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NOVEL
14

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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Mushoku Tensei

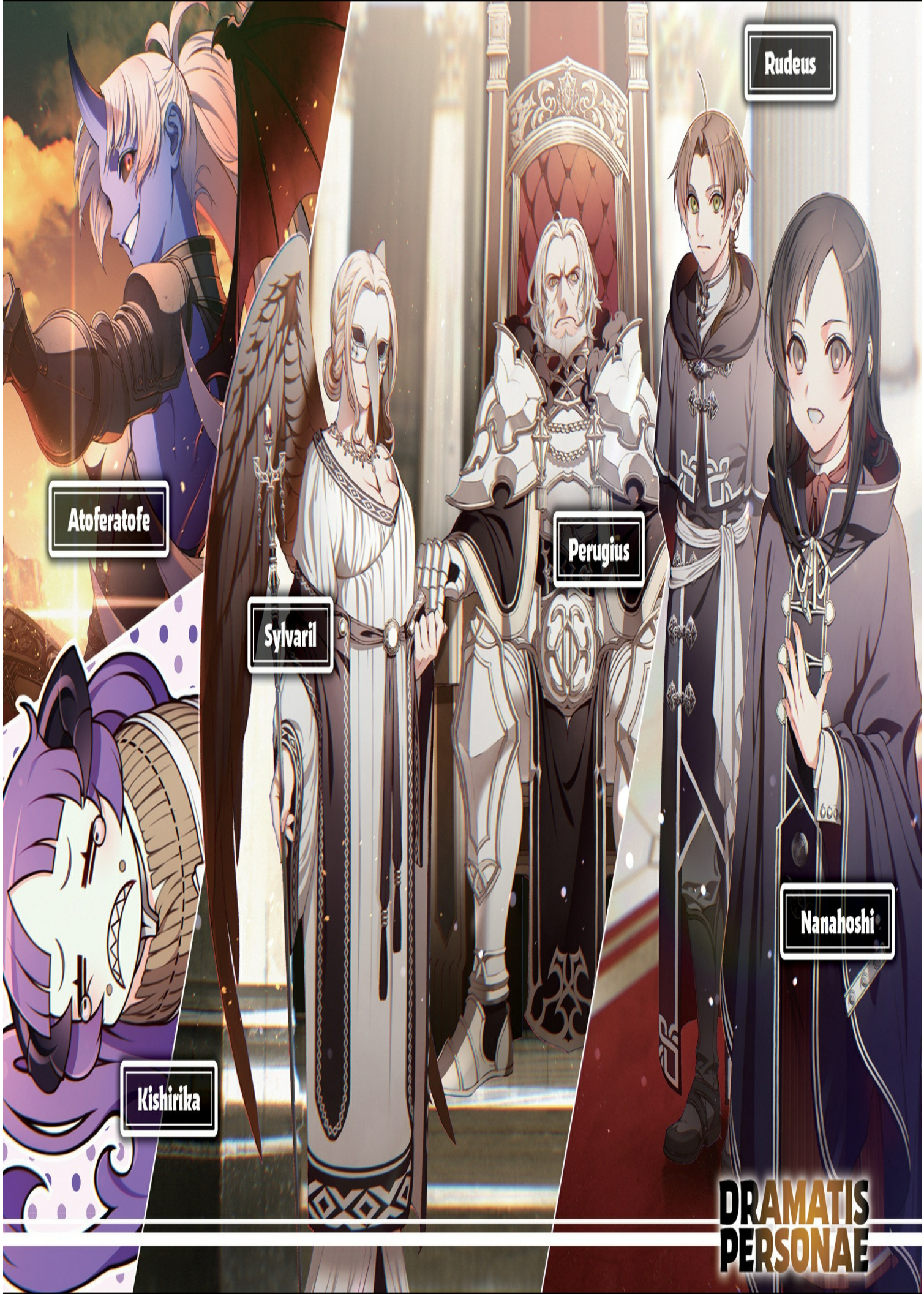
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Rudeus

Atoferatofe

Sylvaril

Perugius

Nanahoshi

Kishirika

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

A full-page illustration of a blue-skinned, white-haired demon king. He has small horns and red eyes, and is wearing detailed blue armor. He holds a large sword with a red scabbard and ornate silver hilt. The background is a dramatic sky with clouds and a bright sun. The text "I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak!" is written in red in the upper right corner.

**"I am Immortal
Demon King
Atoferatofe
Rybak!"**

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Magonote

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Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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"I'm not trying hard enough? It only looks that way to you because your goals lie elsewhere."

—It's because I'm seeking what
a shut-in's goals should be.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:

Floating Fortress

ON FOOT, our journey would take a half-day going north from the Magic City of Sharia, but it was just an hour on horseback. Our destination was some old ruins—the remnants of a stronghold.

Debris was scattered across the ground, vestiges of some stone flooring. Thick stone pillars lay toppled. It was like looking at the Parthenon, except the years had been less kind to this place. No doubt at one period, it was a majestic sight to behold, but now it was little more than an echo of history.

“These are the remains of the Scott Fortress. The humans built it during Laplace’s War. They say there were a thousand humans who barricaded themselves in to oppose the demons’ invasion. Sadly, they were no match for them, and the fortress was eventually captured.”

This helpful explanation came via the woman beside me, a blonde with braided hair. She had an innocent look and was clad in a luxurious travel outfit. Even from afar, you could tell Ariel Anemoi Asura was a peerless beauty who oozed charisma.

Wait, could she be directing that explanation at me?

I kept my mouth shut and glanced around me. Luke and Sylphie were immediately behind us, with Roxy, Zanoba, Cliff, and Elinalise bringing up the rear. Nanahoshi was in front, leading our group. Ariel’s gaze was fixed upon me, and there was no one between us. I was right; she *was* talking to me. We’d recently traveled with some Ranoan nobility for a bit, but the two of us had never really talked, hence my confusion.

“You sure are knowledgeable, Princess,” I said finally.

She gave me a soft smile. “It’s depicted in a lot of the folk songs in this area.”

“I didn’t know you had an interest in folk songs.”

“Making connections with the local nobility requires that I be familiar with

them,” Ariel answered matter-of-factly. Knowledge of old tales was apparently essential for cozying up to the upper class. *That must be a lot of work.*

“But are you sure we can get to Lord Perugia from here?”

“That’s a good question. I have no idea how it works, but...” I paused, looking at Nanahoshi ahead of us. She was shouldering an enormous backpack and having a rough time walking, thanks to the rubble. Even so, she kept on trucking without a backward glance. I was following her lead, but I wondered how she planned to get to Perugia from here. As far as I could remember, my readings on teleportation magic made no mention about such circles around here. Or maybe there was one, but it hadn’t been noted because it was hidden. “I’m more worried about whether he’ll be annoyed by how many people we’re bringing.”

Ariel chuckled. “Lord Rudeus, you say some amusing things. This is the hero who earned himself the title of ‘king,’ you know. Our small group will hardly faze him.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I glanced around, mentally ticking off each person in our group: Nanahoshi, me, Ariel, Sylphie, Luke, Roxy, Zanoba, Cliff, and Elinalise. That made nine of us, enough to be a large family unit. Although royalty might not consider it such a big crowd. They often entertained dozens of guests at once, so a group of fewer than ten probably wouldn’t faze them.

Norn had turned down my invitation; she was too busy with school. She had said she would work hard to balance studying swordsmanship with being a member of the student council. Maybe that factored into her refusal. However, if I’d brought her with us, I’d probably have had to bring Aisha too. That would have made us a party of eleven, definitely a crowd. I didn’t feel comfortable taking that many people to meet someone I didn’t really know.

“Lord Perugia spends his days in seclusion now, but after Laplace’s War, he lived in Asura Kingdom for a time. The people there think of him as an equal to their own king. It’s said he once brought a hundred servants with him when he visited the palace. Someone like that would hardly bat an eyelash at a tiny group of nine people,” said Ariel.

“I guess so.”

In a completely unrelated tangent, Ariel’s voice sure was pleasant to listen to. It was surely natural to be annoyed when visitors came knocking with no prior notice, yet Ariel’s words made it sound as if everything would be perfectly fine. It was honestly disconcerting. Her voice was like the devil’s whisper.

I glanced over at the princess. “If he was fed up with life at the palace, then maybe he doesn’t like the concept of visitors at all.”

“Were that the case, Lady Nanahoshi would not have agreed to let me come along.”

“I don’t really think she puts that much thought into it,” I mumbled, recalling the circumstances that led Ariel to join our group in the first place...

When Nanahoshi first mentioned Perugius, I felt as excited as a little kid on the morning of my birthday. This was the Armored Dragon King we were talking about. I knew all about him. I’d read a book about him, not long after I reincarnated into this world.

Perugius was a hero from Laplace’s War 400 years ago. According to what I read, he could control twelve familiars, had restored an ancient floating fortress to its former glory, and had even fought Laplace himself with his comrades. After Laplace was sealed, people sang his praises so much that the new calendar was named “Armored Dragon” after him.

Although Perugius was known as the Armored Dragon King, he had no territory over which to rule. He eventually left the Asuran palace and began traveling the world in his floating fortress, Chaos Breaker. We were actually going to meet this man from the legends. I couldn’t shake my anticipation. *I mean, we’re going to visit the castle in the sky, Laputa!*

True, I was busy enough between being a parent and conducting my own research, but I still really wanted to go. *Sorry, Lucie, your daddy’s no match for his own curiosity. But I promise I’ll bring something back for you!* And so I decided to tag along with Nanahoshi.

While I inwardly battled with my own selfishness, Sylphie wasn’t nearly as

conflicted. Instead, she asked, “Would it be all right if I brought Princess Ariel along?”

“Ariel?” Nanahoshi scrunched up her expression.

Said princess had tried soliciting Nanahoshi’s favor a number of times. After all, Nanahoshi controlled a large trade pipeline between Asura Kingdom and Ranoa Kingdom. Of course, Ariel wanted the girl in her pocket. Problem was, Nanahoshi wanted as little to do with this world as possible, which was why she acted annoyed at everything in it.

Actually, that’s not acting. I think she really is annoyed.

“Yes,” said Sylphie. “Lord Perugius has lived in seclusion for many years now, but the Asuran court still reveres him. Princess Ariel is...well, considering her plans for the future, I think she’d like to meet him.”

Ariel had cultivated connections in a number of places for purposes of eventually taking the Asuran crown. In fact, she had spent years now making such preparations, but her chances were about as good as a coin toss. Not a very safe bet, if you asked me. The princess would be graduating next year, but I had no idea what she planned to do after that. Maybe she would continue to sit on her hands and accumulate more power, or maybe she would go back to the capital in Asura to seize the throne. I would help if she chose the latter, but honestly speaking, I was feeling a bit less enthused now that I was married and had a child. I wanted to keep my involvement at a level where it wouldn’t negatively impact my family if at all possible.

Well, my feelings aside, Sylphie’s proposal was probably another attempt to help Ariel with her connections. If Ariel could get the backing of Armored Dragon King Perugius, a man revered as a hero in Asura Kingdom, it would make her struggle for the crown easier.

“Well, I do owe you for all you’ve done...” Nanahoshi shrugged. “Sure, why not. You can bring her.”

Considering how obvious Ariel’s ambitions were, I figured Nanahoshi would turn her down, but she agreed readily. Apparently, Sylphie had looked after Nanahoshi while I was gone. That included sharing food, providing her with clothing, and casting detoxification magic on her when she got sick. Nanahoshi

had rarely come over since Lucie's birthday, but Sylphie said she used our bath a lot before then.

Sylphie pumped a fist and smiled. "Really? Thank you. Princess Ariel will be delighted."

And that was how Ariel and Luke ended up joining us. Sylphie said Ariel was unusually enthusiastic about it. I guess being a princess didn't stop her from being excited to meet someone so famous. Even I was psyched. I mean, this was a real live hero we were talking about. The kind you only heard about in books. I couldn't wait to see what kind of person he was. Hopefully not a cranky one.

Come to think of it...

I suddenly remembered I had met one of his subordinates a long time ago, before the Displacement Incident. The man called himself Arumanfi the Bright. He thought I was the mastermind behind the Displacement Incident and tried to attack me. Although Ghislaine managed to talk him down, and I didn't get the impression that he was a bad person. Still, considering he tried to kill me out of nowhere, there was something undeniably dangerous about him. Who knew if his master, Perugia, would be any better? The thought made me nervous.

Okay, but just because his subordinate flew off the handle doesn't mean he will.

Plus, it seemed like Perugia had a premonition of what was about to happen and tried to stop the Displacement Incident before it occurred. If so, he deserved all the praise in the world. Although trying to kill an innocent in the process...

Well, whatever. The past is the past. I'll let bygones be bygones. No good would come out of acting hostile to someone I was meeting for the first time. Forgiveness was important.

"We're here."

While I was lost in thought, Nanahoshi finally stopped our group as we reached the center of the ruins. There was absolutely nothing here. Or so I thought. Upon closer inspection, I noticed a stone buried beneath the rubble that was perfect for sitting on. It was a monument, actually. One with a glowing

emblem that represented a fearsome bunch—the Seven Great Powers. These types of monuments were scattered all over the world, but who knew we’d find one here?

All the same, it wasn’t a magic circle. Perhaps there was a door somewhere that would pop open, revealing stairs that led down to a teleportation circle. Or maybe the monument itself had some kind of warp mechanism installed. Or maybe we just needed to recite some magic words and the stone would automatically teleport us. “So what are we going to do now that we’re here?”

“Call him.” Nanahoshi shrugged off her backpack and fished through it for a metal whistle. She placed it against her lips and blew hard. “Fsssh...”

No sound came out, only air. *Is this a dog whistle or something?*

“I’m not hearing anything?” Cliff narrowed his eyes, skeptical.

“It’s a sound normal people can’t perceive, but he should come now.” Nanahoshi sat herself on one of the many stones scattered around us.

A sound normal people can’t hear, but somehow Perugius can hear it from here? Either that means this flute is a magic item or Perugius is a dog.

“Cliff.” Elinalise’s expression turned grim as she addressed him.

“What is it?”

“Just a little forewarning: someone may say something demeaning to you while we’re there, but you mustn’t lose your cool and mouth off. All right?”

He scowled, pouting like a little kid who’d just been scolded by his mother about his studies. “I know that. I’m not a child.”

Elinalise nestled against him and whispered something in his ear. Cliff’s expression relaxed, which either meant she was telling him sweet nothings or she’d apologized.

“I am anxious to see what kind of statues reside within the floating fortress!” Zanoba declared.

Ever the enthusiast. The moment he learned we would be going to visit Perugius, he’d said, “We should take the opportunity to show Lord Perugius our creations.” Then he stuffed a number of figures I’d made (including the Ruijerd

one) into a box to take with us. I had no idea if we would really get an opportunity or not, but Zanoba planned to advertise our business to Perugia, just as I had shown off my work to Badigadi. He sure was passionate about our work.

Julie and Ginger weren't with us. Julie was staying behind in Zanoba's room, and Zanoba had ordered Ginger to act as a bodyguard for my family. Not that they were in any kind of danger, but at least she could provide assistance if they needed anything. I was sure Ginger's true wish was to be by Zanoba's side, but it was at least reassuring to know I had someone to look after my family while I was gone.

"Try not to push your interests on him too much. We are talking about someone who's lived for over 400 years," I said.

"Bwahaha! Lord Badi has lived even longer than that. Anyone who has lived that long would have to appreciate the fine quality of your figures, Master."

"If you say so..." I tilted my head. "Hm?"

A light appeared in the distance.

"He's here," mumbled Nanahoshi.

A figure appeared before us a split second later. It was almost instantaneous, in the blink of an eye.

The man had blond hair and was dressed in what looked like a white school uniform. He was likely very handsome, but his face was hidden beneath a yellow mask that resembled a fox. A long dagger hung by his side. He looked exactly as I remembered.

"Arumanfi the Bright, at your service," he said.

It really was uncanny, how abruptly he appeared. One moment he wasn't here, and then there he was in the middle of our group. He probably flew from their floating fortress at the speed of light. He did the same when I first met him, back before the entire Fittoa Region disappeared.

Our group went silent. Arumanfi briefly glanced my way. I wondered if he remembered me. Part of me feared he might attack me again. I secretly

activated my Demon Eye, tightening my grip on my staff. However, Arumanfi didn't seem to recognize me at all, much to my relief. His gaze passed over the rest of our party before he walked over to Nanahoshi.

"There's quite a few of you," he said. He must have been tallying our numbers.

Nanahoshi nodded. "Yes, there is, but that's not a problem, is it? He said I could bring a party of ten."

"The number of people isn't an issue. However..." His gaze landed on Roxy. "The demon is."

"Wh-what? Why?" Roxy looked like a cat who'd been splashed with freezing cold water.

"We don't allow demons on our floating fortress."

"O-oh, is that right..." Roxy's shoulders slumped forward. She was crushed.

During Laplace's War, Perugius had fought the demons. Perhaps he still held a grudge against them. War tended to leave its mark on people's hearts. "Is there no way you can make an exception?"

"Lord Perugius is a very magnanimous man, but he hates demons."

I had nearly forgotten such discrimination existed, because most people weren't particularly prejudiced toward demons in this region. But the same could not be said for the rest of the world. Perugius might be a man from legend, but he was also a participant in the war. Just as Ruijerd bore the mental scars from those events, perhaps Perugius did as well. Still, I did feel bad for Roxy, since she was the only one who couldn't come along.

"No, it's fine," said Roxy. Her shoulders sank in defeat. "If that's how it is, I'll stay behind. Besides, I was a bit afraid to see Per—*Lord* Perugius anyway, and I still have my work as a professor here. This is for the best."

Although she was giving up, she couldn't hide the disappointment on her face. A part of her clearly wanted to come with us. Still, she forced a smile as she turned toward me, trying to be reassuring. "It's okay, Rudeus. I'll take care of everything back home."

“All right, but I’ll bring you a souvenir.”

She tugged down the brim of her hat so it would hide her face. After a short pause, she mumbled, as if in jest, “I don’t need any souvenirs. Give me a big hug when you get home and that will be enough for me.”

I threw my arms around her, holding her close for a whole ten seconds. Her heart started drumming hard, and I had to pull away before my atomic bazooka reloaded itself.

“Th-thank you...”

“No,” I said, “thank *you*.”

Roxy’s cheeks turned red as she fidgeted. She smiled, despite her embarrassment, as the two of us pulled away. *Once I get back home, we’ll do all that and more.*

“Finished?” Arumanfi asked. He had made his way over while the two of us were sharing a heartfelt farewell. Now that my hands weren’t otherwise preoccupied, he handed me a baton. I glanced around and realized everyone else had one.

“Keep a hold of that,” he said.

I grasped the object. It was metal, about 20 centimeters long, with a complex pattern carved into its surface. There was a magic crystal on either end. Most likely a magical implement.

“So what do I do while holding it?”

“You need only hold it,” he said. “Lord Perugia will use teleportation magic to bring all of you to his fortress.”

So this item was imbued with teleportation magic? Was there really such a thing? If so, that was awfully convenient. *I thought they said humans couldn’t be summoned? Wait, maybe it’s fine, since this isn’t summoning magic. What’s the difference between the two, anyway?*

“How are we supposed to get back once we’re done?”

“You will return the same way, for the most part,” Arumanfi answered casually.

That means there's some way for them to teleport us back here. Lucie would be an adult by the time we got back if we had to return on foot. It was a relief to know that wouldn't be happening.

"Does everyone have one of these? Make sure you're holding it with your bare hands."

I looked at my left hand. Since it was artificial, there was no way to grip onto the baton with *two* bare hands.

Nanahoshi surveyed us to make sure we had followed the instructions and nodded at Arumanfi. "It appears everyone is ready."

"Very well. Wait just a moment." He bobbed his head and was a flash of light disappearing into the distance in the next moment. Most likely racing back to the fortress to tell Perugius we were ready to be summoned.

"This is kind of exciting," Ariel said, grinning at Sylphie.

"Yeah, it is."

Sylphie was right. The princess was certainly more energetic than usual.

Anyway, teleportation, huh? If something went wrong, we might be warped off to who-knows-where. Living legend though he might be, Perugius was still a person, and people made mistakes. *Hoo boy, this is kinda scary.*

"Hm?"

While I was imagining the worst-case scenario, heat began coursing through the baton in my hands. The warmth transferred to my hands and it felt like I was being yanked toward it. I wondered what would happen if I let go. No doubt, the teleportation magic would fail. But the sensation was so sudden, it wouldn't have surprised me if someone else dropped the baton instinctively.

"Huh?"

I glanced around and realized everyone else was already gone. No—not everyone. Sylphie peered over at me a second before she vanished. Only Roxy and myself remained.

Um? Did they leave me behind?

The second doubt began to creep in, I found my consciousness being absorbed into the baton.

By the time I realized what was happening, everything around me was white. It was an empty space devoid of all color. An invisible string yanked me along at an unbelievable speed. It was like someone was using a power winch to reel in their fishing line, and I was the fresh catch hooked on the other end, whizzing through the air. In the distance, I caught a glimpse of Sylphie being similarly pulled along by this invisible force. *Is this what it feels like to be on the opposite end of summoning magic?*

More importantly, this setting seemed familiar. I'd seen it before...but where?

That's right, the Man God!

I never thought much about it, but now I saw that this place resembled the area I saw when I met the Man God in my dreams. Except in those dreams, I was always in my former body. This time, I was still Rudeus, with my robes flapping around me as I soared forward.

An enormous light lay waiting ahead. It was woven into a mysterious and complex magical circle, and it sucked me in as I approached.

The next time I opened my eyes, there was solid ground beneath me again.

"Phew!"

I sucked in a breath. It was like being startled awake from a dream. Had I lost consciousness at some point? No, that wasn't it. I remembered flying through a great expanse of nothingness.

"So this is Perugia's summoning magic, huh?"

It was a peculiar sensation. The last time I felt this was during the Displacement Incident. Back then, I'd also felt like I was soaring through the air. There was a difference this time, however: a sense of stability. The calamity was like a train running off its tracks. This time was more like a taxi—one that safely delivered me to the correct location.

“That sure felt familiar,” Sylphie whispered to me.

Evidently, I wasn’t alone in feeling this way. “Yeah, it did,” I said, glancing around at our group. Ariel, Luke, Zanoba, Cliff, Elinalise, and Nanahoshi. Everyone was here. Except for Nanahoshi and Elinalise, they all looked absolutely baffled by what they had just experienced. At least they were all safe.

“This magic circle is huge,” Cliff mumbled.

It was only then that I realized what we were standing on. Beneath us was an enormous magic circle about twenty meters wide. It was carved directly into a beautiful marble floor. Water ran through the engraved pattern, emitting a faint light. It was most likely imbued with some type of magic. The water aside, I had seen this same kind of light before—back in the ruins we used to get to Begaritt. In other words, it was a type of teleportation circle.

“Wow...”

What really stole my attention wasn’t the pattern beneath us but the enormous castle in front of us. It had to be at least fifty stories tall, and just as wide, its form massive and imposing. Surely, the interior would be no less majestic. I racked my brain for a comparison from my previous life, but nothing of similar size came to mind. The closest I could think of was if you took Tokyo Dome and slapped a castle on top of it.

So this is a floating fortress. I had seen it from the ground before, but I never realized what a behemoth it was. Even from afar, it was no less impressionable.

“Amazing.” Sylphie’s jaw dropped. “It’s larger than the Asuran palace.”

An expansive garden sprawled before the hulking structure. It had enough trees and colorful flowers that it could be a maze. A canal ran in front of it, its water sparkling in the light. You could tell the place was well taken care of, even from a distance.

“R-Rudy, behind us,” Sylphie squeaked.

“Hm?” I looked behind me. On the other side of the circle was a metal fence. Beyond that was a sea of pure white. “Clouds, huh?”

I had taken a plane once, in elementary school in my previous life. This scene resembled my memories from back then, although it was different seeing it in person instead of peering at it through a window. There was something deeply moving about staring at the clouds like this.

Cliff and Luke were both gaping. Even Ariel's eyes were round with surprise as she peeked over the railing, taking in the sea of white below us. Everyone was struck speechless by the view. I could hardly blame them. Airplanes didn't exist in this world, nor was mountain hiking a concept. There was no other way to experience something like this.

Sylphie clutched at my robe.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm *really* not good with high places." Her legs were trembling.

Had she really agreed to come along to a flying castle despite her fear of heights? She sure was determined. If she lost her balance, I'd be sure to catch her and carry her.

"I do hope the view from our floating fortress is to your liking," said an unfamiliar voice from behind us.

