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A Journey of Two Lifetimes

BASED ON THE WORKS OF

Rifujin na Magonote



Seven Seas Entertainment



STORY BY RIFUJIN NA MAGONOTE ILLUSTRATED BY SHIROTAKA

MUSHOKU TENSEI ~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ SPECIAL BOOK ©Rifujin na Magonote 2022 First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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ISBN: 979-8-89160-487-2 Printed in Canada First Printing: August 2024 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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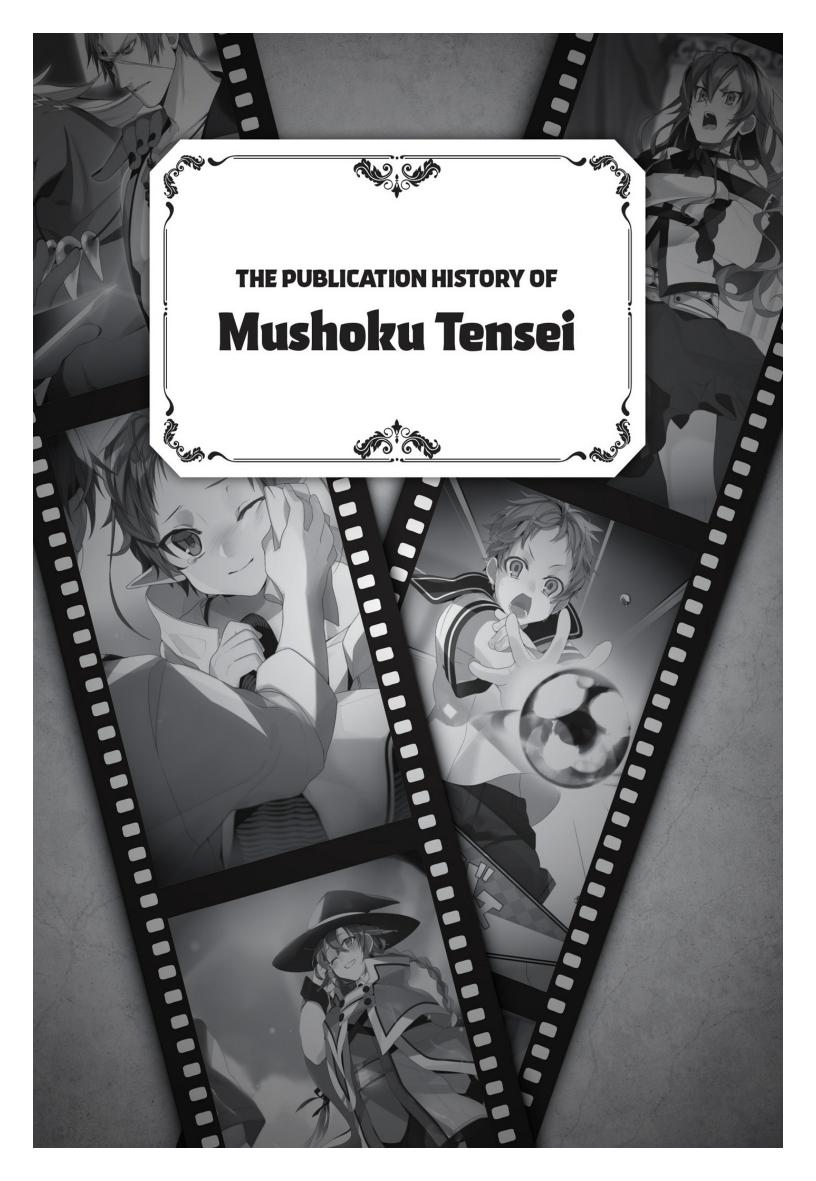
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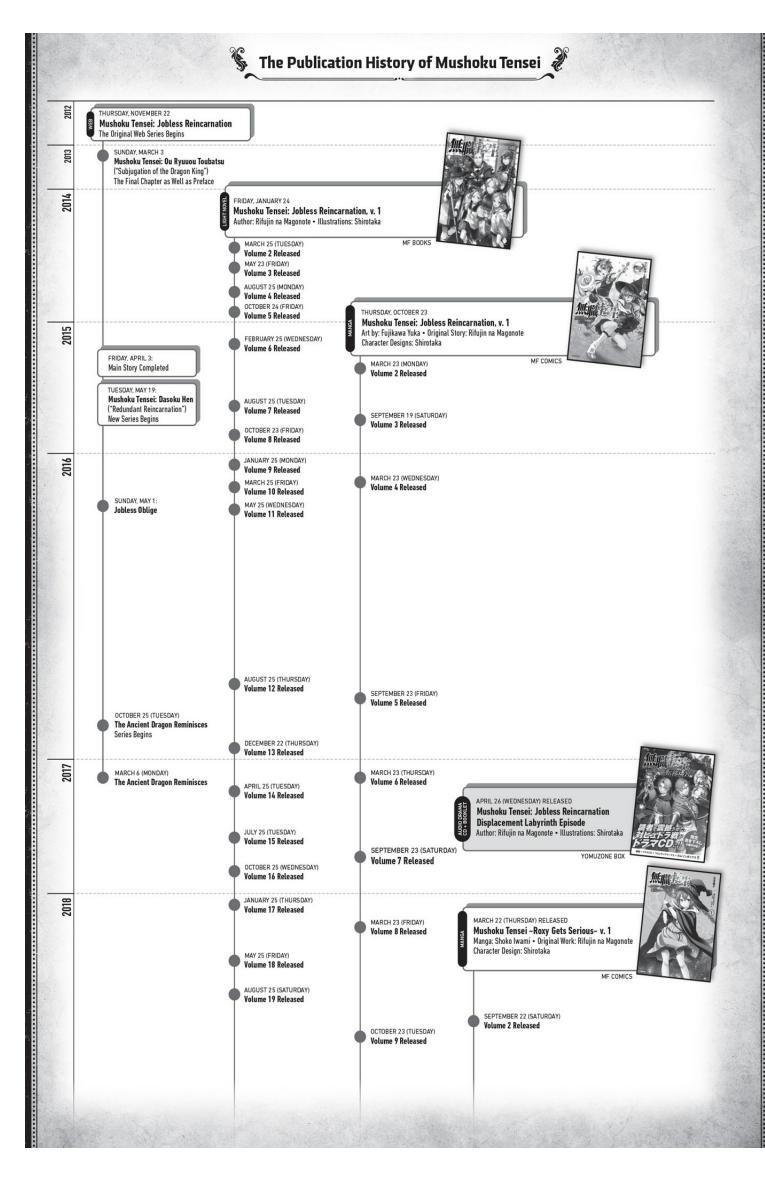


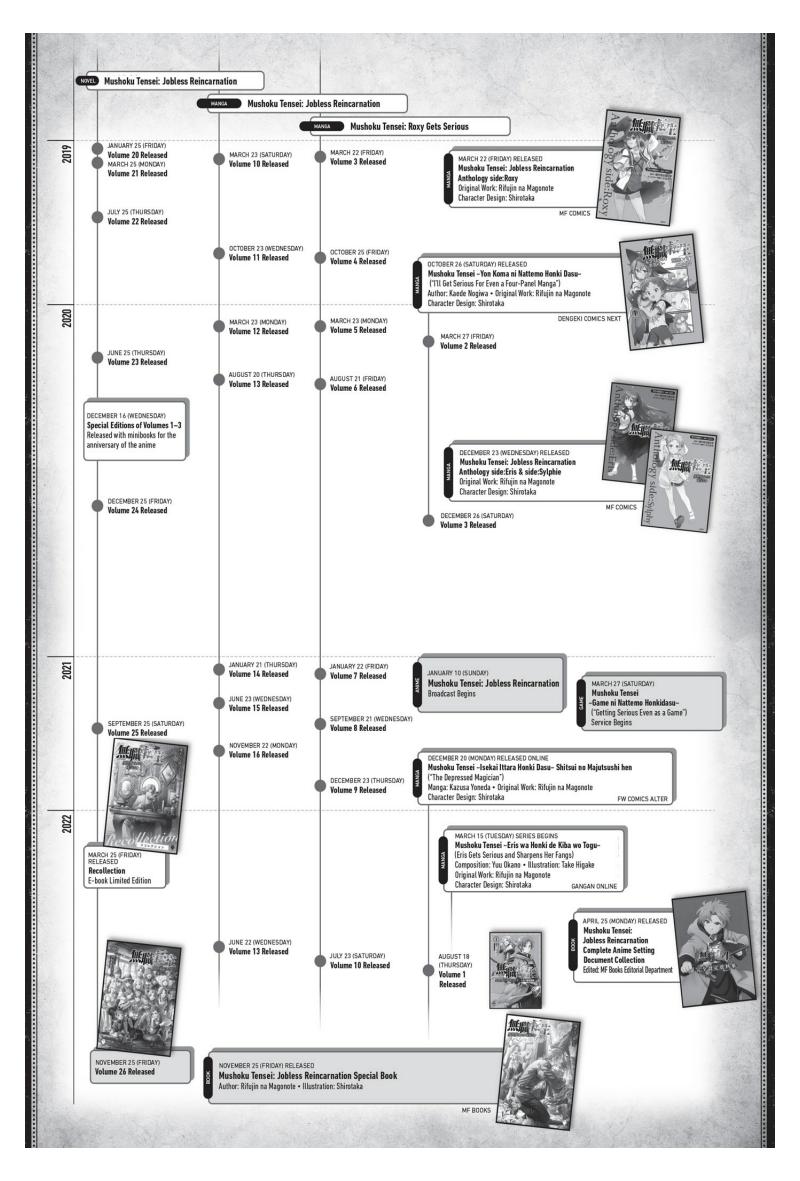


"You're standing on the precipice of a cliff. Step forward and smash into the ground below, or stay where you are and endure constant mockery; the choice is yours."

—I don't want to work, no matter what anyone says!

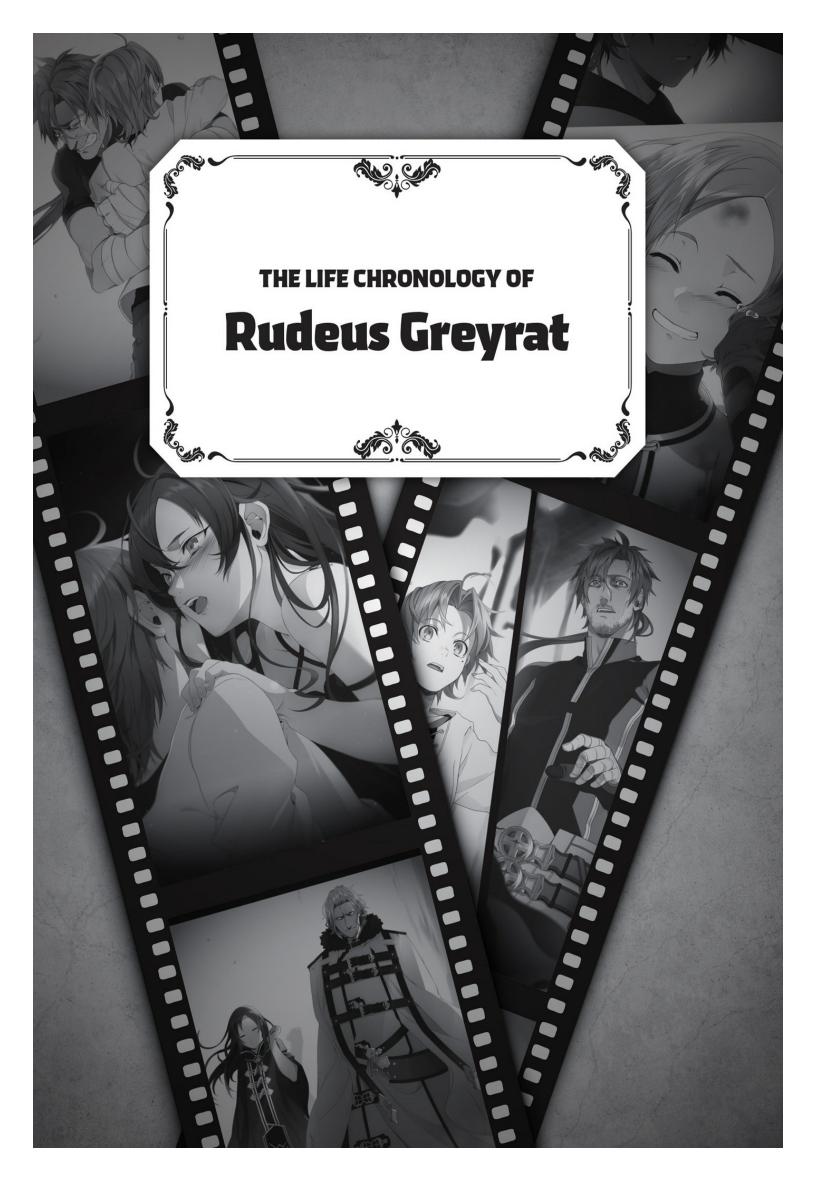






"What I can do easily, you cannot.
What you can do easily, I cannot.
That is all there is to it."

—Since working is truly difficult, don't pretend it's easy.



THE LIFE CHRONOLOGY OF RUDEUS GREYRAT

Year of the Armored Dragon	World Events
Over 100,000 years before Y.A.D.	The Age of the Ancient Gods. The Dragon God, Sea God, Sky God, Beast God, Demon God, Human God, and Void God all controlled their own respective worlds.
20,000–10.000 years prior	The Dragon God begins a campaign to destroy all neighboring worlds. Ultimately, his five Dragon Generals betray him, causing the collapse of the Dragon World. Only the Human World remains.
10,000–8,000 years prior	The Age of Chaos The residents of the collapsed worlds migrate to the Human World. Conflicts arise everywhere.
About 7,000 years prior	The First Human-Demon War.
About 6,000 years prior	The Ancient Hero, Ars, leads his six companions to defeat the Five Demon Kings and the Demon World's Great Empress, Kishirika. The war ends with human victory.
About 5,500 years prior	Warring States Period
5,000 years prior	Outbreak of the Second Human-Demon War.
4,200 years prior	The climactic battle between the Golden Knight Aldebaran and the Empress Kishirika, who fought alongside the Demon King Badigadi. The final explosion cracked the once-massive continent apart into the Central and Demon continents. The second Human-Demon War ends.
4,200–1,000 years prior	The Human race's diplomatic efforts end with an agreement to restrict all demons to the continent bearing their name.
1,000 years prior	Birth of the Demon God Laplace The Demon Continent is soon united by his conquests.
500 years prior	Outbreak of the First Laplace War
??? years prior	The Laplace Wars, Middle Period Laplace bestows accursed spears upon the Superd race.
First Year of the Armored Dragon	The Demon God Laplace is sealed away. Of the seven heroes who challenged him, the Dragon God Urupen, the North God Kalman, and the Armored Dragon King Perugius survived. They are henceforth known as "the Three Demon God Killing Heroes."

THE LIFE CHRONOLOGY OF RUDEUS GREYRAT

Vol.	Y.A.D.	World Events	Rudeus	Roxy	Sylphie	Eris
®			Makes contact with the Man-God for the ninth time. Is told to kill Orsted.			
			Makes contact with the Man-God for the tenth time. Is firmly promised that his family will be spared if he kills Orsted.			
			Lures Orsted out and launches a sneak attack. After his defeat, he becomes a follower of Orsted. The Dragon God heals Rudeus's injuries and severed arm. Rudy also receives a special bracelet.			Arrives at Rudeus's side while he battles Orsted. Joins the fray.
			Duels with Eris and marries her.			Duels with Rudeus and marries him.
©			Goes to the Library Labyrinth with Ariel and company. Meets the guardian of the labyrinth, the Demon King Beethove Tobetha.		Goes to the Library Labyrinth with Ariel and company. Meets the guardian of the labyrinth, the Demon King Beethove Tobetha.	Goes to the Library Labyrinth with Ariel and company. Meets the guardian of the labyrinth, the Demon King Beethow Tobetha.
•		Ariel emerges victorious in the battle to become the next monarch.	Arrives at the capital city of the Kingdom of Asura, Ars.		Arrives at the capital city of the Kingdom of Asura, Ars.	Arrives at the capital city of the Kingdom of Asura, Ar
		Orsted defeats the Water God, Reida.	Defeats Auber and Darius alongside Eris and Ghislaine.		Coerced by Luke to "kill Rudeus," but refuses.	Defeats Auber and Darius with Rudeus and Ghislain
Œ		Elinalise gives birth to a son, Clive.		Gives birth to a daughter, Lara.		
						22 years old: Becomes pregnant with Rudeus's child.
@	427		Arrives at the capital city of the Shirone Kingdom, Latakia, with Roxy and Zanoba.	Arrives at the capital city of the Shirone Kingdom, Latakia, with Rudeus and Zanoba.		

"We all suffer our defeats, but life goes on."

—There's no shame in losing. Or groveling, for that matter.



Congratulations have arrived from all over the world as the series reaches its end!

From the TV Anime Team

Yumi Uchiyama

(VOICE ACTOR • ROLE: RUDEUS GREYRAT)

Many congratulations on the completion of the original *Mushoku Tensei:*Jobless Reincarnation novel! And also, thank you for all the hard work! A lot of isekai works have come out recently, but *Mushoku Tensei* is definitely the pioneering "isekai tensei light novel" and "overpowered protag story" among all the ones loved by so many people over the years. As an actor, I'm honored from the depths of my soul to have had a chance to be part of this work. Also, while playing Rudeus, I've learned all kinds of things—both as an actor and as a human being. While this is a fantasy, there are a lot of realistic moments and scenes that pulled at my heartstrings and stabbed me right in the heart while I acted them out. As someone who had once given up on voice acting, I am really, really savoring the happiness that comes from fulfilling my role as Rudeus right now. Magonote-sensei! I really must thank you so much for such a wonderful story!

Tomokazu Sugita

(VOICE ACTOR • ROLE: THE MAN FROM A PAST LIFE)

The classic phrase for serial procrastinators who talk big and do nothing, "I'll get serious and ___" is one that I've always kept close to my heart. So I remember really clearly how hard I pondered the way my character would think and perceive things even before I took on the role of The Man From a Past Life. That is where that "serious"-ness lies. Both now, and forever onwards into the future.

Ai Kayano

(VOICE ACTOR • ROLE: SYLPHIETTE)

Congratulations on the completion of Mushoku Tensei! The world you've

created that I get to encounter through the medium of Sylphie is ever so beautiful. I really vibe with the fetishy parts... (laughs) I had fun playing the part from beginning to end! Since Season Two has already been announced, I'm so excited to see how they illustrate Rudy's ongoing travels in the anime. It would make me very happy if the fans continued to enjoy and support the original work as well as the *Mushoku Tensei* animated series.

Konomi Kohara

(VOICE ACTOR • ROLE: ROXY MIGURDIA)

Mushoku Tensei has been completed...! Congratulations! And thank you so much for the hard work, Sensei. Ever since I took on the role of Roxy, a lot more people know who I am. I keep getting drawn further and further into the world of Mushoku Tensei that you created, Sensei. It's confirmed that the anime will keep on going, so I think it would be wonderful if it took off even more! I hope that even more and more people will enjoy Mushoku Tensei from now on.

Ai Kakuma

(VOICE ACTOR • ROLE: ERIS BOREAS GREYRAT)

Magonote-Sensei!!!!!!

The ten-year anniversary of the series' beginning!!!!!!!!!

CON! GRAT!!! (ulations)!!!!

This work has the power to make you feel like "So this is what it feels like to be part of this... *Mushoku Tensei* is really amazing...!!" I thought that so many times. The other big thing I felt was how enthusiastic the fans of the original work are. I think the time in your life when you were exposed to it affects exactly what you can get out of it and how it resonates with you. I also think it is a work that you can savor for an entire lifetime, so I will take this opportunity to wish that everyone uses their strength to spread *Mushoku Tensei* far and wide, so that it will reach as many people's hearts as possible.

Yuiko Ohara

(THEME SONG/OP PRODUCER • LYRICS)

Rifujin na Magonote-sensei, congratulations on the publication of your final volume and also on the tenth anniversary of *Mushoku Tensei*! Thank you for bringing the work called *Mushoku Tensei* into the world and captivating so many people. I was very happy to be put in charge of the theme song for the anime. There are some feelings within me that would have never come to light had it not been for *Mushoku Tensei*. I hope I can continue to put those feelings to music and bring them to people everywhere.

Nobuhiro Osawa

(PRODUCER • COMPANY: EGG FIRM, CEO)

MAJOR PROJECTS: SWORD ART ONLINE, IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?, THE DISASTROUS LIFE OF SAIKI K., AND MORE

Thank you for your hard work completing the original series! Thinking about the novels coming to an end, on an occasion like this, I find myself wishing they could go on and on forever. For that reason, I wasn't sure if I should say, "Congratulations," and so I chose "Thank you for your hard work." Really, I mean it—thank you for your hard work over all these years. A whole decade since the start of the web novel serialization! And also, thank you for always collaborating so well with the anime production team. It's been five years since I received the manuscript from Sensei and began my role with the anime, so I am still very much a baby chick in terms of the *Mushoku Tensei* fandom. I'll be in your care from now on, working on the anime along with Studio Bind. I look forward to working more with you in the days to come.

Takahiro Yamanaka

(PRODUCER • COMPANY: HAKUHODO DY MUSIC & PICTURES)

MAJOR PROJECTS: TORADORA!, MINAMI-KE, LISTEN TO ME, GIRLS. I AM YOUR FATHER!,
AND MORE

Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! I first found out about the upcoming anime version in 2017. I binge-read all the novels published at the time and had to exercise restraint instead of surrendering to the feeling of "I'll just read ahead on the internet." I looked forward to the publication of each new novel and read them cover to cover. Now that we're at the end, there's a certain lonely feeling in the air, but I have all kinds of selfish desires for new developments and wish that many people will be touched by *Mushoku Tensei* and enjoy it for years to come. To that end, I will Get Serious myself and help out as best I can. I am honored to be a part of *Mushoku Tensei*!

From Other Creators

Yuu Aifuji

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: TATOEBA ORE GA CHAMIPON KARA JYOUOU NO HIMO NI JOB CHANGE SHITA TO SHITE (FOR EXAMPLE, WHAT IF I CHANGED JOBS FROM A CHAMPION TO A PRINCESS'S GIGOLO?), YOUKOO, SHIRITSU DAI YON MAHOU CHUUGAKKOU HE! (WELCOME TO MAGICAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, PUBLIC SCHOOL NUMBER FOUR!), AND MORE

I think everyone's written this, but I'll start off with a greeting!! Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation has finally reached Volume Twenty-Six—and is completed!! Congratulations!! I'll take the liberty of shortening the title to "Mushoku," which is what I've always called it. Mushoku's success is the story of my youth. Just a little before I wrote my own debut work, it flittered into the rankings, and I've been following behind it ever since. Watching Rifujin na Magonote-sensei's stoic personality and diligence (even though he hasn't been to another world), the sight of him being Serious—it summons up strong feelings of respect in me even now. That is why I am really honored to have received this opportunity to leave a comment. Mushoku was the number one in Narou's previous era and the eternal number one in my world. Mago-san, thank you!! And really, truly: Congratulations!!!

Natsume Akatsuki

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

First off, congratulations on finishing the series. Because we both started our series on the web and were published at about the same time, I unilaterally decided to see the two of us as something akin to classmates, and welcoming this completion brings up some deep emotions within me. It's really difficult to write such a long series all the way through to the end, and I hope that Magonote-sensei and Rudy can relax, rest, and someday move us all once again. I haven't said enough yet about *Mushoku Tensei*, so please listen to me tell you

how much I love it while we're playing fighting games together or something again. Congratulations to Rifujin na Magonote-sensei, who kept running until the end, and to *Mushoku Tensei*, now complete!

Aneko Yusagi

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: THE RISING OF THE SHIELD HERO

Congratulations on the completion of the main *Mushoku Tensei* series! I remember doing my best to write *Shield Hero* back when *Mushoku Tensei* was still being posted on *Shousetuka ni Narou*. It was always pretty high up in the rankings. It was so famous, it never failed to come up in the conversations I had with all sorts of people I met after becoming an author, and now the final volume is here at last. I wonder what kind of work Sensei will surprise everyone with next? I am looking forward to Rifujin na Magonote-sensei's continued works. For now, I'll just say thank you for your hard work!

Taruto Akamaki

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: DEIN NO MONSHO MAHOUJI REJISU NO TENSEITAN (DIN'S EMBLEM ~THE REINCARNATION STORY OF THE MAGE REGIS)

I'd go on for ages if I started talking about the appeal of *Mushoku Tensei*, so instead, please let me go on about my very most favorite character, Ruijerd. At the start, Ruijerd was an awkward, kind sort of man who also had a terrifying side to him. Then he met Rudeus and company and grew as a person while acting as a guardian/big brother figure. Before I knew it, I was devouring his every move and eager to see where he'd go next. Near the end, when it became clear that Ruijerd (who was doing all he could for the Superd race) had made the big decision to protect Rudeus, I shouted out, "Ruijerd-san!!" without thinking. I will never be able to forget that level of excitement, not for the rest of my life. I am really happy to be here for the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*, a work whose name will be engraved in history. *Mushoku Tensei* is the best there

Yuu Okano

(AUTHOR / MANGA LAYOUT FOR ERIS WA HONKI DE KIBA WO TOGU (ERIS GETS SERIOUS AND SHARPENS HER FANGS))

ALSO FAMOUS FOR: THE UNWANTED UNDEAD ADVENTURER, THE MATRIARCH OF A VILLAINOUS FAMILY HAS A CHANGE OF HEART AFTER RETURNING FROM DEATH, AND MORE

Rifujin na Magonote-sensei, congratulations on the completion of the original *Mushoku Tensei* novels and the tenth anniversary of the webseries! I have been reading *Mushoku Tensei* since it was serialized online, and I guess it must have in part been fate, because I had the opportunity to work on the manga for Eris, too. Now that the original novel is finally completed, it really fills me with emotions. The world of *Mushoku Tensei* from the manga and anime will still continue to spread throughout the world, so it's exciting for me as a reader, too!

Kasuga Katsura

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: NEET DAKEDO HAROWA NI ITTARA ISEKAI NI TSURETEKARETA (I'M A NEET, BUT WHEN I WENT TO HELLO WORK, I WAS TAKEN TO ANOTHER WORLD)

To me, *Mushoku Tensei* is my light and my god; it became the compass that determined my life as an author. If there was no *Mushoku Tensei*, there would be no Kasuga Katsura. Every time there was an update, I read it one hundred times, and when I found out it would be published, I felt true joy. When I heard they were going to make it into an anime, I was so happy, I danced for three days and three nights. And now the printed edition of that very *Mushoku Tensei* will reach its end. I felt so emotional, like an epoch—no, like a world had come to an end. And to send a masterpiece like this into the world and to make my reading time so meaningful, for that, I would like to send Rifujin na Magonote-sensei my most colossal regards.

Carlo Zen

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL

Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*. On the occasion of such a massive anniversary as ten years, it's a fine time to remind oneself that time flies like an arrow. You, with your bold strokes, like a jack of all trades, make me envious...or like I was going to write everything seriously, but I probably wouldn't be able to hit the minimum word count, so I'm just going to toss seriousness in the trash. I envy you so much, Sensei! After all, you write whatever you want, and everyone loves it. It must be fun! I guess you could say that Rifujin na Magonote-Sensei gets to write as he pleases with true and complete freedom. I imagine it's not hard to enjoy yourself when you work in that style. Figuring out what's fun for you and creating a work exactly the way you want it; I think it has to be a blast. He must be happy that lots of people are enjoying a work made like that.

Fehu Kazuno

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA: WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN

Magonote-sensei, congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! Though there are many tales that illustrate the story of a person's life, only a few of those are masterpieces. Masterpiece is a fitting description for the tale of Rudeus's life, where he went to another world and faced, head-on, the bonds with other people that we can't run away from. (And now my dark personality and life as an author is overflowing, even when I tried to keep in check.) Damn! What a mountain of genius and hard work! I'm so jealous, Mago-san! You wrote such a magnificent and fascinating work—I'm so frustrated! My jealous soul burns! Ngh... We did eat oysters together, though, didn't we? If you eat oysters with someone, you're best buds forever. I can only congratulate you, that's all that'll come out of my mouth. ...More formally, congratulations on the

completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! I can't wait to see what kind of fascinating stories you'll come up with next, Mago-san!

Natsuya Semikawa

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: OTHERWORLD IZEKAYA "NOBU," YARUKI NASHI EIYUUTAN, AND MORE

Rifujin na Magonote-sensei, congratulations on the completion. These past ten years that I've been scampering around with Rudy were filled with ups and downs. Truly they were the best of days, even for me, a reader. Thank you for allowing me to read a work that really befits the phrase "a monumental isekai tensei story." Rudeus did everything he could in his new life in another world so that he wouldn't have to regret anything ever again. I think I will take what I learned from him to heart and live like him. And finally, once again—congratulations on the completion!

Tsuda Houkou

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: KOUDO NI HATTATSUSHITA IGAKU WA MAHOU TO KUBETSU GA TSUKANAI (I USED HIGH-LEVEL MEDICINE TO COUNTER MAGIC)

Worry, indecision, failure...a realistic protagonist who wouldn't be out of place next to the rest of us. The things he could not achieve in his past life, the things he wanted to achieve, and the things he didn't notice—this is a sublime narrative about how he kept standing up again and again in the face of adversity and continuously did his best to gain, acquire, and continue to protect those things. That is what *Mushoku Tensei* is to me. As a fellow Narou author, *Mushoku Tensei* was always my ideal back then, and even now it continues to inspire me to do better. I am sure that even after the completion, this grand work will continue to be our guiding light. I would like to formally celebrate the completion of *Mushoku Tensei* from the bottom of my heart. That, and thank you for your hard work, Mago-san!

Tappei Nagatsuki

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: RE:ZERO -STARTING LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD-

Congrats on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! Congratulations at this critical juncture—the tenth anniversary of the web series and the completion of the print version! Looking back to ten years ago, it calls up fond memories of fighting over updates and the daily rankings competition on *Shousetsuka ni Narou...* Honestly, it was hell, but also a really fun time! It's been ten years since then, and I feel so emotional seeing the completion of the *Mushoku Tensei* light novels. Really, thank you so much for the hard work! I am so happy that *Mushoku Tensei* has joined the ranks of examples of completed masterpieces from its era. But there still is the anime, the Redundancy material, and the various kinds of stories you've talked about over drinks but haven't put online, right? Once again, thanks for ten years of blood, sweat, and tears! Let's keep having fun for ten more years, Mago-san!

Fuse

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME

To me, reading *Mushoku Tensei* was like a bit of healing after my night shifts. It was so fun, it blew away my fatigue from work in an instant. I felt like I should try to emulate the protagonist's steadfastness. Now that work has finally reached its completion in print. As another author living in the same era, I am honestly full of jealous respect. Thank you for your hard work, Rifujin na Magonote-sensei!!

Blitz/Kiba

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: PAYING TO WIN IN A VRMMO

Congratulations on the completion of the print version of *Mushoku Tensei*! It's almost exactly ten years since the web series started, isn't it?! Anyway, as a

full decade comes to a close, the fact that the time-dense *Mushoku Tensei* story is about to welcome its second completion, from web novel to light novel, makes me think back on Rudy's life and feel kind of restless. This isn't news to anyone reading this, but wow, the depth of the Six-Sided World! Looking around the world from Rudy's point of view gives me that special feeling of excitement that comes from not knowing how things will turn out. It gives me the same feeling as standing on my own two feet in this wide world of ours and looking out at the horizon. And then the jargon and characters that make up this world of *Mushoku Tensei*—it's all so cool! That might be why I really felt the magnificence of this guy who's trying his best to live his second life. And let me formally extend my congratulations on the story's completion. You're number one in the world!

Kon Hoshizaki

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: NET OKU OTOKO NO TANOSHII ISEKAI BOUEKI (INTERNET AUCTION MAN IS HAVING A BLAST TRADING IN ANOTHER WORLD), AND ISEKAI KENKOKUKI ~FUETEKU YOMETACHI TO NONBIRI MUJINTOU LIFE~ (BREAKING NEW GROUND IN A PALM-SIZED VILLAGE: RELAXING DESERT ISLAND LIFE WITH MY EVER-INCREASING BRIDES)

Congratulations on the completion of the printed version of *Mushoku Tensei*! While it was serialized on the web, reading *Mushoku Tensei* was our daily comfort. Then it flew out into the world with the light novel, the manga, and the anime. As a fan, seeing all that go down made me happy. The completion of the series is definitely something special. *Mushoku Tensei* making it all the way to the end is a great achievement that will remain forever in the history of mankind. I'm not exaggerating here. I'm so happy, almost like it was my own achievement, that I'm here for the completion of this wonderful work at this special anniversary, ten years from the start of the webseries. *Mushoku Tensei* has more in store for us, and I'll enjoy it for the next ten years, too! And I'm also looking forward to whatever else Magonote-sensei might create for us!

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: OVERLORD

Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! I think you must be relieved to have brought the curtain down on this story. That said, there may be a lot of things left to do before you can truly rest, but first and foremost, please take care of your health, recharge your batteries, and don't push yourself too hard! Health is wealth!!

Teren Mikami

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: YUUSHA ISAGI NO MAOU HANASHI (THE HERO ISAGI'S DEMON KING LEGEND)

Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! It's been seven years and change since the web novel was finished, too. I can't believe you came this far, and as a representative of your friends, I somehow feel full of pride. Magosan, speaking of the font of energy that supported your hard work—yes, it was Norn-chan, wasn't it? It was because of the existence of Norn-chan, Rudeus's beloved daughter, that you had to make the commercial release of *Mushoku Tensei*'s main story such a record-breaking hit! And though it is true that the main story of *Mushoku Tensei* has been completed, there are still some things you need to do...right?! Anyway, I think it must have been very, very difficult to complete anew a story you'd already ended once. The narratives you write make people happy, Mago-san. Please take care of yourself from now on, as well. Please take care of my dear Norn-chan forever.

Yomu Mishima

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

Rifujin na Mogonote-sensei, congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*! It's been ten years since the start of the web

novel, so as someone who also made their debut at Shousetsuka ni Narou, I find myself full of emotions. Magonote-sensei, your *Mushoku Tensei* was my aspiration. It reigned with a cumulative rank of number one for a long time on Shousetsuka ni Narou, so perhaps many other authors saw it as their goal as well? I'm certainly one of them. If you say Shousetsuka ni Narou, you can't help but think of *Mushoku Tensei*! I was pretty active during that period of time myself, so a lot of memories come rushing back. Your series is now complete, and though it makes me happy, it also makes me feel a little lonely, somehow. *Mushoku Tensei* has been completed, but I'm looking forward to what you'll do next, Rifujin na Magonote-sensei!

Satoshi Mizukami

(MANGA AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: LUCIFER AND THE BISCUIT HAMMER, PLANET WITH, SENGOKU YOUKOU, WORLD END SOLTE

Congratulations on the completion of the light novels! The deep background stories of so many characters and their feelings, their conscientious growth as people, and then the white-knuckle, tension-filled plot twists; I savored and enjoyed it all from beginning to end. You probably still have work to do concerning *Mushoku Tensei*, so please don't push yourself too hard, but I hope you'll do the best you can. All in all, thank you for your hard work up until this stage, Magonote-sensei!

Y.A

(AUTHOR)

FAMOUS FOR: THE EIGHTH SON? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?

Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei* and the ten-year anniversary of the web novel! I am Y.A, and my series *The Eighth Son? Are You Kidding Me*? was posted on Shoustesuka ni Narou as well, and it too has received serialization in print. Back when I started my series with nothing more than enthusiasm and momentum to my name, everyone was already buzzing

about *Mushoku Tensei* in the rankings. It was immensely popular. I thought for a second, "*Eighth Son*'s doing good among the new works, so maybe if I work hard, I can beat *Mushoku Tensei* in the rankings?" but...well, it simply wasn't possible. That *Mushoku Tensei* is now reaching its end makes me, as an author who also came from Sousetsuka ni Narou, feel a bit conflicted. I feel a bit lonely, but I'm glad that you could finish it. And once more, to wrap things up, congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*!

From the Manga Artists

Shirotaka

(ILLUSTRATOR/CHARACTER DESIGN/ILLUSTRATIONS)

Congratulations on the ten-year anniversary! I am deeply thankful that I was in charge of the illustrations for the long-beloved *Mushoku Tensei*'s light novels from the first volume all the way through to the end. I crammed an eyeful of all the experience I've gained up until now into the cover for the final volume, so I would be happy if you would compare and enjoy how the characters have grown and changed from Volume One. I'm looking forward to seeing how *Mushoku Tensei* develops over various media!

Yuka Fujikawa

(MANGA AUTHOR / MUSHOKU TENSEI: JOBLESS REINCARNATION MANGA ADAPTATION)

Congratulations on the completion of the *Mushoku Tensei* light novels and the tenth anniversary of the web novel. This is similar to what Teacher told Roxy in the manga that you so graciously allowed me to contribute to, but: In this world where the future's so uncertain, to be able to welcome this big occasion after so long a period time as ten years, and to finish writing the story...I keenly feel how difficult this is, even for a pro. I am just so grateful that I have been able to continue the manga for so long. When it was first decided the series would be made into a manga, there were very few examples of Narou novels that had been adapted like that, so I didn't know how long I would be allowed to do it and the situation felt much like stumbling in the dark. I hope to write my best, so that I won't put a stain on my senseis' achievements. Congratulations—I really mean it! When the world's whole situation calms down a little, let's go drinking or something again to celebrate! [laughs]

Shoko Iwami

(MANGA AUTHOR / ROXY GETS SERIOUS)

Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*! It's already been five years now since I was approached about the Roxy spin-off in February of 2017, but I remember that I had just finished reading the end of Mushoku on Narou when I first got contacted. I felt so excited heading out for that meeting. Magonote-sensei, thank you so much for creating the work that is *Mushoku Tensei*!

Kaede Nogiwa

(MANGA AUTHOR / YON KOMA NI NATTEMO HONKI DASU ("I'LL GET SERIOUS EVEN FOR A FOUR-PANEL MANGA"))

Congratulations on publishing the final concluding volume of *Mushoku Tensei*! I can't forget the time I binged them all and cried like a banshee. It makes me emotional to know that the day will soon come when kind and serious Rudeus and everyone else's lives will be complete on my bookshelf. The acts humans keep repeating over and over, and the strength to keep doing them over and over anyway, the artlessness of living with the people you treasure—I love all those things in this work. I am really happy that I got to participate in it, even a little. I repeat: Truly, congratulations!

Kazusa Yoneda

(MANGA ARTIST / SHITSUI NO MAJUTSUSHI HEN ("THE DEPRESSED MAGICIAN"))

Congratulations on the completion of the print version of *Mushoku Tensei* and the tenth anniversary of the series. There was a lot going on in my life when I first encountered *Mushoku Tensei*—I felt pretty down back in those days. I was working as a manga author at the time, too, but Rudeus's feelings...or should I say the feelings of the Man from a Past Life were similar to mine, and I identified with him. Except for the perverted parts. Yup. Thanks to that, I looked forward to *Mushoku Tensei* updates and how Rudeus tried his best and managed to overcome depressive feelings similar to my own. During that time, I joked, "I wish I could have drawn the *Mushoku Tensei* manga," but I never would have thought that eight years later I really would... I am honored to have

had an affiliation with a work I enjoyed myself. I pray for the continued activities of—and more and more of—Rifujin na Magonote-sensei.

Take Higake

(MANGA AUTHOR / ERIS WA HONKI DE KIBA WO TOGU (ERIS GETS SERIOUS AND SHARPENS HER FANGS))

Congratulations on the completion and tenth anniversary of *Mushoku Tensei*. I encountered *Mushoku Tensei* for the first time almost ten years ago. I have memories of being covered in sweat in a room without air-conditioning in the summer as I became obsessed with reading everything about it. I am looking forward to more of Rifujin na Magonote-sensei's continued activities and an onslaught of all things *Mushoku Tensei*!!

From the Novel Team

Ken Kindaichi

(MF BOOKS EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT, EDITOR IN CHIEF)

Magonote-sensei, congratulations on the completion of the series. Looking back, it was exactly ten years ago that T1-san and T2-san from F Company received the project for this and said, "Mushoku Tensei? What kind of crazy title is this?!" That was the definitive moment when I entered another world. Since that day, the editorial department has continued to make the pilgrimage to that world each and every day, even now. Even in the future, we will continue to "get serious" and keep at our communications with that world beyond. We think of it as a way to repay both Rudy and Sensei. Thank you.

Ryousuke Imai

(EDITOR IN CHARGE)

In the latter half of my twenties, there was a time when I thought I wanted to sacrifice my life. I quit my job, went home, and spent the next year and a half without working at all. After that, it must have been fate, because I became affiliated with the editing of *Mushoku Tensei*.

Mushoku Tensei has rich plot development, characters, world-building, and literary style all woven together. At the same time, it is a personal story of one man who faces his life all over again in another world.

Life has both richness and brutality. The Man from a Past Life continued to regret his life, but after reincarnating, he is set on the path of repentance. No matter what may happen, as long as you repent, your feet will move forward. There is sincerity and faithfulness in the way it is written. I believe this is Magonote-sensei's conviction coming through.

There is not a single life without failures and regrets. And that is why, to me and *Mushoku Tensei*'s many fans, it is a treasured work.

Mangote-sensei, let me formally say: Excellent work on the completion of the

light novels. Thank you. It would make me happy if we are able to continue to move forward together.

Kouhei Oohara

(EDITOR IN CHARGE)

Congratulations on the completion of Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation!

Looking back, I remember I felt a lot of pressure being your editor on Shousetsuka ni Narou because it was the site's number one work.

Read in a straightforward manner, the arc of Rudeus's past life is pretty dark. Even so, I was completely swept up in the story because there is this amazing balance among the way the story made me identify with the characters, a sprinkling of dirty jokes, and some kitschy moments.

After he was reincarnated, Rudeus didn't just mow down his enemies even though he was blessed with talent and used it. He was depicted as having "difficulties" even with going outside. Thanks to that, I read the story with a feeling of how difficult the everyday things that everyone takes for granted could be, and the courage it must take to face them.

The depiction of Rudeus's growth through the separation from his small family and his meetings with other people almost made me feel like "He might be another me." I feel it's a work one can empathize with.

Even now, I still clearly remember how, starting around the middle of the story, the secrets of the narrative began to come to light and I grew more obsessed.

The illustrations for *Mushoku Tensei* by Shirotaka-sensei are also wonderful. I believe Shirotaka-sensei's illustrations brought color to its world. You could say that the combination of illustrations create, in a sense, a type of "bond."

And what allowed for that bond to come into being is none other than Magonote-sensei's luck and the appeal of the work itself.

I am very happy to have been in charge of the most wonderful saga in the history of light novels! You still may not be able to rest for a while, but when

you can, make sure to get some true, quality rest, and when you're feeling up to it again, please write your next work...!

Yui Tsutsumi

(FIRST EDITOR IN CHARGE/ISEKAI FONTIER KABUSHIKIGAISHA REPRESENTATIVE)

Congratulations on the publishing of the final volume of the light novels! I think that in the harsh world of publishing, to have developed a series over such a long period of time as eight years since the publishing of Volume 1 is something like a wonderful miracle.

At the same time, I remember that I first met Magonote-sensei even before that, and it surprised me. I was only involved in the early set-up days for the series, but I was able to meet you numerous times and I remember being really happy for you when the MF Books publication was decided.

This would be going pretty far back, but I remember with a smile the way that Magonote-sensei wore a horse mask to participate in his first event where he had to give a speech. I will continue to root for *Mushoku Tensei*'s future prospects and Magonote-sensei's endeavors!!

Ueda Design Shitsu

(BOOK DESIGN)

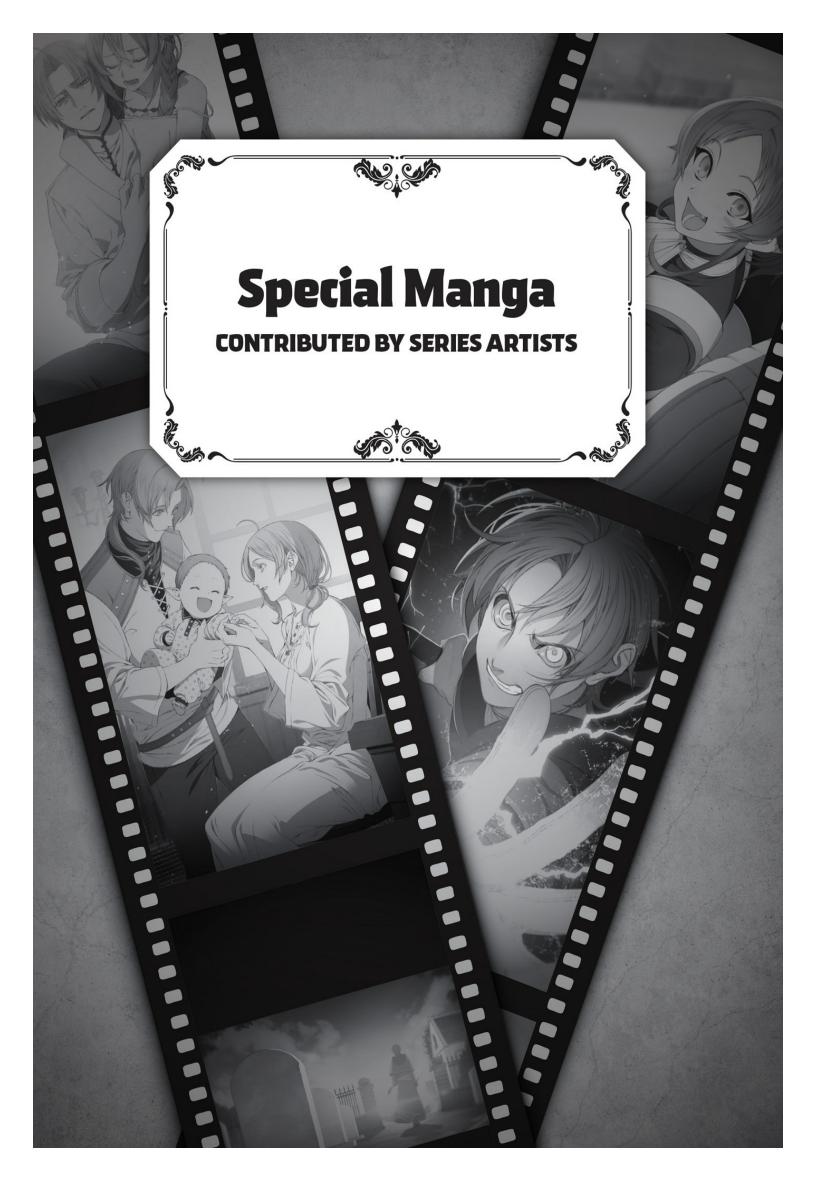
Congratulations on the completion of *Mushoku Tensei*. I am really happy to have helped with such a wonderful work. Magonote-sensei, Shirotaka-sensei, and everyone that had a hand in this series, thank you for your hard work. I hope this story will be loved for a very long time.

PLAIN.

(DTP • PROOFREADING)

We've handled the DTP (or typesetting for the printing) and proofreading since Volume 1. We're big fans of Eris's and also the first readers of the gallery proof for each print volume. While working as the proofreader, I had a hard

time waiting for each gallery proof to be ready. The final volume is finally here, and I hope it won't be long before we get to return to the next story from this world.

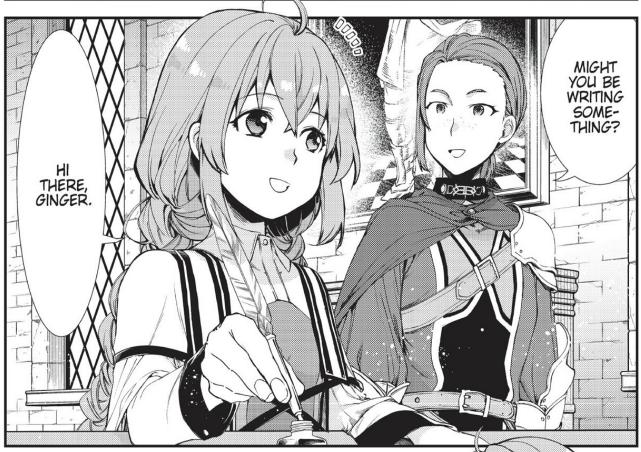


"My communication skills have developed."

—I dunno when it happened but along the way, I found I didn't mind asking my friends for help.





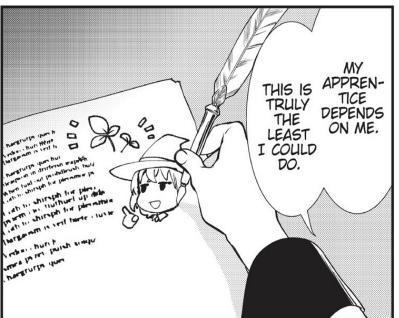


IT SEEMS
HE WISHES
TO LEARN ONE
OF THE DEMON
LANGUAGES, SO
I'M WRITING
A TEXTBOOK
ON IT.

