking his time...”

“I don’t think it’ll be much longer,” I replied.

Right now, Fitz was off fetching me my trusty staff Aqua Heartia. At my request, Badigadi had agreed to wait until it got here. I hadn’t expected Fitz to take this long, though. It wasn’t that far from the library to my dorm, and I’d left the staff standing right next to my bed with a cloth draped over it. It should have been easy enough to find.

“Mm. I hurried over here because I know you humans are always in a rush, but you seem to be quite composed, boy. I’d expect no less from someone who intrigued my fiancée.”

“Your fiancée... by which you mean, uh... Empress Kishirika, yes?”

“Indeed,” Badigadi nodded firmly.

I hadn’t forgotten about the Demon Empress Kishirika Kishirisu, of course. She was the one who’d gifted me my Demon Eye. At first I hadn’t believed she was the real deal, and she’d left so abruptly afterward that I was too stunned to make sense of what had happened...

Still, why the hell was her fiancée showing up to fight me *now*, after all this time? Surely he wasn’t looking to marry Linia or Pursena. “You know, your Majesty, I only had one brief conversation with the empress. Although she did grant me this Demon Eye.”

“Well, she’s always talking about how impressive you are, boy! It’s been ages since I heard her speak of anyone with such excitement in her voice. I’m a very tolerant man, of course, but I’ll admit I was a bit jealous!”

Jealous? Seriously? It wasn’t like I’d *done* anything with her, right? Why would he be angry at me? Was it that joke I made about wanting to have a go with her? That didn’t amount to anything, though. She turned me down because she had a fiancée... which would be this guy. Right.

“Th-There’s nothing special about me, I assure you,” I said, in the calmest voice that I could muster. “I’m just a sad, pitiful mouse of a man, honestly. I can’t imagine why a Demon King like yourself would be jealous of me... the Demon Empress must have been exaggerating somewhat.”

Badigadi responded by bursting into laughter, as if I’d cracked a truly hilarious joke. “Bwahahahaha! Don’t be modest, boy! I’ve heard all about that astonishing pool of mana you’ve got inside you.”

Astonishing felt like a strong word. Yes, it was becoming obvious that I had way more mana than most people did. But surely it wasn’t anything impressive enough to make a genuine Demon King jealous... right?

Come to think of it, though, Kishirika had made some comment about this as well. What were her words exactly? All I could really remember was her cackling with laughter for no apparent reason... “Uh... well, yes. I do seem to have a bit more mana than most people.”

“Ahahahaha! ‘A bit more’, eh? Yes, indeed!” Badigadi proceeded to roar with laughter at some length. After a while, he abruptly fell silent and dropped to the ground with a loud thump. “Sit down, boy.”

I quickly took a seat. Badigadi was still enormous, even seated. It felt like I was conversing with a mountain of muscle. It was a pity I hadn’t been blessed with that kind of a physique.

“It seems you don’t understand what it means to be called ‘astonishing’ by the Demon Empress Kishirika Kishirisu.”

“...Well, I guess I don’t, no.”

“She told me you had an amazing amount of mana. More than Laplace, even.

You're the first person she's ever said *that* about."

Laplace? Like... the Laplace?

Apparently, I had more mana than a Demon God. That didn't feel right to me, honestly. I hadn't run out of mana in a very long time, true, but it wasn't like my body was overflowing with power or anything.

"The Demon God Laplace had one of the biggest total mana pools in recorded history. In other words, yours is also one of the largest ever."

"Oh, come on. That can't be right."

Despite my mild protestations, my heart still jumped with excitement. After all, I was talking to a Demon King here, someone with centuries of experience in battle. It almost felt like a pro athlete telling me I had "potential" or something.

"I don't know the truth of it myself. Kishirika can be a little sloppy at times, after all. There is a chance she misjudged you."

Badigadi's expression turned slightly sour as he spoke these words. Maybe he was remembering some costly mistake his fiancée made in the past? She did seem the type who made some careless errors, honestly.

"Well, I'll admit I've made an effort to deepen my mana pool over the years. I don't know about having more than anyone else in history, though. Wouldn't that mean anyone could break the record if they trained themselves like I did?"

"No. Such a thing would normally be impossible."

Maybe this had something to do with the fact that I'd been reincarnated from another world, then? Or maybe the Man-God had somehow "cheated" on my behalf without me even noticing...

"There's one thing I'd like to ask you, your Majesty. If you don't mind."

"What's that? Feel free to pose any inquiry."

"Uh, just to be clear, I'm not a lackey of the person I'm about to name. So I'd appreciate it if you didn't suddenly attack me."

"I already agreed to wait, boy. A Demon King never breaks a promise."

Really? Well, that's good to know, at least. I'm gonna take you at your word

on that one, okay? No violence, please...

“Does the name Man-God mean anything to you?”

“...Where did you hear that name, boy?”

“He’s someone who appears in my dreams sometimes.”

Folding his upper set of arms, Badigadi began to stroke his chin thoughtfully.

“Hmm, I see. Your dreams, eh?”

“Do you know something about him, your Majesty?”

Badigadi paused for a moment, apparently deep in thought, then shook his head. “I can’t say! I think I’ve heard the name before, but I can’t recall where! It’s been a few centuries since anyone spoke of him to me, at the very least.”

“Is that so? Well, thank you anyway.” A few centuries... that’s kind of vague. I guess he doesn’t have the best memory...

“Not a problem! If I remember, I’ll be sure to let you know! Bwahahahahaha!”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“You’re so damn dull, boy. Laugh with me for once! Bwahahahahaha!”

Badigadi certainly seemed like a man who enjoyed his life. I hadn’t said anything especially funny in this entire conversation, but he never seemed to stop laughing.

I found myself remembering the night I met Ruijerd. We’d first connected on a personal level by sharing a laugh, hadn’t we? Maybe laughter was a kind of common language here. If the person I was speaking to was laughing, it was probably rude not to respond in kind.

All right then, let’s do this. “Bwaaahahahahahaha!”

“Good! That’s the way, boy! It’s like Kishirika always says: laugh first, think later! Come to think of it, she was laughing the last time she died, wasn’t she?! Bwahahahahaha!”

Badigadi laughed yet again. Despite his fearsome appearance, he didn’t seem like such a bad guy.

As we laughed, the group of spectators behind us started to get a little rowdy.

I turned back to see what was going on. It looked like there was some sort of commotion in the middle of the crowd. I could barely pick out the sounds of shouting voices.

“Let me go! I need to give him his staff!”

“Stop it! If you give it to him, he’ll have to start the duel!”

“But what if the duel starts *anyway*? Are you just going to stand here and let him die?!”

“Th-That’s not what I’m—”

“Leave this to me!”

“Ah! Zanoba!”

“Zanoba Shirone?! Unhand me! Unhand— Ow! Ow ow ow!”

Suddenly, Master Fitz burst free from the crowd and rushed toward me with ferocious speed. The guy was seriously quick on his feet. He had to be moving three times faster than I could. Maybe we should paint him red and stick a horn on his head...

“Hah... hah... I’m sorry, Ru... Rudeus. The professors tried to stop me...”
Gasping for air, Fitz came to a stop in front of me. He had my staff cradled in his arms.

“You’re, uh... one hell of a runner, Fitz.”

“Huh...? Hah... No. My shoes are magic items, that’s all...”

I looked down at the boots that Fitz always seemed to be wearing. I hadn’t even realized they were magical in nature. His cloak was probably enchanted too, wasn’t it? He never took it off, even when it was hot outside. “No kidding? Are those sunglasses magical, too?”

“Hah... hah... Oh, these. Yeah, they’re... uh, wait. Sorry, that’s a secret...” Fitz laughed softly and smiled in embarrassment.

Why did this guy have to look so damn cute when he laughed, anyway? He was doing weird things to my heartbeat.

“Hah... Anyway, here you go. Good luck, Rudeus... just don’t push yourself,

okay? If you realize you can't win, then just apologize and run for it. You're up against a Demon King here. No one's going to blame you. Your life's more important than your pride."

Nodding, I took Aqua Heartia from Fitz. It had been a while since I fought a real battle with this thing in my hands. *Let's do what we can, partner. If we make it through this in one piece, I'm going to head straight home and marry my beloved Pineapple Salad...*

Throwing up a lazy death flag just for the hell of it, I pulled the cloth off Aqua Heartia. Fitz drew a sharp breath of surprise. A mischievous thought popped into my head, and I found myself unable to resist. "...Fitz, take a look at the magic stone on my staff. What do you think?"

"I-It's really *big*..."

Oh wow. I think something downstairs just twitched. Whatever could that be?

Well, enough playing around.

Badigadi had already risen to his feet and was happily flexing all six of his shoulders. Had I managed to buy enough time? It seemed unlikely. But I had no idea how I was supposed to talk his ear off long enough for all the soldiers in town to gather, honestly.

Fitz trotted back toward the crowd, looking a little reluctant to leave me. I wouldn't have minded if he stuck around, personally. Some backup might be nice right now. *Seriously. Help? Please?*

"Are you ready, boy?"

"To be honest, I'd rather spend a bit more time chit-chatting..."

"Bwahahahaha! Time enough for that later!"

Did that mean he wasn't going to kill me? No, it wasn't safe to assume anything. This guy seemed careless enough he might accidentally knock my head off, assuming anyone with lots of mana could take a hit or two.

I considered saying something. Could it hurt to ask him for a non-lethal duel...?

Badigadi stood there casually, hands on his hips. He wasn't going to come

charging at me, from the looks of things. Maybe he was waiting for me to signal that the fight was underway. Just as an initial precaution, I activated my Eye of Foresight.

“...Huh?”

To my surprise, it showed me... nothing. There was literally nothing standing where I knew Badigadi was.

“What’s got you looking so astonished, boy? Ah, I see. You already tried the Demon Eye Kishirika gave you, right? Sorry, but those things don’t work on me.” Badigadi let out a snort of pride as he announced this off-handedly.

Wait, seriously? The Demon Eye’s completely useless against him? I guess I should have expected as much from a Demon King... This was definitely a problem. My chances of managing to avoid a fatal blow had just gone down dramatically. I was nothing special, physically speaking; if he hit me in the wrong place, that might be it for me. “Your Majesty...”

“Badi’s fine. I permit those who laugh when I ask it of them to call me by that name.”

“King Badi, then. I have a request to make.”

“What sort of proposal?”

“I’d like to ask that you spare my life, even if I lose this duel.”

Badigadi burst into laughter once again. “Bwahahahaha! Begging for your life before we’ve even started? You never cease to amuse me!”

“Well, a life’s a tragic thing to waste, don’t you think?” I said.

“Ah, yes. You humans die so quickly as it is! I hear many of you feel that way!” the Demon King replied with a cackle. “But why are you so sure you’ll lose? One would think such a massive pool of mana would lend a man some confidence.”

“I was nearly killed by someone called the Dragon God not too long ago. That probably has something to do with it.”

Badigadi’s laughter came to an abrupt halt. “The Dragon God? You mean Orsted? You fought him and lived?”

“By the skin of my teeth. If he hadn’t spared me on a whim, I wouldn’t be standing here today.”

The Demon King’s face was suddenly very serious. This seemed less than ideal. I’d let down my guard when he didn’t react to the name Man-God. What if Orsted was the one I shouldn’t have mentioned? *Talk about careless...*

“Tell me, boy. Were you able to wound the Dragon God in that fight, even slightly?”

“Huh? Yeah, I guess. I managed to tear a little skin off the palm of his hand. That’s it, though.”

Badigadi pulled his mouth tightly shut and stared at me fiercely. The effect was *slightly* intimidating.

C-Come on, why don’t we start laughing again? Bwahahaha...

“In that case, I’d like to make a request of my own.”

“O-Oh really?” I said as meekly as I could, watching Badigadi’s expression. “What would that be?”

“You get one shot.”

“...”

“Hit me with your very strongest magic. I’ll give you one chance, no more. Use the spell that hurt the Dragon God, perhaps. Should it manage to pierce my battle aura and do me harm, then you win. If I am undamaged, then I win. How does that strike you?”

Ooh. Sounds good to me! I couldn’t have asked for a better offer, really. I wouldn’t even have to get my face punched in, though? “Uh, sure, but isn’t that a little one-sided?”

“One-sided? One-sided, you say? Hm, true enough! Very well then. If you can’t scathe me with your magic, then I’ll hit you with a counterattack. It will be a single blow, no more!”

Dammit. I just dug my own grave.

One attack from this monster would probably be enough to pulverize my

heart. I should probably stop talking right now before I managed to dig myself even deeper.

“I understand. Let’s go with those terms, then.”

“Very well!”

At long last, I held Aqua Heartia forward and began to concentrate.

“Whooo...”

I drew in a long, deep breath, and began to gather as much magic power as I possibly could into my staff. I was casting Stone Cannon, one of the spells I was most familiar with. But I made sure this projectile was far harder than the one I’d fired off at Orsted. I’d cast that spell quickly, out of sheer desperation. I hadn’t been holding my staff, and I’d only used one hand. This time, there was no rush at all. Once I gathered enough mana, I should be able to make my spell several times more powerful.

Projectile: Solid and incredibly hard.

Creating the ‘bullet’ wasn’t fundamentally any different from how I made a figurine. But I focused entirely on its hardness, ignoring properties like toughness and resilience. I shaped it like a spindle, tapering to a fine point, and added a pattern of grooves.

Modifications: Rapid rotation.

The faster it spun, the better. I focused until my bullet was just a blur. I had no idea how many rotations per second I was even looking at.

Velocity: Maximum.

This was the most critical part, so I devoted as much mana as I possibly could to it. I’d never used so much mana on a single Stone Cannon before. Given the amount of time it took to prepare, this version of the spell wouldn’t be much use in real combat...and for most monsters, it would probably be overkill. But this man was a Demon King. He might very well just shrug it off. At the very least, I hoped I could put a scratch on him. I really didn’t want those massive arms smacking me in the face.

“Okay then. Here goes.”

“Excellent! Have at me!”

I fired off the spell.



My bullet tore through the air with a high-pitched whine. There wasn't any recoil; for whatever reason, there never was with magic. But that didn't make its power any less real.

The stone slammed into Badigadi with an enormous bang. His entire upper body was blown apart; his six arms disintegrated instantly. His lower half, still intact, soared dozens of meters backward and plopped limply to the ground.

"...Huh?"

What was left of Badigadi didn't even twitch. I'd been expecting my attack to just...bounce off him with a "twang" or something. What *was* this?

Slowly, fearfully, I walked over to Badigadi's body and looked down at him. The intact part of his body wasn't bleeding for some reason. Was that just how it worked with a Demon King? Given how much he laughed, I'd figured he didn't have much use for tears... But maybe there wasn't any liquid in his body whatsoever.

"...Huh?" *Wait, really though? This isn't happening...*

Is he dead?

I still didn't understand what had just happened. When I turned around, I found the crowd of spectators staring at me in total silence. Their gazes made me cringe. Nobody was even moving.

I swallowed reflexively. The sound my throat made seemed weirdly loud. Had I actually killed him?

That can't be right. I mean, come on. He seemed so totally confident. Huh? He said he was immortal, right? He told me to give him his best shot! He didn't seem worried at all! What the hell?!

I needed to calm down. And make sure I understand exactly what I'd done.

Slowly, fearfully, I turned around to look at Badigadi once again.

"Bwahahahaha! I am REVIVED!"

I very nearly fired off another Stone Cannon immediately.

Badigadi was standing right in front of me, alive once again... and about half

as big as before. He was roughly my height now, but his head wasn't any smaller than before. The effect was a bit bizarre. That wasn't really important right now, though.

"Oh. You're alive..."

That was definitely a relief. I'd convinced myself that I'd killed a man without even meaning to. Good thing I wasn't up against a normal human being.

"Bwahahaha! I thought I was done for, boy! In any case, now it all makes sense. It was wise of you to prevent a real battle. Had we fought in earnest, this whole area would have been reduced to a barren wasteland!" Badigadi let out a sustained burst of laughter. I guess he found the idea amusing.

Over the next few moments, all six of his arms came crawling to him across the dirt and rejoined his body. He was growing steadily larger, although he wasn't quite back to normal yet.

"You certainly sent me flying quite a distance, boy. Looks like it'll take some time before I'm my old self again!" Badigadi seemed inexplicably excited about this. "You win this one, Rudeus!" he continued gleefully. "Feel free to call yourself a hero!"

"I don't think I will, but thanks anyway."

"At least give the crowd a victory cry, then! Bwahahaha!"

Badigadi seized my right hand, still holding my staff, and pulled it up into the air like a referee announcing the winner of a boxing match. "Uh..."

Well, whatever. If he says I win, I guess I win.

"I wonnnn!"

The spectators responded to my cry with total silence. For whatever reason, nobody made a sound.

After a long moment, Badigadi nodded to himself. "They aren't much fun, are they? Well, all right then. Time for you to take *my* punch."

"What?!" *That wasn't the deal!*

Before I could object, he smacked me straight in the face. With three fists at

once.

He was still holding my arm, of course, so I had no chance to defend myself. The blow knocked me unconscious.

You... big liar...

Following this, Badigadi apparently went off somewhere with that toupee guy, a handsome middle-aged man in armor, and an old guy in a robe. It sounded like the bigshots had a few things to discuss in private.

As for me, I lay in the infirmary for a while before regaining consciousness. Once I came to, Vice-Principal Jenius took me to a room in the Teachers' Building and offered me some tea and snacks while I recuperated.

He didn't have much to tell me. It sounded like he wasn't entirely clear on what was going on himself. The Demon King had shown up out of nowhere, wandered around knocking out both students and beastfolk alike, challenged me to a duel, allowed me to claim victory, and then knocked me unconscious. That was all we had to go on, and it wasn't enough to make sense of the situation. Still, it seemed no one Badigadi knocked out had actually died from their injuries. He was supposedly a peaceful guy by nature, so that probably made sense.

A number of very important people were trying to figure out his objectives as we spoke. The guy with the toupee was actually the principal of this school. It took me a minute to recall his name was Georg, a King-tier Wind magician. I'd seen him once before, back at the entrance ceremony. Joining him in his talks with Badigadi were the leader of the Magic Guild and the captain of the Magic Nation knights stationed in this city.

"But I must say, Rudeus, that was a truly remarkable effort. You struck down a Demon King with a single preemptive strike, and he even acknowledged you as the victor! The principal believed a lone adventurer like yourself could only buy us a little time... but surely no one could have expected this! Why, you got my blood pumping for the first time in years!"

There was genuine excitement in the vice-principal's voice. It sounded like the

crowd hadn't heard my discussion with Badigadi before the duel began. None of this was that impressive when you considered that he'd let me take the first shot, and I'd never really been in danger.

Jenius fawned over me for a while longer before finally letting me go on my way. He did tell me to stay put in my dormitory until everything was fully figured out.

As I left the Teachers' Building, Zanoba came running up to meet me. "Ah, there you are, Master! I saw every second of your duel. It was truly impressive! But I suppose I should have expected you to triumph."

I shook my head. "He just let me spar with him, that's all." My spell had broken through his aura, true. But he hadn't even tried to evade it or defend himself. And given the fact that he could regenerate completely when defeated, I couldn't possibly have beaten him in a real battle.

"You're too modest by far!" said Zanoba with a chuckle. "Sparring evenly with a Demon King is impressive enough, I assure you."

When I glanced at Julie, she looked even more frightened than usual. I guess it had been a pretty gruesome spectacle, even at a distance. Hopefully I hadn't scarred her for life.

On the way back to my dorm, I ran into Cliff and a very pleased-looking Elinalise. "Hello there, Rudeus. What was all that commotion about earlier?"

"Uhm, what were you two up to for the last few hours?"

"Oh, you know... this and that. Hehehehe."

Cliff blushed red as Elinalise giggled. "You don't have to tell him!"

It seemed these two had been indulging in some grownup fun for the entire duration of the Demon King's assault on the University. *Good for them, I guess.* "The Demon King Badigadi showed up out of nowhere and challenged me to a duel. I managed to win."

"Huh?" said Elinalise, looking mildly surprised. "He's here already?"

...Already? What the heck is that supposed to mean? “Did you know he was coming, Elinalise?”

“Yes, I did. But he was staying with the Ogre tribe... he said he’d be staying there for some time, so I should go ahead by myself. Demons like him tend not to pay much attention to the passage of time, you know? I thought he’d be there for another decade or so at least, and it’s only been two years since we parted...”

You probably would get pretty careless with time after living for a few thousand years, wouldn’t you? I know the years slipped by way faster after I passed 30 in my previous life... although that wasn’t exactly comparable.

“In any case, he’s not a bad man, is he?”

I nodded. “He seems like a decent guy, yeah.” He was probably better than most royalty, at least. That cheerful personality of his was kind of endearing. He did break his promise, but it seemed only fair to hit back when someone blasted your head off.

“Uh, what are you two talking about?”

“Oh my. Are you feeling jealous, Cliffy dear? Don’t worry! I belong to you now, body and soul.”

“That’s not the p— Gah, stop clinging to me. Rudeus is watching...”

“Let’s show him a thing or two, then...”

The two of them began making out, so I shrugged and walked away. As I turned the corner, I heard Cliff protesting “But a Demon King wouldn’t just show up here!”

Yeah. That’s what I thought too, buddy.

Master Fitz was waiting for me at the entrance to my dorm.

When he spotted me, he assumed an expression that I couldn’t quite decipher. Was this excitement, maybe? His cheeks were a little flushed, and his hands were clutched into fists. It almost looked like he was too fired up to put his thoughts into words. “You’re... You’re really strong, Rudeus!”

Wow. Not very eloquent today, huh?

“I never thought you’d take him down in one shot like that!”

“Well, we agreed that I got to fire off one free attack at him, and its power would determine who won. So I just used the strongest spell I have.”

“The strongest spell? But that’s the same one you used on me in your test, right? Was it a better version of that?”

“Yeah, it was Stone Cannon. I just charged it up as much as I could.”

“So even an Intermediate spell can be that powerful if you’re a real master, huh...?” With an admiring hum, Fitz turned aside and conjured a rotating stone bullet of his own. After a moment, he fired it off; it whistled through the air and pierced into the ground some distance away.

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call myself a real master or anything.”

“Don’t you mostly use Earth magic, though?”

“Yeah, I guess. For a while there I was relying on Water spells, but a few years ago I switched over to using Earth almost exclusively.”

“I knew it! You definitely get better with a discipline when you use it over and over again, right?”

Was that actually true? It sounded plausible, I guess. I felt like I was getting steadily better at making figurines, for one thing. “...Yeah, I guess so. I think I’m getting a little more precise, at least.”

“You can use more mana when you keep at it, too!”

“Right, for sure. Making those figurines actually takes a lot of power, you know?”

Fitz seemed to really be enjoying this conversation. Come to think of it, we hadn’t discussed magic like this very often, had we?

“Oh, I’m sorry to go on like this. You must be tired, right? I didn’t mean to hold you up. Go get some rest.”

“Uh, right. Thanks.”

With that said, Fitz broke away and trotted off toward the school buildings. I’d

sort of wanted to keep the conversation going, but he was probably busy. In the aftermath of that incident, the student council likely had a lot to deal with.

At last I was back in my room. I leaned my staff against the wall. Today had been a very long day, what with the Demon King and all. Physical and mental fatigue washed over me the moment I glanced over at my bed.

I lay down and let myself relax.

The next month passed by somewhat uneventfully. After some careful negotiations, the three members of the Magic Nations had decided to recognize Badigadi as an official state guest for the duration of his stay in their countries. Badigadi, for his part, apologized for the hassle he'd caused by offering one of his arms to the Magic Guild so they could study his immortality. He'd also agreed to act as a temporary martial arts instructor for the knights stationed in Sharia.

But that wasn't all...

At our next homeroom session, my two furry subordinates were once again in their seats. Badigadi had dealt with all their suitors, so it was apparently safe for them to venture out to class again.

"You're the man, Boss! Thanks again, mew. We'll give you somethin' for the trouble soon!"

"Didn't expect a Demon King to show up, though. We're too damn sexy for our own good, yeah? Well done protecting us. I'll give ya my permission to squeeze Linia's breasts."

"Appreciate it." Since I'd been given authorization, I went right ahead.

"Myaaaaa!" Linia responded by scratching my face.

What happened to my permission, huh? What happened to giving me something for my trouble? How purrfectly atrocious.

Every girl has a pair of these, right? What's the big deal if I touch a few?

"You're always so... fearless with women, Master," said Zanoba thoughtfully. "And yet, you never seem to pursue them seriously..."

"Hey!" Cliff hissed. "Cut it out, Zanoba! You remember his condition, don't you?"

"...Ah yes, of course. My apologies."

Lately, Cliff had been sitting closer to us. It sounded like Elinalise had been telling him a few things about me here and there. I didn't know exactly what she was saying, but it can't have been that bad, since Cliff was considerably more friendly now.

Incidentally, everyone seemed to be assuming that Eris had dumped me because of my condition. Not that it mattered, anyway. I'd forgotten all about her by now. Really!

On a different note, Cliff and Elinalise weren't making out in public nearly as much these days. It didn't seem like they'd broken up or anything, though. Every couple days, I'd notice Cliff stumbling around the campus looking like a zombie. Elinalise was clearly keeping him very busy at night. They'd probably just reached an agreement to cut back on the public displays of affection.

Still, wasn't all this fun going to give Cliff trouble with his studies? I wasn't going to meddle, of course. It was his life, and he could live it how he wanted. If anything, I was kind of jealous. Just a little.

"...Grandmaster, I don't have enough mana to harden this part. Will you do it for me?"

Julie was devotedly working on her figurines, day and night. I'd started giving her some tutorials on making them by hand, in parallel with our lessons on the magical method. That wasn't my specialty, though, so we were getting some assistance from a dwarf in the same year as Zanoba.

As for Demon King Badigadi... I still only had a very vague outline of the situation. He'd said that he came all this way because he was jealous of me. Would that mean I'd be held partially responsible for all the damage he'd caused? I wanted to think that Jenius wouldn't have that. He was the one who'd

recruited me, after all.

My train of thought was derailed by the sound of the classroom door swinging open. With the exception of Silent, all of the special students were already in their seats. And it was too early for the professor to arrive. Had Silent actually showed up for once?

“Bwahahahahaha!”

A booming laughing echoed through the classroom. An instant later, *he* strode inside.

Without a moment’s hesitation he marched up to the podium and gazed down at us like an emperor surveying his domain. “Behold! It is I, Badigadi—the immortal Demon King!”

Is this seriously happening? Is he seriously...wearing a school uniform?!

The Demon King Badigadi had formally enrolled at the Ranoa University of Magic as sort of a publicity stunt. He wasn’t studying much of anything, of course, but he made a habit of sitting in on classes and speaking to students who caught his eye... which usually resulted in them desperately fleeing for help. Those who were brave enough to stick around were supposedly rewarded with tidbits from his vast stores of knowledge, but they were few and far between.

One way or another, though, things had come to a relatively peaceful conclusion.

Chapter 5:

The White Mask

(Part 1)

RECENTLY, IT SEEMS LIKE some people are a little frightened of me. And by “some people,” I mean basically every student attending the University of Magic.

At first, I just thought everyone was avoiding me for some reason. Not that I was exactly wrong about that. Case in point: sometimes I’d find myself walking down a hallway toward a group of tough guys headed in my direction. Naturally, I’d step out of the way so they wouldn’t harass me, right? But for some reason, they were already moving out of *my* way. Sometimes they’d even look out the window and talk about how nice the weather was, despite the fact that it was snowing.

I was just happy they weren’t hassling me, of course. But in retrospect, maybe they were thinking the exact same thing themselves.

I only figured out what was going on after an incident that took place when I was heading back from my Intermediate Detoxification class one afternoon. When I stepped out of our classroom following the lecture, I spotted Goliade in the hallway just outside. Yes, *that* Goliade—the human wrecking ball who’d falsely accused me of stealing underwear on my very first day here. She noticed me the same moment that I noticed her. Our eyes met.

The two of us were technically acquainted, and she’d been here longer than I had. It seemed like it might be rude to just walk off without even saying hello... and I felt like I should probably apologize for our last encounter, too.

As I walked over, though, Goliade twitched and averted her eyes. She squeezed in her broad shoulders to make herself as small as possible, and looked into the distance with a fearful expression, consciously trying not to see me.

“Uh, hi, Goliade. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about what happened on

my first day here...”

When I actually spoke to her, she immediately started trembling like a newborn faun. “I’m... I’m sorry about that,” she squeaked out weakly. “Really... really sorry. Please, I didn’t know...”

Her attitude seemed *slightly* different from the last time we’d met. I was actually a little taken aback. This almost made me feel like I was threatening her or something. “Er... I was going to apologize to you, actually. I didn’t know the rules about the dormitories at the time, you know? But I won’t be making that mistake again, so...”

As I stumbled through what I’d planned to say, a group of spectators began to gather around us.

“Hey, look, it’s Rudeus.”

“Is he still holding a grudge about what happened on his first day?”

“Oh man. Poor Goliade...”

“He’s the one who broke the rules, right? What a bully...”

“Shut up, stupid. What if he hears you?”

Their whispers were critical of me, and full of pity for Goliade. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. I kind of felt like crying too, honestly. What the heck was going on here? The way they looked at me really hurt.

“What’s all this, mew? Who’s fighting in the hallway?”

“Somebody’s got too much fuckin’ energy, huh?”

At this exact moment, Linia and Pursena happened to show up. They pushed through the crowd, and spotted me and Goliade. After studying her tearful face for a moment, they smiled and nodded to each other, then pushed their way confidently in between us. “Hey, Boss. Why don’tcha leave it at that, mew? Goliade didn’t mean to tick you off, really. Could you cut her a break for us? We gotta look out for the other beastfolk girls.”

“Go on, Goliade, yer fine. Just don’t get on the Boss’ bad side again, got it? You were lucky his right-hand girl was passin’ by. If it weren’t for me, he mighta chopped you into mincemeat.”

“O-Okay! Thanks!” Goliade gratefully bowed to the two of them, spun around and walked off quickly, looking considerably smaller than she really was.

“The rest of you get lost too, mew!” Linia shouted. “This ain’t a show!”

The crowd of onlookers promptly scattered like a nest of baby spiders. I let out a small sigh of relief. But when I turned to Linia and Pursena, hoping for some sort of explanation, I found they’d already started one of their trademark banter sessions.

“Okay, Pursena. So what was that supposed to mean?”

“What’re you talkin’ about, Linia?”

“I’m the Boss’ right-hand girl, obviously!”

“He’s been pickin’ up lots of new flunkies lately. You’re too dumb to keep things runnin’ smoothly.”

“Mew?! Your grades are just as bad as mine!”

“Come on, you two,” I finally interrupted. “You can both be my right-hand girl, okay?”

“Mew just don’t get it, Boss. We gotta have a pecking order!”

“That’s right. It’s fuckin’ important.”

I could understand that beastfolk liked hierarchies, but I didn’t remember establishing any kind of gang, and I didn’t care which of them was which hand. That aside, they’d just bailed me out of trouble. I should get them something to express my gratitude. Would raw fish and a slab of meat do the trick?

“Anyway, that Goliade sure was stupid to tick you off, Boss. What’d she do to you, mew?”

“Uh, she mistook me for an underwear thief on my first day here, but...”

“Huh? I remember that! Wait, so that phantom panty thief was you all along, Boss?!”

“That’s so messed up, man.”

Suddenly, the two of them were looking at me with scorn in their eyes. *How about you let me finish my sentence? I was falsely accused!* Maybe I should gift

them a second helping of despair and humiliation, rather than meat and fish.

“Now that I think about it, Goliade was boastin’ about that for a while. She said she caught some cowardly first-year red-handed, but Fitz protected him. I guess she’s the coward now, huh? Hilarious.”

“She was talking trash about you, and you let her off the hook? That’s real big of you, Boss, but we oughta send a message here. We’ll take care of it, mew.”

That sounded kind of ominous. Hadn’t these two moved past their delinquent phase by now? “Don’t do anything to her, please. I don’t want to go around making enemies over nothing.”

“Pfft. You really gotta get more ambitious, Boss! Who cares about mew enemies? We could rule every dorm in this school if we teamed up to take down Ariel!”

“She’s right, ya know. Ya beat Fitz, Boss, so you could conquer this school in no time.”

What was it with beastfolk and wanting to seize power, anyway? Seriously, they were all a bunch of fuzzy Decepticons. “Let’s say I did seize power over the dorms and everything. What would I even do with that authority?”

I couldn’t care less about being at the top of things. I was fundamentally trying to avoid conflict where possible, and taking on a leadership position basically guarantees *somebody’s* going to hate your guts. In this world, walking down the wrong road at the wrong time was enough to get you stabbed through the heart. It was just safer to be friendly and respectful to everyone you met.

“You could do anything you want, mew. Well... I guess you couldn’t do much with the girls, actually... ooh, I know! We could bring you a pair of panties from all the girls in the dorms at the start of every year!”

“Good idea. Boss loves panties so much he has them on display in his room, right? He’d be super happy.”

“N-No I wouldn’t...”

It wasn’t like I had those there because I loved panties. I mean, I kind of *liked*

them, sure... but that didn't mean I wanted a bunch of underwear from girls I didn't even know, right? I did know Goliade, and I knew I didn't want *her* underwear, either.

Then again, you did see some really cute girls walking around campus sometimes. Although most of them weren't really my type. Honestly... I wouldn't have turned down a pair from Linia and Pursena. Those two did have a slightly musky smell, but at the end of the day, they were still sexy girls. And the scent of their fur wasn't half-bad at close range.

Still...right! Fitz. Fitz wouldn't like me doing that sort of thing. That means it's out of the question. There we go. The matter's been settled at last! I won't be tempted again. Get behind me, Satan...

"I'm not at all interested in the panties of some random girls. If you want to steal their underwear, do it yourselves. But if you cause Master Fitz any trouble, I won't be taking your side."

Phew. There we go. That was a close one, girls of the University. If it wasn't for my condition, you might have ended up in some serious trouble.

"Guh... W-Well, if you wanna keep things calm, that's your call, Boss."

"...Yeah. We'll do what ya tell us."

In any case, this incident finally made the nature of my situation clear to me. I was evidently feared by quite a lot of people. It wasn't hard to understand why, once I'd picked up on it. I'd beaten Fitz, who was the most powerful student in this school. I'd won dominion over all the infamous special students. And then, I defeated a Demon King with one spell in a very public duel. It wasn't remotely surprising that the other students found me intimidating.

From what Badigadi told me after the fact, his battle aura couldn't be penetrated by anything less than King-level spells or sword techniques. Which meant you'd need to be on the level of a Ruijerd or a Ghislaine to even stand a chance against him. Since he relied on this to protect himself in combat, though, he apparently had a hard time beating people above that level.

Anyway... assuming he was telling me the truth, my fully-charged Stone Cannon was now as powerful as a King-tier spell. That was definitely nothing to

sneeze at.

Of course, I was also a complete glass cannon. The swordfighters of this world could sheathe themselves in the protective veil of a battle aura without even thinking about it, but no matter how hard I trained, my body never gained that superhuman strength and speed that Eris and Ruijerd tapped into so easily. My muscles did get bigger, but that was about it. All I really had going for me was my attack power. I did supposedly have the mana capacity of a Demon God, for whatever that was worth, and thanks to my Eye of Foresight, I could go toe-to-toe with enemies a bit above my level. But my body itself remained totally ordinary. I'd basically stand no chance against a truly powerful adversary.

But I couldn't expect the students here to figure all that out. They'd seen a demonstration of my firepower and were probably assuming my abilities were just as impressive across the board. You could hardly blame an average student for steering clear of someone "more powerful than a Demon King."

"Still, you gotta have more confidence in yourself, Boss! I bet that would help with your condition, mew!"

"Yep. But once you get that working, make sure you jump on Linia instead of me."

Confidence, huh? Was that the root cause of my issues downstairs? It kind of sounded plausible, actually. I'd lost my fight against Orsted, gotten dumped by Eris, and then screwed up with Sara. I couldn't find a way to use my strengths effectively, and I'd ended up sinking into a funk. Maybe some confidence really was what I needed to get over this hump. And now, a chance to regain some had been dropped into my lap. Everyone here was afraid of me, after all.