I spun around. A woman stood just outside the lines of the circle, still as a statue. She had shoulder-length platinum blonde hair, and her face was hidden beneath a white bird mask. It was hard to say if she was beautiful or not, but she clearly had a woman's figure. Her clothes were all white, and she held a staff topped with a magic stone that was black and mostly opaque. *I bet that cost a pretty penny.* Not that an item's only value was its financial worth, but that thing still had to be expensive. Even more than my own beloved staff.

That said, the most notable part of her appearance was neither her clothes nor her staff. It was the enormous jet-black wings protruding from her back.

"One of the skyfolk...?"

Her wings had a commanding presence about them, yet the woman was so quiet as she stood there that we hadn't noticed her. It was truly bizarre.

As soon as we had her attention, she tipped her head in a bow. As unversed in

etiquette as I was, I could still tell how polished her every movement was. “I extend my heartfelt welcome to all of you. I am the first of Lord Perugius’s servants, Sylvaril of the Void. I will be the one guiding you all around our floating fortress, Chaos Breaker.”

“I am Luke Notos Greyrat, knight of Asura’s second princess, Ariel Anemoi Asura. It’s a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. We look forward to seeing more of your magnificent fortress.” Luke stood in front of Ariel as he offered his own polite greeting, smiling softly at Sylvaril.

Why’s he smiling at her like that? It’s not like she has giant jugs. Not that they’re particularly small either. Is that his preference? Nah, that can’t be it. He’s probably just being polite.

“I am Ariel Anemoi Asura, the second princess of the Asura Kingdom.” Ariel pinched the edge of her skirt, giving a slow curtsy. Her movements were so graceful that I would never be able to imitate them.

Nonetheless, the rest of us also introduced ourselves similarly. Cliff and Zanoba conducted themselves in the same refined manner as the other nobility. I was probably the most ignorant of our group when it came to proper etiquette.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet all of you,” Sylvaril responded politely, her voice betraying nothing of her inner emotions.

“It’s been a while, Miss Sylvaril.” Nanahoshi was the last to speak up, nodding her head in greeting.

“Indeed, Lady Nanahoshi. It’s good to see...well, no, it seems you aren’t in very good health, are you?”

“Not at my best, but I’m all right.”

Their exchange was rather brief, but if the amicable atmosphere was any indication, the two were on good terms.

“Well, then. Follow me, everyone.” Sylvaril turned on her heel and strode forward, her footsteps utterly silent. Her head didn’t bob as she moved, and her garments were so long that they hid her feet. It was like watching a ghost drift along.

Nanahoshi didn't bat an eyelash as she trailed behind Sylvaril, so the rest of us followed her lead.

Sylvaril took the path that cut straight through the garden. A gate made of stone loomed ahead, one resembling a triumphal arch. As we approached, Zanoba hummed in appreciation. "Ahh, what a stunning relief!"

Although he was only really interested in dolls and figures, he was still fairly knowledgeable about other forms of art. Perhaps because they all had something in common. On the other hand, I had no way of judging these kinds of designs. *Well, if Zanoba is that impressed, I'm sure it must be pretty incredible. He doesn't normally act so awed about anything that's not a figurine or something similar.*

I followed his gaze and looked up. "Oh, wow..." Intricate reliefs were chiseled across the entire surface of the gate, the fine patterns extending even to the underside of the arch. One couldn't resist gawking up at it. We stared as we walked, and Sylvaril chimed in with an explanation.

"This gate was created by Abyssal Dragon King Maxwell. Lord Maxwell has a talent for magical construction and craftsmanship. One of his other creations is the Holy Country of Millis's white palace—"

"Whoooooa!" Zanoba gasped.

Sylvaril paused and turned around. "Is something the matter?"

"I-I must ask! Where is Master Maxwell right now?!" Zanoba's voice came out in a high-pitched squeak as he trembled, his eyes fixed on one particular part of the gate. What was up with him? I had no idea what he was looking at.

"Lord Maxwell is the wandering type," Sylvaril answered. "Assuming he hasn't already passed away, he is probably out venturing somewhere."

"Oh, that is a shame. Such a magnificent man... If only I had the chance to meet him..." Zanoba could barely contain his excitement. Well, to be honest, it wasn't like he was trying.



“May we continue?” Sylvaril asked.

“Oh, yes, of course. My apologies. I was simply moved by the greatness of his work.”

“Truly? In that case, you may find a number of splendid pieces inside the fortress. I hope you’ll take your time and enjoy them while you’re here.” I guessed she was smiling beneath that mask.

Zanoba scuttled over to me and whispered in my ear, “Master, did you see it?”

“I did.”

“This is an enormous discovery. It’s good we came. We owe Master Nanahoshi a huge debt of gratitude.”

What was this discovery he was going on about? *Seems like I wasn’t looking at the same part of the relief he was.*

“Sorry,” I said, “I have no idea what it is you seem to have found. Tell me about it later.”

Zanoba’s face fell. “Unbelievable. To think that my master would overlook such a pivotal piece of information...” Dejected, he fell in step behind me. *Sorry, I just don’t have the artistic eye for things that you do.*

“Hm?”

As we passed through the gate, white particles suddenly started falling from Sylphie’s body as she walked ahead of me. In fact, those same particles were falling from my body as well.

“Oh?” Sylvaril paused again, turning to face us. Her mask hid her expression, but her demeanor had noticeably shifted.

“Um, is there some kind of problem?” I asked timidly.

In the past, Arumanfi had attacked me out of nowhere. It might happen again. I thought it best to clear up any misunderstandings before that. If we had truly done something to offend her, it would be better for us to leave now rather than fight. There were things I wanted to ask Perugius, but if it meant battling

my way to get to him, I would rather go home.

“No, nothing too important. There are many others just like you across the world.”

“Really?” What did she mean by that? It made me nervous. This wasn’t going to be like some kind of game show where they dropped the floor under us and I wound up in another force field like before, right? *Maybe I should activate my demon eye just in case.*

“However,” Sylvaril continued, “would you mind if I asked the two of you one question?”

That confirmed that something was up with me as well. I had no idea what these falling white particles were, but this felt akin to being held up at the baggage scanner going through airport security. “What is it?” I asked.

“Do the words ‘Man God’ mean anything to either of you?”

I forced my expression to remain blank.

Man God. The moment I heard that name, memories of Orsted came rushing back. He had asked me a similar question, and when I answered truthfully, he nearly killed me. Was the same about to happen? I didn’t want that.

I hesitated. If I told her I knew who that was, it might lead to hostilities. It was true that I’d danced in the palm of that jerk’s hand before, and that he’d also helped me out. I had no intention of being one of his henchmen, but I had followed a lot of his advice.

As I waffled silently, Sylphie answered for the both of us. She shook her head. “No, I’ve never heard of that name before.”

“Then do you feel a deep-seated anger within your heart and an undeniable urge to kill when you hear that name?”

Sylphie quietly shook her head again. I did the same, but the description struck a chord. Orsted had reacted that way when he heard the Man God’s name. If that bothered them, then maybe that meant Perugius and Orsted were at odds with each other.

“In that case, I have nothing more to say.” Sylvaril turned away and resumed

walking.

Naming your floating fortress Chaos Breaker was about the geekiest thing imaginable, but its exterior was admittedly impressive. How in the world did one create a structure this massive? It seemed impossible, and yet there were insanely detailed sculptures scattered about its halls. Each decorative piece spoke of their creator's masterful talents.

The interior was every bit as jaw-dropping as I imagined. There were carpets with golden embroidery laid out. The walls were painted, and expensive pottery and statues decorated the corridors. Zanoba drank it all in, babbling. "This sculpture resembles Ganon's style. Is this his work?" and "Is this a statue of an Elanjin knight? How fortuitous, being able to see the real thing in person like this!" Much to my dismay, he added gushing commentary at every opportunity. Sylvaril and Ariel humored him at first, but they quickly tired of his enthusiasm and resorted to only strained smiles in response.

Normally, another member of our group would join in with his own obnoxious antics. Alas, poor Cliff was so visibly nervous that I pitied him for it. His eyes were peeled wide and his mouth firmly sealed shut, as if he'd resolved not to utter a word until someone addressed him. Elinalise was pulling him along by the hand, much like a mother dragging their nervous child. *Well, it's honestly for the best that the two of them aren't causing a fuss.*

"This is the audience chamber." After guiding us down a long corridor, Sylvaril stopped by the door at the end. Dragons were painted on either side. The door itself was thick and adorned with silver.

It had taken us about an hour to reach this place. This fortress was massive. We almost needed a Segway to navigate the place in a timely manner.

"Lord Perugius is a very tolerant man, but I would urge you to mind your manners all the same," Sylvaril cautioned, reaching for the door handle.

Shouldn't you knock first?

"Pardon me, but we're still in our travel garments! Would it not be disrespectful to appear before his lordship like this?" Ariel asked in a panic.

It was pretty commonplace for nobles and royalty to have people wait in a separate room before welcoming them. People typically used that opportunity to freshen up and change into formalwear. That was how I remembered it in Shirone Kingdom when I met their king, although I didn't have formalwear at the time, so I went in my dirty robe. *Wait, crap. Should I have brought formalwear with me?*

"Lord Perugia is not the type to be concerned with one's manner of dressing. In fact, he found the formality in Asura Kingdom suffocating. I believe you would find his reception more positive if you went in as you are now, instead of changing," said Sylvaril.

I somehow wasn't surprised to hear that. Maybe the whole reason he'd started living in this floating fortress was because they'd put him through the wringer in Asura.

Still, Ariel pursed her lips. "All right," she finally conceded. "But could we first store our luggage and outerwear somewhere, at least?"

"Very well. This way, then." Sylvaril nodded and guided us to a side room. It was as spacious as one of the rooms in my house, but cramped in comparison with how enormous the castle was. There was a table and a cabinet, along with a few other furnishings. Despite the decor being more muted than what we'd seen so far, even the hangers and other knickknacks were of high quality.

"We sincerely appreciate your understanding," said Ariel.

"Lord Perugia is already waiting, so I recommend haste." Sylvaril left us with those words.

As soon as Ariel was sure Sylvaril was gone, she began peeling off her jacket. Luke took it from her, while Sylphie fished a brush out of their luggage and began quickly smoothing out Ariel's hair. Likewise, Zanoba grabbed a hanger to put his jacket on before pulling something more formal from his bags to take its place. Elinalise checked over Cliff's clothing and hair. With nothing better to do, I dusted off my robe and adjusted my collar. I didn't have any formalwear, but clothes weren't really what mattered. It was the intention. If Sylvaril recommended we meet Perugia in our everyday casual wear, that was what I would do.

Likewise, Nanahoshi just stood there and watched the rest. The only effort she exerted in her appearance was smoothing out her bangs. *Hey, wait a minute, she's in her school uniform.*

“All right!” Once everyone was finished, Sylphie slipped off her sunglasses, and we were all good to go. In the space of ten minutes, Ariel had drastically changed her appearance. Just taking off her outer garments and smoothing out her hair was enough to leave her looking radiant. *Maybe part of being royalty is honing your ability to gussy up in mere minutes.*

“My apologies for the wait.”

“Not at all. This way.” Sylvaril didn't seem the least bit fazed as she led us back to the door with the dragon crest carved into it. Perugius waited within. The thought made my entire body tense.

“Ah.” Ariel let out a deep exhale as the door swung open.

Chapter 2:

An Audience with Perugius

THE MAN ATOP THE THRONE exuded a commanding presence. He had brilliant silver hair and golden pupils that were small yet piercing. There was an air of royalty about him.

So this is Armored Dragon King Perugius.

My legs began quaking the moment I laid eyes upon him. I instantly knew what it was that frightened me. He looked eerily similar to the man with silver hair who killed me, whom I would never forget. True, their clothing, hairstyles, and facial features were all different, but there was something unmistakably similar about Perugius and Dragon God Orsted.

“Step forward,” Sylvaril commanded.

Nanahoshi led the group, with Ariel right behind her. I went after them as if to hide from view.

The chamber was vast, with a tall ceiling and pillars that resembled massive trees. A dazzling chandelier cast light down on us. The extravagance almost unhinged my jaw. The walls were strung with banners painted with complex emblems. Some I recognized, such as the crest for Asura Kingdom and the Holy Country of Millis. Others looked familiar, but there were some I had never seen before.

Eleven men and women lined either side of the velvet rug we were traversing. They were all clad in pure white, with only the designs of their outfits differing slightly. But each one wore a different mask. Some were fashioned after animals, and others only covered the eyes, resembling the visor that Cyclops from the X-Men wore. Another wore a helmet that made them look like some kind of robot cop, and someone else had what almost looked like a bucket on their head.

These had to be Perugius’s twelve familiars. Not that the word really fit, since they all looked like humans. Arumanfi, however, had been Ghislaine’s match in

combat. That probably meant that all of them had powers on the same level as a Sword King. I definitely did not want to make enemies of them. *I better be really careful about how I speak, just to be on the safe side.*

“Please stop there,” said Sylvaril.

Nanahoshi froze in place.

The throne was two small stairs and ten steps away from where we were standing. Perugia gazed silently down at us. More to the point, I was pretty sure he was looking at me. Our eyes seemed to meet, and a chill ran through me.

Sylvaril slowly walked past our group and made her way up the stairs, taking her place to the right of Perugia. Arumanfi was on his left. The rest of the familiars lined up on either side of us.

Perugia kept his gaze fixed on us as he drawled, “I am the Armored Dragon King, Perugia Dola.”

He said Dola! As in the air pirates?! Wait, no. Castle in the Sky has nothing to do with this.

“It’s been a while, Lord Perugia. I came, as I promised.”

Nanahoshi lowered her head while she spoke. It was rare for her to bow like that and speak so respectfully. I noticed Ariel was doing the same, while Luke and Sylphie were down on one knee. I hesitated over how I should show respect but decided on a regular old bow—Japanese-style!

“So you have returned, Nanahoshi.”

There was something so powerful and intimidating about his voice that I felt a chill run down my back. Fear threatened to swallow me whole. It had such a grip on my heart that I struggled to draw air. Sweat trickled down my forehead. *This is kinda incredible. It’s like he really is a king.*

“I assume that must mean you have found some way to summon things from another world?”

“Yes,” said Nanahoshi. “I’m not sure if the results are what you desired, however.”

“It is the pursuit of knowledge that gives purpose to we dragonfolk, not the achievements themselves.”

Wait, dragonfolk? So he’s one of those dragon people?

I had never really put much thought into it before, but it made sense. Dragon God, Armored Dragon King. They weren’t humans. They were dragonfolk. Now it made sense why Orsted and Perugius resembled each other; they were the same species.

Unruffled, Nanahoshi continued her conversation with Perugius. He was surprisingly friendly with her. At least the time he spent cooped up in this castle hadn’t turned him into a crotchety old man. “As we agreed, I would like you to teach me about the summoning magic in this world.”

“Very well,” he said.

The two of them must have made a deal with each other long before this. Nanahoshi would study how to summon objects from another world, and once her labor bore fruit, she would share what she’d discovered with Perugius. In turn, he would teach her about the mysteries of summoning magic in this world.

“By the way, this is quite the large group you have brought with you. Who are these people?”

“Actually, they helped me with my research. I brought them to visit you as a reward for their help.”

“Oh.” Perugius let out a bored sigh.

Calling it a reward didn’t quite sit right with me, but she wasn’t entirely wrong.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Ariel said, stepping forward. “I am Ariel Anemoi Asura, second princess of the Asura Kingdom. I am most honored to be in the presence of one as great as yourself, my lord.”

“Ariel Anemoi Asura, you say?”

“Yes, I hope we can get to know each other better soon.”

He snorted. “I already know who you are. You lost in that filthy, underhanded

battle for the crown they're having in Asura, but you refuse to concede. Instead, you're dragging everyone around you into the muddy waters of conflict. Foolish girl."

Luke's head snapped up. Anger strained his expression, but before he could do anything, Ariel held up a hand to stay him. She kept her voice even as she replied, "That's a harsh way of looking at it, but you are correct." Her lips curled into a soft smile as she stared back at him, unflinching.

"I assume you came here hoping I would lend you my strength."

"Not at all. You're a world-renowned hero. I simply wanted to meet you."

"Hmph. I can see right through your act."

As always, her voice oozed charisma, but her face had drained of all color. A cold sweat beaded across her skin. Perugius had read her like an open book, and he clearly didn't have a good impression of her. She was struggling to cope.

Perugius stared down at her, smirking as if he were mocking an ill-behaved child. "But you did come here. That must also be fate. I will give you a chance. You may stay here in my castle."

"I-I am...humbled by your generosity." Ariel bowed once before retreating. Her expression dissolved into relief, but there was still anxiety in her eyes.

"Well, then, what about you?"

After Ariel stepped back, Perugius' gaze shifted to me. It was as though he considered me second in rank next to her. Then I looked at the rest and I realized everyone else was on one knee. The only ones standing were Nanahoshi, Ariel, and me. It was only natural that his attention would be drawn to me next.

I put a hand over my chest and bowed my head again. "A pleasure to meet you. My name is Rudeus Greyrat."

"Rudeus Greyrat?" He spoke my name as if he were chewing it over. "I had a lot of trouble teleporting you here."

I tilted my head in confusion.

“Normally, when using teleportation magic, you can’t call upon someone with greater mana than your own.” He scowled. “Your mana closely resembles that of Laplace. If you were determined to resist me, I likely couldn’t have teleported you at all.”

“Oh. Well, I apologize for the trouble.”

Laplace was the Demon God that Perugius sealed away 400 years ago. Every time someone appraised my magic, they always brought him up. *I guess our mana must be really similar.*

“No matter, but I would warn you against trying to use that repulsive magic of yours in my castle.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said.

It was like he was trying to talk me down from trying anything stupid. No, it was more than that—it was a warning. But why was he so wary of me? I wasn’t the type to go berserk for no reason. I wouldn’t even go berserk if I had a reason.

Ah, maybe he remembers what happened just before the Displacement Incident. Specifically, the part where Arumanfi tried to kill me. Maybe he thought I held a grudge and this was his request to treat it as water under the bridge. “Um, if this is about what happened before the Displacement Incident, I don’t hold anything against you. So—”

“Hm? What are you talking about?” Perugius cocked his head.

Arumanfi appeared beside him in the blink of an eye, whispering the specifics into his ear.

“Ah, now I remember. There was a boy trying to cast magic in the sky—one protected by a Sword King. So that boy was you, hm?”

So he didn’t remember. Well, that meant I’d just dug myself deeper. Bringing it up out of nowhere was like announcing I had a grudge. At least they didn’t seem to hold it against me. I hadn’t done anything wrong, after all...had I?

“Rudeus Greyrat, from what I hear, is also the name of the person who managed to injure Orsted.”

If by “injure,” he meant I gave Orsted the equivalent of a paper cut, then sure. *He and Orsted must be acquaintances for him to know that much.* I figured that this was the case. Orsted was the only common link between Nanahoshi and the king of this floating castle. *Looks like I was right.*

“Those with talent like you get overconfident in your abilities at times. Being able to injure the Dragon God no doubt gave you an inflated sense of self esteem. However, if you choose to fight me, death is all that awaits.”

In that instant, his familiars began radiating bloodlust. *Please stop. I don't wanna fight any of you. I only came here to learn about Zenith's illness and learn a little bit of summoning magic.*

Perhaps Perugius was under the mistaken impression that I'd fought Orsted as an equal and that was how I wounded him. Still, he had twelve familiars here. I knew what their abilities were, more or less, but only from what I'd read in books. That wasn't the same as seeing them in action on the battlefield. Plus, numbers were always a huge advantage in a fight. That was what made zombies so terrifying—they were weak on their own, but in large numbers, they could easily overwhelm you. If Arumanfi was any indication, they were also all as capable as Ghislaine at least. To say nothing of the abilities that Perugius himself possessed—no doubt he was strong too. There was no way I could survive taking all of them on. I had no intention of doing so either.

“Of course, I have no intention of trying to oppose you, Lord Perugius,” I said.

“A wise decision. I like clever people. The foolish only blind others, but the intelligent help each other grow.”

In other words, “clever people” were those who didn't oppose him. I certainly didn't think of myself as the intelligent type, but I was at least smart enough not to pick a fight with him.

“Lord Perugius.” Nanahoshi cut in. “If I may, um...his enormous mana pool has been of great help in my research. He's no enemy. Couldn't you please treat him a bit more kindly?”

I knew I could count on you to step in! Yeah, you're exactly right. I have no interest in making enemies. Let's play nice with each other.

“Hm.” Perugius nodded. “Very well, I’ll be ‘kind,’ then. Since you helped Nanahoshi, what is it you desire in return? Money? Or is it power you seek?”

His voice was flat, as if he was bored with the conversation now. He had agreed to treat me as a guest at least, but were people generally so hostile with someone they’d only just met? It seemed especially off-putting since I was being so deferential.

No matter. Might as well ask him the question that had been weighing on my mind. “If I may... I have one thing I’d like to ask.”

“What?”

“It’s about my mother’s illness.” I proceeded to explain the details of Zenith’s condition.

“I see.” He nodded after I’d finished speaking. “I have heard there are old labyrinths out there that take people captive. That person becomes the ‘heart’ of the labyrinth, allowing it to function. The mana that flows through them as a result transforms them. They all lose their memories, without exception, and in return, their body is infused with a mysterious power.”

“A mysterious power?” I echoed, confused.

“I believe you call such people a Cursed Child or a Blessed Child.”

So Zenith had a curse on her, then? One where she could never cry nor laugh? “Why do these labyrinths use people, though?”

“I do not know. There is a theory that the ancient demons gave birth to these labyrinths and their creatures in a quest to create a paradise for themselves. The magic crystal at the center of those labyrinths is supposed to distribute mana to all of its inhabitants. There, they can thrive without ever going hungry. It wouldn’t be surprising if these older labyrinths take humans captive to increase their efficiency.”

So the ancient demons tried to create a paradise where they’d never starve? Come to think of it, there were a bunch of monsters in the Teleportation Labyrinth. The place was practically infested by those creepy Devouring Devils. I had wondered what they could be feasting on in those tunnels, but this explanation made sense.

But wait a second. Roxy said she was running out of mana in the labyrinth. So obviously, it's an overstatement to say it feeds mana to those who inhabit it. Unless monsters have some way to absorb mana from empty space or something?

Well, none of that really mattered right now. Zenith was my priority. "Do you know of any way to heal my mother?"

"I don't know the specifics myself, however..." Perugius's voice trailed off as he shot a look at someone behind me. "There is a woman whose fate followed a similar path. One who is still alive today. If it's information you seek, she would be the most knowledgeable."

I followed his gaze to the elf in our group with dazzling blonde hair.

Elinalise slowly lifted her head.

"Elinalise Dragonroad, one of my companions saved you from a labyrinth about 200 years ago."

"Yes, that's right," she said.

"You are the elven woman who lost her memories. I met you once before. You certainly have grown since then. Have you forgotten me?"

"No, I haven't." She averted her gaze from me, an awkward expression on her face.

What in the world was going on? Did this mean Elinalise had been through the same thing? Someone else had rescued her from a labyrinth 200 years ago? Wait, hold on a minute. I hadn't known about this.

"Why haven't you spoken to him about it?" asked Perugius. "Since the two of you are here together, I assume you must be acquainted."

"Yes, but..."

"You experienced it for yourself. You know more about it than anyone else would."

His words quieted her protest for a moment, but she remained resolute the next she spoke. "I never recovered my memories. I didn't say anything because I thought Zenith's case might be different."

Her face contorted in pain, despite how bravely she spoke. Cliff gently wrapped an arm around her shoulder. I was too confused to speak. Sure, I did think Elinalise had acted a bit strange back then, but I never dreamed such a thing had happened to her in the past as well.

“I’m sorry. I felt like I needed to tell you, but you have been so happy lately that I hesitated to bring it up. Besides, Zenith’s curse isn’t a danger to her life. I thought perhaps she was a Blessed Child or that maybe she’d recover and there would be no adverse effects at all.”

She continued babbling excuses, and it was all I could do to muster the strength to say, “We can discuss this further afterward.”

“All right.”

I had no intention of blaming her, really. She may not have shared her backstory, but she gave quite a bit of advice on Zenith’s condition when we were on the Begaritt Continent. At the time, I thought she was just sharing wisdom she’d accumulated over the years, but apparently, she was speaking from personal experience.

Knowing Elinalise, she probably had her reasons. Maybe she thought Zenith might be different, that she might regain her memories. Or perhaps she simply didn’t want to twist the knife after I had already lost Paul. She only kept it to herself out of consideration for me, I was sure. Still, I did wish she had said a little bit more about the curse that Zenith might be afflicted with.

“Is there anything else?” Perugia asked, disinterested.

I shook my head. “No.”