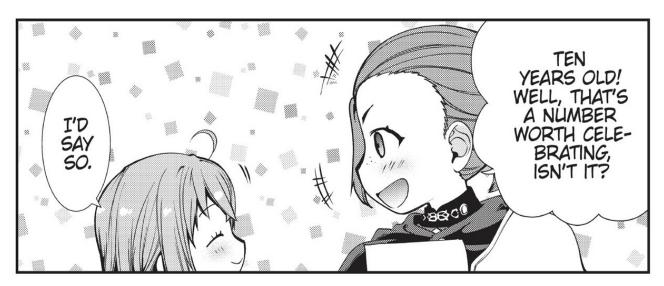
A LETTER
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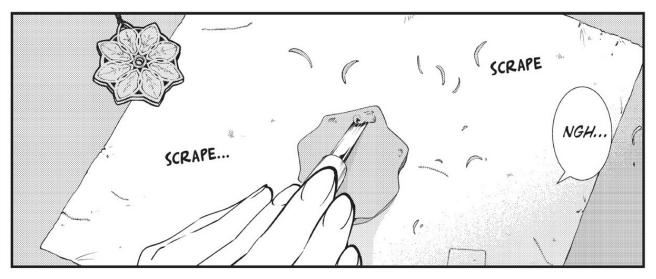






























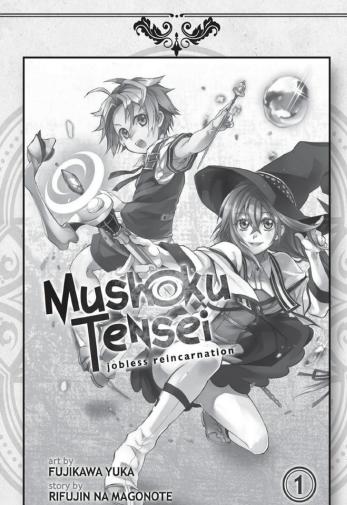








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Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation

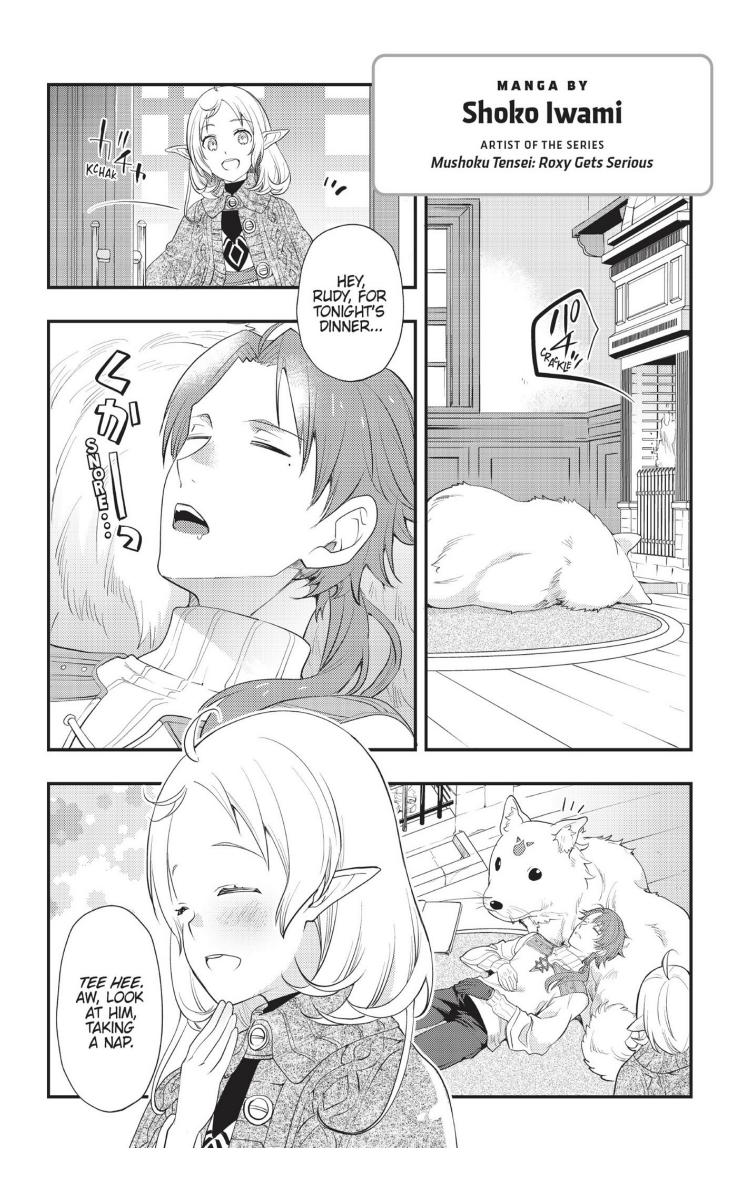
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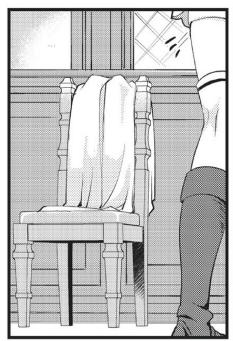




A second chance in a new world!

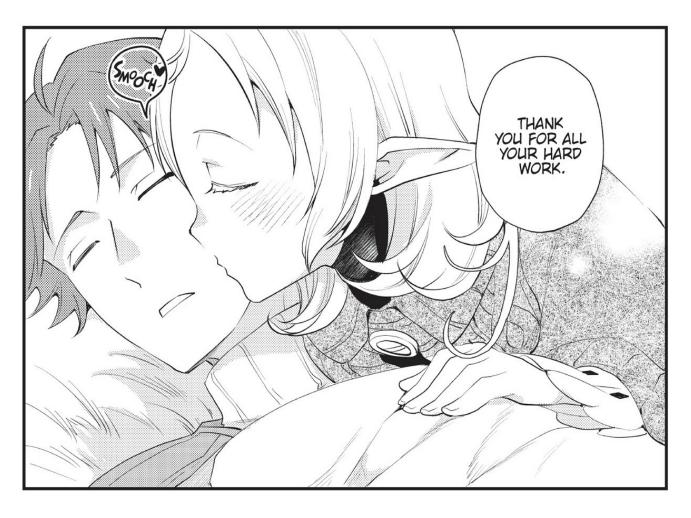
Just as an unemployed otaku reaches a dead end in life and decides that it's time to turn over a new leaf—he gets hit by a truck and dies! He finds himself reborn into an infant's body in a strange new world of swords and sorcery.



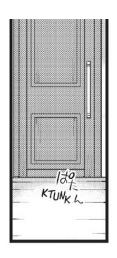


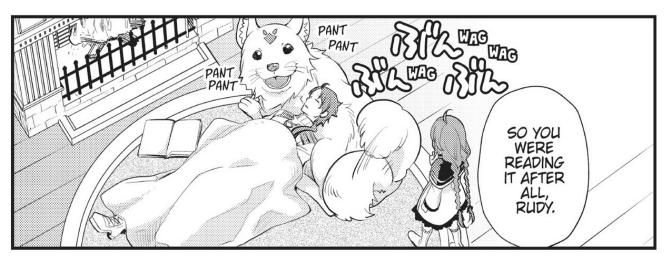






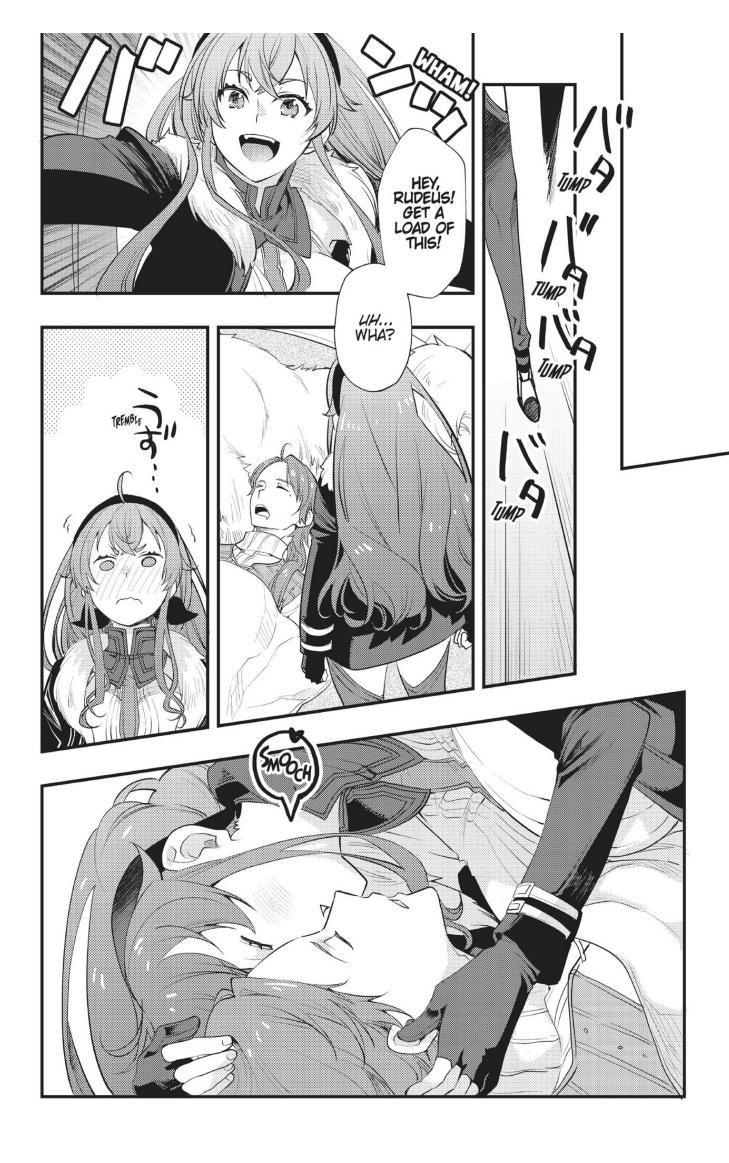
















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Mushoku Tensei: Roxy Gets Serious



MANGA: Shoko lwami ORIGINAL STORY: Rifujin na Magonote CHARACTER DESIGNS: Shirotaka

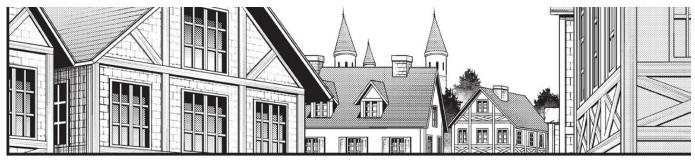
Roxy busts loose!

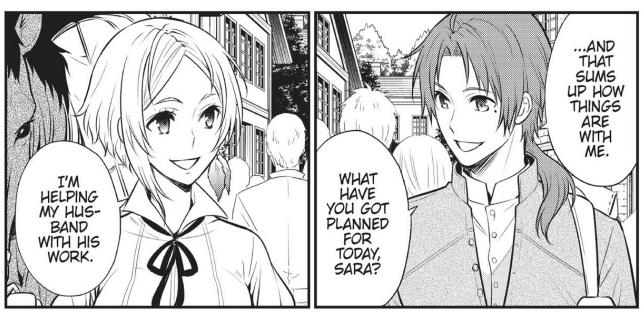
Roxy's life is a lonely one—out of all her tribe, she's the only one without the power of telepathy. Her days pass in silence, while people speak words she can never hear. But when she saves the life of a wandering witch, Roxy gets the chance of a lifetime: the opportunity to study as a magician's apprentice and leave her strange home behind! Don't miss this brand-new tale in the Mushoku Tensei universe: the journey of Roxy, fated to be a star among magicians!

"People wish for a king who can shower his land in joy."

—Cheers over jeers.











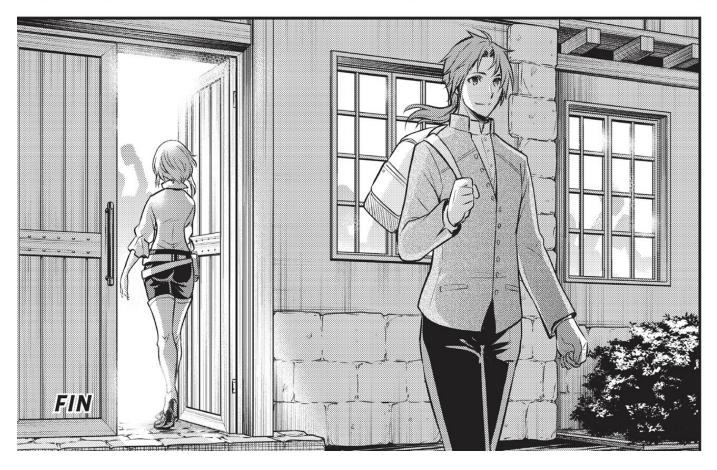














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Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation

Shitsui no Majutsushi Hen (The Depressed Magician)

(FW COMICS ALTER/FRONTIER WORKS)



ART: Yoneda Kazusa
ORIGINAL STORY: Rifujin na Magonote CHARACTER DESIGNS: Shirotaka

A brand-new manga in the world of *Mushoku Tensei*, bringing to life the never-before-adapted events of the seventh light novel!

After Eris left him, Rudeus fell into the deepest depths of despair. Hoping to find purpose, he devotes himself to finding his lost mother, Zenith. His first stop is Rosenberg, second city of the Duchy of Bacherant. Not caring whether he lives or dies, Rudy takes on high-level quests alone in a reckless attempt to make a name for himself. Yet a strange turn of events soon leads to him working alongside the B-rank party "Counter Arrow." One member, a young girl named Sara, somehow reminds him of his old acquaintance Elinalise...





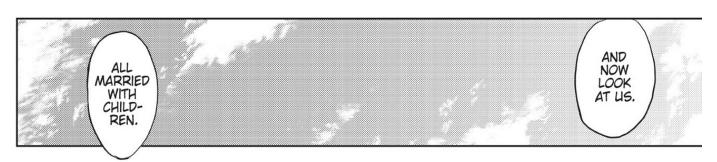


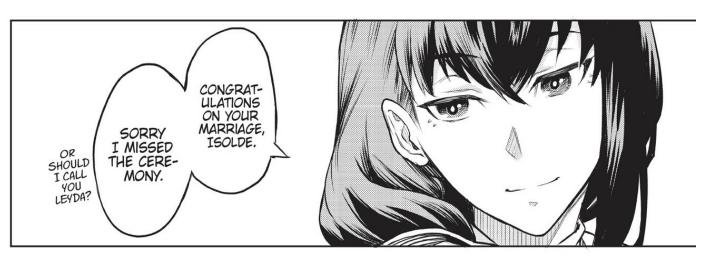










































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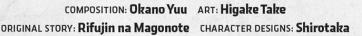
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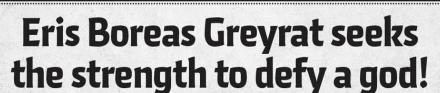


Mushoku Tensei: Eris wa Honki de Kiba wo Togu

(Eris Gets Serious and Sharpens Her Fangs)

(GAN GAN COMICS ONLINE/SQUARE ENIX)





After being thoroughly defeated in battle with the Dragon God Orsted, Eris parts ways with her beloved Rudeus to go study at the Sacred Land of the Sword. There, she single-mindedly sharpens her skills with the blade, seeking to become as deadly as she possibly can. Studying at the feet of the Sword God, she's as dangerous as a mad dog...but yearns for a strength beyond imagining!



"Some men achieve great things."

—Genius isn't real, as a concept.

Short Story: Sylphie's Father

E VER SINCE SHE WAS BORN, my daughter Sylphiette was a pitiful child. Her hair was green. In the eyes of the world, that was devil hair. At her birth, my wife looked at me in shock. Neither she nor I had green hair.

Panicking, my wife insisted that she had not been unfaithful. Of course, I knew that she loved me with all her heart. I never doubted her. On the contrary, I felt sorry. I suspected that that hair had something to do with my ancestor. I was a half-elf. My father's identity was uncertain, and my mother had never told me about her lineage. Sylphiette's hair must have been either my father's or my mother's ancestor's blood coming out.

"My family is the problem," I told my wife. "Thank you for giving birth to her for us." At that, she started crying. My wife herself was the child of a beastfolk slave and an unknown stranger. The two of us, neither of us knowing our fathers, had met, fallen in love, and had a child. I cried too. We wept together, then pledged to God that we would raise this child with love.

After the birth, I went to consult the village men straight away. I told them my daughter had green hair, but that did not mean she was evil. If there was anything I could do for the village, I would do it. I asked them to do their best to set aside their prejudice and accept her. I expect they agreed because of my good conduct up until then: I had settled in the village back when it was first established, and until the arrival of Paul, our resident knight, it had been my job alone to keep monster numbers down. I had built a good relationship with the villagers. That was the reason. And the villagers were good sorts, besides. That was the Asura Kingdom for you. When the land was prosperous, even the villagers were open-hearted. In any other country, we would have undoubtedly faced persecution. But in this village, even our daughter could grow up happy and healthy. That was the optimistic view we took back then.

It was around when my daughter turned four that I realized that rules for adults did not work with children. It was just after the Saint-tier magician Roxy

came to the village and won the villagers' acceptance that my daughter started to be picked on by the village children. I expect it was in part because of the talk going around that Roxy, with her blue hair, was a demon. In the epic tales that adults tell children, demons are always the enemy. The village children also targeted Roxy at first, but that was a Saint-tier magician for you. The children were no match for her powers.

With Roxy gone, the one who became a target in her place was my green-haired daughter. Lacking any way to stand up to them, she had mud hurled at her as she walked along the street; and sometimes they even chased her around with sticks. It made my blood boil. But despite all our daughter suffered, the village's adults were accommodating of us. I could not let my anger drive me to harm their children. So, I started by asking why they were doing such nasty things. To my surprise, the children thought of picking on the demon as a game. The game was that they threw mud and brandished sticks, then Roxy either brushed their attack aside and chased them off, or she played along and pretended to be vanquished. I told them my daughter was still too young for that game and that it only scared her. I asked them to stop. But the children would not listen to me.

After that, we began to take precautions. My wife cut our daughter's hair short and made her trousers to make it easy for her to run away. I asked the children's parents to help her if she was bullied. For her fifth birthday, I went all the way to the town of Roa and handed over the little money we had in exchange for a hooded coat for her—to hide her hair.

But this did not solve things. When the children set in on her, the adults came to her aid, but the bullying began to take place away from adult eyes. At five years old, my daughter was afraid to go outside. She grew more and more downcast, and she no longer smiled. I considered just picking up and moving to a different place, but with her hair, it would be the same anywhere we went. This village, where at least the adults were understanding, was likely still preferable. I thought the children would become more reasonable once they grew older. But how would those years be for our daughter? My wife and I worried over this day in and day out.

On one such day, my daughter's spirits suddenly picked up again. She had met

Rudeus. He had rescued her, and even now continued to protect her. She had taken to him completely, and lately he was all she talked about, even at mealtimes.

The previous night, she had told us happily about how today, Rudy had done this and tomorrow, Rudy would do that. I saw my daughter smile for the first time in a long time. And our dinner table was cheerful again for the first time in a long time. But when it comes to trouble, it never rains but pours. A succession of troubles befell my daughter, and I was at a loss for what to do about it.

"Haah."

"What's got you sighing, Laws?"

It was the dead of night. We were in the middle of our turn on watch duty. Without realizing it, I must have let a sigh slip out.

"Hey there, Paul."

Paul was Rudeus's father. He had taken up residence in the village as a knight, protecting the peace here.

"If something's weighing on you, you can talk to me," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say it's weighing on me."

"Well, say it anyway. Not like we've got anything else to do."

Paul was no ordinary swordsman. He had reached the advanced tier in all three great fighting styles. The likes of the monsters around here couldn't even scratch him. With his abilities, he could have made a living for himself even in the capital. Yet, for some reason, he was here in this back-of-beyond village... All the same, when I thought of how his son saved my daughter, it made me glad with all my heart. But what had me at a loss right then had led directly from that...

Then again, that made him the perfect guy to point me toward some kind of solution.

"Well..." I decided to tell him what had been on my mind lately. "Last night, my wife told our daughter, 'Tomorrow, Daddy goes to the guard post, so you come home around lunchtime and help him get ready.'"

"Hey, you're having her help already? What a good kid." Paul nodded, impressed, but Sylphie and Rudeus were both already seven. It was customary for children to start to learn how to help out around the house after they turned five... But then, Paul had had Rudeus taking classes for gifted children since the boy was three.

"So then what's the trouble?"

"She didn't come home until evening."

Lately, my daughter had stopped doing as she was told.

"Ah..." Paul said. "But hey, that's normal, isn't it? Kids lose track of time when they're playing."

"I wouldn't mind if it were one time, but it's happening a lot these days."
When nothing else was happening, she helped out as usual and listened to what she was told.

"Can't you just give her a good telling-off to make her be careful next time?"

"When I tell her off, she just says, 'But Rudy...' She makes excuses just like that. She doesn't really listen to us." At this, Paul's face grew serious. "Oh, no," I added, "It's not that I blame young Rudeus. He's been a great help to us." He had saved my daughter, after all. My little girl, who, just as she turned five and began to go out by herself, had become the target of the village children's jeers of "Demon!" and "Bad guy!" I was grateful for that, and I understood why she was attached to him. All the same, Sylphie really was making more excuses. When she was five or so, she had accepted everything my wife and I said, but lately, it seemed as though *Rudeus's* word was everything to her, while we were only of secondary importance.

Perhaps that was only natural. After all, when she was suffering, we were unable to help her.

"It's just a little concerning, you know, a child that age not listening to her parents."

Paul frowned, not saying anything. It seemed he had some thoughts about that.

"But then," I went on, "that may change after a few more years." My daughter's head was likely full of nothing but Rudeus right now. So full that she forgot what her parents told her, and that when we asked for an explanation, she only told us, 'But Rudy...' But as she grew up and grew more sensible, I was sure she would start listening to her parents again.

"Well...I hope so..." Now, Paul looked fierce—menacing, even. "We'll see about that," he said significantly, then fell into brooding silence. I was so daunted that I found myself falling silent too. That same oppressive atmosphere hung over us for the rest of our watch. We didn't say another word to each other.

It was not until later that I learned what had been on Paul's mind.

Short Story: The Mad Dog King Finds a Master

WAS HUNGRY. It'd been days since I'd had a solid meal. I was strong of arm and fleet of foot, but now I could barely lift my arms, and my legs shook so badly I couldn't even stand straight. All because my belly was empty. There was nothing in there. The last thing I'd eaten was a bug I'd caught on the side of the road, after which, that same night, I'd been hit with a ferocious stomachache. I threw up again and again, in blinding pain all the while. I didn't get a wink of sleep and puked out everything else I'd eaten. Before the pain finally subsided, I even lost control of my bladder. It had to be the bug that did it. Now, because of that bug, I was sprawled pathetically on the ground, staring up at the sky. After a whole night of stomach pain on top of my stamina being totally gone, I no longer had the strength even to stand.

"So this is it..." I realized I was going to die. It was only a short walk to the main road, but I didn't have the energy. And even if I could have crawled, no one would help me when I had no money or strength left to my name.

I was going to die. This was where it ended. Ghislaine Dedoldia was going to starve to death right here. I was supposed to be a Sword King, but instead of death in battle, I was getting a pathetic death from starvation. And all because I ate that teensy bug. As the realization hit me, my life began to flash before my eyes.

The memories that hit me were of the day Paul and I and the others had disbanded the party, and what came after. That day, we'd all been in bad moods. We all wanted to be rid of each other, myself included. I'd wanted to leave them, but after I did it, my chest grew tight with a loneliness I couldn't describe. I remember my gloomy mood had me scowling for about a month.

After the split, I went from place to place around the Central Continent. There was a period where I thought I'd go on crawling labyrinths like we had up until then, but alone, I couldn't keep track of food and items at all. Even then, though, I wasn't interested in joining another party. I knew better than anyone

that I couldn't get on with other people. I was not keen to experience another separation like the last one, besides. To shake off the loneliness, I moved to the Asura Kingdom. I'd heard it was a highly prosperous country, so I figured even someone like me could land a job there. What a fool I was. For adventurers—especially high-ranking adventurers—the Asura Kingdom was not an easy place to live. In the capital of Ars, I barely got any quest offers I could take. Fighting was my only skill, so I looked for hunting quests, but they were C rank at best—nothing an S-rank adventurer like myself could take on. At the same time, prices in the Asura Kingdom were high, and just staying at an inn quickly burned through the little money I'd saved while we were still a party. If there were no quests, I thought, I'd just kill monsters myself and then sell what I collected from them. But there were no monsters around the capital. It wasn't until I'd totally exhausted my savings that I found out all the monsters were regularly hunted down by the knights.

After the inn threw me out, I wandered the city streets. I lived like a stray dog, scrounging for food scraps—although my master had drummed it into me that "If you want to live with people, you live by their rules," so I never stole or murdered.

It was during that time that I heard the rumors.

The Citadel of Roa in Fittoa to the northeast treats beastfolk well. If any beastfolk out of work were to go there, they'd find jobs.

Latching on to that idea, I set off. I hadn't been eating well, so my body felt heavy. I was in no condition to survive the journey. All the same, I headed northeast. I devoured whatever looked edible—grass, bugs, anything. When I came across a stream, I drank until I was ready to throw up. I had thought about going into the forest to hunt and gather food, but then I remembered that in the Asura Kingdom that privilege was reserved for hunters with permits, so I gave that idea up.

I managed to reach Fittoa and was almost at the Citadel of Roa...and that was when my strength gave out.

"I ate a bug, and now here I am dying with this foul taste in my mouth, like some sick joke..."

I remembered the bug I'd eaten yesterday. Usually, I could sniff out poisonous bugs and plants, but apparently, I was so hungry that my nose wasn't working. Or maybe it hadn't even been poisonous. Maybe I just didn't even have the strength left to digest anything, so all my body could do was throw it up. Either way, I couldn't eat, and I couldn't move. This was the end.

"I never thought I'd die in a place like this..."

At the very least, neither my master nor any of the others I'd trained with at the Sword Sanctum would have guessed that I'd die like a dog in a ditch. I'd always thought my death would come after being defeated in battle. That lot from the Great Forest might have predicted I'd meet this sort of end, though. They never stopped wanting me dead... But I suppose that'd be a wish, not a prediction.

Ah, but that's right. There was one person who foretold that I'd die like this.

Ghislaine, after you leave us, I reckon you'll end up out of work, wandering from place to place until you starve to death.

To be sure, Geese, our party's thief, had said that. And he was absolutely right. Every now and then, that guy's guesses were so accurate it was as though he knew the future. What else had he said...ah, yes...that's right...

You're worth your salt as a swordswoman. If you stopped being so scared of getting close to folk and helped people out or taught 'em how to swing a blade, I reckon you could get by.

Of course. Of course, that was what I should have done. When he said that, I didn't think I could ever teach sword fighting, but maybe, if I taught them like I had Paul, I could train up an apprentice.

"Ha..." That sort of advice came back to me only now that it was too late. I was slow on the uptake, same as ever. I couldn't argue with Paul if he mocked me for this.

"Paul..." Now I thought about it, where had he ended up? I wondered if his child with Zenith had been born safely. I'd heard they were moving to the Asura Kingdom, but nothing else since then. I was a bit worried...

"Heh." As I thought the word worried, a chuckle escaped me. Paul was a

resourceful guy, all in all. He'd messed up at the very end when the party split up, but he never usually made any major mistakes, and while he often made small ones, he managed to get things right in the end. He was that sort of man, so I was sure he was still managing to swing things his way. How conceited was I, an idiot lying here on the verge of death, to worry about a guy like him?

I really was a fool. There were other paths I could have taken, other ways I could have chosen, and yet...

"So this is how weak my will to live was..." If I were reborn, I'd work a bit harder in my next life. Rather than saying I was too stupid like it was an excuse, I'd cudgel my brains until I remembered.

"...Wasn't much of a life," I muttered, then closed my eyes. I wanted to at least die in my sleep.

Just then, a shadow fell over my face.

That day, Eris Boreas Greyrat went out to play in the river with her grandfather Sauros. Sauros was a stern man, but he doted on his granddaughter. That morning, Eris had said, "I want to go see outside the town!" So he complied, finding a gap in his busy workload to take Eris out to play.

They sat in the carriage on the way home, Eris looking pleased. "Well, Eris, did you have a good time?" Sauros asked her.

"I had the BEST time!" she replied without hesitation. In the middle of a grassy plain that stretched out as far as the eye could see, she had chased after fish in the cool water, plunged in from the rocks, swam... For Eris, who was always shut up inside and who, on her occasional outings, never went beyond the town limits, the river that passed through the grasslands was more wide open and wonderful than anything she had known until then.

"Let's go again!"

"Well, of course we shall," Sauros said with a smile. He was thinking that next time, they could go further. Eris, he was sure, had never seen the ocean. While playing in the river, she asked her maid, "The ocean isn't like rivers. It's salty and big and deep, right?"

Given how excited she had been by the river, the ocean would probably have her jumping for joy.

"I thought the ocean—" Sauros started.

"Stop the carriage!" Eris cut him off with a shout that filled the cabin. The driver peered through the window; Sauros nodded straight away, and he brought them to a halt.

"Here, Eris, what—"

"Just wait!"

Eris leaped out of the carriage the moment it stopped. Sauros nodded to the guard for them to go after her, then disembarked himself.

Fortunately, Eris had not gone far. She and the guard stared down into a bush about ten meters away. Apparently, they had found something.

"Grandpa!"

Sauros hurried over to her with long strides. Then, he looked down at what Eris had found.

"Why, someone's dead by the roadside!" A beastfolk woman lay on her back, her eyes closed. From the way she was dressed, she was likely an adventurer. But her cheeks were sunken, and death hung over her.

"Grandpa! She's beastfolk!"

"Well, you don't see that every day! One of the Doldias! And by the look of the ears and tail, a Dedoldia!"

The Doldia tribe was rarely seen in the Asura Kingdom—much less a pureblood Dedoldia, who had the blood of the king of the beasts and seldom ventured out of the Great Forest. It was unbelievable that one would be dying on the roadside in a place like this...

"Mm..." The woman's ears twitched as though the noise annoyed her, and her eyes opened a sliver. There was life in her yet. Right away, Eris crouched down.

"Hey, what're you doing down there?"

There was a long pause as the adventurer stared at Eris without reserve, then said hoarsely, "I'm about to die."

"Really! But your ears and your tail are *so* pretty! It'd be such a waste if you died!"

"It might be a waste, but I no longer have the strength to live. Leave me be." So the adventurer—so Ghislaine said.

She still wanted to live, but her spirit and strength were all gone. For some reason, she couldn't find the words to ask for help. Ghislaine had already accepted death. She had accepted it was her fate to die like a dog. But Eris could have cared less about a thing like that.

"Okay! Then you can be my pet!" Eris declared enthusiastically, her voice ringing out across the plain. "Right, Grandpa? I can, can't I?"

"As you please!" Sauros replied at once. He had no reason to object to a Dedoldia coming to live under his roof. Of course, he never considered that Ghislaine might have ideas he disapproved of.

Ghislaine stared at Eris and Sauros wide-eyed. From the "Okay!" to the "As you please," the whole conversation had made no sense, leaving her lost. But then she remembered that this was what she'd been like, too, long ago, and the chuckle slipped out by itself.

"Heh... If you'll keep me," she said, thinking back on the words of her old party member, "I'll teach you to fight with a sword."

"You will?!" Eris's face lit up with delight. She had always wanted to learn how to use a sword. "It's a deal!!"

And so Ghislaine's fate was decided. There and then, they gave her the leftovers from their packed lunch and saved her life. Out of gratitude for her survival, Ghislaine swore her loyalty to Eris.

What no one yet realized was that Ghislaine was a Sword King, and that under her tutelage, Eris's skill with a blade would improve at a remarkable pace...

Short Story: Old Friends Reunited

It was eight years before Eris's tenth birthday. Her father, Philip, was constantly bored and depressed. Around a year had passed since his defeat in the power struggle had led to him losing his position as head of the Boreas family. He spent his days working the modest assistant job to the mayor of Roa and soothing his increasingly neurotic wife, Hilda. Sauros was always yelling at him. He'd been putting up with the yelling since his childhood, so it didn't bother him, but it frustrated him that he was unable to live up to his full potential in Roa.

On one such day, Paul Greyrat came to Phillip. The man who introduced himself as Paul was both like and unlike what Philip remembered. But that was only natural. It was almost ten years since they had last met.

The moment Paul laid eyes on Philip, he bowed his head. "I want a stable life," he said. "Give me work."

Philip asked about his situation and learned how, after running away from the Notos family around ten years earlier, Paul had traveled the Millis Continent and Central Continent as an adventurer. But then he had gotten a woman with child, so he had returned to the Asura Kingdom to do his duty by her. Beside him stood the woman in question. She was beautiful, with the features of a Millis noble, and indeed, her belly was large enough that it was clear she was pregnant.

Philip was silent. In the Asura Kingdom, it was held that settling in one place was best if one was going to raise a child. That was why Paul had come back. But he was unable to return to the Notos house after he'd kicked dirt in their faces on his way out the door, so instead, he was seeking help from the Boreas family—from his old friend, Philip.

"Please," Paul said. "There's no one else I can turn to." When Philip hesitated, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head. This was the manner of address

used by townsfolk and artisans. It was not befitting of Asuran nobility, and Philip was filled with contempt as he looked at Paul. Paul Notos Greyrat was the eldest son of the Notos Greyrat family: he ought to have been head of that family. But that was all in the past. He had been disowned the moment he ran away from home, so he wasn't an Asuran noble anymore. He had no utility to Philip, which meant he was no better than garbage.

"Tomas, take them—" Philip began, about to cold-heartedly order his butler to throw the pair out, but he was interrupted by a *bang!* The doors to the room swung open, and who should come striding into the reception chamber but Sauros. He looked down at Paul.

"Hmph! If it isn't you, Paul!"

"Lord Sauros, it's been too long."

"Haven't you grown! It seems you still don't know how to behave, though! I ask you: is this how a proud Asuran noble presents himself?"

"I'm as much a noble as...erm, I mean, I no longer have any ties to Asuran nobility, my lord."

"You damn fool! You wouldn't have been let in the door if that were true!" Paul's eyes widened, but he stayed kneeling, his head bowed.

"All the same, I know I'm being unreasonable..."

Sauros snorted. "You get that from your father!" At the mention of his father, Paul's face twisted. Sauros went on. "I couldn't stand how unreasonable he was! But he was always too by-the-book! It was like that when we drank together at his mansion fifteen years back! The fellow wanted to split everything equally down to the contents of the bottles! Now, I said his wine tasted like piss, and I didn't want to drink it, but he said he thought the same, so we'd split it, that once the cork was out, it was good manners to drink it, and actually—"

Sauros got started on what was going to be a long story. Meanwhile, Philip found an old memory coming back to him.

Fifteen years earlier, Philip had been about to start school—he must have

been four or five. One day, Sauros went to pay a visit to the Milbotts Region, part of the Notos's territory. Philip accompanied him on the journey. It was his first trip far away—his first time leaving Fittoa. He remembered how excited he had been by Milbotz's grape vines and windmills. His excitement persisted as they arrived at the Notos mansion, and even while Sauros and the head of the Notos family got started on the wine while the sun was still high. The house, just as spacious as Philip's own, provided ample fuel for his curiosity.

Avoiding Sauros's notice, Philip slipped out of the room and began to explore. Typically, he would never have been so naughty; he would have either stayed at Sauros's side or sat quietly in the room he was assigned. When he behaved himself like that, a servant or the like would take pity on him and bring him toys or sweets, and that kept boredom at bay. His first trip away had made him bold, but the Notos mansion turned out not to be as interesting as the Boreas mansion was. It all looked the same: identical-looking rows of identical-looking rooms. Perhaps he might have seen something interesting if he had looked out the windows, but he wasn't tall enough to see through the glass.

Door after door lined the endless corridor. Nothing at all seemed remotely interesting, and Philip quickly got sick of exploring. Then, Sauros's face appeared in his mind. Philip would get his ears boxed if his bad-tempered uncle discovered that he had been wandering about without permission. He had to hurry back.

"Huh?"

However, by the time this occurred to him, it was too late. He was already lost. He didn't know which room he had come from nor the route he had taken. The Notos mansion had in fact been constructed to inspire a sense of deja vu to deter invaders. All the same, Philip tried his best to make it back to the room he had started from, using his memory to guide him. Unfortunately, wandering while lost would only get you more lost. Before long, Philip had lost track even of what floor of the house he was on. A feeling of helplessness came over him, and he wandered around the mansion with a worried look on his face.

"Father? Where are you...? Hello! Is anyone there?!" He was unlucky. This was the time that the servants took their lunch break, and so the mansion was almost deserted. It wasn't *completely* deserted, of course, but Philip had made

his way into a section of the house that went mostly unused, so no one came. The time he spent lost was probably ten minutes at the most, but to Philip, it felt like hours.

"Wuh... Waah.." At last, he arrived at a dead end. He felt so entirely helpless that he sat down and started to cry. "Bwaaaaaah...waaaaaah..." He cried and wailed, and yet no one came. He would starve to death in the depths of this labyrinthine mansion.

"Hey."

Just then, a shadow fell over his back.

"Hic...hic..." Choking back sobs, Philip turned round to see a boy with light brown hair. He looked about the same age as Philip, or perhaps a little older. He was well-dressed, but there was mud on the hems of his trousers, and his collar was slightly torn.

"What're you crying for?" The boy asked.

"I-I was...exploring, th-th-then I got lost... I don't know...wh-where my father is..."

"Is that it? Right, follow me!" The boy jerked his chin toward the end of the corridor, then started walking.

"O-okay." Philip wiped his tears away and followed the boy.

That was how Philip and Paul Notos Greyrat met. Thinking this boy would show him where to go, Philip followed him, only to end up roped into playing with him. Later that afternoon, Paul got him covered in mud, for which he was told off by Sauros, but let us set that aside for now.

Strangely enough, Philip kept running into Paul. Sauros visited the Milbotts district many times after that, and each time, Philip and Paul played together. When Philip was seven, he started attending the noble academy in the capital, only to find Paul there too. They got on strangely well, and so they ended up hanging out together. Paul had no brains, and Philip had no brawn. The pair helped each other with their weak points and got up to all sorts of trouble. Looking back now, Philip wondered why he had behaved so badly...but when he had been with Paul, he had done it without thinking twice. They had been so

close that you could even say Paul had been his best friend.

When had he become like this? When had he started thinking of his relationships with people only in terms of the advantages they lent him? Was it when he heard that Paul, rather than returning home after graduation, had fought with his father and run away? Or had it been when he vied with his older brother James to be heir to the Boreas family? Before he knew it, Philip had lost the ability to judge people in any way other than appraising their value to him.

Philip looked at Paul. The other man's head was lowered. Paul had veered off the path of an Asuran noble. Philip had thought they would never meet again, and yet here he was, bowing his head for the sake of his unborn child. People could change. But to Philip's eyes, Paul had hardly changed from that day when he had helped Philip—even though his appearance could not have been more different.

"Tomas, the resident knight in Buena village, was killed in a battle with monsters the other day, wasn't he? This man is a master swordsman. He shall have the job."

Before he knew it, the words were out of Philip's mouth. Unable to conceal his surprise, Paul looked up at him.

"Philip..."

"You will be a low-ranking noble in a backwater village without so much as a market. It will be a provincial life. That's all right with you?"

"Of course! I'm in your debt!" With a beaming smile on his face, Paul bowed his head.

Eight years had passed. At the time, Philip did not understand why he did what he did. Why had some old memories made him open his arms to a man with so little value? He couldn't work it out. But now, as he watched Eris's tenth birthday wrap up, he thought that Paul had changed. Several months earlier, when Philip had discovered that Eris didn't know even the basic dance steps, he had assumed that her tenth birthday party would end up as a painful memory for her. But the day had come, and Eris had done the dances correctly. Her steps were still clumsy for a ten-year-old, but even Philip had seen that she seemed to genuinely enjoy the dancing, and—biased as he was, as her father—

he'd thought she looked lovely. He had half despaired of his daughter, but now he thought she might grow into a fine lady by the time she was fifteen.

And all of it down to him...

Philip's gaze turned to the boy standing beside Eris: Rudeus. It was thanks to him that Eris had changed. She had changed a lot. So had Paul. As a boy, he'd been king of the scoundrels; now, he was a father. Philip had thought, when he had offered Paul a job, that he had changed a little too. Even indirectly, Rudeus's influence had changed him too.

He watched Rudeus lead Eris and Ghislaine off somewhere. During the party, Rudeus had asked for food to be brought to his room, so he would probably be endearing himself to Eris there.

Rudeus is excellent as a teacher, but I see great things for him in the future, too. As well as being determined and patient, the way the boy got up to silly little tricks was just the sort of thing Philip loved, and he often caught himself smiling wickedly at his antics. If he continued growing up like this and kept a tight rein on Eris, he would prove useful in Philip's political machinations... But something in him opposed the idea. He felt like he shouldn't use the boy like that, although the Philip of long ago would have made him his political pawn without thinking twice.

"Heh..." Philip laughed to himself. His feelings mystified him a little, but now the thought struck him that if Rudeus were to become head of the Notos Greyrats and Eris the head of the Boreas Greyrats, it could put him and Paul on even footing once again. They could come up with devious schemes together again, and then, regardless of whether they succeeded or failed, raise a glass and laugh about them.

"That sounds like more fun than being head of the family," he said to himself. Chuckling at his thoughts, he turned his attention to his upcoming schedule.

Short Story: Shirone's Super Soldier

This is a story from Before the Displacement Incident.

Roxy Migurdia had a problem.

She had single-handedly conquered a labyrinth in the Shirone Kingdom and was invited back as a court magician in recognition of her achievement. She had been given the role of tutor to Pax, the sixth prince, and now earned more money than she'd ever dreamed of having. Life really didn't get any better than this...or so you might have thought. But things did not turn out so smoothly.

The reason for this was her pupil, Sixth Prince Pax Shirone. When she first assumed her post, she had found him charming—he was just the same height as Rudeus, and his eyes, though a little unkind, spoke to intelligence. He was a little plump, and he had a proud streak. But as time passed, Pax's manner changed. Perhaps he had realized that he, Pax, was a prince, for he began to make ample use of his power. In the past, the cooks had always ensured they ate balanced meals, but at the prince's demands, the amount of greasy food saw a massive increase. Perhaps experiencing newfound desires, he began to sexually harass the ladies in waiting, and then when he learned they wouldn't resist him, his behavior escalated further. He also stopped paying attention to Roxy's lessons. He was brazen about skipping class and even started to sexually harass Roxy, too.

That day, Pax hadn't come to class again. Roxy was left to wait for him in the lesson room in vain. At that moment, he was undoubtedly somewhere in the castle or else out in the town, doing whatever he pleased. In Roxy's experience, this meant the prince had no plans of coming to class. What he would do was come back at the end of the day and yell, "Roxy, class is off today!"

It was nothing to get this irritated about. She sighed, looking exhausted as she muttered, "This is ridiculous..." Then, she rose from her chair. No matter how well she was paid, she was not about to let a whole day go to waste for the sake

of a student who had no interest in learning.

Roxy headed for the town. Her days as an adventurer had brought her to the capital of Shirone on several occasions, but she had been based out of a different town there. Since becoming Pax's tutor, she hadn't left the castle unless she had an errand to run, and so she hadn't explored the area of town that surrounded the castle before. To cheer herself up now, Roxy decided to do just that.

"People always stare," she said to herself. As a demon, Roxy got strange looks from people when walking around unfamiliar towns. But she was used to it, and besides, she liked to walk around places she didn't know.

"The streets around here are so complicated." The capital of Shirone was a maze-like web of narrow streets. Roxy had experience traversing labyrinths as an adventurer, so it didn't disorient her, but any average person who didn't know the lay of the city would be instantly lost. The city had been a location of key strategic importance when humans and demons had fought during the Laplace War, but the demons had once taken it. The people who had worked to rebuild it at the time had increased the complexity of its streets to ensure that it would not be taken so easily the next time. In other words, these maze-like alleys were a remnant of the time when the city had been a fortress. As Roxy walked along the streets, she felt a sense of wonder that the city of those days remained in the present.

"Hm?" As she turned a corner, she caught the sound of a commotion. It was a sound she knew well: the sound of onlookers cheering on a fight. Roxy wasn't interested in quarrels, and yet she was still oddly compelled to follow the voices. She found herself in what you might call the slum district. It had rows of low buildings and the people there were dressed in rags. She also spotted a raised platform of the sort found at slave markets. It seemed like an extremely rough part of town.

I probably shouldn't get involved, Roxy thought. Then, she located the source of the commotion. Hm?

A group of people were gathered in front of what looked like a tavern. From the depths of the crowd, she could hear the clash of swords, as well as bursts of magic. Most likely, a pair of drunks had gotten into a fight that had since turned deadly. To a former adventurer like Roxy, fights were nothing out of the ordinary—she was used to them. Seeing it was nothing unusual, she lost interest and made to walk off again when—

"There! What're you waiting for? Do it! Kill him!" In amongst the cacophony, she heard a voice she knew. It was a voice that, as of late, had made her sigh every time she heard it.

"Excuse me a moment."

"Woah there, miss! This is no sight for a kid!"

"Hmph! I am *not* a child." Roxy pushed her way through the crowd until she reached the source of the commotion. The sight that met her was just what she had expected. There was a man surrounded by a large group of soldiers. Around them, men lay bleeding on the ground, apparently having come out worse in the fight—and even though they had the man surrounded, all the fallen men were soldiers. Presumably, that lone man they had surrounded, with his sword raised and the fire of battle burning in his eyes, was responsible. He was a force to be reckoned with.

"Hey, I asked you a question! Go! Arrest him, now!" Meanwhile, another figure urged the soldiers on. He was noticeably shorter than the other onlookers, but both his girth and his ego were unmatched. It was the source of the Shirone royal family's strife and of Roxy's troubles: Pax Shirone.

In front of him stood five soldiers, as well as the knight who served as his bodyguard. Her sword was raised. Of all the things for him to get up to when he was supposed to be at his lessons... Like as not, Pax had snuck into a tavern, then shot his mouth off with some adventurer—or vice versa. It had turned into a fight, so he had set his bodyguards on them. Roxy worked all this out in an instant, then, afraid she would get dragged in, she turned to leave.

"Ahah, Roxy! Just in time!"

Unfortunately, Roxy's blue hair was hard to miss. Pax spotted her at once.

"Agh," she sighed.

"You help too! Take that man captive!"

"My prince, you got yourself into this quarrel, so I ask that you please finish it yourself. I won't be cross with you for missing your lesson."

"This is no quarrel! There's a bounty on his head!"

"Say what?" Roxy turned back to get a proper look at the surrounded man and found that she did recognize him. His posters had been up at the Adventurers' Guild. Once a member of an S-rank adventurer party, he was a Saint-tier North God style swordsman and could use basic magic in each discipline up to intermediate level—a mage knight. For a time, that party had enjoyed the same level of fame as Fangs of the Black Wolf, but a few years back, when it had come to light that he had assassinated a prince, a bounty had been put out for him. Despite that, between his prowess as a warrior and his knack for laying low, he had thus far evaded capture. Now, he had turned up here of all places...

"I shall see him captured and claim the credit! Go forth, Roxy!"

"All this foolishness over a bounty...?" Roxy said, letting her displeasure show openly on her face. In truth, she wanted to ignore him and go home. But then her eyes fell on the fallen soldiers. Whatever else he had become, this man was still an S-rank adventurer and a rare mage knight. Anyone who couldn't counter both his blade and his magic would only end up dying a pointless death. And those who knew how to do so were few and far between. Otherwise, his head would have already been exchanged for the bounty on it.

Because of the prince, soldiers who had done nothing wrong would die. And if this man killed all the soldiers, he might kill Pax too. If Pax died, Roxy would be held responsible. They would say she had abandoned him. If all they did was throw her out of the castle, that would be all right, but she could also end up with a bounty on her head, just like this man.

"All right," she said at last. With a sigh, she stepped out in front of Pax.

The man kept constant watch on his surroundings. He was probably looking for an opening to make an escape, but they still outnumbered him.

At the same time, Roxy was not confident in her own strength. Monsters were one thing, but her experience against human opponents was limited. Still, her long years as an adventurer had taught her something. She knew how to

fight a mage knight.

"All of you, charge! Go, go!"

"Keep him surrounded," Roxy shouted, overruling Pax's commands. "One of you, get in front of me! I need you to protect me! Focus on his sword! If he attacks with magic, I'll counter it!"

It was a gamble whether the soldiers would take orders from her or not, but to her surprise, they all followed her instructions and formed up around her. Most likely, they all hated Pax.

"A magician?! Dammit. Let the great protection of fire be on the place thou seekest. I call the bold heat of a torch here and now. Fireball!"

"Rapid muddy currents, gush forth! Flood Flush!"

"A-a shortened incantation?!" The man's fireball collided into the mass of water Roxy called up with her truncated incantation. The flames fizzled, then disappeared. Meanwhile, water kept on rushing forward. While the man was still reeling from the speed of Roxy's incantation, it smashed into his face. He staggered.

"Mistress Knight! Go now! He can't cast spells if he can't breathe!"

"Got it! Gaaaaah!" The knight swung her sword over her head, then slashed at the man. It seemed to Roxy that she was rather skilled. But she was still no match for the man, and he easily parried her strike.

"The rest of you, attack him when he turns his back on you! He can't see directly behind him!"

"Gah! Unknown God, answer my call and raise the earth up toward the heavens! Earth Lance!"

"Majestic blade of ice, I summon thee to strike my enemy down! Icicle Edge! Mistress Knight!"

As the knight came at him from behind, the man tried to hold her back with magic—but Roxy quashed his every spell. The man took a strike to his back, but it seemed his armor took the worst of it, because he only stumbled.

"Grr... First you, magician..." He turned to move toward Roxy, but was met by

the knight.

"I'm not letting you go!" She parried his strike, and in that opening, the soldier directly behind him attacked. When he used magic, Roxy took care of it, and in the gaps, one of the others attacked him. Roxy, the knight, and this soldier worked together with such coordination you'd never believe it was their first time fighting together.

"Dammit!" the man shrieked as the knight came at him from the front and the soldier from behind to cut him down. He dropped his sword, then crumpled at the knees to fall on his face. For a few seconds, his body twitched. But he did not rise again. Little by little, the twitching grew weaker. Meanwhile, the blood pouring from his body pooled on the ground around him. Even the onlookers stared in silence as Pax walked toward him, then poked his head with his foot.