Just to try it out, I tried walking through a crowded hallway with Linia and Pursena following closely behind me. The mass of bodies parted magically in front of me.

This was definitely a brand-new experience. I sort of felt like the director of a hospital doing his rounds, or maybe Moses parting the Red Sea. It was hard not to swagger. *Out of the way, kids, this here's my hallway...*

The moment this thought crossed my mind, though, I stopped in my tracks. What if the guys who'd bullied me in my previous life had started off this exact

same way?

That realization took all the fun out of it instantly. Whatever I'd accomplished so far in this life, the fact was that I'd spent my entire last one at the very bottom of the totem pole. That was never going to change, even if my condition did cure itself. And if I forgot about it, I'd probably end up repeating the exact same mistakes I'd made before. I had a more positive outlook on life now, sure, but I was still the same person deep down. I couldn't let myself forget that.

This time around, I wasn't going to end up a shut-in.

A little while after all this, I was in the library, pursuing my research as usual.

I was still focusing on Teleportation and Summoning, of course. The more I studied them, the more similarities I noticed. Calling something to you was fundamentally different from sending something elsewhere, but in many other respects they were comparable. It felt like I needed to make an effort to actually learn Summoning magic. I'd been thinking about this for a while, but there wasn't a single professor in the University who specialized in that discipline. There were supposedly a few members of the Magicians' Guild who could at least cast the spells, but even they were mostly at the Beginner or Intermediate tier. All they could call forth were harmless familiars and mindless, obedient spirits. I wanted to learn from an actual expert.

There were some people in the town who'd risen to the Advanced tier in Enchantment magic, but that seemed to be very different from conventional Summoning. They certainly wouldn't be able to tell me anything about Teleportation. The vice-principal had bragged about the quality of the staff here, but evidently he was all talk.

Then again, maybe this was just how things were. I hadn't encountered any magicians who specialized in Summoning during my time as an adventurer, either. It seemed possible there weren't many of them at all. Or maybe it was more like Barrier and Divine magic, where one specific country essentially monopolized the methods.

Still, I kind of felt like I'd met at least one person with *some* skills in Summoning. I couldn't remember who it was, though. I felt like it would come

back to me if I ran into them again. I probably hadn't seen them in a while, whoever they were.

In any case, I'd read through most of the promising books on Summoning magic in the library at this point. It felt like I'd hit a dead end, honestly. Studying by myself couldn't take me any further than I'd gotten.

It was Fitz who ended up finding me a way forward. "I finally found someone, Rudeus! There *is* one person here who's researching Summoning magic on an expert level!"

"Ooh! Really?!"

"Yeah. I found out about them from the principal and vice-principal, actually," said Fitz with a slightly mischievous grin. "Who do you think it is?"

Well, it probably wasn't a professor. There were a handful of other students trying to learn Summoning as best they could, but surely none of them knew anything more than Advanced spells at best. What did that even leave us, then? "...Someone from the Magicians' Guild, maybe?" It wouldn't be surprising if they had a few experts in the field somewhere. Maybe one of their researchers was borrowing some of the school's facilities to conduct their experiments.

"Hmm, sort of. They *are* an A-ranked member of the Guild, supposedly."

"Wow..." Based on what I'd learned about their structure, an A-ranked member of the Magicians' Guild was the equivalent of a branch manager, while being S-ranked meant you were part of the central leadership group. Principal Georg was an S-ranked member, and the vice-principal was ranked B. "Doesn't that mean they're pretty high up in the hierarchy?"

"Yeah. That's really something, don't you think?"

Even B-ranked members were entitled to some very nice perks. You could start up a school for magicians anywhere you wanted, and the Guild would offer you financial and logistical support.

"So... who is it, then?"

"Well, I think you probably know their name already, at least..."

Did I? I felt like I would have remembered someone that important. "Come

on, tell me already.”

“Heheh. Okay then. It’s Silent Sevenstar, from the special class.”

Ah. Now this makes sense. I’d heard the name before, yes. And more than just the name. I’d heard about the things they’d accomplished at this school as well.

First of all, there were their improvements to the menus at the dining halls. They’d arranged for a regular supply of food from the Kingdom of Asura, allowing them to use ingredients you’d normally never see in the Northern Territories. In addition, they’d introduced the world to something they called kerry soup, which was supposedly their own invention. It was made by stewing ingredients like potatoes, carrots, onions, and others in a pot, with a complex spice blend thrown in for flavor. You ate it by spooning the thick, brown soup onto a hunk of bread. It was curry, basically. The flavor was very different from the curry I remembered, true, but the idea was very similar.

Silent was also the one who’d proposed our official school uniforms. They had connections with designers and manufacturers back in Asura, and had arranged for them to be created there. The introduction of a universal uniform allowed the University to present its student body as a single group with a common purpose, rather than a chaotic mixture of different tribes and races that happened to be occupying the same campus. It improved their public image significantly.

Even the blackboards found in all the classrooms were one of their innovations. Writing on a pure-black surface with a small stick of limestone was a simple enough concept, but the professors had found it exceptionally helpful.

There were many other little improvements they’d made, if you went looking for them. They’d contributed to the University in many small, subtle ways. In recognition of these accomplishments, the Magicians’ Guild had granted them a high rank in their organization.

All that said... their “innovations” were also very *familiar*. They seemed like novel concepts to the residents of this world, but not to me. I wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but I’d had my suspicions for some time. I thought I knew something about Silent’s origins.

Up until this moment, though, I hadn’t voiced my suspicions. I don’t know

why. Maybe I wanted to believe I was special. Maybe I'd assumed I was something totally unique—the one and only person in this world with memories from another. But of course, there was no logical reason why that should be the case.

To be honest, I was a little frightened by the *idea* of Silent. I'd been hoping to avoid ever meeting them. I didn't want to meet someone who'd been given the same advantages as me and made much better use of them. I was afraid they'd ask me why I was wasting time playing around when I could have accomplished so much more. I knew how badly hearing that would hurt.

But when I heard Fitz speak Silent's name, I quickly decided that the time had come. "Got it. Thanks, Master Fitz. I'll see if I can track them down."

I'd probably gotten a little cocky, in retrospect. I'd won the loyalty of a Blessed Child, beaten the two top delinquents in the school, earned the sympathy of its foremost genius, and even made friends with a king from the Demon Continent. Half of the student body looked at me in awe. I was trying not to let it go to my head, but I think it did.

They can't turn up their nose at me after everything I've done here, right?

I learned Silent's whereabouts from Vice-Principal Jenius without any fuss at all. The school had granted them a laboratory, consisting of three large rooms at the very back of the third floor in the main research building. They spent almost all their time there, only emerging on very rare occasions.

I decided to visit them by myself, for reasons I wasn't totally sure of. It might have made more sense to take Fitz along with me. But somehow, I felt like I needed to go alone.

I paused in front of the door that led to their chambers to take a deep breath and try to steady my nerves. I wasn't going to let myself flinch, even if Silent really was like me.

I knocked lightly on the door.

"...Come in."

There was a tinge of irritation in the voice that answered from within. Slowly, I pushed the door open.

The back of the room was dominated by countless scattered piles of books and papers. Strange magic implements of unclear purpose were everywhere; magic stones and crystals lay in giant heaps. This was a laboratory, all right.

Someone sat near the very back of this cluttered space. When they turned to face me, I was struck speechless.

“...Ah. We meet again.”

It was a woman. A black-haired woman.

She wore... something I remembered vividly. Something I’d never forget.

A smooth, nearly featureless white mask.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

I fled the room, screaming in terror. It was the girl in the mask. The one who’d been with *Orsted*. I couldn’t remember her name, but I remembered Orsted just fine. Orsted! Why Orsted?! I’d been ready to meet another reincarnated person, but *not* Orsted!

The terror I’d felt when he killed me flooded back into my mind. The fear I’d been almost numb with in those final instants overwhelmed me. I felt the pain from when he’d crushed my lungs. I felt the helplessness of watching him brush aside all my attacks. I felt the shock of him piercing my heart. And I felt... the terror of staring death in the face.

All I could do was run. I ran, and I ran, and I ran. I didn’t have the first idea where I was going.

When I turned around, though, I found the girl following me. I didn’t understand why. Why hadn’t I gotten away from her by now? Was she that fast?



That wasn't it, of course. I was just slow. I'd barely gotten anywhere, despite what my mind was telling me. It was just my heart dashing along at a hundred miles an hour.

I ran even further, desperate and clumsy. I tripped and fell. I stumbled like a drunkard.

I'd worked so hard on my legs in case something like this ever happened, but they weren't cooperating with me at all. It almost felt like I was dreaming; my legs wobbled weakly underneath me with every step I managed to take.

Silent was still following me closely. I'd faced down a Demon King without trembling, and yet...

I looked down the flight of stairs in front of me. Fitz was standing at the bottom. He'd help me. He'd get me out of here. I felt myself relaxing slightly.

"You shouldn't scream at the sight of someone's face, you know. It's a little rude."

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned around, I was face to face with her.

"Aheee!"

With a weird little shriek, I twitched backward in terror... and fell down the stairs, knocking myself unconscious in a slightly embarrassing fashion.

Someone was stroking my head gently. It was deeply comforting, for some reason. It almost felt like their hand was emitting some sort of healing energy.

I glanced upward to investigate, and found the face of Master Fitz. His hands were warmer than I would have expected. They were also oddly slender, soft, and feminine.

For no particular reason, I reached up to grab one.

"Oh. You're awake, Rudeus? You really worried me there, falling down a whole flight of stairs all of a sudden."

"...I was having a terrible dream. A woman in a white mask was just about to

murder me.”

“Err...” Fitz responded to this with an awkward little smile. I wasn’t sure why.

I wasn’t sure where I was, for that matter. This clearly wasn’t my room in the dorms... or even the dorms at all, for that matter. I’d been here before, though. There were beds lined up in a row behind Fitz...

Oh, right. It’s the infirmary.

I sat up and slowly looked around the room. The place looked almost empty, except for Fitz, myself, and the resident healer.

I turned my head a little further...

“Gaaaah!”

She was here as well.

The woman in the white mask was sitting on the other side of my bed.

I tumbled out of my bed and hit the floor with a painful thump. The woman responded by letting out an irritated sigh. “So *very* rude. Why are you so terrified of me, anyway? I saved your life last time, didn’t I? Or... ah, wait. You were nearly dead, weren’t you? I guess you wouldn’t remember, then.”

That settled it. It was definitely her. This was definitely the girl who’d been travelling with Orsted. “W...Where’s Orsted?!”

“He’s not here,” she replied casually. “He’s a very busy man, you know.”

He isn’t here? Really? Really really? It wasn’t like she had any reason to lie about that, right?

“I wouldn’t worry about him, anyway. He won’t be coming after you anytime soon.”

“Anytime soon’? Does that mean he’ll get around to killing me eventually, or what?”

“I don’t think he has any plans to do so... but the possibility does exist. It all depends on you.”

At the very least, I wasn’t going to get murdered right now. As soon as this fact registered, a huge wave of relief washed over me. I’ve always been a pretty

short-term thinker, I guess.

“Uh, I don’t quite understand what’s going on here. Would you mind explaining?” said Fitz, scratching his ears uncertainly as he turned from me to the masked girl. “First of all, who are you to Rudeus?”

“We’re perfect strangers,” said the masked girl bluntly.

Fitz puffed out his cheeks in irritation. “I’ve never seen Rudeus this upset about anything before. You obviously did *something* to him, didn’t you?”

His tone was unusually hostile. He sounded very much like a protective upperclassman stepping in to protect his helpless first-year friend. Honestly, the support was much appreciated.

“The last time we met, he was beaten rather badly by the Dragon God. I imagine he was remembering all of that.”

“The Dragon God...? Uh, one of the Seven Great Powers?”

“That’s right.”

“Are *you* the Dragon God?”

“Of course not. We just travelled together for a while.”

Answering Fitz’s questions in a disinterested tone, the masked girl pushed back her hair with one hand. I’d only just noticed, but she was wearing the University of Magic uniform. “Still, I must admit I didn’t expect to meet you here...” She turned back to me. Even with the mask, I could tell she was watching me closely. “But maybe that’s just the nature of this route. That encounter at the Red Wurm’s Lower Jaw set the flag for us to find each other at this school.”

Before I could even try to respond, the masked girl reached into her cloak and pulled out a piece of paper.

“I’m going to ask you three questions. Answer them honestly, please.”

Her tone was suddenly so commanding that I just swallowed and nodded.

“First of all, do these look familiar to you?”

I took the paper she handed me. Someone had written the words “Shinohara

Akito” and “Kuroki Satoshi” on it.

In Japanese.

I instantly recognized them as names. And at the same time, I realized my initial hunch had been correct.

“Second, can you understand what I’m saying? Third, which of these two are you?”

Her final two questions were spoken in Japanese as well. There was no longer any doubt about it whatsoever. She was just like me. As for the names on that piece of paper, though, they meant nothing to me. I hesitated for a moment. But I’d braced myself for this by now.

Slowly, I replied in Japanese. *“I’m neither of them. I don’t recognize these names.”*

“I see. But you do speak Japanese, at least.”

“Huh?” said Fitz, peering down at the paper in confusion. “What... language are you two speaking? Rudeus?”

“The two of us share a homeland, that’s all,” said Silent calmly.

“What? That can’t be right!”

I wasn’t sure why Fitz felt so confident about this, but that was hardly important at the moment. Slowly, anxiously, I asked the crucial question. *“So you’re like me, then?”*

Silent nodded. *“That’s right. I was tossed into this world out of nowhere, without any warning.”*

As she spoke, she reached up and took off her mask. And at the sight of her face, something clicked inside my head.

It was the girl. The one from the last moments of my old life. The high-school kid who’d been fighting with some boy, and nearly got run over by that truck. Or at the very least, it was someone who looked exactly like her.

I was sure of this, but something felt a little strange about it. It took me a moment to figure out why. Then I realized her face was *exactly* the same.

Fifteen years had passed since that day, but she didn't look any different at all. That was just bizarre. Wouldn't she have changed at least a little in all that time?

No... hold on. Why does she look anything like she used to? If she'd been reincarnated here, she should have been reborn into an entirely new body, just like me.

Before I could ask her anything, though, she answered my questions pre-emptively. *"I don't know how I was transported to this nightmare of a world, but I'm stuck here for now."*

If she'd been transported, our situations were actually rather different. I'd been reincarnated into a new body, with only my memories intact. But unless I was misunderstanding her, she'd basically been warped here just as she was—in the same body, at the same age.

"My name is Nanahoshi Shizuka, and I'm Japanese. I've been using the name Silent Sevenstar lately, though."

Confusion and doubt swirled through my mind, tangling in my thoughts until I couldn't think of a single word to say. But my silence didn't seem to discourage her. *"Where were you from, anyway? America? Or maybe Europe? You're obviously Caucasian, but you speak Japanese... is one of your parents Japanese? Or maybe you're a foreigner who lived there?"*

I felt like she'd gone well past the three questions she asked for at this point, but I wasn't in any shape to object. My tongue was thoroughly tied.

"In any case, this is clearly an important step forward. I was right to let you live. I suspected something like this the moment Orsted said he didn't recognize you."

The girl was speaking rapidly now, with a hint of excitement in her voice. She didn't even seem to notice the fact that I was bewildered. *"Well, let's see if we can find a way to work together... Uhm, what's your name?"*

"R...Rudeus. I'm Rudeus Greyrat."

"That's just the false name you're using in this world, right? I mean your actual name."

I didn't want to speak the name I'd used in my previous life. I really, really didn't.

When I clammed up, Nanahoshi nodded agreeably. *"Ah, that's all right. I understand. You're wary of me, right? I can certainly understand that, especially after what happened at our last meeting. Don't worry, though—we're on the same side."*

"Still, I wasn't even sure there were others like me here until now. You're the first other person from Earth I've met in this world, you know? It's kind of comforting."

Nanahoshi reached out to grasp me by the hand. Fitz frowned, but she didn't even seem to notice. *"Let's find a way back home together, okay?"*

Somehow, those words cut through all the confusion and uncertainty in my mind. A clear, definite answer came to mind instantly: *Hell no.*

I knocked her hand aside. *"I never want to go back to that world again."*

"Huh...?" For the first time in a while, Nanahoshi was speechless.

"Uhm... Rudeus, Silent... would you two please talk in a language I can understand?" Fitz, of course, was even more lost than before.

The mood in the infirmary was suddenly extremely awkward.

Chapter 6:

The White Mask

(Part 2)

NANAHOSHI SHIZUKA—whose name literally meant “seven stars” and “silent” in Japanese—wasn’t like me. Instead of reincarnating in this world as a baby, she’d simply appeared here in her original body.

Since she’d openly revealed all this to me, I told her my story as well, explaining that I’d been reborn here rather than transported. I did tell her I’d died in a sudden accident, but I chose not to give her all the details. I’d been pretty hideous in my previous life. If she remembered what I looked like, it definitely wouldn’t help her opinion of me. Appearances do matter, you know?

Also, there was a chance it was somehow my fault she’d ended up here in the first place. I didn’t want her going after me because of that.

I talked with Nanahoshi for some time, speaking Japanese again for the first time in many years. We didn’t know each other very well at this point, so we had Master Fitz sit in with us as an observer, but the conversation itself was entirely in Japanese. I felt a little bad about that. He must have been bored stiff.

At the very start of our talk, Nanahoshi made something of a declaration. “I’m not interested in this tedious world. I don’t plan to use my knowledge to make it flourish, like some ridiculous manga or light novel. I’m acting solely for my own benefit, basically. All I care about is getting home as quickly as possible.”

Her priorities, in other words, were the exact opposite of my own. I wanted to live out the rest of my life in this world.

I didn’t enjoy hearing her talk about how “tedious” and “ridiculous” she found it, but I could understand how she felt. She just didn’t fit in, basically. She’d never found a place in this world. I knew how it felt to be in that position, and I understood the temptation to look at everything around you with boredom and contempt. I wasn’t planning to try and “correct” her point of view.

Still, Nanahoshi was already wary of me. My initial refusal to cooperate had been a mistake. I could tell she was hiding some things from me, which made perfect sense, of course. It would be stupid to put your trust in someone who might turn out to be an enemy. I was still a little wary of her myself, honestly.

That said, it did feel like I could have handled this better. If I hadn't run away screaming at first, and maybe told her something like "I'm going to stay here, but I'll help you find a way back home," she might have let down her guard at least a little.

Oh well. No point crying over spilt milk.

Nanahoshi told me she'd originally appeared somewhere in the Kingdom of Asura. Specifically, she'd landed in the middle of an empty field. She only learned later that it was in Asura. There was nothing around her, and no one in sight. She had no idea what to do. But fortunately, Orsted had shown up and taken her under his protection.

"Why was Orsted there?"

"...I don't know, but it doesn't seem like he's the one who brought me here."

In the Kingdom of Asura, Nanahoshi learned about this world—starting with the local language, then moving on to the basics of magic, the economic system, and the lifestyles of its people. She was pretty similar to me in that respect.

Amazingly, it had only taken her a year to master the Human Tongue. Orsted was cursed to be hated by everyone who saw him, so I guess she needed to learn how to do her own talking as quickly as possible. Necessity can be a great motivator.

In total, Nanahoshi spent two years in Asura. In that time, she earned money with her knowledge of our world's cuisine and clothing, spent that money to obtain power, and then used that power to secure reliable streams of passive income. She also made sure people knew that the Dragon God, one of the Seven Great Powers, was backing her. With some skillful negotiation on her part, it was enough to convince some powerful Asuran merchants to arrange

stable distribution routes for her products. By this point, she had enough money to live out the rest of her life in luxury.

It was all well and good that she'd learned the language and built up a solid financial foundation. But these were only stepping stones toward her real objective: getting back to the world where she belonged.

She left Asura behind, and accompanied Orsted on his travels for a solid year. They travelled all around the world looking for information on how she might return, and searching for the two acquaintances who might possibly have been sent over here as well.

Orsted had many enemies, so there had been a number of battles along the way. But in almost every case, he defeated his foes in an instant. His fight against me had been one of these, of course. But she'd sensed there was something unusual about me, and apparently advised Orsted to revive me.

I offered my sincere thanks for that. However we'd gotten to that point, I would have died if Nanahoshi hadn't spoken up. "I have to ask, though... what's Orsted's issue with the Man-God? I was really startled when he just attacked me like that."

"I don't know the details, but it sounds like they have a feud going on. Also, he said it's best to take out the Man-God's apostles quickly, because they cause all sorts of trouble if you let them run wild."

I could really do without people murdering me over feuds I wasn't even part of. And for the record, I wasn't that guy's "apostle," either. I'd been basically doing what he told me for a while now, sure, but we only saw each other once a year or so at most. Our relationship wasn't even that close.

In any case... Nanahoshi had travelled across the world, meeting all sorts of people along the way. Orsted was widely hated, of course, but his title was a valuable tool when used correctly. A single letter signed by the Dragon God was enough to get her personal meetings with famous mages, high-ranking knights, and even monarchs.

"You made it around the world in a year...?" That part of the story struck me as a little strange. It had taken me three years to accomplish that, after all.

“Yes. We used a special method to travel, though.”

“What kind of a method?”

“Warping devices, basically. In this world, they call them teleportation circles. Have you heard of them?”

“I recognize the name, but that’s about it.” Where had I heard about them before? When we were walking across the Demon Continent, right? Yeah, it was Ruijerd who’d told me about them. That really brought me back... “Wait a second, though. Weren’t all of those destroyed centuries ago?”

“There are some that survived intact. They’re hidden inside ruins that date back to the Human-Demon War.”

“No kidding? Where could I find these ruins?”

“I can’t tell you. Orsted asked me to keep that a secret. Teleportation is apparently a forbidden form of magic, so he didn’t want me talking about this too carelessly.”

“...Ah. Got it.”

“In any case, I was just tagging along with him. I don’t even remember where most of them were exactly.”

Rather than trekking all around the world, they’d basically just made their way from one teleportation circle to the next a couple dozen times. She was probably telling the truth about not knowing where they were, then. If you were teleported to some unfamiliar land without a map, you’d have no way of figuring out your own location accurately.

Still, it would be nice to track down at least one of those things... they sounded incredibly convenient. You never knew when you might need to travel halfway around the world, after all.

Anyway, back to the main topic:

Nanahoshi didn’t find the people she was looking for, but she’d met many other interesting characters on her journey. Eventually, one of them told her “Someone may well have summoned you into this world.”

“...Who told you that, exactly?”

“I can’t say. They asked me not to tell anyone I’d met them.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s for my own safety. Should people learn that you met me, you’ll find yourself plagued by swarms of greedy, power-hungry jackals. You’d be wise not to mention my name to anyone if you’d ‘prefer to avoid that,’ in their words.”

Apparently, this mysterious unnamed individual was a world-class authority on Summoning magic, but even they didn’t have any idea how a living person from another world could be summoned into this one. Even putting aside the “another world” bit, it was theoretically impossible to summon a human being from *anywhere*.

Still, Nanahoshi finally had something to work off. She decided to set up a new base of operations at the Ranoa University of Magic, where she could thoroughly research Summoning at her leisure. An enormous donation from her savings was enough to earn her a B-ranked membership at the Magicians’ Guild and her position as a special student.

Once she was on campus, she used her connections in the Kingdom of Asura to introduce the new uniforms and various other improvements. She even arranged a long-overdue reform of the general curriculum and upgrades to the professors’ teaching tools. In the blink of an eye, she’d earned herself A-ranked status at the Guild. They’d even gone so far as to offer her an S-rank if she was willing to share all the knowledge she possessed, but she’d declined the offer.

“Sorry to repeat myself, but I’m not remotely interested in reforming this world for the better. Or climbing my way to the top.”

Because of this attitude, she never made things she wouldn’t use herself, and didn’t provide them to others either. That seemed kind of cold-hearted to me, honestly. Surely it couldn’t hurt to make the world a little more pleasant for everyone, right?

Apparently sensing my unspoken disagreement, Nanahoshi let out a sigh. “Look, we don’t really belong in this world, do we? If we try to change its history too dramatically, we might end up getting ourselves erased.”

“Erased? What are you talking about?”

“Haven’t you read any science fiction? What if there’s some kind of... cosmic force that tries to keep events moving down their proper path?”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered reading a manga where that was a major plot point. I think they called it the “law of causality” or something. “...Is there really anything like that here?”

“I have no idea. It can’t hurt to be careful, though.”

I felt like those issues popped up more in time-travel stories where you had people jumping back into the past. It didn’t seem like something we really needed to worry about, since we’d landed in a totally different world. But whatever. It was her choice, at the end of the day.

Once she’d secured herself a private research space where no one would ever bother her, Nanahoshi devoted herself to an intense study of Summoning magic. She’d also chosen to use a false name here, being famous enough that people would have tracked her down to pester her. *Silent Sevenstar* didn’t seem like a very subtle choice, though. I would have gone with something other than a literal translation. Maybe she wanted to keep it similar enough that her two missing friends could recognize it? Who knew if those two were even around, though? I’d never heard anything about either of them.

In any case, to learn Summoning magic, you had to begin by getting familiar with magic circles. While more dynamic magic like elemental and healing spells were mostly cast using incantations, you needed circles for static magic such as Barriers and Summoning.

Nanahoshi had devoured all the information she could find on magic circles, learning all about the principles behind them. Rather than turning to the professors for instruction, she’d taught herself based on old books and records.

“The people of this world are very... set in their ways, you know? I suppose it makes sense, given the harshness of their environment. But I’m looking to do something totally unprecedented, so I can’t expect anyone to teach me much.”

Hm. What did that say about me? I’d learned almost everything I knew about magic from the people of this world... Maybe it didn’t matter that much, though. I wasn’t looking to achieve anything revolutionary, the way she was.

“And of course, we don’t have any mana,” continued Nanahoshi. “It gets frustrating when they’re constantly assuming that you do.”

“Muh?” I replied moronically. *She doesn’t have any mana? What?*

“What? Did I say something odd?”

“Well, I’ve got mana, actually. I can cast magic fine. In fact, just the other someone told me I have a world-class mana capacity.”

Nanahoshi pressed a hand to her mask. I couldn’t see her expression, but it was obvious this news had startled her. “I see. I suppose you’re different because you reincarnated. My mana capacity... is apparently zero.”

I blinked. Literally zero? Did that mean she couldn’t use any magic whatsoever?

“Everything in this world contains some degree of mana, by the way. Even corpses have a little. But we came from a world where it didn’t exist, so I thought it made sense for me to lack it.”

Corpses had mana? That was news to me. But if magic was really such a fundamental part of this world, wouldn’t lacking it cause you... some sort of problems?

“In that case, I suppose *this* doesn’t apply to you either, does it?”

With those words, Nanahoshi removed her mask once again. It was strange seeing such a recognizably Japanese face again after all this time. She was no supermodel, but she was still pretty cute. I’d seen a lot of gorgeous people since coming to this world, so my standards were probably too high. I could see her being one of the cutest girls in her class back in Japan.

“It’s been about five years since I arrived in this world, but I haven’t aged at all.”

Five years should have changed her at least slightly, but she still looked sixteen or seventeen. Apparently, her body really wasn’t getting any older. “Well... that sounds like a bit of a silver lining, at least.”

Nanahoshi frowned, then put her mask back on with a small snort of laughter. “...I suppose it’s preferable to growing old in a foreign land, at least.”

Come to think of it, the version of me that showed up in the Man-God dreams never seemed to age, either. Maybe that was just how it worked with people who came here from other worlds.

“I don’t have the first idea *why* I’m not getting older, though. It’s just bizarre.”

“Just for the record, I’m aging normally so far.”

“Right. I suppose the cause is something inherent to my body, then. I’ll have to look into it if I get the chance. There might be something I can do about it.”

Nanahoshi opened a small notebook, and jotted down a brief note. She was evidently keeping track of things she realized or wanted to follow up on later.

“Okay then, let’s get back on topic.”

Nanahoshi had learned all about magic circles. Generally, you made them by pulverizing magic crystals and mixing the powder with some specific ingredients to create a special paint, which you then used to draw very specific patterns. Once the paint settled on a suitable surface, it would be absorbed, making it very difficult to erase. Pumping mana into the paint would magnify the power of your magic and produce a specific effect determined by the structure of the circle.

As a general rule, the magical paint would evaporate after a single use. You often needed some very specific things to make it, and the list of ingredients varied depending on the nature of the spell. In particular, large-scale spells at the King-tier level or above required some *very* unusual catalysts. You’d usually need the financial backing of a country to get your hands on everything you required.

“Do those teleportation circles in the ruins vanish after one use too?”

“No, they work differently. They were carved into place using a special technique.”

Interesting...

Making magic circles from paint was apparently the norm these days, but back in the golden days, there had been a much wider variety of techniques in use. Some of those methods hadn’t been completely lost to time. You could

carve a magic circle into stone and pump it full of magic directly, for example. Nanahoshi herself couldn't use that method, so she hadn't spent much time studying it, but it was widely used in the creation of magical implements. "Isn't that more common than the paint thing, actually?"

"I can't use the technique, so I don't particularly care."

Magic circles could be used for almost any sort of spell if you had a good pattern, the right paint, and sufficient mana, but there was one major problem. The patterns had been handed down orally through the generations, and most of them were lost over the centuries. There was no one out there capable of devising new ones anymore, either. If you wanted to discover a "new" magic circle, your only option was to find some old scroll left forgotten in the back of a royal treasury, or stumble across an engraving in the depths of an ancient ruin.

This had been the state of affairs for some time, in fact... until Nanahoshi arrived to shake things up. She'd analyzed the patterns of the known magic circles, drawn up her own attempts, and carried out countless experiments. Eventually, she'd succeeded in creating her own brand-new patterns.

This was all seriously impressive. The more she talked, the more I wanted to learn from her. But before I could even broach the subject, Nanahoshi shot me down. "I can't go handing out my findings to everyone who asks." I wanted to object, but she wasn't done yet. Raising a hand, she looked me calmly in the face. "Let's make a deal."

This was probably what she'd been building up to for some time.

"I don't have any mana, or any means to defend myself. I don't get any older, but I'm fairly sure I'm not immortal."

"Right."

"I can't stand this world, honestly. None of it feels *real* to me. The food is just atrocious, their sense of morality is bizarre, and everything is so incredibly inconvenient. They don't even have shampoo here, for crying out loud. And more importantly, everyone I care about is back in our world. I want to go back there very badly. What about you?"

"I like this world a lot," I replied immediately. "And I've got more friends here

than in our old world, at this point. I don't want to go back."

"I see. You don't have a family you left behind or anything?"

"I've got no regrets."

I didn't even want to think about my old life. I really didn't. Fifteen years ago, I'd decided to do the best I could with my second chance here. All sorts of things had happened since then—some wonderful, some painful. But I was pretty satisfied with my life right now, all things considered. If someone tried to drag me back "home" after all this time, I wouldn't go without a fight.

"I see. I suppose you must have had a good, long life..."

Nanahoshi was misinterpreting the situation slightly, but whatever. It wasn't like I'd told her that I was the smelly loser who'd jumped in front of that truck at the last moment. All I'd said was that my death had been accidental.

"You and I clearly have different goals, then. But we both have something to offer each other, so let's find a way to cooperate."

"Is there something I have that you want?"

"You said it yourself earlier. You've got a world-class mana capacity, right?"

She wanted my mana, of all things? I seemed to remember seeing massive piles of magic crystals lying around her room earlier... all of those weren't enough?

"I'd like you to help me with my experiments. In exchange, I'll teach you what you want to know. If you're looking for answers I don't have, then I'll do my best to find them. I know lots of influential people, and I'm quite a skilled researcher. I'll also help you out in any other way I can, of course."

"So you're looking for a give-and-take relationship, basically?"

"That's right. Simple enough, really."

Nanahoshi seemed like a very smart, resourceful person. I wasn't sure how much help I would really be to her. Maybe she was just showing some compassion for a fellow Earthling, though. She did say something about being glad to meet another of her kind. "Okay, that sounds good to me. I accept."

“Glad to hear it. Don’t go changing your mind later, all right?”

“A man never goes back on his word.”

“...Heh. I have to say, it’s kind of nice to hear a Japanese cliché again.”

“I know what you mean. Nobody gets *any* of my references over here.”

Nanahoshi cleared her throat and resettled herself in her seat. She took three rings out of her pocket and slipped them on one by one. Was there some point to all this?

“Shall we get right to it, then? Is there something you want to ask me? I’ve heard you’re looking into the Displacement Incident.”

“Uh, who told you that?”

I shot a glance over at Fitz, who was sitting silently off to the side with a vaguely sulky expression on his face. Maybe they’d spoken a little while I was unconscious? Noticing my gaze, Fitz tilted his head uncertainly to one side.

“Hm? What is it, Rudeus? Is something wrong?” Nanahoshi asked me, still in Japanese.

“We’re going to talk about the Displacement Incident now. Nanahoshi, would you mind speaking in the Human Tongue for this?”

“All right then.”

Fitz moved next to me and turned to face Nanahoshi. From now on, we’d be using a language everyone in the room could understand.

“I don’t know the specifics of why that disaster took place,” Nanahoshi began reluctantly. “However, it closely coincided with the moment that I arrived in this world.”

I’d had my suspicions, of course, from the moment I learned when and where she’d arrived in this world. And she’d no doubt learned from Fitz that I’d been one of those affected by the calamity. “In other words?” I prompted.

“The Incident was probably a side effect caused by whatever brought me here. In effect...” Nanahoshi paused for a moment before continuing. “In effect, it happened because of me.”

Right. Not a huge surprise.

I'd been anticipating those words for a while now. Summoning and Teleportation were similar in many ways, and Nanahoshi had apparently been summoned here the moment we were teleported. It all fit together too neatly for it to be a coincidence. If anything, I was relieved that disaster wasn't related to *my* arrival here.

Fitz, however, reacted very differently.

With a strangled shout of "I'll **kill** you!", he jumped up and swung his arm threateningly.

"What?! *You*—?!" yelled Nanahoshi, throwing up one of her hands. One of her rings shone brightly, and Fitz's spell failed. What *was* that thing?

Realizing that his magic wasn't going to work, Fitz leapt toward Nanahoshi and begun throwing punches. But the second of her rings shone, and his fists bounced off some kind of invisible barrier.

"Do you... have any idea... how much we suffered?! My mother and father... *died* because of you!"

Those rings had to be magical. None of Fitz's attacks were getting through. "Don't just stand there, Rudeus Greyrat!" shouted Nanahoshi, clearly flustered. "Do something!"

Stepping forward, I grabbed my panting friend by the arm before he could slam his fist against the barrier again. "Calm down, Master Fitz."

"Are you serious, Rudeus? She just admitted it was her fault! How can you be so calm?! You... You suffered too, didn't you?!"

I'd never seen Fitz this worked up before. He was normally so cool-headed. It was hard to blame him for losing control, of course. He'd lost people he loved in that disaster. After five years, he'd probably come to terms with that loss to some degree. But that didn't mean he could stay calm when confronted by the person who was responsible for it.

Based on what I'd heard so far, though, the Displacement Incident wasn't Nanahoshi's fault. Apart from everything else, I was right there with her in the

moment both of us were likely summoned to this world... although I had no idea why she'd showed up ten years after I did.

The bottom line was: she didn't choose to be brought over here. Someone else made that decision for her.

Oh, right. We were talking in Japanese when we discussed that, weren't we? No wonder Fitz had misunderstood. He didn't have any context at all. "I'm sorry, we didn't explain this clearly enough. She didn't come here of her own free will, Master Fitz. She's a victim, too."

"A victim...? Wait...really?" Fitz was still breathing rapidly, but he seemed to take my words at face value. With a long sigh, he slumped back into his chair.

"I'm sorry," said Nanahoshi. "I could have phrased that more carefully. It wasn't my intention to upset you."

"...That's all right. I apologize for jumping to conclusions." Fitz didn't seem completely calm yet. There was still a fierce light in his eyes, for one thing. But it seemed like he'd gotten himself under control, at least for now.