The conversation only lasted minutes, but it left me as exhausted, as if we’d been talking for hours. There was still more I wanted to ask—about summoning magic, for example, or Laplace’s War or the Displacement Incident, but my brain was so full. I couldn’t fit any more information in even if I wanted to.

“What about the rest of you? Is there anything you desire?”

Zanoba rose to his feet. “Would you permit me to ask a question?”

“And you are?”

“I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I am Zanoba Shirone, third prince of the Shirone Kingdom.”

“A prince, hm? And do you also desire my support so that you might take your country’s throne?”

“No, such a thing has no value to me at all,” Zanoba replied, without missing a beat. He slipped a small notebook from his pocket. There was a crest drawn on the surface—one I recognized.

Wait a minute. That’s the one we saw in my basement, on the doll maker’s blueprints.

“This crest resembles your own as well as that of Lord Maxwell. I see there are other similar crests on that wall over there. Do you know to whom this one belongs?”

I followed his gaze to the wall covered in numerous crests. Several of them looked familiar. One of them was the same one I’d seen carved on the monument for the Seven Great Powers. Another belonged to Dragon God Orsted. Another was carved into a magical implement that helped keep the teleportation ruins hidden. Judging by the incantation we had to use for it, the crest likely belonged to the Holy Dragon Emperor, Shirad. The one beside it was the same crest drawn on Zanoba’s notebook.

“I do know it. That belongs to the Maniacal Dragon King, Chaos.”

“Ooh!”

Aha, so that’s the thing that Zanoba saw at the gate. He must have seen Maxwell’s crest there and realized its similarity to the one on the blueprints. Naturally, he assumed the two must be linked somehow. Incredible! I’m impressed!

Zanoba stepped forward, unable to tamp down his euphoria at this discovery. “M-might I ask where this Maniacal Dragon God Chaos is now?”

Perugius shook his head. “He’s dead. He passed away a couple of decades ago, and I don’t know if he has a successor.”

The notebook slipped right between Zanoba’s fingers, landing on the floor.

His shoulders slumped. “I-is that so...” In an instant, his face looked as if it had aged five years. That was saying something, because Zanoba already looked way older than he was.

Perugius slid forward in his seat. “By the by, where did you come across that crest?”

Zanoba continued to look dejected as he answered, “Oh, I found this in my master’s house—in a rundown estate in the Magic City of Sharia. It was drawn on some blueprints for an automated doll.”

“Hm. An automated doll, you say.” Perugius nodded to himself. “And how was the doll? Incredible?”

“Oh, yes, more than words can express! The detail in the craftsmanship was utterly enchanting. You could tell just by looking at it how great the creator’s love for dolls was! I share the same fondness, so I could feel the depth of his adoration myself!”

A smile stretched across Perugius’s face, all the way to his eyes. “It seems you have an appreciation for the arts. That pleases me. I have a number of Chaos’s works in my treasury. I will show them to you later.”

His voice was so gentle, I could not believe this was the same man who had spoken so gruffly with me only minutes before. Why was Zanoba getting special treatment? Not that I really cared, honestly.

“You honor me!” Zanoba’s face lit up as he sank to the floor, prostrating himself. Obviously, he was as happy as Perugius. Better yet, he had won the dragon king’s favor. I envied him for that. I’d wanted to do the same.

“Is there anything else?” Perugius asked.

Sylphie’s hand shot up. “Yes, I have something—I mean, if you wouldn’t mind, there is something I would like to ask.” She awkwardly bowed.

“And you are?”

“Sylphie Greyrat, wife to Rudeus Greyrat and a bodyguard of Princess Ariel.”

Sylvaril leaned over, whispering something into Perugius’s ear. The man grunted, his mood soured. “So it was both of you...” he muttered.

As in Sylphie and me? Had the two of us done something to upset him? Sylphie did have quite the mana pool, but it wasn't as vast as my own. Did it maybe bother him that she once had green hair in the past?

"Before I answer your question, I want you to answer something for me. Do the two of you have a son?"

His query was so out of nowhere that Sylphie hesitated for a moment, confused. She slowly shook her head. "Huh? No, I have a daughter, though."

"Very well. If you should ever give birth to a boy, bring him before me. I will name him for you."

"Uh, um, all right..."

He gave a thin, eerie smile.

Well, that's mildly discomforting. Was he implying there would be something wrong with our child if we had a boy? Or was he looking to give our son some super quirky name? This was the man who'd named his castle Chaos Breaker, after all.

"Now then." Perugia cleared his throat. "What is your question?"

"I would like to ask you about the Displacement Incident. Do you happen to know who caused it?"

That was something I hadn't thought about lately. The Displacement Incident was what teleported Nanahoshi here from Japan. It only made sense that magic powerful enough to rip someone from their own dimension would have some kind of recoil. In my case, I just happened to reincarnate here, but perhaps the laws of physics or magic here were different when someone came here with their original body. Of course, the opposite could be true. Maybe someone was trying to accomplish something else, and the recoil of their magic happened to summon Nanahoshi instead. Which meant the whole thing was just an accident.

"I haven't confirmed anything for certain. At the time, I suspected it was the doing of someone connected to Laplace, but..." He glanced over at Nanahoshi before continuing. "Even I'm not capable of summoning someone like her, and if I'm not able to, no one in this world is."

“Which means?”

“That calamity wasn’t manmade. It was an accident.”

I thought as much. It was possible that someone more capable at summoning magic than Perugius was responsible, like Orsted. Although it would be rude to suspect a culprit behind things when Perugius had already definitively stated there wasn’t one. *I’ll just keep my thoughts to myself. I don’t feel like ticking this guy off any more than I already have.*

“Oh, all right, then. Thank you.” While I was considering different possibilities in my head, Sylphie lowered her eyes and ended the conversation.

“Anyone else?” Perugius asked again. This time, no one answered. Elinalise kept her eyes glued to the floor, and Cliff was too nervous to even move. As for the others, Ariel had already ducked away, and Luke was still quietly kneeling.

“In that case, enjoy your stay here in my fine fortress.” He gave an exaggerated nod, and our audience with him was over.

Sylvaril guided us to the guest area, where nearly twenty identical rooms sat vacant. Inside was dark wooden furniture, feather beds, and enormous, crystal-clear mirrors. Each room was equipped with a cabinet lined with what I assumed was alcohol. The only thing that differed between them were the paintings in each one. The accommodations were far more luxurious than your typical business hotel. To draw a comparison from my previous life, it was like a royal suite at the Empire Hotel. Not that I had any experience staying in either a suite or the Empire Hotel, mind you.

“There’s only twelve of you managing a castle this vast?” Ariel blurted out.

She had a point. There was barely a speck of dust in the corners of the rooms. They looked as if no one had ever been in them. I wouldn’t quite call it creepy, but it had an air of loneliness to it, like buying an extra controller for your console even though you had no friends to play with. Although Perugius had implied that they occasionally got some visitors here.

After we picked our rooms, we split up to do our own thing. Zanoba and Ariel set off to see a bit more of the castle. Luke and Sylphie accompanied their

princess, of course.

As for me, I stayed in my room. I was exhausted. Our audience had lasted little more than an hour, but it was like I'd crammed a whole day's worth of discussion in my head. Part of me did want to see more of the fortress, but for now, I would rest.

I collapsed on the bed. "Ahh, it's so soft." So soft, in fact, that I felt like I would sink right through, all the way to the floor. *I wonder if we could take one of these beds home with us...*

No. Leave the beds aside for now. I was surprised by the crests I saw. A bunch of impressive names came up in our conversations that I didn't recognize, such as the Abyssal Dragon King and the Maniacal Dragon King. If I remembered right, they were part of the Five Dragon Generals. Way back in the mythical age, they faced off with the Dragon God in a battle that claimed all of their lives. But surely, these weren't the same people from the myths? The ones in the story were likely from many generations before the people who'd come up in our conversation.

Of those five, three had been mentioned today: Armored Dragon King Perugius, Abyssal Dragon King Maxwell, and Maniacal Dragon King Chaos. There was also the one whose name I'd heard in the incantation for the teleportation ruins, Holy Dragon Emperor Shirad. That made four of them. There was supposed to be one Dragon Emperor and four Dragon Kings, which meant there was one more Dragon King left. Now that I thought about it, I only saw four crests resembling the Dragon God's on that wall. Maybe the last of their group was on bad terms with Perugius?

In any case, I was more surprised by the connection with the doll. I knew I had seen the crest on those blueprints somewhere before, but to think it belonged to one of the dragon kings... I knew nothing about the language on those memos, but perhaps we could ask Perugius to decipher it for us. That would put us leaps ahead of where we were now. *Maybe I should ask him, then.*

Or not. He didn't seem too fond of me. In fact, he seemed wary of me. *I'll ask Zanoba to pester him about it instead. The two of them seem to share the same appreciation for art.*

Hold on. If that crest belonged to the Maniacal Dragon King, that meant he had once lived in my house. A Dragon King, of all people, had cooped himself up in my basement to fiddle with dolls. Something must have been wrong with his head. The way that doll operated *was* pretty crazy. Well, given that Chaos and Zanoba seemed to be on the same wavelength, the title “maniacal” made a lot of sense. He must have really loved dolls.

That aside, I was hoping to learn summoning magic from Perugius, but at this rate, it wasn’t looking very likely. He was so hostile toward me. If I asked him to teach me, he might say, “What? Planning to summon Laplace with all that mana of yours?”

Hmm. I wonder if such a thing is even possible.

Perugius said it was impossible to summon anyone whose mana was greater than your own. Since mine was on par with Laplace’s, did that mean I actually *could* summon him? Could I set up a sinister altar underground and bring the Demon God back to life? I wouldn’t, of course, but I could understand his animosity toward me if that were true.

“Well, it could have gone worse.” Although Perugius hated me, he hadn’t driven me out of his castle or tried to start a fight with me. For the moment, I could breathe easy. It didn’t go perfectly, but it did at least go well.

And thus my first day in the floating fortress came to an end in silent contemplation.

Chapter 3:

The Past and a Curse, Summoning, and Jealousy

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, a girl was rescued from a labyrinth. She had lost all her memories and emotions. She had no idea who she was, only that she had to be an elf because she looked like one. Thus, she was placed in an elven settlement and resumed a normal life there. The people in the village welcomed her even though she was a stranger to them. The girl's memories never returned, but her emotions did after a few years. She was cheerful and sociable, and before long, she fell in love with one of the men in the village.

It was only after the two became intimate that she began to experience a problem: her libido suddenly spiked. She wanted to have sex every single night.

Elves weren't inclined to frequent intimacy, at least not nearly as much as humans and goblins. Her partner struggled to keep up with her needs, but the two still lived in harmony. However, something strange happened to her body around that time. After they began having sex, she started birthing a small, round magical crystal every month. Inside was an incredibly dense accumulation of mana. When she told her husband, he was a bit unnerved by this abnormal phenomenon, but assured her it was nothing to worry about.

A short time after that, the husband began selling these crystals in a human town. Although it seemed like his eyes were clouded by greed, one could hardly blame him for coveting the money these crystals earned him. He had never been rich, and his wife didn't work. At least, the man never treated his wife like she was his own personal money tree.

Tragedy struck five years later. The husband died—or rather, he was murdered. With his cargo of extremely expensive crystals, he earned the attention of some bandits. They attacked him, taking both his life and his wealth.

With him gone, the woman was now a widow. Although she fell deep into depression, she still endured. Unfortunately, there was a problem with her

body—her insatiable libido ballooned again. Ten days after her husband passed, the urge came on strong and swift from deep inside her. She couldn't suppress it and assailed one of the men in the village. She knew it was wrong, but she did it anyway. At least the man in question wasn't unwilling, and nothing happened after they did the deed once.

Ten more days passed, and she went after a different man. Then another ten days and she did it again. Her appetite was so untamable that word soon spread of her wild promiscuity. The women of the village all denounced her and drove her out. That woman became a prostitute after that, then a slave, and finally an adventurer. It's said that even to this day, she continues wandering the world.

"...And that's basically what my life has been like," Elinalise said. She'd come to recount her story to me first thing this morning.

"You didn't have to tell me *everything*."

Honestly, hearing all of it left me stunned. The curse was the only thing I needed to know about, but Elinalise didn't spare a single detail.

"This is my way of making up for not telling you any of this sooner."

"So, uh, does Cliff already know all of this?"

"Of course. I told him before our wedding."

"Oh, okay. What about Sylphie?"

"She doesn't know. I doubt she wants to know her grandmother once sold her body for money."

I shrugged. "I don't think Sylphie would care about that kind of thing."

"I just hope you won't look at her in a different light if you hear ill rumors about me somewhere. She may have my blood running through her, but she's just a normal girl."

"I know. I wouldn't ever do that to her." *Besides, Sylphie isn't responsible for things Elinalise may have done in the past.*

That said, after hearing everything she had been through, I could understand

why she kept mum about her history, and her relation to Sylphie. No one wants people to look at them differently. Anyway, the past is the past. There were things in my past I didn't want to reveal either. I couldn't pretend the things I'd done in my previous life didn't exist, but that story would stay in my head and my head alone.

"So what *is* your curse exactly?" I asked.

"The mana in my body builds and coalesces into a magical crystal upon receiving a man's seed. If I don't receive a man's seed, the mana will continue building until it kills me."

"But you were fine the first couple of years, right?"

"I honestly don't entirely understand that either. At the time, I wasn't having a monthly cycle, so maybe that had something to do with it."

"Your monthly..." I repeated her words before trailing off. If it had something to do with her menstrual cycle, then maybe it was her ova that were transforming into those magical crystals. In that case, Zenith's curse was probably something different altogether. I assumed she still had those monthly visits. After all, she had already given birth to two children, and although Lilia hadn't given me any details, she was still only 35 years old or thereabouts.

"But your memories never came back?"

She shook her head. "No. Even now, I don't remember anything."

I went silent. So she still didn't remember her past, which meant she had no idea who she was exactly. There was a slim possibility that she might suddenly remember someday, but if she hadn't in 200 years, it seemed unlikely she ever would.

"Zenith's condition is different from mine," said Elinalise. "Judging by how she acts, it seems she knows who her children are. Perhaps she may regain all of her memories."

"I hope you're right." Maybe it was better not to do too much wishful thinking, though. "What about her curse?" I asked.

"At the moment, she isn't showing any signs of having one like mine."

“Ah. I didn’t think so.”

“She most likely has a different curse on her.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “I think there’s a distinct possibility. Do you have any idea what her curse could be?”

An idea, huh... Hm. Maybe a vague one, but nothing conclusive. After a short pause, I admitted, “Nope, nothing.”

“All right, well, best to continue keeping an eye on her.”

Whatever it was, it wasn’t something lethal, but there could be a trigger out there that would cause it to manifest. “I guess that’s all we can do right now, huh? Keep watching her?”

“Yes.”

I wasn’t going to get my hopes up, but I still couldn’t help praying that nothing bad happened.

“That’s the extent of what I know,” said Elinalise. “I’m sorry. There was too much I didn’t want to say, and I was late giving you the truth.” She lowered her head.

I understood not wanting to share about her past. In fact, I felt guilty for not sharing the events of my previous life with Sylphie and Roxy. It did suck that Elinalise hadn’t told me sooner, but I wasn’t about to be a hypocrite and get mad at her for it.

“No, I appreciate you talking about it even though you didn’t feel comfortable. Thank you.” I extended my hand and she shook it, gripping it tight.

“Well, then I’m going to return to Cliff.”

“I’m going to rest a little more, then go check on Nanahoshi,” I said.

“All right. Have a nice day.” Elinalise turned and slipped out of the room.

In the end, I didn’t learn anything new about Zenith’s condition. There was a high probability she had a curse on her, but it hadn’t caused any problems yet. All I could do was prepare myself to act in case anything did happen later on.

After breakfast, we gathered in a room with a long table and took our seats. Nanahoshi and Cliff sat to one side of me with Zanoba on the other. Directly across from me was Sylvaril of the Void, the woman with black wings who served Perugius.

“All right, now let’s begin our lesson.”

The agreement was for Perugius to teach Nanahoshi summoning magic, but Nanahoshi had been kind enough to ask that we be included. We were starting from the very basics, so Perugius wasn’t the one teaching us. He would turn up when it was time to put what we’d learned to the test. He was probably having tea with Ariel at this moment.

Uh, I should probably be focusing on the lesson instead of worrying about where Perugius is, though.

“First,” said Sylvaril, “let’s make sure we are all on the same page. What is summoning magic? You there...”

“Cliff. Cliff Grimor.”

“Cliff, please answer for me. What is summoning magic?”

There were two types of summoning magic. The first was bestowal, which was mostly used to create magical implements—in other words, the drawing of summoning circles. Cliff specialized in this, and it was a flourishing art in the Magic City of Sharia.

The second type was invocation, which allowed you to summon anything in existence, from simple animals such as dogs and cats to highly intelligent beasts. That list included gentle monsters that were easy for humans to tame, as well as ones with low intellect, such as goblins and treants. You could also summon spirits that existed somewhere out in the world.

There were no professors in Sharia who could perform invocation magic. Even the guild only had a few people who could do it, and they were all amateurs at it. Perhaps some other country was monopolizing that school of magic, or maybe it was simply that no one around Sharia could teach it. Either way, that was the extent of my knowledge. And Cliff must have been about as versed as

me, because he relayed the same answer.

“That’s incorrect,” Sylvaril said with a shake of her head. “It is true that summoning requires a magic circle by nature, but the drawing of a circle is not in itself part of this school of magic.”

“Which means only the latter qualifies as summoning magic, then?” I asked. The atmosphere here reminded me of when Roxy used to give me lessons as a child.

“Yes, but Cliff wasn’t wrong when he said there were two types of summoning magic.”

“In other words, bestowal isn’t one of those types.”

“Indeed.” She spoke in a gentle voice, but since there was no blackboard or textbook about, I had to take notes using the stack of papers and quill pen I’d brought. It made this feel like a real class. “There are two types of summoning magic: Fiend Summoning and Spirit Summoning.”

I wrote down both names. From what I remembered, spirits were beings that existed in our world but rarely showed themselves. The only kinds I had ever seen before were the Lamplight Spirits I had summoned with those scrolls.

“What’s the difference between the two of those?” I asked.

“Fiend Summoning, as you humans well know, allows you to call upon a beast living somewhere out in the wild. Per an ancient covenant, anything considered to be a person cannot be summoned. However, everything else that exists in the world can be.”

So all kinds of creatures could be invoked with such magic, even dragons.
“What’s this ‘ancient covenant’?”

“When summoning magic was first born into this world, our ancestors made a covenant. Magic cannot break those ancient rules.”

So people couldn’t be summoned? Was that really true? What was so different between teleporting a person and summoning them? Not that it really mattered. The important thing was getting the basics down pat. I could ask more nuanced questions later. “Sorry,” I said. “Please continue.”

“Very well. In Fiend Summoning, one cannot invoke a creature with more mana than they possess themselves. Even if they do so, there’s a high likelihood they won’t be able to control the creature they summon.”

Come to think of it, I’d read about that in a book a long time ago. *Sig’s Summoning Magic*, I think it was called. It contained the tale of someone who invoked a creature that was stronger than they were, which ate them alive. Considering how vast my own mana pool was, I probably wouldn’t have issues no matter what I summoned, but I had no idea if it would obey me or not. Not that I had plans to summon anything powerful. Besides, we had three pets in the house already. There was no need for me to summon anything.

“Oh, yeah, are living creatures the only thing you can summon?” I blurted.

“Yes. You cannot summon the dead.”

“No, I meant things. Like...could I summon some clothes that are at my house right now?”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

So I couldn’t summon Roxy’s panties. Wait, hold on a second. Nanahoshi had succeeded in summoning a plastic bottle. Surely, it wasn’t impossible. Maybe it was better to say that no one in this world had figured out how to do it yet. That would explain why Perugius was so interested in Nanahoshi’s research—because it meant such magic was possible. Now I understood why he agreed to aid her.

“May I continue?” Sylvaril asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh, yes. My apologies for interjecting repeatedly.”

“Not at all. Your queries indicate how passionate you are about learning.” She nodded slowly before continuing. “Spirit Summoning, as the name implies, involves the creation of a spirit.”

“Creation? As in you’re actually making them?”

“Correct. You expend mana in the process and create a spirit with certain abilities. Such is how Spirit Summoning operates.”

In other words, by using those scrolls Nanahoshi had provided, I wasn’t

summoning Lamplight Spirits from elsewhere; I was conjuring them with my own mana.

“Spirits possess a low level of intellect and will obey the summoner’s orders until they use up all of their mana,” Sylvaril explained.

“Is that an absolute?”

There was a pause before she answered, “No. If you specifically construct the circle so that they won’t follow your orders, then a spirit with free will shall be created instead.”

But if you didn’t do that, would they follow your every command? That was almost like programming. Wait, speaking of programming, I felt like I had heard about a similar concept ...

“That seems odd to me,” said Cliff, voice filled with dissatisfaction. “Those of you who serve Perugius were spirits summoned 400 years ago, yes? You’re awfully intelligent if that’s the case, and it’s odd that you haven’t disappeared in the intervening centuries.”

Just what I would expect from you, Cliff. He was too sharp to let that inconsistency slip by.

Sylvaril nodded cheerfully. “I am glad you brought that up. Lord Perugius’s predecessor, the first Armored Dragon King, passed on his knowledge of how to create eleven ancient, highly intelligent and powerful spirits. Ordinarily, spirits of such caliber would not last more than a single day, but Lord Perugius has developed a way to maintain them for centuries.”

She sure was being boastful. But I could see why. It was quite a feat to maintain for eternity what would normally only last a day. In other words, perpetual motion—a concept just as incredible in my previous world as it was in this one.

Hm, wait a second. She said eleven ancient spirits. Isn’t that one too few?

“Don’t you mean twelve?” I asked.

“No, eleven. I’m not one of Lord Perugius’s spirits.”

I blinked at her. “You’re not?”

“Not at all. Lord Perugia saved me during Laplace’s War, and I have served him ever since. I am simply one of the skyfolk.”

Skyfolk? Well, that would explain the wings then. If the others were his servants, perhaps she was more of a confidant. Or a lover? No, that couldn’t be. Romance wasn’t the only bond that existed in the world.

“So which will we be learning?” I asked.

“We’ll primarily focus on Fiend Summoning,” she said. “However, Lord Perugia considers the summoning of things from another world to resemble Spirit Summoning, so I am sure we will touch on that as well.”

So we were going to learn both? I was looking forward to that. It might be fun to summon monsters from all over the world and open a zoo.

“I would like to learn more about Spirit Summoning specifically, if possible,” said Zanoba.

Cliff nodded in agreement. “I am interested in the subject too.”

As I noticed how invested in this they both were, something in my brain finally clicked. Programming. That’s right. The way the core of that automated doll functioned had reminded me of programming.

Wait. If we were able to learn Spirit Summoning, we might be able to complete that doll. Of course, I didn’t think it would be easy to succeed where Maniacal Dragon King Chaos had failed, but I was sure this magic would come in handy all the same. You never knew when such knowledge would be useful.

“All right, now let’s start by learning the foundations of summoning. First, please look at this magic circle...”

So did Sylvaril begin the lesson. Unfortunately, I was behind the other three when it came to knowing how to draw a magic circle, almost like a dropout who had suddenly decided to rejoin his peers. Maybe I should have learned the basics instead of leaving it to everyone else.

It wasn’t too late to start now, regardless. One was never too old to learn something new, and I was only 18. Look at Zanoba. He was in his mid-twenties when he first entered the academy, and he’d come a long way refining his

ability to craft dolls. *I should learn from his example.* Although I was starting off on bad footing right now. After this lesson was over, I needed to put in some revision and practice.

“By the by,” Sylvaril said, “it’s almost time for lunch. If there is anything specific you would like to eat, please let me know.”

And with that, our lesson ended.

The night before, we had ancient Asuran cuisine for dinner, which included meatballs and potatoes boiled with herb soup. There was bread made from wheat and other grains, among some other dishes. It wasn’t too different from what we ate in Sharia. Considering how grand the fortress looked from the outside, it was quite a simple meal, albeit delicious. But from Perugius’s standpoint, it wasn’t an ancient cuisine at all. He considered this to be traditional Asuran cooking—the standard food people made 400 years ago. There was a saying I’d read somewhere: technology advances during times of war while cuisine advances during times of peace. Asura’s dishes had changed greatly over the past 400 years.

Dinner was brought to each of our rooms, but I ate mine with Sylphie. No matter how luxurious the rooms were, dining by yourself was far too lonely. It was strange how I had never felt that way in my previous life. I had really changed since then.

Breakfast, on the other hand, I had to eat alone. Such is life.

Now it was time for lunch, and Sylvaril had volunteered to make us whatever we liked. Considering Arumanfi was aboard and could do errands at the speed of light, they could fetch ingredients from any country in the world. Actually, they could simply order from any restaurant and have him bring the food back. His speed sure came in handy for home delivery.