When Pax was sure he was dead, he bellowed, "Huzzah! I won!"

"Phew," Roxy exhaled. This was not her first time fighting a person, but she had still been nervous. She would have been in trouble if the soldiers hadn't followed her instructions.

"Well fought, Roxy! That's why you're the court magician, eh!"

Roxy sighed. "Thank you, my prince."

Pax came over to her, his chest puffed up as though he'd won the fight himself. Then, he turned to the knight and the others with narrowed eyes.

"The same can't be said for you lot. Losing four of your number to the likes of him? You aren't training hard enough!"

"Forgive me, my prince!"

"None of you has any aptitude for the blade! Resign as soldiers, this instant! You're not worth your salaries! If you come back, I'll fire you all!"

The soldiers exchanged glances. Their faces were pale. Pax really followed through on this sort of thing.

"Excuse me, Your Highness," Roxy said. "I didn't win by myself... If everyone here learned how to fight against magic, an opponent like we had today shouldn't be a problem for them. If anything, the rewards and praise—"

"That doesn't mean anything if they can't do it now, does it!"

"Well, yes, that's true."

"Hmph. Oh, fine! It's not as though there's any guarantee the soldiers who replaced you would be any better! Ahah, looks like the commotion drew some reinforcements! Here, you ingrates! Where were you? I already claimed the bounty myself! I shall go home and rub my older brother's face in it! Hahahahaha!"

Pax made a soldier cut off the man's head, then, without burying the body, he set off back to the castle with a spring in his step. Of course he ignored the soldiers lying on the ground moaning in agony too.

Roxy sighed again as she set to work casting healing magic on the wounded soldiers.

"Thank you for your aid, Miss Roxy. I owe you my life." Roxy looked up to see the knight who had helped her.

"It was nothing," she said.

"What with you being a demon and a former adventurer, I looked down on you as the little court magician. But you impressed me with your leadership back there!"

"'Little' was unnecessary, don't you think?"

"Would you do us the favor of teaching us how to fight against magic?" the knight asked. The soldiers who had fought with her and the others whose lives she'd saved with healing magic nodded in agreement.

"Yes, Miss Roxy!"

"We're all lost when it comes to magic."

"If you'd teach us, we'll have fewer incidents like today."

"There might be some who aren't happy about being taught by a little girl..."

"One look at what Miss Roxy can do will take care of that! By all means!"

"Now see here, I am not little!" Roxy shouted. In truth, though, she was feeling good. Ever since coming to Shirone, she'd spent every day at the mercy

of Pax's whims, getting more and more stressed. No one had praised her like this. Indeed, it was a long time since she'd been surrounded by people like she was now, and before she noticed what she was doing, she had her chest puffed out and her nose in the air.

"O-oh, all right, if you insist!" she said, as though they'd worn her down. "I'll teach you what magic is all about!"

"Hooray!"

"Now the missus can rest easier at night."

The soldiers were delighted, and the knight, looking relieved, said, "Thank you very much."

And that was how Roxy ended up teaching the soldiers of Shirone how to fight against magic.

If you were going to teach, it was always better to have willing students. From then on, whenever Pax skipped his lessons, Roxy would drop by the soldiers' training area and, half to blow off stress, teach them tips for fighting against magic users, as well as simple spells. Her name would be remembered with gratitude by the soldiers of Shirone.

Short Story: Old Enough

RUDEUS AND HIS COMPANIONS began their adventuring career in the town of Rikarisu in the Demon Continent. Teaming up with Jalil and Vizquel allowed them to climb the adventurer ranks while also saving money. Having cash to spare meant they were well equipped, and once they reached C-rank, they would set off from the town to start the journey home. That was what they were thinking when this episode took place.

Eris was doing upkeep on her gear. She had a newly purchased breastplate, a hood with ears on it, and a sword given to her by the Migurd. Eris was, as a rule, a messy girl. She couldn't keep her room tidy, and she didn't even fold her clothes. But she didn't slack off when it came to maintaining her gear. At some point every day, she always checked it all over—even if she hadn't done anything to get it dirty. It was partly because Ruijerd had told her she ought to, but mostly it was just that she liked weapons and armor. Just looking at them set her heart racing. The sword, the armor, the cloak—they made you imagine an epic adventure, one where you went into a labyrinth, slayed monsters, and got the treasure. They excited her so much that she even forgot about the displacement incident. Eris would have taken a sword and armor over a pretty dress every day.

Of course, if this had been the estate back in the Citadel of Roa, she wouldn't have kept it up for long. Just doing upkeep on weapons wasn't enough to get her heart racing on its own. Eris would have gotten sick of it in three days and gone looking for something else.

But this was the Demon Continent. They spent every day taking quests and fighting monsters to skin and sell their hides, and occasionally they got into fights with other adventurers. Eris used her sword and armor daily, and that meant that instead of giving up in three days, she settled into a daily routine of thorough upkeep on her gear.

That day, Eris was going over her gear with a self-satisfied smirk. She polished

her breastplate, beat the dust off her cloak, and painstakingly wiped down her sword with an oiled rag.

"Huh?" It was then that she realized that the bottle of oil she kept to use on her gear was empty. There had been so much of it when she bought it, but after cleaning her gear almost every day, she had run out.

"Rudeus, I'm out of oil! We gotta go buy some more!" Eris declared, not bothering to ask what he wanted. But when she looked up, all she saw was the empty room of the inn. Rudeus wasn't there, and neither was Ruijerd. Where had they gone? The toilet...? Eris racked her brains—then a memory hit her. While she was polishing her breastplate, Rudeus and Ruijerd had gone out to run their own errands.

"That's right, they said they were going out... But where'd they go?" They'd definitely said where they were going and around when they'd be back. But Eris couldn't quite remember the particulars. She wasn't the sort of girl who got hung up on details, and that had put her in a bit of a fix. Eris wanted to clean her weapon right now. It wasn't a sense of obligation, but she didn't like to do things halfway. Plus, she wanted to wipe away the tarnish on her blade so she could bask in its gleam.

But she'd run into a whole lot of obstacles if she went out. First off, Eris didn't speak the language here. She could sort of understand basic greetings now, but difficult negotiations were out of the question. Then there was the problem of money.

"Wait, I've got money." That was right. Rudeus had given her some money in case of emergencies. She kept it hidden in her underwear so that pickpockets wouldn't get at it. Eris rummaged around in her panties, pulled out her purse, then checked its contents. She wasn't sure how much money here was worth, but she remembered how many coins and notes her cleaning oil had cost last time. The money she had should be enough. Rudeus had said the money was to be used in a crisis, but Eris had cleanly forgotten that. Besides, even if she had remembered, she probably would've thought this fit the bill. Finally, there was the way there...but she'd been a few times. She'd be fine.

Eris had money. She was pretty sure she knew the way. She'd been told not to

wander around by herself, but right now, that had flown out of her mind as well, so that was okay too. In other words, everything was A-OK.

"I think I'll be just fine!" Eris put the sword she'd gotten partway through cleaning back in its scabbard, then leapt to her feet.

A few minutes later, she was trotting along the streets of Rikarisu in high spirits. She was so cheerful you could practically hear someone humming a happy tune. She was going shopping by herself. What with one thing and another, she'd never been allowed to when she was living in the Citadel of Roa, but now her chance had come in this unexpected form. She was so excited she wanted to run down the street. But even Eris understood their current predicament. They'd been transported to the Demon Continent, and there was a lot they had to do if they were going to get home. She didn't have time to play around. She'd buy what she needed without getting distracted along the way, then go straight home.

And so, Eris strode straight down the street toward the armorer's shop. She walked without hesitation, taking the shortest route from the inn to the armorer. Everything about her said that she knew what she was doing. But her confident gait was a bluff. If Rudeus had been tailing her, he would have realized that this was *not* the shortest route. Eris was one street off. There was more than one way to get to the armorer, of course, so Eris still had a decent chance of getting to her destination. It wasn't like she had no sense of direction, and she'd walked along this street multiple times before. If she stopped along the way, cocked her head, and said, "Hold on," she'd realize her mistake.

It was seriously doubtful that Eris, walking along in high spirits, would actually stop to question the street she was on, but all else going well, she had to catch on eventually.

"Hey, Eris!"

Of course, it's always at times like those that trouble crops up. Three demons stood in Eris's path. There was Kurt, a boy with sharp eyes and a single horn protruding from his forehead; Gablin, a nimble-looking boy with a bird's head; and Bachiro, with a body like a boulder and four arms. It was the Tokurabu

Village Toughs.

"Out on your own? That's rare. What's happened? Isn't Rudeus with you today?"

"You won't get any answers out of Eris, Kurt. She doesn't speak our language."

"Yeah, let's get out of here before she punches us again."

"We can't do that. What if she got separated from Rudeus and she's lost? We ought to at least tell her where to go. The Tokurabu Village Toughs don't ignore people in trouble."

"We don't even know if she's in trouble, though..."

While the three of them talked to each other in Demon God tongue, Eris frowned. She didn't understand Demon God tongue, so she didn't know what they were saying. But she did recognize one word—*Eris*. That is, her own name.

After they'd come up to her, now they were muttering about her among themselves. Eris had experienced this before back at the school she'd briefly attended in Roa. It was what you called "talking behind someone's back." They made sure you knew they were talking about you, then said nasty things about you, either making sure you didn't hear them or making a show of it to ensure you did hear. Eris hated it. There weren't many people who enjoyed having mean things whispered about them. Eris had learned from her grandfather that when you had something to say, you said it loud and clear. That being said, Eris didn't know what to do when people insulted her to her face either. She wasn't good at fighting with words. Her opponents immediately shut her down with logic, leaving her with nothing to say back.

Eris clenched her fist.

"Oh, oh no. Look, she's angry—she's angry! Let's go already, Kurt."

"R-right..."

The three demons quickly backed up at the sight of Eris's fist. The memory of how she had beaten them black and blue the other day at the inn was deeply etched in their minds. Healing magic had repaired their physical wounds, but it

couldn't fix the psychological ones.

"O-okay, we're going. Y-you'll get to the inn if you go straight down this street. *Inn.* You understand 'inn,' right?" With that, Gablin and Bachiro dragged Kurt away in the direction of the Adventurers' Guild and out of sight.

"Hmph!" Eris huffed through her nose as she watched them go. But she didn't give chase and beat them up. She was a bit more mellow these days.

"Anyway," she said to herself. After that unexpected interruption, she just wanted to buy her cleaning oil and get back to the inn. She was thinking she wanted to get a move on when something caught her eye. It was an alleyway. According to the map in her head, the armorer was in exactly the same direction that it led.

"This way should be shorter!" she said. Without hesitation, she headed into the alley. Needless to say, that alley did not lead to the armorer...

Eris walked deeper into the dimly lit backstreets. She'd veered way off course, but she never doubted that she was heading toward her goal. Unlike Rudeus, she didn't doubt herself.

She kept walking, progressing further and further into a rougher part of town. A pig-faced demon gambled on the side of the street while a lizard-faced demon asked, eyes glittering, if she had any valuables on her. Eris looked very out of place. The thing was, even if she was just as vicious as any of the folk around her on the inside, she still looked like a little girl. She stood out like an orange life preserver bobbing on the ocean. And so, of course, the sharks that saw anything floating on the surface as a meal started closing in.

"Hey, little girl. This road's closed." One of these was a demon with a face like a fox. "If you wanna pass, you'd better get your wallet out." There was a big scar on his face, and you could tell he was tough. An ordinary person would have taken one look at his face, known he was dangerous, and pulled out their wallet. Or at least, anyone who lived on the Demon Continent would have.

But Eris couldn't even tell demons apart, let alone whether they were tough or not. The way she saw it, a rude fox man had shown up and blocked off the street. And she didn't understand what he'd said, either. She did understand one thing, though: the fox had a sneering grin on his face, and he was making fun of her.

Eris only had one way of dealing with louts like him.

"Now, if I like what I find in your wallet, I might let you...guh!"

Eris hit him with a heavy body blow. The fox man, who'd assumed she was either scared or intimidated, hadn't expected her to throw a punch without speaking so much as a word. Eris's fist came at him faster than he could have imagined and buried itself deep in his gut. He doubled over, clutching his stomach. This naturally meant that he lowered his head. To Eris, this meant it was easier to punch. She took him on the chin with a hook that knocked him out cold.

Eris looked down at the fox man lying face down on the ground. His ragged clothes and the other end of the street he'd been blocking off sparked a recollection... She realized that she was heading in the direction of the place she had once gone to look for a pet. In other words, she had taken a wrong turn.

"This isn't right." Realizing her mistake, she turned around. The direction she set off in wasn't quite the direction she'd come from, but by happy chance, it was the road that led to the armorer. Rudeus, if he'd been there, would have thanked the fox man for showing her the right way... No, scratch that. He wouldn't have gone that far.

In any case, Eris set off without hesitation along the road that led to the armorer.

At last, Eris found the armorer. If she'd had a GPS tracker that let her display the route she'd taken, it would have shown she'd gone an extremely roundabout way. But Eris had no notion of having been lost. It didn't count as being lost if you got to where you were going without ever feeling like you'd lost your way.

When she entered the armorer's shop, all sorts of things threatened to grab her attention, but she suppressed that urge. She took a bottle of cleaning oil from where it sat beside the weapons, then banged two scrap iron coins down on the counter where the shopkeeper sat.

"I'll take this!" she declared.

"Thanks," the shopkeeper said at length.

She had successfully completed her shopping. Well done, Eris. But she couldn't relax yet. The shopping wasn't over until she was back at the inn.

"Ahah! There she is!"

It is said that what goes around comes around. Do a bad thing, and something bad will come back to bite you.

Eris exited the armorer's shop only to find five men standing in front of her.

"You've got some nerve, pulling that stunt back there." One of them was the fox man with the scar on his face. That's right, he'd regained consciousness and come here in a rage to get revenge.

Eris, of course, didn't remember him. The only time she remembered the faces of people she encountered on the side of the road was when they humiliated her. Still, she could tell that the five men around her were extremely hostile.

"We're gonna take you down a peg before you start thinking too much of yourself."

The corners of Eris's mouth turned down, and she backed up. She didn't bother to think about why she was surrounded. That was just what ruffians did, and even she had thought that going out alone might lead her to run into kidnapper-types.

On top of that, these were precisely the sorts of opponents her training had prepared her for.

"Out of my way!" Rudeus had told her she should try her best not to stir up any commotions, so she gave them a warning. If it was up to her, she would have attacked before they had a chance to get a word in, but this time, she followed Rudeus's instructions. Eris had gotten smarter. (Eris didn't think punching the fox man earlier counted as a commotion. That had been more like

saying hello.)

Anyway, she gave the men a warning, but they were demons—they didn't speak human language. And even if she'd said it in a language they understood, they were too worked up for her warning to stop them. Eris's shout ended up setting off the fight.

"Take this!" The fox man charged at her like he was determined to get the first punch in on her.

"Hah!" Even with an opponent twice her size barreling toward her, Eris wasn't scared. She blocked his punch, drove her fist deep into his gut, then, the moment he leaned forward, she clocked him in the jaw with a hook, going through the same motions as the last fight. It was her favorite combo. But there were still four more enemies. She'd taken one down, but she was still surrounded...or so you might have thought. But the other four didn't attack. Why? Because Eris was standing just inside the entrance to the armorer's shop. With the door in the way, the other four couldn't attack her all at once. This was no coincidence. When Eris had been surrounded before, she had deliberately taken a step back to get into this position. That being said, her current location wasn't purely advantageous. Fighting with the entrance to the shop in front of her put Eris at a disadvantage too. She hadn't been able to put enough force into her hook to knock the fox man out. As he toppled forward, he reached out to grab Eris's ankle.

"Ngh.... L-little brat... Gah! G-get her, boys!"

Eris kicked him in the face, but it wasn't enough to make him let go. And while the entranceway was narrow, in the end, it only limited the number who could attack her at the same time. If they used their numbers, it wouldn't be hard for them to pile onto her.

"Tsk." She clicked her tongue, then, feeling a bit desperate, she looked outside. "Huh?" The wind seemed to go out of her sails.

At the same time, she stopped kicking, giving the fox-faced man a moment to glance behind him. "Eh?" Dismay clouded his face. "Y-you're kiddin' me..."

There was only one person standing outside the armorer's shop. The four others that Fox-face had brought with him were lying in the dirt, twitching. They

were out cold. Fox-face didn't know the person standing there, but Eris knew him very well. He had dappled, bluish hair and carried a white spear, and he was glaring down at Fox-face as the demon lay there on his belly.

"Ruijerd," Eris called out. The man—Ruijerd—let out a sigh of relief.

"I was worried, when you weren't at the inn."

"I kind of ran out of oil, so I came to buy some more."

"At least leave a note."

"I'll do that next time!" Eris chirped back. The fox man's grip had slackened, so she shook him off, then walked out of the armorer's shop, stomping on his face as she went.

"How'd you know I'd be here?"

"The Tokurabu Village Toughs. They were at the inn when I returned and they told me you were lost. I guessed from their story that this was where you were heading, and I was right."

"How rude. I wasn't lost," Eris protested. "I'm glad you showed up, though. These guys picked a fight with me for some reason."

"So I saw."

The two of them strolled serenely away, leaving the four thugs twitching on the ground and Fox-face with his mouth hanging open as he tried to work out what had just happened.

What had gone around had come around. This was the price of blackmail.

And so Eris made it safely back to the inn. With Ruijerd at her side, she didn't make any wrong turns. All there was left to do was take care of her sword.

"Oh no, this is bad... This is bad!"

Eris was greeted by the sight of Rudeus pacing anxiously around the room in a flap.

"Wh-what's wrong?" she asked. At this, Rudeus looked anguished and threw his arms around her legs.

"Eris! Listen, when I came back to the inn, it was deserted. Eris should be here, but I can't find her anywhere!"

"U-uh-huh... I'll leave a note next—"

"What should I do?! She might have been kidnapped while I was out. Wait, or it might be a plot by one of my enemies... Damn it! Oh, please don't let any harm come to her!"

Rudeus went on saying things that Eris couldn't make heads or tails of. His eyes were unfocused and rolling around with fear. When he'd returned to the inn and found Eris gone, he panicked. He panicked so badly that his hand snaked around Eris's back to stroke her butt.

"Eris...! Come with me to look for Eris!"

Eris had no words for Rudeus in this state. But she knew what to do when he touched her butt.

"Calm down!"

"Nghaaaagh!" Rudeus's piteous cry echoed through the inn, and he fell to the ground twitching. But there was a smile on his face. He was satisfied, for he had stroked Eris's butt and enjoyed every second.

Eris looked down at his dopey grin and promised herself that the next time she went out by herself, she would definitely leave a note.

Short Story:

The Demon World's Great Emperor's Super Adult Love Story

N A BACKSTREET OF A CERTAIN TOWN somewhere on the Demon Continent, a girl lay sprawled on the ground. She was wearing what looked like bondage gear, and two horns protruded from her purple hair. One of her hands reached up into the air...only to drop listlessly back to the ground.

"Ugh... So this is it..." The last of her strength was almost gone. "Lo, the Demon World's Great Emperor spurneth not the earth even as she strives for the heavens... Heh, that sounds pretty cool. Maybe I'll pull it out the next time a champion beats me."

Her name was Kishirika Kishirisu, the Demon World's Great Emperor, the evil despot who, in an age long past, had dominated the demons and led the Demon Kings in a war against the humans. Of course, now she was just a wanderer without any followers or even a place to live. She didn't even have anything to eat.

"Mrm... I'm starving..."

That's right, she had collapsed from hunger. She was the Demon World's Great Emperor, which meant she could go a year without food and keep functioning just fine. But she was also an airhead, which meant she was dumb enough to forget that she needed to eat something at least once a year. By the time she noticed she was hungry, it was too late. Gone were her power to soar through the sky and energy to cackle. She had joined the ranks of the pitiful homeless.

"The sky's blue... I like it better when it's more purple-y, but for some reason, now I'm about to die, blue seems to fit better..."

Just because she'd collapsed from hunger didn't mean she'd die straight away. She could still appreciate the color of the sky. After all, she found herself on death's door like this every other day. On the other hand, she no longer had the strength to do anything but appreciate the color of the sky...

"Eh?" A shadow fell over her face. Someone was peering down at her as she lay on the ground. It was a boy with a single horn on his forehead. His age was probably in the single digits, and on the low end at that. He was at that age where you couldn't really tell how aware he was of the world around him. Kishirika looked around, wondering where he'd come from, and saw the back door to a house facing onto the alley. He must have come out of it.

"What do you want, boy? If you've come to rob me blind, I must disappoint you, for I am penniless. Or are you some species of death god, come for me at last?"

"Um, what's wrong? Are you okay? Does your tummy hurt?" Instead of answering Kishirika's question, the boy just looked at her with worry in his eyes. His eyes were pure, and there was no ill will in his voice, so Kishirika answered him honestly.

"The truth is, I am very hungry," she said. "I can't even move."

"Ohhh!" the boy exclaimed happily. Then he ran back into the house.

"So he was only taunting me... Ooh!" Kishirika cried out as she saw that the boy had come back already, and what was more, he held a bowl of soup.

"Are...are you going to give me that? Or perhaps you mean to sit in front of me and eat it slowly—if so, you are truly a cruel—"

"It's for you!"

Kishirika jumped up. They say that even when people are at their limits, hope can lend them new reserves of strength. But Kishirika wasn't just 'people.' She was the Demon World's Great Emperor. When things went her way, it gave her the strength of a hundred men.

"Nomnomnom, slurrp, shwrp shwrp, GULP." After taking the bowl from the boy, Kishirika put away its contents with terrific speed. It was a meager soup thickened with flour or something, with a few wilted leaves floating in it. But Kishirika was so starved that it seemed like the best thing she'd ever tasted.

"Fwoar... The way simple flavors fill you up...the only word for it is delicious!" With energy in her stomach, Kishirika stood up. Her hair went from dry to shiny, her skin from shriveled to its original youthful firmness. She used the marvelous

absorption powers of the Great Demon World's Emperor to instantly convert the calories into energy.

"Fwaaahahahal! The Demon World's Great Emperor Kishirika Kishirisu RISES AGAIN!" After this ringing proclamation, Kishirika looked down at the boy to ask for another helping.

"You did me a great service in bringing me sustenance! But that portion was just a tiny bit..." Kishirika trailed off. The boy beside her with his mouth hanging open was a small child, and it was obvious from the rags he was wearing that he was poor. He looked as though he had gone days without food.

Kishirika was not clever. Still, she managed to work out that the boy had given her some of his own precious lunch. Kishirika hungered after power, but she was also just plain hungry. She knew what an empty belly felt like. She still wasn't full, but she didn't ask the boy for any more. If she wasn't getting a refill, there was only one thing to say next.

"I have received thy sacrifice! A boon I shall grant thee!" It was Kishirika's time-honored custom to reward people who gave her food.

"What's a boon?"

"A boon, boy. Is there something you want?"

"Can it be anything?"

"Anything at all," she replied, but Kishirika didn't actually have much. She didn't have any money, as far as reputation went she was as good as homeless, and whatever her rank might be, she didn't even have anywhere to live. But she did have something she'd been born with—the demon eyes. She had the power to grant demon eyes. It was a power so great that it had once brought her within inches of bringing the whole world under her dominion. The demon eyes were synonymous with the Demon World's Great Emperor.

"Don't be modest, say what you want, c'mooon," Kishirika urged, grinning as the boy hesitated, pink with shyness.

"Okay..." The boy plucked up his courage. "Please be my bride!"

"Your bride?! Boy, what do you want a bride for at your age?! Ay yi yi, kids are

so precocious these days..."

Seeing Kishirika's exasperation, the boy's face fell. "No bride?"

He was so sweet that you wanted to blurt out that of course it was okay, but Kishirika was the type to clearly say what she thought.

"No, I'm afraid I have a fiancé. I cannot marry you, boy."

"Oh..."

"Is there nothing else you want? Here, what about a beautiful item that's ohso-handy and starts with D? Know the one? Hmm?"

"No! I want a bride."

Perhaps he would have wanted a demon eye if he had been about ten years older. Demon eyes were tricky to master but worth the effort. But right now this boy didn't even know what a "demon eye" was. And he couldn't ask for something he didn't know.

"Hmmm. A tricky one, that. Not that I object to being asked, it's just..." Kishirika looked down at the boy, frowning. Then, an idea struck her. "I've got it. Why don't I tell you the story of how I met my fiancé? Once you've heard it, you'll give up on me."

"A story?"

"That's right! A spectacular epic, full of thrills and excitement, guaranteed to get the audience cheering!"

"Tell me the story!"

"Very well then."

And so Kishirika began her tale.

It happened one, or two, or three...maybe four thousand years ago. I was on fire back then, kicking around with my entourage of Demon Kings. I used the riches I'd stolen when I attacked the humans to throw parades every other day. I gathered up all the handsome guys in the land and had them wait on me hand and foot. I doodled on the faces of sleeping Demon Kings. I sent so many letters

to the human king that he went bald from stress... Whatever took my fancy, I did it. Not only that, but back when I ruled as the Demon World's Great Emperor, I wasn't a half-baked pipsqueak like now, oh no. I was the embodiment of perfect beauty. The tributes poured in every day from adoring Demon Kings and other famous demons all over the land. Thanks to that, my belly was always full. Truly, I was invincible.

But while I was reveling in being emperor, there were those who came to spoil it. *Humans*. 'Course, given I was invading them, that wasn't a surprise. Now, apart from a very select few, all humans are weak. Small fries, the lot of them. Occaaaasionally you get a real tough one, but only once in a thousand years, so I didn't lose any sleep over it.

Problem is, once in a thousand years means that you'll get one of them popping up eventually. I call them "champions." They always showed up sooner or later. Back in the first war I got done in by a crazy guy with all these weird hangups, kept saying the sky had to be blue. But that's beside the point...

Anyway, this champion was called Golden Knight Aldebaran. You've heard of him, right, boy? That's right, the great champion who single-handedly rebuilt the humans' battle lines and crushed the demon armies. Back then, I couldn't have cared less about a chump like him. I mean, you'd be crazy to worry all the time about someone who might or might not show up once in a thousand years. Most of the time, when everyone gets worked up over some "once-in-athousand-years warrior" another demon king takes care of them.

To tell you the truth, my followers came to me a few times with reports like, "That champion's major trouble. Needs to be dealt with right now," but I thought I'd be all right, that it was no big deal.

But it was not all right. Before I knew it, my army was in ruins, and Aldebaran had invaded my castle. That's when I first got a look at him, and I could tell just by looking at him that this guy was super-duper bad news. He had streaky silver hair and eyes with no emotion in them, like an insect's, and his whole body radiated a sinister aura. He didn't look murderous, but I could tell he'd kill me anyway. And he was strong. Now, this guy had invaded my castle, so obviously, the warriors protecting me attacked him. This was my personal guard, so they were some of the fiercest demons around. He tore them up and tossed them

aside like cotton candy. Seeing that, a mighty demon king stepped up. He was always boasting about his strength, but Aldebaran obliterated him with one hit. Obliterated, you hear? Total insanity. Not only that, but for all that they called him the golden knight, there wasn't a scrap of gold on him. No wonder my servants had come to me wailing about him all those times.

As I faced that monster I was shaking so badly I couldn't do anything. Do you understand, boy? When you realize you're going to die no matter what you do, your body freezes up. That's what real fear tastes like.

He didn't look like the listening type, so I couldn't even beg for my life. All I could do was pray. I didn't have one god in particular in mind. I just sent off prayers to a power that was higher up than this guy. Nothing would hear me, of course. I knew I was going to die.

Then, KABANG! Something dropped down from the ceiling. It was a giant man all dressed in armor. *Yegads, more enemies?!* I thought. But then I realized the back of that suit of armor looked a lot like someone I knew well.

That's right, my prayers had been answered! Not by a god, but by a person I knew! There in front of me was Immortal Demon King Badigadi, last of the Eight Great Demon Kings, wearing armor like none I'd ever seen before. He challenged the champion to a fight.

"Don't do it, he's too powerful for you!" I cried. You see, this guy was a rarity among demons—an *intellectual*. He looked like a big lunk, but every word out of his mouth was carefully considered and clever. Needless to say, he'd hardly ever been in a fight before... But people can change before you know it. Since the last time I'd seen him, Badi had gotten stronger. A close fight broke out, with Badi holding his own against the monster.

KALANG, BALANG!

Even after they'd reduced the castle to rubble, the fight kept going.

BA-BLANG, KALOONG!

Next, they destroyed the town, but the fight still wasn't done. It seemed as though it could go on for all eternity, wiping out every other living soul...but no battle lasts forever. At the end of a long and deadly struggle, a victor emerged.

Badi had defeated the champion. Ah, but this champion was no common man. At the very end, he left behind something *big* for us to remember him by. He blew himself up. He tried to trade his own life for killing Badi and me.

I have to stop him! I thought. But I was helpless. I didn't have anywhere near enough power to stop him. Badi had power—he'd beaten the champion in battle. But in the course of that long struggle, he'd used up all his strength and was on the verge of collapse... All we could do was accept our fate.

Badi's helmet came off, and he turned to me, looking half-dead already.

"If I am born again, I will be your husband..." he said.

I laughed, then said, "If you come back to life, then by all means, I'll marry you."

Then, we both got blown sky high...but we shared a tender smile as we went.

"Ahhh, no matter how many times I tell that story it never gets old. Especially the bit where he comes to rescue me. My heart skips a beat just thinking about it. Anyway, you get it now, right, boy? The bond between Badi and me is unbreakable. So I can't be your bride..."

As she finished her story, Kishirika turned back to look at the boy again. "Eh? What's this?"

"Zzz...zzz..."

"Are you sleeping?"

The boy sat leaning against a wall, sound asleep. Maybe it was his naptime.

"Hmm. Perhaps he was a bit young for an adult love story like mine," Kishirika mused, cocking her head as she got to her feet. If he'd fallen asleep then that was just too bad.

"Still," she added brightly, "I must thank him for the food! Hah!" She jabbed her finger into the boy's eye.

There was a pause, then—"Oww!" The pain made the boy wake up, but by then, it was too late. One of his eyes had been transformed into a demon eye,

and Kishirika was on standby for liftoff to a whole new world.

"Farewell, boy!"

"Huh? Wait, wait up!"

"Fwaaahahaha! Think of that demon eye I've given you as a piece of me—take good care of it! Marriage isn't going to work out between us, but if you master that eye, you never know, I might take you on as one of my personal guard! Fwaaahaha, hahahahaha, fwah, gak, gak."

The boy was disoriented by the change in his vision, but he looked up at Kishirika and reached out toward her. Alas, she was beyond his reach. All he could do was stretch his hand up toward the heavens...

A few decades later, a warrior joined Kishirika's followers. They say his loyalty was fiercer and his mastery of his demon eye more complete than any other... but that's a story for another time.

Short Story: A Special Present

SOMETIMES, NORN ASKED FOR a story before she went to sleep. I told her tales that I knew. Given that they were things I remembered, I thought they were stories for boys, but Norn always seemed to enjoy them.

One day, I tucked her in and offered to tell her a story, only for her to reply, "Hey, tell me a story about Mom."

"Your mom?"

"Uh-huh. Um, today, um, Dol and Martha told me about, um, "First Love." They said in Millis they got a 'present from *desst-nee*,' and that's why they got married."

"Ah..."

Dol and Martha were a married couple from the Fittoa search party. Specifically, they'd gotten married around the summer of last year, so they were newlyweds. I'd been hearing them go on about how happy and in love they were for the past year. I couldn't believe they were bragging to Norn about it too...

"Um, so then, Dad, I was wondering. Did you and Mom get a 'present from desst-nee'?"

"Oh, gee... Nah, me and Zenith didn't really..." I started to say, then I stopped. A few moments sprang to mind, but I didn't look all that hot in any of those stories. I'd given Zenith plenty of presents, but mostly weird, selfish stuff that got me iffy looks from her.

But as Norn looked at me with her eyes all sparkly, I remembered all of a sudden the reason why I'd started giving her all those presents. To be sure, I didn't come out looking too hot in that story, either. But ah, heck. Lately, I'd done nothing but act the fool in front of everyone. A bit more couldn't hurt.

"Maybe there was. Right, I'll tell you an old story. Back from when me and

Zenith were still adventurers..."

Listening eagerly, Norn's eyes shone even brighter as I began my tale.

Zenith had settled in with Fangs of the Black Wolf, and we'd just started taking on labyrinths for real. That day, Zenith and I were walking around some street stalls together. Why it was just the two of us, I can't really remember now... That's right, I think Zenith said she wanted to take a look at the stalls, and I'd made her take me along. Yeah, back then, whenever Zenith tried to go anywhere alone, I'd say, "It's dangerous to go alone," or something. So I used to go out shopping with her a lot.

Was that because I was already in love with Mom? Gee...yeah, I guess I was. I probably would've denied it back then, but I was already in love with her, and I'd have done anything to get her attention.

We were walking along when, all of a sudden, Zenith came to a stop in front of a stall.

"What's this?"

The stall sold antiques...well, that's a fancy way of describing it. Really it was just useless junk dug up from a labyrinth someone was trying to sell off. It was a pretty sketchy shop. The stall was covered in a jumble of old stuff they hadn't even bothered to polish. When we stopped, the stallkeeper said, "Welcome! Take your time looking around." Then he began to tell us about the goods. He showed us a flask that always produced water and a bottle that'd blow up if you threw it, and all kinds of stuff that sounded useful at first, but Zenith and I were veterans. We knew you could get magical implements with more powerful effects and for cheaper prices. The only people who'd buy stuff at a store like this were newbies who'd just started adventuring or idiot nobles going incognito.

Zenith took her time looking over all the items until she saw one that made her go "Oh!" She only said it quietly, but I was desperate to make her notice me, so I caught it.

"This is so cool! I wanted one of these."

She was looking at a totally ordinary, battered old medal. Normally, I'd have given it a glance and moved on without a second thought.

"You have good taste, miss. This medal—"

"C'mon, let's go!" I cut off the stallkeeper as he began his spiel and pulled Zenith away.

"Okay, okay. No need to rush."

If I'd bought the medal and given it to her then and there, that would have been pretty smooth, too. But that wasn't what I did. In order to make her like me better, I wanted to add a little something extra. So after I got Zenith away from the stall, I quickly went back by myself to buy the medal. Then, I went back to the inn and used the kit I used to clean my sword to buff up the medal. I figured she'd like it better polished up all nice than covered in grime like it'd been back at the stall.

The next day, I went to Zenith with total confidence to give her the medal.

"H-how d'you do, Zenith? Fancy seeing you here."

"Hmm? 'How do you do?' Formal today, aren't we? What are you scheming this time?"

"Oh, nothing really. You know how the other day you saw something you liked at that antique store? What was it, anyway?"

I could have just said, "For you," and handed it to her, but it's about the mood, see. I asked the question to lead into it first.

Zenith said, "Ah that," with a satisfied sort of nod. "The knights of the Anchor Kingdom used those medals to identify themselves. There are seven types in all —" Then, Zenith told me about the legend of the Knights of Anchor. Well, it was called a legend, but really, she said, it was a story rewritten to appeal to kids. It had been popular in Millis for a while. It was about an order of knights from a kingdom that was destroyed battling demons in the Laplace War...but I'll tell you that story another time.

Anyway. The story had seven main characters. The knight order had seven ranks, and there were seven kinds of medals. So basically, each person got one

medal that symbolized that character.

"There was a picture of the medals in the book I read when I was little. Seeing the real thing made me all nostalgic... But why are you asking?"

"Uh, no reason! I was just wondering! See ya!"

If I'd gone, "Ta-dah!" and pulled the medal out after Zenith told me about what the medals meant to her, I was sure that'd have made her happy. But after listening to her, I reconsidered. There were seven medals. One would probably have made her happy, but that wouldn't do. If I wanted to really impress her with one big gesture, one wasn't enough. I had to collect all seven and give them to her... That's what I thought.

From that point on, I was obsessed with medal collecting. I spent every free moment going around antique shops. Even when we were exploring labyrinths, when we found piles of junk, I hunted through them for medals. I even asked an information broker about the medals' whereabouts, and I got Geese to help me search. It seemed to pay off. I found one medal after another until I'd managed to find six of them. Six medals. That's right, six. Only the last one escaped me. I never got hold of it. The last one was the rarest of all the Anchor Kingdom knights' medals. It had the most elaborate design, it was the biggest, and it was the most expensive. It belonged to the knight commander, of course. I actually hunted down an auction house where it was up for sale and tried to buy it, but I didn't have the cash. That really got me down. I thought I'd never be able to give her the present.

What's that? Mom would have been happy no matter what I gave her? Ha ha. You're probably right. But that didn't occur to me back then.

Now, while I was worrying about what to do, Geese, who'd come with me looking for the medals, told me something.

He said, "Ya don't have to collect 'em all, right? What if you got a pretty chain and made a kinda fashion accessory out of 'em?"

I wasn't convinced. If it were me, I'd want the full set. Only a real bozo would wrap up six out of a set of seven in a pretty box and make a present of them. First, I'd had one medal. Now I had a set that was one medal short... Out of the two, I'd have taken just one medal.

That was what made me decide to take up Geese's suggestion. But just doing as he said wasn't interesting, so I decided to add a bit of flair. First, I went to a skilled artisan and had them polish the medals till they gleamed like new. You could see your face in them, they were so shiny. Nothing like what I'd managed with my sword-cleaning gear. Afterward, I went to a general store to buy a fine silver chain. The color went nicely with the medals. Then, I went back to the artisan and had them fit them all together. I went to a cloth seller and paid a pretty penny for a bit of silk, which I put in a box I thought I'd put the seven medals in once I'd collected them all. I nestled the medals gently on top of it. And then it was complete—a beautiful pendant that wouldn't have looked out of place for sale at the sort of jewelers nobles shopped at. I was feeling pleased with myself. There weren't many guys around who'd take a grimy old medal from an antique shop and make it into this pretty a present, I thought.

I took the medal and went to find Zenith. Really, I should've made it a date, but back then, you know, I wanted to look cool. I felt like it was a bit lame to go to all that trouble for a girl.

So I gave her the present in the dining room at the inn.

"How d'you do, Zenith?"

"Hmm? 'How do you do?' Formal today, aren't... You know, I feel like we've had this conversation before."

"Have we?"

"So what do you need?" Zenith asked, propping her chin up on her hand. There was a sort of mischievous look in her eyes. She was so pretty. She had beautiful golden hair that shone in the sunlight, and she was elegant even with her chin resting on her hand. It was only her eyes where you saw that hint of mischief. It was the contrast, you know?

I'd seen all kinds of girls in my time—nobles' daughters and adventurers' daughters and daughters of townsfolk—but there was something different about Zenith. She looked and held herself like a noble, all elegance, but she didn't talk or act like a sophisticated type. She had this innocent air.

Sitting in front of her then, I got a bit nervous.

"Oh, uh, I don't, I wouldn't say I need anything, exactly."

"Hmm? What's up?" she said teasingly, leaning in to stare at me.

That was when it clicked. I realized that someone, probably Elinalise or the like, had ratted me out ages ago. Back then, I was the sort of guy who might have gotten mad and stormed off. But I'd put a lot of time collecting the medals and a lot of effort into wrapping them up nicely, and besides, Zenith was pretty.

I stuck out my hand with the box in it at Zenith. "For you," I said.

"Huh?" Zenith probably thought I'd just hand her the medals. When I held out a box, her eyes went wide. "Can I open it?"

"That's the only way to see what's inside..." I muttered. Zenith slowly opened the box.

"Ohh!" she gasped. I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad gasp. Partly because of that, I started to make rambling excuses.

"You said that medal was cool back when we saw it at the antique stall, right? So, yeah. I mean, you said there were seven, so it would be better if I'd got the whole set, but I don't have that sort of time..."

I really was thinking that I ought to have collected all seven. Anyway, when I was done embarrassing myself with my excuses, Zenith took the medals out of the box and gazed at them.

"They're so pretty..." For a while, she held the medals up to the light to look at them, then she put the ones that made up the pendant around her neck and did a twirl.

"Well? Does it suit me?"

"Y-yeah. Looks great," I said. Zenith blushed, but she smiled like she was pleased.

"Come here, Paul. I want to tell you something." She beckoned me with her finger, so I obeyed and went up to her. Zenith leaned in to put her lips to my ear...

Mwah.

Before I knew it, she'd pulled away again.

"To say thank you!" she said. For a second, I didn't understand what had happened. But I could still feel a hint of warmth as well as the soft touch of her lips on my cheek. She'd gone even redder than before. She laughed shyly and said, "Thank you! I'll treasure it." Then she fled back to her room.

"I found out later that Zenith had known I was gonna give her the medals after all. But she hadn't thought they'd be so pretty. She assumed I'd just hand her some dirty medals as I'd found them at the antique stalls, so she was just thrilled... Then...huh?"

As I went on recounting my memories of long ago, I realized that Norn wasn't reacting like she had been at first. I looked down at her face—just like Zenith's, but so much younger. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing deeply. She must have nodded off while I was talking.

"Ah, jeez. Maybe she was still a bit young for that story." I scratched the back of my head, then gently stroked Norn's sleeping one. She'd grown a lot since the displacement incident too. For all that, she was still only a kid...but once she grew up some more, she'd be as beautiful as Zenith. With the boys she'd have chasing after her, Norn would fall in love one day too.

"I wonder what Zenith would say if she brought home a boy like me," I said with a wry smile. Then I stood up.

We still hadn't found Zenith, or Lilia, or Aisha. For now, I had to keep on doing what I could. That was the only way Zenith and I could be together to meet whoever Norn fell in love with.

"Ah, but I guess Rudy'll be first." Just the other day, I'd parted from my son. I pictured his face along with that of the girl with him. Then, I turned off the light and put a hand on the door.

"Goodnight, Norn," I said quietly, then I left her room. "Right, I think I'll do a bit more work!"

With that, I returned to my job with the search party.

Short Story: Rudeus's Summer

W E ARRIVED IN EASTPORT. When I stepped off the boat, I was in the King Dragon Kingdom. There were customs officials, and as they checked our luggage, they charged us a toll. But so long as you paid the required fees, it was no trouble. Eris, Ruijerd, and I went out into the port. Now we were only a stone's throw away from the Central Continent and the Asura Kingdom.

"Huh...?" I'd just set off down the street to look for somewhere to stay when a street stall caught my attention. The goods on display were made of cloth—cloth with very little surface area. That's right, it was an underwear store.

Now, don't get the wrong idea. I wasn't interested in underwear or anything. It was just the material these were made out of, you know, I hadn't seen it much before, so it got my attention. And it got my attention to see a shop in the middle of the street that only sold underwear, too. Street stalls that dealt in clothes usually focused on travel gear and made underwear with whatever fabric they had left over.

That being the case, I went over to talk to the stall-keeper. "Hey, Mister. Don't see many shops selling underwear in a place like this."

"Oho. If you don't know what these are, you must be travelers, eh?"

"That's right. We came from Millis on our way to Asura."

"That right? Well, listen here. This isn't underwear. It's swimwear."

Swimwear?! Did he say "swimwear"?!

It couldn't be. This world didn't have so much as the concept of swimwear. When you went to play at the river, it was lolicon paradise.

"When you go in the water with your clothes on, they get in the way, which makes it hard to swim, right? But underwear goes see-through, and that's embarrassing—and never mind going naked! This swimwear here was developed for folk like that."

"Swimming...? Are there pools here?"

"In this town, there's a bit of coast that was given to a fisherman long ago by the Seafolk after he saved their king. It's not big enough that you can make a living off fishing it, and trouble's come between the humans and the seafolk enough times that you can't even fish for fun. But monsters hardly ever go there, so these days fishermen, adventurers, and the like use it for swimming practice."

"Wow." It wasn't quite like the pools I knew, but they had somewhere for people to swim in the ocean. I was also looking at a display of swimwear made from seriously tiny pieces of fabric. And behind me, her eyes lighting up as she learned that you could swim in the sea here, was Eris. In that moment, we shared a common dream.

"I'll take one, Mister."

"Pleasure doing business," the man said with a toothy grin.

The scorching days of summer had arrived. The temperature was rising in my heart too. Before me was a white, sandy beach, the blue ocean, and the bright yellow sun. The red seashells poking out of the sparkling sand completed the picture. The fisherman who thought he'd have this beach—or the king who'd decided to give it to him—would have looked at this beautiful beach and pictured lovers walking arm in arm or something, for sure. Tragically, the scene in front of me only had single men and women sweating through their swimming practice.

But lo! Upon that very beach there appeared a single flower! Wearing the black bikini I'd bought her, with her red hair tied back in a ponytail, came Eris!

Man, it had been a *mission*. Eris had not been keen. She was like, "I want to swim in the sea, yeah, but in that swimsuit? It's basically underwear!" I'd talked her around, then had her get changed, and now, at long last, I was blessed with this wonderful world!

Eris's boobs and butt had developed a fair bit. Her belly button was charming, and her legs were long and slender. I'm a simple man—just looking at her was good enough for me.

Are you settling for good enough? Time to step into a new world of satisfaction!

I went over to Eris. We had watermelons to split, waves to chase, and sunsets to watch as we whispered "je t'aime" to one another—there's a ton of fun to be had at the beach.

"Rudeus! I'm going swimming!"

"Not so fast, Eris," I told her. "You have to warm up first. What if your leg cramps up in the water?"

But Eris wasn't listening. She could see paradise. With the great expanse of ocean before her, she couldn't wait to dive in. Her heart was already in the ocean, the starfish were twinkling, you get the idea.

"Ruijerd! Teach me how to swim! I'm off!"

"Eris, I said wait!" Before Eris could run off, I tried to grab her shoulder. But either I misjudged the distance, or Eris moved, because my fingers slipped straight through empty air, then caught on the knot at the back of Eris's swimsuit. Perhaps she hadn't tied it tight enough. The knot came undone, and her swimsuit went fluttering to the ground.

"Hey...! What the hell!"

Care to guess what I got an eyeful of next? Eris's two soft hills with their cherry-pink peaks, perhaps?

Nope. All I saw was her tightly clenched fist.

So I took Eris's Boreas Punch straight to the face and blacked out. While I was out cold, Eris had a fantastic time enjoying everything the beach had to offer. And with that, summer came to a close.

Short Story: Everyone's Good and Bad Habits

Luke

LUKE NOTOS GREYRAT HAD a bad habit: he couldn't help but chat up every woman he laid eyes on. In particular, women with large breasts made his judgment go out the window. So long as the cup size was large enough, he didn't care about age. Girls who hadn't come of age yet, women in the blush of youth, old crones who had passed sixty—he flirted with all of them. If he happened to seduce a girl he could take straight to bed, so much the better. For the sake of his honor, however, it should be said that his flirtations were not solely for the purpose of satisfying his sexual urges. It was only a habit. Using his looks and his voice to make women he took a fancy to like him in return gave him an indescribable sense of exhilaration and achievement. Simply put, he just liked getting friendly with women with big boobs. With women older than his father, on the other hand, he tried out his pick-up lines without any ulterior motives.

Sometimes, however, his tendency to try and get cozy with everyone brought about trouble.

"My goodness, if it isn't my darling Luke! How have you been?"

"Hey, Josephine!"

Josephine was the wife of a high-ranking noble. Her husband had already passed away, and she had relinquished her estate to her son, but there were many nobles indebted to her, and so she continued to wield authority at the palace. As you could guess from the fact that she had handed her estate over to her son, she was three times Luke's age. That obviously disqualified her as a potential love interest for him.

"You have another lovely dress on today. It makes your beauty shine all the brighter... No, your beauty would shine no matter what dress you wear."

But to Luke, age was only a number. The compliments came pouring out of him practically automatically. Josephine was delighted.

"Oh, Luke, you know just what to say to make a lady smile! This dress, you know, came from the King Dragon Kingdom. It's woven through with threads

made from King Dragons, so it's ever so durable, not to mention the shine—" While Josephine went on at length about her dress, Luke listened attentively. They went on like that for an hour.

So that you don't get the wrong idea, it should be said that Luke wasn't annoyed by this. On the contrary, he thoroughly enjoyed that hour. After all, there was a lady with large breasts in front of him in a dress that showed off her cleavage, talking happily about things that she liked. There was nothing not to enjoy. If anything, moments like these were why he flirted in the first place.

But with Josephine, it didn't end there.

"Oh, yes. Today, Luke, my darling, I brought you something you'll like."

"Did you now?"

"Fetch it here," Josephine said, and a servant waiting in a corner of the garden stepped forward. They held out a flat object wrapped in cloth to Luke.

"This is for you, my dear. To thank you for always being there to talk to me."

"You shouldn't have! Thank you, Josephi..." As the servant unwrapped the item, Luke's smile froze on his face. Josephine had given him a painting. The subject of the painting, however, was so peculiar and perverted that he shied from putting it into words.

"Oho ho. Do you like it? I had my portraitist paint it just for you."

"Y-yes... Thank you, Josephine."

"You are very welcome. I could hardly do any less when it's for you, my love." Josephine went on to explain the painting in great detail. She told him where she had found the portraitist, the sort of paint it was painted in, and what sort of brush he had used. Luke listened, forcing himself to smile.

At last, Josephine seemed satisfied. "Bye-bye for now, darling Luke. Until next time," she said, and then she left.

Luke was left with the painting. He took another good look at it, then screwed up his face. "Blergh..." He styled himself as a chivalrous type, but this painting was a step too far. That was how bad it was.

"I'll just hide it away in the back of the storeroom later... Or maybe..."

He thought for a moment, then he took the painting home with him.

Ariel

f T HERE WERE A LOT OF perverts among the royalty and aristocracy of Asura.

These were people who had everything—fame, riches, the lot. Anything an ordinary person might lust after could be theirs without effort, and so they developed degenerate tastes. It was said that nine of every ten aristocrats held covert fetishes.