Had Nanahoshi taken out those rings on the assumption I'd fly into a rage and try to murder her? The girl had some guts, I'd give her that. Those were some nice little trinkets. I wanted a set or two for myself, honestly. Maybe they were her primary means of self-defense...

"Anyway, I don't know much more about the Incident itself. I was summoned here because of it, but I have no idea who made it happen, what their motives were, or why it led to such an enormous disaster. No one does."

"Orsted didn't have any theories, either?"

"No. He just said it was *unprecedented*."

Well, if a so-called god couldn't figure it out, we probably weren't going to find any answers, either. I seemed to remember the Man-God saying it was Orsted's fault... but thanks to that curse, everyone who met Orsted hated him. I felt like the Man-God might be under its effects as well. And they had some kind of feud going on even outside of that, right? He might just have blamed Orsted by default.

If Nanahoshi was telling me the truth, at least, it was hard to imagine Orsted actually played a role in causing the Incident. Why would he summon her here and then spend all that time helping her return home? That didn't make much sense at all.

"Why did you say it happened because of you, then?"

"Well, it did, in a sense. And I wanted to get that fact out there right away. I didn't want anyone using it as an excuse to turn against me later."

"I see..."

Instead of trying to hide something that might turn me against her, she told me the truth bluntly, and *then* explained herself. That did seem a better approach, when you considered the risk of me figuring it out somewhere down the line.

Of course, I still had to keep in mind there was a chance that either Nanahoshi or Orsted was a very skilled liar.

"That's a shame, though. I was hoping you'd have some idea what happened."

"I'm afraid not. But I do have a plan to move forward with my research."

"If your research progresses far enough, do you think you'll figure out the truth about the Displacement Incident?"

"I should be able to explain what happened on a theoretical level, at least..."

I nodded thoughtfully. The way she cautiously clarified her promises made her seem *more* trustworthy, somehow.

"But to make that happen, I'll need a great deal of mana."

"I see. I guess I'm the man of your dreams, then."

"Heh. Yes, I suppose so."

Fitz scowled as we spoke. I got the feeling he still didn't trust Nanahoshi completely. Still, I'd never expected such a nice, friendly guy like him to flip out like that. He did say someone he knew came through the Incident okay... but I hadn't known that both his parents died. It was probably smart to let him cool

down a little before I said anything.

“Okay, Nanahoshi. I need a little time to think about all of this. I’ll come back to see you in a few days, okay? Let’s work out the specifics then.”

“All right. I’ll see you then.”

With that final exchange of words, I left the infirmary with Master Fitz in tow.

After I explained Nanahoshi’s situation to Fitz in greater detail, he finally seemed to calm down a little. His anger visibly faded when I told him that she’d been brought to this world by force, and was desperate to make her way back home.

Once I was finished, though, he asked me a slightly odd question. “Anyway, Rudeus...what do you think of her?”

The question was a slightly tricky one. It was easy for me to believe her story, since I’d been reincarnated here myself, but it must have sounded seriously outlandish to Fitz. From the way Nanahoshi talked, it was obvious that she didn’t care very much about this world or what happened to the people in it. She just wanted to get the hell out of Dodge. Unlike me, she’d had nothing but success since coming here. Maybe it all felt *trivial* to her. I wasn’t going to brag about all my hard work or whatever... but I didn’t really like her attitude.

“To be honest, there are some things about her I don’t like very much. But I do think she’s relatively trustworthy.”

“Hm... Okay. That’s good, then.”

Fitz smiled a little awkwardly. Maybe he’d been planning to lecture me about trusting people too easily if I’d responded differently. I didn’t really know how Nanahoshi could have worked out a plan to trick me, considering I’d approached *her* first... but I guess her story was just that hard to believe. “Were you worried about me, Master Fitz? Thanks.”

“Huh?! No, I... I wasn’t *worried* or anything, but... you’re welcome anyway, I guess...”

Watching the guy fidget like this was always weirdly heartwarming.

In any case, Nanahoshi and I had now established a tentative partnership.

There were still dozens of questions I wanted to ask her, but there was no need to rush things. I'd just have to work my way down the list one by one.

Interlude: Sylphiette (Part 4)

LATELY, I'D BEEN FEELING more and more anxious about the situation.

Silent had turned out to be a girl. That was no big surprise in itself. Some of the *Princess's* sources had suggested it might be the case, in fact. In hindsight, lots of her little innovations were things that a woman might appreciate. She'd improved our food, our clothing, and the soap we used to clean our hair... once you realized that she'd been acting for her own sake, it all made total sense.

My anxiety wasn't about *her*, really. It was more about Rudy. For some reason, he seemed devoted to Silent.

There were lots of beautiful women in his life already. Linia, Pursena... Elinalise was dating Cliff now, sure, but she still counted. Rudy had never shown much interest in them.

Silent was a different story, though. For some reason, she was special to him. She had a complicated problem she was struggling with, and he wanted to help her. That was probably a part of it. Rudy liked helping people out.

But it wasn't *just* that. There was some special connection between them, one I couldn't understand. And it was definitely bringing the two of them closer together. They probably didn't have romantic feelings for each other. I didn't get the impression that Rudy had fallen for her. But his relationship with her seemed more...intimate than any of his others. Were they even closer than I'd been with Rudy back in Buena Village? Maybe.

Since Rudy started helping out with Silent's experiments, he was spending less time looking into the Displacement Incident with *Fitz*. And spending more time with her, of course. And when you spend enough time with someone, it's not unusual for something like romantic feelings to develop almost out of nowhere.

Back when he'd befriended Linia and Pursena, I hadn't been *that* concerned. But now, it wasn't hard for me to imagine Silent taking him away. That made my heart throb painfully.

Did I hate Silent or something? It wasn't like we'd even talked that much. I didn't have a reason to hate her. I just didn't want her taking Rudy from me, that was all. She'd popped up out of nowhere, and now she was acting like she'd known him forever. She sat right next to him casually, like they'd been friends for years. That was where I was supposed to be.

I wasn't sitting there now, sure. So I couldn't really come out and complain about it. But if she was going to claim that seat, I wanted her to do it *right*. I wanted her to spend lots and lots of time with him first, and make lots of memories. Either that, or I wanted her to move further away. Maybe then I could accept... whatever this was.

"Sigh..."

Were Rudy and I really going to just...drift apart like this? The *Princess* said I could take my time with it. But if there was no chance at all, she wanted Fitz to stop interacting with Rudy altogether. The two of us would go our separate ways.

Even if Fitz left his life entirely, Rudy would keep on going just fine, moving ahead the same as always. Silent would take my seat for herself. And maybe they'd end up spending the rest of their lives together.

...I didn't like that thought. Not one bit.

This wasn't going well at *all*. But what was I supposed to do?

The answer was obvious enough. I had to come out and tell him who I was, and then tell him how I felt. At least that would be a step forward, one way or another.

But no matter obvious that was, I couldn't get my legs to move. The thought *What if he says no?* kept flashing through my head, and keeping me from moving.

If I didn't do something, I'd definitely regret it. But I couldn't bring myself to act. When had I become such a coward? I used to be pretty timid as a child,

sure, but I thought I'd grown braver than *this* over the last few years.

Had my courage fallen out of my pocket somewhere?

I really wished someone would bring it back to me.

Chapter 7:

A Day at the University of Magic

IT HAD BEEN A YEAR since I'd enrolled at the Ranoa University of Magic, and I'd just turned sixteen. In this world, people only really celebrated their fifth, tenth, and fifteenth birthdays, so I'd kind of forgotten about which day it was at this point. I could have figured it out by checking the age on my adventurers' card every morning, but it wasn't something I took out too often these days.

I didn't care that much, anyway. Age is just a number, right?

After meeting Nanahoshi, my normal routine had changed somewhat.

I started off my days by waking up early, getting dressed, and going out to train. This was the same as always, but sometimes Badigadi would show up when I started my sword drills. He didn't join in or give me any advice, though. For most part, he just watched me silently with his arms folded or resting on his hips, nodding thoughtfully now and then. I had no idea what conclusions he was reaching, and he never shared them with me. I didn't try to start a conversation, either. If he did open his mouth, he'd probably start laughing loudly enough to wake up the whole neighborhood.

Honestly, I wasn't sure how to interact with Badigadi in general. He seemed like a nice guy, but I never knew what he was thinking. And he *was* an actual Demon King, so I wanted to avoid accidentally ticking him off.

One morning, however, he spoke to me for once. "Hm. I find your training fascinating, boy, but I have to ask... is there some point to it?"

Ouch. That's a harsh way to start a conversation. "Uh, well... I don't think staying in shape is pointless, but—"

"You have an absurd amount of mana," Badigadi interrupted. "I don't understand why you'd train without cloaking yourself in battle aura."

Again with the battle aura. I'd heard the words many times before, but

everyone was always super vague about how you were supposed to ‘cloak’ yourself in it. This seemed like a golden opportunity. It couldn’t hurt to ask, right? “What exactly is battle aura, anyway?”

“It’s mana! Nothing more and nothing less.”

The way Badigadi explained things, it was basically a technique that used the mana in you to dramatically improve your body’s physical capabilities, strengthening yourself to unnatural extremes. That bit was more or less what I’d expected to hear. “How do you actually *do* that, though?”

“Simply spread a field of mana over every part of your body, then press it tightly against you!”

“Ooh.”

Now that sounded like some useful advice. The University clearly needed to replace its professors with a bunch of Demon Kings. Once I’d mastered this, maybe I could gain a few power levels.

I gave it a shot immediately, doing my best imitations of various Super Saiyans and Nen users. But no matter how much I manipulated my mana, there was no real change in my physical capabilities. It sort of felt like I might be getting stronger sometimes, but that was probably just the placebo effect at work.

“Well, that’s odd. You’ve got no talent for this, boy!”

Badigadi went on to bluntly explain the reason for my failure. Normally, battle aura was something people began to automatically generate after spending some time doing physical training. On the other hand, I’d put in a good amount of effort on that front, but I still couldn’t cloak myself in the aura even when I tried. That meant I just didn’t have the knack for it.

This did happen now and then. Some people could never generate any battle aura at all, no matter how intense their training regimen.

“Bwahahaha! Not like you have any need of it, of course! Laplace never cloaked himself in battle aura either, but he was truly powerful!”

When he talked about my abilities, Badigadi often used the Demon God Laplace as a point of comparison. I assumed it was because he’d also possessed

a massive supply of mana. “Did you actually meet Laplace, Sir Badi?”

“Indeed I did! He annihilated most of my body with a single blow. It took me some time to reform after that! I thought he’d actually killed me for a moment! Bwahahahaha!”

Is there some reason you sound so proud of that...?

Well, he’d fought against a powerful opponent and lived to tell the tale. Maybe that was something worth bragging about, regardless of the details. According to Badigadi, Laplace had been an extremely shady character, but he was also a master at making use of his mana.

“Could I get stronger if I learned to fight like Laplace did?”

“I don’t recommend trying. If you tried to use your mana the way he did, you’d blow your own body apart in an instant. It’s bizarre for a human to have that much mana inside them in the first place, you know!”

Channeling too much mana at once could apparently destroy a magician from the inside out. On an intuitive level, that did make sense to me. Infusing yourself with magic felt a little bit like stretching your arm out as far as it could possibly go. If you kept pushing things beyond that limit, you’d probably end up with the equivalent of a broken bone or two.

Laplace, on the other hand, had possessed not only a giant supply of mana, but also the sturdy body and technical skill necessary to use it fully. I was a fragile, clumsy little thing by comparison. No matter how hard I trained, I was never going to reach his level.

“But why do you even want to get stronger, boy?”

“Why? Well, uh... I mean...” Someone had nearly killed me not too long ago. I wanted to get strong enough to prevent that from happening again. That seemed reasonable to me...

“I’ve known many men who sought fame and strength to an excessive degree, and it never ended well for them. Take my nephew, for example. Too proud by half, that one! He settled down a bit after very nearly dying, but up until then he was obsessed with becoming the strongest man in the world. There are more important things in life than *that*, you know?”

“Like what?”

“Like women!” said Badigadi with a self-satisfied grin. “Once you have one of your own, you’ll understand! Bwahahahaha!”

To be fair, people who wanted power for their own sake *were* usually villains. At least in the manga I read back in my previous life. But I wasn’t planning to devote my life to the pursuit of power, or anything. Being strong let you swagger around confidently, but it didn’t make you a better or happier person in and of itself. I could understand why you’d prioritize something fun like womanizing instead. Thanks to my condition, though, that wasn’t exactly an option at the moment.

“That reminds me, your Majesty...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You wouldn’t happen to know of a cure for impotence, would you?”

“...No.”

I guess even Demon Kings don’t know everything.

After finishing up with training, I ate a quick breakfast and headed for class.

My mornings started with Intermediate Detoxification magic. Even at the Beginner level, Detoxification enabled you to cure a wide range of common ailments and purge the body of most poisons. But when you got into the rarer illnesses, or the venom used by high-ranked monsters, you needed to know more advanced spells with specific incantations that required using lots of mana. Intermediate Detoxification classes and above were mostly about learning those ultra-targeted spells.

Their incantations were painfully long. Even at the Intermediate level, you’d have to chant a phrase several times longer than anything used for an offensive spell. Modern incantations were said to be abbreviated versions of older, less refined phrases... but when you got into the more advanced tiers of certain disciplines, it felt like they’d never been shortened at all.

There were a *lot* of these to learn, as well. For Intermediate Detoxification,

you had to memorize more than fifty different incantations. Some of these actually *created* poisons, to my surprise; maybe they had some medical use in certain cases.

At the Advanced tier, you'd need to learn more than a *hundred* spells. Once you hit that level, you'd need some serious memorization skills to keep up.

At the Saint-tier, there was supposedly less need to memorize things, but the amount of mana required to cast a single spell ramped up dramatically. And as for the King-tier spells and above... you were looking at things researched and devised by one nation or another, and mostly guarded as state secrets. Some would create poisons incurable by any ordinary magic, as a threat toward other countries. Others would create specific antidotes to those same poisons. It was basically a kind of arms race.

Incidentally, the only Divine-tier Detoxification spell I'd heard of was one that cured a strange and terrible illness called Petrification Syndrome. If left untreated, it would slowly transform the mana inside your body into magic stone. Only one person had ever been able to use the spell in question. It was guarded carefully in the Great Cathedral of Millishion.

Just a side note... as you moved from Intermediate Detoxification to Advanced and onward, the incantations grew steadily longer. Based on what I'd seen, a King-tier spell might require you to recite the contents of an entire book out loud.

My new brain wasn't half-bad at remembering things, but it still felt like I had my work cut out for me. Honestly, monks and priests never seem to catch a break. No matter what world they were in, they always had tedious chants to memorize. Personally, I was planning to just carry around a book with the incantations in them.

My main reason for taking this class was to see if I might find some spell that could cure my condition. But from what the professor told me, there wasn't anything in the Intermediate tier that could make me any perkier.

Not surprising, really.

After my first class ended, it was time for lunch.

I'd been eating outside for months, but it was getting cold out there these days, so I decided to make myself a little shelter. I used Earth magic to surround one of the outdoor tables with four walls and a roof, then opened a hole in the middle of the table and got a fire going inside it. Once I added a hole in the ceiling to let the smoke out, I had myself a comfy little hut. It was actually really nice sitting around that table, since the fire warmed the stone nicely.

Unfortunately, Vice-Principal Jenius quickly showed up and chewed me out. Rather than making myself a building outside, I was encouraged to use the building they already had. I decided to start eating on the first floor of the dining hall instead. I'd expected Zanoba to protest, but he accepted it readily enough. "Julie wouldn't be able to sit with us on the third floor, anyway." Apparently, there was an informal rule up there that slaves weren't allowed to use the chairs. It didn't apply elsewhere, of course.

Zanoba didn't treat Julie like a slave, even if she technically was one. He regarded her as a junior apprentice in the art of figurine-making, nothing more and nothing less. That said, she was still his subordinate, so you did see him ordering her around now and then. The treatment of slaves varied widely in this world, depending on where you were and who bought you. I wasn't sure if Zanoba's treatment of her qualified as good or bad. At least he didn't act like she was less than human.

"Shit, that's Rudeus..."

"What's with that guy, anyway? How the hell did he take over the special class in a single year?"

"I was there when he took out the Demon King, man... he only used *one spell*..."

When I entered the dining hall, the crowd parted in front of me, and I heard murmuring from all sides. I didn't remember "taking over" the special class, and my one hit on Badigadi was repaid with three punches... but whatever. This wasn't a bad feeling, although I had to make sure it didn't go to my head. Orsted had taught me a very painful lesson about the dangers of getting overconfident. If my ego got too big, I'd just end up faceplanting again.

I followed the path opened by the crowd, and found myself led directly to a table at the very back of the dining hall.

“Bwahahahaha! I see it’s finally gotten too cold for you to eat outside, boy!”

Badigadi was sitting there. For some reason, he was chugging from massive mugs of booze, which were definitely *not* served here. Judging from the reddish tone of his jet-black skin, he was probably mildly drunk at this point.

The other students, standing at a safe distance, looked at me expectantly. Their eyes were pleading with me to sit down with Badigadi. I’d apparently been assigned a regular table by group consensus.

Incidentally, Cliff and Elinalise ate on the second floor. I’d witnessed them having a meal together once, and it was enough to make me lose my appetite. They spent the whole time feeding each other and kissing passionately, totally ignoring all the stares. Watching that had left me feeling empty inside, so I’d decided to keep my distance from them at lunchtime.

“Master, what’s the Demon King drinking?” said Julie, tugging at Zanoba’s sleeve. “It looks really good.”

“Bwahahaha! You’re a dwarf, all right! Indeed, this beer is of the highest quality. It was the secret stash of that man with the hairball on his head!”

I’d heard that dwarves liked to drink, yes, but... did Julie already have a taste for alcohol? I felt like she was still way too young for that, but apparently, I was the *only* one who felt that way.

“Hm. Sir Badi, would you mind if she had a little?”

“Not at all! There’s no joy in drinking all alone, you know? Have as much as you please! Bwahahahaha!”

Julie took a cup Badi had filled to the brim with beer, and began sipping steadily away. Was this really a good idea? She had to be a *little* young for this, right? I mean, sure, we could always use detoxification magic if she got too drunk, but still...

Then again, I was drinking here and there at the age of seven myself. Maybe it would be hypocritical of me to object.

“Hmm. Perhaps I’ll have a mug as well, then,” said Zanoba.

“You’ve got classes today,” I pointed out. “It’s probably not a good idea.”

“Ah. If you say so, Master. My apologies, Sir Badi.”

“Bwahahahaha! You can’t even drink when you please? The life of a student must be an unhappy one!”



With this boisterous conversation running in the background, I ate my lunch and set out for my next class. This one was a course on Advanced Healing, located in a fifth-year classroom.

I'd been surprised to find that Pursena was taking this class as well. Specifically, the surprising part was that it was *just* Pursena. Linia was taking a different class. Normally, Pursena didn't take anything seriously. But to her credit, she actually paid attention to the lectures... while gnawing on sticks of jerky, of course.

Still, most of the other students were terrified of her based on her reputation as a delinquent, so she'd been spending a lot of time all by herself lately. She'd even had trouble getting anyone to pair off with her in the practical skills sessions. Because of all this, she seemed genuinely grateful to have me around. On this afternoon, she went so far as to say, "You're the best, Boss. Here, you can have my most prized possession."

The gift she handed me was a half-eaten piece of jerky. By her standards, this was probably a very special gesture. Accepting it with a nod, I went ahead and licked it all over, savoring the dog-girl flavor. Pursena looked at me with open disgust.

Hey, you're the one who gave it to me...

As for Linia, lately she'd been peppering me with questions about elemental spells. It sounded like she was struggling to get the hang of combined magic.

This was apparently a major stumbling block for lots of people who were focusing their studies on offensive magic. Sylphie had picked it up relatively smoothly back in the day, but maybe it was one of those things that got harder to learn as you got older.

Today, I took some time to try and teach Linia about combining fire and water magic. It put me in a kind of nostalgic mood, honestly. I started off by trying to explain the cycle of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation, but the concept just seemed to confuse her.

"Mew? But if the whole ocean turned into rain, wouldn't it just disappear

after a while?”

“I mean, the rain just flows back into the ocean after it falls, so there’s no net loss.”

“That’s not true, mew!” said Rinia, her face shining with triumph. “In the Great Forest, the water soaks right into the ground!”

“Sure, but that water either gets drawn back up by plants or starts flowing along underground. So eventually—”

I tried my best to walk her through it one step at a time, but I didn’t seem to be getting through to her. All I really wanted her to get was that water from the ocean evaporated, formed rainclouds, and then fell back down. Once you had a good intuitive understanding of that, you could start putting the principles involved to practical use... but we clearly weren’t there yet.

Still, Linia wasn’t as totally hopeless as Ghislaine when it came to thinking stuff through, so she’d probably understand eventually.

Come to think of it, though... there was no real guarantee the rain cycle actually worked the same way in this world, given that you could summon water with magic here.

While we’re on the topic of elemental magic, I should mention that I’d recently learned my first Saint-tier level Earth magic spell, Sandstorm.

It was basically a more powerful version of the Advanced-tier spell Duststorm. That might not sound too impressive on its face, but when I’d actually tried it out, an astonishingly fierce torrent of sand and wind blanketed a wide area around me. Anyone caught inside was essentially rendered blind; it was a struggle just to breathe. And even when the spell’s effect finally expired, the entire battlefield would be left covered in massive piles of shifting, unstable sand. Where the Water spell Cumulonimbus involved a careful manipulation of rainclouds and wind currents, Sandstorm required you to blow around a massive quantity of tiny particles. It seemed like many spells at this tier involved changing the weather in some dramatic way.

The professor who taught me the spell repeatedly cautioned me not to use it

inside a town or city unless I absolutely had to, given that it would do serious damage to any crops growing in the area. That was probably a standard warning you were expected to repeat when teaching someone a Saint-tier elemental spell.

In any case, I now officially qualified as a Saint-tier Earth magician. I had a vague interest in reaching that level in the two other elements as well, if I had the time to track down professors willing to teach me.

Incidentally, the guy who taught me Sandstorm was surprised to learn that I wasn't familiar with it already. My silent spellcasting attacks were on a King-tier level at this point, so I guess he assumed that I'd mastered everything at the lower Saint-tier already.

Badigadi recently told me that the Stone Cannon I'd fired off at him had actually been on the Imperial level in terms of pure destructive power. Did that mean I could call myself an Emperor-tier magician?

When I asked the professor, he said I could call myself anything I wanted. Sensing a slight edge to that remark, I decided not to do so. It was hard to imagine any good would come from advertising myself as some master mage, anyway.

In the early afternoon, I often headed over to Nanahoshi's laboratory. The University had given her quite a lot of space to work with. But since she'd filled up the front room with a jumble of junk, it actually felt a little cramped when you stepped inside.

Just past this initial storage area was the experimental chamber, with walls made of magic-resistant brick. The room beyond *that* was Nanahoshi's bedchamber. She seemed to be keeping a sizable stash of food in one corner, which kind of worried me. Why was she sleeping next to her food? What if it attracted mice or roaches?

It had become obvious to me fairly quickly that the girl had the makings of a world-class shut-in. And coming from me, that really meant something. I was also strictly forbidden from actually setting foot inside her bedroom.

As for the nature of my visits here... for the most part, I was just helping out with her Summoning magic experiments. My role was a simple one: I channeled mana into the magic circles that she'd drawn up. Simple enough, but there were a *ton* of them. She was testing out all sorts of things, even patterns she expected to fail, in a trial-and-error approach. Nanahoshi had lots of money to spare, but that didn't mean she could secure herself an infinite number of magical crystals to throw at these experiments. The supply available was always limited, and if you tried to buy them all, you'd make yourself a lot of enemies very quickly. As a result, she'd previously been hesitant to move forward with these tests.

All I did was single-mindedly channel my mana into magic circle after magic circle. Normally, there were no results at all. The magic paint would disappear, leaving only the lines she'd sketched out underneath. However, sometimes one of them would suck quite a lot of mana out of me, and something strange would appear out of nowhere—typically something like a dirty black bird wing, or the leg of an insect.

When I asked Nanahoshi if we'd succeeded, she replied, "Of course not."

The idea was that we'd try out tens of thousands of these things, looking for a fluke success or clues to general principles that she could work from. It sure seemed like it was going to take us a *while*, though.

"What exactly is the goal of these experiments?"

"I want to learn how to summon a human being from our old world. Right now, we're laying the groundwork... for the groundwork of the groundwork... of a *theory* that might get us there."

Once she could make a magic circle capable of summoning people from a different world, she could make one that could send them back home too. Possibly. In theory. Either way, we had a lot of preliminary stages to get through before we got anywhere close to that. This definitely wasn't going to be a short-term project.

"Okay, I understand the general plan. But if we summon someone the same way you were summoned here, aren't we just going to cause another huge disaster?"

“Believe me, I have no intention of creating a second Displacement Incident. But if I can move a few stages further along in my research, I should be able to nail down a theory regarding why it happened.”

“Sure. I know things go wrong in experiments all the time, though. Just be careful, okay? Lots of people died because of that whole mess.”

“It’s not just experiments, Rudeus. Things always go wrong no matter what we do. I’m very aware of the risks, all right? That’s why I’m taking things so cautiously.”

I couldn’t say that I completely followed, but I did understand that she was building up to something slowly and methodically. Maybe it would be best if I learned the basics, at least. “You know, I’d like to learn some Summoning magic myself...”

“Summoning is my lifeline. I can’t go around handing out my knowledge freely.”

“I thought you said you’d teach me anything I want to know?”

Nanahoshi clicked her tongue in irritation. “All right, fine. Once we’re done with this experiment, I’ll answer one question for you.”

“One answer for all of these? You pay terribly, Nanahoshi.”

“Once we’re *really* finished and I head back home, you can have all the resources, knowledge, and connections I leave behind,” she snapped. “So for now, try to be a *little* patient.”

Somebody seemed a little on edge. In her defense, though, I guess it was uncool of me to start begging for rewards when we hadn’t even accomplished anything yet.

Before we continued, though, Nanahoshi did hand me a book with the title *Sig’s Summoning*. “If you’re that interested, do a little studying yourself.”

I felt like I’d seen this somewhere before, but I had no memory of reading it. I accepted it with gratitude.

And thus my experiments with Nanahoshi had continued along those lines.

At this point, I'd stopped dropping by the library for hours at a time. But Master Fitz sometimes showed up to join me when I was visiting Nanahoshi. As I watched him try to help out one day, I realized that these experiments were actually pretty grueling work. He ran out of mana entirely after working through only twenty scrolls or so. "This is crazy, Rudeus. Activating one of these things consumes as much mana as casting an Advanced spell..."

Fitz was a silent spellcaster like myself, but evidently his mana capacity was considerably smaller. And he had more mana than most people, from the sound of things. It did seem like my capacity was just freakishly large. I kind of wished someone could put it into numbers somehow.

In any case, Fitz was a proficient mage, and he'd struggled with this task. Was it something about Nanahoshi's magic circles in particular? Or did Summoning magic just eat up that much mana? Unlike offensive spells, you probably wouldn't be using a dozen different Summoning spells in a single battle or anything, so it seemed reasonable that they might have a higher mana cost. But it was bizarre that scrolls which produced no effect at all would drain so much power from Fitz. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that we were trying to summon things from a different world.

"I'm sorry, Rudeus. I have to protect Princess Ariel, so I don't think I can help with this... I need to keep some mana in reserve just in case..."

"Yeah, of course. That makes total sense."

For some reason, Fitz seemed a little gloomy lately. Maybe he was feeling down about all this. He did seem to have some confidence in his talents as a magician, after all. Everyone had their pride. It wasn't something I paid that much attention to, but for a young guy like him, it might feel like the most important thing in the world.

Nanahoshi didn't really talk to Master Fitz when he came along. Then again, I got the impression Fitz wasn't the biggest fan of Nanahoshi, either.

"I'm not... much use here, am I?"

Fitz's voice sounded downright dejected. I shook my head quickly. "That's not true."

“It isn’t?”

“Of course not. It’s reassuring just to have you around.”

Fitz had helped me out in many ways over the last year. Maybe he couldn’t contribute much to this particular task, but I didn’t want to send him away just because he wasn’t being useful to me. If he had something more pressing to deal with, I wasn’t going to force him to stay... but if he was thinking about leaving because he couldn’t help, I’d encourage him to reconsider. “Please keep coming here with me when you have the time, Master Fitz. We’ve been looking for answers for months now, right? Let’s keep pursuing the truth together.”

“...Sure. Thanks, Rudeus,” said Fitz, smiling bashfully.

That smile was seriously powerful. Fitz was probably only thirteen or so at the moment, but a few years down the line, he’d probably be a real lady-killer. To be perfectly honest...he was so cute that, lately, it was hard for me to not instinctively respond to him as I did to girls.

Was there something wrong with my eyes, or what? Maybe I was just awakening to a latent interest in men?

As the sun set, I headed back toward my dorm with Fitz. We’d be going our separate ways a little before the girls’ dormitory, as always.

“Oh, right. Rudeus?”

“Yes?”

“I think you can take this road now, if you want to.”

Fitz indicated the path in front of him. It led to the place where I’d been accused of stealing underwear shortly after enrolling at this university. Ever since that day, I’d been careful not to wander down into that vicinity. “Come on, Master Fitz. Are you trying to get me attacked by a shrieking horde of angry girls again?”

“Hehe. I’m not sure that’s how it would go this time. You’ve gotten kind of popular in the girls’ dorms, you know?”

“Huh? Wait, seriously? Am I the prince from the tennis club now?”

“Tennis...?”

Fitz seemed totally nonplussed. Understandable.

“Uh, well,” he continued, “People are saying that you’re actually a gentleman. You beat up on the bad guys, but you never hurt the normal students, right? I mean, you’re strong enough to take down the Demon King, and *he* beat all those beastfolk warriors easily, but when the girls surrounded you and made all sorts of threats, you didn’t do anything to them.”

He had to be making this up, right? I’d heard the way people whispered about me in the dining hall. I definitely didn’t have a fan club.

“Hehe. They were all scared of you at first, of course. But Linia and Pursena went around telling them, *Our boss is a nice guy, mew! He never picks on weaklings!*”

As he imitated Linia’s voice, Fitz put his hands up where her cat ears would be. How can I put this? It was cute. Unfairly cute. Something spooky and mysterious was happening down around my groin.

“After that, their opinion of you improved really fast. I mean, your clothing’s a little shabby, but your face is kind of handsome, and some girls like the gloomy look. Oh, and you’re not a pushy jerk, even though you’re really powerful.”

Hmm. Those two must have done some seriously good work out here. From the way Fitz described it, they hadn’t mentioned that whole “impotence” thing, either. *I should treat Pursena to a nice steak sometime soon. What about Linia, though? I don’t even know what she wants. Status? Honor? Cash?*

“Of course, there are some girls who are still afraid of you. Like Goliade, for example.”

“Ah, right. That makes sense. She was at the head of that group on my first day, after all. And I sort of accidentally intimidated her just the other day.”

“Really? Well, Linia and Pursena pester her about it every time they see her, too.”

Hm. That might explain why she’d reacted so strongly when I tried to say hello. “You don’t intervene or anything, Master Fitz?”

“Nope. I mean, it’s her own fault, really. She’s the one who decided you were the bad guy based on nothing at all. Maybe she’ll learn something from this.”

Wow. Fitz could be harsh when he wanted to. I could understand where he was coming from, but bullying wasn’t the answer.

“I don’t think she meant badly. Try not to harass her too much, okay? I’d appreciate it if you passed that message on to Linia and Pursena, also.”

My voice came out sterner than I’d intended. Fitz held up his hands in a placating gesture, looking a little flustered. “Nobody’s *harassing* her, Rudeus! It’s more like they tease her every so often. I don’t think she’s scared or anything, just a little exasperated.”

It was kind of hard to imagine someone as physically intimidating as Goliade being the kid everyone messed with... but in any case, a running joke like that could easily turn into actual bullying, so we still had to be careful here.

“Okay. As long as it’s all in good fun, that’s fine. But for the record, I’m not holding a grudge or anything. Could you keep an eye on things and make sure they don’t take it too far?”

“You really are a nice guy, Rudeus. Sure. I’ll let Goliade know, too.”

That last part might not be necessary. The last thing I needed was her sending me a pair of underwear as a token of her gratitude.

“Hehehe...” With another shy smile, Fitz started walking off down the road, while I stayed back at the crossroads.

After three steps or so, however, he turned around to look at me. “Uhm... like I said, it really is okay for you to come this way now. If you want to.”

“That’s all right,” I said, putting on my best cool-guy expression. “If I’ve managed to earn myself a decent reputation here, I’d better not ruin it by strutting down the road like I own the place.”

“Huh? Uh, r-right. Sure. I guess that sounds like your style...” Stumbling a little over his words, Fitz covered his mouth with one hand. Was he trying not to laugh? Maybe the cool-guy face still needed some work. People were always telling me that my smiles were kind of disturbing, but I’d been trying my best to

improve them. “Okay then, Rudeus. I’ll see you later.”

“Right. See you soon.”

With that, the two of us went our separate ways. For some reason, though, Fitz looked a little sad as he walked away.

After eating dinner, I gave Julie her daily magic lesson in Zanoba’s room.

Julie was a studious, clever kid who absorbed new information like a sponge. She was also rather dexterous, and could use her fingers to do precision work when her magic failed her. Not to be crass or anything, but Zanoba had gotten a real bargain when he picked her up.

Still, this was only her first year in training. Her mana capacity was just too low for sustained work, and her accuracy wasn’t up to par either. Although she was skillful with her hands, she’d only just started to practice with sculpting tools, so she was still awkward with them. Teaching her the ropes was going to be a long-term project.

While giving Julie explanations and advice, I worked on my own figurines as well. Lately, I’d started on a 1/8 scale figure of Master Fitz. But since he always wore layers and a bulky cloak, it was a little hard for me to imagine the exact shape of his body. Most of the elves I’d met were very slender, with almost nothing in the way of body fat... I could work on that assumption. The biggest problem, though, was how to deal with his private parts. I was seriously conflicted. I didn’t want to put anything in between his legs, but he might get mad at me if I depicted him as a girl. And I really wanted to show him the figurine after it was done, too.

“If you’d like, Master, I could sneak up on him when he least expects it and rip off his clothes for you,” offered Zanoba generously.

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

Incidentally, Zanoba was currently working on a Red Wyrms figurine with my guidance and advice. The component parts of this figure were all relatively large, so it was a good project for him. Still, he wasn’t the best with his hands, so progress was slow. We’d have to take it step by step.

Before I went to sleep, I took some time to read.

Today I was working on *Sig's Summoning*, the book I'd borrowed from Nanahoshi. It was the story of a witch named Sig, who had summoned many fearsome Fiends for various reasons. In the end, she used an enormous offering and a huge amount of mana to call forth a creature that was stronger than she was, which promptly killed and ate her. Her student, bitterly lamenting this tragedy, swore an oath to never summon anything beyond his ability to control. There was a moral to the story and everything. It felt a little bit like a fairy tale.

If someone like me, who had more mana than he knew what to do with, were to summon the strongest creature that he could, there was a good chance something too powerful and dangerous to handle would show up. That was an important takeaway, at least. I'd have to start slow with this stuff, and make sure I understood the risks before I did anything too dramatic.

Still, the book didn't have any concrete details on how the Fiends were summoned, or the nature of the magic circles that the witch used. There wasn't much to *study* in it, really...

And so, another typical day at the University of Magic came to an end. I still hadn't found any means of curing my condition. It almost felt like I'd missed my chance and moved on to the next part of my story by meeting Nanahoshi. Maybe the Man-God's prophecy had left me too optimistic. Maybe I should have searched more urgently for an answer, and tried all sorts of things...

As it happened, though, my worries proved to be unfounded. Shortly after this very day, things moved quickly toward an unexpected resolution.

Chapter 8:

Clueless, but Perceptive

WINTER HAD ARRIVED, and the city of Sharia in the Kingdom of Ranoa was covered in snow. Thanks to the city's famous magic implements, the roads and major pathways were kept clear, but massive piles of snow quickly built up to the sides and behind the main school building.