“Could I have something from Millis?” Cliff asked.

“Hm, then I would like something from Shirone,” said Zanoba.

They both desired cooking from their respective home countries. No matter how much they acted like they were comfortable here, they missed home for

sure.

“Very well. I shall have it prepared for you.” Sylvaril’s voice was gentle as she responded to their requests, her mask hiding any emotion on her face.

“I’m fine with whatever,” Nanahoshi said.

Perhaps she hadn’t realized it, but this was our chance. I was not the type of man to let a good opportunity slip by. As the charismatic Char Aznable often said, make optimal use of every chance you get! “I’m thinking vinegar-seasoned white rice with fresh, raw fish that’s been cut into bite-sized pieces on top,” I said. “Do you know of such a dish?”

“What?! Is there such a thing here?” Nanahoshi’s face lit up.

Unfortunately, Sylvaril shook her head. “No, I have never heard of such a thing. Although we do have rice here.”

Nanahoshi’s shoulders slumped.

I was overjoyed to hear this, however. As long as we had rice, we could easily find something else to go with it. “How about cold water with raw egg and wheat flour, mixed into a fine batter that you can dip shrimp, squid, or vegetables in, and fry in oil at a high temperature?”

“I have never heard of that either. Although we do have wheat flour and eggs.”

Ooh, so they do have eggs! Which means I can always have raw egg cracked over steamy hot rice!

Unsurprisingly, sushi and tempura were a no-go. That probably meant I was out of luck with sukiyaki as well, since it involved boiling soy sauce, sugar, and mirin in a pot. Whatever we got here wouldn’t be as delicious as what you could eat at a restaurant back in Japan, but at least with these ingredients we could make something. What we really needed was soy sauce. That was the real Japanese flavor we were hankering for.

“How about a sauce made from fermented soy beans? Either soy sauce or soy paste would be fine.”

“We don’t have anything like that here at our fortress.”

As I suspected, no such thing exists here.

“I have heard, however, that Biheiril Kingdom uses a sauce similar to the one you described. We could order Arumanfi to go search for it.”

I perked up. “Yes, please!” I didn’t care that it was extra trouble for Arumanfi. If we could have him search for it, then we might as well.

After an hour, he came back without any soy sauce. It was no surprise, given the short time frame, and it was my fault for only bringing it up when it was almost lunchtime. But while he may not have found soy sauce, he did bring us something else—a reddish-brown substance that the people of Biheiril made by fermenting beans. They called it tofu, but I decided to call it miso instead.

Because come on, this is totally miso.

If memory served me correctly, Biheiril Kingdom was located in the northeastern part of the Central Continent. Miso and soy sauce were two sides of the same coin. Perhaps they had already invented soy sauce in that country. Someday, I’d need to head out that way to see for myself. I’d have to find time to visit, even if it was 10 or 20 years down the road.

That aside, we had rice and miso, so naturally, I asked them to get us some white fish. Sadly, we didn’t have grated radish or ginger, but we did have lemons. Pickled vegetables would have been a nice addition, but there was no use fussing over something they didn’t have here. I did my best to give Sylvaril a decent recipe, keeping the available ingredients in mind.

“Is this what you wanted?” she asked, reappearing a while later with some piping-hot white rice. Steam rose from the miso-flavored shellfish. Then there was the nicely toasted white fish with lemon. There were two plates, one for me and one for Nanahoshi. Mine came with a raw egg.

“Sometimes you gotta treat yourself to some comfort food like this,” I said.

After a long pause, Nanahoshi replied, “Yeah, I guess.”

Although the two dishes looked perfect, Nanahoshi gazed at them in dismay. Perhaps she disliked that they only resembled Japanese cuisine without actually replicating the flavor. Well, I couldn’t blame her. It tasted nothing like I

remembered. But it was still fun to give it a try, even if it wasn't authentic.

"Put your hands together in thanks and let's dig in," I said.

"Yeah, let's."

Nanahoshi kept frowning as she picked up her spoon and fork and began eating. Her expression was contorted in disgust as she deboned the fish, squeezed some lemon, and took a small bite. Next, she took a hesitant bite of the rice, chewing slowly. There was a white porcelain bowl filled with miso soup that she also sipped from.

Finally, she said, "This miso soup doesn't have any dashi in it." Big, fat tears welled up in her eyes. She continued eating as they fell.



It was pretty terrible. The rice was dry and tasteless, and the miso soup was incredibly salty. While the fish was delicious enough, it smelled awful and it didn't go with the lemon at all. The balance was terrible. It wasn't good at all. The Japanese cuisine from our memories had a much more delicate flavor. Despite all of that, Nanahoshi continued shoveling it down through her tears. She didn't speak again until she finished, but that didn't take long.

"Thank you for the food."

Hearing that was enough to know I'd made the right choice.

After our meal, we wrapped up our afternoon lecture. The lessons on summoning magic were really quite interesting, perhaps because Sylvaril was a pretty good teacher. Although she didn't teach us anything of major note today, we'd surely start to absorb the concepts sooner or later. Right now, I needed to do some revision to prepare for the next class.

With that in mind, I spent my time after class wandering the halls of the floating fortress. Exploring, if you will. This place was insanely huge, so I wouldn't be able to see it all within a day or two. Again, I was awed by how something this massive could fly like this in the first place.

Lost in thought, I spotted a pair up ahead: Zanoba and Cliff. They must have decided to go exploring after class as well.

Wait a minute. That's strange. Why didn't they invite me then? Did they just ditch me?

"Hey Zanoba, Master Cliff. What are you two doing together?" I asked, moseying over. *I'd prefer to be part of the pack instead of being a lone wolf, if it's all the same to you guys.*

"Master! Actually, I was wandering the halls when Lord Cliff called me over."

"Yeah, *that* got my attention, so..."

Apparently, they weren't hanging out specifically, so it wasn't like they'd ditched me. What a relief. Good thing too, since I wasn't actually a wolf—wild or otherwise. I was a human, one that enjoyed flocking with other humans,

since that was what made us the greatest mammals on land.

That's right. We should group up, since we'll be stronger together.

"And what is 'that' you're referring to?" I asked.

Cliff indicated some nearby stairs, which curiously led down rather than up. Apparently, this place wasn't just ridiculously huge; it also had a basement.

"Huh. That does seem interesting. If you guys are planning to investigate, I'd be happy to come along," I offered.

"You'd be more than welcome to, but..." Cliff trailed off.

"What? Is there some kind of problem?"

"It's not that. I just wonder if it's really okay for us to go down there without permission."

"Hm, I don't know." They did tell us we were free to wander about the castle, but was the basement considered part of the castle? Did people usually let others freely enter their basements? Personally, I kept some precious items in mine and would prefer no one disturb them.

"It shouldn't be a problem," said Zanoba. "Why don't we have a look? Lord Perugia said we were free to enter any rooms that weren't locked. These stairs aren't even behind a door, so he surely wouldn't mind."

"Wait, hold up a sec. Sometimes people have unspoken rules about this kinda stuff, you know?" Unspoken rules as in manners that were so deeply ingrained in people that they thought of them as common sense.

"You really think so? Hm..." Zanoba tilted his head, not entirely convinced. Perhaps, being royalty, he couldn't fathom having a room you wouldn't want other people to enter.

"Oh?"

While the three of us waffled back and forth, Nanahoshi suddenly appeared. She was the type who preferred solitude, but perhaps our numbers had got her attention enough to reel her in. "What are you guys doing here?"

We explained that we were interested in where these stairs led but were

uncertain whether or not we'd be permitted to freely venture down them.

"Sure you can," she said.

"Really? We can?"

"Yeah. The doors he doesn't want you to enter down there are locked anyway."

"Have you ever opened one of them and gone inside?"

"Yeah, last time I was here, I got to see a few of them."

She must have been referring to her previous visit with Orsted. The thought alone was enough to make my legs feel like jelly. I could almost imagine him being here.

"You can't enter most of the rooms down there, since they're locked," Nanahoshi explained, "but there is something interesting down there."

"Something interesting?" I echoed, curiosity getting the better of me.

"Something you boys would probably enjoy."

I hadn't heard someone use "you boys" to collectively refer to my friends and me in a while. Nanahoshi seemed like the sort to use that phrase all the time, at least before she got transported here.

"If you're that nervous, shall I be your guide?"

The three of us exchanged looks. Zanoba and Cliff were both eager to take her up on the offer. I was feeling a little less adventurous, but I didn't want to be the only one left out. Since she was volunteering to guide us, surely there wasn't any danger in going.

"Yes, please," I said after glancing at the other two guys.

The basement was even more massive than the main floors. On top of that, they were more maze-like too. Things became more complex after we made our way down several flights of stairs, turning into what resembled a dungeon. It made me wonder if the ground floor was only for entertaining guests and the real fortress was actually underground.

We wandered the halls at length with Nanahoshi leading us. In the beginning,

there were a number of curious doors we tried opening, but they were all locked. Unlocked doors just led to empty rooms anyway.

How many flights of stairs have we gone down by this point? We must be pretty far below the main floor by now.

Although sparsely lit, the first basement floor had at least been clean. However, it got darker the deeper we went, and it was dank down here too. There were fewer doors and more split pathways and turns to take. The floors even sloped here and there, making it all the more labyrinthine.

The corridors hadn't been cleaned this far down, and mice periodically raced past our feet as we went. Their eyes shone green in the darkness. It was eerie, but at least they weren't monsters, and they did flee the moment they saw us, as you'd expect from rodents. Apparently, we had entered an unused part of the fortress, but that didn't stop Nanahoshi. She did, however, ask me to summon a Lamplight Spirit before we proceeded further.

"Hm, I'm not familiar with this type of architecture. For me to not recognize it all must mean it's from before the first Great Human-Demon War or..." Zanoba's voice trailed off. He was deriving plenty of enjoyment just from viewing the layout of the basement. His spirits remained high even as we ventured deeper and deeper.

"Hey, Silent, are you sure you're not lost?" Cliff asked.

"Nope, I'm fine."

Although he found it entertaining at first, Cliff was starting to lose his patience. We were meandering about the halls without entering a single room we passed.

"Ah, this is positively amazing. It's a rare opportunity to be able to visit a place like this. See, Master? Look at the way those stones are arranged. That's a special way of layering them. At a glance, they all look random in size, but they're all natural; none of them have been artificially altered. But when you consider they're part of a basement supporting a castle this enormous, it's baffling, how the place is still standing. You don't really see stones like this on our continent. I don't have much interest in architecture, but the mysteries of this place are captivating. I have to wonder exactly why they chose this kind of

method...”

Zanoba was genuinely enjoying himself. The moment he discovered something new, he would start going on like this.

“Master, what do you think of the way these stones are laid out?”

“I don’t know anything about this kinda... Wait, I’ve seen this kind of architecture before. This is block-pattern piling, I think it was called.”

“Aha, I would expect nothing less from you, Master! So you *do* know about this technique. Block-pattern piling, you say? How exactly does this technique work?”

“Look there at the corner. Those stones have been altered. Whoever built this cut them into a rectangular shape and piled them together in an alternating pattern. See? By doing that, you can enhance the stability of the corners.”

“Oh, I see. By increasing the stability of the corners, you strengthen the entire structure as well.”

Seeing block-pattern piling here was quite a shock. It made me wonder if someone from the Warring States period had built this castle. No, that couldn’t be. This wasn’t a Japan-only technique. Surely, people here came up with the same method of arranging the stones to reinforce the stability of their buildings. Plus, stone architecture was pretty common in this world. This technique must have been something they innovated at some point in the past.

“Oh?”

After we went down another flight of stairs, the atmosphere around us shifted. No longer were we in a labyrinth. Instead, we were wandering down a vast corridor with a single large door in front of us. It resembled the one we’d seen in front of the audience chamber, with an Armored Dragon King crest engraved on it. This gave the impression that something precious and valuable was hidden within.

“A dead end?” I guessed.

Nanahoshi shook her head. “Nope. *This* is our destination.” She strode forward and pressed her hand against the door.

“Ah...”

Although she barely touched it, the door gave way with a creak. Apparently, this one wasn't locked. A large rat came scuttling out, shooting past our feet and slipping through the crack as Nanahoshi nudged the door open.

A vast room lay within, with no other doors as far as I could see. This was the deepest, most inner part of the floating castle—a room hidden behind a door with a crest engraved on it, one that surely contained something secret inside its walls.

“As childish as it may sound for a man my age, I'm excited,” said Zanoba.

Cliff nodded in agreement. “Me too.”

And me as well.

“I knew boys like you would enjoy this,” Nanahoshi mumbled.

I think you're misunderstanding something here. There are boys out there who detest this kinda stuff or are otherwise completely uninterested. Not me, though!

“Let's have a look,” said Cliff. Apparently, he couldn't hold his curiosity back any longer. He entered the room, and I followed close behind, silently using my Lamplight Spirit to illuminate the area.

“Oooh.”

A strange sight awaited us once the room filled with light.

“What is this? It's incredible!” Zanoba was overcome with emotion as he scrambled over to one of the murals on the wall. I chased after him, feeling as if we'd discovered some sort of treasure.

“Murals, huh? These have to be pretty old.”

The paint was chipped in various places, but thanks to how durable the stones were, the paintings weren't damaged enough to be indecipherable. I knew of no tradition involving drawing murals like these in this world. They reminded me of Egyptian frescoes from my previous world.

“I can't even begin to guess at how ancient they must be,” Zanoba mumbled.

“Master, this is an incredible discovery!”

“Calling it a discovery is a stretch. I’m pretty sure Lord Perugius already knew about these before we found them.”

Describing the paintings would be difficult, but they more or less depicted a story. All the murals featured one peculiar figure. Most likely, they were intended to depict what this person had seen and experienced during their life. There were no words to accompany the paintings, so it was hard to guess what scene or circumstance they were trying to convey. There were inverted mountains, people with wings, people worshipping what looked to be a king, a floating stone, people gathered together, a dragon flying, two people cuddling close with a baby, a fallen shadow, a mournful king, a rage-filled king, people consulting one another, and then an eerie shadow standing behind a group of people. The final painting, which most likely represented the conclusion of the story, was only half-finished, and it was anyone’s guess what the artist had tried to depict.

“I feel like I’ve seen this story somewhere before.”

“Me too, but I can’t remember where.”

“Hm...”

The three of us tilted our heads as we stared at the murals. Behind us, a creak echoed. We glanced back to find Arumanfi. Beside him was a man with silver hair and a commanding aura about him.

Perugius...

“What are you doing down here?” he demanded.

“Oh, it’s you, Lord Perugius.” Zanoba knelt down immediately, so Cliff and I hurriedly followed suit.

As I kept my head lowered, I surreptitiously glanced at Nanahoshi, who was still standing. *Can someone please teach this girl some etiquette?*

That said, I could turn those words back at Perugius. What was *he* doing here? Maybe he really was pissed at us for coming down here without permission, and he’d trailed us to complain.

“Enough. Stand up.”

We quickly got to our feet.

“Forgive us. As we were exploring your magnificent castle, we happened to wander down here. And lo and behold, as we would expect of such a grandiose fortress, even the basement holds enough mystery to make one’s heart pound. I never dreamed we would find something like this here.”

Zanoba rambled at a rapid-fire pace, so I just grunted and nodded along. He really came in handy at times like this, and he probably genuinely meant every word he was saying.

“However,” Zanoba continued, “I am afraid we allowed our curiosity to get the better of us and offended you in the process. With Lady Nanahoshi as our guide, we figured we could wander down here so long as there were no locked doors to block our path, but we must have ventured too far in without even realizing.”

“I don’t mind,” said Perugia. “As for these murals, I wasn’t the one who created them.”

Nanahoshi flashed a triumphant look at us, as if to say, “*See? I told you it was fine.*”

“And what do you mean by that?” Zanoba asked.

He turned toward one of the walls, a distant look in his eyes, as if he was gazing into the past. “When I first obtained this floating fortress, there was almost nothing left inside. There were traces of what once existed here, but it had all faded and crumbled away.” Perugia stared at the murals as he spoke, eyes narrowing as he stepped closer and traced his fingers across it. “The only thing left intact were these wall paintings, and they have stayed in good condition ever since. Everything else wasted away.”

“Hm...”

“And from them, I realized our ancestors had a message they wanted to pass on—a story they wanted their predecessors to inherit.” He turned his gaze toward me. “That is why I haven’t locked the door to this room. If someone comes here wanting to see them, I have no reason to refuse. Of course, only

one such person like that has ever appeared.”

“We appreciate your explanation,” said Zanoba, “and I am glad to hear we haven’t offended you. We didn’t necessarily come here hoping to view these murals, but it does seem that our ancient ancestors were trying to pass something on by leaving them here. There is something deeply captivating about that idea.”

“I would like to agree with you, but I am not fond of these paintings,” said Perugius. “There is something suffocating about them. They make me nauseated.”

“Well, to each their own, as they say. That aside, we shouldn’t linger here for too long. I’m afraid I have too little control over my own strength. If I were to accidentally touch these walls, I might destroy them, and that would be a shame.” Zanoba turned his gaze toward the door, as if to indicate that he was ready to return to the main floor.

Perugius hummed under his breath. “Arumanfi, guide them back up.”

“As you command!”

We returned to the main floor with Arumanfi as our guide, but Perugius didn’t join us. He must have had his own feelings about those murals, because he stayed behind in that room.

After that, our group disbanded, and I returned to my room without incident. It was night by now. The sun had set while we were exploring the basement. Another day had already ended.

I wondered how long these little classes of ours would continue. It didn’t matter how much time we took off from the university as long as we attended homeroom, but I didn’t want to be away from home for too long. Lucie and Zenith weighed on my mind.

Well, right now, it’s best to deal with what’s in front of me. I have no idea what’s going on with Zenith, and Lilia is looking after Lucie for me. The only thing left for me to do is practice and revise summoning magic.

Right as I plopped myself on the sofa and started digging through my luggage for a stack of paper, a knock came at the door.

“Rudy? Are you in?” Sylphie didn’t wait for my reply before peeking in. The moment she spotted me, she slipped in and took a seat beside me. Then, she let out a heavy exhale.

I reached for a nearby pitcher, poured some water, and handed it over to her. “Here. You must be exhausted.”

“Thanks.” She took it and eagerly gulped the liquid down. “Phew.”

She looked more worn out than usual.

“How are things with Princess Ariel?” I asked.

“Um, well, not so great.”

“How so?”

“Lord Perugia isn’t taking Her Highness very seriously.”

Apparently, Ariel wanted Perugia in her camp, so she was going out of her way to list all the benefits he would earn from backing her. Once she ascended the throne, he could have noble status, his own territory, or special accommodations if he wanted to engage in commerce in Asura. Of course, Perugia rebuffed her completely, saying he didn’t need any of that.

“Well, yeah, no wonder she’s having trouble,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he chose to live out here, away from all of that. So either he’s not the least bit interested in it or it actively disgusts him.”

“What?” Sylphie tilted her head. “But I thought he said he chose to live out here because it’s more convenient for stopping the Demon God from ever rising again.”

Had he really said that? Well, no doubt that was one of the reasons, too. “That’s not what I mean. If he wants power, he’s already in a position to take it for himself. He’s the hero from Laplace’s War, after all. Sylvaril said he found the formality of the Asuran court suffocating. If you’re trying to reel him in with power and prestige, it’s only going to blow up in your face.”

If he really wanted to leave this fortress, he could easily have done so. But

he'd been cooped up here for decades. Surely Perugius had his reasons.

"Yes, you do have a point. Maybe Princess Ariel is being too impatient..." Her voice trailed off for a moment. "Hey, Rudy, what do you think we should do?"

"That's a difficult question."

I had absolutely no clue. I did feel like Ariel was skipping a number of crucial steps here. Normally, a person would cultivate friendships before asking for favors. If the other party wasn't willing, then you could offer them conditions in return. Ariel had benefited from her natural charisma, using it to her advantage to make instant connections. She had never faced someone who could resist her charms before. Perugius and Nanahoshi were built differently. I was probably in the same category as they were. I was happy to do something for Sylphie's sake, but I wasn't that inclined to help Ariel out.

"First, I think she should try to improve her relationship with Perugius."

"Improve it how?" asked Sylphie.

"By sharing his hobbies or asking him about heroic stories from his past."

"Hobbies and heroic stories? Okay, I think I understand."

"It might help you to bring Zanoba along too. I think Perugius likes him the most out of all of us." Zanoba could carry the conversation for her, and Ariel could just nod. That would probably improve Perugius's perception of her.

"Hm, okay. I'll try telling Her Highness what you said."

"Don't take me too seriously," I warned. "I'm not infallible."

"Ehehe, I appreciate the advice regardless." Sylphie pecked me on the cheek.

The soft feel of her lips was enough to make me forget about studying. Instead, her kiss stirred up wicked desires inside me.

Maybe I should whisk her off to bed with me so we can start on a second baby. I quickly dismissed that idea. *No, I can't let myself get distracted. I'm going to study. I'll just have to settle for feeling up her butt a little instead—wait, no!*

"By the way, how are things going with you, Rudy?"

"Hm, so-so, I guess."

I sealed away my inner lust demon as we discussed everything that had happened in the past day. We talked about Zenith's curse, summoning magic, the meal I shared with Nanahoshi, and how Nanahoshi had led our foray into the fortress's basement floors.

"You sure are awfully nice to Nanahoshi," Sylphie grumbled after I finished.

I guess eating with another girl and hanging out with her really is a no-go after all. That said, Zanoba and Cliff were present both times, so it wasn't as if I was alone with Nanahoshi. But I did go out of my way to make that meal for her.

Crap. I have to do something to fix Sylphie's mood. I had to let her know that my love for her far exceeded the friendship I shared with Nanahoshi.

"Um, Miss Sylphiette..."

"Yes?"

"May I hold you in my arms?"

She sucked in a breath, cheeks puffing as she pouted and turned away. "You always try to kiss up to me like that. Why? Is it because you feel guilty?"

Uh oh. She's being awfully cold today. What's going on? Is she seriously pissed at me? Don't tell me this is that lull period that people often speak of in marriages. But then again, our three-year anniversary is coming up. The accursed three-year mark.

I shook my head. *No, the number of years don't matter! But I'm in serious trouble here. What do I do?!*

"Just kidding! Sorry for pulling your leg like that, but you looked like you were having so much fun talking to her, so I wanted to get back at you a little." Sylphie stuck out her tongue as she threw her arms around me and squeezed me in a hug.

I pulled her close. She was so petite, but she was still as soft and warm as ever. I loved the feel of her. Perhaps I deserved to have her hating me, but nevertheless, I didn't want her to. *I'll have to be more careful in the future.*

"But honestly, why are you so hung up over Nanahoshi anyway?" Sylphie

asked.

“Uh, well, I know a lot about her situation and where she came from, so I want to help her out however I can. But it’s not like I’m romantically interested in her or anything, okay?” The way I rambled made it sound even more suspicious.

“Ehehe, yes, I know.” Sylphie chuckled, patting me on the head. She then tapped me gently on the back before pulling away. “Well, I should return to Princess Ariel. Keep working hard, Rudy.”

“Yeah, I will. And you, too.”

Crap. I thought everything was going really well, but Sylphie’s frustrations with me must have been piling up in the background. This can’t keep up. It might be a good idea to put some distance between myself and Nanahoshi. Maybe going out of my way to do things that would make her happy wasn’t such a good idea after all. Hmm...

Sylphie threw the door open to leave and froze. “Huh?”

Nanahoshi was standing in the doorway. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude on the two of you, but... *cough, cough...*” She broke into a coughing fit, clutching at her throat and chest as her face contorted in pain. “Sorry. I overheard everything. *Cough...* Don’t worry, I have no interest in Rudeus... *Cough...*”

“Oh, um, okay. That’s great, but, uh, are you all right?” Sylphie asked.

“I’m fi...*cough, cough...*”

Nanahoshi’s condition was far worse than I had seen. She was gagging like there was something caught in her throat, which only heightened our unease.

“It’s just, you know, my cough has gotten so much worse... *Cough, cough...* I went to Cliff to see if I could get him to cast some detoxification magic on me, but he was preoccupied with Elinalise. I thought I’d get Rudeus to do it instead, but if that’s only going to cause more misunderstandings, I’ll just wait and have Cliff help me tomorrow.”

“No, it’s fine. Everything is fine. I’m not really that worried about it,” Sylphie blurted in a panic. As Nanahoshi turned to leave, Sylphie grabbed her by the

shoulder. “Um, I can cast it on you, but if my magic’s not effective enough, it might be a good idea to have Cliff cast a higher tier spell on you later.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it, if you don’t mind.”