Compared to the others, Ariel Anemoi Asura was known for being relatively ordinary. She did mess around sometimes, but that was perfectly vanilla. In fact, there were rumors that she only did it to blend in at the palace. Perhaps it was her appearance and her captivating voice that made people think that way. The truth was, Ariel was just like the others.

That's right, Ariel had her own *unique* tastes. Hers was a particularly unusual one. She liked to make a fool of herself in front of people. Some might have thought, *Is that all? That sounds pretty normal*. It was true that there were many others who enjoyed similar pursuits—so-called "exhibitionists." But what Ariel liked wasn't the exposure. For her, it was the moment of embarrassment as she heard the clatter of stacked objects coming crashing down that really titillated her. As she grew higher in rank and in people's estimations, the pleasure it brought her only increased.

It was only pleasurable if she didn't do it on purpose. Deliberately doing something embarrassing didn't push any of her buttons. It only worked when some freak chance shattered the image of perfect Ariel the perfect princess. Because of this, she kept up her perfect act, taking care that no one ever caught on to her proclivities.

"What's this?" One day, she noticed a strange object in a corner of her room. It was rectangular and wrapped in cloth. It looked like a painting. Without thinking anything of it, Ariel picked it up. Some people might wonder why she'd just pick up an item she had no recollection of, but when you were as important as Ariel, you received presents every other day, and as a rule, the contents were checked before being left in her room. Of course, even then, there were sometimes poisoned needles or the like hidden inside, so her safety was by no

means guaranteed... But there were no poisoned needles today. Ariel managed to get a look at the item.

There were no poisoned needles, but it was poison all the same.

"How awful..." Ariel gasped. The painting that emerged was of a character to make you question the morals of the possessor. "Who in the world... Is this some prank of Luke's?" She examined the painting closely.

It was awful. Really awful. It would be mortifying if anyone so much as knew she had it. Just holding it like this made her hot and bothered. She imagined people thinking, *Lady Ariel*, with a thing like that!

"Ngh...!" A shiver went through her.

Ariel had a bad habit. She collected things that would get her in trouble if anyone saw them. Everything she collected was kept securely hidden, and then every now and then, she would think, *If anyone ever found these, I'd be finished!* Surrendering herself to the ecstasy of that thought was one of her few pleasures.

"I'd better hide this," she said to herself. It wasn't stealing. If you were royalty, you naturally assumed that everything in your room was yours. Indeed, nothing in that room did not belong to her—from the objects to the people. As such, she didn't need permission to use or throw away anything left there—or to hide such a thing.

"I'll put it under the bed for now." Ariel stashed the picture under her bed like a junior high school boy hiding porn magazines, then realized she needed to pee.

"Oops, perhaps I drank too much tea."

There were some among the common folk who thought that Lady Ariel never used the toilet. Obviously, that was not the case. Ariel's room had an adjoining toilet for her personal use. She headed to it now.

Fitz

SYLPHIE—OTHERWISE KNOWN AS FITZ—WAS Ariel's bodyguard. Her job was to protect Ariel, and also to carry out the orders Ariel occasionally gave her. Today, the order had been to relay a little rumor to a certain high-ranking noble. She had carried it out without any trouble, then come back to the palace.

"Huh? Lady Ariel? And no Luke, either. I guess he's not back yet..." Her ward was nowhere to be seen. "Is she in the toilet?" she wondered, looking over at the toilet door. Then, Fitz noticed something. "Huh?"

From under the bed, there was a piece of cloth poking out ever so slightly. She hadn't seen it before.

Silently, Fitz drew her staff. If an assassin were lying in wait, under the bed was a terrible hiding place. All the same, she couldn't relax her guard. Taking care not to make a sound, she approached the bed. Her staff in one hand, she extended the other toward the cloth...then she yanked it out.

In the same instant, she pointed her mana-charged staff at it and shouted, "Don't move!" Then she stopped short.

"What is this?" She had pulled out a flat object. Perhaps because she had tugged on it, the cloth had fallen away to reveal a fraction of what was inside. It seemed to be a painting.

"What's a painting doing here...?" Fitz muttered to herself. Very carefully, she began to pull away the cloth. *There might be poison needles concealed inside,* she thought, handling it with caution. But there were no traps set on it, and she removed the cloth without any issue.

There were no poisoned needles, but it was poison all the same.

"Bl...egh..." When Fitz saw the painting, she thought she would be sick. Her mind rebelled at the idea that such an awful thing could *exist*.

"Eww, what is *that...* Hold on, it was under Lady Ariel's bed. Does that mean...?"

Everything that entered the room of a royal was their possession. No

exceptions. So Fitz naturally understood that this belonged to Ariel.

Lady Ariel owns this...? Huh? It was under the bed—so was she hiding it? Huh? Surely not Lady Ariel? Huh? Huh?!

Fitz sat on the floor with feet behind her, holding the picture. Her head was spinning. From behind her, she heard a *click*.

"Ah!" She jumped and spun around, and there was Ariel Anemoi Asura. Her dear Ariel, the woman who had rescued her, who looked after her every need and yet called her not her servant or her slave, but her friend.

Ariel stared at Fitz, sitting there holding the painting with a vacant look in her eyes.

"So you saw it," she said.

Fitz realized she'd seen something she wasn't supposed to. If her head had been a little clearer, she would have noticed the hint of a smile playing around the corners of Ariel's mouth, but she was too shocked after the horror she'd seen.

Oh no! she thought. Her dear friend had tastes she could never accept. What should she say? What ought she to do? Should she act as though she hadn't seen it, or should she spurn Ariel? Unable to work out an answer, Fitz froze up.

Now, Fitz had a certain habit.

Rudy... If Rudy were here, what would he do?!

When she found herself in a tight spot, she liked to think about what her childhood friend Rudeus would have done.

Rudy...Rudy would...!

Her fetish was unconsciously wishing that he would come and save her.

What should I do? Rudy?!

But the Rudy in her mind said nothing. He just patted her on the shoulder with a warm smile on his twenty-percent-more-handsome face.

What do I do?! What?! Almost in tears, Sylphie could do nothing but watch as Ariel slowly came toward her.

Rudeus

JUST AS FITZ FOUND HERSELF in deep doo-doo, Rudeus made his own discovery.

As he was cleaning the carriage, something came tumbling out of Ruijerd's bag. It was an extremely obscene statue. It wasn't like the figurines Rudeus liked—it looked more like a dogu clay doll. Yet concealed within it was such obscenity that even it made even Rudeus cringe. It was like the embodiment of the sin of lust itself. Rudeus couldn't believe Ruijerd owned something like this. But it had come out of Ruijerd's luggage, so it almost certainly belonged to him.

Rudeus picked up the statue and examined it closely. Then, he heard a noise behind him. Rudeus spun around and found himself face-to-face with Ruijerd.

"Something wrong?" Ruijerd asked.

"Um, no." For a few seconds, Rudeus stood there frozen until, at last, the tension went out of him. He quietly returned the statue in his hand to where he'd found it, then turned back to Ruijerd. He had a creepily cheerful smile on his face. He kept it in place as he went over to Ruijerd and clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's okay. I get it," he said. Then, he got out of the carriage and left.

Ruijerd was left with a question mark above his head, unable to work out what had just happened.

"What was that about?" he wondered.

It hardly needs to be said, but the statue was obviously *not* Ruijerd's. It had already been in the carriage and had happened to get mixed up with his things. That was all.

"Oh, well," Ruijerd said, promptly turning off his hovering question mark. He was used to Rudeus's bursts of strange behavior.

"Phew..." Rudeus left the carriage, then looked up at the clear blue sky.

"Different strokes for different folks, huh," he said to himself, a sunny smile on his face.

In fact, he had a certain habit. He tried to understand and accept everyone

else's tastes, no matter what they might be.

"Come to think of it, I wonder what Sylphie's doing right now..." Sylphie's happy face hovered, transparent, in the air before him.

Only the heavens know what Sylphie did next as she faced Ariel, fighting back tears. All that can be said for sure is that whatever it was, it did not damage their friendship.

Short Story:

The Head-Ripping Prince's Work is Never Done!

AFTER I FINISHED MY LESSONS that day, I headed for Zanoba's room. My purpose was, of course, Julie's education. In the month since I bought her, she'd learned how to produce a Stone Bullet with silent casting. I wasn't sure if it was because that was the only thing I'd taught her or if she had a talent for magic, but whichever it was, she'd picked it up incredibly quickly. Maybe it was thanks to her dwarven traits, but she also had nimble fingers and good sense. If she continued with her education, in a few years, she could be making figurines that met not only Zanoba's standards but mine, too. Breathless with excitement, I opened the door to Zanoba's room.

You want to know if I knocked? Ho ho. Between Zanoba and I, there was no need for such ham-handed gestures... Though, thinking about it, maybe I *should* have knocked. Manners are important even between friends, after all...

"Sorry to bother you."

"Why, Master! By all means, come in!"

Despite my worries, Zanoba greeted me with a big grin when I walked in. I should have known he would. He wasn't the type of guy to get hung up on little things like knocking.

"Hm?" With that, I noticed the object that Zanoba was cradling. It was a wooden box big enough to wrap your arms around. It was a bit big to put figurines in...but maybe he'd bought a model from the master grade line.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Ah, you have a discerning eye, Master!" Zanoba's eyes gleamed as if he'd been waiting for me to ask.

Anyone would have wondered about a thing that size, discerning eye or not... Grinning, Zanoba put the box on the table, then opened the lid.

"Oh!" When I looked inside, I gasped in spite of myself. It contained many delicately carved pieces, along with what looked like a game board.

"Is it a game?" I asked.

"I should have guessed you'd recognize it, Master. Indeed, it is Kalka Tranga, a war simulation game."

Tranga was a popular board game on the Central Continent, sort of like chess. The rules and the name varied a little from region to region: I was pretty sure Kalka Tranga was what they called it in Asura, and it would have been a little different again in Shirone, where Zanoba was from.

"Look at these pieces!" Zanoba said, picking up one of the pieces and holding it aloft. It had a staff-like head protruding from a magician's robes. The effect was a bit creepy, but you could tell it was a magician at a glance.

"The model's an interesting shape," I said.

"It is, isn't it?! The originality of using staffs and swords for the pieces' heads! It is not an idea that would come easily to any other modeler!"

"Were these made by someone famous?"

"Oh, yes! The modeler responsible for these was employed by the Asuran palace, and so, as a rule, you do not see their work for sale. But by some quirk of fate, these found their way to Ranoa, and I was able to obtain them! Truly, fortune has smiled on me!"

As he spoke, Zanoba carefully laid out the pieces. There were knights in armor with swords for heads, swordsmen with two sword-shaped arms protruding from their coats, squires in armor with banners but no heads, commoners in plain clothes with short swords for arms, a king with a head shaped like a crown sprouting from his gown...

Without knowing anything else, I got the impression that the pieces with heads were the stronger ones.

"What are the rules?" I asked.

"Master! You don't mean to say that you don't know the rules of Kalka Tranga?"

"No one around me had board games... Do you know them, Zanoba?"

"But of course. It is compulsory for royalty in Shirone to learn every country's rules for Tranga."

I guessed that must mean there were times when the game was used for diplomacy.

Pray tell, dost thou play Tranga? It has rather preoccupied us of late.

But of course, Your Majesty! I would be honored to be your opponent!

Or something like that. Maybe people entertained foreign diplomats with Tranga all the time.

"I'd like to try playing it. Could you teach me?"

"Hmm... If you insist, Master." Zanoba didn't seem that excited about the idea. Figurine supremacist that he was, he probably saw the modeling as the be-all and end-all and didn't care so much about the game.

"First, you arrange the pieces on the board like so..."

Zanoba teaching me something. This is new. With that, I gave my full attention to Zanoba's explanation.

There was a quiet knock at the door. Three hours had passed since Zanoba had taught me the rules and we'd begun to play.

"You may enter," Zanoba called.

"Sorry, is Rudeus here?" Peering hesitantly through the door was Fitz.

"I'm afraid the master is currently engaged."

"Oh, don't worry! That's fine! I didn't need anything. He just didn't come to the library today, so I wondered what had happened..."

Fitz came to the library practically every day to help me with my investigations into the displacement incident. We hadn't agreed to it or anything, but still, he always came. He had probably been worried when I didn't show up without saying anything, and had come to find me. I appreciated that.

"Um... What are you doing?"

"This is Tranga. The master said he had never played, and so I took the liberty of instructing him myself." Zanoba looked down at the board as he spoke. It was a grim picture. My west knight and magician had already been taken, and my king was surrounded by enemy soldiers. Even a king was only human. He didn't want to die, and even if it was just delaying it, he wanted to survive as long as he could. He'd been searching desperately for a way to stay alive, but his army was in tatters, and no help was coming. The right thing for a king to do when he found himself in such a position was to take his own life with good grace. A king couldn't be murdered by commoners, after all.

"Hrm... Mrm... You've got me." After humming and hawing to myself for a long time, I finally bowed my head to him.

"Indeed," Zanoba agreed. He took my king and laid it on its side.

"Gaah," I groaned as my king fell, my head drooping. Zanoba had played with the so-called six-house-down handicap, which meant he was short his two major pieces—the knight and the magician—as well as two swordsmen and two squires. Even then, I'd never felt like I could win.

"The loss of your paladin was when you lost."

"What should I have done?"

"Rather than honor your knight, it would have been better to bide your time for a while. It seemed easy because I made it look that way as a trap."

"Now you mention it..."

The "honor" Zanoba talked about was what, in shogi, you'd call a promotion —or like queening a pawn in chess. When knights gained honor, they became paladins, which were really strong—strong enough to decide the course of a game. Lured by the promise of honor, my knight had charged the enemy's territory and succeeded in claiming it. Afterward, though, his movement options had become more and more limited until, without so much as a struggle, he'd been taken.

"Huh? Rudeus, you lost?"

"Yeah..."

Hmph. Despite what you might think, in my past life, I had actually dabbled in online shogi and chess, and I'd read 81Diver and The Ryuo's Work is Never Done! all the way through... But then, it had been my first time playing this game. And there were a lot of differences between its rules and those of shogi or chess. It stung to have lost to Zanoba when he didn't seem to care at all, but so long as I was a beginner, I'd have to live with it.

"Wow, so there is something you're bad at."

"Hey, there's lots I'm not good at." Where had he gotten the idea that I wasn't bad at anything? A mystery, that was. If anything, it was hard to think of anything I was *good* at.

"Do you want to play too, Fitz?"

"Hmm... Yes, okay. Right, time to get you back for the entrance exam!" Fitz said. Zanoba stood up, allowing Fitz to take his seat and start arranging the pieces.

"I actually used to play Lady Ariel quite a bit when I lived in Asura, so I like my chances."

"Haha. Go easy on me."

"Is two house down all right? Then let's play."

I mean, I was the one who'd said I wanted to play. Today, I'd serve as everyone's punching bag with good grace.

"Huh?" Ten minutes later, Fitz sat frozen with his hand over his mouth. His king was in a bit of a sticky situation. Smoke was rising all over what had been an impregnable stronghold. His steadfast magicians were dead after a hard-fought battle, and while his knights were still standing, the king was cut off from them and now nearly surrounded. There was still a way out, but at the end of that path, he could see the enemy king himself waiting for him. If he could regroup with his knights, he might be able to break free, but the way was too perilous. Things had come to this after I'd cleverly taken care of his magicians in

the middlegame.

"Hmm...hmm..." Fitz hummed and hawed for a while, then said, "I've got nothing. You beat me." After admitting defeat, he added, pouting a little, "You're not that bad at this, Rudeus." Even behind his sunglasses, I could tell he was surly.

"I worked out your plan part way through. That was what led me to it." I thought it had been a pretty good match. Until the middlegame, I'd been on the back foot, but then I'd noticed that Fitz was fixated on his magicians, so I'd cleverly lured him into a trap. If it hadn't been for that, I'd have lost.

"I could hold my own against Luke playing one knight down, you know..." Fitz said. One knight down was the handicap where you played without the knight, a major piece. Knights were the strongest pieces, like queens in chess. The fact that it was knights, rather than swordsmen or magicians, who were the strongest pieces, told you that this game had been made by nobles—but that wasn't important right now.

One knight down was only a one-piece handicap, but it still represented a major disadvantage. Incidentally, Fitz had played two house down, which meant he was down a swordsman and a squire. I probably would have lost without it.

"Is Luke a strong player too?"

"Yes, I heard he won the Asura school championship. Though the contest was only for under-fifteens."

"Wow..."

I glanced at Zanoba. Totally indifferent to us, he was picking up the pieces from the board and polishing them with a dreamy look in his eyes. Julie followed his example, polishing with such enthusiasm that the pieces squeaked.

"I wonder which of them is stronger?"

"The simple answer would be Zanoba..."

I looked at Zanoba again. Now he was nuzzling one of the pieces with his cheek. That sure didn't make him look strong... Of course, from someone else's perspective, it might look like he loved this game, but we knew that his love

wasn't for the game but the craftsmanship of the pieces. Still, there was no denying that he was a strong player.

"Why don't we find out?" Fitz's face lit up with irrepressible curiosity. Boys his age always wanted to know who was the strongest.

"How?"

"Leave it to me," Fitz said, putting a hand to his chest.

Well, if Fitz said so, all I could do was trust him. I'd go ahead and assume I was in safe hands.

A month later, the student council at the University of Magic hosted a Kalka Tranga tournament. It had been a simple process. When Fitz talked to Princess Ariel, she'd said, "That sounds like fun," clapped her hands, and voila, we were hosting a tournament. Preliminary rounds were held in each year group to decide the competitors until there were seven competitors left. They, along with one extra, would participate in the main tournament. The main tournament would be elimination style, with a magnificent prize awaiting the victor—a board and set of pieces made by me. Zanoba hadn't been all that excited about it, but when he found out what the prize was, his eyes had lit up, and he declared he was entering. Luke, of course, was seeded in the extra slot. Important people get all the perks.

Naturally, as one of the people who'd suggested the tournament, I'd taken part in the preliminaries—but my second opponent wiped the floor with me. Tranga was played all over the world and was even commonly used in diplomacy, so experienced players were able to adjust to small differences in rules just like that. Of course, there were also a lot of people who had learned to play with Kalka Tranga, the Asuran rules.

In any case, the preliminaries went without a hitch, leaving us with seven players plus Luke. Sure enough, Zanoba had won the second-year category to secure his spot in the main tournament. Fitz, like me, was knocked out in the preliminaries. He lost to Lady Ellemoi, another of Ariel's servants. After Luke, Zanoba, and Ellemoi, though, they were all names I didn't know. The sixth and seventh-year students were apparently famous—they had won the Tranga

tournament in Ranoa last year and the year before, respectively. The seventh-year apparently had a job lined up as a Tranga instructor in Ranoa...in other words, a pro. When all of them saw the game set I'd made, their eyes lit up. "I never imagined I'd see such a magnificent prize in a school tournament," someone said admiringly. "Lady Ariel really is something."

That made me pretty happy to hear.

The main tournament began. A section of the indoor training area had been booked out and then divided into four boards. The pairings were decided by lots. Each competitor sat down opposite their opponent, and the games began. There were eight competitors, so whoever won three games would win the tournament.

Zanoba won his first game without ever looking threatened. Luke won without any wobbles as well. Ellemoi lost. Zanoba won the semi-final too, but Luke lost. His opponent was the sixth-year who'd won the Ranoa championship last year. As it happened, he'd taken down the seventh-year in his first match. For the final, we called experts up to the stage, drew up a board on a blackboard, and had them provide commentary and analysis of the match. That was my idea.

Zanoba faced off against the sixth-year. It was a fiery contest. Honestly, I didn't really follow it because I'd only just learned the rules, but Zanoba apparently played a rarely-seen move and the sixth-year played the appropriate move in response, surprising the seventh-year who was doing the analysis. He said both of them really knew the game. The match took a turn as they were about to enter the middlegame, when Zanoba made a mistake. He mixed up a play and wasted a move, which led to him losing a knight, the strongest piece. After that, Zanoba was forced further and further into a corner. His magician, his other key piece, was still standing, and he was putting up some resistance, but he couldn't make up for the disadvantage caused by the loss of his knight and he was steadily running out of options.

They reached the endgame. According to the seventh-year's analysis, the sixth-year's victory was all but guaranteed. Both of them had lost pieces, but Zanoba's king was backed almost into a corner without anywhere to run. In order to pin down Zanoba's king, the sixth-year had exposed his own king to

danger, but the difference of that one move meant that Zanoba would still fall to his king's blades.

Just after the seventh-year gave this analysis, however, Zanoba made a strange move. He took the slave piece, the weakest on the board, and moved it forward. I wasn't sure *how* strange it was exactly, but the seventh-year went, "Huh? What's he doing?" At the same time, a whole section of the crowd—presumably the ones who'd played Tranga—fell silent.

The sixth-year stopped short as well. There was a pause, then the seventh-year let out a quiet, "Oh," just as excited murmuring broke out among the audience. I didn't know what it was, but Zanoba had done *something*. A moment later, I heard someone say, "Isn't that mate?"

The seventh-year doing the commentary stared at the board with his hand over his mouth. As though to deny those words, he said nothing. The sixth-year scrutinized the board, his eyes wide, but he didn't move except for the sweat that beaded on his forehead. Zanoba's face was as blank as a robot's. He didn't move a muscle. But now I thought about it, he'd worn that same expression ever since his knight had been taken. As though he'd known this would happen.

Some moments later, the sixth-year let out a deep sigh, then turned to look up at the ceiling. Finally, sounding as though every word was an effort, he said, "I have no more moves. You win."

The murmuring exploded into cheering.

The next day saw Zanoba polishing the game pieces I'd made with a huge grin on his face.

"That was an easy win for you, huh?"

"Easy? Not at all. The last match was a very near thing."

"Oh, right. I guess it was. You did make that mistake in the opening."

"That was no mistake. I was up against a strong opponent, so I prepared a little trap."

"You what?" Having only just learned the rules, I didn't really get it, but he

had to mean he'd messed up the standard move on purpose.

"Master, you know that they say the knight is the strongest Tranga piece, do you not?"

"Yeah. Isn't it?"

"Oh, it is. It is the strongest individual piece. But that only applies when you consider it as an individual... In other words, two squires are stronger than a single knight. When my knight was taken, I took two of my opponent's squires in exchange. In addition, I kept my slave in reserve."

As a result, Zanoba's opponent was unable to carry his attack out to completion, and at the very end, Zanoba had pulled ahead by a single move. The game had turned on a knife's edge.

"Wow... That's amazing. You surprised everyone."

"Really, I cannot fathom what good it does being good at a mere game like this. I would much rather be able to make wonderful things such as you do, Master," Zanoba said hopelessly. Then, he lined up the pieces I'd made alongside the pieces that had set off the whole tournament and gave them a satisfied smile.

I'd have thought he could put his experience in the game to good use in something else, or given his level, he could even turn it into a job... But Zanoba was a prince, so it wasn't like he needed a job or money.

"But enough of that, Master," he said. "I trust you will instruct Julie in magic again today!"

His talents don't fit his dreams, I thought as I took Julie through her magic practice for the day.

Short Story: Elinalise Wants to Be There

T WAS A LITTLE AFTER Cliff and Elinalise first began dating.

I was walking down the corridor at the University of Magic, when Cliff called out from behind me.

"Hey, Rudeus. You have a minute?"

I turned, but there was no one there. Cliff, it seemed, had succeeded in turning himself invisible. Dating Elinalise must have been one of the requirements for unlocking a new skill.

Okay, I'm kidding. He was just standing in the shadow of a pillar and beckoning me over.

"What's up?" I asked. If it had been Linia and Pursena, I would have been wary. With them, it could have been an invitation to some illicit activity, so you had to be cautious. But there was no need for caution with straight-laced Cliff.

"I don't quite know how to put this..." He said that, but there was no way Cliff would say anything really spicy. "I have a request. I want to get Lise a present, but I realized I don't know what she likes or wants."

There you go, just plain old lovestruck couple stuff. Good old Cliff. He didn't have to lurk in the shadows to ask me that. Even if anyone overheard us, it wouldn't... Ah, he didn't want Elinalise to overhear us. Or any dogs and cats who might spread the rumor around...

"I know just the thing," I said.

"You do?!"

"Yeah, if you get naked, wrap yourself up in a bow, then say, 'Tonight you get to do whatever you want to me,' you'll have Elinalise drooling all over you."

"Rudeus."

"I'm kidding."

Though not about the part where Elinalise would love it. If Cliff really surprised her like that, she'd probably get so excited she'd keep him all to herself for days. Then poor Cliff would end up dead in the saddle. I'd stand in front of his gravestone and sob about how I could have made such a stupid suggestion... So it was probably better to call it a joke.

"I feel like you'd be better off asking her directly," I said.

"Yes, I suppose. It's just that the other day Lise was saying how attractive it is when guys casually give their partners nice gifts."

"I didn't know you wanted to be popular with the ladies, Cliff."

"What I want is for Lise to think I'm a good guy. I might be a genius, but this is unfamiliar territory for me."

Now it made sense. For all his self-confidence, Cliff thought that if he took a catch like Elinalise for granted, he wouldn't be able to hang on to her. His ulterior motive here was to show her what a good guy he was now to earn points with her. Of course, I was pretty sure Elinalise was smitten with him, so he needn't have gone to the trouble... No other guy was about to outdo him, not after the passion with which he'd courted her, curse and all. Cliff would waste away and die from too much sex long, long before Elinalise ever came to dislike him.

But then, that was one of Cliff's good points. The guy was a hard worker—so much so that, even with Elinalise wringing him out every night, he kept his grades up and never gave himself up to pleasure. If I had a hottie like that in my bed every night, I probably wouldn't even come to school anymore. Not that I was only here because I couldn't get a girl into bed, mind you.

In any case, this was just another sort of communication. I'd lend Cliff a hand.

"All right," I said. "I'll try and ask her, casual-like."

"I'm in your debt."

After that, I went to find Elinalise. With my conversational skills, I'd find out what she liked in no time flat.

"It's your fifteenth birthday soon, right, Elinalise? Anything you want for your birthday?"

"This is for Cliff, isn't it?"

She was on to me in a second. I thought I'd been so smooth... Except no, 'fifteen' hadn't been smooth. It had been a big flashing arrow.

"I suppose he wants to show me what a good guy he is by getting me a surprise present, but he doesn't know what to give me, and so he sent you. Or something like that."

That was too spot on. Was she an esper? I guess to a woman who'd spent hundreds of years toying with men's hearts, the mind of a newbie lover was like an open book. Anyway, if she already had it figured out that far, there was no point in me trying to deceive her.

"That's...more or less it, yeah," I admitted. "How did you know?"

"When we had lunch together the other day, I brought it up. I said that the best way to get a girl to like you is a present."

So the preparations had already been in place. Elinalise knew all about placing hints—she had Cliff in the palm of her hand.

"That Cliff. He could have just asked me himself. He didn't need to go to the trouble of asking you to do it. I would have told him I was happy so long as he was there beside me."

"That's unexpectedly chaste of you."

"It isn't the same for everyone, but most men don't like women with strong desires. I want the man I love to think I'm a nice girl."

Was that really how it was? I guess it was in Cliff's case. The followers of Millis approved of purity and unselfishness.

"I was so sure that you'd want Cliff to come to you wearing nothing but a ribbon and say, 'Your present is me.'" Elinalise didn't say anything, but her face told me she thought I was a genius. So she was into that sort of thing. She blinked a few times to snap out of her fantasies, then turned to me again.

"What I want is for Cliff to put all of his energy into choosing something just

for me. I would appreciate it if you could find a way to indirectly communicate that to him."

"Understood."

In the end, it wasn't the present itself but the feeling that mattered. The important thing was that you showed you'd thought of them when you chose it, that you'd used your time and mental resources for their sake. I'd bear that in mind for when I had a son who stayed shut up in his room and wouldn't come out.

I told Cliff exactly what Elinalise had said. I could see the scales fall from his eyes.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "If I secretly found out what she wanted, then even if she liked it, it wouldn't mean anything! You have opened my eyes. Thank you, Rudeus!" Then he went running out of the school. Mission complete. Cliff would go and find a special something to give to Elinalise. Whatever it was, Elinalise would shower him in a flood of gratitude, then give him a passionate kiss as a thank you. Then the two of them would head to a room somewhere and spend a wild, passionate night together. Everyone lives happily ever after.

I was disappointed not to get paid for the errand quest, but Cliff and Elinalise were good about obligations, so they'd get me back another time.

But then, all of a sudden, a shadow passed over my heart. What if Elinalise didn't like the present Cliff gave her...? It was impossible. Elinalise was a veteran when it came to seducing guys, and she was madly in love with Cliff. No matter what he got her, she'd be happy with him. Whether that happiness was real or an act might depend on the content of the gift, though... But that wasn't the important part anyway.

What if, though—what if Cliff got Elinalise a present so bad that she couldn't restrain herself? Say, to give an extreme example, Cliff gave her a dog turd he'd picked up off the street. Elinalise wouldn't be able to keep up her smile then. Even if he used really pretty wrapping paper.

Needless to say, Cliff would never do a thing like that. But he didn't know anything about love. He'd lost his virginity, and by now, he'd probably racked up more experience points than I could dream of, but he had hardly any romance experience points when it came to the basics of Elinalise. He was out of school, but didn't have enough experience—a fresh grad, in other words. That was a scary thing to be. He might lose his head and do something bizarre. Dog poop aside, what if he ended up getting her something seriously unspecial?!

Even as the worry passed through my mind, I was already moving.

I ended up glued to Cliff's side as we went around the market.

"Hmm." Cliff had been only too happy to have me accompany him. Now, he was looking at some creepy ornament at a street stall. It looked really ethnic, the sort of thing that Zanoba would know all kinds of useless facts about. That wasn't to say it looked well-made, though. Zanoba, for all that, liked high-quality workmanship, so he probably wouldn't have wanted this. Elinalise probably wouldn't know what to do with it either, but Elinalise was a battle-hardened super slut. Even if he gave her something like this, which would just be a nuisance, she'd shower Cliff with praise like he'd brought her the holy grail, then put it on the shrine in her room.

When you thought about it like that, maybe I hadn't needed to come.

"But then, Lise is probably used to this sort of thing. I want something that's more what she likes, something we'll remember..."

Look at Cliff's face in profile there as he put all his energy into choosing a gift for Elinalise. He wouldn't choose anything too weird, not when he was thinking that carefully about it.

I'd been stupid. Cliff would choose something great, something Elinalise would accept without a hint of dissatisfaction even though it wouldn't be quite to her taste.

Sorry? You think he could give her something that would make her genuinely happy? Ha ha. As if that would ever happen. All that made Elinalise genuinely happy were dates with Cliff and the inns she took him to on the way home—not objects.

And even if there was such an object, this was Elinalise. She'd have Cliff stop by the market with her on a date, then guide him into choosing it for her. Either way, the moment Cliff came here without her, he was doomed. I mean, it was possible that he'd pick out the right thing by coincidence, but that would be all right too.

Anyway, Cliff seemed fine, so it seemed like it was time for me to head home. I wasn't going to get made to feel inferior by seeing Cliff and Elinalise being all lovey-dovey up close.

"Um, Cliff? I just remembered I had to..." I began, but then I noticed something. On the other side of the crowd behind Cliff, someone had ducked in to hide in the shadow of a stall three along from where we were now.

"What is it?" Cliff asked.

"Well... It looks like we're being watched."

"Say what?!" Cliff gasped. "Someone's tailing us?!"

I mean, there was only one person who'd be tailing us here.

"Elinalise probably wanted to see your face as you think hard about what to buy her."

She'd really thought this through. She wanted to see Cliff doing his very best to choose something for her on his own. If she tailed him, she got to enjoy it. After she'd satisfied herself watching over Cliff's first errand, the memory would serve as a side dish to the evening's enjoyments. Elinalise would get what she wanted, and Cliff would be satisfied. It was a perfect win-win.

"Rudeus," Cliff said in disbelief. "Lise wouldn't do a thing like that..."

"Really?"

"No... But it might be an assassin."

"Say what?"

"My grandfather is very high up in the Millis Church. He sent me here so that I wouldn't get mixed up in any political struggles, but if my grandfather lost, his enemies would go after me, his blood relative..."

I pulled myself together. I was pretty sure he was overthinking it, but back when I'd been an adventurer, it was always the situations that no one had anticipated that ended with people dead. Cliff was from a complicated family, so I couldn't just reject the possibility out of hand.

If this really was someone sent from Millis to murder Cliff, the way he was getting carried away here for Elinalise's sake was putting him at serious risk. I was not keen to make trouble with the Millis Church...but he was my friend, and the idea of making Elinalise a widow left a bitter taste in my mouth.

In any case, what was I supposed to do now? Right now, it was just the two of us, Cliff and I. We were outside the university and extremely vulnerable to attack. I could guard Cliff and use the Eye of Foresight to prevent any surprise attacks... But this outing hadn't been planned, so perhaps our enemy hadn't expected to find Cliff this defenseless and was hesitating. If so, it seemed that rather than let them find the perfect moment to strike, I should act first. Only, I couldn't be sure that our enemy was acting alone, so I didn't want to leave Cliff by himself...

"Understood. Cliff, you should get back to the safety of the university as fast as possible."

"Ah, hey, Rudeus!" I set off at a run, leaving Cliff behind me.

The chase went on for a while. The shadowy figure with their hood pulled down over their eyes fled into the industrial district of Sharia, weaving their way through the narrow tangle of alleys.

They were in better shape than I was, but I had the Eye of Foresight, and silently casting Sonic Wave gave a massive boost to my cornering performance and acceleration, so I managed not to lose them. What I couldn't manage, though, was to catch them. Maybe they were used to running away, or maybe they were cleverly choosing their path through the alleys. It was possible that this whole chase was just a way to buy time and that even now Cliff was under attack. Just as that fear crossed my mind, the figure stopped. It was a dead end.

"Whew... I finally caught you," I said. The hooded figure's shoulders jerked. Then, as though resigned, they turned around and lowered the hood to reveal long ears and gorgeously styled hair. I knew both well.

"For goodness' sake, did you really have to chase me all the way in here?" In the end, it was Elinalise after all.

All right, who was the one who brought up Millis assassins again? Not that I'd put it past her, but she's more the type to get stabbed. If you know what I mean.

"Why were you tailing us?" I asked.

"You know, don't you?"

"Nope, no idea... Don't tell me your plan was to enjoy yourself watching Cliff thinking hard about what to get for you, then save up the memory for tonight when the two of you spend a passionate night together?"

"My goodness, do you read minds?"

After checking my answers, I'd gotten a perfect score. I still hadn't known Elinalise that long, but this side of her was easy to work out. She basically thought the same way as a dirty old man.

"I see," I said.

"Would you mind not telling Cliff? He'll think I don't trust him and be upset."

"Of course, I wasn't going to..." All of a sudden, I was exhausted. How had I ended up running around all over the place, sprinting down alleys and chasing people for the sake of this farce?

"Oh, but the look on Cliff's face as he was thinking hard about what to choose..." Elinalise sighed. "I could come three times just watching him."

With a deep sigh, I headed back to find Cliff. I told him they'd been tailing me, not him, then went back to the dormitory. I don't know what the two of them did after that, but, well, I'm sure they had a good time.

"So that's what happened," I finished. It was the next day, and I was complaining to Fitz about what had transpired. "If they want to be all lovey-dovey, that's fine. I just wish they wouldn't drag me into it."

"Hahaha. You're one to talk after you stuck your head in," Fitz said, grinning.

"Even so."

After I finished my story, Fitz let out a sigh, then looked up out of the window. "Elinalise really is an adult woman, isn't she?"

"You think?" Well, her mind worked like a dirty old man's, so she was an adult, at any rate.

"I kind of admire her."

"Oho! Is she your type, then, Fitz?"

"N-no way! Not like that! It's just, I don't know, I just thought, a woman like that, she's so cool."

"Well, if you say so."

Setting aside the finer details, it was true that Elinalise's philosophy of loving her man and accepting him with all his flaws was pretty cool.

It was also true that I kind of liked seeing Fitz get flustered, when *he* was usually so cool. Just getting to see that, I thought, meant something good had come out of all this.

Short Story: The Gospel of Roxy

T HAPPENED WHILE I WAS in the library doing research, just like I always did.

"Huh?" There was a note in between the pages of the book I was reading. "Hmm." On the note someone had written a question about combined magic —why does casting Water Fall, Heat Island, and Icicle Field in succession produce mist?—along with their thoughts on the question. To me, it sounded like the sort of natural phenomenon you learned about in junior high. But in this world, they hadn't even invented microscopes. No one had come up with a scientific explanation for why water turned into steam when heated. But I guess it was only natural that you'd consider this sort of thing when you wanted to understand what you were doing properly. That was way better than accepting what you were taught as just the way things were without understanding the fundamental principles. Just doing the thinking was worthwhile, even if you didn't arrive at the right answer. You could be sure it would come in handy somewhere else.

Having said that, the writer of this note finished by saying, *Could it be that water changes its form according to temperature?* They had arrived at the right answer. They were pretty clever. But what was the note doing here? This book, for the record, was a text on teleportation. It had nothing to do with combined magic... Chances were they'd just used it as a bookmark, then forgotten about it when they returned the book. I returned the note to where I'd found it and was about to close the book when—

"Huh?!" It hit me. The handwriting in the note looked like the handwriting of someone I knew. I quickly opened the book again, took out the note, and took a proper look at the letters. It was just as I'd thought.

"I knew it," I said. "This is Roxy's handwriting!"

I'd know these letters anywhere! This...this was a fragment of the word of God!

Would you believe it? After losing the book I'd had in my possession to the displacement disaster, I'd thought none of Roxy's writings remained. But of course, God's writings extended beyond that one book. God had lived just as long as I had, including my past life. That meant that, even if it wasn't the same as a book, she was bound to have left more notes like this one. Especially as this was the Ranoa University of Magic—the very university God had attended in her youth. Given that she had undoubtedly been a diligent student, it was no surprise that she might have noted down questions that occurred to her during her time here.

"What a treasure... Why, it's like a graduation album of her writing."

Yes, this was a treasure—a document of historic significance. But no one but me knew its value. It was even possible that if a librarian found it, they might decide it was trash and throw it away. The very idea! I had to rescue them first.

"Heheh..." I stashed the note in my pocket, smiling vaguely. Now that I thought about it, Roxy had been a student at this university too. This was the first time since I'd come here that I'd come across any trace of her, and that made me feel happy, somehow. I don't know, I felt like I'd never really appreciated that this was the same university Roxy had attended until this moment when I'd seen it with my own eyes. Of course, it was possible I had seen other signs but overlooked them...

"Wait up," I said aloud. Did that mean there were other Vestiges of God, and I'd just failed to notice them? If so... Oh, the very idea...

O God, forgive my lack of faith.

"I can't sit around here, not now I know." I stood up and was about to dash off, but caught myself. I began to pack away my books. As Roxy's apprentice, I could hardly leave library books strewn about like this. An apprentice mustn't go damaging his master's reputation, after all.

Then, as soon as I'd finished tidying up, I set off running.

I began my investigation with the library's lending record, deciding that I should start by rescuing the extant texts. If I knew Roxy, she could easily have

made the same blunder multiple times—misfortune never comes alone, after all. And it became all the more likely if she herself didn't think of forgetting a note as a blunder. With that, I went to ask the librarian. I was told that usually, the records were not made available to ordinary students, but an exception could be made for a special student.

And so I got to see the records. This library was really something. They kept proper records going back more than a decade. When I voiced how impressed I was, would you believe it, I was told that one time, someone had stolen books from the library collection to sell, and since then, strict controls had been put in place. Thanks to that, I managed to get my hands on the record of books Roxy had borrowed. Back then, it seemed she had primarily taken out texts on magic circles and combined magic. In other words, while she was simultaneously pursuing studies in those two areas, she had also gone hunting for texts on teleportation. She would have been somewhere between a second and a fourth year. That was Roxy for you—she'd pulled off multitasking perfectly, too. It was only too easy to imagine when you considered she was a Saint-tier water magician. After all, Saint-tier was rare among graduating students. I couldn't help but be proud of my master.

I'd track down the books, then carefully read through them...or, that's what I wanted to do, but I had other things to be doing too, so in the end I just flipped through the pages looking for notes. In the end, I did find several more. It seemed she had been using them as bookmarks after all. None of them had anything significant to say about the study of magic, though. To me, most of it was basically common sense...but now I thought back, all of it was things that Roxy had taught me. So Roxy hadn't just followed the textbook. Rather, she had readily shared with me the knowledge and realizations that she alone had picked up in the course of her studies. That really touched my heart. Anyway, I decided to store the notes safely so that I wouldn't lose them... But could there be more?

"Rudeus?" I realized that Fitz was peering at what I had in my hand. "I never thought I'd see you reading about combined magic... I didn't think there was anything you didn't know about it."

"Don't be silly. There's loads I don't know." It was true that thanks to my

memories of my past life, my knowledge of things like science and chemistry was above average for this world. But for all that, I was still a high school dropout. I was at the same level as a junior high student. Plus, it was all hazy recollections of almost twenty years earlier, so for a lot of things it wasn't until Roxy taught me about them that I finally remembered that, oh yeah, that - phenomenon worked like that. Never in a million years could I have remembered and applied them myself.

"But this isn't for class," I explained to Fitz. "I'm looking for these."

"Huh? 'Why is it that casting Water Fall, Heat Island, and Icicle Field in succession produce mist?'" he read aloud. "Uh-huh, uh-huh... Their conclusion is correct, isn't it? What are these?"

"It would appear that these notes were left behind by my master during her time at this school. I ended up wondering what she'd been like as a student, so I started looking."

"Huh..." Fitz nodded, but he looked a bit bored. I mean, fair enough. In my past life, I hadn't been a Christian, so if a friend had come and told me about a fragment of something written by some saint they'd found and how amazing it was, I bet I'd have reacted like Fitz did. Not that I'd had any friends to talk to back then, mind you.

"So I thought I'd go look for another special something of the same kind," I said.

"I see... Would you mind if I came too?"

"Oh? Are you interested in the writings too?"

"No, I've just never seen your eyes light up like this before, so you know..."

Ah, so while Fitz wasn't interested in the holy scripture, he was interested in joining me as another brave explorer venturing into the depths of the jungle. Boys would be boys.

"All right, let's search together."

"But where do we start?"

"Hmm... You'd expect most things like this to be in spaces she used in her

daily life. So where she slept. The girls' dormitory seems promising."

"You'll get in trouble with Goriade again."

Uh oh, that's right. There was a gorilla that guarded the depths of the jungle. Watch it, Rudeus. That's a line you're not supposed to cross, and you were about to run right over it.

I had to tread carefully. If I ended up surrounded by people hurling blame at me, it'd trigger my trauma.

"Um, okay, how about we ask a teacher who'd know about back then?" I suggested.

So that was what we ended up doing.

To cut a long story short, we didn't find any teachers who knew where we might find vestiges of Roxy. Vice Principal Jenius had been teaching here since Roxy was a student, so I thought he would know something about her, but I didn't want second-hand stories. I had set out on this journey to seek relics—holy relics—and nothing else. Obviously, I was curious about what Roxy had been like as a student, but Vice Principal Jenius hadn't seemed all that keen to talk to me, so I wasn't about to force him. On the off chance he said something bad about Roxy, I might not have been able to keep my inner beast at bay. Faith is an anchor for your soul, like a fire on a dark, cold night. But that's also why, when someone tries to trample on your faith, you can't help but resist with all your might—you know that without it, you can't go on.

Anyway, when I didn't get any information from the teachers, I moved on to the university shop. At first, Roxy might strike you as sleepy and disorganized, but in fact, she was an extremely active woman. She'd probably often gone out to the town during her student days and might even have done some adventuring to earn some allowance. Because of that, I'd thought about heading to the Adventurers' Guild next...but when I considered it properly, I didn't see Roxy mixing her studies with her adventuring activities. She'd probably only use notepaper if she were sleeping outside and needed to get a fire going because it burned easily. There wouldn't even be ashes left by now. No, the best place to find vestiges of her was inside the university. Apart from

the library and the dormitory, the places Roxy was likely to have visited were classrooms, the training area, the dining hall, and the university shop. From what I heard, the dining hall was completely different now, thanks to Nanahoshi, so that was out too. There were too many classrooms to count, but only one University of Magic shop. So that was how I ended up here.

When I asked the woman at the desk about Roxy, she said, "Roxy Migurdia? Why yes, there was a girl by that name. Yes, I remember. She was a demon with blue hair, a tiny wee thing, no?"

If Roxy were here, she'd have shot back, "I am not tiny," straight away.

"She always came to buy her lesson supplies with such a scowl. Always muttering about things being too expensive or how she didn't have the money, you know."

So Roxy had been a starving student back then. Maybe, unable to buy the things she needed at the school shop, she'd collected them outside while she did her adventuring quests. That was a rough life for a student. If you asked me, Roxy could have been a special student, but then, it wasn't like she'd been Saint-tier when she enrolled, and she'd still been yet to become an A-rank adventurer who pulled off feats like defeating a labyrinth solo. As such, she hadn't made much of a name for herself, so that was that.

"I'm actually looking for books she wrote in..."

"Books?"

"Even just something like a notebook. Can you think of anything?"

"How would I..." the shop woman began, then her eyes widened, and she clapped her hands together. She bustled away into the back of the shop. Apparently, she had something.

She came back holding a pamphlet. "It was so long ago that I'd quite forgotten. She asked me to give this to any student I saw like her who was having a hard time."

The pamphlet was a stack of around fifteen pages of note paper, roughly bound together. I took it and peeked inside. Sure enough, there was Roxy's familiar handwriting.

O God, at last I have found it. The holy relic you left me is in my hands. I had no doubt that she had left this holy book for me. Deliver me, O God.

Acani Grass grows in the forest to the west as you leave Sharia. It is a comparatively safe place for anyone able to cast beginner-level offensive magic, so you may harvest it yourself.

That was the first page. There was even a helpful illustration of Acani Grass.

If you are not confident in your abilities, place a request at the Adventurers' Guild for a large Ranoa copper coin. This will take longer, but it is cheaper than purchasing from the university shop.

I flicked through the pamphlet. She had written detailed instructions for obtaining not just acani grass but mustard treant seeds, tadeeye roots, and more of what seemed to be ingredients for something.

"What is this?" I asked.

Fitz had the answer, of course. Where would I be without him? "Ah, those are the ingredients for magic circle ink. The simplified sort that doesn't need mana crystals. I used it in class once... Wow, I didn't realize so many of them grew around here. Usually, you'd just buy this stuff at the university shop...but I guess that's tough for people without any money, huh..."

I could more or less guess who Roxy had made this pamphlet for now—starving students. At the Ranoa University of Magic, if you weren't a special student like me, you had to pay a hefty enrolment fee. For students like me from Asura, whose currency was highly valued, it wasn't so much that you couldn't save up by working hard, but not everyone was like me. Some who managed to pay the enrollment fee would find their expenses stacking up until they couldn't even properly take part in classes anymore. Roxy had left this pamphlet for students like that. As proof of that, when I flicked through the pages, I found not only ingredients for lessons, but shops in the town where you could eat for next to nothing, fishing spots in the surrounding area, edible plants, and adventurer requests that were good value for money.

Roxy must have struggled. Now I thought about it, even in Buena, where my family provided her with food, clothes and board, she had taken jobs clearing rocks and tree stumps from land to be cultivated or summoning rain to

vegetable fields. She'd called it "earning pocket money." It must have been hard work being a student without any money. It gave me a sense of comfort to learn that about her.

As I went on skimming the rest of the pamphlet, I began to notice that she'd written complaints here and there too. There were all sorts—some seemed to be directed at the friends she shared a room with or other students in her year. Some were about discrimination from students from the Millis church. For some reason, I'd thought that Roxy had always been alone. But of course, that wasn't true... That was obvious, really.

"What's wrong?" Fitz asked after a while.

"Oh, it's nothing."

I didn't know what sort of student Roxy had been or what sort of people she had around her while she was at this university. But looking at her complaints, it was easy to see that it hadn't been all bad things and bad people. It was totally unsurprising, but it must have been how she had become the Roxy I'd known in Buena—the Roxy who, even when people looked at her in suspicion for being a demon, had gone around introducing herself to everyone and taking on jobs, until in the end the villagers had smiled and greeted her themselves. I realized that my heart was bursting with warmth. It had to be because of the people she'd met here that Roxy had learned it wasn't futile to go up and talk to people. And it was thanks to that that I wasn't still shut up in my room.

"Ma'am, would you do me the favor of giving this to someone who seems harder up than me?"

I couldn't let what Roxy had left at the university go to waste. The pamphlet wasn't for me to take. It was for someone who needed it. Even if the shops with the dirt cheap meals might have already gone out of business.

"What good does it do me to hand out a pamphlet with instructions on how not to use my shop?"

"This pamphlet is to stop students who can't afford to use this shop from dropping out. I can't say for sure, but I doubt it'll affect your sales. Well, all right, they might drop a bit... Still, would you please do it?" I bowed to her.

The woman considered a moment, then shrugged. "Oh, very well. So long as I've got my shop here, that's peace of mind enough for me."

Some time later, I heard from Fitz that fewer students had dropped out that year than usual. Was that because the pamphlet had helped them? I couldn't say. But according to the woman at the university shop, she'd had a few students leaf frantically through it before dashing out again, so I was sure it wasn't entirely unrelated. If all those poor lambs had found salvation through Roxy, then as far as I was concerned, this was a great success. Yes indeed. All humanity should find salvation in Roxy.

The woman at the university shop did come to me to complain that her sales had gone down after all, so I ended up having to buy a bunch of stuff I didn't need...but I decided to think of that as a necessary expense.

Short Story:

Luke Notos Greyrat's Unnecessary Item

"MRM..."

When Luke awoke that morning, a sweet smell greeted him, just like usual. He reached out for the source of the smell to stroke it softly, and his palm touched something a little rough, but warm and pleasant.

"Good morning, kitten. Sleep well?"