Not long after this season began, a letter found its way to me. It was from a certain Soldat Heckler, S-ranked adventurer and head of the party Stepped Leader, and it informed me that Soldat had just arrived in town. Apparently, there was some kind of clan conference taking place here. Thunderbolt, the clan Stepped Leader belonged to, had been officially summoned to this city to fight the Demon King Badigadi. But when that request was cancelled prior to their arrival, they ended up hanging around in town for some time anyway, and eventually decided to hold their yearly clan meeting here. Every winter, they took two or three months to talk things over and make plans for the future.

Soldat was an S-ranked adventurer and a member of the clan leadership. Choosing not to attend the conference wasn't an option, so he'd been forced to come all the way to the Kingdom of Ranoa. The man didn't get along too well with his clan's leader, and he'd honestly been dreading this. He was convinced he had a couple long, dreary months ahead of him. But then, on his way up here, he remembered that his old buddy Quagmire happened to be staying in this city. Since fate had brought us back together, we might as well take the chance to reconnect. Thus, he sent me this letter inviting me to catch up over a meal.

The idea appealed to me as well. Soldat was a good guy, and I owed him a lot. He had a past with Elinalise, so I felt like it might be a little awkward introducing him to her devoted new boyfriend...but he was made of tougher stuff than me. He'd probably get over it easily enough.

With that decided, I let Nanahoshi know that I'd be taking a break from our experiments on the next day off. I invited Fitz to join me but he frowned and

shook his head. “Sorry, I’ve got something else that afternoon. I’m guarding Princess Ariel.”

The life of a bodyguard wasn’t easy. Everybody else might be off for the day, but he was on duty from dawn to dusk. Talk about a slave to the machine.

No, no. I was being rude to Master Fitz. He was just devoted to his work. In any case, I couldn’t ask him to ditch his responsibilities. It was a pity he couldn’t make it, but that’s just how things went sometimes. It seemed only Elinalise, Cliff, and I were going to meet Soldat.

When the day came, the three of us walked over to the Adventurers’ Guild together. The roads in town were clear enough, but their surface was still white with a trampled layer of snow. The stuff was removed regularly throughout the day, but often the snowstorms grew more intense at night, and the city’s magical snow removal couldn’t keep up.

“Hey! Are you even listening to me, Rudeus?”

“What? Of course I’m listening.”

For the last few minutes, Cliff had been boasting about his plans for his own research. He’d been studying curses intensively for some time now, with the ultimate goal of lifting Elinalise’s. But curses had been around since ancient times, and were the subject of ongoing study throughout history, so lifting one wasn’t as easy as you might hope. For all of Cliff’s bravado, six months of dedicated research hadn’t yet brought him any major successes.

“Isn’t it tough, working that hard with nothing to show for it?”

“I’m not worried in the slightest,” said Cliff, his voice full of genuine confidence. “I’m a genius, so I’ll figure something out eventually!”

You had to admire the guy. I knew there were some things I’d never accomplish no matter how hard I tried; I probably couldn’t have motivated myself to slam repeatedly against a brick wall like that. Smashing your way into a whole new frontier nobody had ever reached before really was something only a “genius” could ever hope to do.

“Still, if you know anything about curses, I hope you’ll share your knowledge with me.”

“Hm...?”

I paused a moment to think this over. I felt like I’d heard the word *curses* pop up quite a few times during my journey from the Demon Continent to this city. “Uh, let’s see...”

Where had I heard it, exactly? Curses, curses... for some reason, the sound of the word made me want to cringe in fear. That was probably because Orsted had a few of them. It was the Man-God who’d told me that, right?

Come to think of it, I’d heard the Demon-God Laplace was cursed as well. He’d supposedly transferred his into the spears he gave the Superd, dooming them to centuries of persecution.

“Well, I’ve heard that Laplace once transferred his own curse into a number of objects, and used them to pass it onto a certain tribe of demons.”

“Objects...?”

“Right. To be specific, the spears the Superd used during the Laplace War. Thanks to the curse on those weapons, they lost their sanity and ended up getting a reputation as mindless killers.”

Cliff opened his eyes wide. “What? I’ve never heard that before! Is that actually true?!”

“Well, I only heard it secondhand, so I can’t say for sure.”

Was it the Man-God who’d told me that as well? Yeah, that sounded right. It was probably safe to take him at his word on this one. I couldn’t see what he’d stand to gain by lying to me about it.

“Either way, that is a most intriguing concept. I didn’t know it was possible to transfer a curse into an object.” Cliff put his hand to his chin and nodded thoughtfully, apparently pondering the idea.

“I don’t know *how* you’d do it, though. Sorry.”

“That’s all right. Just knowing that it’s been done before is very helpful in itself.”

Had anybody other than Laplace even pulled it off, though? It seemed like the sort of evil trick you'd expect a Demon God to use, but it wouldn't have surprised me if there was some ancient taboo against messing around with that sort of thing.

That said... Blessed and Cursed children were supposedly the exact same thing, right? Maybe there was some precedent for trying to move a blessing into a different vessel, at least. "Hmm. Cliff, do you know if anyone's ever tried to transfer a blessing, rather than a curse?"

"Hm? What do the Blessed have to do with anything?" said Cliff, tilting his head curiously.

Strange. It felt like we weren't working from the same starting point here. "Uh, well, Blessed Children are the same as Cursed ones, right? They're all born with something strange about their mana, which gives them odd powers. The only difference is whether the effect happens to be positive or negative."

"...That's news to me."

I looked over to Elinalise for backup, but she was also looking at me in surprise. Evidently neither of them had heard this before. Maybe it wasn't widely known? I seemed to remember someone telling me about it really casually, though...

Wait, that was the Man-God too.

All of this was Man-God information, wasn't it? That guy needed to stop dropping obscure arcane knowledge on me like it was nothing.

"Still, this is all very interesting... Objects, eh? Very interesting indeed... Perhaps I could try that..." Cliff was squirming with excitement. He looked convinced that I'd handed him an important clue. To be honest, I think he was swallowing everything I told him a little too readily, but whatever.

Either way, it felt like curses had some connection to the so-called gods of this world. The Man-God, the Dragon God, *and* the Demon God all had at least one. And then there were the Blessed Children, who were supposedly "divine" somehow. Was there some meaningful connection here, or was it just a coincidence?

“Thank you, Rudeus. I think you’ve helped me hit on something!”

Cliff’s face was full of optimism and energy. While he was at it, maybe he could find a way to fix the “curse” afflicting my private parts.

“Hey, Quagmire! Long time no see!”

Soldat and his buddies greeted me with easy smiles; within a few minutes, we’d made our way to a nearby tavern and settled down around a large table.

When they heard about Cliff and Elinalise’s relationship, the members of Stepped Leader were...shocked, to put it mildly. “What the hell?” someone piped up, stifling a laugh. “Are you seriously getting married? And here I thought you were a slut for life.”

Cliff exploded with anger, obviously. But Soldat and the others just found that hilarious, which drove Cliff to new heights of fury. For a moment, I thought things might come to blows. Fortunately, Elinalise somehow talked her boyfriend down while simultaneously changing the subject. The woman was seriously impressive sometimes, especially when it came to anger management.

Come to think of it, I’d never once seen her get angry or break down in tears. She’d gotten sulky a few times, sure, but never seriously upset. Paul was the only person she’d ever mentioned hating. What the hell had my old man *done* to her, anyway?

While I pondered all of this, the topic somehow shifted to my outfit. I’d worn my school uniform, as usual. “It’s funny seein’ you in that outfit, Quagmire! Makes you look just like another random rookie!”

Some students from the University of Magic made a habit of coming over to the Adventurers’ Guild still wearing their uniforms, with at most a cloak thrown on above them. Almost all of them were rookies at rank F or E, so they didn’t interact directly with Soldat’s party very often. But sometimes, they’d come up begging for an invitation to Thunderbolt.

“Hmm. Well, if I’m a rookie now, why don’t I act like it and carry your luggage for you?”

“Hah! Nice try, kid. Nobody touches our stuff but us!”

“Right, right. I seem to remember you hauling back all the goodies from that stray dragon...”

“Ah man, that was one profitable day...”

It was kind of fun reminiscing about this stuff. When I’d taken down that Red Wurm, the whole party had carried its meat and scales all the way back to town to split up equally.

“Oh, right. That reminds me, Quagmire! So we were up in the Neris Tundra the other month, and—”

From this point on, the conversation shifted from reminiscing about the past to stories of Stepped Leader’s recent adventures. Cliff still looked pretty sulky for a while, but as Soldat and the others went on, his eyes began to sparkle with excitement. Come to think of it, he’d once dreamed of becoming an adventurer, right? *I guess he is still just a teenager. It’s easy to forget, given how he usually acts.*

“—So we got outta there in one piece, at least. Anyway, it’s about time we moved to a new place, right? What’s next?”

We’d all finished our food, and the story was at an end. It seemed like a good time to find ourselves a new tavern and start *really* drinking, but... A messenger from the clan came out of nowhere just as we were leaving. “Hey, Soldat. They’ve just called another meeting.”

“What, again? Are you serious? We just had one this morning!”

“Sorry, but it’s happening. The leader’s really full of energy today, I guess.”

From the sound of things, Soldat was being called to a sudden gathering of party leaders, and declining to show up wasn’t an option. “Shit. Sorry, Quagmire. I was lookin’ forward to killing a whole day getting drunk with you, but I guess it ain’t happening this time. Let’s pick up where we left off another day, okay?”

“No problem, Soldat. Send me a message any time you’re free.”

With a firm nod, Soldat strode off down the street.

In any case, we'd lost the host of our party, so it was probably time to call it a day. It was only early afternoon, though—maybe 2:30 at the latest. If I went home now, I'd be left with a lot of time to kill. "What should we do now?" I asked, looking around the group.

"Well, actually," said Elinalise, "I was hoping we could teach Cliff a thing or two about adventuring."

"Oh yeah?"

Interesting. Elinalise must have noticed how excited her boyfriend got over Stepped Leader's stories and had decided to show off her chops as an adventurer.

"Ooh, now that sounds like fun. Gonna educate a rookie, huh?"

"Can we tag along too?"

The other members of Stepped Leader seemed to approve of the idea as well. After a little more discussion, everyone was generally on board with giving Cliff a taste of the adventuring life. The idea was to take on a request to slay an A-ranked monster and get him some *real* experience. Cliff was a little grumpy about the vaguely condescending way everyone was talking about him, but his excitement seemed to override that.

"What about you, Rudeus?" asked Elinalise.

"Well... I think I'll pass, actually." I could give Cliff some advice on how to contribute in a party with multiple mages, but somehow, I didn't think he'd want to get lectured by someone younger than him. In situations like this, it was easier to swallow your pride when everyone teaching you was older.

Also, it wasn't a great idea for me to go spend a couple days hunting down some elusive monster. If I didn't run it by Nanahoshi first, I could imagine her getting very, very cranky. Despite her self-imposed isolation, the girl seemed weirdly hungry for company. She got sulky every time I went a day or two without helping her. If she wanted to be a *real* shut-in, she needed to learn how to savor the loner lifestyle. Of course, it seemed like she missed Japan a lot, so I could understand her wanting someone to speak her native language with. But as someone who'd decided to keep living in this world, it was hard to resist

telling her to go outside more often.

“All right then. Will you let everyone know where we’re going, then?”

“Yeah, no problem. You be careful out there, Elinalise. You’ve got a beginner with you, so don’t drag him anywhere too dangerous.”

“Don’t worry, Rudeus. Unlike a certain someone, we’re not planning to go challenge a Red Wurm or a Demon King.”

It wasn’t like I’d fought Badigadi because I *wanted* to, but okay. Whatever.

After saying my goodbyes, I headed back toward the University alone. From the Adventurers’ District, that meant walking across Sharia’s central commercial plaza. As I entered the area, the tempting scent of grilled meat on sticks wafted through the air to me. I looked toward the scent, and found that a number of merchants had set up outdoor stalls, despite the snow everywhere. *Must be rough doing business out here in this cold, man...*

Still, I had some free time to burn. I could head back to the dorms, but there wasn’t much to do there except studying, practicing, and making figurines. Maybe it would have been smarter to just tag along with Cliff and company, instead of overthinking it. Too late now, though.

“Well, I’m out here already. Might as well look around a little.” I aimlessly set out down the streets of the Commerce District.

I didn’t need anything in particular, but maybe I’d spot something interesting. After that discussion with Cliff, I was somewhat interested in the various kinds of magic items. Those cursed spears Laplace gave the Superd were presumably magical implements of some sort, after all. I hadn’t given much thought to magic items up until now, since the ones on sale were all incredibly expensive. But Fitz was apparently equipped with some, and Nanahoshi had a few handy artifacts of her own. Sharia was basically the hometown of the Magicians’ Guild. Maybe I’d find a few interesting things for sale here. I wasn’t planning to actually *purchase* them, but a little window-shopping never hurt anyone.

Incidentally, though I’d originally got the two categories confused, magic items and magical implements were two distinct things. Magical implements

were man-made objects with magic circles engraved on them. When the user chanted a specific incantation, their mana would flow through these, producing some effect. As long as the user's mana wasn't exhausted, they could be reused indefinitely. Magic items, on the other hand, were objects infused with their own supply of mana. You activated them through some sort of gesture or action. They could only produce their effects a few times per day, but their internal mana supply would regenerate over the course of several hours.

Basically, magical implements could be used quickly many times in a row, but they cost you mana, whereas magic items had limited uses, but didn't require anything from you. Magic items were generally considered to be more practical and useful, since you didn't need to expend your precious mana or memorize an incantation to use them. But most of those in existence had been found deep inside various labyrinths, and their capabilities were kind of random. As a result, those with powerful effects tended to fetch astronomical prices. Those boots Fitz wore, for example, were probably worth considerably more than every piece of property I owned combined. As a side note, though, some of the weapons known as "magic swords" were man-made but also had the qualities of a magic item.

Of course, I had more than enough mana to go around, so magic implements were also alright by me. Even ones that used too much mana to be practical for most people might prove useful to me. I was kind of hoping I might stumble across something like that, misclassified as a "defective" product, if I searched the shops here thoroughly enough.

But then, as I was walking down some random street, I noticed two familiar faces. "Hm?"

Luke and Fitz were chatting with each other in front of a clothing store of some sort. Fitz was looking at some trinket in the show window with a delighted expression on his face. Luke was smiling too, although he also looked slightly exasperated. He was already carrying a large shopping bag in one hand. It almost looked like they were out on a date.

Didn't Fitz say he's guarding Ariel today? Is it okay for them to be hanging out here like this? Well, whatever. Can't hurt to say hello, at least...

“Good afternoon. I wasn’t expecting to run into you two out here.”

“What th— Rudeus?!”

Luke spun around, his face stiffening in shock. As always, the man didn’t seem to be especially fond of me. I was doing my best not to tread on their turf or anything, but I guess I’d gotten myself too much attention lately. That was probably a source of some irritation for them. All I really cared about was staying on good terms with Fitz, though.

“...Hm?”

Somehow, Fitz seemed...different today. Was he dressed differently, maybe? No. This was something else. I couldn’t seem to put my finger on it. “Master Fitz, did you change up your look or something?”

As soon as the words left my mouth, Fitz twitched and looked at me with an expression of pure shock on his face. Was it the way he held himself, maybe? His body also seemed a little more...rounded out, somehow.

As I continued to study him, Fitz turned his face away from mine. An instant later, Luke slipped himself in between the two of us. “Hello there, Rudeus. What are you doing here? Did you need something from us?”

It felt like he was hiding Fitz from me... like an overprotective boyfriend or something. His tone was calm, and although his gaze was sharp, it wasn’t openly hostile. Still, there was definitely some tension in his voice. Had I come across them at an inconvenient moment?

Were the two of them *actually* out on a date? Maybe Luke actually swung both ways, and the two of them had an arrangement? It would make sense for them to try and keep that a secret. There might be something of a stir if everyone found out that Ariel’s guardians were lovers.

I didn’t seriously think that was the case, of course. But for some reason, the thought still made me flinch. “Not really. I just saw the two of you and thought I’d say hello... Uhm, Master Fitz?”

Fitz hadn’t even glanced in my direction for a while now. ...*Huh? Is he giving me the cold shoulder? But why, though? Was it something I said?*

“I see. Thank you for the greetings. I have to remind you, though, that Fitz isn’t supposed to speak while he’s guarding the Princess. I’m sure you understand, yes?”

His words were superficially friendly, but Luke was trying to chase me off. One thing was clear, at least. I’d *definitely* come by at an inconvenient moment. Still, it seemed really harsh of Fitz to ignore me completely like this...

Fitz still wasn’t looking at me. Well, no. He *was* shooting me glances now and then, but they weren’t exactly friendly. I could tell he was frowning. His body language made it very clear that he was waiting impatiently for me to leave. I can be a bit oblivious at times, but even I could see that he was snubbing me.

“What’s the matter?” asked Luke calmly.

“It’s nothing. Please excuse me.”

I turned and walked off quietly. I don’t think I gave anything away on the surface, but on the inside, this was hitting me hard. Being shunned like that by Fitz hurt so badly that I could hardly even think straight.

I’d lost all interest in window-shopping. It was time to go home.

The road in front of me was covered in a coating of slightly grimy snow. It was coming down again, of course.

The wind felt very cold today.

Slowly, I made my way back to the University campus.

I thought things over at some length as I walked, but I couldn’t come up with any explanation for why Fitz had treated me like that. As far I recalled, I hadn’t done anything to upset him recently. I kind of wanted to talk to someone. Or maybe just vent.

Zanoba was off at the Magicians’ Guild today, helping them with their research into Blessed Children. He’d probably taken Julie with him. Linia and Pursena were technically an option, but I wasn’t too optimistic that they’d take this seriously. It would probably end up with them jumping to conclusions and teasing me ruthlessly. Elinalise and Cliff weren’t an option, of course. Badigadi

didn't seem to be on campus today, either. And Nanahoshi... kind of had her hands full with her own problems.

I couldn't think of anyone else to turn to. I didn't have that many friends.

In the end, I headed straight over to the library. At times like these, it was best to sit somewhere quiet and lose yourself in a stupid book for a couple hours. A tale of heroism or adventure might be nice right about now. Had any tales about Kishirika and Badigadi been turned into a book? That was the sort of thing I wanted right now: the tale of two peerless warriors, smacking pitiful magicians around as they cackled with laughter...

I stepped into the library, nodding slightly at the guard. We'd never had an actual conversation, but I'd been here often enough that he let me pass automatically. I paused for a moment to brush the snow off my clothes, used a silent spell to quickly dry myself off, and then headed for my usual seat with a small sigh of relief.

The building was, as I'd expected, nearly empty. There weren't many students here who spent their days off in the library. In this world, reading wasn't that big a thing in general... the literacy rate wasn't especially high, after all.

"...Huh?"

Somehow, Fitz was in here. He was sitting at the table we usually shared, reading a book with his head propped in his hands and a mildly bored expression on his face.

"Oh! Hi there, Rudeus." When he noticed me approaching, he looked up with his usual bashful smile. "Back already? I thought you'd be staying out later. Did you meet your friend, at least?"

"Uh, yeah..." I sat across the table from Fitz, and studied his face carefully. He seemed... normal. His clothing and his mannerisms were the same as always.

There was something very strange about this. I'd run into him outside, and then headed straight over to the library. The path I'd followed here was basically the shortest possible route. How the hell was he sitting here right now?

"Uh, what's wrong? Is there something on my face?" said Fitz, running his

hand over it anxiously.

This was the other thing, right here. Why was he acting like this? He'd snubbed me to my face five minutes ago, but now he seemed totally relaxed and trusting.

"Why did you ignore me like that earlier?"

The question popped out of my mouth before I could stop myself. Fitz's smile froze in place. After a moment, he carefully assumed a serious expression. "Well, you know... I'm actually not supposed to talk to anyone when I'm on guard duty. I'm Silent Fitz and all, you know? My voice is kind of childish, so people don't take me seriously when I speak. When I'm in public, particularly when I'm guarding Princess Ariel, she wants me to keep quiet as much as possible."

"Is that right? I didn't see Princess Ariel around, though."

"Oh, she was inside one of the nearby stores. It's a place we know we can trust. Luke and I aren't her only guards, either. The others were keeping watch at her side while we kept an eye on things from a distance. Uhm, don't tell anyone else about that, though."

Fitz's words came out smoothly, without a moment's hesitation. Almost as if it was something he'd rehearsed in advance.

"I see. Well, I'm sorry for getting in your way while you were working, then."

"Oh, that's okay! I'm sorry, too. I wasn't trying to be rude or anything."

I was starting to get an idea about what was actually going on here. I couldn't be completely sure, but...it was likely Princess Ariel had somehow taken on Fitz's appearance as a disguise. There was probably a magic item or implement involved somehow. She hadn't spoken to me because her voice wasn't affected by its powers. Maybe the color of her eyes didn't change, either? That would explain why Fitz always kept his eyes hidden. Otherwise, it would be a dangerous giveaway when Ariel needed to disguise herself as him.

Yeah. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to fit. The reason "Fitz" had shunned me earlier was simple enough. I was friendly enough with the actual person that I would have seen through her attempt to imitate him.

Right. I hadn't done anything to make him angry, after all. Seemed like a good explanation to me. I'd take it.

"That's a relief, though. I thought you hated me now, Master Fitz. It got me really worried there for a minute."

"Ahaha... Don't be ridiculous, Rudeus. I couldn't hate you if I tried..."

Fitz scratched at the back of his ears in embarrassment. He made that gesture all the time, but lately it got my heart beating faster every time I saw it. Why did such an adorable person have to be a guy, anyway?

...Assuming he really was. I still wanted to believe otherwise.

Fitz had been on my mind a lot lately.

As always, we only ran into each other once every few days. And it wasn't like we had that much to talk about when we did. But even so, I couldn't seem to stop thinking about him. Sometimes I'd catch myself remembering the little gestures he made. The way he scratched his ears. The way he stretched out when he'd finished up some task. At other times, I thought about his scent—the way I'd catch a whiff of it when he walked past me in the hall. Above all else, I thought about his smile. That bashful little grin of his just wouldn't get out of my head.

It was no different on the days when I didn't see him. Whenever I saw a crowd of students, I'd find myself searching it for him.

In my defense, he *was* in the middle of a crowd more often than not. Princess Ariel and her retainers were famous in this school. When they went around on student council business, a handful of them often attracted a large crowd of onlookers. And even among that eye-catching group of people, Fitz in particular got a *lot* of attention. Silent Fitz rarely spoke in public, but he was one of the Princess's most trusted guards, and one of the most skilled mages in the entire University. It wasn't surprising that people would be interested in him.

I was one of them at this point. Whenever I did see him, my eyes always seemed to follow him.

I recognized what all these symptoms meant, of course. I was in love. I'd fallen for a guy. Assuming he really was one, which I wasn't totally convinced of.

This seemed like an important question. Depending on his gender, I'd have to come to terms with the fact that I was gay, or possibly bisexual. Not that it really mattered in the short term, given that my "condition" still hadn't improved.

I was still kind of hoping he turned out to be a girl, though.

Once I finally managed to admit my feelings to myself, I set out to gather some information on this subject.

The easiest and most ethical approach would be to ask the guy himself, but that was going to be my last resort. For all I knew, he might be self-conscious about that charmingly girly face of his.

I started off by heading to the Teachers' Building. There were presumably student records on file in the offices here, with the actual truth recorded in them. I expected them to have some policy about protecting the students' privacy, but maybe I could convince them to help me out just this once.

After some hunting around, I managed to find the professor in charge of the fourth years, who was serving as Fitz's advisor. I put the question to him straight. "Can you tell me what Master Fitz's gender is, Professor?"

"I can't give you any information about Fitz."

"Are you sure? Couldn't you bend the rules a little, just this once?"

The professor cringed slightly as I spoke. Apparently, he found me somewhat terrifying. These days a lot of students went pale every time they saw me, but I'd hardly expected this from a member of the faculty. Maybe I could use this to my advantage. "If you really can't be flexible, maybe I'll shoot a nice thick Stone Cannon up your backside and see if that helps..."

"Eee! Wait, I... I..."

"Hmm? Maybe you'd prefer a vigorous blast of water instead?"

"...I-I'm very sorry, but I simply can't tell you anything!"

The man proved to be a stubborn nut to crack. It was nice to see the faculty here didn't give in to threats, at least. "I was only joking, Professor."

Giving up on the simple intimidation approach, I headed off to find Jenius instead. If I couldn't get answers from the guys at the bottom, I'd go straight to the top instead.

I found our beloved vice-principal in the midst of a spirited battle with a mountain of paperwork. Given the size of this university, there were probably plenty of forms to sign off on in any given day. I felt a bit bad about interrupting him, but it wasn't like this should take too long. "Hello, Vice Principal Jenius."

"Ah. Good day, Rudeus."

"You seem fairly busy, I have to say..."

"Oh, not at all. Thanks to you keeping our problem children under control, my life's gotten much easier of late."

Problem children? Was he talking about Badigadi and Zanoba, maybe...? Not that they were really *children* in most senses of the word.

"In any case, what can I do for you today?"

"Actually, I wanted to ask you for some information about Master Fitz."

The Vice Principal's eyebrows twitched. "I'm terribly sorry, but the people calling the shots gave us some rather strict instructions regarding him and his employer."

"Is that so?" I was slightly tempted to tell him that I didn't give a damn, but something about the exhaustion on his face made me reconsider. The administration had their own problems, clearly. They might have secured themselves crucial support of some kind by accepting the second princess and her retinue. "Could you at least tell me what Fitz's gender is, though?"

"His gender...? Hmm..." Jenius offered me one of his famous awkward smiles. These really were his specialty. For about a minute, he thought over my request. A minute could feel like a very long time when you were waiting in total silence, though.

"Fitz... is a man."

In the end, that was the extent of his reply.

Ultimately, I still wasn't sure about Fitz's gender.

Jenius had backed up the official story, but he was clearly under some pressure, and he'd thought it over for a weirdly long time. It was hard to say if he was truthful with me or not. Of course, he'd automatically used the pronouns "him" and "his" for Fitz before he even heard my question... did that mean he'd told me the truth after all?

No, there was no point over-analyzing it. I didn't have the evidence to make up my mind either way.

Without realizing it, I'd made my way over to the library and to the table where I always worked with Fitz. I sat down and let out a soft little sigh. What was the point of finding out about his gender, anyway? Could I even bring myself to tell him how I felt? Could I tell someone that I had feelings for them? Me, of all people?

It was good to get these things off your chest, in theory... but the idea felt kind of wrong. I wasn't approaching this the right way. First off, what did I even want to happen after I confessed?

That was important. Very important, in fact.

I couldn't take things too far with my body in this condition. My crane didn't want to move, but it wasn't like I had a shortage of gasoline. My brain was full of dirty, evil thoughts at all times. At some point, I wouldn't be able to restrain myself. But I wouldn't be able to *do* anything when I tried. That just sounded like torture.

Right. Let's put aside the pretty words that people always throw around. No more euphemisms about my "feelings."

I want to sleep with Fitz. I want to do all sorts of things with him. I want to experiment. I want to try a little this, a little that... well, maybe that's taking things too far...

"God, I wish I could jerk off, at least..."

Just as I muttered these words to myself, a hand dropped to my shoulder. I turned and looked upward, and found myself face to face with Fitz. “Jerk what off?” he said, tilting his head curiously to one side.

“Waaaagh!” I leapt up violently, tangling my feet in the legs of my chair.

“Whoa! Watch out!” Fitz reached out and grabbed me by the hand, trying to steady me. But he wasn’t strong enough to pull me back.

“Aaaah!”

We ended up falling together, still tangled up with the chair, pushing back the table as we went.

And when we hit the ground... Fitz landed on top of me. I was lying on my back, holding him in my arms.

Fitz’s face was very close to mine.

Thanks to those huge sunglasses, I couldn’t fully make out his expression. But I could see the bridge of his nose and his slender lips only inches away. I felt the warmth and weight of his body on top of me. Not that he weighed very much at all.

A pleasant smell filled my nostrils. It was Fitz’s scent, at a greater intensity than I’d ever experienced it before. I could have spent a whole day savoring it.

My arms had somehow wrapped themselves around his hips and bottom as we hit the ground. His waist was slender and feminine. His bottom wasn’t exactly plump, but it was *soft*. The sensation alone had my naughty little guy standing...at attention...

Holy shit.

“Ah! S-Sorry, Rudeus!” Flushing bright red, Fitz quickly tried to push himself up and off me.

“Master Fitz...you really are a girl, aren’t you?”



He looked at me in shock, then gaped wordlessly for a few seconds before finally managing to shake his head. “N-No! I told you, I’m a man!”

Jumping up to his feet, he...or she...backed away from me for a few paces, then turned around and sprinted for the exit. Fitz had left a number of books behind on the table. Maybe she’d been picking up some reference documents for a class, like on the day of our first meeting here.

And she was definitely a girl.

But there was something even *more* important on my mind right now.

“I got a boner...”

After three long years of silent slumber, my little corporal was finally saluting the flag once again. After all that frustration and disappointment, just touching Fitz had gotten me aroused.

Gingerly, I reached down with one hand to make sure I wasn’t just hallucinating. “...Wow. It’s not a dream, is it?”

In this moment, I finally understood the meaning of the Man-God’s advice. *This* was why he’d told me to poke around the library.

That said...I’d known from the very start that Fitz was hiding things from me. Whatever his gender, if he was concealing anything, it had to be for a good reason. I didn’t want to blow his cover with my theories and my blundering.

I was in love with Fitz. Fitz wanted to be known as a man. Would it be fair to prioritize my feelings under those circumstances? Or my desires, for that matter?

Obviously not.

I had no right to expose her secrets. If anything, I had a responsibility to respect her wishes and help her keep up the act. That felt like the only safe approach, actually. If I didn’t force myself to think that way, I was afraid I might sneak up and whisper, *I’ll keep my mouth shut, so come over to my room tonight* in her ear. That would be one hell of a way to repay her for everything she’d done for me...

‘I never thought you were such a scumbag,’ she says bitterly, getting down to

her underwear... and then, at long last...

No, no. Nooo! Bad thoughts! Very bad thoughts!

He'd...or she'd...helped me out so many times, in so many ways. It would be truly unforgivable to betray her like that. And I didn't want her thinking of me as a scumbag, either! I was a gentleman at heart, really. Sort of.

I'd just have to treat her the same way I did before. And if she ever seemed in danger of being exposed, I'd quietly step in to help out. She'd done the same for me on my first day at this school, after all, even though it had probably been a risky move for her. Complaining about the dorm's regulations could have put her on some seriously shaky ground. But even so, she'd jumped in to help me. She'd come to my rescue, though I still didn't know why.

If that situation was ever reversed, I'd have to return the favor. I'd help Fitz, just like she'd helped me.

"Wait a second, though. If Fitz is really a woman..."

At this point, my mind went off on something of a tangent, and a few memories flashed vividly through my head.

I was suddenly recalling all the dirty jokes I'd made in front of Fitz in the past. My one-liner at the slave market, the stuff I said when I captured Linia and Pursena... oh god, and that thing I made him say when he brought me my staff!

I writhed in agony for a while.

Once I'd finished up with this delightful trip down memory lane, I found that my little soldier had resumed his lifestyle as a shut-in. No matter how I urged him, he stubbornly refused to emerge. I guess he was less obnoxious about it than the old me, at least, since he didn't start pounding on the floor when I pestered him.

I'd really wanted to give the little twerp a proper jerking for the first time in years... but apparently, I was still far from being totally cured.

Oh well. At least I had reason to be hopeful now. No point rushing things. For the time being, I headed back to my room to try and fix that wonderful

sensation in my memory.

The next morning, it took a serious effort to pull my sluggish body into a sitting position. I'd been so preoccupied with my partner's brief recovery that I hadn't managed to get much sleep. The little guy in question was still pretending nothing had happened, sadly.

My mind was filled with thoughts and images of Fitz, but I didn't get so much as a twitch of a reaction from that traitor downstairs. When was he going to stop sulking and help me blow off some of the steam that was building up inside me? Maybe memories just weren't enough to please him?

I still didn't know exactly what had set him off. It might have been her scent, her voice, or the feeling of her body. Either way, something about Master Fitz was clearly the key to curing my condition. The Man-God was right on the money all along. I hadn't realized it for months, but the medicine I needed had been close at hand all along.

Still, when I slowed down to think about this rationally, one major problem still remained. How was I going to get myself a prescription?

Fitz couldn't reveal her real identity, and I didn't want to do anything that would make her uncomfortable or angry. Curing my condition was important, but so was keeping Fitz's trust. If I'd thought Fitz was a girl six months earlier, I might have courted her more aggressively, caring more about my own problem than her opinions. But now I had actual romantic feelings for her. I didn't want to repeat the mistake I'd made with Eris and get physical too early. I didn't want Fitz to walk out of my life without a word.

"I guess I'll just see where things go."

Hah. So now I was the guy who was counting on the crossdressing bodyguard of a princess to cure his impotence, huh? Sounded like an amusing concept for a show. *If you're enjoying this, Man-God, how about throwing me a tip?*

With a sardonic little smile, I rolled out of the bunk bed which I still had to myself and stretched. I couldn't suppress a loud, long yawn; this was definitely going to be a long day.

I walked over to the empty bucket I'd left in one corner of the room and filled it up with warm water. The face that stared up at me from inside was relatively handsome. I'd inherited a mixture of Paul's bad-boy womanizer look and my mother's softer features. By the standards of my old world, at least, the result wasn't bad, although it wasn't what people in this one thought of as perfect. No matter how many times I looked at this face, I couldn't think of it as mine, but I'd gotten used to that by now. It was a better one than what I had last time, and that was good enough for me.

Did it appeal to Fitz at all, though? That was the important thing.

Okay, stop. There's no point even thinking about this. Fitz was a man, and I wasn't going to do anything to him. That was my official stance for now.

As I began to wash my face, I noticed a hint of something on my chin. When I tugged on it, my skin stretched out a little with it. It was a whisker. A single soft, downy whisker.

"Guess I'm getting to that age now, huh..."

Humans didn't age too differently in this world, from all appearances. My dad wasn't a hairy guy, so it had taken a while for me to develop anything on my face, but I had hair growing in the other places you'd expect by now.

I wasn't sure how that worked for people from the other races, like Fitz. Were elves different somehow? Did he have hair down there yet?

Hm...?

Something about that thought nagged at me, for some reason. I felt like I was on the verge of remembering something, but it just wasn't coming to me.

"Ah, whatever." With a shrug, I shaved off the stray hair on my chin.

Two days passed without any progress whatsoever.

I had no contact with Fitz at all in that time. I wasn't going to risk doing anything suspicious, like trying to track him down. Nothing to see here, officer. Everything was the same as always.

On the third morning after the incident, however, I found Luke waiting for me

in the hallway of the boys' dormitory. I didn't panic. I'd been expecting something like this to happen eventually. "Hello there, Master Luke," I said as brightly as possible. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

Luke didn't seem too chipper himself. Something about the way he looked at me suggested he wasn't in the best of moods. "I need to speak to you regarding Fitz."

As expected. But I had my response to this line of questioning worked out in advance. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh? Is that a fact?" Luke's tone was challenging. Was he looking for more information on what had taken place the other day?

...Maybe he thought I wasn't sure about Fitz's gender, one way or the other. I had blurted out my thoughts when we were lying on the ground together, but she'd never confirmed the fact that she was female. And it wasn't like I'd grabbed her breasts...or stripped her naked, Son Goku-style. They might be hoping they could still hide the truth from me if they pushed the issue hard enough. And I was fine with letting things go in that direction, of course.

Still, was it really *that* much of an issue if I knew Fitz's secret? Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I was technically a Greyrat. I'd cut my ties with the Boreas family at this point, but I didn't know what they thought of Paul. Whatever the case might be, it seemed like a good idea to express my intentions very clearly now that I had the chance.

"Just to reiterate, Luke... I have no intention of making enemies of you people. And I don't know anything about Fitz, or any secrets he might be hiding."