“All right, then here goes.” Sylphie gently pressed a hand to Nanahoshi’s neck. She cast her detoxification spell without ever reciting an incantation—a feat I remained unable to perform. *Sure, whatever, I can’t do it at this point in time. But I’m sure if I work at it, I’ll eventually be able to do it too.*

“Hm?” Sylphie’s voice cut through my thoughts as she tilted her head in confusion.

In the next moment, Nanahoshi started her hacking cough again.

“What? This is...kind of strange? My mana is...what is this?” Sylphie cocked her head to the other side and tried pressing her opposite hand to Nanahoshi’s shoulder. In the meantime, Nanahoshi’s coughing fit only worsened.

“Hey, is everything all right?” I asked, my anxiety spiking.

Nanahoshi slapped a hand over her mouth. “Urgh...blegh!” There was the sound of liquid spattering.

“Huh?”

A clot of blood fell to the floor.

“H-hey...”

Nanahoshi stared silently down at her hand, dazed. Her brain couldn’t seem to digest what she was seeing. She turned her palm toward me, as if she thought I might have the answers. Her skin was coated in blood. A second later, she collapsed to the floor and lost consciousness.

“What? Why?”

I wasn’t the only one standing there dumbstruck. Sylphie was also frozen in place.

“Just now, when I tried to pour my magic into her, it...why? I don’t...” Flecks of blood coated Sylphie’s face and hands as she stared down at Nanahoshi. Her skin was deathly pale.

I immediately strode toward her. "Sylphie." There was a tremor in my voice.

She flinched, eyes trembling with fear as she retreated a step. "N-no! It wasn't me. I didn't do anything to her." Sylphie continued edging back until she was trapped in a corner. I silently followed her until her back was to the wall. Once she knew she had nowhere left to run, she squeezed her eyes shut. "I know what I said a minute ago, but I really only intended to tease you a little bit...but really, I...I would never do something like this!"

I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket, moistening it with my water magic, and slowly began wiping the blood from Sylphie's face.

"Eh...?"



Once that was clean, I started scrubbing her hand next. The worst vehicle for disease was a sick person's bodily fluids. I didn't think wiping Nanahoshi's blood off of Sylphie would magically fix everything, but I couldn't leave her looking like that. For Sylphie's part, she didn't try to resist; she merely stood there and let me work.

"It's okay, Sylphie. I watched your whole interaction with Nanahoshi. You didn't do anything wrong."

"O-okay."

I was calm now. Seeing her lose all of her composure had helped me keep mine. At least, I hoped it had. "It's okay," I repeated again. "You didn't do anything. Nanahoshi has been sick for a while. Understand?"

"Yes..."

"Things just happened all at once, with the worst possible timing. This is absolutely *not* your fault."

"O-okay, but...when I tried to use my magic on her, there was something...strange inside of her. It was like my mana wouldn't go through her. In fact, it just seemed to...coalesce together or something..."

Blood was trickling from Nanahoshi's mouth and nose as she lay on the ground, unconscious. Her life could be in danger if we didn't get her help. Sylphie was still in shock.

I need to calm her down. No, maybe just the opposite. Perhaps I should order her to do something. Usually, when someone was in this sort of confused state, giving them something to do helped them snap out of it.

"Listen to me, Sylphie. I need you to get help—either Cliff or Lord Perugius."

"Y-you want me to go?"

"Yes. I'll watch over Nanahoshi and do what I can for her, but in the meantime, I need you to go get help. Can you do that?"

"Y-yes, I can do that." Clarity returned to her eyes as she dashed into the hallway and left. Sylphie had faced carnage several times before, but that hadn't prepared her for having an acquaintance throw up blood out of

nowhere. Even she was caught unprepared. Worse yet, it all happened right after Sylphie touched Nanahoshi.

I knew my wife wasn't the type to hurt someone else, no matter how jealous she was. That said, sometimes she could be compulsive and—

No, nope, not possible.

"All right," I said, throwing those thoughts out the window as I turned to face Nanahoshi. Despite what I told Sylphie, there was little emergency care I could give our unconscious friend.

I'll just have to do what I can.

Chapter 4:

Lament

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since Nanahoshi collapsed. She had yet to regain consciousness, and we still didn't know what caused her to throw up blood.

Arumanfi instantly appeared after Sylphie left to get help. He looked Nanahoshi over and carried her straight to the sickbay. In the meantime, I gathered everyone to explain the situation. I told them that Nanahoshi's condition had worsened, and when Sylphie tried to cast detoxification magic on her, she spat blood and collapsed. I also told them she was being treated in the sickbay. All of it had happened so fast, and that was pretty much all I knew. They were all taken aback, but at least they understood what was happening.

At the moment, Yuruzu of Atonement was the one looking after Nanahoshi. Yuruzu possessed a special healing power that allowed her to transfer one person's stamina and health to another. Since this operated very differently from detoxification magic, it could be effective in treating illnesses that couldn't be cured through normal means. Supposedly, anyway. The only issue was that Yuruzu couldn't do it on her own. She needed someone's cooperation to perform her magic.

Sylphie immediately volunteered. Yuruzu had her lie beside Nanahoshi and began working her magic. Nanahoshi's face was contorted in anguish throughout the process, and her coughing fits were ceaseless, even as she remained unconscious.

"Karowante, how is she?" Perugius glanced at Nanahoshi once before ordering one of his subordinates to inspect her. The man at his command was Karowante of Insight, whose ability allowed him to peer through the unknown—to identify a person's secrets. This also meant he could analyze a person's condition if they were unwell, almost like x-ray vision.

He looked at Nanahoshi—or maybe through her—and shook his head. "It's not something Yuruzu can cure with her powers."

“Then search the archives,” said Perugius.

“As you command.”

With that, his subordinate began to search for information on this illness and how to cure it. Karowante was going to compare the symptoms he’d observed in Nanahoshi with the literature they kept in the fortress. I offered to help, but Perugius flatly turned me down; he had no intention of letting an outsider into his archives. In the interim, Yuruzu continued her treatment, and Sylphie remained in the sickbay.

I was left with nothing to keep me preoccupied. Of course, I didn’t spend the next three days doing absolutely nothing. I returned home and updated Roxy on our situation, letting her know that Nanahoshi had collapsed and Sylphie was helping to treat her. Thus, I said, we would be a bit delayed in returning home.

After hearing everything, Roxy immediately took action. She contacted the university and requested time off, then explained everything to our family in my stead. She also promised to take care of everyone while we were gone. She was far more calm and collected than I was. No doubt she was used to these sorts of situations.

In the end, I didn’t actually do anything. Roxy did it all in my stead. All I did was remind Aisha and Norn, once again, that we would be late coming back. Then I grabbed an extra change of clothes and hightailed it back to the floating fortress. Not that there was anything I could do when I got back except pray that Nanahoshi would come out of this safely.

“I wonder if she’ll recover?”

Like me, Cliff had nothing to do other than twiddle his thumbs. The castle had a chapel, and that was where Cliff went to offer his fervent prayers. “Let thy will be done, Lord Millis,” he said, hands clasped and eyes closed.

People of faith often prayed like this in times of trouble. As for me, I’d never believed in any sort of higher power. I only put faith into the people who had helped me in this world. And I knew that even if I prayed to Roxy or Sylphie, it wouldn’t relieve the anxiety I felt.

As the silence stretched on, I suddenly remembered a movie I’d seen long

ago. It was a famous one about aliens taking over the world. Their scientific advancements allowed them to overpower mankind and wipe us out. But at the very end of the film, their machines all came to a screeching halt. They had no immunity to the common cold virus, and it decimated them all.

Nanahoshi had teleported to this world. She wasn't reincarnated into it, like I was. On top of that, she didn't age, and she couldn't use magic or magical implements. Perhaps it wasn't simply mana she lacked but immunity to pathogens in this world as well.

No, if that were the case, she should have fallen ill much sooner. It's been eight years since the Displacement Incident. That was a long time for her to go unaffected.

My lips thinned.

Is she actually going to die?

Today was the fourth day since Nanahoshi collapsed. We were all called into a room with a round table. Perugius and all of his familiars were present, except for Yuruzu of Atonement. They stood behind their lord as he took his seat in an extravagant chair.

"Please sit," said Sylvaril.

We did as she asked, settling into our chairs. Sylphie was still assisting Yuruzu with Nanahoshi's treatment, so without her, there were only six of us left.

"We have discovered what ails Lady Nanahoshi," Sylvaril said, stepping forward once we were all seated.

So they finally figured out what it is.

"The name of her illness is Dryne Syndrome."

Dryne Syndrome? This was the first I'd heard of it. I glanced around; it seemed I wasn't the only one. Cliff probably had the most medical knowledge among us, but even he looked confused, shaking his head.

"It's not surprising that you are unfamiliar with it. It was active an eon ago, when humans possessed less mana than they do today. Back then, a number of

children were born without any mana at all. By the time they reached ten years of age or so, without exception, they would die from this syndrome.”

Well, that *did* seem to match up with what Nanahoshi was experiencing. Although she wasn’t a ten-year-old, she had been in this world for eight years by now, and she didn’t possess any mana. So her illness definitely wasn’t Sylphie’s fault after all.

“According to the literature, those who do not possess mana of their own lack the ability to neutralize outside mana that filters in. Thus, it accumulates inside them over a decade and causes this illness.”

I didn’t quite understand what that meant, but it sounded similar to the concept of good and bad bacteria. Having your own mana meant having good bacteria to flush out the bad, but those who didn’t have any would only build up bad bacteria in their bodies instead. While I wasn’t sure how much we could trust this literature Sylvaril spoke of, her explanation did make sense.

“Did you find anything about how to cure this illness?” I asked.

“There was nothing. This took place 7,000 years ago. As humans’ natural mana strengthened over time, the syndrome died out.”

That timeframe meant the syndrome was active prior to the first Great Human-Demon War. If memory served, that war was said to have lasted a millennium. Such vast conflict brought about great evolution. However they did it, mankind must have managed to strengthen themselves. It only made sense that Dryne Syndrome died off as a natural byproduct of that.

Nonetheless, 7,000 years was a long time. It wasn’t surprising they had little literature left on the topic. It was a miracle that we’d managed to find out the name of what plagued Nanahoshi.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“Freeze her in time.” It wasn’t Sylvaril who responded to me this time but rather Perugius, whose imposing form sat rigidly in his luxury chair. “Scarecoat of Time can use his power to freeze Nanahoshi’s clock.”

A man stepped forward as Perugius spoke. He wore a mask that protruded at the mouth. It somewhat resembled the puckered lips of a Hyottoko mask—no,

maybe more like a gas mask? *So he's Scarecoat of Time, huh?*

I was pretty sure his ability was to freeze the time of anyone he touched. It would stop his time as well, but at least if he used it on Nanahoshi, it would keep her from dying or getting any worse.

"All right. What do we do after that?"

"We contact people on the surface and look for a way to cure it."

Okay. That was one way to do it. With Perugius's reputation, surely there weren't many who would turn us away.

"Although I have no idea how many people out there will want to try to save her," Perugius added.

"Can't you use your influence to help her?" I asked.

"Nanahoshi and I are merely bound by contract. I won't put myself in debt to other people to help her."

That sounds awfully cold to me.

That said, I knew nothing about their relationship, so I wasn't about to stick my nose where it didn't belong.

"Don't misunderstand me. You are my guests, so I will do what I can to help. However, my entire life's purpose is to seek out Laplace and vanquish him. What aid I can offer only extends so far. I cannot assist her at the cost of my own objective."

So basically, since watching over Laplace was his job, he wouldn't put in extra effort into helping her. If he requested help from someone else, that would put him in their debt, which he would eventually have to repay. It would be an especially heavy debt considering we needed a cure for a syndrome that hadn't existed for thousands of years. There was no telling what kind of price would be extracted for a favor like that.

Perugius had no obligation to someone like Nanahoshi. No, in fact, he'd already done more than he was duty-bound to do. He treated her condition and was keeping her alive. That was why he was making this declaration, saying he wouldn't do any more than he already had. If one of us wanted to save her, we

were welcome to do so. I didn't think there was anything wrong with that.

"You're just planning to abandon Nanahoshi then?!" Cliff erupted, springing to his feet.

"I never said I would abandon her."

"Liar! You have this incredible castle and all of these exceptional familiars at your disposal! If anyone can search for a cure, you should be able to!"

Perugius's brow twitched. "Having the ability to do something does not mean one is obligated to do it."

"Enough of your games!" Cliff snarled. "It's the duty of those with power to help those in need!"

"Hmph. Don't push Millis's annoying religious drivel onto me."

"What did you say?!"

I knew Cliff was merely speaking out of anger. He was a believer in Millis, which resembled Christianity from my previous world. Perhaps one of Millis's teachings was that people should extend the hand of mercy to those lambs in need of succor. I thought it was a mistake to say that to Perugius, though. He was operating on his own sense of morality. For the past 400 years, he had been working toward one objective. He was interested in Nanahoshi's research on summoning from other worlds, but that did not take priority over Laplace. It was mostly a way for him to kill time.

"What you're saying is tantamount to abandoning Nanahoshi! If you're going to help her, you should commit to doing it right!"

"Cliff, enough!" Elinalise bellowed at him after he kicked his chair. She seized him by the shoulders and held tight so he couldn't move. "I know how you feel, but hold it in."

His lips drew taut.

"I don't want to lose you over something like this," she continued.

Around the room, all eleven of Perugius's familiars were poised for battle. Perugius took one glance at Cliff, who was comparatively powerless, and his lips curled into a mocking smile. "If you're so bothered over her condition, why

don't you take action? Your God would say the same, would he not? 'When helping those in need, don't rely on others,' I believe it was?"

"Grr..." Cliff scowled as he slid back down into his chair, vexed by Perugius's words. Surely it wasn't his intention to jump down Perugius's throat. It simply upset him that someone so powerful, who seemed capable of anything, wouldn't try to help us.

"Huff." I took a deep exhale. *Okay, now what? I want to help Nanahoshi out, but I have no idea where to start.* The rest of the group seemed similarly stumped. Within my family, Aisha in particular had spent a lot of time with Nanahoshi and would be sad if she passed. Plus, if we did nothing and watched Nanahoshi wither away, Sylphie would blame herself.

Isn't there something I can do?

"Pardon me," said a voice as the door to the room swung open. Yuruzu of the Atonement stepped inside. "Lady Nanahoshi has regained consciousness."

The moment I heard that, I jumped out of my chair. "A-and? How is she?"

"On the surface, her symptoms seem to have improved."

"Meaning?"

"Dryne Syndrome causes a buildup of mana, which alters one's body and leads to illness. We have managed to treat those symptoms."

By the sounds of it, Dryne Syndrome seemed to resemble AIDS. All of her coughing up until now must have been a sign. That was why our detoxification magic was effective at clearing her surface symptoms but never entirely got rid of the problem.

"Can't you absorb the mana from her body or something?" I asked.

"I'm not able to do that, no."

"Then don't you know anyone who can?"

Yuruzu slowly shook her head.

"Oh, all right, then..."

I wondered if there was some other way we could drain the excess mana out

of her body. For instance, we could make a magic implement with such properties. Surely, our ability to make such objects had progressed in the 7,000 years since Dryne Syndrome first appeared. What else could we do? Could I use the Mana Absorption Stone to cleanse her?

Nah, that thing isn't capable of absorbing mana from inside a person's body. Although I get the feeling it's not impossible to use it that way. Maybe we should make something instead? But how long would it take to make something with those capabilities? And there's not even any guarantee we could make such a thing. Shit.

"At any rate, I'm going to go see how Nanahoshi is doing," I said, making my way to the door. The others quickly followed me.

The sickbay was desolate. It had the same furniture as the guest rooms, but the interior was made of windowless stone. An operating table of sorts stood in the center of the room, and there was also a cabinet containing a knife and bandages and other medical supplies.

Silence hung in the air.

Nanahoshi was in a bed in the corner of the room. All the blood she'd hacked up was gone now. At some point, Sylphie and Yuruzu had given her a pristine white gown as if she were some kind of hospital patient. From the outside, there was no indication that she was in any danger, yet the life seemed to have been drained from her.

"Nanahoshi? Are you okay?"

She glanced at me. "Do I *look* okay to you?"

No, she didn't. Her face was deathly pale, and there were dark bags under her eyes. You could tell she was ill just by looking. Perhaps Yuruzu's powers of Atonement were also draining for the patient.

Incidentally, the bed beside Nanahoshi's was empty. Yuruzu had Sylphie carried off to her guest room right as we came in. I'd seen Sylphie in passing and she looked emaciated. She'd been helping with Nanahoshi's treatment these past four days. Although she hadn't gone without food and water, it still

had a noticeable impact on her constitution.

“Yuruzu said they can’t cure me.”

“I know,” I said as I sat beside her. It seemed Miss Yuruzu hadn’t hidden any of the details from Nanahoshi. “Well, I’m sure you’ll get better soon, though.”

“We both know I won’t.” She turned her gaze to the wall and went quiet.

Perhaps saying that had been a bit reckless of me.

After a long, drawn-out silence, Ariel and the others tried talking to Nanahoshi. Some of them tried to comfort her, some encouraged her to keep her spirits up, and others promised she would get better soon. They were all just trying to brighten her mood, but unfortunately, in times like this, sometimes that had the opposite effect. For those in pain, there was nothing more contemptible than empty reassurance.

Nanahoshi wouldn’t respond to anything, so they all eventually ran out of things to say. An oppressive silence permeated the air, stifling the atmosphere.

“Well, then, Nanahoshi, I should be getting back to my room. I’ll come see you again,” said Ariel. She was the first to leave, and the others soon trickled out after her.

Cliff lingered. It was only with Elinalise’s prompting that he finally vacated the room. When they slipped out the door, I heard her say, “There’s no words we can offer her.”

I was the only one left. I didn’t know why I had stayed, but I felt like I needed to be here with her—that it would be dangerous to leave her alone right now. There was nothing I could say to her, though. Not when she was sick with an incurable illness. Anything I said would be pointless.

Nanahoshi had to be filled with anxiety. Her research on summoning magic was headed in the right direction. She had once been stalled at the first stage, but she’d sailed past the second and third phase. Judging by what Perugius said, she already had all she needed to move to the next step. I had no idea how close she was to the fifth phase of her research, but if things kept up the way they had been, she could probably go home in another year or two.

But just as things finally started to look up for her, this happened. It was like a cancer diagnosis. Even though cancer was no longer considered untreatable in my world, the death rate was still quite high. It was enough to drive Nanahoshi into a corner and fill her with despair.

It wouldn't be surprising if she snapped again. If it really was true that this illness had no cure, then she had no future waiting for her. If it meant that she would never be able to return home, so maybe she deserved the right to go berserk. Perhaps if she unleashed her fury until there was nothing else left, she could settle down and find some way to enjoy what little time she had left. If she did decide to cut loose, I'd stick by her side to the end.

"I never had a strong body to begin with, you know," Nanahoshi said with a sigh as I sat there in silence. Her voice sounded more cheerful than I expected, but it was the empty, insincere kind. "I wouldn't really say I was the sickly type, but I did catch a cold about once every year."

I kept quiet and listened as the words poured out of her.

"My grades were good, but I wasn't really athletic. I preferred being indoors."

After a brief pause, she changed the subject. "This world hasn't made much progress on the medical front, has it?"

When I didn't respond, she continued. "Maybe it's because they are so reliant on magic in this world, but did you know the people here don't even wash their wounds after they've been injured? As a result, there are many who receive treatment too late and die or lose a limb. Idiots, aren't they? Even just cleaning their wounds with ordinary water would prevent such infections from ever happening..."

I waited and she switched to a different topic.

"Ever since I realized I can't use magic, I've been taking a number of precautions. I avoid crowded places to keep from contracting any illnesses. I also refuse to eat food that I'm unfamiliar with."

These pauses continued, interspersed with her random thoughts.

"I might look really unhealthy, from your perspective, but I've actually been exercising in my room. I've been staying as fit as I can, in my own way. I mean, I

knew if I got sick, it might not be treatable. In fact, I figured it would probably be incurable. And it would probably be some illness I had never even heard of before.

“Don’t you think this world is pretty strange to begin with? There are monsters here heavy enough to crush you, and I don’t know if it’s the magic or what, but this world seems to ignore the laws of physics altogether.

“I mean, okay, sure, I thought this place was pretty cool when I first came. I’ve actually played quite a few video games myself, and I don’t hate swords and magic and stuff. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t find it kind of exciting. Part of me once felt jealous of you for being able to reincarnate into a world like this...”

Her voice trailed off suddenly, shoulders trembling. Slowly, she turned her face toward me. Her eyes were red and puffy as they welled up.

“I don’t want to die.”

The tears came falling one after the other, as if a dam had burst inside her.

“I don’t wanna die in a place like this! Not in this freaky, weird world! Why?! Why is this happening to me?! It doesn’t make any sense! Did you know that my body hasn’t changed once in these past eight years? I haven’t grown any taller, and my hair is the same length as it ever was! But my stomach growls, and if I eat, I still poop. Yet my nails won’t grow, and I haven’t had any periods either!”

She lashed out and grabbed a nearby pitcher, which she flung across the room. It struck the opposing wall and shattered, splashing water all over the floor.

“I’m not a human of this world! I’m not *living* here! I’m like a walking corpse! So why? Why am I able to get sick?! It’s completely messed up. Why does this have to happen to me? I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna die in this stupid, weird world!”

The tears came faster and faster as she wailed.

“I mean, I haven’t even kissed anyone! I haven’t told the guy I love how I feel yet! I’m so jealous of you. You enjoy every single day, living each moment to its fullest. What do *you* have to be sad about? Oh, so your dad died and your mom’s seriously ill? So what? Who cares! I won’t even get to see my dad before

I die. My mom's not even going to know I'm gone. I miss them—both my mom and my dad!

"I still remember the morning before I teleported here. My dad said he would come home early that day, and my mom said she was going to grill some mackerel for dinner. I told him that I had friends coming over so I'd prefer he not come home early, and I told my mom I was sick to death of mackerel. Why... why did I say those things? I'm sure they're both really worried. I miss them. I want to go home. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die here..."

She looped her arms around her legs, burying her face in her knees. Muffled sobs spilled out of her, along with hiccups and mournful cries.

The pain in her voice was like a dagger to my heart. When I first came to this world, I probably wouldn't have empathized with her at all. *"I miss them. I want to go home. I want to see my family again."* The person I was back then would have been baffled to hear anyone say such things. I would have thought, *Eh, just forget about them and enjoy the new world you're in.*

Now things were different. I understood wanting to go home and wanting to see your family again. I knew how precious those seemingly monotonous days could be. Once they were gone, you could never get them back again. Ever.

Paul was dead. Zenith's memories might never come back. The warm family I knew from Buena Village was gone. However, in its place, I now had a new family to protect: Sylphie, Roxy, Lucie, Lilia, Aisha, Norn, and Zenith. If I were somehow separated from my girls forever, it would tear my heart in two. If any of them were to vanish on me, I would go to the ends of the earth to find them again. And if I were to somehow be transported back to my old world, it wouldn't matter if I could use magic there or if girls tripped over themselves to shower me with attention. I would still be dead set on coming back to this world.

"Hic...hic..." Nanahoshi's entire body shook as she squeezed her arms around her knees.

She'd never gotten any closer to Zanoba, Cliff, or Sylphie than was absolutely necessary, but she always listened to me. When I asked her for something, she would oblige. When I held a party, she would attend. In hindsight, she'd never

treated me unkindly. She brightened up just a bit whenever we spoke Japanese to each other. As the only person who could speak her mother tongue here, I was her one respite from it all.

“Please, someone, save me...” Nanahoshi cried out in a quiet voice.

I got out of my chair.

I returned to the room with the round table to find Perugius still seated inside. His familiars had all left. He was there all alone, as if he’d been waiting for me.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’ll save her. I would greatly appreciate it if you could spare me any assistance, but I won’t ask for more than you are willing to give.”

His brows lifted in surprise, but he nodded. “Oh? You’re going to look for a way to save her?”

He stared fixedly at me, as if trying to ascertain how genuine I was being and how determined I was to see this through. I sensed skepticism from him, as if he didn’t think I would do anything unless it benefited me, but I wasn’t really the calculating type. Since I had nothing to hide, I stared right back at him.

“Very well,” he said. “I would be aggrieved to see her die as well.”

Great, I’ve decided what I’m going to do, but now where do I start?

This was an illness extinguished over 7,000 years ago. None of us had a clue how we could find a cure for it. All we knew for sure was that detoxification magic and healing magic were ineffective. Perugius would have said something if the cure were that simple.

Maybe a magical implement? But I have no idea if that would do the trick either.