"Oh, good morning, Sir Luke... Did I wake you?"

"Between nonsensical dreams and a beautiful woman bathed in sunlight, I'll take the latter."

"Haha. You're good at this."

"I only said what I think. One can't be good or bad at that, surely?"

A woman in her underwear sat on the bed beside Luke. She looked down at him with a shy expression. Only an exceptionally dense person or a very young child could have failed to guess what had happened. It was no great mystery. When Luke was off duty, he brought women home, and everyone around him knew about it.

"Thanks for yesterday. It was good of you."

"I do as you request, Sir Luke."

This woman wasn't a regular acquaintance of his. By chance, she had come across Luke as he was tidying up his room, and offered to help. He had half-jokingly invited her out for dinner to thank her, and the chemistry had been good, so he'd taken her right back to bed...or put another way, he'd given her a free one-night stand.

"Actually, Sir Luke, the thing is, I know this is very forward, but I have a request..."

Luke looked around a little shiftily. People tended to think he had no

standards in who he took into his bed, but in fact, he was exacting in his choice of women. It wasn't a question of the size of their breasts, of course. Rather, he only brought home women he could sleep with without any significant negative consequences. This girl had slipped through the selection process.

"What is it? Until you put your clothes on and leave this room, I am your lover, my dear. I'll listen to most anything you might want from me."

Luke spoke in a honeyed whisper, but privately, he thought, What a pain.

Luke Notos Greyrat was next in line to be head of the Notos Greyrats, one of the great noble families of the Asura Kingdom. He sometimes got women who knew his title looking to get something out of his position. If it was money she was after, that would be all right. Luke would wrap up a handful of coins and pass them over with a smile. Though if the figure were too high, he might start haggling her down... If, however, she wanted him to marry her...well, he didn't even want to think about that. In the Asura Kingdom, it didn't matter if noble girls were virgins or not, but it was different in other countries. One could end up having to take due responsibility. Happily, Luke had succeeded in deliberately avoiding such women. Thus far, at least...

"Um, while we were cleaning yesterday, I found this..." The woman produced a small box. Luke recognized it—it was his. But he had no recollection of what was inside it.

"That box... What was in it?"

"Perfume." The woman opened the box to reveal a tiny, pretty glass bottle. "Knowing you, Sir Luke, you must have bought it as a present for a lady, no? But it was entirely covered in dust, so...I wondered if you wouldn't give it to me. You see, I'm a little curious as to the kind of perfume Asuran royalty uses."

"Oh." Luke remembered the little bottle, why it had been hidden in a corner of his room, and why it was covered in dust. "Ah, um, in fact, that isn't perfume. So I'm afraid I can't give it to you."

"It isn't? Then what—"

"Instead, let me take you on a date! I'd love to give you a perfume that really suits you!"

"Oh, my!"

"Does lunchtime tomorrow work?"

"Yes!" The woman nodded, blushing.

"Then let's put some clothes on and return to our days, shall we?"

"Can't I stay a little longer?"

"My, my, those puppy-dog eyes. Of course you may." Luke kissed her. His thoughts, however, were back on the day that he had received the little bottle.

It had been before Ariel had set her sights on becoming monarch. It seemed like every day that she attended some party with Luke and Derrick. That being said, it wasn't that Ariel enthusiastically sought out party invitations. Rather, she was so charismatic that the mere sound of her voice had half the people she spoke to eating out of her hand, and she was beautiful, making her the perfect belle of any ball. As such, she was always receiving invitations from nobles and royalty who wished to add some class to their events. Likely some of them were angling at marrying Ariel to get close to the royal family. Derrick liked to say that they should use these events to collect allies and seek the throne, but back then, that had not been Ariel and the others' plan. For his own part, Luke was less interested in such things than he was in the women.

Luke was good-looking. By the standards of the Asura Kingdom, he was in the top five percent of faces—what Rudeus might have called a Tokyo University-level face. This meant that noble girls flocked to him like bugs to a light trap. Luke could pick and choose as he liked, and, as the latest in a long line of womanizers, it was inevitable that he would devote himself to seducing the fairer sex. At the time, however, his father sternly instructed him to select the women he took into his bed carefully. Not all the women were young. There were heiresses who had inherited their family estates, ladies who ruled over their households while keeping their husbands on a short leash, and all sorts of others who came after Luke. Luke was aware of his own attractiveness, as well as the wiles of women, but he was up against ladies with long years of experience. Making a move on any of them would without a doubt end in disaster. Lest he wanted to tear down the Notos family and lose his position, he

was under no circumstances to make advances on that sort of woman. That was what Pilemon told him. Luke found it restrictive, but he knew Pilemon was likely passing along what he had learned through experience—Luke's mother was formidably strict with her husband. In any case, Luke took care to avoid such women as he continued with his womanizing. Parties were the perfect venue to see what was on offer.

"Might you be Sir Luke?"

On that day, it was not a woman who approached him, but a man—and a young man at that. Luke was adored by women, but men tended to dislike him, which made this an unusual occurrence.

"I am honored to make your acquaintance," the man went on. "My name is Cord Reech, head of the house of Reech."

"The house of Reech...? Sorry, where are your lands?"

"I wouldn't expect you to know it, my lord. We are nobles of mid-rank, with holdings in the countryside of Fittoa."

The word "Fittoa" made Luke's guard go up. Fittoa was ruled by the Boreas Greyrats, the great noble family who supported the second prince. Given their poor relationship with the Notos Greyrats, who supported Second Princess Ariel, Luke was none too keen to draw their attention.

"So what does the head of your house want from me?" he asked.

"The truth is, my father passed away suddenly not long ago, and so I became head of my family...but when I went to present myself, I am afraid I angered the retired lord..."

"Lord Sauros, eh? He doesn't hold back when someone rubs him the wrong way."

"I meant to call on the head of the family as well, but...well, I suppose word must have reached him that Lord Sauros was displeased with me. I wasn't even granted a proper audience." Cord lowered his voice. "If I may be frank, it made me quite uninclined to ally myself with the Boreas family as it is now."

Ahah, Luke thought, suppressing a smile. He wants to shift allegiances, and

he's here testing the waters.

Cord wanted to leave the Boreas Greyrats and subordinate his house to the Notos Greyrats instead. That he had gone out of his way to approach Luke rather than appeal to Pilemon directly must mean he thought Luke would be easier to persuade.

Explains why Lord Sauros hated him, though I expect my father will take a liking to him.

Pilemon would welcome him with open arms. At present, the second princess faction that followed Ariel was facing a full-blown shortage of supporters. Pilemon Notos Greyrat went about doing the legwork to make Ariel queen, but not only was he a poor politician, Ariel did not want to be monarch. It would have been more of a shock if they were succeeding. They had none of the pieces they needed to seize the throne.

What Luke actually said was, "The Boreas Greyrats despise you, and now you want us to take you under our wing?"

If he were welcoming from the outset, Luke and his family would lose this sly young man's respect, and if he did not respect them, he might start scheming to betray them for another house next—the Euros Greyrats or the Zephyros Greyrats, for example. Both houses supported the first prince, who saw Ariel as a threat for some reason, despite her not trying to take the throne. He probably wouldn't do anything to her if she continued that way... Still, Luke wished to avoid making more enemies.

"The second princess's faction will end up clashing with the Boreas...that is, the second prince's faction, no?" Cord said. "It's only a matter of time, isn't it?"

"Perhaps so, but that time is not now. You see that much, don't you?"

They both knew it. In other words, this conversation was a farce. In other words, Luke's words held a hidden meaning. A spoken agreement was not enough, he said. Bring me a token.

Incidentally, while he didn't so much as try to imply it, he was also thinking that if this man had a younger sister, he'd like her too.

"I thought you might say so, Sir Luke, and so I brought this. Given your

popularity with the fairer sex, I was sure you would like it." The young man produced a small box from his pocket. Opening it revealed an exquisite glass bottle wrapped in silk and nestled carefully inside.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It is an aphrodisiac produced on my family's lands."

Luke raised an eyebrow. "Do you imagine I'm so hopeless with women that I need something like this?" He spoke with genuine annoyance. Women loved Luke. He considered that fact part of his identity. Now this man meant to slight him by offering him, Luke, an aphrodisiac? Inside, he knew that was not the case, but the existence of the aphrodisiac grated on his nerves.

"N-nothing like that." Cord at once grew flustered and tried to smooth things over. "Only, this aphrodisiac is extremely potent. A single mouthful, and all any woman will be able to think about is the man before her. Indeed, it even works on men."

Cord might act as though he had everything under control, but he was the master of an estate in rural Fittoa... After falling out of favor with the Boreas Greyrats, he probably felt like he was running out of options.

"I'm afraid I'm not interested in men."

"Oh, no. I only meant that if, say, you were to experience difficulties in that area, this would relieve all concern... That is, not that you would ever... Oh, and if you are ever with multiple women at once, it has a fortifying effect that would give you the endurance to last not just a night but as long as three days. Our aphrodisiacs are far more potent than any others produced in Fittoa. I'm sure it will prove useful to you, Sir Luke."

Luke was perfectly capable of satisfying a woman without resorting to such substances. A whole night was nothing, and even if he couldn't hold out for three days, he'd be ready to do it all again after a day's rest. But then, Luke's cool came back to him. Setting aside what Cord was saying, there was ongoing demand for Fittoan aphrodisiacs at the Asura palace—which was to say, people would pay for them. Offering this to Luke was Cord's way of communicating that his family was turning a profit through these aphrodisiacs and had cash to spare. He was pitching Luke on the idea that his family would help them out if it

came to that. That was all. Luke had gotten touchy over nothing; Cord had never meant to insult him.

"Well, if you insist, then I suppose I accept."

"You mean, Lord Pilemon...?"

"Yes, I'll put a word in with him. And with Lady Ariel, of course."

"Thank you very much!" Cord said, and left.

Luke looked down at the aphrodisiac in his hand for a moment. Then, with a snort, he put it away in his pocket.

Luke still had the aphrodisiac. When he fled the Asura Kingdom, he had brought it with him, thinking anything easily converted into cash might be useful. With Fittoa destroyed, the manufacturers of those aphrodisiacs were also destroyed, and the value of this bottle exceeded a hundred gold coins. Happily, Luke had still not found himself so hard up as to have to sell it, but that might not always be so...

Cord's whereabouts were unknown. It was likely that he was dead.

"If I were to experience difficulties in that area, huh?" He mulled over Cord's words, looking at the bottle. Then he thought back on his tryst the previous night. It had been, in a word, incredible. He'd never get tired of sleeping with women. It satisfied him like nothing else. The women also praised Luke's masculinity, so it satisfied his pride, too. Luke had never been more than an average swordsman and scholar, so this was the one area in which he felt confident. Far from home, menaced by assassins, and never sure what tomorrow might bring, Luke would probably have fallen apart somewhere along the way without the company of women. If, hypothetically, such difficulties had afflicted him at that moment and he had lost the right to enjoy his affairs...well, Luke would probably fall apart on the spot.

Just the thought made him short of breath. He returned the little bottle to its box, trying to calm his pounding heart.

"If it came to that, would I use it...myself...?" The market value of the

aphrodisiac would continue to rise. After all, consumable or not, it was out of production, and there were many people who would dearly like to use it. At present, it was worth several hundred Asuran gold coins. In a few years, it could easily be worth a thousand.

Whether we sell it or use it, until the time comes, we'd best keep it safe. Luke tucked the aphrodisiac in its box away at the back of a shelf. Though that probably won't be for a long time yet... He let out a quiet snort of laughter.

This episode occurred a mere three days before Rudeus made a full recovery from his ED.

Short Story: Table Talk Adventure

Half a Day's Journey north from the royal capital of Laat, there was a large village by the name of Usu. It had been built to support the people who worked in the coal mines still further north and had thriving farms and forestry. But a problem was plaguing the village of Usu: goblins. These goblins had built a nest near the village, which was beginning to suffer as the goblins stole their livestock and young girls.

"If they have a good forestry industry, I feel like the woodcutters' guild would find a way to handle it."

No, um...the Usu Woodcutters' Guild was dealing with a bigger threat, so they weren't available... Right, yeah, a horde of Treants showed up in the east. That's why Usu sent a request to the capital's Adventurers' Guild, asking them to please drive off the goblins. The ones who found their request were you guys, who just signed up for the Adventurers' Guild around the same time. Cliff the warrior, Sylphiette the sword fighter, Zanoba the monk, Elinalise the thief, and Juliette the wizard. You five new adventurers form a party on the recommendation of the Adventurers' Guild and head to the village of Usu. But you've only just met. Let's introduce ourselves and what we can do. Anyone can start.

"I'll go first then. I'm Elinalise, and I'm a thief. I'm a demon, and I'm good at lockpicking and scouting. I'm not a very strong fighter, but I can use my bow to attack from a distance... Apart from that, I'm good at cooking and gambling, and my catchphrase is 'That's a jinx.'"

That character sounds familiar, somehow.

"My bow will make me more useful than any monkey-faced individuals you might know, just wait."

Will it, now. All right, next.

"Um, I'm Sylphiette, and I'm a sword fighter. I'm a human. I'm good in close combat, and I can swing my sword twice in one attack. Um, what else am I good at...oh, I love women, and I have two beautiful wives."

Sylphie, you don't have to base your character on a real person.

"But Paul is the only sword fighter I know..."

There are others, aren't there? What about Luke?

"Luke isn't a sword fighter... Plus, he isn't that different."

Okay, fair enough. All right, next.

"I'm Cliff the warrior. I'll tell you now, with me there, goblins will be no trouble. I might not have said, but on the same day I signed up as an adventurer, I roasted more than ten goblins. I think I'm the natural choice for party leader."

Trust you to be good at roleplay, Cliff.

"What's roleplay?"

I'm saying you're playing your character well. That being said, given everyone knows you only became an adventurer today, I think they can work out that you're lying about killing those goblins.

"J-just so you know, I really did kill goblins on my first adventure."

Huh? Oh, well, seeing as it's you, Cliff, I'd expect nothing less.

"W-well, you know..."

All right, next. Let's learn from Cliff's example and really get into character.

"I am Zanoba Shirone. I wish to express my gratitude to you all for indulging my wish to play this game of the master's creation."

Zanoba, it's great of you to thank everyone, but could you please play your monk now?

"Understood, master. Ahem. I am the monk Zanoba. I am skilled in healing and antidotes. In order for my prayers to reach my god, however, it is crucial that I be in the correct mood. As such, if you wish to benefit from my skills, you must make a commensurate offering. Take heed."

You're good at this too, Zanoba. I can imagine shady monks like that really existing.

"Back in Shirone, I had the opportunity to see the theater, you see... Though this now was an impression of a Millis bishop who used to frequent the Shirone palace."

Now, now, Cliff. There's no need to frown like that. There are always people like that in the world, even when they've sworn themselves to a god.

"I know that. It grates on me, is all."

Right, lucky last. Can you do it, Julie?

"I'm Juliette...the magician. I burn...all...goblins."

Great job, love the fighting spirit. You're a wizard, not a magician, but that's all right for now. Anyway, after you introduce yourselves, the five of you set off for the village of Usu. You walk at an easy pace for half a day, when in front of you, three goblins appear!

"What a marvelous goblin figure! D-did you make this yourself, master?!"

I thought I might as well, you know. Oh, I forgot. These are your figures. I made one for each class.

"Woooooah! Maaaaster!"

Zanoba, don't shout. Look, I'll give them to you when the game's over, so quiet down for now, okay? Anyway. There are three goblins in front of you. What do you do?

"Everyone assume fighting positions!"

"Cliff, wait. My jinx says it's best to avoid unnecessary bloodshed."

"But we're here to kill goblins, aren't we? Isn't it better to take out these ones while we're here?"

"Fights that do not pay are best avoided."

"I burn goblins."

We have three who want to go for it and two who think you should avoid the fight.

"Then it's decided."

"The majority isn't always right, but if it's what our leader wants, I'll follow. That's a jinx."

"A bunch of hotheads, the lot of you..."

In that case, the battle begins. Adventurers, please do your best not to get slaughtered. The person with the highest speed stat goes first... That's you, Sylphie. Okay, roll this dice, please.

"Oh gosh, I'm nervous..."

It's her first battle since becoming an adventurer. Swordfighter Sylphiette, her knuckles white on the hilt of her sword, faces down the goblins and raises her blade...

Some small figurines of Zanoba's were what set all this off.

"Hmm..." When I went to see him, he was staring at a collection of little figurines and grumbling, with a big scowl on his face. That was a rare sight, him looking at a figurine with a face like that. Usually, he wore a creepy smirk.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Oh, if it isn't you, Master. In truth, I made quite the lucky find with these figurines. Behold." He showed me a stone figurine, like a miniaturized chess piece. It was made with its center of mass in its feet, so it could stand up by itself. I guess they were similar to board game pieces in this world, only these were even smaller, and there were more types. The sizes didn't quite match, either. Some were shaped like people, but others were shaped like monsters. Sometimes, there were a few of the same model; sometimes there weren't. There was no regularity.

"What are these?"

"They were previously used in war room meetings. That being said, however, much about them remains enigmatic."

War room meetings? He had to mean the thing where you had a big map that you put tokens in different colors on so that you could easily visualize the state

of the battle. It was true, they seemed too non-uniform for a war room. In the first place, with figures as small as these, if you put them on a map, then people sitting on the edges at the meeting would struggle to see them.

"It is my conjecture that these were used for some different purpose, but there's the puzzle! I have no clue whatsoever as to what that purpose may have been."

"Then I guess they must be from a game or something?"

"Oh! Very good, Master! What makes you think that?"

"No reason. When I first saw them, I thought they looked like the pieces from a board game I played once. Plus, they're just the right size for people gathered around a dining room table to look at."

"That is true. But if they are for that sort of game, it is strange that they should be so lacking in uniformity!"

Was it strange? Okay, compared to the world of my past life, this world had less variety in its entertainment. When it came to game pieces, they were usually round coin-type things like you'd get in Othello, rather than pieces that are easy to tell apart, like with chess—more tokens than pieces. It wasn't standard to use figurines that fit in the palm of your hand in games. Were these ornamental, then? But that didn't seem right either. Ornamental figurines weren't this bland.

"Maybe, in the past, there was a really spectacular battle, and they tried to make a lifelike record of it by reconstructing it using figurines."

The diorama theory. "Oho," said Zanoba, with a look that said he was intrigued. "You advance the most fascinating theories, Master. I believe there was an artist who made such things from stone."

"Forgetting my theories for the moment, did you ask Lord Badi?"

"But of course. Only his lordship did not have any knowledge of these tokens. As they are from before the First Great Human-Demon War, he speculated that Lady Kishirika might know something of them."

"I wonder why he doesn't know about something from before the First Great

Human-Demon War."

"According to ancient texts, Lord Badi was born after the war. It follows that he would not know of things from before his birth, I suppose."

I wasn't sure how immortal demons were *born...* But I suppose everyone's shaky on the details of things that happen before they're born. Of course, I didn't really have a sense of what that was like when it came to things that happened thousands of years ago, but it made sense that you knew about things you actually experienced in a different way to stuff you'd only heard or read about in books.

"It's not like you to go to so much trouble over something like this," I said.

"Au contraire! Old craft items such as these are deeply imbued with the customs and practices of the time they were created. That background is part of what makes it *art*!"

"Oh, right." I actually kind of saw what he was getting at. Take Picasso's *Guernica*, for example. You appreciate its value because you know the artist Picasso painted it about the war that was going on. People who don't have that information struggle to see what makes it special. When I saw it when I was in elementary school, I just thought it looked like scribbles. That had to be what Zanoba was saying now. You had to genuinely admire his faith that there was value in these things.

"All the same, I don't know if Kishirika will know what these are."

"Oho? Why is that?"

"The monster pieces are all monster-shaped, but the people all have human characteristics...which makes me think this was made by a human. And I wouldn't count on the Demon World's Great Emperor knowing about human games, you know?"

"True. If a demon had made this, you would expect the people to be demonshaped... Very good, Master! Insightful as ever."

"It's also possible she does know, of course. But either way, it's not like we can go and ask her."

For all I knew, in the distant past, the world was ruled by monster-like creatures, and one of them had made these figures...but if that were true, surely even Kishirika would have been more...monster-ific.

All the same...I'd seen games that used pieces like this before in my past life. Back then, I didn't know anyone, so I couldn't actually play them...but out of interest, I'd read through the rule books. Now that the opportunity had presented itself, maybe I could try and make one.

"Zanoba, the original purpose of these pieces was probably something else, but—"

And so it was that five rookie adventurers made their debut in my house, playing Rudeus's homebrew TTRPG.

The five of them had placed the figures I'd made for them from earth magic on the map I'd drawn by hand myself, and now they were discussing their options.

"A nest will have at least thirty goblins, you know," Elinalise said. "Considering how hard we struggled against just three, it's too dangerous to charge in without a plan."

"But Lise, after that last battle, we...'leveled up,' right?" Cliff countered. "We learned new...'skills'? If we have a go, it should work out."

"Hmm." Sylphie considered. "What if we sealed off the entrance with magic?" Zanoba turned to Julie. "Well, Julie? Could you do it?"

"Stone Cannon. Grandmaster taught me."

"Julie, you're a rookie adventurer here, so you can't cast magic strong enough to collapse a cave."

This was my first time playing a TTRPG too. Despite studying the rulebooks, that was my past life, so I'd never had the chance to play. After all, I'd had no friends.

Because of that, I was really feeling this out as I went. But it was going well for now. The rookie adventurers had struggled a bit with the three goblins they met

on the road, but they beat them in the end, and all of them had leveled up together. They picked up new skills and arrived at the village just as everyone was getting into it. Now, they were outside the cave where the goblins lived, and it was strategy time. Stuff like "Let's light a fire at the cave mouth and smoke 'em out!" and "Let's scatter poisoned food at the cave mouth then attack when they're overcome by stomach cramps!" was all very well, but personally, I just wanted them to go into the cave.

"You mustn't underestimate goblins," Elinalise went on. "They're classed as monsters in Millis, but they're clever enough that some theorize they were another sort of demon in ancient times. On top of that, they can see in the dark. Caves are their territory... I know they say hunting goblins is the best way for newbies to test their strength, but eliminating a goblin nest or settlement makes this quest B-rank or higher. As soon as we knew it was a nest, we should have returned and lodged a complaint with the guild."

Elinalise seemed not to want to go in at all. She kept on finding fault. As an experienced adventurer, she probably didn't want to let new adventurers make an obvious mistake. My lack of research was at fault. I'd carelessly assumed that you had new adventurers fight goblins. I hadn't known that destroying a nest was a different thing.

Right, what to do? These goblins can't see in the dark and they're weaker, so I could persuade them they'll be fine, but that feels too inelegant.

"Master Cliff, we need not listen to the whimpering of spineless cowards. Earlier, I learned the spell 'Torchlight.' With that to light the cave, we can exterminate the filthy goblins together."

"Oh, ahem, I think I ought to go too," Sylphie said gruffly. "I want to hurry up and take care of those goblins so I can get back to carousing in the company of beautiful women."

"I burn all goblins."

The other three were on board. Elinalise gave me a troubled look, as if to say, "You're an A-rank adventurer, aren't you? Say something to them."

I decided to give her something to set her mind at ease.

"While you were all talking, Elinalise, the thief, discovers the remains of a massive amount of blood as well as bodies in the nearby bushes. From the color and the smell, Elinalise can tell that there was a battle here a few days earlier, and that many goblins are dead."

"Rudeus," Elinalise said slowly. "Aren't I just assuming the situation that works out best for us?"

"The goblins are definitely dead, and as a result, there are that many fewer goblins in the cave. For certain."

I was sending her a message: What you're worried about won't happen, so go into the cave already. I stared at her, praying it had gotten through. She met my eyes for a few seconds. Then her mouth opened in realization. She gave me an apologetic smile.

"Then I suppose there's nothing for it," she said. "But if any of ya die, I ain't taking your bodies home! Okay? And that is a jinx."

She understood this was just a make-believe game, not an adventure simulation. She was always so level-headed, but perhaps, this being her first time playing, she hadn't gotten the point. I mean, her style of play was fine, too...but I was starting as a game master, too, so if she could cut me some slack, I'd take it.

"All right. Let's go." With Cliff in the lead, the party headed into the cave.

"Now, I shall reveal to thee the light of God! Torchlight!"

Zanoba was fully immersed in the roleplay. I hadn't known he was this sort of guy, but then, his gaze was fixed on the figures. The monk figure I'd made must have *really* looked like that corrupt priest he'd met long ago... Anyway, thanks to Zanoba, the group had a light source. With Elinalise as the lookout, they pressed on into the depths of the dark and scary cave.

"There are enemies ahead," Elinalise said. "They seem to be asleep, but they'll notice us if we go any further. What do we do?"

"We crush them, of course."

"Now they shall at last behold God in all His majesty."

"Wait, look here. These footprints on the map are bigger than goblin tracks. There might be a monster stronger than a goblin about. There was a hole in the wall along the way, right? Wouldn't it be better to investigate that first? I mean, look, here, according to the map, there are footprints around the same size as the ones at the entrance this way. That might be the goblins."

Whenever there was a whiff of an enemy, Cliff and Zanoba proposed rushing in without thinking, while Sylphie and Elinalise urged caution. Sylphie was exceptionally perceptive and good at assessing a situation, so she had a high success rate on drawing the correct answer from the information she had. She must have developed that ability as Ariel's guard.

"Come to think of it, the villagers said there might be Terminator Boars living near the goblin nest."

"Oh, you're right...which means that might be what killed the goblins at the cave mouth..."

"When you look closely, there's signs of a cave-in around here. Maybe, by chance, the Terminator Boar nest and the goblin nest got linked up."

The adventurers arrived at the correct answer using what information was available to them. Actually, the same thing was written in the notebook on the ground ahead of them, so that was a shame, but oh, well. They could verify their answer, at least.

That said, this was a party of adventurers who had barely defeated a group of the same number of goblins. Could they really defeat a Terminator Boar that had torn more than a dozen goblins apart? When you thought about it like that, the side route that Sylphie had discovered was the right one.

"Right, then let's take down this Terminator Boar while we're at it."

"They *are* pests. 'Tis the duty of roy...er, of those who serve God to keep villagers safe."

"Yes, a Terminator Boar alone shouldn't pose any great threat."

"It sounds a bit dangerous, but I suppose we'll be all right with all of us. I'm on board."

Oh...crap. Should I have prepped a stronger enemy?

I'd thought a Terminator Boar would be too dangerous an enemy for rookie adventurers, but veterans Elinalise and Sylphie seemed to see things differently.

I want to respect my adventurers' wishes... Let's change things up a bit.

"Hmph. It's asleep," Cliff grumbled.

"Lucky us," said Elinalise.

When the adventurers reached the Terminator Boar, the beast was snoring quietly.

"Behold, the path continues beyond it."

"Okay, then let's have Julie attack before it notices. If we impede its movements with magic, we'll have the advantage after it wakes up too."

My wife was always full of clever ideas.

"Okay. Grammaster, give me power... Quagmire!"

That spell wasn't on the skill list, but I had just taught her the other day that Quagmire was the product of combined water and earth magic. I'd let her have this one. It'd just confuse her if I said she couldn't do it.

"Right, we all attack together." With this order from Cliff, the battle began.

"That was tougher than expected, huh."

Quagmire had restricted the Terminator Boar's movement. But it had quickly gotten free and come charging at the adventurers.

"Honestly, there's no way a Terminator Boar would be as powerful as that."

"Might have been a mutation. I've heard even among the same species of monster, you sometimes get ones that are especially big and strong."

"We ought to have better ascertained the situation in advance. Proper observation would surely have revealed something so obvious." Zanoba had clever things to say now, but he'd also charged in before anyone else, no holds barred. I suppose roleplay and someone's real thoughts are two different

things.

"What should we do now?" Sylphie wondered. "Given we used up all our 'wound salve,' and Julie and Zanoba don't have much mana left, should we head home for now?"

"If we do that, the goblins might move their nest," Elinalise pointed out.

"We'd end up failing the quest..." Cliff agreed. "But that's not worth our lives, is it...?" Perhaps the fight with the Terminator Boar had cooled him off a bit. After being so eager to go, now he was backing off. Scratch that; I should say he was back to his usual calculating self. As a note, I hadn't thought much about what would happen if they went home in the middle of the quest, so if possible, I wanted them to go further in.

"We could go in a bit further before we decide."

"That's true. In adventures, after you defeat a powerful enemy, there's always a treasure waiting!" Cliff said cheerfully.

Smirking, I led them deeper into the cave. There, they found a treasure chest. Further back from that was an elevated area, below which seven goblins and a hobgoblin were snoring. They could get in a surprise attack, but taking down all the enemies would be a tall order.

"Treasure!" Cliff tried to run toward it, but Elinalise held him back so she could deactivate the trap on the chest. Inside, they found several wound salves and a one-handed hammer. It was a magic item that affected creatures it hit with the "paralysis" effect, rendering them temporarily immobilized. "Paralysis" was particularly effective against beast-type monsters. And it worked on goblins, too, of course.

"At last, some excellent loot," said Zanoba. "We may fail at this quest, but by selling this, we could make up for that and then some."

In this world, useful magic items were sold for extremely high prices. The money you'd make from clearing out a goblin nest couldn't begin to compare.

"I don't like to throw in the quest, but it seems like really, clearing out a goblin nest is a job for adventurers of a slightly higher level, so maybe if we report that there was a nest, it won't be counted against us... If the goblins move their nest because of our attack, that should give the village some time before the next attack, so I feel like we should leave off here."

Sylphie, it seemed, had thought that far ahead. When planning this scenario, I had not thought that far ahead, but if they *did* go home now, that was probably what I'd do. They *would* fail the quest, though.

"Wait a moment." Just then, Elinalise noticed something. Perhaps it was a gut feeling born of many years of adventuring, or maybe it was that when it came to using magic items, she'd been doing it longer than the others... Okay, either way, it was because she was a veteran adventurer.

"With this, we could finish off the rest of the goblins, couldn't we?"

"It's not impossible, Lise, but...wait, hang on... Huh. You're right, that'd work."

Cliff was a clever one. He'd picked up on the tidy formulas and turn orders that the battles so far had followed. He'd seen that if Zanoba paralyzed one goblin each turn, they could just wipe out the rest. He could do the math.

"Right, let's go," he said.

The rookie adventurers headed into their final battle.

To cut to the end, Zanoba died.

They held the advantage for the whole of the fight. Zanoba paralyzed one enemy after another with the hammer, and then Sylphie or Julie would finish them off. Once the number of enemies had dwindled, Zanoba charged valiantly at the hobgoblin—shaking off the others' attempts to hold him back. In a show of wild courage, he got into a fistfight with the hobgoblin without so much as casting a healing spell, and so lost his precious life. As a note, paralysis didn't affect the hobgoblin. That's because it was a boss.

"I ask that you give my body to the waves."

"I will not. The Millis faith doesn't do funerals like that."

"Master...don't die..."

As a note, there was no permadeath in this game. They dragged the out-of-

commission Zanoba back to the town, then had the local church do a resurrection ritual. A few minutes later, we returned to find Zanoba alive and kicking, in perfect health! The trade-off was that the resurrection cost a fifth of their payout for the quest. In other words, Zanoba lost his cut. That was the penalty for being an idiot. Still, with the extra they got for taking down the Terminator Boar, even after subtracting the penalty, they earned more than they thought, so they didn't seem too down about it.

"Mission complete. Congratulations." When I declared this, the five of them broke out in smiles.

"If you ask me, in the end, there was nothing to it, really," Cliff said.

"Oh, Rudeus! If we're adventurers, we'd definitely go out for a drink at a tavern after this."

"Then let's really go out to the tavern, shall we?" Zanoba proposed. "Drinks are on me!"

While the others grew more and more cheerful, Julie murmured, "Master... died..."

"Oh, that's right. Zanoba, I really wasn't sure how I felt about that."

"Master Sylphiette, as the blood of royalty, there are times when I must display my valor. If Queen Ariel had been in my place, I am sure she would have done the same thing."

"She definitely would not have, and I would have fought first before she had the chance."

Julie's comment set off a postmortem of the session. This went well; that was terrible; if we'd really done that there, what would have happened... A few questions came my way too, so I answered them all thoroughly. Only as I was answering, I could see where the rough spots in my scenario and the game system stood out. I was only copying what I'd read in rule books long ago, so that was to be expected, but still... Seeing how many areas I might have caught in advance did make me feel a bit frustrated.

"Master," Zanoba said, looking at me suddenly.

"What?"

"This game was mightily entertaining. Thank you so much for putting it together."

The game was full of rough spots, and I had a few thoughts about how it had gone...but when Zanoba said that, I was glad I had made it.

Short Story: Something Cliff Wants

FIRST-RATE ADVENTURERS are able to instantly pick up on danger creeping up on them and evade it. I myself am a first-rate adventurer. While I've since retired, given that I was practically too successful as an A-rank adventurer, I'd say I qualify as first-rate.

Just then, my first-rate adventurer's sixth sense was telling me someone was out to get me. Specifically, out to get my virtue.

"I'm not after anything," Elinalise said from beside me, looking like a pantheress in heat. But she was lying.

"All right, why are you rubbing up against me, then? Hey, please don't put your hand on my knee. Stop stroking!"

I sensed danger. She was after my body. Now, usually, I'm a hard-boiled sort of guy who has no trouble throwing himself into danger. But that was a little tricky right now.

"Hey, Rudeus, I actually want you to do something for me."

"Absolutely not! Go ask Cliff! That's what you mean, isn't it? More to the point, you know I can't do it right now!"

"No, today it's not about that. I have a normal request!"

Really, though? Would a normal request lead to you putting your hand on a guy's knee and stroking his leg? But then, this was Elinalise, so I couldn't rule it out...

"All right, what's this request, then?"

"Oh, well, actually—"

It was a simple story. Cliff's birthday was coming up soon. He wasn't actually turning fifteen this year, but apparently, he had spent his actual fifteenth birthday alone and lonely. Elinalise had found this out, and now she was hyped

up to throw a proper celebration this year. The idea she had arrived at was to get him in a good mood by giving him a present, then carry that through to the bedroom.

"And so," she said, "I was wondering if you could subtly find out what Cliff might like."

"Couldn't you do that yourself? You're good at that sort of thing, aren't you?"

"Oh, Rudeus. You don't understand, do you? If I ask, Cliff will work out what's going on. Besides, there are things guys will only talk about with other guys, right?"

I thought Elinalise probably gave him *those* sorts of presents every day...but oh, well. It wasn't such a hassle to ask some subtle questions. I could help someone out for a change.

"All right," I said. "But don't expect much. It's not as though Cliff and I are that close."

"Okay. I'm expecting great things."

What'd I just say?

After talking to Elinalise, I paid Cliff a visit. As usual, he had set himself up at the front of the classroom and was studying alone. Not everyone could do that —buckling down hard while the other students were having fun and lazing about. You had to admire it. But anyway: how to talk to him? I went over to stand opposite his desk, then laid a hand on its surface.

"Hmph... Oh, it's you, Rudeus." Cliff looked a little miffed to have his studies interrupted, but when he saw it was me, his expression softened. "This is unusual. What's the matter?"

I'd go as far as to say I respected Cliff where women were concerned, but we didn't make a lot of small talk...

I might as well get straight to the point.

"Actually, Cliff, I really wanted a Q and A with you..."

"Q and ...?"

"I wanted to ask you something."

Cliff looked a little taken aback. "To ask me...Huh?! O-oh! Yes, of course. I suppose even *you* have things you don't understand, eh? No, nothing to be ashamed of. What's giving you trouble? I assume you've got your textbook." He fidgeted as he spoke.

What I want to know isn't from class... But it wasn't a bad place to start. First, we'd study together, then I'd bring the conversation around to recent happenings. By happy coincidence, I was carrying my healing magic textbook and everything.

"Okay, well, it's about incantations for advanced healing magic..." I began.

"Incantations? Why are you asking about *that* when you can do silent casting?"

"I just can't get the hang of healing magic. I can't cast it without incantations."

"Huh! You don't say? To think that's your weak point...but I suppose it isn't really a weak point. Anyway, which part in particular do you not understand?"

"Um..."

And so, I ended up having Cliff help me with my studies. He wasn't a great teacher. He used a lot of jargon and kept talking about difficult concepts while assuming I knew what he meant. A beginner would have been totally lost. But then, other teachers couldn't help it if they paled in comparison to the great god Roxy. Only...well, perhaps because I knew a thing or two about magic as well, what he said made sense. Maybe it was thanks to the depth of Cliff's knowledge.

"Wait, so the reason advanced healing spells have long incantations..."

"That's right. The scope of what can be healed expanded, but with it, the scope of what must not be healed did the same."

"It becomes possible to heal too much, and so to prevent that, the incantations get longer. At the same time, control becomes more difficult."

"That's right. Of course, above Saint-tier the discipline becomes still more sophisticated and subdivided. Thus, the incantations become absurdly long,

too."

"Huh... I get it now. Wow, thank you." I was all set for my next test now. I mean, not that I cared that much about school test scores, but still, Cliff was really something. He probably knew more than our teachers. I'd really learned a lot. Next time I didn't understand something to do with healing magic, it was Cliff I'd be calling on.

Several days passed. As it had totally slipped my mind to find out from Cliff what sort of thing he liked, Elinalise came after me, and I ended up paying him another visit...but that's a story for another time.

Short Story:

Rudeus Can't Learn Silent Healing Casting

T WAS A LITTLE AFTER Sylphie and I got married. After we ate, we went into the living room, then started smoothing like we always did...um, I mean, we started our magic practice.

"I told you, Rudy. With silent healing casting, it's like you're knitting together the flesh inside the target's body."

This world had all sorts of entertainment. Board games, card games, theater... Well, not after the sun went down, but there were bards at the tavern. But since way back, when Sylphie and I were together, we always did magic practice. During the laid-back hours after dinner, rather than playing games or chatting, we naturally wound up teaching each other magic. At the moment, I was teaching her disturb magic, and she was teaching me silent casting.

"Okay, I'll give you a demonstration," she said.

You could only use healing magic on someone who was injured, so I made a small cut in my finger, then held my hand out to her. Sylphie wrapped my hand in her own, then closed her eyes. No sooner did I feel a faint warmth in my hand than the cut was gone.

"Well?"

"I...you're amazing." I still got flustered when Sylphie squeezed my hand. I was pure of heart, you see.

"Save the flattery. You'll be able to do it just as soon as you get the knack. Now, you try it." Sylphie made a small cut in her pinky finger with the knife. Beads of blood rose from it.

Oh, no. Not a cut in such a beautiful hand. I'd better heal it quickly, I thought. I wrapped her hand in mine. Lately, I'd gotten pretty smooth when it came to taking her hand. In my previous life, I never would've taken a girl's hand like this. Sylphie's hand, though... So slender, but still soft and cool to the touch...

Her hand felt so nice. I wanted to hold it forever.

"Rudy? Ruuudy?"

Ack, crap. Gotta concentrate.

I let mana flow from my hand, imagining flesh knitting together...

Uh-huh...huh? Uh-huh...ah.

My eyes met Sylphie's. She was staring right at me. Her cheeks were a little pink. Maybe it was because she was holding my hand... Definitely not. It could just be that the fire was burning a little hot. Anyway, concentrate.

Honestly, though, I didn't know what I was doing. Offensive magic came relatively easily when I tried it, but I couldn't get a feel for healing magic at all.

"No good?" Sylphie said eventually.

"Yeah... Seems so." After concentrating for a while, I looked and saw that Syphie's finger had stopped bleeding. There was still a mark where the cut had been.

"What next, Rudy? Do you want to try again?"

"Yeah." There was always value in repeated practice. That being said, it was no good to have Sylphie cut her beautiful hands more just for me to practice on. You might say I should just use my own hands...but I wanted an excuse to hold Sylphie's hand, all right? To which you might say, you're married, you don't need an excuse to hold her hand. I'd say so too. But you see, there was a subtle difference between how Sylphie reacted when I held her hand with an excuse compared to when I held it without one.

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"Um, Rudy?"
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"Hmm?"

"My hand. If you don't let go, we can't practice..."

"Ho ho. Your hand is so cold, my dear. Won't you allow me to warm it with mine?"

Sylphie went bright red at my attempt to be cheesy. *Oh my gosh she's so CUTE.*

I could leave off here for the day, get us into a good mood, then into bed... But no, I had to practice. If I lost my hard-working attitude, Sylphie might cast me aside. And so, I let go of her hand.

"Tee hee." Sylphie let out a giggle, like she couldn't hold it in anymore.

"What?"

"Nothing, it's just something about me teaching you magic, it's sort of emotional. I mean, when we were little, it was always you teaching me, you know?"

"Yeah. That takes me back."

"You don't mind, do you, Rudy? Me teaching you."

"Course not. If anything, I love it."

"You do...ha ha."

It really did take me back. Back when we lived in Buena, Sylphie had been small and timid and oh so cute. Though you could barely tell her apart from the boys... Well, no. It turned out I was the only one who couldn't tell.

"A lot has changed since back then."

"It has. But there's something that hasn't changed, Rudy."

"Huh?"

"The way I feel about you."

That did it. Practice was over for today. I had to show her my perviness hadn't changed since back then either. Wasting no time, I swept her up in my arms and headed for the bedroom—bada bing, bada boom.

Short Story:

Rudeus and the Many-Storied Sand Castle

DESERT STRETCHED OUT as far as the eye could see. In the sky above, the stars did the same. There was a campfire, near which many people lay sleeping. But two were sitting up: a man and a woman. They were on watch for the night. The woman's name was Carmelita. She was a desert warrior with the second name "Bone Crusher."

Glaring over the fire at the man, she fretted. Many of the sand warriors were quiet types, but they had a saying: "A silent night summons evil." If you stayed quiet all through a night's watch, you might find that before you knew it, your comrade had been replaced by something else. To prevent that, you had to talk about something...

"Hey."

"Something the matter?"

Carmelita wasn't much of a talker, and on top of that, she was talking to Rudeus, the magician she hated. A number of days had passed since they began their journey together, and they had already exhausted all the standard conversation topics—not that she even particularly wanted to talk to him in the first place... This was the situation that was troubling Carmelita.

"Um..." With another sand warrior, she could have gotten through it with word games or the like, but not with the magician. That was a given. But then Carmelita remembered something. Word games were no good with the magician, but he would know other ways to drive away evil.

"You're a great sorcerer, aren't you?"

"Well, I don't know about 'great."

"They say a great sorcerer can build a castle in a night. Try it, magician."

If the great sorcerer showed he was more powerful, none of the evil around them would come near. This demand of hers, based on old sayings, put Rudeus on the spot.

"You can't expect me to just...oh." Rudeus, looking indignant, began to shake his head, but then something seemed to occur to him. A lightbulb switched on inside his head. "All right," he said. "I'll do it." With that, he softly laid a hand on the ground.

Was he going to make a castle appear just like that?! Carmelita steeled herself, but what Rudeus made rise out of the ground was not a castle. It was cylindrical, like a giant cup... It was a bucket.

Carmelita looked at him questioningly. Was this supposed to be a castle? Without a word, Rudeus used magic to fill the bucket with water. Then, he began to add sand. After putting in a certain amount of sand, he added water, mixed it a little, then added more sand. He went through this process a few more times, then, when the bucket was full, he patted the top, then flipped the bucket over.

What ritual was this? Bewildered, Carmelita watched this display, totally different from any magic she was used to, with a wary eye. A moment later, her eyes went wide.

Rudeus raised the bucket to reveal a perfectly cylindrical mass of earth. To think that this sandy earth could be so changed. In all her years living in the desert, Carmelita had never seen such a thing.

Rudeus then used magic to make a sort of spatula, with which he began to carefully carve into the cylinder. Before Carmelita's eyes, he whittled the cylinder into an oblong, then made castle walls, windows, watchtowers, a castle gate, and a central tower.

"Phew. Finished." A little under an hour had passed since Rudeus began working. Before him stood a little castle. It was a castle of sand that looked like a strong breeze might blow it away at any moment, but a castle was a castle.

"Well? It's a castle, isn't it?"

If you have to carry water in a sieve, just slap tape over the holes, said Rudeus's smug grin. But Carmelita wasn't looking at his face. The sand she knew so well had, without question, transformed into a castle. She couldn't conceal

her surprise at that fact. At the same time, she understood something. When they spoke of great sorcerers building castles, they meant creating a shrine to drive away evil spirits. So long as they had this castle of sand, no evil would come near them that night.

"Amazing. I've misjudged you."

"With a bucket and water, you could do it too, Carmelita. Shall I show you?"

"No, I don't use magic. Better not." Bad things followed when a warrior learned magic from a magician. Remembering a saying along those lines, Carmelita shook her head.

"It's not really magic, though," Rudeus muttered. He looked a little put out at Carmelita's response, but there was also a hint of a smile on his face at her praise for his creation.

Short Story: Spoiling Dinner

T WAS A FEW DAYS after we rescued Roxy, and we were planning on exploring the labyrinth the next day. On that day, I went to the market with Paul. We didn't have anything to buy—but we would be down in the labyrinth for a good number of days. For more than a month, we wouldn't know sunlight. That stresses a person out. It was important that we took it as easy as possible while we could...and so Paul, saying, "Come with me for a bit," had brought me here.

Me, I would've liked to spend the day reading with Roxy, just like any other day...but such is life, eh? Paul probably wanted to spend some quality time with the son he hadn't seen in ages. As a good son, I had no choice but to go with him.

"Woah, see that, Rudy? A Luciano steel sword for only five hundred cinshas."

"Wow... Um, is that cheap?"

"You'd pay ten times that much on the Central Continent."

"Does it have a good edge or something?"

"Ah, never used one, so I dunno..."

It seemed Luciano steel was a common material in these parts. When I really tried to remember, I had the feeling that the desert warrior I'd traveled these parts with had used a weapon made from Luciano steel. But then, I didn't have the skill to identify metal by sight, so chances were I was imagining things.

"Huh?" Just then, something stirred my nasal passages.

"What's up?"

"Just now, did you smell something good?"

Paul looked around us, then his eyes locked onto a female adventurer who had just passed us.

"Ah..." he said. "You listen to me, Rudy. When a girl smells good, it's usually

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perfume."
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"Not that."

Are you for real? Also, Sylphie and Roxy didn't need perfume to smell good, all right? Okay, Sylphie might have been putting something on. But the point is, I wasn't talking about that.

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"Hm? Huh? Something smells real tasty."

"Yes, that."

Indeed, an indescribably fragrant smell was wafting our way.

"What're they grilling..."

"Let's go have a look."
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Keeping it cool, Paul and I set off in pursuit of the smell.

We arrived at a street stall. It was a special sort of stall, one I'd never seen before. That wasn't to say the vendor was playing a flute while sending out clouds of the delicious aroma of soy sauce. Rather, the first thing that caught your eye was the big tablet. Wait, maybe tablet wasn't the right word, but in any case, it was a massive stone plate. It was being heated by the scorching sun, and the vendor was grilling something on it, sweat pouring off him. I'd never seen anything like what he was grilling either. They looked like brown lumps. They were made from a paste, like ground-up wheat, or beans, or something. The vendor brushed them with oil, sprinkled on some spices, then grilled them. They didn't look that appetizing. But then there was that fragrant smell and the mouth-watering sizzle...

"Hey, Rudy. What do you say we try a bit?" There was a sign next to the plate that said 2 CINSHAS FOR 1. That wasn't that expensive. But...

"But Lilia and the others are going to have food ready for us when we get back."

Seeing as you're all going into a labyrinth tomorrow, she'd say, I'll cook up a storm. She was sure to make a lot, too. And by the looks of things, this stall's portions were pretty substantial: one of these things looked enough for two people. This shop did things super-sized. I knew just one would be enough to fill

me up. If we ate here, we wouldn't be able to finish the food that Lilia and the others were so thoughtfully preparing.

"Come off it... If you don't try one now, you might never get the chance."

"That's true."

Even though I'd journeyed from the Demon Continent to the Central Continent, I'd never seen food like this before. It had to only be sold in these parts, or else it was this guy's original recipe.

"What if we went halves?"

I considered this for a long moment. "No, it won't work."

"It'll be fine. Look, so long as we finish our dinner, no one will be the wiser. You're a man, you can stuff a little extra in, can't you?"

Yeah, in my past life, I was the type to shovel down enough for two or three people. But now I was trying to maintain my figure, you know? I exercised and everything...

"Well, you don't have to have any..." Paul said. "Ahh, what a shame. I'm betting they're delicious."

It seemed Paul was going to eat one. I wanted to! The aroma and the sound were both calling out *I'm delicious!* to me. And yet...and yet...

"Gahh..."

In the end, I was no match for my appetite and my curiosity. Paul and I wound up facing hell at dinner that night, but that was a story for another time.

Short Story: Compliments to the Genius Maid

AT PAUL'S FUNERAL, everyone brought something that carried a memory of him to the feast. Aisha brought a soup of stewed potatoes and beans.

"I didn't know my dad that well, but when we were in Millis, he was so happy when I made this for him." Aisha began a story from not long after she and Paul had been reunited.

After the incident in the Shirone Kingdom, Aisha went with Lilia to the Holy Country of Millis. They were protected by Shirone Knights, and so their party arrived safely in Millis, where they met up with Paul. He was happy to see them safe. After that, Paul, Lilia, Norn, and Aisha's life together in Millis began. Paul went on searching for the residents of Fittoa as he had been, and Lilia helped him. Aisha and Norn began going to school in Millis together. This period of their life would be over in a vanishingly short period of time...but for Aisha, it did not hold many fond memories.

Paul was so busy every day he never had any time for Aisha. But she did have one memory of him. It happened at lunchtime on just another ordinary day.

That day, Lilia was out of the house. She had gone to deliver some papers to the other side of Millishion to help the search party with their work. Norn had gotten poor marks on her tests, so she was at school taking a remedial class. Aisha, who had excellent grades, was at home, and in a rare event, Paul too had some spare time and had come home before lunch. This, however, was when the trouble occurred.