"...You're willing to pretend not to know anything? Why?"

"Well, I'm not connected to the Boreas or the Notos families at this point. And more importantly, it would be a little scary to get on Princess Ariel's bad side."

A look of pure surprise flashed across Luke's handsome face, and he fell silent. Had I said something dangerous? Maybe it would have been smarter to keep up the pretense that I literally didn't know a thing. "Anyway, that's all I've got to say."

"Right. Sorry to have bothered you..."

With this final exchange, I walked off and left Luke standing in the hallway.

After finishing up my classes that same day, I headed over to Nanahoshi's rooms for our regularly scheduled experiments. For some reason, though, I found Fitz standing just outside.

As I recalled, she wasn't supposed to come help me out again for a few more days, until she had a break from her duties as the Princess's bodyguard. She wasn't off-duty today; I was fairly sure of that. But she'd showed up anyway. She'd come to Nanahoshi's lab, rather than sticking with the Princess.

Presumably, there was a reason for that. And presumably, it had something to do with certain recent events: my close encounter with Fitz the other day, and my conversation with Luke this morning. Fitz and Ariel had no reason to take me at my word. If anything, they had plenty of good reasons to distrust me. That was a natural consequence of uncovering someone's secrets.

In other words, Fitz was probably here to keep an eye on me. Maybe she wanted to confirm if I really meant the things I'd said to Luke.

Heh. I'm too damn clever today, man.

"..."

I'd been silent for a while, and Fitz's face was visibly tense. After a few minutes of this, Nanahoshi muttered, "What is this? Did you two have a fight or something?" while drawing up a new magic circle.

"N-No! We didn't have a *fight* or anything!"

Fitz's response was hilariously awkward. He really was adorable when he got flustered. Still, it was obvious that he still doubted me. How were you supposed to earn someone's trust in a situation like this, anyway?

Maybe I would've been better off just bending the knee and offering tribute to Ariel. All I could really think of was to buy him a nice box of pastries or something...but given how cautious they were about me right now, that might backfire badly.

"Look, I don't really care either way," said Nanahoshi, her voice distinctly

irritated. “Just don’t drag me into your nonsense.”

The girl had a strict policy of avoiding trouble as long as she was stuck in this world. Fitz was deeply involved with Asuran royalty, and Nanahoshi clearly didn’t want to get mixed up in any conflict between the two of us. Of course, if she went around talking *that* rudely to people, she’d probably make some trouble of her own eventually. But I was basically the only person she interacted with right now, so maybe it wasn’t that big a deal.

Well, whatever. If she didn’t want to get involved in this world, that was her call. I didn’t really have any right to an opinion on the matter. I felt like it wouldn’t hurt for her to try and be a little more outgoing...but she was currently spending every single day frantically drawing up hundreds of magic circles. It was hard to suggest that she set aside some energy for socializing.

“...Tch.”

Normally, I carried out these experiments while chatting idly with Fitz or Nanahoshi, but today we were all silent. The only sound was the occasional click of the tongue from Nanahoshi. The atmosphere was strained, to say the least.

“...Okay, that’s it. We’re done for now.”

After a few hours of this, Nanahoshi called it a day, her voice low and tired. Once again, we’d made no real progress.

As we made our way back toward the dorms, Fitz and I still couldn’t seem to start a conversation. I wanted to talk about something. I wanted to act like I normally did. But what was I supposed to say? If I opened my mouth without thinking, I was afraid I might ask to see her naked or something.

Before I could hit on anything, we reached the fork in the road that led to the girls’ dorms.

“Hey, Rudeus...” Fitz walked a few steps ahead, then spoke to me in an oddly tense tone.

“Yes? What is it?”

Her hand, which she’d been holding to her mouth, moved downward. She

made it into a fist and squeezed it against her chest. He was obviously going to say something important. Maybe something about his gender. I braced myself as best I could.

“...Sorry. It’s nothing, actually. Bye.”

“Okay then. See you...”

Fitz looked at the ground as he turned and quickly trotted off toward his dorm. Exhaling softly, I watched him go with an unpleasant hazy feeling in my chest. I’d decided not to cause him any trouble if I could possibly avoid it, but... to be honest, this was a little hard to take.

Chapter 9:

Rain in the Forest

(Part 1)

IT WAS EVENING, but there were still three people in the student conference room.

The first was a striking beauty who turned heads everywhere she went—Ariel Anemoi Asura. The second was a sharp-faced but handsome young knight who charmed women with ease—Luke Notos Greyrat.

“...So, what was it you wanted to discuss?”

Across the desk from them was a young man with white hair, wearing sunglasses and a male school uniform. His name was Fitz. He’d brought his hands to his belly and was fiddling with his fingers anxiously.

Ariel looked at him for a long moment. But he didn’t seem inclined to speak, so she continued. “The other day, Rudeus ran into us while we were out shopping. He found ‘your’ actions rather suspicious, Fitz.”

“...”

“Not long thereafter, he threw you to the floor in the library, after which you ran off, declaring yourself to be a man. Or so the rumors have it.”

“...”

“Rudeus probably believes that to be a lie. He did get the chance to touch your body at some length, from the sound of things.”

“...”

“However, it seems he has no plans to tell anyone about your secret. He claims to be frightened of antagonizing me, but given his skills, that seems *highly* unlikely. I believe he’s simply attempting to do right by a friend. Quite admirable, really.” Ariel shot Fitz a sharp look. “The question at this point is... what are *you* going to do?”

Fitz's shoulders twitched at Ariel's harsh tone, but he made no reply.

"I do think it's all right to take your time with this," Ariel continued. "However, it's now been half a year since you made any progress at all. Can you blame me for wanting to say something?"

She waited for Fitz to reply. Thanks to the large sunglasses he wore, she couldn't see the look in his eyes. But she recognized the way he was fiddling with his fingertips. It was a tell-tale sign that he was overwhelmed, something he only did when he couldn't think of anything at all to say. If she let him keep going like this for much longer, he'd probably whimper something like *I'm sorry* or *I need a little more time* to try and postpone this conversation.

And so, Ariel pressed on. "I have to say, I've gotten rather sick of watching you dither about like this."

This wasn't actually true. Ariel enjoyed watching Fitz squirm. She was a little jealous of his feelings for Rudeus, but she certainly didn't oppose them. However, Rudeus was spending less and less time with Fitz as a result of his new friendship with Silent. And Fitz was growing more melancholy by the day. That was rather painful for her to watch.

"I think it's about time you found the courage to tell him who you really are, Fitz... or rather, *Sylphie*."

Fitz pressed "his" lips together tightly and raised his head to look at Ariel. And a moment later, he took off his large pair of sunglasses.

The face underneath them was distinctly feminine. It would have been hard to mistake it for that of a boy, in fact.

It was the face of Sylphiette, Rudeus' childhood friend.

"Princess Ariel, I..." she began, seemingly ready to speak her mind at last... but then stopped almost immediately, looking like she might burst into tears.

This was enough to tell Ariel something. Something she'd suspected vaguely for a long time. "Sylphie. This is going to be the third time I've asked you this, but... Right now, is there something that you want to do?"

There was. Yet Sylphie shook her head. What she wanted was impossible, for

two different reasons.

First of all, she was too afraid. She felt that Rudeus might have forgotten her entirely. Secondly, she cared too much about the friends in front of her. If she chose to pursue this new goal, it might mean parting ways with Ariel. That would mean betraying her and Luke—these friends who’d fought at her side, struggling to survive and realize their objective. Together, these doubts kept Sylphie silent.

But this time, Ariel didn’t take no for an answer. “Sylphie... you’ve saved my life many times,” she said, her voice soft and gentle. “If you hadn’t fallen from the sky in the gardens of the Silver Palace, I would have died on the spot. It was you who protected me from the assassins who came for me when I slept, as well. And you fought for me, desperately outnumbered, at the Red Wyrms’ Upper Jaw. You’ve helped me countless times in the last few years.”

“But I owed you that, Princess Ariel... and more. When I was teleported into the palace, I didn’t have the first idea what was going on. If you hadn’t helped me—”

Ariel shook her head slowly. “Any debt you owed me was more than repaid when we fled the Kingdom. Since then, we’ve been on equal footing. I’ve simply been manipulating you into serving me.”

“You aren’t manipulating me!” Sylphie shouted, her eyes wide. “I *want* to help you, because we’re friends!”

In response, Ariel smiled in satisfaction and nodded slightly. “I’m sure that’s true, yes. And for the very same reason, I’d like to help you now. Because we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“What...?”

“I know you, Sylphie. You’re probably holding back for my sake, aren’t you? But you aren’t my servant, you’re my friend. There’s no need for you to put my goals first and ignore your own. If there’s something else you want to do, then leave me and prioritize it.”

Ariel’s kind words were enough to shake Sylphie’s resolve. But even as her heart wavered, she managed to squeak out an objection. “But that would

mean...betraying you.”

“It most certainly would not,” Ariel replied firmly. “In fact, were I to hold you back, I would be betraying *you*.”

This claim might not have passed scrutiny if they were still in the Kingdom of Asura. There, Ariel was a princess, and Sylphie merely the daughter of some nameless village hunter. She had earned herself the title of Guardian Mage, true, but they were still far from equal in rank. However, this was the Kingdom of Ranoa, and Ariel was essentially in exile. Because of that, her words had the ring of truth.

If she’d said something similar to Luke, he would no doubt have objected strongly. He took great pride in his role as Ariel’s retainer, and would have begged her to give him orders, and to use him as she saw fit.

Sylphie, on the other hand, hadn’t sworn an oath of undying allegiance to Ariel. But she considered the princess a woman worthy of her service. She respected her so strongly that she would have sacrificed herself obediently if Ariel ordered her to do so.

She couldn’t quite manage to express these thoughts in this moment, though. Mainly because Ariel was speaking to her with such great kindness.

“Tell me, Sylphie. Do you intend to make a traitor of me, after all that I’ve done for you?”

“What? No!” Surprised by Ariel’s manipulative words, Sylphie looked up with wide eyes. The princess met her gaze with a stern expression. Sylphie found herself wanting to avert her eyes, but managed to resist the impulse. She couldn’t help swallowing loudly, though.

“Show some courage and speak your mind. What do you want to do right now?”

“Well... I...” Sylphie pinched her lips together and squeezed her hands into fists.

She knew what she wanted to do. All she needed now was the courage to put her feelings into words. At some point, she’d lost that courage altogether. But now, as her good friend waited patiently, she managed to find it once again. “I

want to... be with Rudy.”

“Well done.” Ariel smiled at her friend. For once, it wasn’t artificial. This was her genuine smile—one she used only rarely. “I’m glad you finally came out and said it. Pursue your own goals first, Sylphie. You can always come back to help me out once you’re ready.”

There was kindness in Luke’s eyes as well. “She’s right. Deal with your personal affairs before worrying about ours.”

He had somewhat conflicted feelings about this situation, in truth. But he was happy that his friend had finally voiced her real thoughts, and he wanted to trust Ariel’s judgment.

“But...I don’t think I can take it if Rudy doesn’t remember me.”

Ariel and Luke exchanged a look and smiled wryly.

“Let’s think that part over now, shall we?”

With these gentle words from Ariel, an impromptu strategy conference was convened on the spot.

“Perhaps it would be best to keep things simple. Why not just tell him you’re Sylphiette from Buena Village?”

“I think that’s inadvisable. If he really doesn’t remember her at all after all this time, the name might not ring a bell.”

Luke and Ariel pondered each other’s words for a moment. To be sure, there was a good chance that Rudeus had forgotten Sylphie. It had been eight years since they parted, which was more than long enough to forget a childhood friend. At the very least, Sylphie hadn’t heard Rudeus mention her name even once in the last year. It was hard to imagine her name alone would suffice to jog his memory.

What *could* she do to make him remember her? That was the crucial question.

Ariel tried to put herself in Rudeus’ shoes. She didn’t remember the names of all the attendants who’d served her eight years in the past, but there were a

few she did recall. For example, Lilia, who'd left the court when Ariel was very young. Ariel couldn't remember the woman's face clearly, but she remembered the way she'd fought off an assassin to protect her.

"Sylphie, what kind of memories do you have with him?"

"Memories?"

"Yes. People remember us by our skills and the memories we share. That's the reason that nobles are constantly throwing parties to introduce themselves to each other. They memorize flowery speeches and practice complex dances in order to leave at least some impression in the memories of their peers. There are quite a lot of them, you see, so it's impossible to remember every single one you meet."

Sylphie's skills were certainly distinctive enough. There weren't many people in the entire world who could cast spells silently, and none so young as Sylphie or Rudeus. But even with the benefit of that enormous hint, Rudeus hadn't thought of her.

There were three reasons for this.

Firstly, Rudeus' tendency toward self-deprecation. He instinctively believed that anything he could do was easy enough for anyone else to imitate.

Secondly, he had since run into Ruijerd, Kishirika, Orsted, and Badigadi. His encounters with these overwhelmingly powerful individuals had left him with the impression that the world was full of people much stronger than he was. In his mind, it seemed reasonable for there to be plenty of silent spellcasters out there.

And finally, there was Ariel herself. Sylphie's silent spellcasting might have seemed more unusual if she was only an ordinary student, but she was the guardian of a powerful princess. It made sense to Rudeus that any mage who served as a royal bodyguard would be highly capable.

"Memories, huh? Uhm... I did tell you about how I used to be bullied, didn't I?"

"Yes. You told me you were picked on rather ruthlessly about the color of your hair."

Incidentally, Sylphie had never revealed to Luke or the princess that her hair was originally green. She'd feared it might cause them to treat her with suspicion. It wasn't that she didn't trust them. The thought of admitting it was simply frightening, so she'd decided to pretend that her hair had been white all along. Once the lie was out there, it was hard to take back. And her hair showed no signs of changing back to its original color, so she didn't really have to.

This was probably the ideal moment to reveal the truth she'd hidden from them until now... but the bullying she'd suffered in childhood had left its mark on her mind, and she couldn't bring herself to do so.

"The first time I met Rudy was when he saved me from those bullies. It's the strongest memory I have of him."

"...Hmm, I see."

Ariel thought it over. Could they arrange to have Sylphie attacked by a group of ruffians, giving Rudeus the chance to swoop in and save her?

There was a problem with that plan, unfortunately. Sylphie was a powerful mage. You wouldn't know it to look at her now, but in real combat, she was decisive, quick, and deadly. Your average pack of thugs wouldn't last five seconds against her. In all likelihood, Rudeus held his friend Fitz's strength in some regard as well. Were there any potential attackers available that were skilled enough to put her in real danger?

...The answer was yes, actually.

Most of the adventuring clan Thunderbolt, known for its skill in combat, was currently staying in this city. For the right price, they could probably be convinced to pretend to assault Sylphie. However, rumor had it that they were on friendly terms with Rudeus. Someone claimed to have seen "Quagmire Rudeus" drinking tea with Soldat of the party Stepped Leader in a café recently. Elinalise Dragonroad and Cliff Grimor had been there as well. Based on this fact, hiring Thunderbolt wasn't a suitable option.

Choosing another random group of adventurers to play that role also didn't strike Ariel as advisable. Rudeus probably had more acquaintances in that community than Ariel even suspected. Even if she tried to find a group that didn't know him, there was a good chance they'd have met somewhere before.

That might make things complicated. And messy. Someone might even end up getting hurt, and Ariel certainly didn't want to risk that.

"Do you have any other memories of him?"

"Uhhh... Oh, yes. One other thing comes to mind..."

Sylphie's face went red, and she paused for a moment before continuing. "At first, Rudy thought I was a boy, you know? One day it started raining while we were outside practicing magic, so I came over to his house to take a bath. But then he, uhm, started tearing off my clothes..."

Halfway through her story, Sylphie glanced over at Luke. He promptly covered his ears with his hands. Say what you will about the man, but he could take a hint.

"Uhm, and then... h-he pulled down my panties... and saw my, uh, private parts. That was how he realized I was a girl..." Sylphie went on to explain how Rudeus had been a little depressed for a while after that.

Ariel had already heard the story of what happened after this incident, actually. It seemed possible to her that these events had something to do with Rudeus' decision to keep his silence about Fitz's gender. Even if he didn't remember Sylphie clearly, he'd learned a lesson then that still stuck with him: you didn't forcibly expose people's secrets.

"That's... quite a nice story," said Ariel, smiling. On the inside, however, she was thinking *This is it*. They'd just have to create an identical situation and make Rudeus undress Sylphie with his own hands. With excitement running high on both sides, she could hopefully overcome her anxiety and blurt out the truth.

"All right. Let's go with that." Ariel had made up her mind, and there wasn't going to be any debate. "Luke, take your hands off your ears. We're going to discuss our plan now."

At this point, however, the princess remembered their second-biggest problem: Sylphie's penchant for self-sabotage. If they didn't take some precautions, her cowardice would doom their plan to failure.

"Before we get into the details, though, there's one point I want to make sure we're clear on."

“O-Okay...”

“Sylphie, you told us that you want to *be with Rudeus*. But I’d like to know what that means to you, specifically.”

Sylphie considered the question. What, specifically, did she want from Rudy? What did she want to do with him? She wanted to be at his side, at least. She’d been in love with him for quite some time, and those feelings had only grown since their reunion.

But she sometimes indulged in some very specific fantasizing, also. For example, she often daydreamed about what their life would be like after they got married.

In these fantasies, the house they lived in was the one Rudy’s family owned back in Buena Village, or at least one of the same size. The two of them shared the same bed, naturally. When she woke up every morning, Rudy was lying by her side. He greeted her with a “good morning” and a kiss, then got dressed and went off to do his morning training.

Heading downstairs, Sylphie made breakfast. This was one of her jobs around the household. It wasn’t anything too fancy, but Rudy always had a solid appetite, so she made plenty of food. By the time everything was ready, Rudy was back. He ate the food and said something like “delicious as always” once he finished. He didn’t talk while he was eating, though. Sylphie just watched him pack it in, serving second helpings when he wanted one.

Once breakfast was over, Rudy headed off to work. Sylphie handed him a lunch box and waved goodbye, then headed off to meet up with Princess Ariel. They both had jobs, just like Rudy’s parents. She hadn’t come up with a specific job for Rudy, but it was just a fantasy, so that wasn’t too important.

When Sylphie finished her day at work and came back home, she ran into Rudy at the entrance. He smiled a little at the sight of her, brushed the snow off her shoulders, and pulled her in for a hug. Then they headed inside together and turned on the heating stove. Before too long, they had the bath ready. Once they cleaned themselves off and warmed up, it was time for dinner. While Sylphie worked on that, Rudy was making figurines by the stove or something.

Dinner was a little different from breakfast. Rudy was much more talkative,

for one thing. He told her all about his day, and the things he'd seen at work. All of his stories were amazing... too amazing for her to think up in advance. She giggled at his jokes and felt impressed by his accomplishments.

Once the meal was over, they spent some quiet time together on the sofa by the heating stove. Sylphie snuggled against Rudy, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Sometimes they talked; sometimes they didn't even say a word. Before too long, they started gazing into each other's eyes, and their faces drew closer. Their shadows would overlap as Rudy picked Sylphie up in his arms, turned off the stove, and carried her to the bedroom.

Rudy's kind of a pervert sometimes, you know? He might say "How many kids do you want?" or something like that. But then I'll say, "As many as you want to give me, Rudy!" He'd probably just laugh and say "That might be too many," then start taking off my clothes... and then I laugh too, and say "Better get started, then!" Hee hee hee!

"—Hee hee hee!"

"Ahem."

"Gah!" Snapped back to reality by a tactful throat-clearing from Ariel, Sylphie shut off her internal monologue, flushed bright red, and looked at the floor while fiddling with her ears.

"Now then," said Ariel gently. "Take that fantasy of yours and imagine another woman in your place."

Sylphie tried to picture Nanahoshi taking on the role of Rudeus' wife. She imagined herself living in the house next door, watching them through the windows as they went about their day. But when Rudy and Nanahoshi noticed her, they smirked a little and shut the curtains...

"You don't like that idea, do you?"

"N-No! Not one bit!"

"Very well then." With a firm nod, Ariel looked Sylphie right in the eyes. "Whether this operation succeeds or fails is entirely dependent on your efforts, Sylphie."

“R-Right!”

In case this wasn't enough, Ariel chose to hammer the point home. “I won't allow you to chicken out again. Not this time. If you come back and tell me that you couldn't find the courage to speak up when it counted, then I'll never help you with this again. In fact, I'll do worse than that. By my authority as Ariel Anemoi Asura, Second Princess of the Kingdom of Asura, I'll forbid you to ever contact Rudeus Greyrat again.”

Sylphie swallowed loudly. She understood, of course, that Ariel was only trying to push her forward. This was less a literal threat than an order to approach this very, very seriously.

Seeing the tension on Sylphie's face, Ariel slowly said her final words on the matter. “Give this *everything* you've got.”

“Uh... yes, ma'am!”

“Very good.” Ariel nodded deeply one more time, and proceeded to outline her plan.

Sylphie

WE WASTED NO TIME putting our operation into action.

It was lunchtime on a school day, and I was on the first floor of the dining hall. The room was packed full of “common” students: ex-adventurers, beastfolk, demons, and all sorts of other people.

The noble-born students tended to mock this group ruthlessly at every chance they got. But most of their insults were based on nothing more than prejudice. Princess Ariel found that attitude absurd; she liked to point out that only four hundred years ago, some of the very tribes they mocked so freely had nearly driven humanity to total defeat.

Not that any of that was too relevant right now.

I spotted Rudy sitting at the very back table, chatting casually with a small group of friends. He was with Zanoba, King Badigadi, and Julie, who sat at the far end of their table holding a cup in both hands and shooting glances at the other three.

“Do explain, Sir Badi. What are the most crucial qualities of a figurine, in your estimation?”

“They must be cuter than the real thing! And more importantly, they must be sexy enough to excite all those who see them!”

“Ah yes, the erotic element! Your tastes are truly refined, your Majesty. Here, have another drink...”

Badigadi was guzzling down large amounts of beer. His dark skin looked slightly flushed. Rudy and Zanoba watched with big smiles on their faces, regularly refilling their mugs. This was strange. This dining hall didn’t even serve alcohol. Had they gone out to buy some beforehand?

“Incidentally, Sir Badi, what would you think about me making a figure of Empress Kishirika? A *very* sexy one, of course.”

“You wish to depict my fiancée? But you don’t even know what she looks like fully-grown, boy.”

“That’s exactly the point, though. Once she’s back to normal, you won’t get to see the charming miniature version of her any longer! That’s why we need to preserve her current appearance for posterity.”

“I see! You may have a point there. The woman’s a bit careless at times, though, and she’s been known to get herself killed rather abruptly. I’d expect she’ll be back in her smaller form sooner or later.”

“But surely the décor of your castle would be much improved by a display of Empress Kishirika at various ages!”

“You’re a human, boy. You won’t live long enough to see her at all her ages.”

“That’s the problem, all right. If we’re going to make that dream come true, I’ll have to pass on my figurine-making techniques to future generations. And that’s why I could really use your support, your Majesty! Ehehehe.”

“Bwahahaha! For all your power, you play the role of a wheedling salesman oddly well! I approve of your naked greed, boy. What is that you desire, then? Money? Men?”

“Oh, nothing like that. I was merely hoping you could put in a good word for me every now and then...”

Rudy had his evil smile on again. It really did make him look like a total villain. He didn’t smile very often, but when he did, it tended to turn out like that. That was one thing that hadn’t changed since I met him.

There’d been someone who smiled like that in the royal court as well—a man I knew as Minister Darius. He was our mortal enemy, and the one who eventually drove us out of the country. But his smile looked like Rudy’s, so I’d never flinched when he turned it on us. Maybe it was just something that came with being a clever person.

Rudy and Zanoba seemed really devoted to their hobby of using Earth magic to make little sculptures of people. It was hard for me to comment on the quality of their work, but at the very least, the figurines were really detailed and precise. When Rudy showed me a Red Wyrms sculpture they were working on, I’d been seriously impressed.

They were also training Julie, who’d proven to be a talented young dwarf, to

help them out. And now they were trying to rope a Demon King into the business as well. It was obvious they were really serious about this project. I did want to join in and help them out, since I was a pretty good mage myself, but that wasn't an option. I had to save my mana for protecting Princess Ariel.

"Hello, Rudeus."

"Oh! Hello there, Master Fitz." When I called out to him, Rudy looked up at me with a pleased expression. I'd been acting a little strangely around him recently, but it didn't seem like he was wary of me or anything. Honestly, he could be kind of oblivious sometimes.

Still... it felt like proof that he trusted me completely. That did make me happy.

"What can I do for you?"

"Uhm..." I hesitated for a moment. It was kind of hard to broach the subject with Zanoba and the Demon King watching me. "Er, would you mind stepping outside with me for a minute?"

"Not at all. Zanoba, can you handle the rest?"

"Of course, Master! Leave all the details to me."

Rudy and Zanoba sure were close these days. I couldn't help feeling just a little jealous.

I led Rudy out of the dining hall and found a quiet, isolated spot to talk. Now it was time to get to the point.

"Go right ahead, please," Rudy said. He looked so *handsome* when he had that serious expression on his face. It wasn't even fair.

"Uhm... actually, I have a pretty big favor to ask of you."

"You do? Well, rest assured!" said Rudy, thumping a fist lightly to his chest. "I'll do everything I can, of course!"

"Hold on a second. I didn't even tell you what I'm asking yet..."

"I'm not going to refuse you, Master Fitz. Well, not unless I absolutely *have* to."

Wow. That was really sweet, actually. It made me feel terrible about deceiving him like this. It was bad enough that I couldn't even bring myself to tell him who I was...

"Okay, so... you remember how I told you Princess Ariel was spending a couple days at the home of a noble she knows? Well, they had this bodyguard there, and apparently she's *really* strong."

"Ah. You want help fighting this bodyguard, then?"

"What? No, no!"

"Oh, I see. That's good, then. I'm not much for fighting."

Not much for fighting...? Is that supposed to be a joke? Should I be laughing right now? Let's just move on... "Princess Ariel started to get annoyed by how much this noble boasted about this bodyguard. She insisted that 'her Fitz' was even stronger."

"Ahah. Got it."

"So then the noble tells her, 'My bodyguard braved the Forest of Hail with a party of only four, and brought back the flower that grows in its depths,' in this really boastful tone..."

Rudy put a hand on his chin and nodded thoughtfully. "A flower that grows deep inside the Forest of Hail... she must mean the Freeze Fringe, right? Its petals can be used to make a powerful tonic, but it's well-known for only growing there, and only in the winter."

Wow. That's our Rudy. He knew that off the top of his head? It was a good thing we'd taken the time to do our research and pick a plant that actually existed.

"The Forest of Hail is dangerous in the winter," Rudy continued, "But if you head in there with a party of four A-ranked adventurers, it's not *that* impressive an accomplishment. As long as everyone moves carefully, you could get the flower and get out without putting yourself in too much risk."

He went on to rattle off the names of the various monsters that resided in the Forest of Hail: Snow Hornets, White Cougars, Mustard Treants, and so on. I was

a little stunned by how easily he pulled this information out of nowhere. How did he have all of this memorized?

“Uhm, right. Anyway... Princess Ariel couldn’t bring herself to back down, so she told him ‘Fitz could pull that off with an even smaller group!’ Not that she asked me first.”

“Now I see. So that’s the issue, is it?” Rudy nodded with a look of satisfaction. “I’ll get in touch with an adventurer friend of mine and have them sell you the flowers at a good price. That noble will never know you didn’t go there yourself.”

“What?! That would just be cheating, Rudeus! I’m supposed to get the job done myself!”

“Power comes in many forms. Having connections is one of them. I’ve got tons of adventurer friends, and I’m *your* friend. You’re just putting the relationships you’ve built to use. That’s a totally valid way to get things done.”

Oh wow, listen to him playing around with words. What is he even talking about?!

“Sorry, I just can’t do that. If word got out, I’d end up humiliating Princess Ariel.”

“Hm, okay then. Let’s go get the flowers ourselves, then.”

Rudy changed his tune easily enough. The idea of facing that dangerous forest with a party of two didn’t seem to intimidate him in the slightest.

...Or so I thought, until the next sentence left his mouth.

“Give me three days, and I’ll round up some guys I know. This should be simple enough with a group of ten or so helping out. Don’t worry, Stepped Leader’s in town right now. I’m sure I can get some of them to come along.”

Now I was *completely* lost. “What? Rudeus, no! Ariel said I’d go with a smaller party! Why would we bring ten other people with us?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. They’ll just enter the forest a few hours before us *coincidentally*. Maybe some of them will be gathering materials there, and others hunting monsters for a job. They might *happen* to wipe out all the

threats in our path, but none of them will touch the flowers. We'll grab those all by ourselves."

Uh... wow. Talk about sneaky. Was this just how adventurers did things?

No, no. Rudy had been an adventurer for years, and he'd learned just how dangerous forests really were. He was just worried about me getting hurt, since I was an amateur at this sort of thing. Yeah, that had to be it. Probably.

"Look, d-do we really need all those other people? I bet you and me could handle it just fine on our own, Rudeus."

"...Oh, wait. Are you just asking me to be your bodyguard, Master Fitz?"

Wasn't that what I said at the start? Maybe not, actually... "Y-Yeah, that's right! Can you help me out, Rudeus?"

Rudy put one hand on his chin and thought for just a moment before nodding. "Okay then. You've helped me out in all sorts of ways, Master Fitz. It wouldn't be right of me to turn you down."

"Th-Thanks, Rudeus! I was a little nervous about going out there alone."

Despite a few close shaves, I'd managed to get past the first hurdle. Honestly, though, it felt like he'd come up with a new plan every time I opened my mouth. Rudy really was something else...

The operation moved on to its second phase. Rudy and I would be heading into the Forest of Hail. It was located about three days' travel north of Sharia, ending right on the border with Basherant.

I set out in my normal travelling gear, but Rudy showed up heavily equipped. He was carrying an enormous knapsack, which was apparently stuffed full of emergency supplies and rations. I said I'd expected him to come along empty-handed, given how strong he was... but he replied "You shouldn't underestimate the dangers of any forest. There are some monsters out there that can dodge a Stone Cannon in mid-air."

That sounded totally absurd to me, but when I pressed him on the point, he said there were tons of creatures like that in the forests of the Demon

Continent. I'd assumed it was some kind of joke at first, but his face was totally serious.

The monsters known to appear in the Forest of Hail were B-ranked threats at worst, though. I could probably handle them just fine... "Sorry, Rudeus. It feels like I made you do all the prep work."

"No need to apologize. That's part of the job when you're on a bodyguard mission."

Wait. If that was how he was thinking about this... was he going to ask me for money at the end or something? "Uhm... should I be paying you for your services, then?"

"Don't be silly. I'm doing this because we're *friends*. I don't want anything from you."

For some reason, Rudy really emphasized the word "friends." I wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean. "I mean, I could afford to pay you, if you want. It's no big deal." Ariel did pay me a regular salary, if not a large one. I didn't have much to spend the money on, so my savings had been accumulating for a while. I could afford to rent Rudy for a couple days, at least.

Oh, but... he's supposed to be a King-tier magician now, right? D-Do I actually have enough?

"Heh. I don't come cheap, you know."

"W-Well, I guess you wouldn't, but..." For some reason, I found myself remembering the slave market, and picturing Rudy climbing onto a stage naked. *Buying Rudy... might be kind of fun...*

A funny feeling rushed through my lower half. I felt my face growing hot with embarrassment. "Uh, anyway! Let's get started!"

"Right."

Together, we stepped forward into the Forest of Hail.

At first glance, it looked like a perfectly ordinary wood of the sort found all across the Northern Territories. We were surrounded by tall trees packed with snow. However, there was some sort of magical abnormality in this area that

caused hail to fall very regularly. When you stepped on the snow here, it made a distinctive crunching sound.

“The flowers bloom on a cliff on the far side of the forest. We’ll head straight there while clearing the snow in our path. Follow me and keep an eye on our surroundings, please.”

With this announcement, Rudy started to march steadily forward, melting the snow in front of him as he went. I tried to help out as well, but I couldn’t get the hang of it. I had to assume he was using Fire magic, given the limited range of effect... but it wasn’t easy to continuously generate enough heat to melt a thick bed of snow. I could have done it if I wanted to, but it would have cost me way too much mana. Rudy spent his reserves of magic really lavishly.

The snow here was deep enough to reach our shoulders, but he just kept clearing it as we moved along. At first, I was worried that the clouds of water vapor might attract monsters, but somehow, he wasn’t making any. When I asked him how he was doing it, he said that if you carefully controlled the temperature, you could get it just hot enough to make the snow melt without producing any clouds of steam. How much practice would it even take before you could do something like that?

Focus, Sylphie. That’s not really important right now.

It was time to get started with the plan. Taking a deep breath, I pointed to the staff that Rudy carried. “I remember bringing you this the other day, Rudeus. It’s an amazing staff. I’ve never seen a custom-made one with a colored magic stone outside the royal court before.”

“Yeah. The young lady I was tutoring gave it to me as a gift on my tenth birthday.”

Rudy looked a little sad for some reason. Come to think of it, he’d never told me much about this young lady he’d spent years tutoring. It felt like he didn’t want to talk about her. From everything I heard, she sounded like a really violent girl... maybe he had some bad memories from that time in his life.

“Do you think I could try holding it for a while? All I have is my beginner’s wand, you know. I’ve always wanted to use a staff like that.”

“Really? I assumed they’d give the bodyguard of a princess a nice staff if they wanted one.”

“They said I didn’t need one, since I could cast spells silently anyway. Talk about cheap, huh?”

Of course, this wasn’t the real reason I’d stuck with my little wand for so long. Rudy had given it to me as a gift, so it meant a lot to me. It was a common kind of rod, wand. I couldn’t blame him for not recognizing it.

“Well, go ahead. Get a nice good grip on the shaft, there. Pretty thick, huh?”

For some reason, Rudy had a strange smirk on his face as he said this. Was there something funny about this that I wasn’t seeing? Feeling slightly nonplussed, I squeezed Rudy’s staff in my hands. It was a little awkward holding onto this thing. My hands were too small for it.

“Yeah, it’s *super* thick. Are you supposed to hold this in both hands?”

“...Maybe. I think they wanted to make sure I could still use it once I grew up.”

“Hmm...”

Smiling to himself, Rudy resumed his forward march and snow-clearing duties. I followed closely after him, still holding his staff.

Okay. So far so good. Time for the next step...

Bringing the ring I wore on my pinky to my mouth, I whispered the keyword, “Red tower,” as softly as I could. The small stone embedded in it changed from blue to red.

This ring was one of the magical implements that Princess Ariel always wore on her person. When you spoke the keyword, its stone changed color—and so did the stone in its companion ring. The effect didn’t work over very large distances. But right now, the other ring in the set was waiting for my signal just outside this forest.

Is this really going to work?

I glanced nervously at the sky, and waited for the next stage of our plan to begin.

Despite my anxiety, it happened soon enough. The sky began to grow cloudy with unnatural speed. Everything was going well so far.

“Hm?” It didn’t take long for Rudy to notice the change in the weather. Looking up, he murmured “Rainclouds? That’s strange,” to himself.

Rain almost never fell at this time of year in the Northern Territories. As a result, the protective gear most people wore wasn’t much good against it. The heavy stuff we had on was made of Snow Hedgehog fur. You could brush snow right off it before it melted, so it was really useful in the winter. Rain would soak right into it, though. And once it got drenched through, a single gust of arctic wind would basically freeze you solid.

“It looks like it’s going to rain, Master Fitz,” Rudy called back to me, frowning.

When something like this *did* happen, your only real options were to create a makeshift shelter on the spot or take refuge in a cave. The latter option was considered somewhat safer and more reliable. Rudy was very good at Earth magic, of course, but he wouldn’t want to keep spending mana just to keep us dry until the rain stopped. That was seriously tedious work. And so, I had an alternative proposal to offer. “Uhm, let’s see. Looking at the map, I think—”

...there’s a cave just ahead, so let’s take shelter there.