If we were looking for a magical implement that could affect someone internally, Cliff had engineered one for Elinalise. In her case, he had improved it over time while ascertaining its effectiveness, but even then, it hadn’t entirely lifted her curse.

Still, perhaps we could do the same with Nanahoshi and gradually work on her condition while adding improvements to the device. That would, however, require us to monitor her constitution for changes over time, and Nanahoshi probably didn't have that much time. She'd vomited blood during this flare-up. Yuruzu had cured the surface symptoms, but they would no doubt reappear soon. She might not live through the next flare-up. On top of that, with her body frozen in time, there was no opportunity for us to experiment.

So we couldn't use a magical implement. Perhaps we could make one eventually, but right now, we needed something with immediate effects. Maybe someone knew of such a treatment, like Man God or Orsted. They were the most likely candidates in my mind. Problem being, I had no way of contacting Man God. With any luck, he might visit me in my dreams tonight and impart his advice, but our communication was entirely by his leisure; I had no way of reaching out. Plus, we didn't have the time to spare waiting around and hoping he might show up.

"Lord Perugius, is there any way for us to contact Dragon God Orsted?" I asked.

"No. I do not know his current location."

So even Orsted was beyond our reach.

"In any case, I doubt he would know a solution either. He only appeared in this world about 100 years ago. Wise though he may be, he would have no way of knowing about an illness from 7,000 years ago."

Orsted was about 100 years old then, huh? I figured he'd been around longer than that. Compared to Perugius, he was pretty young. Even if he was still way older than me.

"All right, but then who in the world *would* know about a 7,000 year old illn..." My voice trailed off.

Wait. There is such a person. I just remembered.

Yes, indeed. There was someone who had lived that long. I didn't get the impression that they knew a lot about diseases and the like, but there was no harm in asking.

“Actually,” I said, “there *is* someone who comes to mind.”

“Oh?”

That said, I had no idea how to find them. The last time we met was entirely by coincidence, and we parted ways not long after we ran into each other. I had little connection with them on top of having no way to contact them.

Still, I had to do *something*. If I waited around here, nothing would change. “Would it be possible for you to send me to the Demon Continent?”

“The Demon Continent? And what do you plan to do there?” asked Perugius.

I had only met this person once in the past. Roxy had apparently run into them as well, but it was anyone’s guess as to where they were now. Nonetheless, I had known their name—her name, rather—for a long time now, having studied about her exploits when I lived in the Fittoa Region. Our meeting was one I’d never forget.

“I’d like to track down the Demon World’s Great Emperor, Kishirika Kishirisu.”

Kishirika—that was the name of the woman responsible for the first Great Human-Demon War that happened 7,000 years ago.

Chapter 5:

Return to the Demon Continent

OUR PLAN was simple. First, Perugius would get us to the Demon Continent. We would then start our search for Kishirika and ask her if she knew how to cure Dryne's Syndrome or, failing that, if she knew anyone who did.

Really, it was simple.

Or at least it would be if she was holed up in some castle somewhere like Perugius. Sadly, Kishirika tended to wander the continent, so it was down to luck if we could find her. I had no idea how long that would take.

The situation wasn't all bad, at least. Perugius said he would make a teleportation circle that would take us to one of the Demon Continent's central hubs. Simply put, we could teleport instantly to most of the towns in The Demon Continent from this castle. I'd been most anxious about travel time, so that worry was out of the picture at least. With any luck, we might be able to find Kishirika within the week.

Teleportation circles were a bit terrifying, though. Their power let us instantaneously travel from this castle in the sky to any town in the world. That meant, as a tool of war, they could let armies bypass any terrain or defenses. Not that anyone would try to invade this fortress. Still, I could understand why it was considered forbidden magic and why Orsted and Perugius only used it in secret.

No, I'm sure they're not the only ones using it. No doubt there were other spells and tools that people used in secret despite it being forbidden. Such was the way of the world.

I had no qualms cheating and using such magic to speed up my search for Kishirika. We would be using Roxy's strategy when she came to the Demon Continent looking for me: we would visit each city individually and search them thoroughly before moving on. I wasn't sure how long that would take, but I guessed we'd be done in maybe a year. After all, travel would only take a day.

The only issue we faced was potentially passing each other by as we moved to the next town and Kishirika rolled into the one we'd just vacated. To counter that, I would take a page from Roxy's book and put in requests at each Adventurers' Guild we passed to reduce the chances of that happening. It would be a Kishirika treasure hunt, so to speak. We'd pay a handsome reward to anyone who managed to find and capture the Great Demon Emperor. With the stipulation that they leave her unharmed, of course.

I gathered the others—Ariel, Luke, Cliff, Elinalise, Zanoba, and Sylphie—and explained my plan to them.

Sylphie had regained consciousness while I was speaking with Perugius. However, it was obvious that these treatments had taken a toll on her. She was fairly thin to begin with, but now she looked almost skeletal. I figured she needed at least five days to regain her strength.

"In order to save Nanahoshi, I would like all of you to help," I said.

Ariel immediately nodded. "If that's what you wish, I will gladly lend you my magical implements." She offered up one of the rings she wore. It was one of a pair, and pouring mana into one made the jewel on the other ring light up. It was a secret treasure of the Asura Kingdom, used to alert the person on the other end of danger. I wasn't sure what I would use it for, but surely it would come in handy at some point. Almost like a pager.

"Zanoba, Miss Elinalise, I would like you to come with me."

I wanted the two as bodyguards. After all, Zanoba was a Blessed Child. If we happened to face a hydra again, he could surely handle it. I couldn't create a Battle Aura, so my physical defenses were pretty weak. It was only thanks to Disturb Magic and the Mana Absorption Stone that I had high magical defense. With Zanoba in our vanguard, we'd have a chance if we faced another hydra. Of course, I'd be devastated if my overconfidence led to his death, which was why I added Elinalise for support.

"What about me?" asked Cliff.

"I'd like you to create a magical implement."

Frankly speaking, there was no guarantee that Kishirika would know anything about this sickness or that we would find a cure. It was possible we were just wasting time. Therefore, I thought we should approach the situation from multiple angles. Nanahoshi's illness was similar to a curse. If Cliff worked off his existing research, he might be able to make an item capable of extending her life.

"No," he said. "I'm going with you!"

Cliff was quite opposed to my idea.

"Please, take me along! I want to do something for Nanahoshi, too!"

His research would constitute doing something for her, but he wanted to be more proactive. That was understandable. Doing the same research he always did wouldn't give the same sense of accomplishment.

Cliff continued, "I implore you, Rudeus. I understand the feeling of wanting to go back home."

Now that I thought about it, Cliff had been away from his home for quite a while. He was fairly short for his age, so he only looked about fifteen, but in reality, he was already nineteen. *I think he said he left the Holy Country of Millis about six or seven years ago.*

Cliff's desire to go home wasn't exactly the same as Nanahoshi's, given she was from an entirely different world, but he could empathize with her on some level at least.

"All right," I said finally.

"Seriously?!"

I was already taking Elinalise with me, and with Nanahoshi frozen in time, there was a limit to how much research Cliff could do here anyway. I didn't have to force him to stay and work while we went out looking. He could resume his research if we came up empty-handed or failed to find Kishirika altogether, we would support him in whatever way we could. "Yes, Master Cliff, I'd be happy to have you along."

In that case we needed to shorten our search time in order to make the shift

to researching a cure as smooth as possible, assuming our current route of inquiry failed. About six months to a year should be sufficient.

“And...what about me? What...should I do?” Sylphie asked at last, her face pale. She had yet to recover her strength, so there was no way she could come along with us. Besides...

“Sylphie, I want you to rest for the time being.”

“Sure, but after that, then what?”

“When you finish recovering...” I hesitated. Finally, I said, “I’d like you to return home and look after Lucie.”

“What?” Her face clouded over.

I quickly explained, “I might not be able to come home for the foreseeable future. I don’t think it’s good for a child to be away from both of their parents for so long.”

I wasn’t saying a child absolutely needed their parents for proper childhood development, but Paul and Zenith were the reason I grew up the way I did. It was better for a child if they had parents to look after them. It was fine for their mom and dad to leave for a week or two, but not to leave a child without parents for months on end.

“Um, okay,” Sylphie conceded. “I guess you do have a point. If you’re not around, it’s up to me to look after her.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.”

I had already told her that Nanahoshi’s condition wasn’t her fault, but it was clear that Sylphie still wanted to help. “Sylphie, you have already done more than enough. I’ll take care of the rest. Trust me.”

“I know...” She nodded, even though she still looked disappointed.

It wasn’t like she didn’t love Lucie, but Sylphie had been fending for herself since she was 10, thanks to the Displacement Incident. Her parents had died before they ever had a chance to reunite. Sylphie had largely survived because of luck and the people she met along the way, but she still worked hard at her

job and put a lot of effort into our marriage as well. Perhaps she thought a child would be fine without their parents. Or maybe it was a more widespread belief in this world that a child didn't always need a mother and father watching over them.

Either way, Sylphie was still only 18. People's way of thinking didn't suddenly change the moment they had kids. Instead, they matured through the years as they raised said children. The thought of having kids never even occurred to me when I was eighteen in my previous life. In that respect, Sylphie was doing fantastic.

"I do think Roxy will have some words for you if you're going to the Demon Continent," Sylphie warned. "There's none among us more familiar with that place than her."

"You're right about that. If I run into any trouble while I'm there, I'll be sure to consult Roxy when I get back."

Roxy wasn't here. I would love to have her advice, but Perugia had no intention of letting a demon aboard. He rebuffed me when I tried asking directly.

At the same time, Roxy had her career as a professor to think about. After going through all that trouble to earn her position, it would be a shame for her to be fired after a year. I did want to save Nanahoshi, but not at the cost of everything we'd built as a family. Our lives were important, too. That was why I needed Sylphie and Roxy to look after everyone else and keep things running smoothly.

Okay, so part of that was probably my ego talking. My words weren't exactly wisdom for the ages, but all the same, I didn't want Roxy and Sylphie walking into danger. I never wanted to witness someone I love die ever again. Not after Paul. Nowhere in this world was entirely safe, but the Demon Continent was far more dangerous than the Magic City of Sharia.

"Please don't lose an arm or anything this time, okay?" Sylphie's brows knitted with concern.

"I'll be careful."

That was precisely why I was bringing Zanoba and Elinalise with me. Although if either of them were in mortal danger, I would readily sacrifice my right arm to save them. Preferably not my own life, though—not if I could help it.

Well, whatever. Things would go much better this time around, I was sure.

I returned home once more to explain the situation to Roxy and the rest of my family. When I told them I wouldn't be coming home for a while, Aisha in particular looked anxious. Fortunately, going back and forth would be much easier this time. I planned to come back and see them every few days. It was more like a business trip than an extended absence. I only told them I might not be back for a while in case the unforeseen happened. There was a possibility our teleportation circle would deactivate, then it would take us a long time to travel home.

"All right, I'm leaving things here to you."

"Okay. You be careful, Rudy," said Roxy.

I figured she would insist on coming along, but she agreed to stay behind after hearing all the details. It was a bit anticlimactic, actually.

Anyway, I would be travelling to and fro from the floating fortress, but it was important to prepare for the unexpected; you never knew what might happen. Perugius told us that even if we were unable to use the teleportation circle to return to the fortress, we could use a certain magical implement in front of one of the monuments to the Seven Great Powers and he would send someone to retrieve us. It wasn't that I didn't trust him, but you never knew what could happen. Maybe Laplace would revive the second after we left. If that happened, Perugius would be too preoccupied to worry about us.

With those possibilities in mind, I secured a large sum of money and items we could barter with, as well as a map of the teleportation ruins. We would be able to return here from the Demon Continent in six months as long as we had all of these precautions in place. I also tucked a number of useful items in my luggage, including some Lamplight Spirit scrolls. My preparations were all in order.

The teleportation circle in Perugius's fortress was located below the ground level.

"This way," said Sylvaril as she guided us to a room on the basement's third floor. The door had been locked when we came exploring. The interior was unlit, but the pale glow of the circle kept the darkness from swallowing us up.

"Lord Perugius has newly drawn this circle. It is linked to a circle in the Demon Continent that has long gone unused."

"What do you mean by 'long gone unused'?"

"There are many teleportation circles in the world whose connecting circles have, for whatever reason, been destroyed, leaving them inactive."

Teleportation circles only operated so long as both sides were connected. By linking his circle to one that had come decoupled, he could restore its functionality. The circle in question was probably one of many that had met such a fate.

"And Lord Perugius knows of all the teleportation circles out there?"

"He is powerful and great," Sylvaril answered proudly.

Honestly, it would be useful to set up a bunch of new teleportation circles linking to those old ones. Granted, such magic was forbidden in the first place, and I was sure he wouldn't teach it to me. *Plus, fiddling with such things for selfish reasons would only net me more enemies, and that's a terrifying thought. No need to be greedy.*

Besides, I couldn't forget that anyone could use those circles—not just me. It was always possible a fearsome monster could stumble onto one of those circles. If I created a bunch without regard for the consequences, it could lead to the destruction of an entire village. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if that happened.

"Lord Perugius said this circle will lead you to a place that is close to the Great Demon Emperor," said Sylvaril.

"Wait, so he knows where she is?"

“Of course.”

Oh, okay. That’s a surprise. I figured he’d just send us to a big city and we’d have to do everything on our own.

“That said, there is a possibility his calculations are off.”

“Yeah, that’s not surprising,” I muttered. The Demon Emperor I knew was rather unpredictable, after all. Just when you thought you’d find her in one place, she would wander somewhere else. Her fiancé was the same in that regard.

Oh, that’s right. I forgot about Badigadi.

I hadn’t seen him in a while. Maybe he already returned to his own territory. It seemed he had also lived a long time, so asking him about the syndrome might not be a bad idea either.

“All right,” I said. “We’ll check it out anyway.”

“We haven’t checked your destination. There is a possibility that the circle on the other end is located in a place with no exit. Please be cautious.”

“You mean you think it’s closed off?”

“Possibly. In order to conceal its location, someone may have sealed the entrance.”

Well, she had a good point there. If there was no entrance to the place, no one would ever discover it. There were people out there who searched for hidden doors, but few who went around brandishing a pickaxe at walls. The only people who dug that persistently when they found some old ruins were Egyptologists.

Who knows, maybe there are grave robbers and archaeologists here that go pilfering teleportation ruins and I just don’t know about it.

I shrugged. “Well, if it looks like we can’t get through at all, we’ll just come back here.”

“I wish you good fortune.”

Sylvaril remained in the room as our party jumped onto the magic circle and

teleported away.

How many times had I teleported like this now? Once during the Displacement Incident, twice going to and from Begaritt, and then once using magical implements to visit Perugius's castle. This excursion was jaunt number five. I was finally getting accustomed to the sensation, which was like waking up from a dream.

"Phew."

The place we teleported to was a dark room. The stench of mold and dust hung heavy in the air. Whatever this place was, it had long been abandoned. There was no light and no candles we could use. It really was like an old ruin.

Come to think of it, I forgot to ask where exactly the circle was going to take us.

"Achoo!" Cliff sneezed behind me.

I glanced back as the other three stepped out of the circle. Elinalise was entirely unfazed. Zanoba also strode confidently. Cliff was the only one who seemed intrigued by the teleportation process.

"The air here sure is stale. Let us leave this place quickly." Zanoba kickstarted our search for a way out.

"Hm." I scanned the walls. There were no doors, stairs, or holes in the ceiling we could crawl out of. To my chagrin, studying the floor also turned up nothing. We were in a locked room.

So this was what she meant by 'closed off.' Sylvaril was right on the money.

"Hey. So, uh, how do you figure we get out of here?" I asked.

"Hm."

Our group split up and began searching for ways out. We looked up, down, left, right, left, right, from B to A... Basically, we looked everywhere and then some.

"This is it," Elinalise announced after minutes of searching. She had found a

wall adjacent to another room. She'd knocked on it and heard the echo, meaning it led somewhere. The walls were so thick that I couldn't hear anything. *Guess it's no surprise that elves have superior hearing.*

"Okay! It's punching time, Zanoba!"

"Hmph!" He slammed his fist into the wall. Despite being about 50 centimeters thick, it still gave way, leaving a small opening. Zanoba continued to widen it, jabbing his fist through the wall with the same ease as a child toppling a sandcastle. Once it was wide enough for someone to slip through, Elinalise stepped through. "I'll take the lead."

This new opening led to another open space, also pitch-black. That was expected, given this structure was made entirely of stone, but there was little else we knew about the place. We had no idea whether we were above ground or below it.

"Rudeus, give me some light," said Elinalise.

I followed her command and used one of the Lamplight Spirit scrolls. It illuminated our surroundings, revealing a square room about ten meters across.

"Ugh..." Cliff groaned as he glanced around. Shadows danced across a number of bleached white bones on the floor. As we were on the Demon Continent, it was perhaps unsurprising that the skeletons varied in shape and size, making them seem almost artificial.

"It appears this place was once a prison," said Elinalise after examining the remains. Indeed, there were rusted metal cuffs on the skeletons' hands.

Cliff's expression turned sorrowful as he clasped his hands. "Khh... May Lord Millis grant them salvation in death."

I followed his example, placing my own hands together. *Hail to Amitābhā Buddha, hail to Amitābhā Buddha. Rest in peace. I'm afraid we will disturb you for the moment, but we will leave as soon as we can.*

"All right, let's be off."

This place was covered in bones. Just how many people had they locked up in here? I bet none of them realized that just on the other side of that wall, there

was a teleportation circle. Wait, but Perugius mentioned that the circle wasn't connected to anything anymore. Maybe these people were teleported here and sealed in with magic. If that were the case, whoever did it was awfully cruel.

"I found some stairs," said Elinalise. "We can go up from there."

The steps were in the corner of the room. From the look of it, these prisoners weren't even kept in cells. Or so I thought, until I approached the stairs and spotted some old rusty hinges on the floor. Maybe there had once been wooden bars to hold these people in, but they rotted away over the millennia.

At the top of the stairs was a metal hatch that opened upward. Elinalise carefully checked it for traps and tried to open it, but no luck. There was something heavy on top of it, locking it in place.

"All right, Zanoba Robo, time for you to blast it open!" I declared.

"Master, what is this 'Robo' thing you speak of?"

"Oh, uh, in one of the regions I've been to, that's what they call men with bodies of steel who possess monstrous strength."

"Hahaha, so that's what it means. Hmph!"

Zanoba pressed his hands against the door and began heaving. It creaked as it started to open. Sand came falling down on us. "Guh!"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll take care of the sand."

"Y-yes, all right, Master."

I used my magic to block the falling sand as Zanoba continued lifting, heaving the cumbersome hatch with all his might. Soon, rays of light punched through the cracks. Apparently, this was the way outside. Once Zanoba had forced the lid up far enough that someone could climb through, Elinalise slipped past us and headed out first.

"It's all clear."

With this assurance, we clambered after her.

Outside, we found ourselves on a steep incline. The sharp slope was covered with reddish-brown dirt, with boulders strewn about as far as the eye could see.

In the distance lay a forest that resembled the bones of a fish, a unique sight only found on the Demon Continent. I also spotted what appeared to be a Great Tortoise far off on the horizon.

“So this is the Demon Continent!” Cliff gulped, cautiously gazing down the incline.

There was no city nearby, at least not that I could see. I wondered how close we really were to Kishirika. Did we need to seek the closest city? And where in the world were we anyway? Perhaps it would be best for us to return to the fortress and ask.

No, before we do that, we should search the area.

“Master Cliff, the Demon Continent is enormous and dangerous. Worse, many of the monsters here cluster together, so please be careful.”

“Yeah, I know.” Cliff’s expression was entirely serious as he nodded.

I meant what I said about this place being perilous. Even a skilled warrior would lose his life if he wandered around thinking it was as safe as the Central Continent or the Millis Continent.

“There are no monsters in our vicinity. We’re safe for the moment,” said Elinalise.

She wasn’t letting her guard down. I wanted to think I hadn’t either, but the last time I was here, Ruijerd was with me. Perhaps that had softened my sense of danger, but I could at least make use of my experiences in Begaritt now.

“Also, I should warn you that there aren’t many Millis faithful here. Their way of thinking is much different from yours, so try not to start any unnecessary fights,” I said.

“I already know...” Cliff cut himself off and cleared his throat before continuing. “No, you’re right. I understand.”

Maybe I sounded a bit too condescending, but Cliff had never been anywhere with this many demon folk. Picking fights over insignificant differences in opinion would only cause problems. This wasn’t like when I was travelling with Eris. I wanted to avoid conflict as much as possible.

“Cliff doesn’t know Demon Tongue,” said Elinalise. “So you won’t have to worry.”

True, and Elinalise didn’t know how to speak it either. She and her party had traveled this continent for nearly two years, but apparently, they let Roxy do most of the talking. Although Elinalise seemed to know some sexual terms. If Cliff heard about her daily life here, he’d probably faint. But that was because of her curse.

“Master!”

Zanoba had crested the slope and was bellowing down at me. The concept of being careful was probably entirely lost on him. Not surprising. He could fall from a cliff and come out unscathed.

“Do you see something?” I climbed up after him.

“Whoa.” The edge of the slope abruptly dropped off to sheer cliff. My eyes widened in surprise at the sight that lay beyond.

“Ooh, this is amazing. So this is what cities here look like.” Cliff’s voice was full of wonder.

This was no ordinary cliff we were standing on—it was an enormous one. A whole city sprawled below us, nestled inside a crater. In the middle were the ruins of an iron castle.

“Wait, so this is where he thinks she is?” I mumbled to myself sullenly.

I knew this city. The crater acted as natural protection, preventing monsters from invading. At night, the magic stones embedded in the inner walls would light up, illuminating the city.

I also knew the origin of the castle. It was once the headquarters of the Demon World’s Great Emperor, Kishirika Kishirisu. The place was badly damaged in a conflict during Laplace’s War. It was now known as the Old Kishirika Castle.

This city, Rikarisu, had left me with nothing but bad memories the last time I was here.

Chapter 6:

Search for Kishirika

RIKARISU WAS A CITY I had adventured in the last time I was in the Demon Continent, along with Ruijerd and Eris. We were driven out of this place in the end, leaving me with a bitter taste in my mouth. Nonetheless, my experiences here hadn't been all bad. Rikarisu taught me not to overthink or worry too much about things.

We made our way down the slope and circled the perimeter of the crater, heading for the city entrance. Two guards stood watch just as when I last came here. Back then, I'd made Ruijerd wear something on his head.

"Hey, hold up." Cliff stopped short and looked at me. "There are guards here. Are we really going to be okay?"

"We'll be fine. Towns in the Demon Continent never really turn anyone away."

"Okay, but these guys feel pretty intimidating."

He was right about that at least. These guards were clad in black armor with helmets that completely hid their faces. The armor looked rather sinister, with sharp points on it. The soldiers here hadn't worn such equipment during my last visit. Maybe they'd had a wardrobe change since then.

"Halt," they said when we tried to slip past them.

"Yes, what is it?" I responded in Demon Tongue.

"It's about that woman you have with you..." They eyed Elinalise.

Cliff took a step forward as if to shield her, but Elinalise was unfazed. "What are they saying?"

"Well?" Asked one of the guards, conferring with his partner. They produced a sheet of paper and glanced between it and Elinalise. I sneaked a peek; it depicted a woman as bewitchingly beautiful as a succubus. She was tall with voluptuous breasts and wavy hair. It was in black and white, but admittedly,

Elinalise did look a bit similar. *Still, their breast size is totally different.*

“It’s not her.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t match.”

The guards put the paper away. “Sorry to keep you. Go on, then.”

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing that concerns you.”

Their rejection was blunt enough that we quietly went on our way.

“Seems like they’re looking for someone,” said Elinalise.

“Apparently so.”

Had some criminal taken refuge in this town? Well, it surely had nothing to do with us, but we had to be careful all the same, lest we run into a serial killer in an alley while we were searching for Kishirika.

“Well,” Elinalise continued, changing the subject, “what should we do first?”

“Let’s get some money. We’ll head to the Adventurers’ Guild first.”

“All right.”

And so we did.

“Wow, this place is incredible.”

The open market near the entrance was enough to take Cliff’s breath away. It was no less busy and bustling than I remembered. There were adventurers of all races here, many of them riding lizard beasts. But despite these differences they carried on the same way as people in Sharia. Merchants squabbled with adventurers, townspeople milled about, perusing stores with great interest, and beggars pleaded with shop owners for charity, and got a kick for their troubles. It was a sight you could see anywhere. Cliff should have been used to it, but the different demon races had seized his attention.

There was one thing that caught my notice: soldiers in black armor were stationed around the city. Each time they caught a glimpse of Elinalise, they pulled out that sheet of paper to check. It must have been easy to tell she wasn’t the one they were looking for, even from a distance, because they never

actually approached us.