"Hrmmm." Aisha finished cleaning the room she was in, then came out to find Paul in the kitchen, groaning. He had potatoes, beans, meat, and vegetables laid out in front of him.

"Master? What's wrong?" She asked.

"Huh? Well...it's lunchtime, right, Aisha?"

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"Yes."

"You're hungry, right?"

"Yes."
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"Exactly..." Paul muttered. He usually had lunch at the tavern where the search party was based. As such, Lilia had gone out without preparing anything for him...and as a result, Paul, who had thought he would eat at home, had come home to find there was nothing for lunch.

Norn had taken a lunchbox, by the way.

"Don't worry, Aisha. I'll make something for us right now."

"Er...all right." Aisha decided to keep an eye on him.

"Um, right, what's first again? You cut the ingredients...or do you light the stove first? Rats, where are the pots?"

Paul's cooking skills were highly doubtful. He stared down the ingredients, the kitchen knife in his hand hovering uncertainly. Paul had spent some time as a solo adventurer, so he could manage something a bit like cooking. But he couldn't go feeding typical male cooking to his daughter.

"You know what, how about we eat out? Well, Aisha? Anything you want to __"

"Just a moment, Master."

"Huh? Oh..." When Paul gave up and tried to suggest going out, Aisha pushed him out of the way at the kitchen bench. Then, she took a spare knife out from the cupboard and rolled up her sleeves.

"Wh-whoa, that's dangerous." Paul was alarmed. A small child had suddenly pulled out a knife.

"It's fine. Watch me, please."

"What d'you...oh."

When Aisha started working, Paul's protests stopped. He stared in slackjawed amazement as Aisha, with practiced hands, took out a pot, filled it with water, turned on the stove, chopped up the ingredients, and tossed them into the pot. At the same time, she put the bread that sat at the edge of the bench into a basket, tore up some vegetables to arrange in a bowl, then carried it all to the table. Ten minutes or so later, Paul had soup, salad, and bread in front of him. It was a meal that compared favorably to what Lilia usually made him.

"Here you are, Master."

To Aisha, however, it was simple food and nothing special: soup thrown together from what she'd had on hand, some vegetables she'd torn up and called a salad, and bread that had already been baked. If anything, she had slacked off.

"I keep telling you," Paul said. "You can call me 'Father,' not 'Master... Oh, mm, wow..." In the middle of telling Aisha off for being too polite, he let out a sigh of amazement. "Incredible. You can already cook like this at your age, eh, Aisha?"

"What?"

"Like this, you'll have no trouble finding someone when you're older," Paul said, then ruffled Aisha's hair. It was probably a shock for Paul to discover that Aisha could cook. After all, his other daughter Norn had never so much as picked up a kitchen knife.

"I don't know, it surprised me when he complimented me just like that." At the time, Aisha had not been used to praise. Lilia was strict, and Zenith's relatives, the Latrias, were cold toward her. Even at school, as a child born out of wedlock, she rarely got any praise. As such, Paul's words had been a shock for Aisha, too.

"I don't have many memories of Dad. But this one dish, it's special," she finished, her mind still back on that day.

Short Story: A Swordsman Only Goes Sober Once

AT PAUL'S FUNERAL, everyone brought something that carried a memory of him to the feast. Roxy brought a bottle of imported beer.

"Back when I was Rudy's private tutor, Paul didn't drink much..." Roxy began a story from when Rudeus was still only little.

It was Rudeus's fifth birthday. These days, it was common enough knowledge not to need an explanation, but humans had a custom of treating birthdays that were multiples of five as special. Rudeus's fifth birthday was no exception. The family all got him presents and put all their energy into celebrating. Roxy gave Rudeus a staff. Through one thing and another, that staff was now in Sylphie's possession, but that was another story.

That day, the Greyrat household threw a small party. Roxy was allowed to join in the festivities, feeling grateful to them for treating her like family. It was that night that it happened.

"Hm?" Roxy awoke in the middle of the night, sensing something wrong. Her long career as an adventurer meant that even when she slept in a soft bed, she could wake in an instant to any noise... All right, that was a lie. She had been sound asleep and just happened to wake up in time to hear a faint noise. It sounded as though someone was moving around in the corridor.

"A burglar?" Thanks to Paul's efforts in Buena, the village was, by and large, a safe place where people were kind to outsiders. But there were always people who'd fall victim to temptation. If such a person were to break in somewhere, it naturally would be the house with the most money. And because Paul was the resident knight, they were the most well-off family in the village.

"For goodness' sake." Roxy got out of bed, then, staff at the ready, she went out into the corridor on tip-toes. After this family had done so much for her, the least she could do was throw the intruder out quietly so as not to disturb them. So decided, Roxy went down the stairs toward the source of the noise.

The noise was coming from the kitchen. She peeked inside, and saw someone with their head buried in the back of the cupboard, apparently scrounging for food, it seemed. No one in the Asura Kingdom had too little to eat. The land was so fertile that you could find any number of edible leaves and fruit by the side of the road. That being said, a person living in a village might look to other people's larders first. In any case, if it was food, not money, they were after, she could talk them around.

"Are you hungry?" she called out softly.

The figure jumped, then slowly drew its head out from the cupboard.

"Oh...it's just you, Roxy." There, a guilty look on his face, was Paul.

"Huh? Paul? What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"Um, nothing really." Paul tried to hide the item in his hand, overtly avoiding her gaze. But Roxy managed to catch a glimpse—it was a bottle of alcohol.

"You're drinking so late at night?"

"This is, um..." Paul quickly tried to hide the bottle behind his back.

Roxy was puzzled. It wasn't as though alcohol was forbidden in this house, and Paul had been drinking at the birthday party, too.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Look, since Rudy was born, I've been trying not to overdo it with the drinking. I don't want people to see me making a fool of myself drunk, y'know? Especially Rudy."

"I can understand that, I suppose."

"But in the end, it's not enough, y'know? Like, sometimes you just want to get off-your-face drunk, or...do you see what I mean? Rudy's already five, right? And it was only just the other day he was born..."

Roxy didn't like alcohol very much. Most of it was bitter, and she always ended up drunk straight away. But she understood wanting to cut loose at a party—especially if you were always restraining yourself.

"Yes, I understand," she said.

"Haha. You're doing me a favor," Paul said. "But don't tell Zenith, all right? She'd be pissed for sure if she knew I was getting drunk by myself."

"I won't. But in exchange..."

That day, as a condition of keeping his secret, Roxy asked Paul if she might join him for a drink.

"He told me to keep it a secret...but that doesn't matter anymore, does it?" she said, then downed the last cup of beer. Usually, she found alcohol bitter and unappetizing. But she remembered how on that day, it had tasted unbelievably good.

Short Story:

How the Swordsman and the Thief Use Their Money

AT PAUL'S FUNERAL, everyone brought something that carried a memory of him to the feast. Geese brought several medals.

"There was a time he got right into collecting these, y'know." Geese began a story from after Zenith joined Fangs of the Black Wolf.

At the time, with the addition of Zenith as healer to the party, all was going well for Fangs of the Black Wolf. After traversing a number of labyrinths, their finances were looking good too. Perhaps because of this, Paul got into collecting odd medals. As he said it, they were medals that had been awarded to knights in countries that had fallen into ruin before the Laplace War. Geese couldn't see why things like that should be sold for such high prices. But as part of his profession, he frequented the places where such things were traded, and so Paul often made him come with him on his medal hunts.

"A hundred!"

"Ugh, a hundred and ten!"

"A hundred and ten, I've got a hundred and ten, can I get another offer?"

That day, Geese and Paul were at the auction house. Paul's hand was clenched around the bag of fifty Millis silver coins he had saved up for this day. It was a veritable fortune for the likes of an adventurer.

"Oi, Paul. It's time."

"Y-yeah...I'm a bit nervous..." Up for auction today was the final type of medal in Paul's collection. Upon catching wind of this, the two of them had come to the auction house, which they did not usually visit. He had never bid on an auction before. Feeling like a fish out of water, Paul broke out in a cold sweat.

"All right then, our next item is an Anchor Kingdom knight captain's medal, starting at ten silver."

"Ah." At last, the item he was after appeared.

"Ten!" Paul quickly raised his card and said the price. Anchor Kingdom knights' medals weren't all that popular among collectors, to say nothing of ordinary people. Only serious medal fanatics would want it. Paul thought that with a bit of luck, he could get it for around twenty silver.

"Twenty-five!" But just like that, someone raised the bid. Apparently, there was a serious medal fanatic here.

"Thirty!"

"Thirty-five!"

Paul and the other voice began shouting over each other.

"F-forty..."

"Forty-five!" the other voice called out confidently, perhaps hearing the reluctance in Paul's voice and smelling victory.

"Ngh..." Paul's voice caught in his throat. His budget was fifty silver coins. But this was, in fact, the entirety of his current assets. He'd assumed he could get the medal for forty coins at the most because, according to his research, that was about the market rate. He had brought fifty coins just in case, but if he spent them all, he'd go hungry until they earned another bounty.

"Forty-five, I hear forty-five, can I get a higher offer?!"

Paul looked at the auctioneer in anguish. Did he choose the medal, or not...?

"Haaah..." An hour later, Paul staggered down the street. In the end, he hadn't bought the medal. That is to say, he'd tried. He'd shouted out, "Fifty!" But his opponent had outbid him straight away with "Fifty-five," and Paul had been silenced.

"Ya shoulda borrowed a bit from me if it meant so much to ya," Geese said. In the end, Geese had thrown him a lifeline, saying, "How 'bout I lend ya ten silver?"

Paul had considered it for a second, but decided not to borrow the money. And so, the auction concluded.

"Just ten wouldn't have been enough," he said.

"Ya can't know that without tryin' it."

"Nah, I could tell. That type doesn't fold. Swordsman's instincts." Paul spoke like a man who'd accepted defeat, but he still hadn't quite let go.

So Geese asked, "How come you're collecting them medals anyway?" He knew a guy didn't need a reason for collecting things, so he hadn't questioned it until now. But he found himself wanting to ask.

"That's, I mean, you know..." Paul looked away, his face flushing a little as he explained. "It's...it's Zenith. The other day, we were at an antique dealer's and she was all, 'Look at this medal, it's so cool.'"

So it was a present for Zenith. Geese let out a heartfelt sigh.

"Well, in the end he took my advice and bought a pretty chain, then got the medals he'd bought up 'til then remade into one pendant. And he got Zenith to like him better, so good for Paul, eh? And that was that." Geese had heard that the medal pendant had been lost in the displacement incident. But antique dealers were always hawking them.

He thought it could be a bit of fun, collecting medals, once things settled down.

Paul hadn't been able to complete his collection the day they had visited the auction house together, so Geese would do it for him. As Geese finished his story, he thought that might not be a bad idea.

Short Story: The Reader and the Elven Warrior

AT PAUL'S FUNERAL, everyone brought something that carried a memory of him to the feast. Elinalise brought a book.

"That Paul. Underneath it all, he was quite the reader, wasn't he?" she said—and so began a story from when she and Paul had first formed their party.

That morning, when Elinalise went to the dining hall to eat breakfast, she found a young man there. It was Paul. Elinalise was a little surprised at the sight of him. It wasn't the fact that he was there, of course. He was lodging on the second floor, and so seeing him there was nothing strange. What surprised her was the book open in front of him. It was rare for adventurers, and especially warriors and swordsmen, to read books, as almost none of them studied. Quest postings and contracts at the Adventurers' Guild were written in letters, so there weren't many who couldn't read at all, but almost none of them read for pleasure. This was because books themselves were expensive.

"What a rare sight. But you do know you won't attract any ladies just by opening a book to make yourself look intellectual?"

Elinalise, therefore, thought it was all for show. She assumed Paul had the book out to make himself look cool to get girls.

"Say what? I'm not reading 'cause I want to attract girls."

But she was wrong. Paul, it seemed, was actually reading.

"Did you buy that book?" she asked.

"Don't be stupid. I borrowed it."

This world's paper-making technology was relatively advanced, but bookbinding and printing were still developing. Handwritten books were the norm, and they fetched high prices. They weren't something ordinary commoners could buy on a whim. To cater to commoners who wanted to read, there were book lenders. Basically, it was a book rental industry.

"Wow... What sort of story is that one?"

"Nothing, just adventure stories."

The book Paul had borrowed was a collection of adventure tales. That being said, the stories were just accounts of the experiences and mistakes of adventurers who had happened to be around, so a lot of them were anticlimactic or ended badly. Such stories were popular with commoners who had no connection to adventurers, though. Back when Paul was the heir of a noble family, he had snuck out of the mansion many times to run down to the book lender and read these sorts of books.

"Even though we adventure every day, these are great, aren't they?" Elinalise said to herself, then spotted the landlady. "Could I trouble you for some breakfast?" she called, and ordered soup and bread.

While she waited for her food to arrive, she sat down at the table, rested her chin on her hand, and watched Paul read.

"Ooh...whoa, there...don't do that..." Paul was entertaining as he read. His muttering to himself followed what was written on the pages while his face went through a whole range of expressions. Paul had always had an expressive face, but Elinalise couldn't help but smile at the thought that even a book could bring this out of him.

"Tee hee..." The laugh slipped out from Elinalise, making Paul look up. "Oh, pardon me," she said. "I only got curious about what's written in there, that's all."

"Right..." He must have known she was covering for what anyone could have told was a laugh. But apparently, Paul was more preoccupied with something else.

"It's a shocker of a story," he said.

"How so?" Elinalise asked.

"How...? First off, all the characters are morons..." The story Paul was reading was about six adventurers who went to a labyrinth and, through a small mistake, ended up in a tight spot until one of them used their wits to escape. It was a story pattern you often found in these adventure tales. Their one fault

was that you were never quite sure if they were true or made up, but because, as a rule, they had happy endings, their popularity endured.

"—and then the swordsman who's their leader says, 'We just gotta keep going."

"Well, it's a valid option."

"Nah, it isn't. I knew when I read this bit that later they'd run short on supplies and end up screwed. And what do you think happened? They run out of supplies and find themselves up the creek without a paddle."

"Wow..." As she listened, Elinalise had a strange sense of deja vu. She'd thought that pressing on was a valid option, but at the same time, she had for some reason had an idea that they could run out of supplies and be "up the creek without a paddle."

"Then their magician says, 'If we go up this hole we can escape,' and tries to climb up, right, but his belly gets stuck—"

After that, one after another the adventurers botched something and got into hotter and hotter water. Each time, Elinalise's sense of deja vu intensified. She was sure she'd never heard the story before, yet for some reason it felt like she had.

"Then at the end the healer does something clever and they escape by the skin of their teeth, then everyone lives happily ever after... That's the story."

Elinalise paused. "It's a common story, isn't it?" she said.

"Yeah, probably. But you know, somehow reading this story just made my blood boil. Like, surely you could do something before it got that bad...or like, I don't know..."

"Yes, I suppose so." Elinalise agreed with Paul. She too felt an irritation at the story she couldn't put into words.

"Ahhh, if I were there I'd have done it better..." Paul said, vigorously scratching his head before closing the book.

"Oh." Elinalise realized why she had deja vu. "That story."

"Hm?"

"Isn't that what happened when we went down into the Youjmatz Labyrinth a year ago?"

It clicked for Paul as well. "Oh."

One year earlier, yes, back when the party had only just got together and they were all new to the labyrinth exploring game. Fangs of the Black Wolf had, without making any proper preparations, gone down into the Youjmatz Labyrinth, and they'd gotten their asses handed to them and barely made it out with their lives. The characters in the story had different names, different classes, and the order of their mistakes was different. But it was definitely that adventure.

"'If I were there I'd have done it better'?" Elinalise said, repeating back what Paul had growled angrily. Paul looked away, his face going red.

"Me now, I meant," he muttered.

"Let's say that, shall we?" Elinalise said, laughing.

Immediately after Paul and the others had escaped the Youjmatz Labyrinth, another party of adventurers had cleared and destroyed it. Because of this, Paul had totally forgotten, but Elinalise remembered what Paul had said after their escape.

Next time, I'll do it better.

"Tee hee..." Elinalise let out a little chuckle at the thought that even a year later, Paul was saying exactly the same things.

Short Story:

The Swordsman and the Dwarf Have a Drinking Contest

AT PAUL'S FUNERAL, everyone brought something that carried a memory of him to the feast.

The magician Talhand brought a bottle. "The scoundrel never knew his place when he was young," Talhand said, and began to tell a story from when he and Paul had first formed their party.

"Is it true that all dwarves can hold their drink?" It was after they'd finished a quest and were at a tavern to celebrate that Paul asked the question. He was probably just curious.

"What d'you mean?"

"'Dwarves can hold their drink' is like...it's one of those things everyone says, but you don't drink much, right? Just struck me as odd."

Talhand didn't drink much for the simple reason that he was broke. People thought all a magician needed was a staff, but in fact, the occupation was a real money guzzler. He always had to have scrolls and magic crystals at the ready for the branches of magic he didn't specialize in. And in Talhand's case, he also needed armor and a hand axe for close combat. He never had any cash to spare.

"Hah. I don't have the money to waste," he said.

"Really?" Paul said teasingly. "You sure it's not because you're actually a lightweight?"

In fact, Paul's jibe wasn't far from the mark. Dwarves loved to drink alcohol the same way that humans needed water to stay alive. But it was true that Talhand didn't like his drink as much as other dwarves. If he had water and alcohol placed in front of him, he'd choose alcohol, but unlike the others, he didn't love it so much that he couldn't go a day without a drink. He was content to go without when he couldn't afford it.

Despite all that, what he said was, "How about we find out?" It must have been a passing whim.

"Oh yeah?"

"We just finished that quest, so I've got money. Best way to see if I'm really a lightweight's to test me yourself, wouldn't you say? Oi, master! We need drinks!" Talhand ordered two drinks from the tavern keeper, who immediately set two tankards down on their table with a thud.

"A drinking contest, eh...? I like it." Paul licked his lips. He was always up for a competition, no matter what it was. Even ones he had no hope of winning.

Elinalise and Geese, who had been having their own conversation off to one side, now looked over.

"What's this? If you're having a drinking contest, might I join in too?"

"Ya ain't got a hope in hell against a dwarf by yourself. I'll lend ya a hand."

"Hah. I'll take any number of you. It won't change anything." Talhand drained his first tankard, looking at the other three and thinking he'd have a good laugh at these youngsters after he'd drunk them under the table.

An hour passed.

"Taaaalhand, hey, Talhand you dumb bastard," Paul said thickly. "Here, how come even though magicians wear robes, you've got all that heavy armor on, huh! Bit weird, isn't it?"

"I imagine the armorer saw a wet-behind-the-ears dwarf and thought, here's an easy mark!"

"'This here robe's made of strong steel plate, perfect for a magician,' or somethin'? Fwahahaha!"

Paul, Elinalise, and Geese were all well and truly off their faces. Unlike dwarves, they had no resistance to alcohol, and so it had only taken a mere dozen or so drinks. Talhand, meanwhile, watched them with his usual sullen expression, quietly sipping his drink—

"Bahahaha! Just so! That old armorer was so senile, when I said I wanted a robe he brought out a full suit of armor! Then on top of all that, he said he'd

throw in an axe!"

No such luck. Talhand was as red in the face as the others, guffawing as he drank heartily from a keg cradled under one arm. He was completely sloshed.

"An axe!" Elinalise crowed. "That shopkeeper judged you entirely by your looks, didn't he!"

"But I felt so bad that I bought it all, and what do you know, it came in handy! And I've been wearing armor ever since."

"Fwahaha! So the old armorer was right after all, eh!"

That day, Talhand laughed and drank a great deal. He kept them all entertained with lies and made-up stories he rarely told, and drank until he fell over. It was as though there had never been any drinking contest. Drink had never tasted so good before.

"It was a puzzle to me back then. Why'd it taste that good? How come getting drunk felt so good? I mean, we were drinking watered-down, cheap stuff."

As he thought back on that night, Talhand raised the bottle he had brought to his mouth and took a deep swig. "Thinking about it now, the answer's simple. It's not the quality of the drink that makes for a good night of drinking. It's who you drink with," He grinned around at all of them, his face bright red.

Short Story: The Knight's Attendant's First Job

AT PAUL'S FUNERAL, everyone brought something that carried a memory of him to the feast. For Lilia, this was a cake made with dried fruit.

She wouldn't explain why she had brought the one food Paul hated—it wasn't a story for other people's ears.

You hated this cake, didn't you? she thought, recalling something that happened not long after she had first become the maid to the Greyrat household.

Lilia made the cake on the day Rudeus was born. While the plan was to hold a proper celebration later, she thought a cake would be a nice way to enjoy the happy occasion in the meantime.

That night, Paul ate dinner alone.

"Heh heh. A son, eh... He hardly cries, dunno what that's about...but a son..." He started drinking, muttering, "A son..." over and over and grinning. He was over the moon at Rudeus's birth.

"Ahh..." He took another swig, then he saw the cake and frowned. "And this is?"

"It's to celebrate Master Rudeus's birthday."

"Um, right..." Paul poked at his slice of cake with his fork, but didn't take a bite. Instead, he went on sipping his drink.

Perhaps he didn't like it. If so, perhaps she had done a bad thing.

Just as Lilia started thinking this way, Paul suddenly said, "Why'd you become our maid, anyway?"

"Why, sir?"

"Yeah, I want to know why. The reason."

"Didn't I explain that when you hired me?"

"No, I get your situation. But you didn't have to come to my house, did you?" "Well, I don't know..."

At the time, she had been at risk of being assassinated for political reasons. As such, she had needed the least noticeable place she could find and someone who would protect her. Finding such a place was hard enough; finding such a person was near impossible. First of all, there was no one who would shelter her once they found out the servants of the Asuran royal family were after her. Paul, though, had owed Lilia a debt. She'd thought if she played her cards right, there was a good chance he would protect her even if the assassins came for her.

She didn't know if Paul had understood all that or not. He had hired her just like that with barely any negotiation.

"If anything, I wondered why you were willing to hire me," she said.

"Well, there's hardly anyone willing to come to a backwater like this..." Paul fell silent for a moment and looked at Lilia. "I mean, that's part of it, but also, when I saw your name, I thought, there's something I need to say to her. Only I was worried you might not like me dredging up the past, so I never managed to do it."

When Paul said 'the past,' Lilia remembered her first time. A far greater number of terrible things had happened afterward, while she was a guard-maid at the Asura palace, so the impact had faded, but she couldn't forget it, and it was not a good memory.

"But today, what with my kid being born, I made up my mind," Paul said. "What I did back then was wrong. I know an apology isn't going to make it right...but I hope you'll forgive me."

Lilia was shocked. The Paul she knew had been a rascal through and through. The sort who did bad things without thinking twice, who thought he was better than everyone else in the world. That was why, when Lilia had applied for the job, she had planned on using the past as a bargaining chip. Now he was married, she thought, he wouldn't want it exposed to his wife. He played dirty,

so she had meant to do the same.

"Oh..." And yet, after this sudden apology, Lilia was at a loss for what to say. It wasn't a question of whether to forgive him. For her, what had happened was water under the bridge. In which case, if she were to consider her future, the correct response would be to tell him it didn't bother her.

"All right, then please eat that whole cake." The words were out of her mouth before she realized it. Paul looked a little taken aback—but then he nodded slowly and began to eat.

He definitely didn't like it. In fact, he must have hated it, because he retched and choked a few times as he ate. But even as tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, he ate the whole thing without spitting anything out.

When she thought back on it, Lilia wasn't sure why she had said what she did. But she did know one thing. That had been the moment she had truly forgiven him, and the moment she had fallen in love with him.

Short Story: Roxy Shows Her Gratitude

ROXY MIGURDIA HAD A DILEMMA. Just the other day, she had received a thank-you gift from Rudeus and Sylphie after their wedding. But was it okay to just accept such a thing? When you received a present, wasn't it common courtesy to give something in return? Having come to this conclusion, she'd gone out to look for something, but she wasn't sure what they would like. Sylphie's present was giving her particular trouble. They had lived together in the past, so Roxy knew her tastes: she preferred simple to showy, and practical to stylish. That made a household item or clothing, something a little on the expensive side, her prime candidates. And yet as Roxy spent three hours wandering in circles around the market, nothing seemed quite right.

But the longer you searched, the more opportunities would present themselves.

"Oh!" As soon as she saw the street stall, Roxy knew she'd found what she was looking for. It was a pair of white leather boots lined with fur. They looked incredibly warm. Boots like those would be perfect for the cold Sharia winters. And the white leather would look wonderful on Sylphie, with her pale skin and white hair. Also, Sylphie had been saying lately that her feet got cold. These really were perfect.

Roxy hurried over to the stall...

"One pair of these, Mister."

"Well, well. You've got good taste. Water bounces right off 'em, and they won't slip. And they're toasty warm to boot. Only, they're made of a special material, so they'll cost you five silver."

"I'll take them!"

This was the conversation that unfolded right before Roxy's eyes. The female adventurer who had bought the boots out from under her nose disappeared

into the crowd exclaiming, "Man, what a great find!"

"Oh..."

Missing out on an item by a hair—it happens all the time. But Roxy picked herself up and went up to the stall keeper.

"Ahem. Those boots just now, do you have any more in stock?"

"Eh? No, those were the only ones, I'm afraid."

A one-of-a-kind item—that happened all the time too.

"Grr... A-all right, then who supplied them to you?"

"Ah, well, I made 'em myself. I collect materials wherever my travels take me, then make 'em into goods as fit those places and sell 'em... It's a kind of apprenticeship, see."

Roxy looked at his wares and saw they were indeed inspired creations that looked ready to be the next big thing.

"Is that right..." she said. "I'd never have pegged you as an apprentice. You're very skilled."

"I'm happy to hear that. What d'you say, little miss? If there's anything that takes your fancy, you're welcome to try it on."

"I'm much too old to be getting called 'little miss'... But leaving that aside, today I'm looking for a gift."

"Know their size?"

"Of course. Now please, I have faith in your skills, so won't you make another pair of boots like those ones?!"

She could have just shrugged and bought something else instead of going to any more trouble, but the biggest fish is always the one you fail to catch. Roxy was convinced beyond a doubt that the boots from before were better than any of the other items in front of her.

"I'd be happy to make 'em...only, I'm all out of the material."

"What material is that?"

"Yeti leather."

Yetis. Roxy knew those monsters well. They were D-rank monsters that lived in the great glacial valley of northern Sharia. If you went to the Great Glacier, you could find a good number of them shuffling about. You did not, however, often find their hides for sale. This was because the Great Glacier valley had nothing that people needed, and as such, people didn't tend to go there. You only saw yeti leather when a lone yeti showed up after being driven away by the others, or when the types who accompanied foreign kings to the Great Glacier on sightseeing trips brought some back to add to their stocks. If people knew that leather could transform into such beautiful boots, they would surely value it differently, but as things were...

Roxy tried to work out what to do. There, in front of the shop stall, she worried, then worried some more, until...

It was early the next morning, and Rudeus was wandering around the entranceway to the house. The previous day, Roxy had gone out and not come back. Rudeus's mind was full of worst-case scenarios. What if she'd been abducted? What if she'd been in an accident? Or perhaps she'd gotten sick of him and wanted a divorce?

With such thoughts whirling around in his head, in the end he hadn't slept a wink.

"I really am worried, though," Sylphie said. "She's not the sort to stay out at night without telling anyone..."

She was concerned about Roxy too. She stood with Rudeus at the front door, staring out the window.

"Oh!" As they did so, they heard the clip-clop of a horse's hooves approaching. Rudeus and Sylphie strained their eyes to see what was going on and saw a beautiful horse—the one Rudeus had named Matsukaze—coming toward the front door. Mounted on its back was a girl with shining blue hair... It was Roxy. For some reason, she was all beat up.

She jumped down from the horse, then bobbed her head to Rudeus and

Sylphie, who had come out the front door. "I have returned," she said.

"Um...are you all right? Did you run into trouble?"

"I meant to get this done yesterday, but it ended up taking a really long time. Here. These are for you." From the bag on her back, Roxy produced a box which she held out to Sylphie. Sylphie opened it with an air of trepidation, then cried out in delight.

"Oh, what gorgeous boots. Thank you! But what's the occasion?"

"A thank-you for the present you gave me the other day. These took a bit of getting hold of."

In one day, she had galloped to the Great Glacier, hunted down an unlucky yeti, then rushed back as fast as she could and had the stallkeeper stay up all night to finish them. The grueling pace had been enough to leave even the well-traveled Roxy unsteady on her feet.

"Huh. Well, I'd like to know what happened, and I was worried...but thank you. I love them." Sylphie gave her a shy smile.

"I'm truly sorry if I made you worry," Roxy said, but when she saw how happy Sylphie was with her present, her face split into a satisfied grin.

Then, Rudeus said, "What about me?"

Roxy looked at him. For a few seconds, she didn't move. Then, she said, "Oh."

After that, Rudeus fell into a crushing depression, and so Roxy tried all sorts of things to cheer him up, but that's a story for another time.

Short Story: Birdbrain Atofe

$\mathbf{G}_{\mathsf{YAAAAAH!}}$

In the castle of black iron that stood at the center of the town of Rikarisu in the Biegoya region of the Demon Continent, a demon king was raging.

Blue-black skin, white hair, red eyes, bat-like wings, and horns—you guessed it, it was Atoferatofe Rybak.

"Perugiuuuuuus! Damn yooooou! You dare to break your alliance with Karl..."

Bang, crash. Atofe rampaged about, destroying everything in her vicinity. Her personal guard stood by in that same vicinity, ducking their heads whenever something came flying their way. Just incoming projectiles would have been all right, but if they got in the way of Atofe's swinging fists, there'd be no avoiding a fatal wound. It wasn't that they were afraid to die. Atofe's personal guard did not fear death. All the same, Atofe was scary.

"Strictly speaking, he did not break the alliance." Only one person was unfazed: Moore, Atofe's advisor and the captain of her personal guard. The reason for this was partly that he was also of immortal demon stock, so a punch wouldn't kill him, but primarily it was his long acquaintance with Atofe that allowed him to stay calm.

"The alliance only forbade you from killing each other, and you are still alive, Lady Atofe. If Perugius had wished it, as soon as—"

"Shut UP!"

Moore went flying into a wall. With a loud clang, his helmet fell to the floor. It bore a horrible dent. Atofe had punched him.

"I know that!"

"My apologies, my lady." Moore got back to his feet straight away, then

bowed. This was business as usual for him.

"Grarrr..." Atofe paced about the room, growling like a wild animal. Her anger wouldn't subside. If it had been a defeat in a head-to-head battle... That wouldn't have made her rage like this. She'd have readily bowed to her opponent, handed over her treasure, and become their servant. But here, she had been defeated thanks to unexpected interference by the despicable Perugius. Reinforcements, as far as Atofe was concerned, were permissible. But not from Perugius. She couldn't allow reinforcements from him. This was because she really didn't like him.

Atofe circled the room three times, then stopped short.

"I haven't made an alliance with them."

Atofe, in her own stupid way, sometimes had brainwaves. For example, the fact that there was no rule saying she couldn't kill Rudeus and the others, or vice versa.

"Lady Atofe, surely you don't need to trouble yourself with riff-raff like that?"

"No, I won't. I won't let them get away with this! Not after they teamed up with Perugius to catch me in a trap!" Atofe pointed a finger at Moore, then screeched, "A duel!"

"Very good, my lady."

"Hunt them down!"

"I will put together a search party," Moore said, agreeing promptly.

As for the rest of the guards, they looked none too happy. For their part, they were against the search. Rudeus and the others had used a teleportation circle to disappear off to who knew where. Searching high and low for someone when you had no idea where in the world they were or how to find them would be nothing more than a wild goose chase. On top of that, almost all of Atofe's personal guards were swordsmen with no connections. They didn't know a thing about searching for people. They might spend a lifetime searching and never find their target. They weren't immortal demons; they had expiration dates.

"Right then, get going! While you're gone, I shall train special techniques to use against the spells he cast!"

"Yes, Lady Atofe!"

Despite all that, none of them raised any objections. That was because Atofe's personal guard followed her orders without question... Well, that was part of it. But there was actually one more reason.

Three days passed.

"Lady Atofe." Moore had come to the mountain where Atofe was.

"What?" In front of her lay sprawled an enormous dragon. Its hide was mottled in green and yellow, but blood trickled from its mouth, and it wasn't breathing. To train herself, Atofe was hunting Thunder Dragons, which could control lightning. Thanks to this, she now had a surefire counter to lightning magic.

"I have put together the search party. They are ready to depart at any time."

At this, Atofe turned around slowly. Then, she looked directly into Moore's eyes, cocked her blood-splattered head to one side, and said, "What are you talking about?"

This happened a lot. Atofe would get angry, order them to go search for something, then totally forget about it. Of course, it had only slipped her mind, so the moment someone said the name or she saw the person's face, she'd remember straight away. So she could remember, but...

"Nothing, my lady," Moore said nonchalantly.

It would have been one thing if they were at war, but wasting Atofe's personal guard on something like this didn't align with her goal of building up her forces in preparation for the great battle to come.

"Hehehe. Forget that, Moore, and listen to this. I have at last devised a way to deal with the lightning wielded by Thunder Dragons. With this special technique, lightning shall hold no fear for me!"

"Remarkable as ever, Lady Atofe!"

"Only, why was I trying to learn a special technique to use against lightning...?"

"As I recall it, my lady, being a demon king, wished to be prepared for the coming of a champion."

"Was that it? Of course it was! Mwaaahahaha!"

Listening to Atofe cackle, Moore looked up at the sky and murmured, "Another quiet day."

Short Story: A Nightmare

"STOP IT... PLEASE, I'm begging you, stop..."

It was an awful sight. Sylphie sat slumped against a tree, a red stain covering her chest. As the healing magician, she had taken the first hit. Everyone had tried to protect her, but the attacks had come one after another with unerring accuracy until, eventually, one found her, throwing against the tree trunk, where she'd slid down it to her current position. She had twitched for a while, but now she wasn't moving at all. She was paler than she had ever been, and the blood trickling from her mouth had dried up. The flow of blood from her chest had stopped too. She was dead.

Roxy lay fallen on the ground, her arm outstretched toward Sylphie. One of her trademark twin braids lay on the ground beside her. The other was probably still attached to her head, but where her *head* was... I couldn't see it anywhere. Her headless body would never move again.

After losing the other two, Eris still held on. But with every two or three exchanges of blows she had taken more damage until, eventually, she was hit by a mortal blow. She was at death's door, but even now, she tried to fight back, roaring like a lion. But the next hit took her arm off. The next opened a gaping hole in her stomach, and she fell to her knees. She looked back at me with empty eyes, saying something. But I couldn't hear her.

"Please. Spare us. I'll do anything. Just please have mercy. Please...please..." My begging fell on deaf ears. Before I knew it, the scene had changed, and I was looking at my house. Everyone was dead. Lilia, Aisha, Norn, Zenith...and there, with a face like a demon, Orsted held Lucie up by her head.

"N...uh...uh..." I couldn't make words. I had to say something, but I didn't know what. Even if I begged him to stop, he'd never listen to me. I knew that, but I couldn't think of anything else.

"Please. Please, don't destroy the world. You can kill me. Just don't take my

children, don't take their future. Please. I'd never felt that before. I'd never felt that sort of happiness before. Please, forget about the Man-God. Please."

The reply was the same one I'd heard once before.

"I cannot."

He crushed Lucie's head in his fist.

"Aaaaaaagh!" I leaped up, my breath coming in short gasps as I cast my eyes around me. I was standing on top of my bed at home. Apparently I'd woken up so violently that I'd actually stood up.

I looked outside. Sunlight poured in, too bright to be morning light. It was maybe a bit before noon. Even though it wasn't really morning, I could hear the tweeting of birds. How peaceful.

I took some slow, deep breaths and looked at my hands. I'd lost my left hand, but it was definitely there now. That was the hand Orsted had regrown for me. Around it was a bracelet I wasn't used to seeing there yet. That, too, Orsted had given me.

"It was...a dream..."

Right, of course. After everything that had happened yesterday, one thing led to another and I had yielded to Orsted. Neither Sylphie, nor Roxy, nor Eris were dead, and he hadn't attacked the rest of my family either.

Right? He hadn't, right?

"Huh? Big Brother, are you awake? You okay? You were yelling like crazy." Aisha poked her head through the door. I beckoned for her to come over. "Hm? What's up?"

Still standing on the bed, I stroked her head. Aisha seemed to enjoy it. Apparently, she was the real thing.

"Eheheh... What do you think? Easy to stroke, isn't it?"

"Yep. Oh, a split end."

"What! No way!" Aisha pulled away, then began to check her hair in a nearby

mirror.

"Just kidding," I said. Aisha looked back sulkily at me, folding her arms with a huff.

"Hey, Big Brother, I'm happy that you're giving me attention and all, but you should pay attention to someone else first."

I followed Aisha's gaze. There at my feet, I saw a woman lying prostrate around the head of the bed. A glance at her white hair and long ears told me it was Sylphie.

"She stayed up all of last night to take care of you, you know!" Aisha said, then left. I sat down on the bed. Right, yesterday I had come home after the fight with Orsted, then fainted. Sylphie had stayed with me all that time...

Feeling a great rush of love for her, I put my hand on her head and stroked her hair gently, so as not to wake her. She breathed softly, sound asleep. At that moment, I wanted to pull her out of bed and share the joys of life with her, but I restrained myself.

"Mruh..." Sylphie began to groan. I looked closely at her, frowning. Was she having a nightmare? No sooner had I thought this than—

"Gah!" Sylphie awoke with a start. Her shoulders heaving, she stared at me wide-eyed. After a moment, she reached out and patted my face, then my shoulders, my arms, my chest, my stomach... Woah there, wife. Bit early in the day to be touching that, isn't it? Wait, you're not touching it? Yeah, guess that figures.

Sylphie let out a sigh of relief. I could more or less guess what sort of dream she'd had.

"Morning, Sylphie. Hotter than I was in the dream, right?"

"Morning, Rudy... Yeah. Unlike in the dream, you have a head."

I found this so funny that I snickered. Sylphie, her eyes still blurry with sleep, chuckled too. Her quiet laughter, free from any pain or strife, filled the bedroom. Feeling at ease, I silently thanked Orsted for rescuing me.

Short Story: Nanahoshi's Public Apology

N ANAHOSHI SAT STILL as a stone, stopped abruptly in the process of raising a cup of tea to her lips, utterly motionless. She looked for all the world like she'd met Medusa's gaze, but from the way her hair moved in the breeze, it was clear she hadn't turned to stone. But there *was* someone glaring at her.

This person wore a white robe and had gleaming silver hair. Those sanpaku eyes, which set all who gazed upon them trembling, were a reptilian gold. If Rudeus had been there, he might have tried to sound clever by saying, "It'd be no exaggeration to call you Medusa." But of course, this was no such mythical creature. It was Orsted.

Orsted, who might be considered even more terrifying than any mythical creature, had appeared soundlessly as Nanahoshi drank her tea and sat down opposite her just as soundlessly. Nanahoshi had totally freaked out and frozen up like a deer in the headlights. The reason for this was that Nanahoshi, in collaboration with Rudeus, had sold information on Orsted.

After many twists and turns, Rudeus, defeated, had yielded to Orsted. But that wasn't going to get Nanahoshi off the hook.

A scene from a gangster movie she'd seen long ago flashed through Nanahoshi's mind. She couldn't remember the plot with any accuracy, but in one part, one of the characters had sold out a gang boss to a rival gang and then skipped off to a foreign country. Through a stroke of luck, the boss survived, and the incident resulted in the gang rising in the world. But the gang leader hadn't forgotten about the man who sold out his boss. In order to take care of matters, they began tracking his movements. The man caught wind of this and ran, but the gang pursued him no matter where he went until, at last, somewhere in the depths of the Canadian mountains, they caught up to him. The gang leader sat down across from the terrified man and unhurriedly drank a hot coffee. They didn't say anything that could be called conversation. The man who'd turned traitor just babbled a stream of excuses and pleas for mercy.

Then, when he finished his coffee, the gang leader took out a gun and shot the man dead without a word.

That scene had left such a striking impression on the young Nanahoshi that it had ended up being the only part of the movie that stuck in her memory. It had taught her the lesson that this was what happened when you lied to someone and sold them out. And so, with Orsted sitting in front of her, Nanahoshi was totally freaking out.

Orsted regarded her steadily. His expression was blank. Because his resting face was terrifying, he looked like he was angry. Nanahoshi had known him the longest of anyone she'd met since coming to this world, so she knew that wasn't necessarily the case. But she couldn't rule it out either. If it had been Rudeus, Nanahoshi probably wouldn't have been so scared. For all his talk, Rudeus was soft. He might get angry and scold her, but the idea of him *killing* her was laughable. Though it might depend on what she had messed up, so long as she begged as hard as she could for her life, she would surely have escaped death.

Beg for her life. As she arrived at those words, movement returned to Nanahoshi's petrified body at last. She returned her tea, now well and truly cold, to its saucer, then let out a breath. She knew what she had to do. She had to apologize. First, she would offer a sincere and genuine apology, then if he still didn't forgive her, she would beg for her life. For the traitor in the gangster movie, his prodigious begging had earned him a truly miserable death... No, that wasn't right. It was only because he couldn't have escaped that miserable death that he had begged so pathetically. He had cast aside all pride and dignity, looking only for salvation, but lacking anything with which to buy it, laying his feelings bare as he asked that they only spare his life... Nanahoshi doubted she was capable of that, but from what she'd heard, that was how Rudeus had begged Orsted, and Orsted had forgiven him. That being the case, she decided that she had better do the same. This wasn't about what she could or couldn't do, it was what she was willing to do.

With that in mind, Nanahoshi snuck a look at Orsted. He was still glowering at her. It was the way he didn't say anything that was really scary.

"I'm sorry." She couldn't look directly at him, so she said it with her eyes

turned down. "I sold you out to Rudeus." She felt like a cat wearing a pet-shaming placard. She questioned whether there wasn't something else she ought to say, but given she had no idea how Orsted would react, she couldn't find the right words. Nanahoshi knew that Orsted showed unexpected kindness toward those who came to him themselves. Make an enemy of him, however, and he was merciless. Everyone who had done so in the past, he had consigned to oblivion in a single blow. Nanahoshi had seen it many times. At first, she had been filled with terror by Orsted, who had no qualms about killing people. But she had slowly grown used to it, until she stopped minding it at all. Of course, that had been as long as she was not the target of his wrath.

Now, unable to guess when that strike would come at her, too fast for the eye to see, she was beside herself with terror. If she'd known this was going to happen, she would have put a phonebook or something over her chest. But this world didn't have phonebooks, and besides, Nanahoshi wasn't well-endowed enough to hide a phonebook.

"Nanahoshi." At the sound of her name, Nanahoshi raised the spoon she hadn't realized she'd been fidgeting with to guard her chest. But Orsted's strike did not come. "Don't let it concern you," he went on. "I am always making enemies."

It was slight, so slight that unless you knew him well, you wouldn't have caught it. The corner of Orsted's mouth twisted in a tiny smile. It carried a hint of self-deprecation. Nanahoshi's chest grew tight at the sight of it.

"Oh..." Who was it who had helped her ever since she had come to this world? Who was it who had assisted her in searching for a way to return home? She hadn't forgotten. "No!" she exclaimed. "Your curse doesn't affect me! You...I owe you my life...though so does Rudeus...but that's to say, I swear I didn't try to betray you because I hated you or because I was afraid of you..." She couldn't find the right words. Even though she had carefully selected what she would say here after thinking it through over and over again, her words came out in a jumbled stream.

"That's enough, Nanahoshi," Orsted said. Nanahoshi shut up. Neither Orsted's expression nor his tone gave any hint as to what "that's enough" meant. He might mean it didn't matter to him anymore. But it could also mean...

"I shall return to check on you soon, Nanahoshi. Understood?"

These last words gave her the answer. She had, it seemed, been forgiven.

"O-of course," she said, nodding. Orsted stood up, then, again without a sound, he left.

Nanahoshi watched him go. "It was so good to apologize properly," she said with a sigh of relief.

Short Story: The Imprisoned Prince

AFTER THE TROUBLE IN the Asura Kingdom died down, Ariel gave me an estate. She couched it by saying I could just stay there when I had business in the Asura Kingdom, but it was twice the size of our house and came with a garden. On top of that, it was crawling with servants, so in all honesty, I didn't feel comfortable there. But for the time being, I took advantage of the convenience as I dealt with the aftermath.

On one such day, a servant I didn't recognize approached me. "I beg your pardon, sir. A letter has arrived for you from a personage of note."

Of course, only a short time had passed since I began my stay at the estate, so maybe there were still servants I hadn't seen yet. Either that, or they might have left so little an impression when they introduced themself on the first day that I hadn't remembered them.

For the time being, I took the letter, but—

"Hey...huh." No sooner had I done so than the servant vanished like a ninja. So they were an intruder.

If that had been an assassin just now, I could have been in trouble, I thought, breaking out in a cold sweat. But I'd missed my chance to sound the alarm. For the time being, I decided to see what the letter said.

Loosely translated, it basically read: I wish to speak face-to-face. Come to room 403 at the palace the day after tomorrow.

Room 403 was the room on the third floor of the fourth tower from the east of the castle. The sender's name wasn't written, but the sealing wax was marked by the crest of the Asuran royal family. That made me think it was a summons from Ariel...except that if it were, she would have sent Sylphie or Luke or another servant with a message rather than bother with a letter. Heck, she might have just come herself.

This really was suspicious. Maybe it was some sort of spam mail. If I went to the location as instructed, I might get locked up and asked to pay a massive sum of money. All the same, the letter intrigued me. Therefore, that night, I went to the graveyard to ask Orsted's advice. I couldn't help but wonder what he'd think of his new recruit showing up in the middle of the night with a piece of spam mail, asking, "What should I do with this?" But Orsted didn't look annoyed.

"It's Grabel," he said.

Honestly, I needn't have bothered Orsted. Grabel Zafin Asura was the first prince. He'd lost the struggle for the throne and been imprisoned. If I responded to the summons of a guy like him, that might draw undue suspicion from Ariel. All the same, the fact was, I was interested.

The next day, I told Ariel that Grabel had contacted me and decided I'd go and meet him. Ariel raised one eyebrow like she wanted to say something. But when I told her I had Orsted's leave, she only nodded politely and made no comment. She didn't have to look so grave about it...but then, I suppose Ariel had to consider the possibility that Orsted might swap her out for Grabel. It's hard being in a weak position, huh?

"You weren't surprised that it was me who summoned you." Grabel was just like the last time I'd seen him—a handsome older dude in expensive-looking clothes.

"I knew after I looked into it," I explained.

"And here I thought I'd chosen people who wouldn't crack even under torture... Does being a magician of rare skill allow you to read the hearts of men as well, then?"

"No, of course not."

The room in which Grabel was informally imprisoned looked like any other noble's quarters. The furnishings were all top-class, and he even had servants and a maid. About the only thing that spoke to his imprisonment, if I had to name something, was the guard on the door. But then, this was confinement

for a member of the royal family. I guess they picked the location accordingly.

"So, what did you want to see me for?" I asked.

"It's nothing, really. I merely wanted a good look at the one who bested me."

"You know Queen Ariel is royalty, right? I'm pretty sure it'd be rude to stare at her."

"It would appear I have the misfortune to have been bested by a man with a terrible sense of humor."

I thought it had been quite the witty riposte... But then, as first prince, he'd been at the heart of the Asura Kingdom. He would have seen all sorts of jesters who'd put me to shame.

"I barely did anything," I said. "I suppose I created an opportunity for Queen Ariel, but she's the one who took it."

"Hah. Playing the sage, are we...? But that is what I wish to ask you about. You will tell me about the course of your life thus far."

First he summoned me here, now he was ordering me to tell him about my life with an air of superiority. He was royalty through and through. But I guess it was fine. I mean, I was the one who'd walked into this.

"Long ago, in a village called Buena in the Fittoa District, there lived a young couple named Paul and Zenith..."

But we're gonna be here for a while.

"Hmph. So it was a bad joke after all, eh?"

Though I thought it would be a long story, it didn't actually take that long to finish. Maybe two hours or so.

"I don't know about that," I said.

"As if I asked for your opinion...but now I understand." A faraway look came into Grabel's eyes. Soon, he would be sent off to some remote corner of the Asura Kingdom, where he would spend his days in comfort but without freedom. Though his life would be spared, he would be separated from his retainers and his children and live out the rest of his life a defeated man.

Without understanding how he had got there, it would probably be unbearable.

"Tell Ariel to pay heed to the conflict zone. She may maintain the balance or destroy it as she pleases, but if she missteps, she will set off quite the explosion."

"I see."

"In addition, she is not to offer welcome to the knight orders of Millis. That lot are a pack of heartless demons. To rely on them is to lose one's soul. Even when not at war, she must not neglect the military."

"I see."

"In addition—"

"There's *more*?" I said without thinking. Grabel looked taken aback for a moment, then he snorted.

"No," he said at length. "That's all."

I was sure there was no end of things he'd have liked to say. Not to mention things he'd wanted to do after becoming king. I mean, from what Orsted said, even if this man had become king, the Asura Kingdom would still be standing strong eighty years down the line. Yes, he would have been a great king. In the world where Ariel had lost, he would have expanded the Asura Kingdom even further.

"You may go, sage," he told me.

"Thank you, Your Highness...except, I'm only a sage after my wife and I get intimate."

"Your jokes are awful, but I found our talk interesting. You have my thanks."

As I left, it struck me that in becoming Orsted's servant, I had altered one part of history.

Short Story:

What if it Wasn't a Mercenary Band I Came Up With?

The Story So Far

BURIED IN CRUSHING DEBT, Linia was taken in by Eris! One thing led to another and she became our maid, but she was so bad at housekeeping that Aisha flipped out, and so Linia got sacked! There was nothing else for it—I had to find Linia another job!