But before I could get the words out, Rudy shook his head and interrupted. “Don’t worry. I’ll scatter those clouds in no time.” He then lifted his hands toward the sky.

Oh crap!

In that instant, I realized I’d made a serious mistake. Rudy was a Saint-tier Water magician; manipulating the weather was second nature to him. Princess Ariel had told me that she’d hired two Advanced-tier Water magicians for this job, but they’d be no match for Rudy. He’d probably get rid of those clouds in no time at all.

What do I do? What do I do? If it doesn’t start raining, the whole plan falls apart!

Acting on reflex, I started to channel mana into the staff I held in my hands. I could feel it amplifying my power to a remarkable degree. Maybe I could do this

after all...

“Hmmm?” Still pointing his hands upward, Rudy tilted his head in puzzlement. He was probably confused by the clouds’ stubborn refusal to dissipate. What he didn’t know was that I was fighting to keep them together. I don’t know if Rudy wasn’t giving it his all, or if the staff gave me an edge, but the two of us were basically cancelling each other out. Which meant the two Advanced-tier magicians outside the forest could maintain control.

Whispering silent prayers to no one in particular, I channeled more and more mana upward. I visualized the rain clouds growing fatter and spreading across the sky. I did it just like Rudy had taught me—gathering moisture, cooling it until it condensed, and letting it fall!

“Hmm...” Rudy frowned again. A moment later, the first cold drops of rain fell upon us. “...Sorry, Master Fitz. Looks like I’m not performing well today.” He looked a little upset at this development, understandably.

“Th-That’s okay, Rudeus. It’s probably because I was holding your staff.”

“Even without my staff, I should have been able to scatter those easily enough,” he muttered, studying his hands. “I guess I haven’t done this much lately... am I just rusty? Or maybe...”

I got the idea he suspected those rainclouds might have been intentionally created. Still, it probably hadn’t even occurred to him that I might have actively interfered with his attempt to dispel them.

“Oh well. There’s not much we can do now that it’s coming down. There’s a cave up ahead, isn’t there? Let’s take shelter there.”

“Y-Yeah! Good idea!”

I nodded forcefully, and we started moving again at once. Our Snow Hedgehog gear sucked up the water like a sponge. Before too long at all, we were both freezing cold.

All according to plan.

“There it is!” Finally, shivering and soaking wet, we stumbled into our shelter. It was a small, natural cave, no more than ten meters deep. And it was also our

real destination.

Chapter 10:

Rain in the Forest

(Part 2)

I KNEW THERE WAS something fishy about this from the start.

Master Fitz had been acting strangely ever since he hired me, and then events had taken a really odd turn. Those rainclouds had gathered unnaturally fast. Sudden downpours in the winter were very, very rare up here. There was a good chance someone created that storm using magic. But what would the *point* of that be? Why just... make it rain on us? Did they want to make it harder for us to complete our goal? Who would do that? The noble Princess Ariel was arguing with, maybe? To what end? Well, to keep Fitz from getting the flower, presumably.

But if that was the goal, why just harass us with some lousy weather? You could always make it rain arrows instead.

Had Master Fitz picked up on any of this? There was a tense look on his face, which suggested the answer was yes. But he also seemed oddly calm, considering. Maybe he'd been expecting something like this to happen.

If that was the case, though, I couldn't understand why he hadn't warned me upfront. Could *he* be planning to *assassinate* me? That didn't make much sense either. He could have killed me quite a few times by now, if she wanted to.

What the hell was going on here?

My thoughts were troubled as I worked on setting up a fire we could use to dry our wet clothing. Fortunately, I'd brought along some pre-cut firewood just in case something like this happened. It was possible to keep a fire going using nothing but magic, of course, but it would be immediately extinguished if I had to turn my attention to some passing monster. That could be dangerous, since it would deprive us of our main source of light, and I'd have to get a new one going afterward. It was smarter to just carry the basics with you.

“...Okay, I’m going to get the fire going.”

Once the wood was all laid out, I set it alight. As soon as I was sure it was burning steadily, I took off my outer coat. The thing was absolutely soaked through; the outside was coated in a thin layer of frost. I’d been wearing my old grey robe underneath, but it was sopping wet as well. From the feel of things, I was drenched to my underwear. At least I’d brought a spare set of those so I could prioritize drying out my other clothes. Using a mixture of Wind and Water magic, I carefully evaporated the excess moisture in them. I couldn’t force the water out completely, though. It would severely damage the fabric if I tried.

Once I’d done what I could, I made a simple drying rack using Earth magic and hung up everything except my underwear to dry.

I turned to the fire and moved in close, but it was still *freezing* in the cave. I used magic to seal the cave’s entrance. Of course, completely closing us in here would be a good way to die of carbon monoxide poisoning, so I opened a ventilation hole in the ceiling to let the smoke escape.

I’d made things slightly more comfortable, at least. Now the question was what to do about my underwear. It might be a little awkward to strip totally naked right in front of Fitz.

I shot a glance over at him—and found him hugging his shoulders, trembling like a leaf, and whimpering softly. He’d taken off his outer coat, but was still wearing his cloak and everything underneath it. The guy was going to give himself hypothermia at this rate.

“Shouldn’t, uh...”

Shouldn’t you take those off to dry? was the sentence I had in mind, but I cut myself short. Fitz might claim to be a young man, but I suspected he was actually a girl who was hiding her real identity. Stripping in front of me might not be an option. But this was a genuinely dangerous situation.

What now? Hmm... “Master Fitz.”

“Wha... What is it, Rudeus?!” he answered me a little too loudly. Clearly, he’d also realized the dilemma he was in. This was not good at all. I needed to give him some way out.

“You know, a girl I know told me that elves have a rule against letting people from a different race see them naked. Why don’t I turn around and cover my eyes? You just take those clothes off, dry them with magic, and tell me when you’re done.”

“Huh?!” Fitz sounded more than a little surprised. That made sense, given that I’d made up the whole thing on the spot. If there really was a taboo like that, then it was one that Elinalise violated every single day of her life. However, the misinformation I was choosing to “believe” here should be very convenient for Fitz, as long as he just played along.

I slowly turned around, closed my eyes...and began to listen carefully. No reason not to enjoy the sounds of him stripping down, at least. My imagination would do the rest.

“.....”

“...”

For some reason, I wasn’t hearing anything. His clothes were wet, yeah, but even so... taking them off and drying them out with a spell should have produced at least some faint hint of a sound. This was *really* odd. Did he have some way of changing his clothes without making any noise at all?

Come to think of it, there had been a girl at my elementary school who could change into her swimsuit without taking her clothes off first. That was a pretty cool trick. That school wasn’t equipped with actual changing rooms, so the boys and girls were forced to change clothes together in the classrooms. Those were good times, in retrospect. Later, once the internet got popular, I stumbled across an explanation of that stealthy clothes-changing method. I’d developed a certain interest in tricks of that sort. My interest in this matter was purely academic, of course. It definitely wasn’t a sexual thing. Probably.

If Fitz *hadn’t* taken off his clothes, he’d probably be freezing right about now. With that excuse in mind, I slowly turned around.

My eyes met Master Fitz’s at once. He still had his sunglasses on, but I could tell he was looking at my face. I didn’t look away this time. Mainly because his face was alarmingly pale. “Master Fitz!”

He was still clutching his shoulders with both arms, trembling more fiercely than before. There was no color in his face at all. It was obvious that he was chilled to the bone.

In winter, temperatures in the Northern Territories were constantly well below freezing. Just walking along outside robbed your body of its heat very quickly. Hell, I was still pretty cold myself. The temperature in the cave was slowly rising, but with those wet clothes on, Fitz was basically giving himself an ice bath.

This was incredibly dangerous.

“Please, you’ve got to change out of those clothes. Do you want me to make you a little stall or something? Or maybe I could just leave the cave? Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll get out right—”

“Wait.”

As I turned toward the entrance, Master Fitz called out to me. He stared at me for a moment, still trembling. And then, standing up on quivering legs, he slowly walked over and looked at my face.

“.....”

“...”

He was just...looking at me. Like there was something he wanted to say. But what was it? What was he trying to tell me? “You’re, uh... you’re going to catch cold, Master Fitz...”

“Y-Yeah,” he replied, his voice shaking. “Y-You’re right.”

I was beyond flustered at this point. I couldn’t begin to understand what he was thinking. “You’ve... got to get those clothes off. It’s dangerous. Getting too cold can kill you...”

“Yeah... I guess I’m going to die, at this rate...” Fitz nodded, but showed no sign of taking off his clothes. Uh, not that I was hoping he’d strip naked while I watched, of course.

I know nothing! Master Fitz is a boy! Definitely not female! That’s my official stance on the matter, damn it! I really needed to close my eyes now, right?

“I can’t take these off myself. You do it for me.”

What the hell was he talking about?

“...Well, if you can’t get them off, I guess I’ll have to do it.”

What the hell was I talking about?

Crap. My hands were already moving forward. I touched his shoulders first. They were cold...and slender, and soft. His body felt very delicate in my hands.

Okay, she certainly felt like a girl. And of course, I was a man.

Generally speaking, it wasn't okay for a man and a woman to get naked in front of each other until they'd reached a certain level of intimacy. That was as true of this world exactly as it had been in my old one.

“U-Uhm, Master Fitz...to be honest, I’m aware of the fact that you’re a woman.”

“Okay. But if you don’t take my clothes off, I might die, right?”

“R-Right...”

This did not compute. I couldn’t figure out her thought process here. She was obviously plotting something, though. Could this be some sort of blackmail scam? Like, I’d take off her clothes, and then some scary guy would pop into the cave, tell me that I’d learned too much, and carry me off to an Asuran laboratory to be dissected? Not that I’d have any room to complain, given that I was about to “experiment” on Fitz myself...

My hands, which had acquired a mind of their own at some point, slipped Fitz’s thick front-button cloak off. This revealed the drenched white shirt beneath.

Not to repeat myself, but this was a white shirt. As you may know, shirts of that color are prone to becoming transparent when wet. This meant that I could see Fitz’s underwear—specifically, something that looked like a sports bra. The contents appeared...modest. But with the wet bra clinging tightly to her skin, there was no denying they were there. Fitz had natural padding of the kind that tends to captivate the masculine mind.

“Master Fitz...”

“What’s the matter, Rudy?”

When I heard that familiar nickname, I felt an old memory rising slowly toward the surface of my mind. I’d experienced something similar to this before. Something *very* similar to this. “Uh... pardon me, then...”

“Go ahead.”

Fitz’s face was bright red all the way to the tips of her ears. Somehow, even that felt weirdly familiar. I peeled off her white shirt, exposing the pale skin underneath. For a moment, I just stared at her delicate shoulders and her slender neck. She was thinner than I’d expected.

Seeing her up close...and touching her directly...was having an effect on me. Some invisible knight was lifting my “sword” steadily upward as part of some holy ceremony.

What was it about Fitz? I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something about her got me so... excited. I had to fight down a sudden urge to push her to the ground right then and there. Ignoring my desires as best I could, I reached down to Fitz’s belt. After a few clumsy, clattering seconds, I managed to undo it. I reached out to grab her pants by the waist... and then an image from the past flashed into my mind.

I’d done something like this before, years ago. I was five or maybe six years old, but I hadn’t forgotten.

When I pulled down Fitz’s pants, I exposed a pair of white panties. Unlike the first time around, I hadn’t pulled her underwear down as well. That said...the panties were so drenched with rainwater that they were bordering on see-through. Was I seeing things, or was that a smooth curve down there...? I swallowed loudly.

Fitz silently pulled her legs up out of her pants, then sat down in front of me with her legs splayed out to either side. I sat down on my knees right in front of her. The floor of the cave was rugged and rough, so my shins started hurting immediately.

I reached out to her once again. She still had those drenched white gloves on her hands. “Let me... get those too...”

As I stripped the gloves off, I found that one of her hands was marked by an old scar. I recognized this hand.

How had that happened, again? Right, right. She'd stuck her hand into a stove once and burned herself. I remembered wondering if that accident had anything to do with her struggle to learn Fire magic.

"Rudy..."

Fitz wasn't looking me in the eye anymore. Her gaze was turned slightly downward, at a different part of my body. The tent I'd pitched a few minutes earlier was still going strong. Fitz really was a miracle worker.

"There's still one thing left."

I knew she wasn't talking about her bra or panties. By now, I'd finally caught on. I reached up for her sunglasses and took them off.

Beneath, I found a familiar face—one I'd expected to see.

Back in the day, I'd thought 'he' would grow up to be a real lady-killer. My plan had been to latch onto him like a remora and snatch up some of the girls he passed over.

That was how pretty she'd been, even when she was a kid. And now...she had grown even more beautiful than I'd imagined.

Her features still had a hint of childishness about them, maybe. But *beautiful* was the only description that applied. Her eyes were sharp and clear. Her nose was a little long, and her lips were slightly thin. I thought I saw a resemblance to her fellow elf, Elinalise...but somehow, her face was more approachable and endearing. Maybe she'd inherited that from her human ancestors.

"Uh, Master Fitz..."

"Yes, Rudy?"

The way she tilted her head to listen, even as she blushed, hadn't changed at all. Why the hell had it taken me so long to figure this out? Her hair? Yeah. Her hair color was different. She'd had green hair before, but now it was pure white. But of course, people's hair changed color all the time. You could just bleach it if you wanted to, for one thing.

“Is your real name... Sylphiette, by any chance?”

“...Yes.”

Fitz—or rather, Sylphie—smiled shyly and nodded.

“Yes... it is. I’m Sylphiette. Sylphiette... from Buena Village...”

After only a few seconds, she was overcome with emotion, and her smile crumpled and disappeared. Before she broke down completely, she managed to lean forward and throw her arms around me.

“I finally...said it...”

Her body was very, very cold.

We stayed like that for a few long minutes.

I was still shocked, to say the least. But at the same time, I was starting to feel like everything finally made sense.

Sylphie was sobbing and sniffing quietly while squeezing me tightly in her arms. It was pretty similar to how this had played out last time, actually. It looked like she was still a crybaby.

Her body was still soft, too. She was so slender you’d think there wasn’t an ounce of fat on her, but when you hugged her, it felt like you had your arms around a cloud. Did she use fabric softener on herself in the bath, or what?

“I waited... I waited for you all that time, Rudy. I stayed in Buena Village, and I worked really hard...”

I knew that much was true. Paul had already told me all about how Sylphie had spent her time once I went off to tutor Eris. Saying nothing for the moment, I just stroked her head. She reacted by squeezing me even more tightly.

After a moment, she raised her face to look at me. Her tears and runny nose had left it something of a mess. I wasn’t sure what to say to her.

“I’ve always...”

Sylphie knew what *she* wanted to say, though. She looked me right in the eyes and said her piece. “I’ve always loved you.”

All I could do was stare down at her in stupid, blank surprise.

“I loved you so much back then, Rudy. And now I love you even more. Don’t leave me again... please? I want to stay with you forever...”

My mind short-circuited. I was quite literally stunned.

Of course, Sylphie had been really attached to me back in the old days. You might say I’d arranged it that way, really. But things were different now. I’d spent a year learning to trust and respect “Master Fitz” as my friend and equal. She was her own person, standing on her own two feet. I had real respect for her. Were her feelings for me just some lingering trace of my attempts to brainwash her as a kid? It seemed possible.

Still... I’d come to genuinely trust and rely on Fitz. She was a smart, knowledgeable person who listened to my problems and helped me think them through. I wasn’t the only one who held her in high regard, either. Princess Ariel placed great trust in her as well.

And she was telling me that she loved me.

A warm, pleasant feeling swelled inside my chest. It was still hard to wrap my head around the fact that Sylphie and Fitz were the same person...but I was still so happy that I felt like dancing.

For a moment, I found myself thinking about Eris. Had I ever actually told her that I loved her? We’d talked about becoming a family at one point, but she’d been the one to bring that up. I couldn’t remember what I’d said.

What about Sara? No, things had never gone that far with her. I wasn’t sure if I really *had* loved Sara, honestly. I definitely liked her, and I’d tried to get her into bed... but I felt like “love” wasn’t quite the right word for what I’d felt.

Okay then. How about Fitz... or Sylphie, rather? What did I think of *her*?

To be honest, I wanted to take some time to think it over carefully. I wanted to double-check my own thoughts, and work out a clear, precise answer. But unless I gave her an answer right now... she would probably disappear on me, like Eris had.

I found myself taking Sylphie by the shoulders and setting her an arm’s length

away. She tried to resist, but it was a pretty feeble effort.

“I love you too,” I said.

Sylphie’s face was a total mess at the moment, but that was all right. I stroked her gently on the head, then brought my face to hers.

Her lips were very soft. Also slightly slimy from all the snot, though that didn’t matter right now. By the time kiss was over, Sylphie had finally stopped crying. She just looked up at me in a daze, her face still flushed bright red.

I’d lost the ability to speak myself. Words weren’t really necessary at this point, fortunately.

Now that we’d confirmed our feelings for each other, the next step was obvious. When you’re in love, you’re supposed to *make* love, right? Not to be crass or anything, but my little buddy had gone two years without any form of release, and he was about ready to explode.

Sylphie didn’t object when I made my move. She let me lay her down gently on her back on the camping blanket I’d brought along. It felt like she’d been prepared for this to happen from the start, honestly. Maybe she’d organized this whole “mission” just so she could tell me the truth in total privacy.

But this wasn’t the time to be thinking about any of that. Right now, I just had to make sure I didn’t screw everything up again. “...Is this your first time, Sylphie?”

“Huh? Uhm, yeah. It is. Is that a problem...?”

“Of course not.” *Far from it, really*

Still...that did mean I had to be careful with her. If I messed this up, things might turn out just like last time. I didn’t want to feel that way ever again. It was bad enough getting dumped by Eris...and Sara, for that matter. I couldn’t screw this up. I just couldn’t.

Slowly, carefully, I reached down to touch Sylphie...

“...Uhm, Rudy?”

And realized that my tent had collapsed.

An hour passed before we finally gave up.

The rain had stopped by now. Thanks to all the time we'd spent pressed up against each other, our bodies had warmed significantly. Our clothes were very nearly dried out, as well.

At the moment, though, I mostly felt like crying. I was painfully depressed by my inability to *perform* at such a crucial moment. How many times had I felt this particular variety of agony, anyway? It never seemed to get any less awful. And this time around, I wasn't dealing with some girl from a brothel or an adventurer I'd hit it off with in an inn. It was someone I actually loved. Someone who I had a special connection with.

I was terrified Sylphie might turn to look at me with disappointment on her face, heave a long sigh, and then walk right out of my life. And so, I just lay there, trembling slightly as I held her hand.

Sylphie didn't go anywhere, though. She seemed shocked by this turn of events as well, if not *quite* as devastated as me. There was an awkward little half-smile on her face.

"It's not your fault, Rudy. My breasts are pretty small, aren't they? I know I'm not really sexy or anything..."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sylphie. You're beautiful. The thing is... it's been like this with me for three years now, actually."

"R-Rudy..."

I told her the story. The whole long, humiliating story, starting with the day three years ago when I'd slept with someone for the first time. I even admitted that I'd come to the University of Magic in hopes of finding a cure for my condition, and that I'd had no luck so far.

"Embarrassing you was the last thing I wanted to do, Sylphie. Please accept my sincerest apologies."

I ended up groveling in apology. There was nothing at all wrong with her body, of course. Her breasts were on the small side, yes, but she was

wonderfully slender and beautifully proportioned. She was the definition of a petite beauty—and I was a big fan of petite beauties. I mean, she was the only girl who'd even gotten me ready to go in the last three years. Of *course* this wasn't her fault. I was just a useless coward.

"Don't talk like that, Rudy! I'm not embarrassed, okay? Come on, go back to normal."

Sylphie's voice was pleading and a little sad. That just made me feel even more pathetic. "I'd love to go back to normal, of course. But there seems to be nothing I can do about this, I'm afraid."

"No, no..." she said, a tear trickling down her face. "I just meant you can stop apologizing to me so formally..."

"Oh, uh... right, right. My bad. I just got kind of flustered."

God, I just can't stop screwing this up. I'd been bowing and scraping by default for a while now. I tended to slip back into that mode automatically when I wasn't thinking straight.

"...Still, is it that weird for me to be a little formal with you? I mean, I've been calling you *Master Fitz* for months now."

"Yeah, I guess... but when you talk like that, it kind of feels like you're keeping people at a distance."

Really? This was the first I'd heard of it. Had Eris and Ruijerd felt the same way? What about Zanoba? Well, I tended to boss him around more than anything...

"From now on, I want you to be more casual with me."

"As you wish."

"...Okay, that's *not* casual."

"Come on! You can't cut me a break on one little *as you wish*?"

"Hehehe... well, maybe I'll make an exception."

This conversation seemed to be improving the mood slightly, at least. Still, it was a while since I'd consciously been *casual* with anyone. After coming to this

world, I'd mostly gone with "polite to a fault." I did spend a few years of bantering with Soldat and company, but then I'd landed at this school and gone right back to the bowing and the scraping.

...Come to think of it, though, there was one other exception. Back in Buena Village, I'd been pretty relaxed around my cute little friend Sylphie. In that case, maybe casual was just the norm for us.

For a while we just sat cuddled up against each other in our underwear, saying nothing in particular, listening to the crackling of the fire. When I turned my neck just a little, I could look right down at Sylphie's collarbone. Her bra was slightly loose, so when I glanced down from that angle, I sometimes caught a glimpse of a pretty little pink something-or-other.

After a little while, though, I broke the pleasant silence. "So anyway... can I ask why you were crossdressing all this time, Sylphie? What happened to you after the Displacement Incident?"

I wanted to know why she was Princess Ariel's bodyguard, why she'd dyed her hair white, and why she was hiding her identity. I didn't know if it was okay for me to ask those questions, but it seemed worthwhile to try.

"Oh, right. Uhm... where do I even start...?"

Slowly, Sylphie began to walk me through her story.

She began with her training at Buena Village, and her attempts to find out where I was from Zenith and Lilia. They'd ended up thoroughly training her in Healing magic and etiquette, respectively. She also mentioned making me the pendant I still wore to this day.

"So you made this yourself, huh?"

"Why do you even have that, Rudy?"

I'd been hiding the pendant in question inside my clothes for years now. Sylphie had obviously noticed it when I took my clothes off earlier. "Lilia gave it to me when I found her. But she didn't say anything about you making it for me, Sylphie."

"Well, she probably thought I might be dead."

“Ah, I see.” Some people might be okay with carrying around a memento of a dead friend, but others might just be sad and uncomfortable.

“Uhm, mind if I continue my story?”

“Sorry about that. Go right ahead.”

After the Displacement Incident, Sylphie’s life had taken a sharp turn for the stormy and dramatic. She was ejected above a garden in the royal palace with a dangerous monster right below her. After saving Princess Ariel’s life by sheer coincidence, she was granted her present role as her Guardian Mage as a reward.

Somehow, her hair had lost its original color when she was teleported. And the people of the royal capital were so different from what she was used to in their outlook and ambitions that every day left her with a stomachache. She’d been forced to fend off assassins sent to kill Ariel, as the members of the royal family and their supporters struggled for power.

Eventually, they’d been driven from the capital and set off on a journey none of them were ready for. There had been betrayals, deceptions, and moments of desperate danger. But eventually, they’d reached the Ranoa University of Magic, where they began to plot their comeback... at which point I showed up.

“I know it’s not your fault, Rudy...but when you introduced yourself to me like a stranger, it was kind of a shock.”

“I’m sorry about that. But you know, if you’d just told me who you were a little earlier, this wouldn’t have taken nearly so long.”

“Yeah... y-you’re right, I guess. Sorry. It’s my fault for not saying anything, huh...? I’m really...sorry about that...”

Suddenly, tears were rolling down Sylphie’s face. She’d been in anguish over this for some time now, from the looks of things. It wasn’t like she’d withheld the truth just to mess with me or anything. I hadn’t meant to criticize her. “Hey, I’m sorry too. I had a whole year to figure it out, and I didn’t even realize.”

Based on Sylphie’s story, she’d been hiding her identity for a reason, and seemed to think I’d forgotten her entirely. And if I *had* forgotten her, there was a risk I’d tell someone the truth about her if she opened up to me. I did have

connections to the Boreas family, after all. There was a possibility I might even turn out to be an enemy. Keeping quiet was probably the smart call.

Also, I hadn't really given any indication that I was looking for Sylphie at any point in the last year. If she thought I wasn't even worried about her, you *really* couldn't blame her for hesitating, right? Yeah, you couldn't. All sorts of circumstances had gotten in the way. And in the end, she'd opened up to me. That was what really counted.

I wrapped my arms around Sylphie's shoulders and she leaned her head against me. Her body was still a little chilly. I decided to keep her pressed up against me until that improved.

"I just couldn't work up the courage, Rudy. And I guess there was a part of me that kind of liked things the way they were."

"Yeah. It wasn't half-bad being friends with Master Fitz, I've got to say."

However, she'd apparently started to get worried. There were a few pretty girls in my life these days, and she thought one of them was going to snatch me away unless she acted fast. Thanks to my condition, that scenario felt kind of unlikely...but you never know. Say Nanahoshi had found me some magical cure or something. I would have been *very* grateful to her, right? Maybe our relationship would have evolved in some unexpected ways.

In any case, Sylphie had decided to risk everything on one major operation. I'd proven to be oblivious, and routinely sabotaged her plans by trying to be thoughtful. For her part, she tended to chicken out at the last moment, anyway. But this time, she was going to back herself into a corner...and then slap me in the face with the truth until I finally figured it out.

"You really are oblivious, Rudy."

"Yeah, guilty as charged."

I'd once sworn a silent oath to act like a clueless protagonist, but after this, I couldn't make fun of those guys anymore. Sometimes, when there's a lot of complicating factors involved, it really can be hard to realize someone's into you.

If I'd been a little hornier from the start, maybe I would have read the signals

coming from her more clearly. Did all those dumbass harem protagonists just need a Viagra prescription too? That would explain a lot, actually.

“So I guess I ended up walking right into your trap, huh?”

“Uhm, yeah. Sorry. I feel a little bad about tricking you like that.”

“It’s fine. I don’t think it would have worked unless you took things that far.”

At the rate things were going, I would have kept on pretending Fitz was a man indefinitely, assuming I was doing her a favor. And to be honest, I wasn’t sure how well I’d remembered my old friend Sylphie before she gave me that helpful reminder.

“By the way... does Princess Ariel know you’re doing this?”

“Oh, absolutely. She planned the whole thing.”

“Did she really?”

“Yeah.”

That was a relief, then. If Sylphie had acted on her own, it might have been safer to continue pretending that I didn’t know the truth...although the “Fitz” character wasn’t going to go away in either case.

“She was kind of worried about this whole thing, though. She could never figure out what your objectives were, or what you were thinking. I don’t think she had any idea you came here because of your, uh, problem.”

There were rumors about my condition going around, but from the sound of things, she’d probably dismissed them out of hand. Truth can be stranger than fiction sometimes. “Hmm. In that case, maybe I should join her team after all?” Honestly, I still wanted to avoid getting mixed up in dangerous power struggles. But if it would help Sylphie, I’d offer them whatever support I could.

“Princess Ariel’s done a lot for me, so personally I’d be happy to have you on her side... but you don’t want to get mixed up in Asuran politics, right? Don’t force yourself, Rudy.”

Sylphie smiled shyly at me once again. Her cuteness really was amplified by a hundred when she didn’t have those giant sunglasses on. For the second time today, I felt a surge of heat down in my groin. Unable to restrain myself, I

leaned over and licked her ear.

“Aah?!”

“Whoops. Pardon me.” Sylphie’s shriek of surprise scared my rowdy little friend back into hibernation. I really couldn’t seem to control my own libido lately. Still, it was a relief to get any movement at all down there. It seemed like I was on the road to recovery.

All thanks to Sylphie, of course.

“Thank you, Sylphie.”

“Huh? For what...?” Sylphie tilted her head at me in confusion.

We hadn’t made it all the way yet, but this was good enough for now. Rome wasn’t built in a day, right?

Chapter 11:

The Final Push

IT TOOK THREE DAYS for me and Rudy to make it back to the city of Sharia. In that time, we talked about all sorts of things. One of the major topics of conversation was what Rudy had gone through in the last few years. He'd apparently been abandoned by a young lady named Eris, which had left him kind of traumatized. Ever since then, he'd been having trouble "performing" with women.

I'd heard a few rumors about this Eris Boreas Greyrat at the royal court, actually. People said she was uncontrollable and violent, more like a wild beast than a well-bred girl. From what Rudy told me, she probably wasn't quite as bad as I'd imagined her... but still. He'd escorted her from the Demon Continent all the way to Asura, and then she'd just tossed him aside because he wasn't good enough? That was just unbelievable. I told Rudy that if I ever met her, I'd give her a piece of my mind. But he went white as a sheet and told me that was a very bad idea. If nothing else, Eris was a highly skilled swordswoman.

I can't say hearing all this made me feel very happy. At the end of the day, though, it was only thanks to Eris dumping Rudy that we'd been reunited here. At least some good had come of it.

...Had Rudy really come here because of his condition, though? Wasn't he investigating the Displacement Incident?

Well, maybe he'd just been pursuing two goals at once.

Finally, we arrived back at the front gates of the University. By this point, I was back in my usual attire—the costume I wore when I was "Fitz."

"Okay then," I said. "I'm going to go report to Princess Ariel, I guess."

"Sure," said Rudy, with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I'll...see you soon, right?"

It took a moment for me to figure out exactly what he meant by that. Then I put the pieces together, and my face got very hot. I was blushing all the way out to my ears again. “Yeah... of course!”

The two of us were officially dating now, weren’t we?

That made me really happy. My body felt almost weightless. I’d never known what people meant when they talked about “walking on air” before, but now I understood. I headed straight over to the student council room to give Princess Ariel an update on the situation. It was lunchtime now, so she’d almost certainly be there.

I thought about all sorts of stuff as I walked. There were so many things I’d always wanted to do with Rudy. Like...go shopping in the city together, for example. I’d have to be dressed up as a boy for that, though. People might give Rudy some funny looks.

S-Still, that didn’t really matter, right? Not as long as we loved each other.

Then again...boys tended to think about love in a really physical way, didn’t they? Luke always said “If you’re not sleeping together, you’ll eventually drift apart.”

Rudy didn’t seem too interested in my body, though...

Wh-What am I supposed to do about that?

When I stepped into the student council room, Princess Ariel took one look at my face and sighed. “It didn’t work after all, I see.”

“Huh? Uhm, Princess Ariel...?”

“It seemed like a perfect plan at first, but in retrospect...even if there was some risk of you freezing to death, it was silly to expect that he’d tear the clothing off a friend.”

She seemed to have jumped to the wrong conclusion for some reason. That part had gone just fine, actually...

“It’s all right, Sylphie,” interjected Luke. “Just tell us exactly what happened as calmly as you can.”

“Uh, okay. The plan you came up with actually worked really well, Princess Ariel.”

Princess Ariel twitched an eyebrow upward in surprise, but managed to keep her voice steady. “Is that so? I must say, you don’t look particularly overjoyed.”

“Uhm, yeah. About that...”

“I’m sorry. You can explain that later. Start your report, please.”

“Oh, right.”

Trying to calm myself down a little, I described the outcome of our operation step by step. Things had gone exactly as planned for the most part, really. We’d taken shelter in the cave and told each other how we felt next to the fire. In hindsight, it almost sounded like something out of a dream. I could tell I was blushing again.

Princess Ariel looked at me with growing confusion, though. She was obviously wondering what the problem was.

“So anyway, uh... Rudy got a little depressed after that. He said he came to the University to find a cure for his condition, actually.”

“Wait, what?”

“Huh? Uh, you know. He was looking for a way to cure his, uh, impotence.”

“I see. Pardon me. I was a little startled, that’s all.”

Princess Ariel had pressed a hand to her mouth, a disbelieving expression on her face. I could tell what she was thinking: *I’d heard the rumors, but never thought they might be true. Why would you enroll at the University of Magic for such a reason? This is a place to learn magic, not a medical facility.*

“I must say, I’m a bit disappointed in this Rudeus. A man’s got to perform when it counts, doesn’t he? I thought he was oblivious, but I hadn’t expected him to embarrass a lady in this way. Especially one who was brave enough to make the first move.”

Princess Ariel’s words were harsh, but she was probably just trying to keep herself cool and in control. She knew I’d get angry; once I did, she could slip into a soothing, apologetic tone, and move the conversation forward without

revealing her confusion. It was a trick she used very frequently.

But to my surprise, Luke stepped in to object before I could say a word. “Princess Ariel, I think you’re being quite unfair. At times, a man simply can’t help these things; Rudeus didn’t make a conscious choice to spurn Sylphie. In fact, I think this explains why he’s been so hesitant up until now.”

“L-Luke...?”

“I’d *wondered* why he always looked so insecure. Poor man. He must have come here out of sheer desperation, with no idea where to turn for help...”

Luke could be frivolous and even rude sometimes, but he almost never talked back to Princess Ariel. Sometimes he offered her his advice, but he wasn’t the type to flatly dismiss his liege’s opinions in this way. I couldn’t remember him ever speaking to her this firmly before, in fact.

The princess seemed a little taken aback. “...My apologies. I suppose I went a bit too far.”

“It’s all right, Princess Ariel. I wouldn’t expect a woman to understand these things.” With a small nod, Luke turned to face me. “Sylphie, do you want to cure Rudeus’ condition?”

“Huh? Uhm, yeah, of course.” I’d been worrying about myself this whole time. But come to think of it, Rudy had been obviously depressed by the situation. He’d started talking to me really formally, and I’d seen something that looked like fear in his eyes. His hands had been trembling, and not from the cold. “Rudy took what happened really hard. If there’s anything I can do to help, I’ll do it.”

“Even if it’s difficult?”

“S-Sure. I’ll do anything it takes.” A long time ago, Rudy had rescued me from a really miserable situation. I wanted to repay that favor in kind, if I possibly could.

“Very well then. Wait here, will you? There’s something I need to give you. Please excuse me for a moment, Princess Ariel.” Without any further explanations, Luke strode quickly out of the student council room.

Princess Ariel furrowed her brow slightly as she watched him go. “I am sorry,

Sylphie. I shouldn't have said that about Rudeus."

"It's all right, I'm not upset. I'm a little surprised Luke argued with you like that, though. He doesn't do that very often." On top of that, I hadn't expected Luke to stand up for Rudy. I had the impression that he didn't like him very much, and he didn't seem like the type to take the man's side in a situation like this.

"In any case, this does sound like a rather serious obstacle."

"Yeah. What should I do, Princess Ariel...?"

"Well, Luke seems to have a plan of some sort in mind... but I do know of a few cures for impotence myself, as it happens."

"Really?"

"Indeed. It's one of those little things you're taught as a member of the royal family."

That made some sense. When a princess got married off to someone, it was really important for them to have children. Even if their husband had a problem like Rudy's, they'd still need to find a way to make that happen.

"I was taught about this when I was rather young, and I'm afraid I didn't pay that much attention. I do remember a few things, though. In general, you start off by getting them drunk."

"Really? Hmm..." I found myself remembering what I'd seen in the dining hall the other day. Rudy, Zanoba, and King Badigadi had been drinking together, and they were all in a really good mood. I didn't have experience with alcohol myself, but I knew that it made easier for people to behave more boldly than usual. It put you in an altered state of mind, basically... but if Rudy's condition was already abnormal, maybe that meant it would make him "normal," instead?

Princess Ariel went on to list a number of specific methods for seducing men. Rather than physically curing impotence, most of her tips seemed to be about arousing an otherwise disinterested target. Still, I didn't doubt they'd be effective. The royal family of Asura made sure its members were well-educated in all sorts of things.

“...after that, you say you’re feeling hot, and slip your dress down your shoulder just a little.”

“Would that really work?”

“Oh, I imagine it would. You’re *extremely* cute, after all. Once the mood’s right, all you really need is a good finishing line...”

By the time Luke returned, we’d worked out the general outlines of a plan. He listened to us talk for a few seconds in silence, then abruptly interrupted. “What sort of a fool complains about the heat in this frigid weather? Your whole approach is misguided, anyway. Sylphie’s not curvy enough to tempt a man with her body.”