“Master Cliff, it seems your wife is just as popular over here,” I teased.

“Uh, yeah. Is this going to be a problem?”

“Assuming Miss Elinalise didn’t do anything to get herself in trouble when she was last here, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

I shot her a look. Elinalise shrugged. “I haven’t done anything wrong.” She refused to meet my gaze. Maybe she hadn’t done anything wrong, but she had done something dirty.

The Adventurers’ Guild was just the same as I remembered. The weather hadn’t been terribly kind to it, but it had been dilapidated to begin with. When we headed inside, we instantly drew everyone’s attention.

Ah, how nostalgic. The last time I was here, we put on a little show and had everyone busting a gut. The people warmed up to Ruijerd rather quickly after that.

It was all for naught in the end, though.

The other occupants quickly lost interest in us and turned away. A party with an elf and a bunch of humans was rare, to be sure, but it wasn’t enough to keep people’s attention for long.

We headed for the receptionist and exchanged a number of Ranoan gold coins for some of the Demon Continent’s currency. We received what was nearly a hundred green ore coins in return and tossed them into our money pouches without bothering to check the amount. In the past, counting out each coin had been a daily endeavor. Things sure had changed.

Nah, all that’s changed is that I’ve got more money now.

After that, we put in a request with the guild to have people search for Kishirika. “She looks like a young girl with purple hair and leather clothing. She also has a maniacal laugh that you can’t miss and goes around calling herself the ‘Demon World’s Great Emperor.’”

Given the nature of our request, it was a low-ranked mission, but I added a

handsome reward to it just the same. As I watched the receptionist tack it to the bulletin board, another flier in the corner caught my eye—the search and rescue for Fittoa Region survivors.

The search party in Millis had disbanded, but the mission was still up. The contact information was also the same, referring people to Paul of the Holy Country of Millis. If anyone did turn up and made the trek all the way to Millis, they would be pretty devastated to find no one there to receive them. I had the receptionist change the contact information, instead directing people to Alphonse at the refugee camp. I assumed he was still accepting survivors. I could have written my address instead, but we didn't have the means or energy to take care of any strangers that turned up.

“All right, we're finished here.”

“What next?” Cliff asked.

I wondered the same. Surely, we could do some searching ourselves. We could stay here for a week and gather information. We could also hire some people to help canvas the area thoroughly. Our request with the guild was ultimately insurance in case we couldn't find her ourselves.

“Let's begin by gathering information,” I said.

As I glanced around, one man started making his way toward me. He had the head of a horse.

Oh, it's you. I couldn't forget you if I tried.

This was the man who'd led us into a trap. It was his fault we were driven out of Rikarisu. Well... okay, it would be an exaggeration to say that. We also broke a bunch of rules ourselves.

“Heya!” Nokopara called out just as cheerfully as I remembered from our first encounter. This guy made it his business to greet newbies on the daily, didn't he? Then I realized it was Elinalise he was addressing.

“It's been a while, eh? You and Roxy already split up?”

Elinalise stared quizzically for a moment until realization dawned on her. She smacked her fist. “Ah, you're the guy who used to be in a party with Roxy a long

time ago.”

“...What?”

He was once a member of Roxy’s adventure party? What the hell?

Elinalise turned toward me. “Rudeus, please interpret for me. This guy is my... well, actually, he’s Roxy’s acquaintance.”

At her encouragement, I approached the man who had tried to make a meal out of us eight years ago. *So he used to be in Roxy’s party a long time ago... Does that mean he tried to do the same thing to her? She never said anything about that, though.*

“Heya, name’s Nokopara. Can you understand what I’m saying?”

Apparently, he didn’t remember me. Not that I could blame him; my appearance had changed drastically in the eight years since our last meeting. Nokopara had also...not really aged at all from what I could see. Truthfully, I had no idea how to gauge a horse’s age. In fact, maybe he had trouble telling humans apart because of our race, and that was why he didn’t recognize me.

“Yes, Mister Nokopara, I can speak Demon Tongue,” I said.

“Rudeus, this guy knows a lot about this city,” Elinalise cut in. “Maybe you can get him to help us?”

Yes, I knew well how good his information gathering skills were—as well as how persistent he was. He kept a close eye on people. His ability to collect intel was invaluable, too. That was how he almost caught us in his web the last time. He might even hold a grudge over how things played out back then. Instead of dredging up the past and making an enemy out of him, it was probably better to conceal my true identity and make use of him.

“Quagmire,” I said. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Yeah! Quagmire, huh?” He paused. “Wait, have I met you somewhere before?”

“No, don’t be absurd.”

If Eris were with me, I doubt she’d be able to forgive him for what happened. But time was a luxury I didn’t have, and I wasn’t about to waste it by dredging

up old conflicts. After all, Nokopara hadn't known Ruijerd was a Superd back then, and we were the ones who let our guards down. It was water under the bridge. Nokopara had even shit himself in public last time, so we'd gotten some justice out of it.

"We are looking for someone. Perhaps you could help us?"

He stared at me for a moment before asking, "How much are you paying?"

That got under my skin. The first thing he brought up was money?

No, hold on. It's only natural for someone to ask about payment when you want them to work for you.

"Two green ore coins. And if you actually find her, we'll give you two more on top of that."

"Four coins?!" he squeaked. "A-are you serious?!"

Ah, maybe I offered him a bit too much. It's been a while, so I completely forgot the value of money here. Oh, well.

"That's how pressed for time we are. But I'll warn you against deceiving us simply because you know we have money."

"Hey, come on now, I'd never scam any friend of Roxy's. In fact, I'll be happy to take half of what you offered." He chuckled, wiping his hand over his nose.

After we gave Nokopara all the information he needed to find Kishirika, he told us he'd contact us again in half a day, disappearing out into the tumult of the city streets.

"You did a good job of holding it in," Elinalise commented after we saw him off.

"Holding what in?"

"Well, it did just occur to me—he's the man who set you up before, isn't he?"

My eyes widened. "I'm surprised you know about that."

"Oh, you know, a little bird told me when I was here last. They said Nokopara almost got himself killed after messing with Dead End. I don't think Roxy knows

about it, though.”

I couldn’t believe Elinalise knew. Well. Maybe it would be more surprising if she didn’t. A Superd being driven from the city was pretty big news.

“It was mostly an unfortunate accident,” I said. It was partly my fault for trying to take the easy way out. True, people like Nokopara who used others for their own end gave me the creeps, but I was no saint either. I had no business judging others. If Nokopara didn’t recognize me, that was fine. “I don’t plan on getting revenge or anything. Although I won’t be so forgiving if he tries to double-cross us again.”

They say if you touch Buddha’s face three times, he’ll lose his patience. Sadly for Nokopara, I’m no Buddha. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, and there won’t be a next time.

“By the way, what was all that about him being Roxy’s former party member?”

“Oh, that...”

Hearing about their connection left me conflicted. I didn’t have the best opinion of Nokopara, but knowing he’d spent time with Roxy before I knew her made me a little jealous.

Ah well, who knows, maybe he was a decent guy when he was a kid. After all, no matter how good someone was as a child, there was no guarantee they’d grow into a good adult.

There was a lot left on our plate while we waited for Nokopara. First we had to find a place to stay. A great number of inns here were marketed to adventurers, from beginners to those of especially high rank. We picked one of the latter to stay in. For one thing, the more luxurious inns were safer. Besides, the exchange rate meant that even the most expensive luxuries were like pennies to me.

“This sure brings back memories.”

As we were searching for a place to stay, we passed by Wolf’s Claw Inn, where

I'd stayed last time. Three young and likely low-ranking adventurers emerged as we went by, chatting amongst themselves. It was a little late in the day to be picking up new quests from the guild, so maybe they were going out shopping.

I thought of the other rookie party that stayed in the same inn with us way back then. I wondered how Kurt and the others were doing now. A mistake I'd made had led to one of their deaths, but I hoped the others were still doing well.

Nah, it's been eight years. Who knows if they're even still alive. If they were and I happened to run into them, though, it'd be nice to kick back and talk about old times.

Hey, there's an idea. Maybe I should see if I can't get some help from P Hunter, too.

If memory served, their names were Jalil and Vizquel. They were small-time thugs. This time I wouldn't be asking them to help locate a pet, but then again Kishirika was kind of like an animal. Who knows, maybe they could find her.

"I think I'd like to stop by a certain shop. I know the people who run the place pretty well."

"I would expect no less from you, Master. You are certainly well-connected."

"I wouldn't say that. These are about the only people I know here."

I led the party to P Hunter's pet shop. I had a general sense of where it was, though the memories had faded a bit. Fortunately, I had walked these same streets so many times when I was younger, and there were still landmarks I remembered along the way. But the shop looked completely different when we arrived at our destination. The pet shop was now a butcher's shop, selling processed meat.

Someone covered in what resembled rat fur was manning the place, so I approached him.

"Welcome!"

"Excuse me, but I thought there used to be a pet shop here. Do you know what happened to it?"

“Ah, you mean Jalil? He messed up trying to train a beast two years ago and died.”

Seriously? He died?

“What about Vizquel?”

“Her? She left this place a year ago. Said there wasn’t any work here for her with Jalil gone.”

So she’s not here either.

I couldn’t believe Jalil had really died. I knew the Demon Continent was a harsh place, but I was actually a bit sad to hear he was gone. Although he also betrayed Ruijerd in the end, we had worked together and were on good terms there for a time.

“Vizquel passed this store over to me when she left,” the butcher explained. “Are you a friend of theirs?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Okay, in that case, I’ll give you guys a discount.”

I inquired about Kishirika and bought some Great Tortoise meat from him as thanks. Unsurprisingly, it tasted absolutely terrible.

We spent the rest of the day trying to gather intel, which was a very slow process. I was the only one in the group who could speak Demon Tongue, so I had to do all the asking around. *Maybe I really should have pushed the matter and insisted Roxy come with us.*

No. In reality, an additional interlocutor wouldn’t have sped things up that much. All I could do now was count on Nokopara. At least he was an expert in this field. I had all but given up hope on finding any leads myself.

And then...

“She looks like a little girl with purple hair and leather clothes. She also has a maniacal laugh that you can’t miss and goes around calling herself the Demon World’s Great Emperor. Have you seen anyone like that?”

“Ah, that girl. Yeah, I’ve seen her. Not recently, though. I think it was about a year ago.”

I’d gotten so used to negative responses that this answer was unexpected. Highly unexpected, in fact. Perhaps our first venture to the Demon Continent would be a success after all.

“We hit the bullseye!” Cliff declared in excitement, as though we had already found her.

Elinalise shook her head. “Yes, but they said they hadn’t seen her recently.”

Sadly, she was right. They mentioned seeing her but that was a year ago. And to make matters worse, no-one had seen her in the last six months. Perhaps she wasn’t even in this city anymore. Maybe we should have asked where she headed next. Rikarisu was located on the northeastern tip of the Demon Continent. If she was going to another village, she would have to either go south or west. There were mountains to the southwest, so I didn’t think she would go there.

Yeah, but this is Kishirika we’re talking about. Not that I knew her well, but she didn’t seem the type to use normal highways. If I was right about that, there was no telling which direction she headed off in.

“For now, let’s wait and hear Nokopara’s report.”

“I somehow doubt he’s got anything of note in a mere half a day’s time, though.”

In any case, we made our way back to the Adventurers’ Guild. We planned to grab a table and eat something, but Nokopara came wandering over before we could fill our stomachs.

“Heya. Sorry for the wait.” He had that same upbeat expression on his face. “As you might expect, I wasn’t able to find the little lady, but I did get my hands on some info.”

“Let’s hear it.”

For the most part, what he told us matched what we’d found out. There was

only so much he could ferret out in half a day, after all. But he'd managed to put together a dossier of where she was spotted most often and when she was last seen. That was pretty impressive for the short notice he had. He probably gathered info regularly, or maybe he simply had really good connections. Either way, that meant he just had to dig out a bit more info by poking around before he could sell his knowledge. Geese seemed like he'd be pretty talented at that sort of thing, too.

"Also, about your demon emperor...it looks like some demon king is searching for her, too."

"Demon king?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, about a year ago, the demon king from a neighboring region came all the way here for some reason."

Said demon king was the current resident of Old Kishirika Castle in the middle of Rikarisu. Those black armored guards scattered about the city were supposedly the private soldiers, knights, or elite bodyguards—whatever you wanted to call them—of this demon king.

"Does their name happen to be Badigadi?" I asked.

"Nah, it's not Lord Badi. It's his older sister, Lady Atofe, a terrifying demon king."

Huh, so Badi has a sister? I wondered if she also had six arms, was super ripped, and looked like a black amazon. "Terrifying, you say?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She survived Laplace's War by dint of being an aggressive demon king who solved every problem by the use of force. If you do anything she doesn't like, she'll immediately take your head off your shoulders."

It was hard to picture that, considering how good-natured Badigadi was. But if what he claimed was true, it was probably best not to approach her. Although if she *was* related to Badigadi, she might *also* be immortal. In other words, maybe she'd been alive 7,000 years ago and might know a cure for Dryne's Syndrome. Seeking an audience to ask her about it might not be a bad idea, though I had no idea if she'd agree to meet with us or not.

"While we're on that subject, has Badigadi not returned?" I asked.

“He hasn’t... But hey, he is still a demon king. You should be using a proper title when you refer to him.”

“Oh, my apologies.”

So Badigadi had yet to return. Just where did he wander off to? Then again, he wasn’t around eight years ago either. Maybe gallivanting to and fro was some kind of hobby for him.

After speaking with Nokopara, I updated the rest on what I’d learned. Zanoba pressed a hand to his chin and said, “Still, even if Lady Atofe is looking for Kirishika, the picture they had looked nothing like your description.”

He had a point. The Kishirika I remembered looked nothing like the woman they were searching for. The one I knew resembled a little girl. In fact, it had never occurred to me that the picture those guards had was supposed to be Kishirika. There was some resemblance, though. Maybe that was what Kishirika looked like as an adult. Perhaps she had matured in the years since I saw her?

Nah, that can’t be. The people around town described her as a little girl, too. In that case, maybe this demon king had no idea that Kishirika looked like a child right now. It might be worth asking Nokopara about that.

“Hey, that sketch the guards had looked nothing like Kishirika. What do you know about that?”

“Demon kings are fairly flippant when it comes to details. Lady Atofe probably didn’t bother to factor in the demon emperor’s current age.”

“Ah, okay.” Badigadi was pretty lackadaisical in that respect, too. It wouldn’t be surprising if Atofe were the same. “I guess we should go pay Lady Atofe a visit and have a chat.”

I stood up and Nokopara panicked. “H-hold up, wait a minute. I’m telling you, Lady Atofe is bad news. You’re better off staying away from her.”

“No, I’m afraid this is necessary. As long as we don’t offend her, we’ll surely have no problems.”

We wouldn’t, would we? I certainly hoped not. If push came to shove, I could fire off magic from behind the safety of my Zanoba shield. All I had to do was hit

her with a good shot like I did Badigadi then make a run for it. Once we got away, we could hunt Badigadi down and have him mediate as we begged for forgiveness.

Yep, sounds like a plan!

“If you intend to seek an audience, I believe my title should come in handy.” Zanoba stood up and chuckled.

I didn’t share his confidence. Maybe he was royalty and accustomed to using his position like that, but Ariel seemed a safer bet if we were taking that route.

Hold up, after seeing how things went down with Perugia, maybe Zanoba is the more likable of the two. Ariel was desperate to make connections. Her rather transparent ulterior motives might sour the demon king’s mood.

“Is Lady Atofe knowledgeable about fine arts?” I asked Nokopara.

“Huh? Fine arts? I have no idea. I mean, she *is* a demon king, and most of those guys have some kinda hobby like that. As for Lady Atofe...I’m not really sure if fine arts is up her alley or not.”

What about Badigadi? What was his hobby? I got the impression he didn’t really have one. Unless you counted alcohol. He did like drinking the expensive stuff. Nokopara mentioned Atofe was terrifying, but Badigadi could also be intimidating. If she wasn’t any worse than he was, I’d be fine.

“All right. Well, for the moment, we’ll just head on over and see.”

With that, Elinalise and Cliff stood up and joined us.

The whole sorry affair took us about an hour, and left us standing a distance away from the castle. In the briefest summary, it was a disaster. Zanoba showed the guards the Shirone royal family crest, and I interpreted for him, requesting an audience. Sadly...

“Never heard of that country. Plus, Lady Atofe is busy! She has no time to waste on meetings!”

In other words, we were turned away at the door. Not that I could really blame them. Shirone was a rather tiny country. It was like someone from a small African country announcing themselves to a Japanese person. Plus, we

didn't have an appointment. It was only natural for them to dismiss us.

"Terribly sorry, Master. It seems my country lacks the necessary authority." Zanoba wasn't upset despite how rude their rejection was. Instead, he apologized to me.

"No, I didn't give the idea enough thought. That was my bad."

"Well, I also doubted if they'd even heard of my country." He frowned. Zanoba wasn't the patriotic sort, but surely he found it insulting to have his homeland belittled like this.

Cliff sighed. "Hey, why don't we rest a little bit?" He was leaning against a nearby wall.

I still had plenty of energy to keep going, but Zanoba had sweat beading across his forehead. "Yes, I am a bit exhausted."

Given his monstrous strength, it was easy to assume he had a lot of stamina, but he was more of the indoor type. Maybe a full day of exercise was taking its toll on him. We had been working nonstop. Even my mind was starting to drag. *Maybe we should rest.*

"You all have a point," I said. "How about we get a small bite to eat?"

There hadn't been any time to eat lunch. The jerky we'd munched on in the meantime hadn't been enough to fill our stomachs. I wasn't too keen on eating since the food here was pretty disgusting, but we didn't have much choice.

"Master, there appears to be a street stall over there, so why don't we try that? Would that be all right with you, Lord Cliff?"

Now that Zanoba mentioned it, I caught a whiff of grilled meat. My attention was drawn to a skewer stall. Spices filled the air, indicating this was some of the Demon Continent's zesty meat. There were three customers waiting.

"I'm not complaining, but are we going to stand and eat? Isn't that poor manners?" asked Cliff.

"It's a bit late to worry about that."

Elinalise joined the back of the line. "I'll order for us," she said. "In the meantime, Rudeus, please get us some chairs."

I hesitated. “You sure you’ll be okay even though you don’t speak the language?”

“I can use my fingers to indicate how many we want. I’ll be fine.”

In other words, body language was universal enough that she didn’t have to speak the language. In the meantime, I magically conjured some chairs on the roadside. Standing and eating was all well and good, but we should sit down if we were going to rest. I didn’t mind planting my butt in the dirt, but Zanoba and Cliff clearly felt differently.

Cliff left to join Elinalise. “I’ll go accompany her.”

“Phew.” Zanoba and I took our seats as I finished setting up. Exhaustion swept over me. I felt like all the effort we’d put in had been for nothing. We had no idea whether we would find Kishirika or not. Even if we did find her, she might not have the information we sought. In fact, there was a high probability that she wouldn’t. Like Badigadi, she had lived an incredibly long life, but she probably didn’t care that much about illnesses. Plus, how many details would she recall after so many millennia?

“Don’t overthink things,” Zanoba warned.

“Huh?”

“Master, you seem to feel far more responsibility than you should when it comes to Lady Nanahoshi’s illness.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Logically, I knew her being sick had nothing to do with me, but my emotions had a mind of their own.

Zanoba continued, “But I do understand how she feels a little, wanting to return to the home where she lived most of her life. That’s why I am here, trying to help.”

“Really? I thought you were pretty attached to the way your life is now.”

“Of course I am, but I’ve recently started to feel nostalgic about my home.”

Apparently even he had fond memories of Shirone. I thought he would be fine anywhere as long as he had his dolls or figures, but Zanoba wasn’t so different from normal people. “Considering how desperate Lady Nanahoshi is to return, I

can only imagine she left something incredibly precious behind when she came here.”

“Yeah, the guy she loves and her family, from what she’s told me.”

It was a pretty cliché answer, but that didn’t make the people she treasured any less valuable. I knew just how important family and loved ones were, and how much it hurt to lose them.

“I’m afraid I can’t relate to either of those things,” said Zanoba.

“Think of it this way: the way she feels about them is the way you feel about dolls.”

As we spoke, I kept my gaze on Cliff and Elinalise. The two of them had changed a lot since I first met them. As usual, Cliff sucked at reading the atmosphere, but he did try to empathize with others in his own way. Elinalise was much the same. I still remembered when she spent all her time pursuing men. But if they got separated now, I knew they would expend every effort to find one another again.

I continued watching them in silence. The customer in front of them purchased their meat, and a beggar with a tattered hood scrambled over in hopes of getting some scraps, only for said customer to kick them away. Cliff’s nose flared as he watched, but Elinalise stopped him before he could pick a fight.

Knowing Cliff’s character, I bet he’ll buy extra for the poor beggar.

And he did just that. The beggar thanked him profusely before gobbling down the skewers. Then they started pleading with Cliff for seconds. Although exasperated, he relented them and handed them some more. The beggar took his hand, their whole body trembling with gratitude.

Hold up a second. I’m getting déjà vu here.

Hadn’t I’d experienced this same thing a long time ago? When was it? And where? I was pretty sure it was on the Demon Continent. No, wait. Was it on the Millis Continent? I remembered sharing some of my food with a beggar...no, they weren’t a beggar, were they?

No, no, more importantly, didn't that beggar just thank Cliff in Human Tongue?

Right then, the beggar grinned and began laughing maniacally. "Fwahahaha!"

Her voice was so loud it echoed throughout the city. She threw off her cape and bellowed, "My name is Kishirika Kishirisu! The people call me the Great Emperor of the Demon World! Since you saved my life, I will grant your wish. Go on, name whatever it is you desire!"

My head started spinning.

Kishirika looked the same as ever. She wore knee-high boots, leather hot pants, and a leather tube top. The revealing getup exposed the flat narrowness of her physique, from the pale skin of her clavicle to her belly button to her thighs. She had the same voluminous, wavy purple hair and two goat horns. She was covered in more dirt and grime this time, but there was no mistaking her for someone else. This was the Demon World's Great Emperor, Kishirika Kishirisu.

"Fwahahahaha! Fwaha! Fwahahaha!"



Cliff stared, dumbfounded. Elinalise also watched in mute amazement, her face pulled into a comically blank expression that I'd never seen her wear before. I shared their confusion, though. Even I had no idea what was happening right now.

Zanoba was the only one who had kept a cool head. He put a hand to his chin and mumbled, "Ah, so this is the woman that His Majesty Badi thinks so fondly of."

A saying suddenly came to mind: "The good you do for others is the good you do for yourself." Cliff was a prime example of that. It was easy to say you would help a person in need if you came across them, but many didn't follow through. After all, beggars wore tattered clothes, had grime-covered skin, and rotten-looking teeth. More often than not, they also smelled foul. That discouraged people from going near them for fear of catching something. Could I see such a person, feel compassion for them, and offer them food I had just bought for myself? Maybe not. I wouldn't kick them the way the other customer did, but I wasn't a philanthropist, either.

Cliff, however, *did* possess a charitable heart. When I first met him, I thought he was narrow-minded and petty, but now, I thought he would one day make a splendid priest. Viva Cliff!

Okay, let's quit lavishing Cliff with praise and get down to the more important question: why is Kishirika acting like a beggar, here of all places?

"Come now, there's no need to be shy! Name whatever your heart desires! And tell me your name, while you're at it," said Kishirika.

"Huh? Uh, okay... M-my name is Cliff Grimor." Cliff was still in shock from her sudden declaration that she was the very individual we'd been searching for. He glanced back at me with a pleading look.

Kishirika took a haughty pose as she responded, "Cliff, hm? Feeding me was quite the noble achievement! After all, I haven't had a single bite in the past six months!"

I stepped closer and inserted myself into the conversation. "In that case, would you care for some more food?"

“Ooh! Truly? You boys really are generous. Yes, generous indeed! You will go far in life, mark my words!”

Kishirika chowed down on more Great Tortoise skewers. The way she inhaled them made me wonder where she was storing it all in that tiny little body. And she just kept going, one after another.

“Phew! That filled me right up. Now I’ll be good to go for another year.” Having finished her meal, Kishirika slapped her hand against her belly in satisfaction.

We’d bought every last skewer the stand owner had for sale. At least he was happy at having done so much business.

Now, with that done...

“It’s been a long time, Lady Kishirika,” I said.

“Hm? And who are you?” As I lowered my head, she snorted and stared me down. “Mm? Oh?” One of her eyes spun, switching from a normal eye to one of her demon ones. Then she slammed her fist into her palm. “Aha! It’s you! You’re the human boy with the disgusting mana. Of course I remember you! I gave you one of my eyes. I think your name was, uh... Roo... Roomba? Roombaus! Yeah, that was it! It’s been a while.”