"Haah..." Right then, I was lounging in a nap spot that came recommended by Linia, absorbed in my thoughts. It was grassy, and the sunlight was warm. There were cats everywhere. I got the sense I was cramping their style, but with Linia's coaxing, they'd resigned themselves to clearing space for me. It was comfortable enough.

I'd spent the whole day trying to find a job I could entrust to Linia, but I hadn't come up with any good ideas. Zanoba and Cliff had both been non-starters. Ideally it would be a job where, even if she couldn't pay off the whole debt of 1,500 gold at once, she could at least chip away at it little by little. But I didn't get the feeling Linia had any aptitude for that sort of steady work.

I shot a glance at Linia. She was talking to the cats who had come to share her perfect patch of sunshine: "Meow meow meow."

Among beastfolk, and especially beastfolk with the Doldia name, people who could converse with dogs and cats were common. Apparently Beast God Tongue was easy for beasts to understand, but there weren't many races who could understand the languages of beasts. Take our Leo—he could understand what I said, but I couldn't understand him. We couldn't have a conversation—though sometimes I thought I understood him. Hmm. Was there something clever I could do with this that would make money? A service to communicate a pet's feelings to its owner—love, discontent, the whole shebang... So Bow-Lingual.

Huh. That wasn't half bad. I wasn't sure about these parts, but in the Asura Kingdom, there were loads of nobles with pets.

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"Hey, Linia," I said.
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[&]quot;Mew?"

"What's that cat there saying?"

"Nothing much. Just saying hello, mew."

"Huh... So, uh, can you understand bugs and snakes too?"

"Don't be silly. All I can understand are things like dogs and cats, mew."

That would make my service tricky. From what I heard, the Asura Kingdom's long history meant that what I'd think of as strange pets were more common than cats and dogs. You got stories about people keeping centipedes as big as dogs. Unlike in my previous life, in this world, there was no common assumption that "pet" meant a cat or a dog. Basically, everything was what you'd call an exotic animal. If she could only understand what a tiny handful of that wide range of pets were saying, it was likely that the business wouldn't get off the ground. And here I'd thought it was a good idea...

"Meow...prrr, meow..." Linia was on all fours as she chatted to the cats. Her butt was pointed at me, and her fluffy tail twitched. It was so alluring. Like, I could grab that tail and just... *No, I mustn't! Begone, tempting demon!* I quickly took the holy relic from my pocket and held it up to my face to calm my mind. But the next moment, there was a big *whoosh* and a sudden gust of wind. It set my robe billowing like you wouldn't believe, and snatched away the item in my hand.

"Crap!" The frilly white material flew through the air.

It was precious. I couldn't lose it. I'd never get it back. Those thoughts flashed through my mind. I threw my arm out desperately, but I was too far away. In the blink of an eye, it had flown up high into the sky.

I had pushed mana into my legs and was about to jump when I heard a "Meow!" Linia sprang.

She shot straight up like a rocket, slicing through the wind to catch the holy relic mid-flight before somersaulting about three times to hit the ground in a silent superhero landing.

"Whew, that was close, mew..." she began, then exclaimed, "Wait, are these panties?! Eww, yu—mew?! O-oh, those...?! Not yucky, mew! No purr-oblem! Here, your holy item, mew, here, mew..."

Linia held the holy relic out. She was respectful, but she also held it with only her fingertips, like she was trying to touch it with as little skin as possible. I took it back and took a deep sniff. Clarity came over me.

A job that combined the Doldia tribe's ability to converse with animals, Linia's physical capabilities, and her sexy butt...? I had it.

"Linia," I said, gripping her by the shoulders.

"Y-yes, mew...?"

"Let's put together a circus troupe!"

And so the Ruquag Circus Troupe was born.

"Nya hah!" Linia soared through the air before me on a trapeze. She wore a leather leotard and fishnet tights—in short, a bunny suit. Accompanying her, acrobats in clown costumes and trained magic beasts cavorted about.

"Good, good. Another great success." Standing right beside me and dressed in the same bunny suit as Linia was Aisha. She was counting silver coins, looking smug. It'd already been a year since we formed the Ruquag Circus Troupe. Many beastfolk were physically gifted, and at Linia's invitation, a whole lot of thugs and goons had changed careers to become acrobats. Because Linia could communicate with magical beasts to a degree, it wasn't too difficult to train them to perform tricks.

When I appointed Aisha as advisor, she threw herself into the task of realizing my vision: a big tent full of acrobats and magical beasts, strong men, beautiful women, and ferocious, terrifying creatures, all coming together for a show of lights and shadows.

In the Asura Kingdom, our circus was a runaway success. After she became ringmaster, Linia paid off her debts just like that, and Aisha was smiling again. The circus also seemed like a good way to find employees for the Orsted Corporation and to sell Ruijerd figurines, so I was feeling smug too.

After that, if you're interested, the circus made it big on the world stage. Linia became one of the world's richest people, but she let it get to her head and

ended up losing all her money againbut that's a story for another time.

Short Story: Flattery and Honesty

"H 00, HOH, HAHH!"

Hmm? Randolph was loitering around the castle when he came across someone going through sword drills in the castle courtyard. It was Pax. He had a wooden sword in his hand, swinging it as he whirled around in circles. His movements were more rhythmical and dynamic than ever. He balanced on one leg, swung the sword one-handed, jumped in the air, turned to face backward, and swapped the sword one hand to the other. He disoriented his opponent, unleashing a rain of blows on the imaginary enemy in front of him. Only, his eyes were not on that imaginary enemy but rather glancing off to one side.

Randolph followed his gaze to where a girl with long blue hair sat on the ground. Her eyes were vacant, but he could see she was looking at Pax.

When Pax noticed her gaze, his movement changed again, taking on the ferocity of a man fighting two or even three opponents.

"Hooah! Gwoah! Yaaah!" His shouting grew more intense too. Benedikte's expression did not change as she watched him...or so your average observer might have thought. But over the past few months, Randolph had learned to pick up on the subtle shifts in her expression. Yes, Randolph could see the hope and yearning in her eyes, and Pax must have seen it too. He had to look dashing for her, so he was going through his sword drills with more enthusiasm than ever.

"Phew..." After a while, Pax vanquished his enemy and came to a stop. Then, he looked over at Benedikte and made his eyes go wide just as though he'd only now realized she was there.

"Woah, if it isn't Benedikte, how long have you...and Randolph?" Pax noticed Randolph at the same time. He stared as though a skeleton had burst out of the ground in front of him. He couldn't have noticed. Randolph had a habit of masking his footfalls as he walked.

"Heh heh heh. Good day to you, Lord Pax," Randolph said encouragingly, putting on the best smile he could. "Training? Working hard, hm?" To a swordsman like Randolph, seeing a member of the royal family working hard on his sword drills was truly admirable.

"Uh, mm..."

"Water, my lord," Randolph took out the cup he just happened to have on him, filled it with water from his own canteen, then held it out to Pax. For just a moment, Pax looked doubtful, but he accepted it and took a gulp. His shoulders shot up, then he downed the rest. Ice cold water with a squeeze of citrus—that had to taste marvelous. And yet, for some reason, no one else drank it.

"Say, Randolph." Pax mopped his brow, then asked, "How did you like my sword dance just now?"

Randolph glanced briefly at Benedikte. He knew why Pax was asking.

"Simply incredible, my lord! Perhaps one day you shall be Sword God or North God." It was, he thought, a perfect answer. Despite appearances, Randolph was accustomed to flattering royalty.

"Don't be ridiculous!" However, Pax's response was not what he had expected. "Even I know that was no better than a child's fantasy of a sword dance! I have no swordmaster. Even in Shirone, I shirked my sword lessons! I don't want flattery—I want you to tell me what I'm doing wrong!"

"Oh, er, I see..." Randolph was a little taken aback. He had never been spoken to thus by royalty before. Though while they didn't speak as fiercely as Pax, he did get suspicious replies like, "When you say that, what are you scheming?"

Randolph contemplated Pax. Pax was built a little strangely, but he was in decent shape for royalty, and Randolph felt he was serious about studying the blade. He probably wanted Benedikte to see his good side. Not just an act, but his *real* good side. And so all Randolph could do was answer him. Just as Pax had given him his honest thoughts on his cooking.

"I am not well versed in sword dances," he began, "But... Let's see. Standing on one leg and swinging a sword is harder than it looks, my lord. My suggestion is that you keep both feet on the ground, hold your sword in both hands, and train until you can make strikes anywhere, high, middle, or low, from any stance."

Randolph wondered if he had said too much. Your shoulders, arms, and lower body are all undertrained. You'd better get back to basics. He was basically giving a big NO to sword dancing.

"Both feet on the ground, and high, middle, and low..." Pax muttered. "Yes, I see. Like this?"

"You have too much weight on your front foot. You want to be able to pull back at any time while also keeping your weight centered so that you can step forward at any time. I think you should also keep your sword closer to your body."

"Like this?"

"Yes, just like that, my lord."

"It feels a bit cramped."

"That's to be expected. You keep yourself coiled up so you reach out front and back or to the side."

"So this is how you do it..." It was a bit unclear if Pax was convinced, but he made a few practice stabs with his sword from the cramped stance. Eventually, he let out a deep breath.

"Randolph, I thank you for your advice."

"Not at all. I am simply happy to help."

"I require a little more of your help."

"My lord?"

"All this exercise has made me hungry. Fix me something to eat before my afternoon studies."

"Heh heh heh. Of course, my lord. If you will follow me..."

"Good. Benedikte, we're going!"

With an unsettling smile, Randolph led Pax away. It was for all the world like a summons down to hell. But Pax went along without a care. Only, Benedikte was

following behind, so he went slowly.

Not long after, Randolph began to give Pax advice on his sword practice...but that's a story for another time.

Short Story: Norn's Part Time Job

THAT DAY, I, RUDEUS GREYRAT, had acquired some information of great importance. It was information that should have been confidential and that I was not supposed to have. It was really only by coincidence that I did.

It started with what Zanoba's servant Ginger saw while doing her shopping. When I heard, I was shaken. Even as I was wondering how that could be, I also wanted to see it myself. I knew it was forbidden, but I could not suppress my curiosity.

That was how I ended up at a diner hidden away in a corner of Sharia. It did fairly good business. Maybe it was closer to a cafe. It might have been geared toward nobles, as the clientele skewed toward high-born types. With my noblestyle outfit and sunglasses to hide my face, I must have stood out a mile. I should have brought someone like Sylphie... Maybe we could have our next date here.

Now, the thing about this place that I suppose I ought to mention was that the servers were all women wearing somewhat unique outfits. When I say unique, I don't mean, say, tight leather with fishnet tights and bouncy bunny ears. These dresses had probably once been used by the ladies in waiting at a palace somewhere... In other words, the servers' uniforms were classic maid outfits. The main item on the menu was apparently tea they imported from the Asura Kingdom, but that's not important here.

The goods I had my eyes on took the form of a young woman weaving precariously between the tables. Her blonde hair, just like her mom's, was tied back, and she had on the same uniform as the other staff.

It was my little sister Norn.

What was Norn doing working at a place like this? Was she short on pocket money? Did she want to learn the ways of the world while she was still a student? Or perhaps, unbeknownst to me, she'd picked up some debt and had

to work to pay it off...?

I had infiltrated this coffee shop to find some answers.

"Welcome. Please take a seat."

"Huh, I haven't seen you before. New hire?"

"A friend of mine is unwell, so I'm just filling in for a few days. I hope you'll excuse any shortcomings in my service."

So according to the intel I acquired independently, a friend of Norn's from the University of Magic was sick, and she had ended up here to help out at short notice. Only Norn, student council president and relied on by all, would have done this for a reason like that. What a relief it wasn't debt. This wasn't so bad.

It was time for me to excuse myself. Part of me wanted to watch Norn working, but she'd be mad if she caught me. With this sort of thing, it was best just to take a quick look accidentally on purpose, then leave.

I stood up, then—

"Wah!" There was a crash as something bumped into me, and I felt a warm sensation around my middle. Looking down, it was bright red.

"Wh-what the—?!" I shouted without thinking. But it wasn't like blood was spurting out of me. I'd stood up right into the path of one of the servers and bang, she'd dumped her whole tray—drinks and food and all—onto my front.

"Oh! I-I'm so sorry!"

Still, I shouldn't have yelled. The server seemed to misinterpret it as me being angry, because she got down on her knees to apologize.

"Y-your clothes, sir, they must have been very expensive..."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I guess?"

Okay, the pretext for this outfit had been something that wouldn't embarrass me among Asuran nobility. It had probably cost a fair bit. But when I spoke, the server's face turned white.

"I...I beg your p-pardon sir! I should pay for your clothes, but my family is so poor, I couldn't afford the finery of a noble such as yourself..."

"Oh, no. Don't worry about it."

"I can pay with my body, so please, please forgive this! I have two younger sisters. I have to feed them, so please, please, sir!"

Not a good listener, this girl... I thought. Then it happened. A figure loomed behind the waitress as she groveled on the ground. She put a hand on the waitress' shoulder and ushered her behind her.

"Kierna, I'll look after the customer. You go out back and get changed."

"Norn? But..."

"Please leave it to me. I know him." The waitress called Kierna returned to the back of the shop...and I was left face to face with Norn.

"All right, Big Brother," she said. "What are you doing here?" Norn had her hands on her hips and was looking at me coldly. Apparently, my disguise wasn't helping. I ran through a bunch of excuses in my mind, but...it didn't look like I was getting out of this.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I have two younger sisters. Both are growing girls, and I have to keep them fed."

"I am aware."

"I heard one of them had started a part-time job without telling her family. It made me worry."

Norn sighed. "A friend came to me asking me to fill in for her, so I said I would. Satisfied?"

"Yep, that's all your big brother needed to hear. Sorry to bother you at work. I'll be off, then."

"You don't need to go," Norn said. "Why not stay and enjoy yourself?"

So I took her up on it. I spent the whole day in that cafe watching Norn go about her job. She was a hard worker, and while I saw her messing up a fair bit, she didn't get panicked or flustered or sulky like she used to. Instead, she calmly got on with the job.

Watching her, I could see how much she'd grown. I went home with a warm



Short Story: The Morning of My Day Off

It was the day after I got back from wrapping up a big work trip, and I had my heart set on spending a quiet day at home. It only counted as a day off if you could properly rest both body and mind, so I got up a little later than usual, then enjoyed a late breakfast. Resting was about relaxing without worrying about the time, after all. Now, what should I do today? Playing with Lucie was one idea, but she'd just gone out to play with her red-headed mama already. I could go after them now, but I could also just wait until they got back. In which case, I had the morning free.

"...Huh?" Or so I thought, until I heard a kerfuffle break out upstairs. From the living room, I threw a glance at the stairs just as Roxy came running down, halfway through putting on her coat. Her hair was mussed up as though she'd just gotten out of bed, and one of her braids was unraveling.

"I...I'm late..."

O God, how shameful, for you to oversleep. I quickly held out the half-eaten bread in my hand to her. Roxy took it with her teeth like she was in a bread-eating competition.

"Thank you, Rudy! I'm off!" With that, she ran out the door.

She worried me a bit, actually running off with bread in her mouth. If she got into a collision with a transfer student, this could be the start of a "wife starts affair with high school boy" love story.

Maybe if I chased after her now I could nab the transfer student role. Not to brag, but I was pretty sure I could make Roxy's heart flutter.

First, I'd go, "Oh, you're that girl!" Then I'd nickname her Bread Girl, and when she hurt herself on sports day, I'd carry her to the nurse's room. We'd go out to buy supplies together at the school festival, then I'd confess my feelings as we gazed into a campfire on the roof. Roxy would love all those scenes, for

sure...except there was no sports day at the University of Magic.

"Huh? Where's Roxy? I thought I heard her..."

"She left for school."

"I thought she said there was no school today."

"Oh, hmm."

She could have lesson prep or something to do even if there were no classes... I considered that idea for about a second, but this was Roxy. As if she would oversleep and be late when she had things to do. Roxy was clumsy in various ways, but she had her life together.

"When she gets home, tell her food's ready, okay?"

"Will do." Maybe Aisha was thinking along the same lines. She disappeared into the kitchen, flapping her hands.

I finished my breakfast. Then, with a cup of tea in one hand, I went to wait by the door. Not long after, the door opened with a click, and a girl came in.

It was Roxy. She made it past the entranceway, then saw me and jumped.

"Do you need something?" she demanded, glaring.

Uh oh. if I teased her now, she'd get huffy.

"Welcome home, m'lady. Your meal is waiting for you. Or would m'lady prefer to take her bath first?"

I teased her anyway. It was a shame to waste the chance. Besides, Roxy was cute when she got in a huff.

I took her coat, holding out a hand at the same time like an escort.

"Fine. Breakfast, then." Roxy pouted, but she took my hand without complaining. Roxy, you see, liked that sort of thing.

I sat back and sipped my tea as I watched Roxy munch on her food. As I stared, Roxy's cheeks turned pink, and she looked away. But she didn't tell me not to stare or ask what I wanted. Breakfast went by comfortably enough. It was a laid-back affair.

"Do I find you at leisure today, Mistress?"

"Yes, there's no class today. Do you have today off too, Rudy?"

"I do."

So Roxy's schedule was open. There was only one thing for it, then.

"In that case, would the lovely young lady care to accompany me on a date?"

Roxy froze. She looked from the kitchen to the living room, then at me, then glanced away a little and began twirling her hair around her finger.

"A date? With me?"

What she meant was, "You'd settle for me?" Out of respect for Sylphie, Roxy tended to avoid being alone with me where Sylphie couldn't see us. I was pretty sure Sylphie didn't mind, but it wasn't for me to say for sure.

"Why yes. We shall take my steed and ride together to the stream that runs outside the town, then whisper words of love to each other on its bank."

Roxy considered. "Okay," she said, then seemed to notice her untidy braid. "Ah, give me a moment to get ready."

If it meant you'd doll yourself up for me, I'd wait all day.

"But of course."

And so I got myself a date with Roxy.

The two of us rode together on horseback. I was behind, with Roxy in front, and I held the reins. The top of her head was right in front of me. Looking around us, there were other people on the road. No one was paying us any attention, but from time to time, someone would glance at us with a "huh?" expression. They were Ruquag mercenaries. When I waved, they bowed.

There was something about riding on a horse together. It brought back old memories.

"Master," I said.

"Rudy, when you call me that..." Roxy began but then stopped. "Never mind. What is it, apprentice? If you're going to ask to touch my chest from behind, the answer is no."

She made a bit of a face when I called her "master," but went along with it. I didn't touch her breasts, of course. I mean, there'd be plenty of chances for that later.

"Remember that day years ago when you taught me Saint-tier magic at the graduation exam?"

"Yes. You had a hard time because you were too scared of the horse to get on it."

"I wasn't scared of the horse," I said. Roxy looked around at me. "I was scared to go outside," I explained. If she hadn't dragged me out, I probably would've stayed a shut-in the rest of my life.

"Is that true?"

"It is. I am truly grateful to you. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything..." Roxy turned to face forward then started playing with her hair again. Then, she gently squeezed my arm and leaned back into my chest. "You rescued me from the labyrinth, Rudy. We're even." I couldn't see the look on her face, but I felt sure she was giving me a slightly embarrassed smile.

Short Story: Dance Practice

THAT DAY, I WRAPPED up a work trip and came back to the Magic City of Sharia, just like always. I'd thought this trip would drag on for a while, only for it to be over before I knew it. What I'd thought would take five days was over in two. I don't think I'm amazing at what I do or anything, but after pulling things off as efficiently as I had on this trip? I felt that amazing. And it feels pretty good to feel amazing.

When I arrived home, Lilia called out, "Welcome home!" Just like always. "That was faster than I expected," she added.

"Yes, I'm quite something if I do say so myself." I was joking, but Lilia nodded like this made perfect sense. She'd agreed with me. That was no good. If I kept this up, I'd end up deluding myself that I actually was something special. I had to remember to be humble. I mean, I'd just happened to get lucky this time. More to the point, the fact that I'd gotten done in two days what I'd expected to take five meant I'd misjudged a bit, didn't it? If I were really all that, I'd have seen it was possible from the start, and... But then, there was no point thinking like that. The important thing was that whenever I got cocky, I ended up blowing the next trip. It was important to praise myself to keep my spirits up, but I had to do it in moderation.

"Huh? Come to think of it, where is everyone?" There was no sign of Sylphie, Eris, or the others. At this time, Roxy was probably at school.

"Um, well..." Lilia was uncharacteristically hesitant.

"You don't mean....!" At once, I was struck by a horrible premonition. My whole body tensed. But Lilia, seeing this, quickly dispelled my fears.

"Oh, no, it's not that anything bad has happened. Please don't worry."

"R-right."

What had happened? Maybe Eris had finally forgotten her own strength and

ended up breaking Linia and Pursena's backs or something. No, scratch that. I was pretty sure that would be categorized as a bad thing. Even if they'd mend up fine with healing magic.

"So what's going on?" I asked.

Lilia hesitated, then said, "I was instructed to keep it a secret from you, Master Rudeus."

Well, that just made me want to know more. But I'd lived in this world thirty years now, and I was married. I hadn't gotten to my age without knowing a thing or two about the workings of the feminine mind. I wouldn't pry. Lilia had been kind enough to say this much, and that meant it probably wasn't anything bad. With that, I headed for my study on the first floor.

Guess for now I'll fill in my diary, I thought.

"One two three four, one two three four, good! Good!"

But then, I heard a voice from out the window.

It was Sylphie. I peeked out and saw two women stepping together in time, hand in hand. White hair and red hair bobbed up and down in time with the call. It was a dance. Sylphie and Eris were dancing. What were they doing a thing like that for? I was a tiny bit curious.

Did they ever make a beautiful pair, though. Sylphie wore trousers that harkened back to her days as Fitz, and in a rare sight, Eris was wearing a skirt for the first time in ages. It was the opposite of usual for both of them, but they both looked dashing and cool. I was so entranced by the sight of the two of them hand in hand, going through the steps, that I wanted to watch them forever.

"Uh oh, no you don't," I told myself. "This is a secret, remember."

Right. None of that, Rudeus. You mustn't sneak a look at the fairy dancers.

Oh, but look, Rudeus. See how Sylphie's dancing the man's part? She's still just as dashing as she was back in her Fitz days. Yes, she's beautiful, isn't she, Rudeus? The way she stands so straight and tall.

Oh, and Rudeus, look at her partner. Isn't she so much better at dancing than

she was back in the day?

Well, Eris learned how to match her partner's rhythm and use that to throw them off at the Sword Sanctum. This much is easy for her.

Don't be so sure, Rudeus. Perhaps Sylphie is a much better teacher.

True. Fitz was always a good teacher, wasn't he?

"Oh, hey, Big Brother. Welcome home." I realized with a start that Aisha had been near the window. She came over to me, waving. Crap. This was supposed to be a secret, but I'd been caught.

"Ack! Rudeus!" Drawn by Aisha's voice, Eris noticed me too. She immediately released Sylphie's hands. It was like I'd walked in on her having an affair... But then, it was Sylphie, so I couldn't blame her. I couldn't hold a candle to Sylphie.

"Oh, Rudy. Welcome home." Sylphie noticed me next and came running. She opened the window to welcome me back.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to spy on you, I just...what were you doing?" I couldn't help the fact that I'd been spying, so I doubled down and asked.

"Dance practice," she replied. "Lately, you've been visiting palaces and attending parties and things in lots of different countries, haven't you? Eris goes with you as a bodyguard, but she was saying if she had to dance, she might embarrass you."

"I'm not going to get embarrassed just because Eris can't dance."

If anyone dared insult my wife for being so obsessed with her sword she couldn't even dance, I'd be questioning their sanity before feeling embarrassed. Like, "You know the woman beside me is the world-renowned Berserker Sword King, right? You know your head could be off your precious neck before you know what hit you, right? Are you feeling okay?"

Jokes aside, everyone had their strengths and weaknesses, and Eris was better than anyone else with a blade, so I felt like not being able to dance was fine.

"When I got the chance I was going to dance like I used to and surprise you," Eris said, pouting. She said it as though she'd used to be *good* at dancing.

Eris, you used to dance like a pro wrestler...

Maybe she was just talking big in front of Sylphie.

"Tee hee. You heard her."

"Right then," I said. "If I'm going to keep up with you when we get the chance, I'd better practice too."

"Oh, then I'll be your partner, Big Brother!" Aisha said, raising her hand enthusiastically. And that was how, for the first time in a long time, I found myself practicing dancing.

By the way, after practice was over, Sylphie snuck me into her bedroom, then, sounding a little shy, asked, "Would you dance with me too?"

So we danced, just the two of us. But that's a story for another time.

Short Story: Fitz's Doubts

H EY, RUDY. Have you ever been to a brothel?"

It was a quiet afternoon. I was relaxing in the living room, and at that moment the only people in the room were me, Sylphie, and Roxy. When I heard the question, I thought for sure she must've gotten the wrong idea from something. I mean, you would, right? If your wife suddenly asked you if you've been to a hostess...or rather, a brothel. She was saying, "You're seeing other women in secret, aren't you?" In other words, she suspected I was cheating.

No such thing was true, of course. But Miss Sylphiette had been clever with her question. She asked if I had ever been to a brothel. And the truth was, I had. It wasn't like I'd gone every chance I got, but after I found out I had ED, Soldat had taken me to what you'd call a high-class brothel. In the end, after being unable to reach the finish line, I got drunk off my face, and then Sara slapped me. It was a painful experience. I hadn't been back since, but it was true I had gone that time.

Which was to say, what I ought to do now was play it cool and say I'd been once long ago, but not recently.

"Oh...yeah. Ages ago. But not *recently,* you know." Crap. The way that came out made it sound like I'd gone yesterday.

"What sort of place was it?" Roxy asked, joining the conversation.

"What sort of place...?"

Until yesterday, I'd been in the Asura Kingdom. After finding Eris's parents' bones in the conflict zone, we'd reinterred them in Asura, then invited Ghislaine to visit the grave. James, the current head of the Boreas family, had invited us out for dinner, during which he had come out and asked, "What do you think of my granddaughter, eh?" I hadn't made any moves, of course. Eris sat beside me. At a single glare from her, the poor girl drew back, trembling—and more

importantly, I was currently Rudeus the Celibate. Which was to say, yesterday, I had *not* been to a brothel.

"The brothel from ages ago, you mean?"

"Yes."

What exactly was I being asked right now? Well, they might be testing me. If the brothel I described now actually had the same system and the same girls working there as a brothel in our neighborhood, then they'd have me.

Wives, you have nothing to worry about. I'll breeze through this test, just watch.

"Why, uh, are you asking?"

Still, this was scary, so I took my time getting to the point. Look, there really wasn't anything on my conscience, but if I answered incorrectly, I'd probably end up apologizing on my knees.

"Actually, the parents of one of my students are in debt, so she had to leave school and go to a brothel... She was worried, so she came to me for advice, but I don't know much about it. I've been struggling to work out what to say to her..."

So that was it. I'd gotten worked up over nothing. Still, a girl having to leave school and go into sex work because her family was in debt was a lot heavier than I'd expected.

"Well, the place I went was really high class," I explained, "but you get all sorts of brothels, so I don't think it'll be much help..."

"Please tell me. This will be the last time I see her, so I want to offer her something."

So for the moment, I told her everything I knew. I started from the system the high-class brothel had used, and went through the courtesan's education and techniques.

Now, even in my previous life, I'd never gone to that sort of establishment. All I knew was stuff I'd picked up from ero games. Anything other than that was second-hand knowledge from people like Soldat and Elinalise. That being said, I

thought it was all close enough to being true. In the end, it all came down to pleasing the dude so he'd think, I want to see that girl again.

"Pleasing" might have sounded simple, but you'd be wrong if you thought it was just about being good at the act itself. If anything, the real test was your hospitality the rest of the time—things like introducing yourself with grace, showing deference to the customer, and physical contact in the form of a casual squeeze of the hand or a brush on the shoulder. People tended to see prostitution as a shady line of work, but as you got closer to the top, the job looked more and more like what you'd find at any morally upstanding - establishment. The key things were solicitude and customer service.

That was immediately obvious when you looked at Elinalise Dragonroad, otherwise known as the Sex Grand Master, and who I got the impression had taught Roxy and Sylphie all their technique. She wasn't just good with her hands; she enticed men with everything else as well, employing her wiles to get them into bed and then providing a no-strings-attached bang. And she offered full aftercare too. Cliff would probably flip his lid if I called her a prostitute, but I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd worked her way to the top of a high-class brothel somewhere, considering her background.

As I explained all that at length, Roxy took notes, looking serious. "I see, yes. So you're saying if I want to know more, I should ask Elinalise."

"Yeah, she seems like she'd know more than me."

"Thank you. I'll ask her next time I see her."

Roxy really was an eager student. With that diligence, even if she somehow ended up as a prostitute, she'd rise high. She probably wouldn't reach the very top, not with her figure, but I, for one, would be charmed into becoming a repeat customer. Then, after I'd spent all my money on her, I'd take her hand and say, "Let's run away together." But she'd look back cold and unimpressed and reply, deadpan, "I'm afraid I must decline." Later, when I turned into a stalker, a man in black would come out the back of the building, arrest me, then drag me off to see the management.

"Hey, Rudy." Sylphie wouldn't make it to the top either, but she'd definitely build up a base of diehard fans.

You'd peel layer after layer of baggy clothing off of the silent Fitz until—hello, there was slender Sylphiette. She'd be so shy that when you stroked her face, her ears would twitch in embarrassment... Heh heh, oh, I'd definitely be a repeat customer. Then, after I'd fallen head over heels for her, I'd beg her to marry me, and a man in black would come out from the back and—

"You seem to know rather a lot about this. Have you *really* not been recently?" Sylphie said.

"Uh..." She was so intimidating that before I knew it, I was on my knees. But just so we're clear, there really wasn't anything on my conscience.

"I really haven't, okay?" I said.

It would take a little while for her to actually believe me, but that's a story for another time.

Short Story: Chef Rudeus's Special Skewers

THE STAPLE FOOD OF the Superd was Invisible Wolf meat. As the name suggested, Invisible Wolves were monsters who made themselves invisible to hunt their prey unimpeded. They were four-legged beasts with whitish fur. As for the meat, it was actually really tender and savory, like pork. Maybe they'd evolved the ability to turn invisible after being relentlessly hunted for their delicious meat... But all that was just my imagination running away.

In any case, there was tasty, fresh meat, and in my hand, I had a little bottle of the ogre's drink of choice: soy sauce. With this, victory was as good as mine.

While I was preparing, Sandor came over. He peered at my hands with a look of great interest. "Oh? Do you cook, Master Rudeus?"

"Yes. I'm no professional, but I like to at least make the things I want to eat." As I talked, I added alcohol and grated fruit to the soy sauce, then mixed it up. I could have done with some mirin and sugar about then, but there was none on hand, so I'd have to do without.

Next, I chopped the Invisible Wolf meat into bite-sized pieces, then set it to marinade in the sauce.

"Do you cook, Sandor?"

"Oh, no. I just do the eating. I do have a relative who's a cook, though—he even opened up shop in the King Dragon Kingdom."

"In a big city? That's great."

"Well, I heard it fell into a slump and shut down a dozen or so years ago. Who knows what happened after that?"

The bigger the city, the greater the variety of businesses. In this world, where there were no chain stores, you got all sorts when it came to eating out. I had eaten in the King Dragon Kingdom long ago, but from what I remembered, it hadn't been that good.

"But this relative of yours was an amazing cook, huh?"

"Just goes to show that in a big city, it's hard to keep afloat by skill alone."

When there were lots of shops competing for business, you had to put your energy into promotion, and things like location impacted sales, too. It was a dog-eat-dog world out there.

"Right." With the meat still marinating, I took a skewer and stabbed holes in each piece before finally arranging them on the skewers. Then, I lined them up over a grill I'd made with earth magic. I would have liked some charcoal, but it was no good getting greedy.

Sizzling and crackling sounds began to fill the air, along with the rich smell of burnt soy sauce.

"Now that smells good," Sandor said.

"It does, right?" I flipped the skewers, then brushed on more sauce. When they started to crackle, I turned them again and added another layer of sauce. I went through the same process over and over again until the sauce ran out. Then, I sprinkled on some of the spices the Superd grew in the village, picked up a skewer, and took a bite.

"Hot-toh-toh!" The meat burned my tongue as I turned it over in my mouth. That rich aroma that only soy sauce has rose up through the back of my nose.

Ahhh... This here, this is the stuff...

"Mmm..." I wasn't totally happy with the marinade I'd thrown together off the cuff. I hadn't fully brought out that special soy sauce zing that whams you in the tastebuds. Even so, my brain was shrieking with happiness. For the first time in more than twenty years, I was experiencing the joys of soy sauce.

"I say, Master Rudeus. This is damn tasty." Sandor, without asking, was eating a skewer. I'd forgive him. I mean, like, I'd gotten to eat food cooked, like, in *soy sauce*, you know?

"Well, it's still a long way from my dream flavor." I could make myself a bowl of tamagokake gohan, but cooking with soy sauce wasn't amateur territory. If I

wanted to serve this to the likes of Nanahoshi, I'd need to experiment a bit more.

When the battle was over, I'd assault the ogre's home base, have them teach me how to cultivate the beans and brew them into soy sauce, then get Aisha to help me grow them at our house. I had to chase my dream.

"You're a diligent one, Master Rudeus."

"I just want to eat the food I like."

"Pursuing a dream isn't something many can do, you know..." Sandor sounded like a middle-aged man waxing philosophical like that. Maybe he had something in his past.

"Sandor, you're not old enough to talk like that yet," I said.

"Hahaha! Just so! Begging your pardon. Well, Master Rudeus, when you make something that's more like your dreams, I hope you'll let me partake again."

"All right, it's a deal."

I continued with my experimentation, and in the end I served up some great fried rice balls to Nanahoshi, but that's a story for another time.

Short Story: The Throne

N ORN GREYRAT HAD no grand ambitions. She was an ordinary woman and a commoner. Yes, she had an older brother and sister who were a little *too* exceptional, but Norn was just another average girl who would have been happy with a quiet, pleasant life, doing her best where she could and marrying someone she loved.

That day, Norn was getting food from the storehouse like usual. In the Superd Village, food was stocked in the storehouse as a shared resource from which each household took home what they needed to cook.

Formerly, the cooking had been done in the village kitchen, with people taking home the finished product or eating it there, but the current system had been adopted as a measure against the plague.

Accordingly, Norn was taking ingredients back to Ruijerd's house, but on that day, she took a little more than usual. Just a day earlier, her older brother had shown up at Ruijerd's house accompanied by a demon king with a gigantic appetite and her son, and as a result, they had run out of food.

Barely able to carry all her supplies with both hands, Norn decided to give her arms a rest and take a break on her way home. She looked around and saw a chair in the perfect spot. What was it doing there? It hadn't been there the other day. But even as she thought this, she reasoned, *Until the other day, Big Brother and the others were fighting. Maybe someone put down a chair so they could take a rest.* She had no particular doubts about it.

And so, Norn sat down without a thought. She didn't mean anything by it. And, to re-emphasize, she, of course, had no ambitions.

"Here we go..." Norn sat down. The moment she did so, all the people doing their training drills a little way off from the chair stared at her open-mouthed. But Norn did not notice. She wasn't sensitive enough to her surroundings for that. Otherwise, she might have had an easier time in life, and Aisha wouldn't

have teased her so much.

"Hey, Norn. What're you doing here?" There, calling out to Norn, was none other than Rudeus.

"Oh, Big Brother. Nothing really. I just sat down to rest for a bit. The bags were so heavy..."

Rudeus grinned. "No doubt, no doubt," he said, nodding. "All right, I'll carry them for you."

"Would you really? Thank you."

Thanks to the magic armor he wore, Rudeus was very strong. Even without it, he was still stronger than Norn. As such, she was only too happy to accept his offer. Once, she would have pouted and said, "No, thank you," but now, perhaps thanks to her stint as the student council president at the University of Magic, she had grown accustomed to relying on people.

She didn't need to rest if her big brother would carry the food for her. She had just begun to stand up when— "Uh oh. Too late," said Rudeus. Wondering what he meant, Norn looked at him.

"Eep." The squeak slipped out from the back of her throat. This was because Demon King Atoferatofe, famed even on the Demon Continent as fear incarnate, was striding toward them with a swagger.

"Yoooou!" Atofe howled.

She could probably flatten the likes of Norn with her little finger. Overcome by primal fear, Norn cowered, but Rudeus took a step forward. Protecting her.

"I'm sorry, Lady Atofe. My little sister, she just couldn't help herself."

At this, Atofe, who had looked ready to grab hold of Norn, pulled up short.

"Couldn't help herself?" She repeated.

"Yes. She looks up to you, you see."

"Heh...heh heh...mwaaahahahaha! You don't say! She does, does she?"

What in the world were they talking about? Norn looked dubiously around them. The Superd warriors were watching her anxiously. At last, it hit Norn. Yet

again, she had put her foot in something. She just wasn't sure exactly what.

"In that case, I shall make an exception for her. When I was young, I got in trouble with my father when I tried to steal his throne!"

"I am sincerely grateful for your generosity!"

"Eh heh heh. That being said, it is still my throne. Mind you don't get comfortable, eh?"

"Of course. I think she's more than satisfied already. Right, Norn?" At Rudeus's nudge, Norn clicked. This was *Atoferatofe's* chair.

"Y-yes. It was amazing. Thank you very much!" Norm jumped to her feet and bobbed her head to Atofe. Then she took hold of the bags left beside the chair and got moving in a hurry. Rudeus stuck to her like a bodyguard, meaning she still had to be in danger.

"Heheheh," Atofe chuckled. "Next time you come after my throne, do it to my face. I'll meet your challenge."

"...Yes, ma'am," Norn replied weakly. As she did so, she made a promise to herself. She would not go near it. Never again, Not ever.

"That was a close shave," Rudeus said.

"Ohh," Norn whimpered. "Big Brother, thank you..."

"It's a good thing I noticed first. She's like a really territorial bear, so you've got to watch out for chairs and things. You understand?"

"How am I supposed to know which 'chairs and things'...?" Norn replied.

Rudeus made a face. "I see your point."

Short Story: A Parting Gift

"SOMETHING, THERE MUST be something..." Norn Greyrat was in a fix. The previous day, her big brother had announced that he was withdrawing from the Superd Village. He had told Norn, in particular, that she was to get home as soon as possible. There was still a lot left to sort out here, but the enemy was defeated, and the danger had passed. It was logical for the people who weren't needed on the ground to gradually withdraw, and only natural that Norn, who had only been acting as a nurse in the village, should lead the way. She was reluctant to leave, but if she'd been the one in charge, she would have sent Norn Greyrat home quickly too. She accepted it. It was just how things were.

It was, however, undeniably a wrench to be parted from Ruijerd. Once she went home, she was sure it would be some time before she saw him again. Ruijerd had found his people and settled here, and she would return to the Magic City of Sharia and go back to her life.

She might be able to see him straight away if she wanted to. With teleportation circles, you could travel to far-off places in a literal instant. But the circles were forbidden: she wouldn't be

allowed to use them just because she missed Ruijerd. She might even go the rest of her life without seeing him again. That, Norn knew, was what parting meant. Indeed, back in Millis she had been parted from her father, who she had loved so much, and she had never seen him again. Some of her classmates from the University of Magic she had been close with had died, and she would never see them again.

Not being able to see people was just the way of the world. Norn would have liked to spend more time with those people, if she could, to see them all the time. But sometimes, you couldn't. And that was just how things were.

Even Norn herself—who knew when she might die in some unexpected accident? And that wasn't the only possibility. It seemed like Rudeus was being

careful, but as the relative of someone involved in such intense battles, she might easily find herself targeted. Norn had no faith in her ability to survive an encounter with anyone who could seriously harm Rudeus and the others. Ruijerd, on the other hand, the legendary warrior, had far better odds of survival, and so Norn at least wanted him to remember. She wanted him to remember her.

When she and Ruijerd had last parted, he'd given her a figurine of himself. Norn had gotten through many a hard day by gazing at it and thinking back on the conversations they'd shared. That was how important Ruijerd was to her. She wanted to leave him with something to remind him she existed.

"...Ugggh!"

Norn, however, had never been quick on the draw. As a result of the many things she'd learned at the University of Magic, she'd learned to plan and prepare carefully, and, when it came to her everyday tasks, to do them as well as if not better than average. However, when she had to do something without any warning like this, it totally threw her.

"Norn, you aren't ready yet? Aisha's calling." While she was floundering, her time ran out.

"Ruijerd..." He had come to get her. Norn looked at him miserably. If this had been her younger sister Aisha, she would have completed her objective in next to no time, maybe by some method Norn would never have thought of—using her position in the Ruquag Mercenary Company to have a present delivered later, for example.

"Are you looking for something?"

"No...um..." Rather than a thing, it was more accurate to say she was looking for an idea.

"What is it...?" Ruijerd asked kindly, but when Norn looked up at him, she only got tongue-tied. If Aisha had been here, she would have pressed her to spit it out already. But Ruijerd waited quietly for her.

Finally, Norn found her words.

"Ruijerd, I, um, wanted to give you something..."

"Me?"
"Y-yes."

"Oh." They fell silent. If Ruijerd had asked her "Why?" Norn might have been too embarrassed to say anything further. But Ruijerd waited for her. That was why Norn made herself continue.

"Ruijerd, I just, I don't want you to forget me..."

Ruijerd reached out a hand to her. Norn thought he would stroke her hair like he always did, but contrary to her expectation, Ruijerd laid his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him and saw him smiling as if to say she was just as silly as ever.

"I am not going to forget you," he said.

"You...you aren't?"

"No. Something about you reminds me of my lost wife. How could I forget?"

"I... Oh..." Norn nodded, her feelings confused. She could not have described what was occurring in her chest even if she had been ordered to. There was shock, as well as loneliness and resignation.

"Let's meet again," were Ruijerd's parting words to her.

"Yes," Norn somehow managed to reply. After that, she left him and returned to the Magic City of Sharia. Little did she know that a few months later, they would be reunited...

Exclusive New Story:The Dedication Ceremony for Fittoa Castle

FITTOA HAD LOST EVERYTHING in the displacement incident. Many more lives were lost to its recovery. After getting back on his feet, Sauros Boreas Greyrat was executed for palace intrigue, and Senior Minister Darius, who had sought to seize control of Fittoa by funding the recovery, met his end after losing a power struggle... If the successor to the throne, Ariel Anemoi Asura, had not declared she would support the recovery, it would likely not have progressed nearly as far. Yes, Fittoa's recovery was quiet and steady. It was overshadowed by the turbulence of the times, though sometimes those in power offered their support.

One day, in the lands at the center of Fittoa that had once been the site of the Citadel of Roa and where the town called Reborn Roa now lay, a building was completed.

It was a castle.

Okay, maybe it wasn't big enough to be called a castle. It was the size of a fort at best. Or, if you were comparing it to the noble district in the capital of Asura, maybe a mansion. All the same, it had been an indispensable feature of the center of Roa before the disaster.

After the site had been lined up, it was a long time before construction began. James Boreas Greyrat, the current lord of the region, did not see it as necessary for the recovery. He stayed away from Fittoa.

But when construction began, it showed the people that the recovery was going smoothly. When it was completed, the people who had worked on the recovery thought, We've made it this far at last. These lands have a mansion for a great and important lord to live in again.

Because of this, Lord James decided to hold the dedication of the castle in a grand fashion. He put on celebrations throughout the entire town, invited a great many nobles to the newly completed mansion, and applied to Queen Ariel

Anemoi Asura for permission to hold a dedication ceremony. Ariel was only too happy to consent and decreed that all the nobles present would attend. The news also reached Ranoa, and Rudeus Greyrat.

"All right then, let's get this strategy meeting underway."

"Okay."

"Yeah!"

It was nighttime in the Greyrat household, and three women had gathered in one of the bedrooms. This was the Greyrat girls' club, which they held regularly enough to have lost count of the number of times. Usually, most of the women took part, but this time, there were only three in attendance.

Sylphie, the club president, introduced the topic for discussion. "We are going to be attending a party in Reborn Roa."

"What about it?" These days, Eris was comfortable with going to these sorts of parties. What she meant was, "If we go, we'll just do what we always do, right? What's there to discuss?"

Sylphie understood this, of course.

"Well, listen to the end. So, um, on paper, this party is to celebrate Fittoa's recovery. But I think really it's to make sure everyone knows how well the recovery is going and that the Boreas family is back in power again."

"Is that right?" Eris turned to Roxy, who sat beside her.

"It's no good asking me..." Roxy replied. "But as a rule, humans don't throw parties for no reason. I know there's usually some political motivation involved, like making a show of authority or showing off a relationship."

"Do demons have parties for no reason?"

"Oh yes. Especially the Demon Kings."

"Those sound more fun!"

"Well, from what I hear, they mean no end of hardship for the people who organize them...though given they're purely for enjoyment, I suppose they

would be fun," Roxy said. "But I'm from the countryside, so I've never attended one."

"Ahem." Sylphie cleared her throat. The other two sat up straight, then indicated for her to continue. "Usually, the three of us attend these sorts of occasions as Rudy's wives—that is, not as nobles, but as Queen Ariel's guests. Because nearly all the nobles know that Rudy was instrumental in putting Queen Ariel on the throne, there have never been any serious issues beyond gossip behind our backs."

A significantly embellished version of the story of how Ariel Anemoi Asura had claimed the throne was now known far and wide. In particular, the story of the dramatic showdown when Perugius went to Asura Castle had been dressed up so spectacularly that rumors had sprung up of Ariel physically throwing out all the nobles who stood in her way, which had set all the nobles who were hostile toward her trembling. Because of this, few would openly speak or act against Rudeus's household, who were the ones who had orchestrated it.

"But this time is different," Sylphie went on. "That's because this time, there also will be a lot of mid-ranking, rural nobles in attendance who can't go to court at Asura Castle."

Mid-ranking, rural nobles—in other words, there would be masses of people who didn't really understand Rudeus and Ariel's relationship, or what the high-ranking nobles who interacted daily with royalty were afraid of and what they held back.

"As such, I'd like to prepare now for what people might say to us and the attitude we ought to adopt before there's any trouble. Especially you, Eris!"

"Why me?" Eris demanded, pouting.

Recently, how she conducted herself...couldn't be said to have improved, but if nothing else, no one was brave enough to find fault with her when she attended parties in the capital at Rudeus's side.

"Because you're descended from the Boreas family, which puts you in the trickiest position. I think you'll likely have some odd types bothering you."

"I'm not a Boreas anymore."

"That's true. But details like that don't matter. Not when people want to find fault with someone they don't like. You understand, right?"

"Yeah, I get that!"

Eris cared just as little when someone rubbed her the wrong way. She also didn't care about details when people found fault with *her*. Fights were decided in an instant, and if you bothered with stuff like that, you lost.

Seeing that Eris understood, Sylphie gave a satisfied nod. "Good. Then let's do our best so that we don't make trouble for Rudy."

Eris folded her arms and nodded. "Gotcha."

Really, if the party was going to be that bad, they also had the option not to go. There was no need for Rudeus's family to carry out the obligations of Asuran nobility. But *this* party was "The Anniversary Party for Fittoa's Recovery." Eris and Roxy had once lived in that region, and its lands held fond memories, so they wanted to attend if possible. For Rudeus and Sylphie, this went without saying.

"Don't worry," Sylphie said. "Parties this big don't happen every day. So long as nothing turns into a really serious problem, Queen Ariel and I will take care of things."

Sylphie had called them to this strategy meeting because attending this sort of party *meant* something. She was sure Rudy would have said the same.

"All right, first of all..."

And so the night went by in that bedroom in the Greyrat house...

The day arrived. A great crowd was gathered in the courtyard of the newly constructed mansion in Reborn Roa. There were high-ranking nobles who had come all the way from the capital, mid-ranking nobles who resided in Fittoa, and nobles from neighboring regions who had supported the recovery...and it wasn't all nobles. Key members of the organizations who had worked on the recovery, as well as merchants who had laid down their personal fortunes to help out had also received special permission to attend.

The party began with a speech from James Boreas Greyrat, but his words sounded somehow empty. It was as though he was simply rattling off lines that sounded good. To be fair, that was a given. No one could accuse James Boreas Greyrat of making any great effort toward Fittoa's recovery. All the same, those who had worked on the recovery were deeply moved when Alfonse, the old man standing at James's side, began to weep. They knew he was the one who had carried on with the late Sauros Boreas Greyrat's wishes. It was he who had taken on the role of leader, a role he continued to fulfill in the present. It was he, a mere servant, who had gone around talking to all sorts of people, offering encouragement or lending a hand as required. He had brought people together and, all the while, patiently persisted in bringing the recovery to the attention of his lord, who was apathetic toward it. Now he stood weeping at his lord's side not as a servant, but as one who had done a great service. Just seeing him there made the party worthwhile for those who had worked on the recovery.

After the speech, the party continued smoothly. Ariel spoke after James, and then a Millis blessing was conducted. After that came the introduction of the band, followed by the introduction of the head chef; then the party transitioned into the sort of stand-up dinner party common in Asura. The style had come into fashion after Ariel's accession to the throne and had been well received by many nobles as, especially at well-attended parties like this one, it made it easy to approach the high-ranking nobles one wanted to curry favor with. The style did have its problems, however. In particular, when there were massive differences in rank between attendees as at this party, people would talk to those who, by rights, they were not permitted to address.

"So you're that Eris woman who used to be a Boreas Greyrat."

Indeed, the trouble Sylphie had been afraid of was unfolding right then and there. The buffet had opened, and Eris made a beeline for the whole roasted hog. That was when trouble closed in.

Usually, Rudeus would have been at her side to block off such pests.

My husband...

Oi, what're you saying to my wife? Hey, where are you from? You know Queen Ariel and I are friends, yeah?