“Ah...”

I found myself at a loss for words, and Princess Ariel shot Luke a reproachful look. “Did you have to put it so bluntly, Luke? The poor girl’s worried sick about this.”

“...Princess Ariel, the men of the Notos Greyrat family are traditionally attracted to women with large breasts. As a case in point, I myself feel no attraction to Sylphie whatsoever.”

The Notos Greyrats loved busty girls. That was common knowledge among anyone who associated with the Asuran nobility, just like the Boreas family’s unnatural love of beastfolk. “S-So you’re saying I can’t seduce him with my body?”

“You can try. It just won’t work.”

I have to admit, hearing that stung a little. Luke’s insults usually didn’t bother me at all, but right now I had no confidence at all in my own attractiveness.

“However...if you convince him to drink this, you’ve got a chance.”

Luke handed me a small bottle that fit neatly in the palm of my hand. I looked down at it in confusion. “What is this thing, Luke?”

“A powerful aphrodisiac that invigorates and arouses anyone who drinks it.”

“An aphrodisiac?!”

Luke nodded deeply. “It was made years ago, in the Fittoa Region, from the petals of the Vatirus flower. The method of its manufacture was known only to the mayor of Roa, who monopolized its sale. Following the Fittoa region’s disappearance, all production ceased. I’m afraid no one knows how to make it anymore. This is very rare stuff, in other words. Its current street price exceeds a hundred gold coins per bottle.”

Back when Luke bought it, it had been worth about fifteen Asuran gold coins. He’d bought five at the time, and had already used two of them himself. The effect was supposedly remarkable. “I’d thought to hold onto this for a rainy day and sell it if I ever found myself in urgent need of money. But I’ll give it to you, Sylphie.”

“What? You’re just going to give me something this valuable?”

“That’s right.”

With a small nod, Luke proceeded to list off several things I needed to be aware of. Once a man took this stuff, his libido essentially went into overdrive. If I couldn’t keep up, it was best for me to take some as well. Also, both of us using it would probably mean our first time wouldn’t be the gentle, romantic occasion I might have pictured.

“Luke... thank you so much.”

“Think nothing of it, Sylphie. You’ve saved my life often enough.”

Luke and I had formed an odd friendship of sorts over the years. I was deeply grateful for that now.

There was another person in the room, however, and she didn’t like being left out of anything. “You two get along so well, don’t you? I suppose I ought to chip in as well.”

Smiling like a saint, Princess Ariel handed me two Asuran gold coins. Which might not sound like much, but it was enough to buy almost anything I wanted in this city.

“But Princess Ariel! This is your personal money, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Everything I got for this month.”

Since arriving at the University of Magic, we'd put a lot of effort into securing financial resources, and we had a good stash of money by now. But those were our war funds, reserved for our future plans. We kept it separate from our day-to-day spending money. Princess Ariel was well aware that both she and Luke tended to get careless with their spending, so she'd agreed to strictly limit their access to our funds.

"Now that things have reached this point, this is about the most I can do to help you."

"You've done so much already, Princess Ariel... I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"Heh. As benevolent as always, your Highness."

The three of us had gotten a little carried away, in retrospect. We were all feeling very proud of ourselves for putting our friendship first. Still, this episode did bring us closer together. That's got to count for something, right? The three of us had united to stand fast against a common enemy: my new boyfriend's erectile dysfunction.

"Good luck out there, Sylphie."

"Thank you both so much! I'm going to do this!"

Energized for the long battle ahead, I walked confidently out of the student council room. I was heading for Sharia's Commerce district. For a liquor store, to be precise.

Night had fallen, and I was standing in a hallway with two bottles of pricey liquor in my bag. To be perfectly honest, I didn't know much about alcohol. I'd never even drunk the stuff before, for one thing. And I had no idea what Rudy liked. However, I felt confident that stuff this expensive couldn't be *too* bad.

I'd also changed into a new set of underwear before coming over. I was wearing the set that Princess Ariel had picked out for me a little while ago. It felt like a good time to give my Steelsilk Bustier the night off.

Of course, I also had a certain small bottle in the pocket of my uniform.

"Okay..." Everything was ready. I was going to be fine.

Still, I had to give myself a minute to take a few long, deep breaths. *Mom and Dad... give me your blessing, please. I'm going to become a woman tonight...*

Once I'd finally steeled my nerves, I reached out and knocked on the door in front of me. Was there any chance that Rudy would be off with Zanoba at this time of night? No, no, this was going to be fine. He'd said he was going to rest up tonight.

"Yes...? Oh, Syl— Master Fitz. Come on in."

When Rudy opened the door, he looked surprised to find me standing there. At his invitation, I stepped into his room. I also took the liberty of closing and locking the door behind me.

"What's the matter?" Rudy asked, his voice gentle.

We'd both agreed it would be best to take a night to recover from our trip, but here I was anyway. "Uhm... I came to spend the night, actually."

"...Oh. O-Okay! Well, why don't you sit down, then?"

I got the impression Rudy wanted to make a comment about this, but he kept it to himself and just offered me a chair instead. His expression actually looked a little...discouraged. I wasn't interrupting anything, was I? This *was* going to work, right?

I sat down slowly, took off my sunglasses, and took the two bottles of liquor out of my bag. I set them down on the table along with a little snack I'd made—some mixed nuts with spicy flavoring. I'd also picked up some smoked meat in case Rudy didn't care for them.

"What's all this?"

"Well, I thought we could... celebrate our reunion or something, you know?"

"...Right, of course. Yeah, we really should commemorate the occasion, huh?" Scratching at his cheek, Rudy sat down as well.

At this point, I realized we didn't have any cups. That was kind of a problem, unless we were going to start guzzling it straight out of the bottle. Did I need to go back and get some?

"Don't worry, I've got cups. I do have *some* possessions, you know."

Somehow reading my mind, Rudy stood up with a wry smile and took a pair of cups from a shelf at the side of the room.

They were grey and had a perfectly smooth surface. Were these made of some sort of rock, maybe? They felt a little heavy in your hand. Apart from the weight, though, they looked like something an Asuran noble might have owned. “These look expensive.”

“I made them myself with Earth magic, actually. Guess that makes them priceless.”

“No kidding? Wow, that’s incredible.” It made sense, though. He really was good at this sort of thing, wasn’t he?

I opened the first bottle and poured some of the amber-colored liquid out into our cups. Rudy narrowed his eyes slightly as he watched. “That looks like pretty strong stuff.”

“Yeah. I don’t know anything about liquor, but I brought some expensive ones.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s fine. This is a special occasion, after all.”

Was he worried about how much I’d spent on these? I’d have to keep it to myself that Princess Ariel had given me the money for them. Knowing Rudy, he’d probably feel like he owed her something.

In any case, I’d poured the drinks and put out our snacks. So far so good. The aphrodisiac... was supposed to come out later in the evening. Right.

“Well then, let’s have a toast. To the reunion of two old friends from Buena Village!”

“...And to our future together, Sylphie.”

“Ch-Cheers!”

O-Our future together...? Honestly, sometimes Rudy said the most embarrassing things out of nowhere. Feeling myself blushing again, I took a big gulp from my cup—

And promptly choked on it.

What *was* this stuff? My throat was on fire!

“Are you all right? Maybe we should have watered it down after all.”

“Watered...it down...?”

“When you’re drinking something this strong, people usually dilute it a little bit to make it easier to drink.”

Wait, really? Nobody bothered mentioning that to me. Rudy had a slightly amused smile on his face, which ticked me off a little. “Well, how would I know that? I’ve never even tried this stuff before.”

“Hey, I’m not laughing at you or anything. Hold on just a second, okay?” Rudy moved the majority of the liquid in my cup over to his, then summoned some steaming hot water into mine using magic. “Go ahead, try that.”

Slightly reluctant, I took a tentative sip. The painfully strong smell that had lingered in the back of my nose was washed away, replaced by a gentler and more pleasant aroma. This was actually pretty good.

“That reminds me...that hot water trick was the reason I started learning magic from you, wasn’t it?”

“Hmm. Was it?”

“What, did you forget? One of those bullies had thrown mud on me in the street, and you washed it off.”

That really brought me back. Even as a child, Rudy could silently cast combined magic without even thinking twice about it. I still couldn’t pull that off the way he could; I had to use different spells in quick succession to produce a similar effect.

“Oh, right. Wow, that brings back some memories...”

“Yeah.”

That got us started reminiscing about the good old days. My memories of Buena Village were beginning to grow a little fuzzy, but when we started talking about the subject, lots of things came back to me.

We could never go back to that period of our lives again. For one thing, Buena Village was gone for good. That hill we'd played on was still there, but the tree had disappeared. They *had* been good times, though. I spent my days playing and practicing magic without a care in the world, and the progress I made day by day always left me overjoyed. I still got excited when I managed to improve my skills or learned something new, though these days, I was usually thinking about how I could put a spell to use in battle.

"I really miss those days..." The longer we talked, the more mellow I felt. Was this what it felt like to get drunk? Hmm. "Oh! Wait. Before I forget..."

Snapping out of my nostalgic haze, I took the little bottle out of my breast pocket and slowly placed it on the table.

Rudy tilted his head quizzically. "What's this?"

"Uhm, well... it's a special kind of medicine. For your problem."

I'd been really unsure about the best way to get Rudy to drink the aphrodisiac. I could have mixed it into his drink without him noticing, but that felt like a pretty nasty trick to play on someone you cared about. Then again, coming out and admitting I'd brought an aphrodisiac might cause him to misunderstand some things. I didn't like that idea very much either. So I'd decided to call it "medicine." That wasn't exactly a lie, either.

"Really...? Hmm. I feel like I've seen this stuff somewhere before."

"Yeah, really. Uhm, I was hoping you'd give it a try, Rudy."

Rudy smiled a little sadly at this. It was obvious he wasn't optimistic. He'd probably tried many supposed cures, none of which had ever worked. Still, he took a swig from the bottle without a word, draining two-thirds of its contents at once. I was a little amazed how readily he'd swallowed all that dangerous-looking pink liquid just on my word. What if it had been poison or something?

Oh. I'd forgotten to tell him how much to take.

"It's okay to take this stuff with alcohol, right?" asked Rudy.

"Uhm, they said it was fine to mix it in a drink, even. A-Also, it uh... takes effect really quickly, from what I hear."

I was already taking off my cloak as I spoke these words. That left me wearing nothing but my shirt and bra up top. I felt a little chilly, honestly. According to Luke, I didn't need to bother showing off my shoulder as long as he could see my neck and my breasts clearly.

"If it does start working, well... you don't have to hold back, okay?"

Rudy's eyebrows twitched at that. His gaze was fixed on my upper body. It was kind of embarrassing when he stared at me this openly. But I guess I was... seducing him, wasn't I? Hopefully I wasn't coming off as totally shameless... It was going to be okay, right? He wouldn't mind, would he?

I felt like I was getting more nervous than he was. I'd been hoping that the alcohol would give me a little more courage than this, honestly.

Maybe I needed to commit myself more fully.

...O-Okay then. With a small nod, I reached out for the little bottle of aphrodisiac.

"What? Are you taking some too, Sylphie?" Rudy asked, understandably confused.

Instead of answering, I drained all the pink liquid that remained inside. It was thick and slightly bitter, but I washed it down with a little alcohol and swallowed hard.

Almost instantly, I could feel a strange warmth growing down around the pit of my stomach. Trying to distract myself, I reached out for the bowl of nuts. After eating three handfuls, I took another swig of liquor. My first glass was empty now.

"You shouldn't drink too quickly, Sylphie. You might make yourself sick."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just kind of nervous, that's all."

"Ah, right. I guess it is your first time drinking..."

Rudy sipped steadily at his own drink as we spoke. He hadn't watered down his glass, so he wasn't gulping it down the way I was. After a few moments, he reached for the bottle and poured me a little more, diluting it with hot water just like before.

For a while after that, the two of us ate and drank in silence. The smoked meat turned out to be too salty and not particularly good, but for some reason I couldn't stop nibbling at it. After a while, my whole body started to get hot. The area just above my thighs, in particular, was practically throbbing. The stuff sure seemed to be working.

Was it doing anything for Rudy, though?

He looked the same as ever. Just as handsome as always. Maybe *more* handsome than always, in fact.

My eyes kept finding parts of him I didn't usually pay much attention to. His neck, his mouth... I was starting to get in a kind of naughty mood. Was it just my imagination, or was Rudy's face getting redder?

Our eyes met. Rudy was staring straight at me. It was an intense stare, too. He hadn't looked away from my eyes for a while now. I could hear him breathing roughly.

Wait, no. That was me, wasn't it? How embarrassing. But it wasn't exactly my fault, was it? I'd taken that aphrodisiac, and my head was spinning from the liquor. That meant it wasn't my fault.

Yeah. Not my fault.

I felt so *hot*.

I undid the top button of my shirt, exposing more skin to the air. I'd thought it was kind of chilly in here at first, but now I was burning up. Rudy was staring at my breasts now, but I didn't feel embarrassed anymore.

I took another swig from my cup. Hot liquid slid down into my stomach, spreading even more warmth throughout my body. I was all done with my second glass. I reached out for the bottle...only to be intercepted.

"Oh..." Rudy had reached out and grabbed my hand. His grip was strong enough that I knew he wasn't planning to let go. Not that I had any intention of running from him, of course. "Sylphie..."

Staring at me with bloodshot eyes, Rudy rose to his feet. He circled around the table to come beside me, still grasping my hand. And then, a little

hesitantly, he tugged me upward. I let him pull me up out of my chair, making no effort to resist.

“You, uh... can’t contain yourself, huh?”

Rudy nodded silently. He slipped a hand around my waist and caressed my bottom, then pulled my body tightly to his. Something very hard was pressing up against me.

It worked. Oh wow. It worked.

The moment had finally come. It was time to break out the closing line I’d worked out in advance with Princess Ariel. “O-Okay then. Go ahead and eat me up, Rudy...”

The instant those words left my mouth, he pushed me onto the bed.

And then—



Rudeus

I OPENED MY EYES and stared up at the underside of the top bunk. I was in my room. And I remembered the events of last night clearly.

Not too long after we started drinking, I'd suddenly gotten so aroused that I couldn't even control myself. I'd practically thrown myself on Sylphie. That "medicine" she'd brought over was amazingly effective. I'd never known such a thing existed, but I couldn't shake the feeling I'd seen the stuff somewhere before.

...Oh, right. It was that aphrodisiac I'd seen a merchant selling in the city of Roa, wasn't it?

This was the first time I'd ever tried the stuff, but it was incredibly potent. My little man had popped out of his room in a frenzy to go on a total rampage. By the time the madness finally ended, I was so drained I felt like I might melt into a puddle. Clearly, there was a reason that stuff had been going for ten gold coins back then.

As impressed as I was, though, I also found myself struggling to hold back a wave of fear and anxiety. I'd acted like a madman last night, yes. But I did remember everything I'd done. To be honest, I'd been really rough with Sylphie. She'd tried very hard to keep up with me, but she'd obviously been in some pain. It was her first time, after all.

She never complained or even asked me to slow down, though. It was obvious she was pushing herself, but she just kept saying *I'm fine, I love you, and it feels good* on a running loop. I hadn't paid any attention to her body language. I hadn't spared a thought for how she was feeling. The way she'd whispered in my ear just got me more excited. I hadn't taken it easy on her at *all*.

This was only the second time in my long life that I'd slept with someone. I wasn't at all confident that I'd done a good job. In fact, I was convinced I'd behaved even worse than I did on my first time. Even worse than I'd behaved on *that* night.

And the morning after that... Eris wasn't lying next to me in bed.

Slowly, I looked over to the side. My eyes met someone else's.

"Good morning, Rudy."

Sylphie was there. Smiling bashfully at me.

I reached out slowly and touched her hair to confirm that she wasn't a hallucination at least. Sylphie closed her eyes and let me stroke her head with a look of pleasure on her face. Her hair was short, but it was also wonderfully silky.

I let my hand keep moving—first, down her neck and to her slender shoulders. They felt so delicate every time I touched them.

But I wasn't finished, of course. I brought my hand down to her breasts and squeezed.

"Hyaah! Wha... Rudy!" Sylphie flinched in surprise shot me a look of protest. She didn't move away, though. Her face went red, but she let me continue.

Sylphie's chest was truly modest. There wasn't much to grab hold of. Still, there was definitely a distinctive softness cradled in my palm. For a moment, I saw the ghostly image of an old man giving me the thumbs up and shouting the wise words "All breasts are created equal!" in my direction.

Thank you, Wise Old Hermit. Long time no see.

Sylphie was lying there next to me, all right. No doubt about it. And thanks to the softness of her body, my monolith was rising toward the skies once again. Imposing and manly, it towered above its surroundings, as it was always meant to do.

Gazing down at it in awe, I was convinced of something very important. "I'm cured."

I hugged Sylphie. I hugged her very tightly. And I started crying... just a little.

"Uhm, Rudy...? What do you think? My body's...okay, right?"

Perhaps a little confused by my sudden dramatics, Sylphie tentatively asked for an explanation. But if she had any memory of last night, she had to know

that question didn't need to be answered.

“Thank you.” Instead of telling her something she already knew, I just expressed my gratitude. It was the only thing I could do, in that moment.

My mind was full of happiness and embarrassment. I was afraid I might say something extremely idiotic if I tried to talk right now. Something like... “Thanks for the meal.” Or “The service was top notch.” Or, god help me, “You’re vewy, vewy kyoot!”

I didn't want to make a total fool of myself. So instead, I just hugged her tightly to express my gratitude.

At long last, my struggle had come to an end.

Interlude: Sylphiette (Part 0)

THAT NIGHT, I dreamed about the past—about Rudy’s arrival at the University.

It was my third year at the Ranoa University of Magic. Linia and Pursena had settled down after their defeat, and *Princess Ariel* had secured the position of student council president. Those successes had attracted many new supporters to our camp; everything was going relatively smoothly. By this point, we’d recruited as many of the school’s influential students and faculty as we could. We decided to start luring powerful potential allies to the University of Magic, where we could then attempt to secure their cooperation. And as we worked on this, we stumbled across something totally unexpected.

Specifically, our research led us to a person known as “Quagmire Rudeus.” I knew immediately that it had to be Rudy. Quagmire was described as a young magician who’d quickly worked his way up to the A rank in the Adventurers’ Guild. He’d only been in this region for a few years, but word of his exploits had already spread throughout the Magic Nations. His specialty was Earth magic. It was hard to judge how powerful he truly was from the rumors, but most said he could summon a bog without speaking a word.

The silent spellcasting was the detail that convinced me it had to be him. And in hindsight, he’d used mud-based magic the very first time we met, too. Rudy could use Saint-tier Water magic, so people tended to expect him to rely on that. But he’d favored using clever tricks like blasting himself around with shockwaves, or summoning bogs to slow down his opponents.

I explained to *Princess Ariel* that Quagmire Rudeus was almost certainly the boy who’d taught me magic—my old friend who’d been missing for many years.

“Well, if he’s the genuine article, it would certainly be nice to have him on our side...”

At the time, *Princess Ariel* was obviously skeptical about Rudy. That was understandable. The rumors going around about him sounded really fishy. They went something like this:

Rudeus Greyrat was born in Buena Village, located in the Fittoa Region of the Kingdom of Asura. While only three years old, he began studying under the King-tier Water mage Roxy Migurdia (although she was only Saint-tier at the time). At the age of five, he became a Saint-tier Water magician in his own right. At seven, he took a position as the tutor of Eris Boreas Greyrat, the daughter of the mayor of the Citadel of Roa; over the next few years, he transformed this wild, uncontrollable child into a respectable young lady. After this, he went missing in the Displacement Incident.

Back in the day, I probably wouldn't have raised an eyebrow at any of this. But now, after the time I'd spent living in the Silver Palace and studying at the University of Magic... I had to admit, it sounded bizarre. Even fictional.

Of course, I knew that Rudy really *had* studied under Roxy, and that he respected her deeply. I'd never met Roxy myself, but I knew she'd spent some time in Buena Village. In fact, the wand I carried was something she'd given to Rudy. The part about him becoming a tutor at the age of seven made sense, too; that would've been right when he was shipped out of the village by his parents.

"Trust me, Princess Ariel, this information is accurate. It's definitely him."

"Perhaps so. But I must say, in all honesty, that these rumors are rather difficult to believe."

Princess Ariel and Luke hadn't been convinced by my claims. They trusted that I wasn't deliberately lying to them, but they didn't fully buy the story either. I couldn't blame them. I knew Rudy personally, and it sounded crazy even to me.

"In any case, would such a remarkable magician really lend us his aid? Let alone one with ties to the Boreas Greyrats?"

I still wasn't that familiar with the tangled web of alliances and rivalries that defined the noble families of Asura. I'd only spent a year at court, and there was just too much to learn. But I did know a good deal about the various Greyrat branches. The Boreas family was loyal to the first prince. That made them our

enemies. And if Rudy was working for them, there was a good chance he was our enemy too.

That said, it seemed fairly obvious that he'd cut ties with them some time ago. Otherwise, it wouldn't make much sense for him to be wandering around the Northern Territories as an adventurer. "I-I'm sure he'll help us out if I ask him..."

My voice wasn't particularly confident. I couldn't even convince myself that it was true.

Luke snorted in amusement. "With a chest that flat, you're not going to win over any Notos man."

I covered my chest with my arm and shot Luke an angry look. He was *always* like this. He never missed a chance to mock me about the flatness of my chest. According to him, women without "proper breasts" weren't even women, which meant I was the definition of unattractive. I'm not sure what he wanted me to do about that. I had elf blood in my veins, and elves just aren't voluptuous.

To be fair, Luke usually softened the blow in the end: "I suppose that's the reason that we're friends, though."

It was nice to know that he thought of me as a friend. Still, the constant insults about my appearance weren't exactly doing wonders for my self-esteem. I knew my looks were unremarkable compared to *Princess Ariel's*, but that was a really high bar to clear.

"That's not even what I meant, Luke!"

"Well, what *did* you mean, then? Surely you don't intend to reveal your true identity to him."

"Huh? Oh... you're right." I was supposed to be Silent Fitz now. I couldn't go around blowing my cover... what now?

"Still, I'm very happy for you, Sylphie," said *Princess Ariel* with a smile. "It must be wonderful to find someone you've been looking for all this time."

Really, the princess was a kind person. Sometimes she could be very stern,

and she did spend a lot of time cooking up all sorts of sneaky plots, but deep down she had a good heart. I knew that by now. But even so, I wasn't expecting what came next.

"I'll make a special exception. You can reveal your identity to this Rudeus."

"Huh?" *What? She's willing to unmask Silent Fitz?* "But Princess Ariel, our whole plan might fall apart..."

I was conscious of the importance of the role I played in our overall strategy. Fitz was the living embodiment of *Princess Ariel's* power. He was a man of mysterious origins and remarkable magical skills who stayed silently by her side, obeying her every order. It added greatly to her mystique, and made her seem much more intimidating.

Over the last few years, I'd come to realize that I was powerful enough to beat an average magician or swordsman handily. I suppose Rudy had trained me well. I wasn't yet at the King-or Imperial-tier, let alone that of the Seven Great Powers, but I could probably hold my own against a Sword Saint. I was no match for the King-tier warriors some of the other contenders for the throne could call on, but right now I was the strongest weapon in the arsenal of *Princess Ariel's* faction. There were a good number of people at the University who'd decided to support her because she'd won the loyalty of someone as strong as "Fitz." If word got out that I was actually just a common girl from a backwoods village, those people might very well break away from our camp.

My abilities were still real either way, of course...but people don't always think about these things too logically.

"You've done a great deal for me already, Sylphie. Surely I owe you an emotional reunion with your friend, at the very least."

"But—"

"Should that somehow result in all our plans falling to pieces, I'm willing to accept that outcome," Ariel interrupted, her voice firm and decisive. "And in any case, if we're going to cajole this young man to our side, who better to recruit him than his childhood friend?"

"...Thank you, Princess Ariel." I hesitated for a moment, but ended up simply

expressing my gratitude. The *princess* was obviously angling for some personal profit here as well, but that didn't bother me at this point.

What was Rudy going to think when he saw me now, all grown up? I was already looking forward to it.

Our plan to lure Rudy to the University went very smoothly. We passed our information on him to the administration, lightly hinting that it might be a good idea to recruit him. Vice-Principal Jenius took care of the rest without any further nudging.

A few months later, the day I'd been waiting for finally arrived. I was in a practical skills class in the training hall when the vice-principal walked in with someone right behind him. When I saw who it was, I very nearly shouted out in joy.

It's Rudy! It's really Rudy!

There was no doubt about it. His face looked a little gloomier than before, but it was definitely Rudy. There was no mistaking him.

Oh wow! He's so handsome!

You could still see traces of the boy I'd known back home, but he'd done a lot of growing up. His movements were smooth and steady, too—it was obvious he'd done a lot of training. The robe he wore was slightly tattered, but that just added a nice hint of danger. You could tell he'd been through many battles in that thing. He carried his staff with practiced ease.

As he walked into the training hall, Rudy looked all around him, studying his surroundings carefully. It was something he'd been doing ever since we were kids. *I thought I was going to marry him back then, but maybe he's out of my league...* The longer I stared at him, the hotter my body grew.

Seized by a sudden impulse, I took a sharp step forward, ready to run over calling out his name. "Ru—"

But just as I started to speak, I froze on the spot. A very beautiful woman had just stepped into the hall behind Rudy.

Wait... is that Rudy's wife?

She was an elf, from the looks of things. Something about her kind of reminded me of my dad. Her face was elegant and dignified; she looked a bit like a queen, or maybe a wealthy noblewoman. And she was hanging *all over* Rudy. He seemed a little exasperated by her behavior, but he didn't complain or push her away.

...Huh? Huh?

As I stood there watching, stunned and bewildered, I lost my chance to run over and greet him.

A few minutes later, I was called over to help administer Rudy's "entrance exam." I guess they wanted to verify that he really could cast spells silently.

By this point, I'd managed to calm down somewhat. It wasn't strange that Rudy had a gorgeous woman in his life, given how handsome he'd become. That was what I kept telling myself. It didn't matter if he was married now. It really didn't. The two of us were just friends, after all. Why would it be a problem?

I'd have to congratulate him. Well, not right away, of course. First we could take some time to celebrate that we were both alive. Holding these thoughts firmly in my mind, I braced myself for my first conversation with Rudy in many years.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Rudeus Greyrat."

I froze in place.

A pleasure... to meet me?

Huh? Uh... what? No way. Hold on. Did he... forget about me?

"Provided everything goes smoothly, I'll be a first-year starting next semester. If you find me lacking in any way, I hope you'll help guide and encourage me along."

"Ah... huh?"

After a few totally bewildered moments, I finally remembered I was wearing a

large pair of sunglasses, had white hair now, and was dressed up like a boy. On top of all that, eight years had passed since the two of us were parted. I'd grown much taller over that time. It would be silly to expect him to recognize me immediately.

I'd gotten too far inside my own head. I'd recognized him, so I just assumed he'd recognize me. I hadn't been thinking straight, plain and simple. All I had to do was take off my sunglasses and tell him who I really was. *Princess Ariel* had already given me permission. I couldn't do it in public, but I could always call him somewhere private later.

But even as I was thinking this, another thought flashed through my mind. A very ugly one.

Rudy doesn't remember me anymore, does he...?

Once I allowed myself to think this, my fate was sealed. My sunglasses weren't going anywhere. What if I showed him my face, told him my name, and he *still* said "Sorry, who are you again?"

The thought of that was too painful to bear.

"Oh, y-yes!" I stuttered awkwardly. All the things I'd planned to tell Rudy were gone, scattered to the wind. I didn't even know what I should say to him anymore. And before I had the chance to gather my thoughts, the exam got underway.

I lost our duel. Rudy totally crushed me.

He started by binding my magic with some spell I'd never seen before. As I stood there helpless, he fired off an unbelievably powerful Stone Cannon spell that grazed my cheek. He could have hit me if he wanted to, of course. He took it easy on me.

All the progress I'd made as a magician felt completely irrelevant. Rudy had moved far, far ahead of me.

"H-how did you do that just now?" It was the only thing I could even manage to ask him.

"It's called Disturb Magic. You don't know of it?"

I'd never even heard of it. It was probably some obscure secret spell passed down among the members of a specific tribe or something. I doubted anyone else in the University would recognize the name.

Rudy's amazing...

I'd known that from the start, of course. But he'd *really* driven it home. I couldn't help feeling a little awed by him. I'd worked my butt off for years to get where I was, but he'd somehow grown far more than I had.

As I stared at Rudy, he slowly bowed to me. "Thank you, sir! For purposefully losing so I could look good in front of everyone else!"

"Huh?"

Now I was even more confused than before. Rudy wasn't making any sense at all. I hadn't stood a chance against him, and he had to know that. What was he *talking* about? Totally nonplussed, I shook Rudy's hand when he offered it to me. It didn't feel like a magician's hand—more like that of a swordsman. There were callouses on it where blisters had formed and broken. Rudy had probably spent more time with a sword in his hand than Luke, even. And he wasn't even a swordsman.

Even in my state of confusion, I felt my heart beating harder than before. Rudy's warmth was spreading through my hand, and it made me irrationally happy.

He kept right on saying things that made no sense, though. "I'll be sure to thank you properly later." What was he talking about? I really didn't understand. Feeling myself begin to blush, I just nodded.

Once he left, I remembered that he hadn't recognized me all over again. I had to take some time to cry.

A month later, I saw Rudy at the entrance ceremony. He looked even sharper than before, now that he was wearing our school uniform. When our eyes met, my heart skipped a beat.

Still, he'd enrolled here as a special student. There probably wasn't much left

for him to learn here, so I figured we wouldn't run into each other very often. After the entrance exam, I'd discussed the matter with the others, and we'd decided that I shouldn't approach Rudy too aggressively if he didn't remember me. *Princess Ariel* and Luke said all sorts of things to justify their opinion on this, but they mostly just seemed upset that Rudy had forgotten me. That cheered me a little. I could tell they cared about me as a friend.

Ultimately, the *princess* said she'd leave the matter up to me. It seemed we wouldn't be recruiting him to our cause immediately, but we could always wage a slower campaign to win him over, as we had with many others. She added that "Fitz," as a fellow silent spellcaster, was best suited to the job of recruiting him. In hindsight, I think she was well aware that I had feelings for Rudy.

How should I even start talking to him, though...?

For the rest of the day following the ceremony, I thought it over while sitting through classes with *Princess Ariel*. The princess was expected to be an exemplar for the other students, so she had to maintain superb grades. Sometimes it's tough being on top.

They taught combined magic very differently here, for some reason. Rudy had supposedly learned it from his master Roxy, who'd studied at this school, so I'd expected the methods of instruction to be familiar. I felt like they made it really complicated. Still, I had Rudy's teachings to fall back on, so I usually figured things out sooner or later. *Princess Ariel* and Luke, on the other hand, were struggling. I did my best to help, but when I tried to explain things the way Rudy had, it often just confused them more.

"Fitz, could you go bring me anything that might help with the next class?"

When my explanations weren't enough, *Princess Ariel* often asked me to stop by the library to look for helpful reference material. The library here was its own building, and there wasn't that much time before our next class. Still, I'd been visiting it for three years now, so I had a good idea where to find books on any particular subject. It only took me a moment to picture where I'd find the material she needed.

Once I made it over there, I moved quickly through the aisles, grabbing one book after another. At this rate, I'd be back in no time.

But then I saw a certain someone standing in front of a nearby bookshelf and let out a small gasp of surprise. “Oh!”

Rudy was in the library too. I’d been thinking about finding an excuse to go see him in the next few days, but now I’d bumped into him by sheer coincidence. *Wh-What do I say?!*

Just as I was starting to panic, Rudy glanced over and noticed me. And a moment later, he bowed his head deeply.

“I apologize for the other day. It was my shallow actions that caused you to lose face. I planned to bring you a box of sweets, but unfortunately, as a new student, I’ve been busy with so many things...”

“Guh?! N-no, it’s fine, please don’t bow.”

Apparently, Rudy was under the impression that I was upset with him. That was a surprise...but it did explain why he’d made up that nonsense after the exam. Come to think of it, he *had* kind of embarrassed me in public, hadn’t he? Yeah.

...Maybe that had something to do with why *Princess Ariel* had seemed so upset earlier, too. I’d gone in assuming that I didn’t stand a chance against Rudy, although I hadn’t expected him to beat me *that* soundly. But *Princess Ariel* and Luke were probably a bit unhappy that I’d lost at all.

That wasn’t important right now, though. I’d have to think about it later.

“Rudy—um, I mean, Rudeus, was it? What are you doing here?”

“Just a bit of research.”

“Into what?”

“The Displacement Incident.”

Those words brought me up short for a moment. Was there any chance he’d been thinking something along the same lines as me?

“The Displacement Incident? Why?”

“I lived in Asura Kingdom’s Fittoa Region, and I was teleported to the Demon Continent after the incident.”

“The Demon Continent?!”

Once again, I found myself too startled for words. I’d heard about the Demon Continent, of course. It was supposedly a terribly harsh place where every single monster was D-ranked or tougher. Some devoted swordsmen sometimes travelled there to train themselves, but most never returned. The people who landed there during the Displacement Incident were said to have no chance of survival. But Rudy had made his way back in one piece.

“Yes. It took three years for me to return home. My family has all been found since, but there’s still one acquaintance of mine that’s missing. This seemed like a good opportunity to do a little research.”

“Is that why you came to this school?”

“That’s right.”

That was incredible. Honestly incredible.

“I see. You really are amazing, after all.”

He’d spent three long years making it back from the Demon Continent. And then, instead of breathing a big sigh of relief, he went searching for other people, which was impressive in itself. But when the University reached out to him, he jumped at the invitation as a chance to learn more about the Incident. Talk about determination. If I’d been in his shoes, I would have collapsed in exhaustion the moment I made it back home and spent the next couple years hanging around a refugee camp.

“And what, might I ask, are you doing here?”

The question snapped me out of my reverie. I’d forgotten all about the reference books I was supposed to be bringing back to *Princess Ariel*. I wanted to keep talking to Rudy, honestly, but I couldn’t just leave her hanging. Class was going to start soon.

“Oh yeah. I’m carrying some documents with me. I have to go now. I’ll see you again, Rudeus.”

“Yeah, sure, see you.”

As I turned away to check out the material I’d gathered, something suddenly

occurred to me. This library was really big and had tons of books in it, but there were relatively few that had information relevant to the Teleportation Incident. Rudy might be brilliant, but tracking down the stuff he was looking for would probably take him a while.

“Oh, right. You should read a book by Animus that’s about teleportation, called *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth*. It’s creative nonfiction, but easy to read.”

Just for starters, I recommended him a book that had helped me understand teleportation. It was simple enough that even a child could learn the basics from it. And it also mentioned some specific details that were often torn out of the more advanced books on the subject.

Feeling slightly pleased with myself, I left the library behind.

That evening, I was washing a load of underwear. *Princess Ariel’s* underwear, specifically.

There was a reason that this job had fallen to me. First of all, the *princess’* underwear was made of extremely expensive fabric. And the fact that they had been worn by an Asuran princess added considerably to their value. In other words, you could sell them for *quite* a lot of money on the black market. There’d been an incident not long after we enrolled here, actually. Some of her panties had been stolen after we sent them off to be washed. Of the five that were washed, four disappeared; three of these were subsequently sold, and the male student responsible kept one for his own private purposes. Some of the more innocent girls in our dormitory had shrieked in disgust when this incident came to light. But for *Princess Ariel*—who’d grown up in the royal court of Asura—and myself, who’d served as her attendant for a brief time, it wasn’t really shocking. There had been *many* people in that place who did far more depraved things on a regular basis.

That didn’t mean the situation wasn’t unpleasant, though. Since then, doing the princess’ laundry had become one of my official duties. She’d hesitated slightly to push the job on me, but I could wash my own clothes at the same time, so it wasn’t much of an inconvenience.

Incidentally, in order to disguise my gender, I now wore the exact same panties as the princess—only in a different color.