That threat would have cleared away any malcontents in no time. But alas, Rudeus was paying his respects to Alfonse and wasn't there to watch after Eris as he should have been. Eris had no choice but to deal with this one herself.

To her, the man speaking to her was a stranger. She didn't know that he was the second son of a mid-ranking noble who resided in a corner of Milbotts, not far from Fittoa. His family had originally been low-ranking nobles with no lands of their own, but after the destruction of the Fittoa region, they had provided aid to the refugees who had come to Milbotts looking for work, furnishing them with accommodation and employment. In recognition of these deeds, his family had been elevated to mid-ranking nobility.

They had gone on to take on various odd jobs related to the recovery, which had brought them to the attention of James and Ariel. The local nobility also regarded them with interest. The son, however, once everyone suddenly began fawning over him following the abrupt improvement in his father's position, had started to get some funny ideas.

"That's right!" Eris said. She didn't know any of that. She was just doing as they had practiced.

"I heard that you, a lady of the Greyrat family, went and married a backwater noble or something."

"That's right!"

"Dear me. All that talk from the Boreas Greyrats about recovery, but now I see they bought it by whoring out their own flesh and blood." He scoffed. "How our greatest families have fallen."

"Yes, quite right!"

Under normal circumstances, talking like that about a great noble family like the Boreas Greyrats would not have been tolerated. The man could even have been executed then and there for his disrespect. But his family had provided aid to the Boreas Greyrats during the recovery at great hardship to themselves. Basically, this guy saw it like this: Even if I say a bit more than I should to one of the Boreas Greyrats, the worst that happens is my father gets some flak. I'll get a pass in the end.

Eris didn't know any of that. She wanted to eat the roast hog while it was still sizzling hot, and she was considering punching out this annoying man in her way. But Sylphie had told her firmly that she was not to punch anyone. So Eris was patient. Her sword training had taught her endurance. That being said, she hadn't gotten any better at learning or remembering, and she couldn't apply what she did learn to save her life, so she had no idea what she was supposed to do in this situation. At this rate, the party was going to get showered in one body's worth of blood. Eris had learned endurance, but she had also learned to counterattack at top speed without her brain getting in the way.

The nobles nearby watched them uncomfortably. Most were mid-ranking nobles who knew the second son but didn't know Eris. They were unsure whose side to take without knowing the relationship between the two. On top of that, they were afraid that if they stuck their noses in, it would only bring trouble down on their heads.

"Eris!" Someone ran over to her.

She turned, then, recognizing who it was, she called out in delight: "Ghislaine!"

Tall, with red-brown skin, big ears, and the muscles Rudeus described as "like steel," Ghislaine was getting on in years but still in good shape. Sword King Ghislaine, the Queen's Guard Dog from the Seven Knights of Asura, personal bodyguard to Ariel Anemoi Asura and one of the greatest sword fighters in Asura, came over to Eris, then looked down at the noble who was hassling her with a crooked smile.

"This guy must be very brave to tangle with you."

"Really and truly." Another voice chimed in to agree with Ghislaine. Another woman stood hidden in Ghislaine's shadow. "If it were me, I'd plead and cry and say I didn't want to, even if Her Majesty herself ordered it. The cost of picking a fight with this one's more than I can afford." It was Water Emperor Isolde Cluel, the King's Shield in the Seven Knights of Asura. She was another of Asura's best sword fighters.

"Wh-what's your deal?" The noble shrank away from the two of them, taking a step back.

"We're friends of Eris's... You don't know us, sir?"

"How should I?!"

"Picking a fight with someone you don't even know in the Asura Kingdom..." Isolde sighed. "Ghislaine, Eris, what do you say that we show mercy to him for his bravery and settle for only throwing him out of here?"

"Throw me out?! Just who do you think I am?! If it weren't for us Tilmonds, Fittoa's recovery would never—"

"How about you tell me who you think this woman is?" Isolde said, her face dead serious. The noble shrank back even further.

"But she's just, you know, that girl from the has-been Boreas family. The one they said was a problem child..."

"You are entirely mistaken," Isolde replied promptly.

But that couldn't be right, the noble thought. He didn't know the exact details, but he was sure she was only one of those good-for-nothings who often cropped up in noble families, who had married some foreign magician who wasn't even a noble.

"Then who is she ...?"

Isolde smiled faintly at his confusion. "By all means, go and find out for yourself. Before you ruin that family you're so proud of, that is," she said, then grinned. The noble realized that his feet had left the ground. Ghislaine had picked him up by the scruff of his neck.

"H-hey! What are you doing?! Put me down! Let go!"

Without a word, Ghislaine hefted him above her head, swung, and released.

"Aaaaaaaaaa...grbt!" The noble sailed out through the open window, letting out a wail that ended in a croak like a frog as he vanished from sight and, by the sounds of it, landed in a hedge.

Eris watched him go, then turned back to the other two.

"Hey, it's been ages! Thanks for helping me out!"

"It really has, Eris! I was on tenterhooks wondering when you'd punch him."

"Sylphie told me you don't punch people in places like this!"

"Does that mean if she hadn't said anything, you would have punched him...?" Isolde asked.

"Obviously. Anyway, let's eat already. It'll get cold!"

"Heh. Yes, let's. Ghislaine's stomach has been rumbling so loudly..."

"Bothered you, did I? My apologies." Laughing together, the three of them dug into the roast hog. Not a soul tried to say anything untoward to Eris—not with Ghislaine and Isolde on either side of her.

Well, that wasn't quite accurate. There was *one*. Two men who had been watching from a distance now approached, drawn by the sound of the wailing. One was on the other side of old age, while the other was a youth. The old man regarded Eris with a somewhat conflicted expression until, at a word of admonishment from the younger, he slowly moved toward her.

"Lady Eris," he said. The old man—Alfonse—came up to her, then gave a short bow. "You have grown into a fine young woman. I am truly glad to see you well."

"Alfonse..." Eris stood up straighter. She hadn't known that Alfonse would be at the party. But she had been thinking that if she ever ran into him, there was something she ought to say. The only thing was that after discarding the name of Boreas and running away from her duty to Fittoa's recovery, she knew she had no right to say it. Of course, even if she had stayed, there was probably nothing she could have done other than get married off to some nobleman... But she understood now, more or less, that that had been her duty as a noble. So she knew she was in no position to say what she was going to say. At the same time, there was no one else to do it. And so she said it. She said it because her father—or rather, her grandfather—could not. She said it as the last of the Boreas Greyrats who had lived in Fittoa.

"Since you took over to see Grandpa's wishes carried out, it's amazing how far the recovery's come! Thank you for all your work!"

For a while, Alfonse stared blankly at Eris. Then, tears began to flow down his cheeks. "Thank you," he said.

He had sworn his loyalty to Sauros, served Philip, and worked himself to the bone, all for the sake of the Boreas family and Fittoa. Then, Fittoa had been destroyed, Sauros and Philip died, and Eris left. Some days, he did not know why worked so hard for the recovery. Some nights he had lain awake questioning himself. He never found any answers. Nor had he forgotten how Eris had left rather than fulfill Sauros and Philip's dying wishes. An emptiness had remained inside him even after the mansion had been completed.

"Truly, a fine young woman," he said. "Your husband must be very happy."

Despite all that, those simple words from Eris made him feel whole again. His heart was full of feelings he could not put into words. He felt as though everything he had done for the recovery had been leading him to this. Yes, on that day, Alfonse knew it had all been worth it.

Out of the corner of her eye, Roxy watched the upset around Eris, then let out a sigh of relief. She had been worried, what with everything Sylphie had said beforehand, but there had been no need. Even Eris had plenty of friends in the Asura Kingdom. There were lots of people around to help her out. It embarrassed her to think she had been readying herself to step in on Eris's behalf if it came to that. But in any case, the trouble had passed. Now, just as planned, all that was left to do was partake of the enormous cake the size of a grown Migurd man that she'd been eyeing up since the food was served. Things like going around and greeting people could be left to Rudeus and Sylphie. If anything, she thought it was better that she didn't participate in that sort of thing. Roxy was well aware of how she looked. If she followed them around as they greeted everyone, she would get funny looks, perhaps even patronizing comments.

But Roxy was forgetting something.

"Here, what's a demon child doing in a place like this...?" came a voice. "Must have snuck in from somewhere..."

She had forgotten that she was, if anything, more conspicuous on her own.

Here we go. Can I please just get some cake? Roxy didn't panic. She was used to this sort of thing. No matter where she went, there was always someone

who couldn't pass up the chance to be racist to demons.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of your acquaintance," she said. "My name is Roxy M. Greyrat."

Roxy wasn't Eris. She was the type to put what she learned to proper use. To discourage them, she greeted them per Asuran manners, then mentioned the Greyrat name. If they were an Asuran noble of good sense, the name of Greyrat ought to put them off, and even if they didn't know who she was, a *demon* with the name Greyrat would make them leave her be rather than risk provoking her.

"A Greyrat, you say?"

"I am married to Rudeus Greyrat of Ranoa." If this person didn't understand, she would simply state her relationship with Rudeus plainly. You know Rudeus, he enjoys Ariel's favor. You know what that means, don't you?

If he went on jeering at her for being a demon after that, she only had to introduce him to one of her acquaintances nearby. Happily, she saw many familiar faces.

"Hmm. Then I suppose you must be *the* Roxy M. Greyrat, King-tier water magician and adventurer extraordinaire?"

"Yes, I suppose," Roxy admitted.

Of course, you never knew how things would really play out.

"And the Roxy who put together that treatise on learning methods for silent spellcasting and truncated incantations, right?"

"Yes, I wrote that. What about it?" Roxy, reeling a little at these unexpected questions, looked up to see a nervous-looking man with pronounced cheekbones. In the depths of his eyes, she thought she saw not scorn or hatred, but something else altogether. That look was why she didn't immediately appeal to someone she knew for aid.

"Do you really believe, my good lady, that so long as one practices it from a young age, anyone may learn to perform silent casting?"

"I wouldn't say anyone, but it should be possible for most people." The man

had sounded like he disagreed, which made Roxy a little cross. But she did her best to reply calmly.

Engaging with people who wanted to prove her wrong was a bad habit of hers, but here, it was the way the man had looked at her that made her decide to talk to him.

"In that case, why did you add abridged incantations, what one might call a degraded form of silent casting, to your treatise? Was it not the case that you, unable to master silent casting yourself, did not wish to lose your superior position?"

"Not at all. You have to practice in order to cast silent spells with your hands or feet, or from a staff or the like. If you lose any of those, or if your mental state becomes significantly unstable, it is possible to fail to cast the spell correctly. With incantations, however, the process is half automatic, so the spell may still work even in such a state. That being so, it is rational to study both methods."

The noble blinked a few times at Roxy when she was finished, took a deep breath, then let it out. Then, he got down on his knees, looked her in the eye, and held out his hand to her.

"I am Platio Navydog, Chancellor of the Asura Institute of Magic. I cannot express how honored I am at the chance to meet a great magician of such eminence. For all that it was uttered in ignorance, I hope you will forgive my earlier rudeness. The fact is, so little is known for sure of your appearance that many claim your name falsely."

"Oh, no. I didn't mind. It reminded me of the back and forths I had with my master long ago..." At this sudden shift in the man's demeanor, Roxy, too, adjusted her tone. So he was testing me, she thought with private relief. Thank goodness I answered him properly.

"When you say 'master,' do you refer to Vice Principal Jenius of the Ranoa University of Magic? I met him once, and what a humble fellow he was. I suppose he was the same when he had these sorts of debates with his students."

"No, back then, he was very short-tempered. As was I, for that matter...But

after looking back on my mistakes, I realized that it's no good simply standing above everyone else." Roxy took the man's outstretched hand—a handshake, how humans greeted one another. But Platio looked down at her hand with a doubtful expression. For a few seconds, he didn't move, but then he muttered, "I see," and gripped her hand in return.

"Is something wrong?" Roxy asked.

"No, I only saw the back of your hand and thought that seeing as you appear to be a lady, I ought to...but then I remembered you are married."

"Oh... Yes, my husband might be unhappy with you if you did that."

"What a frightening thought. But in any case, I am very glad to have met you. Your name is even more widely known than Master Rudeus's. I have wanted to talk to you for a long time."

"You have?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's a very pragmatic concern, but I admit, with some embarrassment, that I am interested in King-tier water magic, and so if possible, for my future reference—though I fully realize the impertinence of my request—and I am related, if distantly, to the Bluewolf family, so I believe I can offer you appropriate compensation..."

"You want me to show you?"

"Well—" Platio's eyes moved to something behind Roxy and he swallowed his next words. Roxy turned around. There, with a disturbingly fake smile, was Rudeus.

"Rudy...?"

"What is it, Master Roxy?"

"What's wrong? That look on your face is terrifying..."

"Is that...right?" Rudeus rubbed his cheeks, then pushed the corners of his mouth, which were stretched uncannily upward, back down. "It's just, I see my beloved wife, my teacher, the guiding light of my life, with some lowlife hanging off her, so I come over only to find it's someone who *fully apprehends the situation* and, well, I couldn't help it."

"You're getting creepy again, Rudy."

"Are you saying I'm not always creepy?"

"Don't be like that, please."

"Sorry. Ahem." Rudeus cleared his throat. "How about it, Roxy? After all Mister Platio's just said, why don't you give him a King-tier water magic show?"

Platio looked up with a start. "Would you really?! N-nothing would make me happier! The rulers of Asura give so little support to magic that we have no one who can cast King-tier magic—none of us has so much as laid eyes on such a person. But it is not only about King-tier magic. I have heard that the beauty of your spellcasting outshines even the other educators of the Ranoa University of Magic! May I beg a demonstration of your refined technique?"

"Who's been saying all that?" Roxy said. "No, I can guess."

Rudeus watched, grinning, as Platio went on with such enthusiasm that he might have been about to apply to be her apprentice. Whenever some exaggerated story of Roxy's talents went around, it was usually his fault.

"Well, if you insist, I suppose it couldn't hurt."

All the same, Roxy was not a woman who was indifferent to praise. Rudeus disappeared like a mirage before reappearing a few moments later with her staff. She took it and headed for the balcony, then she raised the staff to point out the window. Then she stopped short.

"Wait, should I do this now?"

"Is there a time and place to show the world the true extent of your powers?"

"Of course there is."

"Even so, you are very busy, Master, and I imagine it won't be easy for Mister Platio to come all the way to Ranoa."

"Surely I can just go to Asura."

"Summoning you just so that you can demonstrate King-tier water magic? I won't stand for it."

"I mean, I wouldn't mind just tagging along when you have business here,

Rudy, but...oh, all right. But where should I aim? After how far the recovery has come, I'd feel awful if it got swept away in a flood..."

For just a moment, Rudeus looked sad to have lost the chance for a date. But he recovered himself, then pointed to a forest in the distance.

"Somewhere over there should work, right? They're planning on developing it, but apparently, negotiations with the woodcutters guild have been rough, so they won't be able to start for a while. I doubt anyone will complain even if your spell wipes out the forest."

"I'm not you, Rudy. I don't have that kind of power..."

"Well, in any case."

As they spoke, Roxy readied her staff. The nobles nearby looked at her with slight alarm, but Rudeus was so unfazed that Roxy didn't notice. She began her incantation.

"Oh, spirits of the magnificent waters, I beseech the Prince of Thunder! I call upon you, mighty spirit of light, lord of the heavens! Grant me my wish, and as thy divine hammer strikes its anvil, cover the land with water!"

If you knew, you knew. If you didn't, you were out of luck. Roxy shortened the incantation of the King-tier water spell as though it were nothing.

"Do you see your sworn enemy, in all his arrogance? I would be the holy blade that strikes him down! Let your radiant power teach him that the Emperor yet reigns supreme!"

The prayer she recited had not only been substantially shortened compared to the original incantation, it was also optimized. This was undoubtedly the result of Roxy's ongoing hard work and research. That was why Rudeus clasped his hands together like he was praying and made goo-goo eyes at her. Roxy's shortened incantations produced spells more efficiently than Rudeus's silent casting. For Rudeus, who had a massive reserve of mana, this was no advantage, but for most magicians, it was a useful, if unflashy technique. The trade-off was an increase in the difficulty of mana manipulation, but Roxy had done enough practice that she carried it off effortlessly.

"Lightning!" In the same instant that her staff came sweeping down, there

was a flash of electricity. The fat bolt of lightning streaked down from the pitch-black sky, causing a small explosion where it struck. A moment later, the distinctive roar of thunder shook the party, and all the nobles froze at the sudden boom. There was a moment of silence alongside many puzzled expressions. Then people began to babble excitedly, and soon one sound drowned out the rest: applause.

"Bravo!" Rudeus's eyes had gone spiral-shaped, and he was clapping. Platio followed suit, applauding as he began to sing Roxy's praises.

"What an extraordinary display of magic... One could tell you shortened the incantation, but the impossibly perfect control with which you manipulated the mana was more impressive still. I wish every magician would follow your example!!"

The nobles might not have quite understood what had just happened, but they knew who Platio was. This was the chancellor of the venerable Asura Institute of Magic, not to mention one of the kingdom's few magicians. For him to be so full of praise, some of them thought, it must have been something pretty amazing, and they started clapping too. This inspired others to join in. Asuran nobles were acutely sensitive to the atmosphere around them. It was better to clap now, even if you didn't know why, rather than risk being seen as harboring ill-will by not clapping at all. Not knowing this, Roxy accepted the thunderous applause with an air of self-consciousness. At the same time, though, she drew herself up a little, and there was a look of pride on her face.

"A-anyway, that's more or less the idea."

"I am awestruck. Master Rudeus was so lavish in his praise that it began sounding slightly over the top. I doubted the reality would live up to all he said, but you went far above and beyond anything I imagined."

"Of course she did. I could never do her justice in words. In the first place, she doesn't just have wonderful powers, she's also a wonderful person, and—" Rudeus started off on a loud rant, but Roxy deliberately ignored him. It was the best course of action when he started acting strangely.

"How in heaven's name did you get to this level?"

"With proper practice, anyone could do what I...well, that might be going a bit

far, but I've always tried to improve myself, and this is the result."

"I see. I shall teach that to my students."

"I'm honored... Oh, but do make sure to praise them. Things that might seem trivial to you and me could be a sign of steady improvement to a student." As Roxy said this, a hint of yearning came into her eyes. She was probably remembering the student she had lost once. Rudeus, who knew that story, was for once quiet and on his best behavior. That was the severity of the wound that incident had left in Roxy's heart.

Platio, noticing all of this, gave a gentle nod. "I shall bear that in the front of my mind."

Sylphie watched Eris and Roxy's conversations from Ariel's side. For all that she had drilled into them, she needn't have bothered. The likes of Asuran nobles were no match for either of them. She thought that perhaps the idea of a celebration of Fittoa's recovery had put her a little too on edge.

"You're in good spirits, Sylphie," Ariel said, smiling at her.

"You can tell?"

"Yes, has something good happened?"

"Well... Today is the celebration of Fittoa's recovery, and so while it might not be how it was, I really felt that little by little, I'm getting my home back. That alone would have been enough to make me happy, but..."

"But?"

"Me, Rudy, Eris, and Roxy have lived here before. But we're not the same as we were back then. I was thinking about how much we've surely all grown in the meantime, until we were able to return. I don't know, it just made me happy."

This brought back to Ariel a memory of Sylphie, just after the destruction of Fittoa, when she had been so frail and seemed perpetually terrified. She'd come to the palace in Asura, and by living as Fitz she had, little by little, grown stronger. Perhaps that meant that when she was living in Fittoa, back before

they had met, Sylphie had been even weaker and more fragile. And she doubted Sylphie was the only one. Rudeus was different, as were Roxy and Eris. Seeing those differences had made Sylphie happy.

"What sort of child were you back in Buena?" Ariel asked.

"Well...my hair was green."

"Like Sieg, your son?"

"Yes. I could never tell you because I thought you would despise me."

"True, back then just the sight of green hair would probably have had me screaming in terror."

Sylphie chuckled. "It's a good thing I kept my mouth shut, then," she said, and the two laughed. After a moment, she added, "I really am glad we came."

The party to celebrate the recovery of Fittoa was, to the majority of nobles, an event of no great importance. Even those who had worked on the recovery and those who had once lived in Fittoa could have done without it. But people need moments to reflect on their lives. They need the chance to look at where they've come from in order to know where they are now. This party, Sylphie thought as she gazed out at all the familiar faces she could see among the partygoers, had been such an opportunity for her.

Later, it was discovered that Roxy's spell had started a fire that consumed the whole forest. Not only that, but the story picked up embellishments until rumors were flying that Rudeus, angry at being laughed at by his wife, had destroyed it. The Greyrat family laughed themselves silly when they heard this —but that's a story for another time.

Original Appearances of Collected Short Stories

"Sylphie's Father"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 1, at the end of the volume.

"The Mad Dog King Finds a Master"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 2, at the end of the volume.

"Old Friends Reunited"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 3, at the end of the volume.

"Shirone's Super Soldier"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 4, at the end of the volume.

"Old Enough"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 5, at the end of the volume.

"The Demon World's Great Emperor's Super Adult Love Story"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 6, at the end of the volume.

"A Special Present"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, at the end of the volume.

"Rudeus's Summer"

Included as a bonus in MF Books' First Publication Celebrating the Second Anniversary

"World's First! Amphibious Body Pillow Set (Eris)."

"Everyone's Good and Bad Habits"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 8, at the end of the volume.

"The Head-Ripping Prince's Work is Never Done!"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 12, at the end of the volume.

"Elinalise Wants to Be There"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 13, at the end of the volume.

"The Gospel of Roxy"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 15, at the end of the volume.

"Luke Notos Greyrat's Unnecessary Item"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 16, at the end of the volume.

"Table Talk Adventure"

"Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation" manga adaptation, Volume 17, at the end of the volume.

"Something Cliff Wants" [クリフの欲しいもの]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 9

"Rudeus Can't Learn Silent Healing Casting" [ルーデウスは無詠唱治療魔術を習えない]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 10

"Rudeus and the Many-Storied Sand Castle" [楼閣の砂城]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 11

"Spoiling Dinner" [買い食い]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 12

"Compliments to the Genius Maid" [天才メイドは褒められた]

Drama CD Booklet "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation — Displacement Labyrinth Episode" Animate • Gamers Bonus

"A Swordsman Only Goes Sober Once"[禁酒剣士は一度だけ]

Drama CD Booklet "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation — Displacement Labyrinth Episode" TSUTAYA Bonus [転移迷宮編]

"How the Swordsman and the Thief Use Their Money" [剣士とシーフの金遣い]

Drama CD Booklet "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation -- Displacement Labyrinth Episode" Amazon Bonus

"The Reader and the Elven Warrior" [読書家と長耳族の戦士]

Drama CD Booklet "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation — Displacement Labyrinth Episode" Tora No Ana Bonus

"The Swordsman and the Dwarf Have a Drinking Contest" [剣士と炭鉱族の飲み比べ]

Drama CD Booklet "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation — Displacement Labyrinth Episode" WonderGOO Bonus

"The Knight's Attendant's First Job" [騎士の侍従の最初のお仕事]

Drama CD Booklet "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation — Displacement Labyrinth Episode" First Print Bonus

"Roxy Shows Her Gratitude" [ロキシーの恩返し]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei *Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu*" Volume 13

"Birdbrain Atofe" [アトーフェ・オン・ザ・バードヘッド]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 14

"A Nightmare" [悪夢]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 15

"Nanahoshi's Public Apology" [ナナホシの謝罪会見]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,"

"The Imprisoned Prince" [幽閉の王子]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 17, bonus

"What if it Wasn't a Mercenary Band I Came Up With?" [Note: I F もし思いついたのが傭兵団ではなかったら]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 18

"Flattery and Honesty" [お世辞と本音]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 19

"Norn's Part Time Job" [アルバイト・オブ・ザ・ノルン]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 20

"The Morning of My Day Off" [休日の午前]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 21

"Dance Practice" [ダンスの練習]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 22

"Fitz's Doubts" [誘惑のフィッツ]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 23

"Chef Rudeus's Special Skewers" [シェフルーデウスの気まぐれ串焼き]

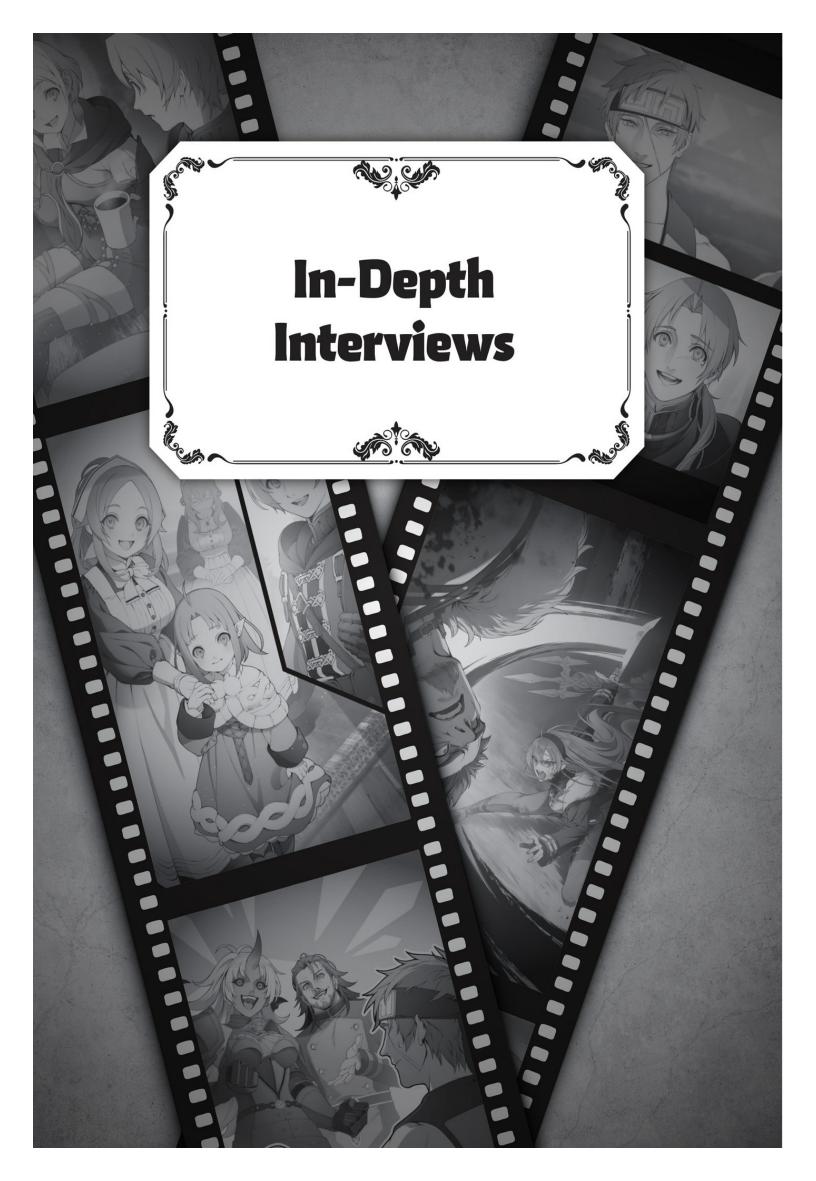
Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 24

"The Throne" [王の椅子]

Bonus for the Taiwanese Edition of "Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation," Volume 25

"A Parting Gift" [別れ際に渡すもの]

First printed in this book.



In-Depth Interviews

This is an interview with Rifujin na Magonote-sensei, the original author of *Mushoku Tensei*, and Shirotaka, the illustrator. From their memories of the series' beginning to secrets about its genesis and characters, this deep dive into *Mushoku Tensei* will reveal new and interesting facts about the series.

The Author Rifujin na Magonote

Please tell us a little about what first inspired you to write the novel.

I first became interested in the form of the novel back in grade school when I first saw Studio Ghibli's *Whisper of the Heart*. Around the same time, my school had a "Let's try writing a novel" sort of assignment, which would wind up being the first fiction I'd ever written. When I moved on to junior high, I joined the computer club, but there wasn't much in the way of activities, so I wrote some simple stories with a word processor. After that, I didn't write anything new for a while, but I started to get serious not long after I graduated college. At that time, I entered a few award contests from different publishers, but that didn't go too well, and I eventually gave up on going pro.

Please tell us about what inspired you to start a series on the website "Shousetsuka ni Narou."

One day, I saw Kogitsune Kanekiru's *Re:Monster* lined up on the shelves at a bookstore and I thought it looked interesting. While reading, I saw "This work was first posted on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*" written inside. That's when I first found out about the site. When I browsed the works that were serialized there, I think my inspiration started from the admittedly pretty negative thought: "I bet no one will make fun of my work if I post it here."

How did you think up the setting for Mushoku Tensei?

At the time, reincarnation and displacement stories were getting popular, so I thought about how I could put my own spin on it, like, "If they're going to be reincarnated, then I better make the childhood part really solid, huh?" or "Maybe I'll make good use of the part of the story that takes place before they get reincarnated," or "If it was me, I'd do this." That kind of thing.

How did the character Rudeus first come into being?

While I was first thinking up the setting for *Mushoku Tensei*, I hadn't even decided on the protagonist's name yet. All I had at that point was "thirty-four years old, unemployed, middle-aged." The character was still empty. So when the time came that I needed to name the character, I reused one from a story I'd tried writing in the past. That work was actually a portal fantasy with Nanahoshi as the protagonist. There, Rudeus Greyrat was a native of the place Nanahoshi had been displaced to. He was still the viewpoint character but saw her from a native's point of view. For better or worse, he was a pretty flat character. Then, while I was writing the story with Rudeus as a protagonist, the idea of a Man with a Past Life came to me. From there, it became "Work hard in my new world and erase the regrets from my past life." I took the names for Zanoba, Cliff, Badigadi, and some others from a setting I'd thought up a while ago, too.

This isn't only the case on Shousetsuka ni Narou, but it's common for webnovels to be updated on a daily or weekly basis. You updated Mushoku Tensei almost every day—wasn't that difficult?

It was difficult, but more importantly, it was fun. And even beyond the writing itself being fun, I got responses from the readers soon after posting. I'd often reply to them, then think, "Hmm, what should I do for the next plot twist...?" and that became something of a cycle, so eventually it wasn't difficult at all. Though if you're wondering if I was writing new material every single day, then that's not quite right either. I'd write a chapter's worth and then divide it into parts, post the first bit, and while looking at the reader comments, I'd fine-tune what I planned to post the next day. That was my style.

What kind of writing routine did you have while the series was ongoing?

Every day I would wake up and comment on the responses I received, and in the afternoon, I would reread what I wanted to post that day and fine-tune it. After all that, it'd be about four o'clock, and then I'd work on the next chapter until seven, which is the time I set for the new post. That's about how it was.

After posting, I definitely didn't want to read the comment section! [laughs] I'd leave to go out and have fun for about two hours, and when I came home, I'd reply to the comments. That was about the cycle. As far as my daily writing quota, I aimed to write about 3,000 words a day, something like that. Looking back, I was really diligent.

You wrote at quite a fast pace! It was only two years from the debut of chapter one to completion.

There were times when it was really hard to write during those two years, but I made sure I never let my pen stop and just kept going. Or, should I say: When you keep on writing the same story, you get all these new ideas, like the layers of an entremets, and start wanting to write a new work. But if you start a new project, then the old one (in this case *Mushoku Tensei*) comes to a standstill, so I really reined myself in and held back on doing that. If I still wanted to write something different, then I'd make sure to keep it short—something I could finish writing in one or two days.

Please share some memories from back then.

To be honest, back when I started writing *Mushoku Tensei*, I didn't have a firm idea about what "erasing regrets from a past life" meant, and I was going to write a clichéd "I'll get reincarnated and have a blast because I've got overpowered abilities" story like you often see on *Narou*. But after I posted Chapter Four where Roxy appears, and Chapter Six where she tries to take Rudeus outside, the response was amazing. It shot up to number one in the daily rankings. After that, I decided to stick with this direction. If Roxy hadn't appeared in the story at that time, *Mushoku Tensei* might have been a story where Rudeus just uses his overpowered abilities to mow down enemies, and Rudeus's character as it stands now would never have been born.

You close the curtain on the Mushoku Tensei story at the point where Rudeus passes away, but was this what you had planned from the start?

I had a hard time deciding on the ending, but I did basically plan for it to end with Rudeus's death. Since he died at thirty-four in his past life, I originally thought, "I'll write until Rudeus is thirty-four." Only, infirmity at thirty-four isn't realistic, so I decided that the ending should be "the bracelet will accidentally come off when he's thirty-four and the Man-God will show him the future." Again, I thought Rudeus's story couldn't just be that he wins the battle and it's over. Since the prologue was the story of him getting kicked out of his house and dying, I didn't want it to end with him beating someone to a pulp. And so I had his final battle be against Geese, someone who isn't suited for battle, and decided on a direction where the ending was a destination Rudeus had been guided to by his connections to everyone he loved and cherished.

You don't have any plans to write about Rudeus's next battle, right?

Even if I were to continue Rudeus's story, I think it'd turn into something like "Man-God has recruited a new disciple, and...!" From a writer's point of view, that would feel like doing the same thing over again, and I'd find it difficult. And from the reader's point of view, it would also get tedious, so I'm not thinking about writing a continuation. I am satisfied with the current ending for *Mushoku Tensei*.

Rudeus is Mushoku Tensei's protagonist, but when you look at it from the perspective of this being just one story from the Six-Sided World, and that there are more battles with the Man-God waiting in the future, one could also say that Rudeus is something like a supporting character.

That's true. I don't remember when I decided to take this direction, but I wanted Rudeus to become someone whose name would remain etched in history—like eighty or a hundred years later, people would say, "There once was a legendary magician named Rudeus!" I actually once wrote another Six-Sided World story for a publisher's writing award contest, and Rudeus's name appears in that one, too. On the back of a flush toilet, to boot. A character that was warped to this world finds it and goes, "Who's Rudeus Greyrat, anyway?" It was that kind of story. Of course, reading it now would be really embarrassing

because it's so immature, but if I get the chance someday, I'd like to take another crack at it.

This original webnovel started serialization in November of 2012 and Volume One of the printed version went on sale in January of 2014. How did you feel when you learned that a physical print version would be published?

It was a time when a lot of works that had made the *Shousetsuka ni Narou* rankings kept getting publishing deals, so with *Mushoku Tensei* doing pretty well in the rankings, I mostly felt like, "Ah, it's finally time."

What difficulties did you run into getting ready for the light novel release?

It was my first experience with traditional publishing, so I didn't even know what would make the book better when revising the manuscript for print. It was pretty hard fumbling around with that while also trying not to drop the pace of updates for the web version. When a work is published online, you never know if you're going to get the whole story until the very day that it's finished, so I wasn't in the kind of mindset where I wanted to switch to the route of purely traditional publishing. It didn't feel right to leave my webnovel fans hanging. After all, a lot of the people who bought the print version are the same guys who'd been cheering me on since the early days of the webnovel. I didn't want them to think, "The webnovel updates are over, aren't they?" So I did my best to handle both of them at once.

You wrote a lot of new short stories as bonuses for both the light novel release and manga adaptation. Was there any special approach or focus you used for these?

A lot of the time, I had to write three or four of those for individual retailer bonuses, so I divided them pretty well between Roxy, Sylphie, and Eris. And then I wanted to make it so that you could enjoy them in the context of the material for Volumes One through Ten, so I tried to make sure that their content wouldn't intersect too much with the main storyline.

Please give us the impressions you had when it was decided that Shirotakasensei would do the illustrations.

Shirotaka-sensei creates beautiful art with a certain sense of openness, so I was a little uncertain whether it would be a good match for *Mushoku Tensei*, which has some sordid and sexual parts. But when I saw the first illustration of Roxy, I immediately thought, "I'm glad we went with Shirotaka-sensei." I don't know if Shirotaka-sensei grasped the essence of the series or what, but the illustrations for both the covers and the interiors got better and better as the volumes progressed. Shirotaka-sensei drew such nice stuff for us that every time a new volume came out, I'd think, "This illustration's got to be the best one so far."

What kind of meetings did you two have regarding the character designs?

I never had any direct communications with Shirotaka-sensei, but I wrote down things like the character's name, gender, and "they're kind of like this" on the character sheet. If there was an existing character that might be of use as a reference, I would attach that character to it. Stuff like that. But, you know, because it's a novel, there were characters that I didn't have any strong mental image for. Especially Orsted. I didn't have a firm image of him at all. The only thing I could think up was something like "kind of like a bird of prey." Maybe I put Shirotaka-sensei on the spot when I sent in such sparse character sheets? [laughs]

The first season of the Mushoku Tensei anime was broadcast back in 2021, but please give us the impressions you had when it was first decided that it would become an anime.

At the time I thought, "They're saying they're going to make it into an anime, but maybe it'll never get finished." And then, when the preview went live, there was this amazing response, and everyone expected such good things from it that it was even trending on Twitter. I was so grateful. I'm such a real-time person that I don't really watch anime, but while it was being broadcast, I was

live on Twitter and there was a whole bunch of tweets from the fans. It was a totally new experience for me.

Season 2 of the anime will air in 2023. Is there anything you're hoping for?

I'm actually involved in the production myself as the original author, but there are some differences between the novel and anime due to the differences inherent to both mediums. I figure I shouldn't have too many specific expectations, but I hope it will be just as good or even better than the first season.

Please let us hear your feelings regarding the completion of the printed version.

Naturally, I feel a lot of emotions. As I told you before, when I first received the publication offer, I did think, "This probably won't make it all the way to the end." Books always have cancellation looming over them, and I kept thinking, "There wouldn't be anyone who would go to the trouble of buying something they can just read for free on the web." I was told that it looked like they'd be able to publish the light novel all the way to the end around the time when Volume Seven came out, but at the time, it didn't really feel real. I am very grateful to everyone who cheered me on.

Is there anything you're hoping to do in the future, possibly beyond Mushoku Tensei?

For *Mushoku Tensei*, I would like to finish writing the story of what happens eighty years after Rudeus's death sometime before I die. Other than that, I've had this desire to go camping lately. I've collected a set of camping supplies and I hope to get out there when I have the chance.

To wrap things up, please share a word for your fans.

Thank you so very much for your patronage these past ten years!

The Illustrator Shirokata

When did you first begin illustrating?

I think I've been drawing ever since I became a sentient being. I would always draw characters I liked, and in elementary school, I liked to play by trading drawings with my classmates. I began to draw more seriously in the last year of junior high when I learned about Pixiv. There was lots of high-quality art there, and I thought, "It'd be fun if I could draw, too." That was how I really got started.

Please tell us the impetus that made you decide to become an illustrator.

After I learned about Pixiv, I vaguely started to think, "I want to find a way to draw for a living." I started coloring with the paints I used in school and did things like enter a contest to illustrate light novels being held back then. I didn't win, but I did win a few years later during a different opportunity. I slowly began to get work after that.

Please tell us about the works, genres, and artists that have influenced your work.

I've been influenced by a lot of people, but the way I draw now owes a lot to Kouhaku Kuroboshi's *Kino's Journey*. I really liked not just his cute girl characters but his wide range of alluring characters, scenery, small objects, and abstractly expressed illustrations. In terms of fantasy works, I've been influenced by the *Final Fantasy* series, the *Rune Factory* series, and similar. Those are the games I was crazy about when I was a child.

Is there something you pay special attention to when creating illustrations?

Lately, I've been trying to do about fifteen minutes of sketching before I start

work. Even if I only do it for a short time, I get an idea about the state of my art, what's going well and what isn't, and so on. It feels like my hand moves along better, so I make it a daily habit.

Please give us the impressions you had when you read Mushoku Tensei for the first time.

I started reading it with the thought, "I guess it's a story about living an isekai life with cute girls, maybe?" and so I was really surprised when everyone got displaced to the Demon Continent. I was drawn into the allure of the work through plot twists like how Rudeus, who experiences another world's difference in values through Ruijerd and manages to create good relationships—how he doesn't just have a simple parent-child fight with Paul, how the state of Eris's heart couldn't be understood from Rudeus's point of view, and more events that came later. The story became something more like a period drama, and there was a freshness to watching a character's entire life unfold over the course of the story.

What kind of direction did you receive for the illustrations?

The covers and detailed nuances of the character designs were created during meetings, but it was very hard to decide on the cover for the first volume. It was a real struggle. After that, it was decided that a frontispiece similar to a family picture would be used, and that throughout the series, each cover should depict a single scene from the work. That was the direction we went with.

How did you decide on the layout for the covers and other illustrations for each volume?

I would have a meeting with the editor in charge and receive guidelines for the characters, situations and a general layout of what I should draw. I worked while taking special care to create a scene that wasn't too similar to any previous volume and to capture the characters they wanted. *Mushoku Tensei* has a great many characters, so there were times where I had to add one that

wasn't in the scene, which was difficult. In situations like that, I would use things like movie poster designs as a reference. I'd say Volumes Fifteen and Twenty-Five are pretty clear examples of this approach.

Please tell us of any illustrations you particularly like from among those you've created up to now.

The family picture-style illustrations from Volumes One, Thirteen, and Twenty-Six were difficult to draw, but I like them very much. I think they're attractive because of the essence of *Mushoku Tensei*. I am floored by Rifujin na Magonote-sensei and the editor who gave me direction. They're amazing! Aside from the original works, I also like the cover for *Recollections*. I was able to cram in decorations and small items that I don't usually have enough time to include in normal illustrations because of time constraints. Unlike the covers for other volumes, I didn't have detailed directions, and the required characters were pretty much only Rudeus, so I was able to illustrate with a different feel than before, which was a lot of fun.

Are there any elements of the way you draw that changed as you progressed from volume to volume?

Across eight years of publication, your own tastes and drawing abilities will inevitably change, so I think the impressions you get from the first volume and the twenty-sixth volume are different. So that the readers who look at them don't get confused, I take it to heart not to change fundamental parts of the design, but staring at my own illustrations too much kind of numbs my artistic senses, so it does bother me when I wonder how it really looks to the readers.

Please give us the impressions you had regarding the characters you designed, or any interesting vignettes from the production period.

Rudeus

The beauty mark under his left eye is there because I wanted to put in a physical detail that the reincarnated person's parents would immediately recognize as coming from them. This was after I imagined how a parent with a child whose soul comes from another world would feel. So, I remember putting the beauty mark in the same place as Paul's. Rudy's inner self and outer self as written in the story each have such a different impression that it was hard for me to get a clear image. I'll admit I experienced a lot of indecision over this character design.

Roxy

At first, I thought she should have a more unfashionable, wizard-style kind of robe. However, Roxy is also the first major heroine introduced, so there was a part of me that wanted her to wear a cute outfit. So I designed her with white clothes that made her blue hair stand out beautifully and a skirt length that's neither too short nor too long.

Sylphiette

When I was reading the original work, I really thought she was a boy until her gender was revealed, so I figured it was important to make it hard for the readers to tell, too. I took giving her an androgynous look to heart. I remember putting a lot of care into how her hair curled at the ends.

Eris

I designed her with the most upturned eyes that I could draw at the time, so that she'd look just as fierce as she seems in the text.

Rudy's Children

I already had their parents designed, so when I designed the children, I just picked whatever features I wanted them to inherit. It was a process that I'd never used before, so it felt fresh. There are children that I've given some of Paul and Phillip's features to as well—it would make me happy if you try to work out who resembles whom.

The Demon Race

Before I received the job for *Mushoku Tensei*, I mainly designed pretty bishoujo-type characters, so designing the demons involved continuous trial and error. The blend of Geese's human and monkey characteristics, the balance of Badigadi's muscles, the equipped armor and weapons for characters like Perugius—for things like that, I would buy books that looked like they might work as references and molded them piece by piece.

Characters Designed for Fujikawa Yuka-sensei

Because Nanahoshi's sailor uniform, Marta, and the Sacred Beast appeared earlier in the manga version than in the novels, I used Fujikawa-sensei's designs! The Sacred Beast sure is cute!

Elinalise

She is mainly an adventurer in appearance, but I feel like I did a good job of including the dress-like aspects of her portrayal.

Fitz

In the early roughs, the shape of the sunglasses was a basic square, but after I received some feedback, they took on their current shape. I wondered about not being able to see the heroine's eyes at all, so I remember taking care to draw them slightly translucent so that, while you couldn't discern the eye color, you could still just barely read her expression.

Linia, Pursena

These characters had some dynamic poses, so it was very fun to draw them. As for the design, I also like the balance they strike when they are next to each other.

Ariel

I couldn't decide how to differentiate her from the other beautiful characters, as she is an unrivaled beauty and a person of great charisma. So I made Ariel the only character with white eyelashes and tried to make her face give a striking impression in the illustrations.

Blessed Child of Memory

This is a rare brightly colored character for me. She was supposed to be a chubby character, so I changed the balance of her silhouette. Looking back at her design now, I think I went a little too far, but I like it because it was challenging and a rare chance to draw that kind of physicality in a more balanced way.

Alexander

In my first roughs, I turned in a more boyish design. The character concept was, "Acts like the protagonist of a shonen manga even though he's too old for it," so they wanted me to make him older, and that's how the current design came about. Making him look older lent the character an exquisite sense of cringe and the design gained more depth; I was surprised at how on point the revision directions were.

Beginning with Rudeus, the characters of Mushoku Tensei grow older over the course of the story. Did you pay particular attention to anything regarding the way the characters age visually?

At first, I focused on the eyes and the bridges of the nose, adjusting the contours of their faces each time, but the changes were too scant and hard to notice with just those details. Take Rudeus, for example. Depending on his age, the length of his trousers and the length of his hair at the nape differ. I designed him so you could see the changes reflected in his clothes and hair. Out of all the changes, it was hardest to draw the difference between characters in their twenties and their forties. When I drew Lilia and Zenith on the cover of Volume Thirteen, I still didn't have enough artistic skill to show their ages, and I feel bad about that. In contrast, on the cover of Volume Twenty-Six, I blended small wrinkles in with color. I think that's a pretty good way to show them getting older.

The Mushoku Tensei anime series started in 2021. What were the impressions you had about the anime while it was airing?

The way the images move, the cast's voices, the music that streams through—it was all wonderful. I think that projects where a lot of people come together to make something are truly amazing. I really like the sense of world and place that you can feel through the depiction of scenery, small items, background characters, and so on. I went crazy looking forward to the opening each and every time.

Is there anything you're hoping to do in the future, possibly beyond Mushoku Tensei?

I would like to make a creative book where I decide on the setting and theme. And ever since seeing the *Mushoku Tensei* anime, I've been wanting to try having my own illustrations move. I also have an interest in 3D, so you could say there are a lot of things I'd like to challenge myself with.

To wrap things up, please share a word for your fans.

I believe it's all thanks to the way the fans love and cheer on Rifujin na Magonote's wonderful work that it was published all the way through to the end.

I was completely overawed and very honored to be a part of such a beloved series. There are a lot of developments still to come with the manga and anime series, so I hope I will be able to enjoy them with everyone. Truly, congratulations on the completion! Thank you!





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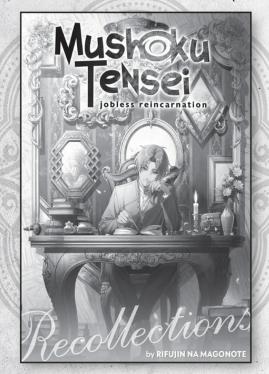
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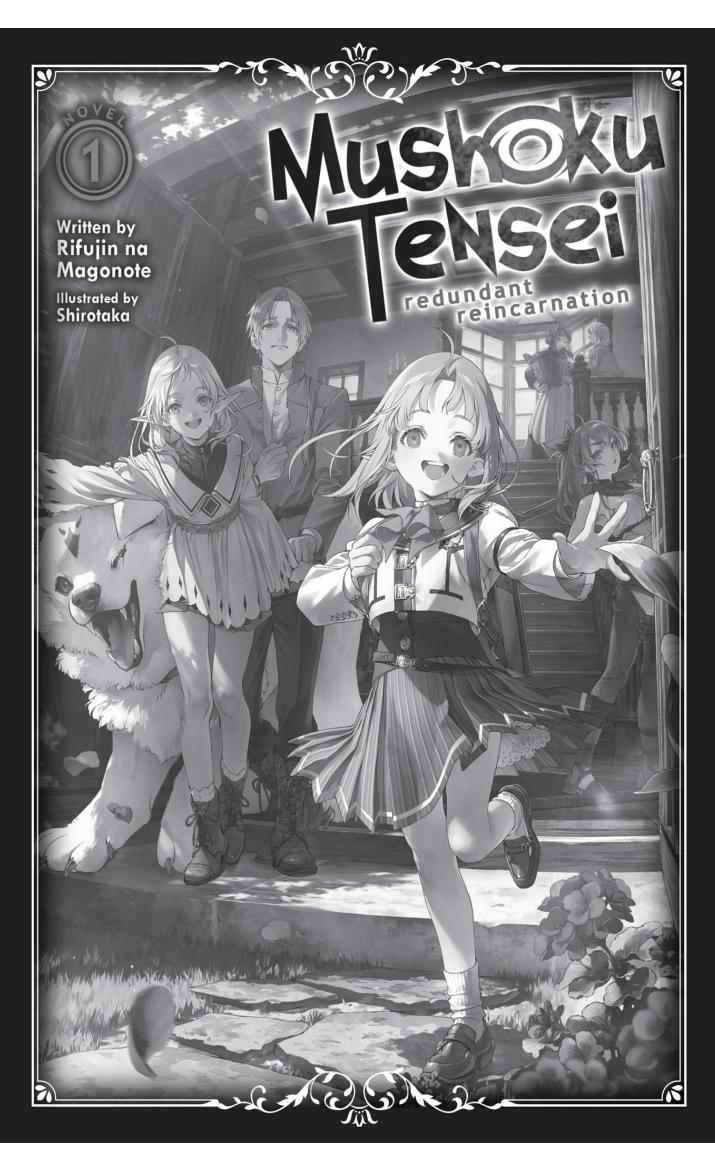


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