I finished up the day's washing and headed to the balcony to put out the underwear to dry. The rest could wait, but we wanted these ready for tomorrow. But just as I was starting to hang them on the clothesline...

"Huh?"

I happened to glance down at the road below, and saw something that made me blink in surprise. There was a male student walking along the path, even though the sun had set.

The dormitory rules were very strict on this: men weren't allowed to walk this way after dark. Nobody wanted their panties stolen, and although it wasn't that time of year yet, there was also the mating season to consider. What was this boy thinking, coming here at this hour? Maybe he was just taking a shortcut back to his own dorm. But even if that was the case, he'd probably be surrounded by the "self-defense committee" from the first floor soon enough.

Should I tip them off right now, actually? The first person who spotted a boy at this hour was supposed to let everyone else know. I wasn't supposed to talk out loud if I could help it, though...

W-Wait a second, am I seeing things?

As the boy drew closer, I realized it was Rudy. *What's he doing here?!*

In my surprise, my hands slipped. The pair of panties I was holding fluttered downward through the air... right toward Rudy. The instant they flitted by his face, he caught them with a quick snap of his hand.

He's so fast...!

He *never* let down his guard, did he? The sheer speed of that reaction told me something about what it took to make it across the Demon Continent alive.

After a few seconds, Rudy seemed to realize that what he was holding was a pair of underwear. He looked upward, spotted me, and lifted the panties as if to say "you dropped this." It was a slow, casual gesture, very different from his reflexive movement earlier.

Oh, of course! He just enrolled today! He doesn't know!

Rudy was a special student, and they all got a room to themselves. I'd heard they were also exempted from all sorts of typical dorm duties... including attendance at the meetings where we explained the local rules.

I needed to warn him right now. If he stood outside our dorm holding a pair of panties, somebody was definitely going to get the wrong idea.

"Gyaaaah! Panty thief!"

My fears became reality almost instantly. A girl screamed from below, the self-defense committee that lived on the first floor came running out, and Rudy was quickly surrounded.... *Well, it's Rudy, though. Maybe he'll be able to wriggle out of this.*

Rather than intervening immediately, I succumbed to some optimistic thinking.

I was somewhat interested in seeing how Rudy would handle this situation. Would he just take them all down, like he beat those bullies back in Buena Village? Or maybe he'd come up with some clever excuse and talk his way out of it? There was also the "scare them off with some magic" approach. And the classic "make a run for it."

I watched and waited in anticipation... but Rudy didn't do much. A girl named Goliade had seized him by the arm, and he just looked at her unhappily. Seeing him like that reminded me of the way I'd been bullied back in Buena Village. All of a sudden, there was a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach.

What the hell am I doing?!

Silently cursing myself, I leapt from the balcony, landed on the ground, and ran over to the group.

"Oh, what's this? You plan on resisting? How gutsy for a panty thief! You really think you can fight this many people?"

It was dark, so the others didn't seem to realize, but Rudy had fixed his legs to the ground with Earth magic. I didn't understand the reason why, though. Maybe there wasn't one? I mean, this was *Rudy*. It was hard to imagine his legs

were shaking or anything...

But even as that thought crossed my mind, I remembered something from my childhood. When Rudy chased off Somal and those other bullies, his legs *had* been shaking. And then, a little later...after he found out I was a girl, and things got kind of awkward for a while... he'd trembled slightly as he said, "Man. I feel like you're really cold lately, Sylphie."

Yeah. He was scared because he thought I hated him. Just like a normal boy.

Oh...

I realized something in that moment. Something I should have noticed before. I'd been acting like Rudy was *special* just because he was talented. I'd always felt like he was years and years older than me. But we were actually the same age, weren't we? I found myself recalling a question my dad had asked me once, and the promise I'd made in response.

"Sylphie, are you just going to sit around letting him protect you forever?"

No. I was going to help Rudy. I was going to be strong enough to stand at his side. I was going to support him, no matter what. I'd promised that to myself. That was the whole reason I'd worked so hard all this time, right? But he was in trouble right now, and I hadn't done a thing. Worse, the whole mess was my fault!

"Wait! Don't do anything to him!"

I pushed my way into the middle of the group, and then mounted a forceful defense of Rudy. It might have been the first real conversation I had in this school, except for my talks with Ariel and Luke. That was how consistently I'd stuck to the Silent Fitz act.

However, the girl holding Rudy's arm—Goliade—proved to be very stubborn. She kept insisting he was a criminal, even though he hadn't done *anything* wrong "Hm, it's surprising that you'd go this far to defend someone. What you say must be true. Still, the fact remains that this boy violated the dorm rules. We'll make an example out of him by punishing—what?!"

The instant I heard the word *punishing*, something snapped inside me. I wasn't about to let them make an example of someone I cared about just

because he'd been unlucky. I pulled out my rod, pointed it at Goliade, and channeled mana into it. "Didn't I just say he did nothing wrong? Enough. Now let go of his hand."

"F-Fitz... sir?"

"Or would you all like to be sent to the medical office?"

I'd learned how to make threats like this from Luke, back in the Kingdom of Asura. He always said that bluffing was an important skill, so I'd worked hard at it. During our journey from Asura to Ranoa, I'd given it a try a few times when we ran into groups of bandits. Luke always teased me that my voice was too childish for it to accomplish much of anything.

This time, though, it seemed to have the intended effect.

"Tch... fine, I understand." Goliade finally let go of Rudy's arm and left, grumbling loudly. With their effective leader gone, the other girls disappeared as well.

"Phew... that girl. If only she'd listen."

I'd seen what Goliade was like by now, and she wasn't a bad person or anything. But beastfolk like her tended to be really serious about following the rules, and enforcing them strictly. They weren't at all flexible about stuff like this.

None of that mattered right now, though. I had to apologize to Rudy. This was basically my fault, after all. "Sorry. If I hadn't dropped that underwear, this would never have happened."

"You haven't done anything wrong. You helped me." Rudy's voice sounded a little odd somehow. The usual stiffness in his voice had disappeared. I looked at his face and realized he was looking at me a little differently. And then all the pieces came together.

...Rudy was wary of me until now, wasn't he?

His attitude had seemed a bit strange from the start, now that I thought about it. He was always bowing to me, for one thing. But now I understood why. It made sense, of course. I was Silent Fitz now, not his old friend. Why

wouldn't he be wary of me?

It seemed like I'd earned a little trust now, though. *That makes me kind of happy.*

None of this would have happened if I hadn't screwed up, but it felt like the two of us were a little closer now.

I took the opportunity to explain the dorm rules to Rudy, warning him about this road being off-limits after sunset. Just as I'd suspected, it seemed like nobody else had told him any of this. He nodded deeply as I spoke.

"I'm truly grateful to you, Master Fitz." And with those words, he bowed his head again.

It felt a little weird seeing him acting all grateful to me. Back when I was being bullied, our positions had been totally reversed. Had I ever thanked him so politely? Something about this struck me as weirdly funny. "Ahaha, it feels kind of weird to hear you thank me."

"Oh? Why is that?"

I very nearly said *Well, because the first time we met...* At the last moment, though, I hesitated. Did I really want to reveal my identity? Anxiety swelled inside me at the thought. If he said "Sorry, I don't remember you" right now, that would *really* hurt.

I convinced myself that it didn't matter anyway. So what if he didn't remember me? We could start over fresh, with a blank slate. I could leave the past aside and get to know the person he was now. That sounded good enough to me.

And so, all I said was "That's a secret."

Rudy just blinked in confusion.

I returned to the dorm after that. Naturally, I had Rudy return the panties first. Since he'd caught them in mid-air, they weren't dirty or anything, but Rudy was a man. I was a little uncomfortable with making Princess Ariel wear underwear that he'd held in his hands. "I guess I should wash them again, huh...?"

Holding up the panties under a hallway light, I froze in place. They weren't Princess Ariel's after all. They were mine. Rudy had been holding these for... quite a while, hadn't he?

It took some time before I managed to stop writhing in embarrassment.

It would be another month or so before the two of us started researching the Teleportation Incident together.

When I awoke from my dream, I found Rudy by my side. "Wargh..."

I couldn't help giving a little yelp. Fortunately, it didn't wake him. He was sleeping soundly with a peaceful expression on his face. I'd seen him like this a few times back in Buena Village... but this was the first time I'd gotten a chance to watch him sleeping as an adult.

...An adult, huh?

The word called to mind what we'd done last night. When I looked under the blanket, I found that both of us were completely naked. The pleasant fog of drowsiness gave way to embarrassment, and I was suddenly conscious of a lingering soreness between my legs.

We actually did it...

It was something I'd dreamed of for years, if not in graphic detail. But now it was reality. The more I remembered from last night, the more I wanted to squeeze a pillow to my chest and roll around kicking my legs in mingled embarrassment and ecstasy.

Gah...

In the course of covering my face with both hands, I accidentally bumped an elbow against Rudy's shoulder. For no particular reason, I gently pressed my cheek against that shoulder. Rudy looked slender at a distance, but he actually had a surprisingly muscular body. He was big enough to swallow me up completely in his arms.

Agh! Stop it!

I really needed to get these stray thoughts under control. My face was going to set something on fire.

I pulled away from Rudy. But as I moved, he furrowed his brow.

“Mm...” He was grimacing in his sleep, almost like he was in pain. When I took his hand in mine, though, his expression softened. At this point, he finally opened his eyes. And after staring at the ceiling for a few seconds, he slowly turned over toward me.

“Good morning, Rudy.” When I spoke to him, a clear look of relief spread across his face. Roughly two seconds later, he reached out to me and grabbed my breasts.

“Hyaah! Wha... Rudy!”

I didn’t punch him or anything. Mainly because I kind of liked the way it felt.

After groping me for a little while, Rudy hugged me tight and murmured “I’m cured” in a voice full of feeling. I didn’t understand what he meant immediately. But there was something else on my mind, too.

“Uhm, Rudy...? What do you think? My body’s... okay, right?” I asked my question tentatively, my heart racing with anxiety. I felt like everything was probably fine now. But I still wanted to hear the answer.

“Thank you.” That was all Rudy said.

I didn’t understand why he’d thanked me in the cave, but now I did. This time, I’d been able to help *him* out. Maybe I wasn’t his equal, in some respects. But I’d still managed to support him.

You’re welcome.

The dream I’d been chasing all these years had finally come true. From now on, Rudy and I were a team.

Extra Chapter: The Mad Dog Rages

THE PLACE KNOWN only as the Sword Sanctum lay to the far north, in a harsh and unforgiving region covered in snow the whole year round. This was where the first Sword God had chosen to establish his school, and where he'd spent his final years training his students. In modern times, it was a destination of choice for many swordsmen and women, and a place from which many new talents emerged. Anyone who truly wished to study the sword was encouraged to make at least one pilgrimage here.

Young masters in the making were continually gathering here in great numbers. Many were youths who'd first revealed their talents with the blade in their teenage years. At present, there were three *true* prodigies staying at the Sword Sanctum whose talents outshone even their gifted peers.

First of all, there was the daughter of the current Sword God—Nina Falion. Nina was currently eighteen years old, but even at sixteen she'd been called a peerless talent. She'd already earned the rank of Sword Saint. Most believed she was certain to become a Sword King before the age of twenty, and a Sword Emperor by twenty-five. No other student in the Sanctum was thought of so highly.

Second, there was Nina's cousin, Gino Britz. Gino was a second son of the Britz family, a branch of the Falion clan that led the Sword God School. At present, he was fourteen years old. He'd earned his current title of Sword Saint at the tender age of twelve, and remained the youngest student to hold that rank. While he was still a step behind his cousin, there was no telling which of them would ultimately prove superior.

And finally, there was Eris Greyrat.

Eris was a seventeen-year-old who struck terror into the hearts of everyone she encountered—a mad dog known to viciously savage anyone who annoyed her. She'd come to this place two years ago, accompanied by her teacher, the

Sword King Ghislaine.

This girl was utterly uncompromising in every respect. Every single day, she subjected herself to a brutal, death-defying training routine, torturing her own body relentlessly. Her arrival at the Sword Sanctum had been a very memorable one. So much so that it remained a popular topic of discussion, even years after the fact.

Roughly Two Years Ago

ERIS FOLLOWED IN Ghislaine's wake as they stepped into the Sword Sanctum's Ephemeral Hall for their audience with the Sword God. The hall was lined with high-ranking students of the Sword God Style, all Sword Saints or better. Nina and Gino were among them. Ignoring the others who surrounded her, Eris did not bow her head as she approached the Sword God—much less kneel.

"I'm not interested in a lightweight like you!"

And the first words she spoke to Gall Falion, known to be the strongest living swordsman, were unthinkably rude.

"What?! How dare you insult the master!"

"On your knees, girl! Do you know nothing of our precepts?!"

"What are you teaching this little fool, Lady Ghislaine?!"

The Sword Saints began to stir, their faces twisted with anger. But then the Sword God said "Sit," and they fell silent. Gall Falion was going to cut this insolent mutt down. All of them believed this. No one had ever spoken to him so arrogantly and left this place alive. Even Ghislaine, who was infamous for her insolence, was looking at Eris with a shocked expression. Her ears and tail were standing on end.

But for some reason, the Sword God was simply grinning.

He alone understood what the little beast in front of him was seeking in this place. He alone understood why she would insult a man she'd just met. Why

she was trying to provoke him.

And so, there was a smile on his face as he spoke to her. “I like the look in your eyes, girl. Tell me—who is it you want to kill?”

Eris answered immediately and decisively. “The Dragon God. The Dragon God Orsted!”

Everyone in the room recognized the words *Dragon God*. But none of them had heard the name Orsted before—with one, and only one, exception.

“Haaahahahaha!” Slapping his knees, the Sword God laughed uproariously “Well, hell. Compared to Orsted, I guess I *am* a lightweight! You want to kill that old bastard, huh? And here I thought I was the only one!”

The other swordsmen in the room took in this bizarre spectacle with bated breath. The Sword God was *laughing*. He’d been insulted to his face, provoked by a young girl, and he was laughing. It was incomprehensible.

But the Sword God understood something they didn’t. This girl wanted to kill the Dragon God Orsted. That meant she wanted to become the strongest single person in the world.

“But you know...” Suddenly, his laughter stopped. For a moment, silence fell over the Ephemeral Hall. “Talk’s cheap, girl. Can you *do* it?”

“I will,” Eris replied at once. There was no hint of hesitation or doubt in her voice, or in her eyes.

The corners of the Sword God’s mouth twitched upward. “Good. Let’s see your sword, then. Gino, dance with her.”

“Huh?! Y-Yes, sir!” Gino Britz rose to his feet at his uncle’s call, his heart beating quickly. This girl wasn’t much older than he was, but somehow, she’d made his uncle laugh with her insolent jokes. Now he had the chance to humiliate her.

“This kid’s my youngest student,” said the Sword God. “You’ve got a couple years on him, and he’s still soft as hell, but he ain’t half-bad with a sword.”

Without a word, two of the other Sword Saints tossed wooden swords to Gino and Eris.

“All right. We’ll start at the—”

“Raaaah!”

The instant she caught her sword, Eris swung it viciously down at Gino. Caught totally unawares, he had no time to defend himself. The wooden blade struck his right wrist, and his sword fell from his hands. Before he could even understand this, much less surrender, Eris knocked him down with a second blow. The sheer violence of her attack was such that Gino felt he’d been cut down with a real sword. He lost consciousness at once.

“Wha—?!”

Most in the Ephemeral Hall were too shocked even to speak. This was absurd. Unthinkable. A duel was supposed to begin with the combatants facing each other at the center of the hall. Gino hadn’t even been looking in Eris’ direction. The Sword Saints thought her sudden attack an act of unspeakable cowardice. Nina was one of them, of course. It enraged her to see her cousin and fellow pupil brought down by such a cruel sneak attack.

There were four in the room, however, who saw the situation differently: one Sword King, two Sword Emperors, and the Sword God himself.

“Ah, yeah. See what I mean? The kid *is* soft, isn’t he?”

“No kidding.”

Eris shook her head disdainfully, letting her short hair swing back and forth. But her eyes were carefully watching the movements of everyone else in the hall. The girl was ready and waiting for one of them to take a run at her. She was fully aware of her surroundings, and her body was tensed to move at any moment.

The Sword God had not condemned her actions. He’d simply called his fallen student “soft.” If you let down your guard while you held a sword in your hands, there was no one to blame but yourself for the consequences. Only a fool would disregard the possibility of an immediate attack. This was the unspoken message.

“Right. You’re up next, Nina. This time, go face off at the center of the hall first. Nothin’ wrong with sneak attacks, girl, but I’d like to see how you handle

someone who's ready for you."

As the Sword God spoke, Nina rose to her feet, and one of the Sword Saints tossed a wooden sword to her. When she caught it, she glanced back over at the man who'd thrown it. The sword was oddly heavy. It had a metal core.

The Sword Saint who'd thrown the weapon nodded almost imperceptibly. *Kill this impudent outsider.*

Quivering slightly, Nina nodded back.

Nina was a Sword Saint in her own right. She'd taken lives before. To use a wooden sword with a metal core was cowardly, perhaps, but this girl had been the first to violate the rules of propriety. Given the humiliation Gino had just suffered, she deserved her fate.

The two of them faced each other at the center of the hall and assumed their stances.

"Begin!"

At the signal from a nearby Sword Saint, Nina swung her blade. She'd practiced the forms of the Sword God Style tens of thousands of times. Her execution was flawless. She was going to strike down this impudent red-haired girl with the very style she'd insulted so brazenly. Her anger and determination made her even swifter than usual.

The two swords met.

With a dry crack, Eris' wooden sword shattered into a thousand pieces.

Nina's victory was at hand. All she needed to do now was land a ruthless strike on the girl's head as she stood there dumbfounded.

But just as she was reveling in her victory, a fist slammed into her face.

The next punch caught her on the chin. And as she staggered backward, a sharp kick sent her flying to the ground. All of a sudden, the girl was on top of her. Before Nina even knew what was happening, her arms were pinned beneath Eris' legs. Looking up, she saw a demon with murder in its eyes swinging its fists down at her.

"S-Stop! Stop! That's enough!"

By the time the Sword Saints called the fight, Nina had taken perhaps a dozen punches to the face. Her nose was bleeding freely, several of her teeth were broken, and she was totally unconscious. A puddle of steaming liquid spread out on the floor beneath her lower body.

Eris stood slowly and picked up Nina's suspiciously heavy wooden sword. "Hmph." With a snort, she kicked her unconscious foe over to where Gino lay. "Do you have anyone who *isn't* soft here?"

"How... How dare you!" This time, the Sword Saints lost their temper. Cries of "Coward!" went up from all around the hall. Those ranked Sword King and above, however, looked down on their angry students coldly. They understood who was in the right here. Eris had been fully justified once again. A true duel didn't end when a sword was broken. It ended when the swordsman was.

"Sorry, girl. Guess I underestimated you a bit. I'll play with you myself."

But when the Sword God himself stood, the two Sword Emperors in the hall looked at him with surprise on their faces.

"Surely there's no need for you to handle this personally, Master."

"Ghislaine could... Ah, but I suppose the girl is her student. Shall I, then?"

Ignoring their words, the Sword God picked up his weapon. Its blade was real.

At the sight of this, Eris kicked off the ground, jumping backward to where she'd left her own sword. She seized the partner that had accompanied her throughout her travels, and pulled it quickly from its sheath.

"Don't get too worked up, girl. I'll give you a handicap... Oh, hey. Nice sword you got there. Ain't that one of Julian's?"

"I don't know. A member of the Migurd tribe gave it to me."

"Ah, okay. Well...this here's a Julian too, as it happens."

The Sword God drew his sword deliberately. Its blade shone with an eerie golden light. This was one of the Seven Sword God Blades. It was also one of the 48 magic swords created by Julian Harisco, a legendary craftsman of the Demon Realm, from the bones of the King Dragon Kajakut. It was known as Windpipe.

The Sword God held it loosely in his hand, letting it dangle downward. The

Sword Saints watched with bated breath. The Sword God almost never held a naked sword, except in his mock duels with the Sword Emperors.

After a moment, the Sword God casually murmured three words: “Okay, let’s go.”

All but simultaneously, Eris was sent flying through the air. Her body crashed through the doors at the entrance to the Ephemeral Hall and kept going, landing in a massive pile of snow outside.

The Sword God stood where she had been, perfectly still, his sword fully extended. No one in the room had seen him move.

“Splendid!”

“Astonishing!”

“Splendid, Master!”

The Sword Saints all around him complimented his skill effusively. This wasn’t his sword’s power. It was his own overwhelming battle aura that had sent Eris flying through the air. All of them believed that the brazen interloper was finally dead.

“Ugh... guh...!”

But then they heard groaning from outside the hall, and the signs of something stirring weakly in the snow. Had she somehow survived a strike from the Sword God? No, that wasn’t it. He’d simply taken it easy on her. But of course, there was no need for Gall Falion to take that stray dog seriously. Now they would simply banish her from the Sanctum and toss her out into the snow.

And yet, the Sword God’s next words betrayed their expectations.

“Ghislaine, tend to Eris’ injuries. As of this moment, she’s a Sword Saint. I’ll train her, starting tomorrow.”

The smiles faded from the faces of the Sword Saints. This meant the girl would become a direct student of the Sword God himself. There had been no student so highly honored since Ghislaine herself.

“That’s absurd! Sword Saint is a special title, granted only to those who master the Sword of Light technique! That’s girl’s nothing more than a wild,

vicious—”

One man raised his voice in objection, only to fall silent when the Sword God turned his blade toward him. “She took down two kids who know the Sword of Light. That’s good enough for me.”

“But Master...”

“Look, you don’t get to be a Sword God by memorizing something or other, right? I’m a special guy, but there’s nothing special about my title. Why should *yours* be any different?”

“...My apologies, Master Falion.” The Sword Saint fell silent. He’d realized that he was speaking out of simple jealousy. All those of his rank knew that such emotions only slowed their blades.

This was a misunderstanding on their part, however. The Sword God’s combat style was fueled by raw emotion and desire. When made use of properly, even the ugliest of motivations could make your sword swifter and more deadly.

But of course, Gall Falion had no intention of spelling out such crucial truths for every student who wandered through his halls. Those who needed to be *told* these things would profit nothing from the knowledge.

And thus, in a rather memorable fashion, Eris attained the rank of Sword Saint.

Present Day

NINA HAD HATED Eris from the start. Understandable, perhaps, given the girl had beaten her so severely that she’d pissed herself in front of her fellow students. She’d been shamed. Humiliated.

Eris was nothing but a wild dog who wandered in off the streets. When her sword wasn’t up to the task, she lashed out with her fists like an angry child. Such behavior was unworthy of any student of their style, much less a Sword Saint. This was Nina’s firm opinion on the matter, and she shared it freely with

anyone who would listen.

For nearly two years, she'd barely spoken to Eris herself. In fact, she'd worked with Gino to ensure that none of the younger students would give her the time of day.

However, Eris spent most of her time training single-mindedly with the Sword King Ghislaine, anyway. The two of them even shared a sleeping chamber. She had no connection to Nina or the others, and no need to speak with them. She certainly didn't make any effort to do so. The only words they exchanged were sardonic insults, when they were paired off against each other during the monthly general training sessions that all the in-house students were obligated to attend.

The two of them were evenly matched in these contests. Nina, at least, believed she won more than she lost. As long as there were proper rules in place, where a dropped or damaged sword meant the duel was over, she thought herself superior to Eris.

It would take a little longer for her to realize that these very thoughts were the "softness" her uncle had identified in her. For now, she was still lacking in real experience.

Eris and Nina were rivals in the eyes of those around them. But as far as Eris was concerned, Nina wasn't even worth thinking about.

One day in the late summer, Nina was speaking with a few girls around her age. The topic had turned to romance—which students they thought were handsome, and which of the girls had spent their first night in bed with someone.

Nina had devoted her life to the sword from the very beginning; it was hard for her to imagine ever pursuing a relationship with anyone. She always found these conversations awkward. The only boy she was even close to was her younger cousin Gino, but they'd essentially been raised as siblings. The idea of taking him as a romantic partner just made her feel uncomfortable. She was going to keep living for her sword. If she let herself get distracted from her purpose, Eris would surely leave her in the dust—and there was nothing she

hated more than losing to that girl.

By sheer coincidence, Eris happened to pass by as their conversation was ongoing. There was steam rising from her body. She'd obviously been training hard while they chattered away out here.

Nina felt a twinge of anxiety about this. And so, she called out to her reflexively. "Hmph. Do you ever do anything except train? *You'll* be a virgin until the day you die, I'm sure. Too bad your sword can't keep you warm at night!"

These were big words from someone who had no experience herself. But Nina had chosen these words precisely because they would have hurt her deeply. She assumed they would have the same effect on Eris.

"Heh!" To her surprise, however, Eris simply snorted with laughter.

The smug look on her face made Nina blanch. "Wh-What?"

"Sorry, but I'm *not* a virgin." Her voice was slightly proud, and there was a hint of a blush on her face. Nina and the other girls knew at once that she wasn't merely bluffing.

"What?! You can't be serious! Who was it? Who would sleep with *you*?!" Unable to disguise her shock, Nina pressed Eris for the details in a flustered tone of voice.

"A guy I knew since we were young."

Normally, Eris barely spoke a word to anyone. But on the topic of this young man, she could babble on at some length. She spoke of how they'd grown up together, and how they'd travelled from the Demon Continent back to their homeland. She spoke of how they'd met the Dragon God, who he'd managed to land a blow on. And she spoke of how they'd spent a night together.

She explained that she wanted to be stronger for *his* sake.

It was a heartfelt tale, delivered with the passion of a girl happily in love. It left Nina utterly stunned. She'd been defeated. Totally defeated. They were evenly matched in their skill with the sword, perhaps. But she was older than Eris. And Eris had a boyfriend.

The only defense remaining to her was to deny his existence entirely.

“You’re... You’re full of it, Eris! Father says the Dragon God is protected by some sort of Holy Dragon Aura. An ordinary spell can’t even scratch him! You made this up. This man doesn’t even exist, does he? Admit it right now, before you really embarrass yourself!”

“I’m not lying, and Rudeus isn’t *ordinary*. That’s why I’m not fit to be with him right now, you know? I’ve got to get way stronger...”

As she spoke, Eris clenched her hand into a fist. There was a fire burning in her eyes now. She turned suddenly from Nina and the others, and walked right back toward the Tempering Hall, where she’d been training up until now.

Nina watched her go in astonished silence. Eris was the last person she would have expected to be ahead of her in *this* department. The news about this boyfriend had left her reeling.

That wild dog had a partner in her life, and Nina didn’t. That sounded ridiculous on its face. It had to be a lie, surely. This Rudeus didn’t really exist.

On the basis of this assumption, Nina used her next day off to travel to the nearest town, where she paid an information broker to look for information on Rudeus Greyrat. She fully expected—or hoped, at least—that he’d find nothing, given that Rudeus *had* to be fictional. But to her surprise, it didn’t take long at all for him to put together a report.

Rudeus Greyrat: born in Buena Village, Fittoa Region, Kingdom of Asura. At three, he began studying under the King-tier magician Roxy Migurdia. At five, he became a Saint-tier Water magician. At seven, he took a position as the tutor of Eris Boreas Greyrat, the daughter of the mayor of the Citadel of Roa. After this, he went missing in the Displacement Incident. However, he’d later reappeared in the northern part of the Central Continent, earning a name for himself as the adventurer “Quagmire Rudeus.” He was currently staying in the Magic City of Sharia. The Ranoa University of Magic had invited him to enroll as a special student. Additionally, he was respected by many of his fellow adventurers. Rumor had it that he’d even slain a stray dragon single-handed.

The bottom line was simple enough: This was a real person, not some fantasy prince from Eris’ imagination. Nina found that fact depressing. But at the same

time, she wasn't that impressed. His achievements up until the age of seven were incredible, yes, but he hadn't amounted to much in the end. There was no mention of him attaining any rank beyond Saint-tier, and he made his living as a common adventurer. The nickname "Quagmire" didn't strike her as particularly complimentary, either. His talents had clearly faded after his childhood.

This line of thought led her to a deliciously wicked idea.

How would Eris react if she tracked this Rudeus down, beat him in a duel, and dragged him back here as her prisoner? The look on her face ought to be *priceless*.

The plan appealed to her greatly, and so she put it into action. Nina was just as impetuous as her father had once been. That very day, she'd packed for her journey, leapt onto a horse, and set off for the Kingdom of Ranoa.

Fortunately, her destination wasn't far away at all. In winter the trip might have been more challenging, but at this time of the year it was simple enough. With one of the Sword Sanctum's finest horses at her disposal, she could make the trip there and back in less than three months.

Nina's six-week journey to Sharia went off without a hitch, and she arrived at the University of Magic right on schedule. What she found there surprised her somewhat.

In all honesty, Nina had always looked down on magicians. She'd thought of them as arrogant weaklings who felt that knowing how to mutter a few incantations made them strong. But inside the University of Magic, many of the people on the streets were brawny men. There seemed to be an oddly high number of beastfolk, and the majority of them were dressed like warriors.

She did see some smaller pedestrians who wore robes or a cute uniform of some kind. On the whole, however, there were far more muscular people here than she'd expected. They obviously trained their bodies as earnestly as their minds.

Nina felt a bit ashamed at her own ignorance. For all of her eighteen years, she'd apparently been harboring unfair prejudices toward magicians.

After looking around for a little while, she approached a man who happened to be passing by. He was a muscular young beastman who dressed very much like a warrior. When she asked him where she might find Rudeus, the beastman said that he was looking for the very same person—and had a good idea where to find him.

How convenient, Nina thought, and tagged along.

Before long, the beastman spotted a boy who wore a uniform. Rudeus looked more or less exactly how Nina had pictured him. He wasn't quite as skinny and weak-looking as she'd expected, but he certainly wasn't intimidating. And while his face wasn't unattractive, his insecure body language made him very unappealing. A good match for that mangy Eris.

All right then, time to beat him down...

But before Nina could speak, the young beastman strode up to Rudeus and began to bellow at him. "I take you to be Quagmire Rudeus, the A-ranked adventurer who cut down a stray Wyrms single-handedly! I challenge you to a matrimonial duel, sir!"

Nina was startled, to say the least. The beastman hadn't mentioned anything about challenging Rudeus to single combat.

"You know, I've actually got piano practice today..." Rudeus, for his part, declined the duel in the least manly possible way. But the young beastman spouted off some confusing justifications, jumped right in front of him, and instantly attacked.

Nina assumed Rudeus would be torn apart in a matter of seconds. This beastman was clearly a competent fighter, although perhaps not on her level, and Rudeus was a magician. Every swordswoman in the world knew that his kind was helpless up close. There was nothing a mage could do when someone got the drop on them.

And yet, things somehow turned out very differently. Rudeus defeated the young beastman in no time at all. The fight lasted all of three seconds, by Nina's count. If you blinked your eyes, you might have missed it. Without so much as a backward glance in her direction, Rudeus promptly walked off, leaving his unconscious foe lying on the street.

It took a few minutes for Nina to recover from these startling events. She had to take some time asking around again, but eventually learned that Rudeus was now in the library.

By the time she'd gotten directions and headed over there, there was a large group of beastfolk lined up neatly outside the building. Nina found this curious, but it clearly had nothing to do with her. She headed straight for the entrance.

But as she passed by the crowd, a beastman called out to her. "Do you intend to challenge Rudeus to a duel as well?"

"Uh, yes... that's right," Nina replied thoughtlessly.

"Then get to the back of the line!" shouted the man. "You don't get to jump ahead!"

Apparently, this entire line consisted of people who wished to challenge Rudeus to a duel. Confused and astonished, Nina turned around and headed toward the back. There seemed to be at least thirty people ahead of her.

As she went, a beastman near the front of the line called out "Sorry, kiddo. That's too bad." She didn't know what that was supposed to mean.

In any case, waiting seemed to be her only option, so she waited. Morning gave way to afternoon, but Rudeus gave no sign of emerging.

And then *he* appeared.

A demon with obsidian skin and rippling muscles suddenly stood beside them, looking down at the group with an arrogant smile on his face. "Hoho! What's this line for, friends? Is there a festival going on?!"

"This is the line for those who wish to challenge Rudeus Greyrat to a duel!"

"Is it indeed?! And there's so many of you, too! Bwahahaha! The boy's in great demand, I see! I'm a patient man, of course, but is there any way I could get a shot at him first?!"

The beastfolk didn't take this question well at all. Shouts of "Get in line!" and various insults came flying from all directions. Nina was furious too. She'd come a very long way, and she was waiting patiently. She told the demon to wait his

turn like everyone else.

But then, in the midst of all the jeering... one fool said something he *definitely* shouldn't have. "You want to go first, big man? Then you better defeat everyone who got here before you!"

"Bwahahahaha! Lovely! I like the sound of that! Come at me, all of you. As a reward for your boldness, I'll let you take a free shot before I crush you!"

The unbelievable arrogance of this remark drove all the others mad with fury.

"What the hell did you just say?!"

"You're gonna regret that, shithead!"

Moving almost in unison, the beastfolk leapt to the attack, eager to teach this pompous idiot a lesson. Before she really even understood what was happening, Nina found herself joining in as well.

Long story short: she lost. Badly.

She hit the demon with the Sword of Light, fully intending to kill him. And he shrugged it off. Her blade hadn't penetrated his skin. She'd made a shallow surface cut, but the wound healed instantly before her very eyes.

"I am the immortal Demon King Badigadi! Bwahahaha! I'll bestow the title of Hero on anyone who defeats me!"

Compared to many of the others, Nina's effort was fairly respectable. But the Demon King was on a whole different level. Before she could even think up some sort of plan, he'd caught her, smacked her brutally to the ground, and broke her beloved sword apart.

As she lay there groaning in pain, her mind was full of terror and bewilderment. Why was she fighting a Demon King in the middle of some school for magicians? What was a ruler from the Demon Continent even *doing* all the way out here?

Everyone else was thinking the exact same thing, of course.

Mere moments after Nina fell, Badigadi finished off the entire group of beastfolk. Somehow, although most were injured, none seemed to be dead. He'd taken it easy on them.

The moment she realized this, Nina shed bitter tears onto her quivering fists. But no matter how deep her frustration, she couldn't do a thing now that her sword was lost.

"...What the hell?"

In that exact instant, Rudeus had emerged from the library. He spoke with the Demon King for a time, after which they moved elsewhere.

Grimacing, Nina forced herself to stand and dragged her battered body after them. Rudeus and the Demon King were standing at the center of a huge open courtyard, sizing each other up. They appeared to be talking about something. Sometimes she could hear snatches of booming laughter, but it was impossible to make out any of their discussion.

The duel finally began after a strangely quick-footed boy brought a staff to Rudeus.

Nina saw the whole thing from start to finish. Not that it took very long. Rudeus took his staff, unsealed it, mouthed a few words, and pointed it at his foe. And a split-second later, the Demon King's entire upper body exploded violently.

The man had defeated an opponent Nina couldn't even *compete* with. The man her hated rival loved, the man she'd assumed to be worthless, had destroyed a Demon King with a single attack. And Eris was trying to ascend to his level.

Faced with these facts, Nina's mind went blank with shock. She didn't remember what happened after that. Before she knew it, she was back on top of her horse, heading for the Sword Sanctum.

But when she made it back there, and saw Eris swinging her sword with single-minded focus, Nina felt something. Something that she hadn't felt before.

After that fateful day in Sharia, Nina Falion turned over a new leaf.

She devoted herself to her training with even greater vigor than before, and

began to carry a second sword, in case her first was ever broken. She stopped mocking Eris for her tendency to lash out with her fists. She grew more distant from the other girls her age, who she'd never truly been that close to.

And when she looked at Eris, whose determination never seemed to flag, her gaze was not so harsh as it had once been.

In time, the two of them would become true rivals. But that's a story for another time.

Incidentally...

Rumor has it that the Sword God, who'd been sharpening his sword excitedly after hearing of the Demon King's arrival, sheathed it with a disappointed expression after Nina reported what had happened.

About the Author:

Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication. "Now that I think about it, I never paid that much attention in school," said the author with a tinge of regret.



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