“Rudeus Greyrat,” I corrected. *I’m not a damn cleaning robot, thank you very much.*

“Yes, Rudeus, a long time indeed. You sure have gotten much larger. Well, how did things go after we parted? Have you been doing well for yourself?” She patted my thigh, going as high as she could reach. It reminded me of a section leader at an office job patting his subordinates on the shoulder.

“Yes, the eye you gave me before really saved my life numerous times.”

“Fwahaha! Yes, I’m sure it did!” She nodded, pleased.

She really is way too easy to manipulate.

“However, I will only bestow my reward upon one of you! Just one!” She whipped around and thrust her finger at Cliff. “You, Cliff Grimor. State your desire, whatever it is.”

He gulped and stared back at her. In that moment, doubt crept into my mind.
He wouldn't, would he?

It was common knowledge that Kishirika Kishirisu offered demon eyes as a reward to people, and Cliff had his own objectives. A demon eye might greatly help him create magical implements. Even I realized that. *Which is why I hope I'm wrong...*

"I-in that case, please tell me how to cure Dryne Syndrome," Cliff said finally.

"Oh?"

"An acquaintance of mine came down with it. They have managed to survive so far, but there's no indication that they'll recover on their own. If you know of some way to help them, please tell me."

My shoulders sagged with relief. My worries were entirely unfounded, and honestly a bit offensive to Cliff. I would have to treat him to a meal when we got back home.

"Hm, Dryne Syndrome, you say. That name does bring back memories. I will admit I am a bit surprised to hear of someone coming down with it in this day and age, though."

Zanoba and I exchanged looks, nodding. It seemed Kishirika was familiar with the illness.

"Is it curable?"

"A silly question. Of course it is! All you have to do is get some Sokas Grass, make some tea from it, drink it, and you'll flush out the problem along with your poop."

I grinned. This was perfect. There was a chance that Kishirika's memory was spotty and this grass wouldn't work, but at least we now had some information. By "make some tea," she probably meant to decoct the leaves in some water and then drink it.

"Sokas Grass? I've never heard of that before. Where can we find it?"

"Maio, the Phantom City."

"Uh, Phantom City?!"

Yikes. When the word “phantom” was used in the same sentence as “city,” it usually meant the place in question was difficult to find. Like you could only ever visit it in your dreams, or you had to wade through a desert to get to it—something like that.

“Just north of that city, at the tip of the Red Wyrms Mountains, lies a cave in the depths of a ravine known as the Red Wyrms Tail. Tucked within its deepest, darkest folds is a bountiful harvest of Sokas Grass.”

“So we have to go to a cave in this Wyrms Tail place?”

This felt like an RPG. After coming all this way, was she really going to send us on an errand quest to retrieve the grass? And we had to go to a cave located in a place called the Wyrms Tail? If the name was any indication, we would probably be fighting some dragons along the way. That was a tall order.

No, this isn't that bad, honestly. The worst-case scenario was not finding Kishirika and spending the next several years searching.

Okay, but hold up. I knew of the Red Wyrms Mountains, but I'd never heard of a place called the Red Wyrms Tail. “So where exactly is the Wyrms Tail located?”

“Wise question. You see, at the end of the second Great Human-Demon War, the Dragon God and Fighting God's battle ended with a hole punched in the continent, wiping out the place that was once called the Wyrms Tail.”

“...What?”

Uh, so the place we needed didn't exist anymore? Also, this story she was feeding us was entirely different from what I had heard. History said the huge hole in the continent was a result of Kishirika's battle with the Golden Knight. That said, Kishirika didn't seem like the fighting type... Well, whatever. It was a legend after all, and people often spun those stories in ways that were convenient for them. Right now, my priority was the Sokas Grass.

“Does that mean Sokas Grass doesn't exist anymore?”

Kishirika shook her head. “No, I was merely explaining that the Wyrms Tail cave is where it was initially discovered.”

If that was where it was first discovered, then did that mean it also grew elsewhere?

“Sokas Grass grows deep inside caves, where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Based on that description, we might be able to find this grass within labyrinths. Could we just go into any old labyrinth, though? If so, we needed to rethink our party composition before we ventured in. We would need about twenty people... No, we could offer a reward, recruit some adventurers, and send a hundred people in.

“And,” Kishirika continued, “that was why I ordered every demon king to cultivate this grass beneath their castle!”

“ ... ”

“After all, the herb is delicious. Those who drink it have exceptionally long life spans. Namely because the ones who drink it are immortal demon kings. Fwahaha!”

“ ... ”

So basically, what she was telling us was that every demon king had this stuff growing under their castle? And given that it was considered a luxury tea, it might be possible for us to find merchants selling it?

“Fwahahahahaha! Did you think you would have to go fetch it yourselves? I bet you did, didn’t you? You pitiful things! It’s growing right over there in my castle! Fwahahahahaha!”

No one would blame me for seeing how far I could kick this idiot, right?

Cliff seemed to have the same idea. He charged forward with his hands balled into fists. “You little...!”

“Please wait, Master Cliff! Let’s not be hasty. We need to make her spill everything she knows first.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right.”

Whoops, maybe I shouldn’t have said that last bit out loud.

If there really was Sokas Grass inside the castle... there was nothing to be

angry about. In fact, it was perfect. Sure, she worried us for nothing and that irked me a little, but this was a lesson on its own.

Okay, cool your head. You can just get on your knees and beg her for it.

“All right, Lady Kishirika, then I implore you to share some of your Sokas Grass with us.”

“Of course! There is just one small problem.”

“What problem is that?”

“Well, you see, there’s a detestable individual staying in my castle at the moment. They are rather difficult to deal with and not terribly intelligent, so I have spent the past six months on the run from... Uh-oh.”

Her words trailed off as she stared at something behind us.

“Hm?” I followed her gaze.

Several soldiers dressed in black armor stood there. Five, six, seven...twenty in total. Worse, another group gathered in the street opposite us, and more spilled from a nearby alley. Pretty soon, we were surrounded by thirty of them. They stared us down, as if trying to intimidate us.

Elinalise stepped forward, her hand hovering over the sword at her hip. A cold sweat coated her forehead. With their numbers, there was no way we could run.

What should we do?

I could grab two of them—Zanoba in my right arm and Cliff in my left—and use my magic to take a flying leap. But what about Kishirika and Elinalise?

The man apparently in charge of the soldiers advanced toward us. His voice was hoarse yet vibrant as he said, “We are the personal guard of Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe, who rules over the Gaslow Territory.” He spoke in fluent Human Tongue. “By her royal order, please hand over Lady Kishirika and come with us back to the castle.”

Behind him, the other knights pulled out their sketches and compared them to the real-life Kishirika. Their faces filled with confusion. As Nokopara suspected, the picture didn’t look like Kishirika at all because Atofe had been

loose with the details. But although she didn't resemble the woman they were instructed to apprehend, shouting at the top of her lungs that she was the Demon World's Great Emperor was enough to attract anyone's attention.

"And if we say no?" Elinalise quipped.

The guards immediately drew their swords. The deafening clang of blades leaving their sheaths echoed through the area.

"We will show you no mercy."

Not that I had the ability to tell a person's strength at a glance, but even I could see these people were experienced at battle. There was a marked difference between a novice and those who had weathered many fights before, and these soldiers were undoubtedly the latter. I sensed they were far more capable than a regular band of knights.

"Y-you mustn't listen to them. If you let them take you to the castle, there is no telling what may happen to you. This is Demon King Atoferatofe we're talking about," Kishirika reasoned. "She's nothing if not a complete imbecile!"

My brows furrowed. She had a point. Why should we agree to let this supposed idiot apprehend us? We had no business with Atofe. We had to find some way to weasel out of this.

Ah, but hold on a second, isn't the grass we need beneath their castle? Maybe we can sneak inside... No, let's be realistic, I've never seen this grass before so I wouldn't even know what to look for.

As I hesitated, the leader of the knights removed his helmet.

"I implore you." His hair was flaming red, and his face was weathered with age. He gave us a soft smile and lowered his head. "If you don't come, I'm afraid my lady will punish us. I swear we won't treat you unkindly, so please..."

The way he bowed like that was sincere enough. I used to be the kind of Japanese person who didn't care about refusing people, but not anymore. When someone spoke so earnestly like this, it was hard not to feel obliged to humor him.

"Don't trust a word of what he says! Atofe isn't the kind of person you can

have a reasonable conversation with!” Kishirika had cold beads of sweat pouring down her face. There was obviously more to this than she was letting on.

“I heard what you were talking about,” said the old knight captain. “We grow Sokas Grass in the Gaslow Territory as well, so we know how to cultivate it. If you desire, we can supply a potted one for you to take home. So please come with us.”

He continued to keep his head bowed. I sensed nothing but honesty from him. He and his subordinates could have just as easily captured us by force, but he was going out of his way to make it a request. I didn’t know anything at all about Atofe. The only demon king I knew was Badigadi. But having a superior like Atofe was undoubtedly difficult.

“While we’re on the topic,” I said, “what does Lady Atofe have against Lady Kishirika? If possible, I would like to know the reason why she’s been chasing Lady Kishirika for the past six months.”

“A year ago, my lady came to this city for a special flask of liquor that was produced in the Gekura Territory, but Lady Kishirika swiped it and drank the entire bottle.”

“Aha.”

The old guard captain sighed. “My lady was greatly looking forward to that bottle, so she was enraged by this affront. She called us in from our stations back home and ordered us to search for the culprit. Sadly, we were unaware of Lady Kishirika’s current appearance, and the sketch we had of her wasn’t accurate enough to be of any assistance, so we were having no luck up until now.”

“All right. I understand your situation.”

I clapped some cuffs on Kishirika, using my magic.

Chapter 7:

An Audience with the Immortal Demon King

TO SUM IT UP, the Old Kishirika Castle was a picturesque piece of demon architecture. It was built with specially-crafted iron stones, and while it lacked the intricate detail and elegance of Perugius's floating fortress, it was still a sight to behold. In fact, someone with more practical tastes would probably like this better. Its only blemish was a sizable hole in the central tower.

The place was a tourist attraction, so it was normally open to the public (provided you paid the entry fee), but the areas you could go into were limited. We were taken straight to the audience hall. Not the spacious, gaudy one used to dazzle sightseers, but a cramped one that saw more regular use.

Knights in black armor lined the narrow hall, and their presence made it all oppressive and stuffy. The cherry on top of this displeasing cake was that the throne in front of us was empty.

"She sure is taking forever," I mumbled.

Zanoba replied, "Royalty require time to prepare before they receive visitors."

"Does that include you?"

"Have I ever taken so much time to prepare that I made you wait for me, Master?"

"As much as you love the fine arts, you don't seem to have any interest in clothes."

Zanoba grunted. "It disheartens me to hear you say that. I thought you, of all people, would understand the care I put into my buttons and embroidery."

"You mean you fuss over that stuff when you're buying it or having it made, right? Not when you're getting ready."

We had been waiting for at least two hours. Our senseless banter had kept me from being bored out of my mind, but the sun had already set. I wasn't complaining about standing around being exhausting, but I wish they'd given us

seats while we waited.

Zanoba and I were the only ones in the audience chamber aside from the guards. Elinalise and Cliff had gone off with one of the knights to retrieve the grass we needed from the castle's basement.

"Hey, where is Lady Atofe? Is she coming?"

"I've already told you, we sent someone to fetch her."

"Isn't she a bit late, though? Don't tell me she's outside the city?"

"She's not the punctual type. Her sense of time doesn't work like the rest of us. Best if you give her a day's grace."

"Okay, but we can't just keep these people waiting around forever."

"You lot, shut your mouths."

I overheard the knights squabbling. They were acting pretty casually. Hearing their conversation put me at ease.

Suddenly, the old knight captain made his way over. "She will soon be here, so please wait a bit longer. Also, I ask that you refuse any reward she offers you."

"Sorry, a reward?"

"If things go south and you wind up accepting a reward from her, there'll be nothing the rest of us can do to help you."

"Uh, okay... I'll keep that in mind." I nodded, genuinely intending to take his advice.

I had no idea what he meant, but I had no interest in accepting any reward. I hadn't fallen so far that I would sell out Kishirika for compensation. Speaking of, said Demon Emperor was currently bound in so much rope she resembled a caterpillar as she lay there on the floor. She would be punished later. I didn't know what they had in mind—a spanking? Toilet cleaning duty?—but surely it wouldn't be too severe.

That aside, I couldn't let my guard down. We were meeting a demon king, after all. The only high-ranking demons I knew were Kishirika and Badigadi.

The two of them are always so happy-go-lucky, but I bet if you pissed them off...huh, weird. I get the feeling it wouldn't be that bad, actually.

“Move it.”

A voice sounded behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a woman. Of everyone I'd met, she looked the most like your stereotypical demon. Her skin was a bluish-black, her hair white, and her eyes blood red. She had wings like a bat, and a single, thick horn protruded from her head. Like the knights, she also wore black armor, although it was clear that hers had seen far more battle than theirs had. It was covered in scratches, and any decorative elements had long been ripped off. An enormous sword hung at her waist, one that looked far too large for her scrawny arms. Its sheath was far more extravagant than the other soldiers.' She wasn't that tall, probably average height for an adult female. Taller than Ariel, but shorter than me.

The most noteworthy thing about her was something else altogether. There was an aura of indescribable rage and hostility about her. If violence were a scent, she would wear it like a perfume, for it was obvious that she would use force on anyone who tried to disobey her. That reminded me of Eris. She was like a female knight—no, a knight captain, to be more accurate. It would be wise not to provoke her.

“Did you not hear me? I said move it,” she reiterated.

“Oh, yes, of course.” I obediently stepped out of the way.

“Much better.” Long locks of white hair swayed behind her as she strode to the throne and spun to face us. She sat down and, having removed the sheath from her waist, slammed the sword down between her legs, taking a kingly pose.

She took a deep breath and bellowed, “I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak!”

“...Huh?”

As I tilted my head in confusion, the black-armored knights hastily removed their swords from their sheaths, raising them as a show of respect and fealty to their liege. One of them abstained, however, and approached the throne. It was

the old knight captain.

“Lady Atofe! Why did you come in from the front entrance? How many times have I told you to enter the throne room from the back door?!”

“The reason should be obvious. I enjoy entering from the front more.”

“Your whims should not dictate your behavior!”

“Don’t you know that the best part of challenging a demon king as a hero is being able to waltz through their throne room before engaging them in a fight?”

“What relevance does that have?! Your father was once one of the Five Great Demon Kings. Oh, how he would lament to see the way you behave! And not only him, what would your husband, Lord Rybak, think?”

“Shut it already!” Atofe pulled her sword from its sheath and thrust it at the old man so fast I couldn’t follow her movements.

The old knight captain drew his sword to parry her attack, but he wasn’t quick enough. His helmet went flying as he collapsed backward. The other knights in the room rushed toward him in a panic.

“Stop hollering in front of our guests,” snapped Atofe. “My old man would be rolling in his grave!”

The knight captain’s helmet came rolling toward me. It was cracked right down the middle.

What incredible power.

I bent down to pick it up, and found the inside coated in wet, sticky blood. “Ugh!”

Wait, hold on. That means her attack actually connected with his head. Uh... Seriously? Did she actually kill him?

“Very well, but I still implore you to be mindful.” Despite my concerns, the old knight captain peeled himself off the floor as if he was completely fine. He bowed to Atofe, wisps of smoke rising from his forehead.

Looks like he’s okay.

Maybe he was immortal too. In fact, maybe the rest of the guards were all immortal.

“Glad you get it now. All right, let’s do this thing over again.”

“As you command!”

Atofe returned her sword to its sheath and resumed her highlander-like pose. One of the other knights brought the captain a new helmet, they fell into formation. Once again, they unsheathed their swords and offered them up toward their leader.

“I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak.”

Zanoba quickly took a knee and bowed his head, so I followed suit. I knew nothing about this type of etiquette and assumed I should just follow his example.

“First, allow me to thank you. We were able to catch this idiot thanks to you.” Atofe turned her gaze toward Kishirika.

Our demon emperor was rolled up like a burrito. She looked resigned, as if she’d completely given up hope. I almost felt bad for her. We’d essentially spat on her after she helped us and gave us the answers we sought. Still, it was a necessary evil. We had our own objectives to fulfill.

“We had no references for her, so our search for it dragged on. You did well to find her for us.”

Ah, so it was just as I suspected. Lady Atofe was loose with the details when she had that sketch made.

“Also...” Atofe continued posing as she stared off into the distance. Her voice trailed off, and she remained completely silent. Five minutes passed with her frozen in place like that.

Uh, did her engine give out or something?

“Moore, what was it I was supposed to say next?”

“A reward. You were going to give them a reward.”

Apparently, the old knight captain’s name was Moore. Something about that

name made me picture a guy smiling maniacally. Like *moo-hoo-ha-ha*.

“Hm, yes. I do need to give them a reward,” Atofe mumbled to herself.

“No, that’s not necessary.” I recited the line I’d mentally prepared after Moore’s advice. I assumed this was a formality. That was probably why he suggested I turn her down.

Atofe stomped her foot. “Are you saying you don’t want my reward?” She glared at me, her eyes murderous.

My legs began quaking. The enmity she exuded was no joke. It was on a completely different level from Linia’s and Pursena’s. It was the same animosity in Ruijerd’s eyes when he glared at me.

“N-no, I’d be happy to receive your reward.”

It was better not to defy someone like her. If she wanted to insist on giving us something, it was better to just take it.

Yep, that’s all I can do. Moore had advised against this, but if the alternative was to intentionally piss her off, it was probably better to give in.

I cleared my throat and asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, what is it you intend to give us?”

Atofe’s eyes narrowed, a satisfied grin stretching across her face. “Power.”

Power, huh? Power... Well, I would be lying if I said I didn’t want that. If that was what she was offering, it was worth taking.

Okay, but Mister Moore told us we were better off not accepting it. Maybe I should just call the whole thing off and tell her he already agreed to give us some of those leaves in the castle’s basement so we’ll just take that and go home.

“I grant you the privilege of joining my personal guard so that you can train your bodies!”

“You what?!”

Huh? So she wasn’t going to just put her hand to my head and awaken some latent power in me, or grant me a demon eye like Kishirika had?

“You look pretty puny. But hey, ten years of my training will bring you up to snuff.”

“Um, uh...”

“That’s right, for a whole decade I will go without rest to help you temper your body. Well, what do you think? It’s a great honor, isn’t it?”

Ten years without any breaks?

Uh, no, I’ve got two wives and a kid waiting for me back home, so I’d like to pass on the whole bootcamp thing if it’s all the same to you.

Sure, ten years of training surely would make me a lot stronger, but what would be the point if I had to abandon everything to do it? What would be the purpose of getting that strong? Who was I aiming to defeat? Okay, maybe I could protect my loved ones better if I were stronger, but was that worth abandoning them for a decade?

So what do I do? No, I mean, I have no choice but to turn her down. I can’t join her personal guard.

I glanced at Moore. He shook his head, a look of resignation on his face.

“I’m sorry, but as great of an honor as that is, I will have to abstain.”

“Nonsense! Now, someone, go bring him an extra suit of black armor and prepare a contract for him to sign!”

Several of Atofe’s personal guards scrambled out of the room at her command.

“I am giving you the best armor, the best training, and allowing you to enter the most renowned guard in the whole of the Demon Continent! There is no greater honor! You won’t be able to oppose me once you sign the contract. Not that you would try anyway, I’m sure, even without such a formality. In fact, you must be overjoyed right now.”

I wasn’t the least bit overjoyed.

Still, of all the high-ranking demons I’d met, she sounded the most like a demon king. In a strange way, I was glad to have the opportunity to meet her. Maybe I wasn’t the only one she had offered this reward to, either. Perhaps

others in her guard had also been forced into a contract.

“I am terribly sorry,” I said, “but I have a family waiting at home. I can’t just leave them for 10 years.”

“I don’t see the problem. I haven’t seen my son once in the last hundred years. Trust me, no news is good news. It’s proof that they’re still alive.”

What, so because she’d abandoned her kid for a century, she wanted me to do the same to my family for a decade? Heck no.

“B-but ten years is an incredibly long time for a human. Plus, I promised my family I would go back, and...”

“And?” Veins were twitching in her forehead. She was starting to lose her temper.

“And I have a sick friend waiting for me. I need to find a cure for her as soon as possible and get back home. Besides, I have so many other things to do right now. I can’t just stay here and hoard power for myself—”

“Shut up!” Atofe snapped so loudly it echoed against the walls.

Oh, boy, that was mildly terrifying. Okay, no, it was just plain terrifying. What’s wrong with her? What is she yelling at me for?

“Are you going to enter my personal guard or not?! Quit playing word games and answer!”

“I-I’m not going to!”

She froze in place. Her entire face turned red as her expression contorted. “Why?! Why would you refuse me?!”

Huh? Uh, didn’t I literally list all the reasons?

“Uh, um...”

Now was a good time to leave things to Zanoba. Or at least that was my plan, but I looked over at him, and he practically had question marks dancing above his head as he stared quizzically back at me.

Ah, crap, that’s right. We were speaking in Demon Tongue the whole time. He had no idea what we were saying. I can’t rely on him.

So what *was* I supposed to do? How was I going to convince her to give up?

The knights had been in high spirits moments ago, but after my exchange with Atofe, the atmosphere turned hostile and tense. It was like they were a sports team who had come to play on their opponent's home turf.

"I told you," Kishirika blurted. "She's a complete imbecile. You're better off not getting involved with her. You can't even have a proper conversation with her!"

"Shut up! I'm not an imbecile!" Atofe abruptly shouted, drawing her sword. "Now I get it. You're making fun of me! That's why you said you wouldn't accept my reward. You think I'm stupid, so you're mocking me!" She strode furiously toward us.

Uh, what? Hey, hold up!

"Lady Atofe, please try to calm down! You'll break something inside the castle if you keep swinging that thing around!"

"I'm not an idiot, okay? I'm not!" She brandished her sword, face contorted in anger, as she stormed toward us. Her guards tried to head her off and stop her. "Move it!" Atofe shoved them aside and came charging at us like a bull.

Oh, crap. Oh, crap! Should I use my magic?! No, I might make things worse if I attack her.

"I'll handle this," Zanoba said. He got up and stood in front of me. "Hmph!" He grabbed Atofe's arms as she lunged at us. She tried to kick him out of the way, but he did not budge, as you might expect with a Blessed Child's power.

"Hm, you are pretty strong!" Her eyes widened with intrigue as she stared at Zanoba, a smile curving across her lips.

Oblivious to what she was saying since he didn't speak the language, Zanoba berated her. "Calm yourself! We mean you no offense. We only want the grass you have in your basement."

"Stop speaking those weird foreign words at me!" she snapped back, uninterested in whatever he had to say. In fact, it seemed she didn't understand the Human Tongue at all, despite Moore's fluency in the language.

Still grasping her sword, Atofe tried to pummel and kick Zanoba, but to no avail. At last, she howled in displeasure.

“You freak, you’re as hard as a rock! You must have some serious Battle Aura protecting you. Interesting!”

With that, she severed her arm with her sword, freeing herself from Zanoba’s hold.

That’s right. Atofe cut off her own limb with zero hesitation. In her eyes, it was just a nuisance holding her back. She severed it with the casual indifference of someone snipping off a loose thread after their sweater got snagged.

“Hmph!”

The moment her arm separated from her body, it turned into a flaccid lump of flesh. Zanoba let go and it thudded wetly against the floor. Seconds later, it crawled toward Atofe and reconnected itself to her body. Moments later, her arm was back to normal. I’d seen Badigadi do something similar. The wound healed without leaving so much as a scratch behind.

“Fine, then. I will give you my full introduction: I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak, wife of Kalman Rybak, the founder of the North God sword style. I’ll show you what the style truly looks like when used in combat!” She lifted her blade high into the air.

Zanoba stood with his fists balled, as if he planned to take her on unarmed. A tremor ran down my spine. Something told me this wasn’t going to end well. As in, Zanoba could die. Blessed Child though he might be, Zanoba wasn’t impervious to injury. For example, I managed to scratch even the Dragon God Orsted with my magic, powerful as he was. There were no absolutes in this world. Zanoba, for instance, was weak to fire. Also, while he might be resistant to physical attacks, that didn’t mean they couldn’t injure him.

“Urgh!”

I immediately started pouring my mana into a spell, intending to make it as fast and dense as possible. Casting Stone Cannon would take too long, unfortunately, but I had more experience using magic now than I did before.

“Fwahahaha! Now die! This is the North God style’s ultimate...”

“Electric!”

Purple lightning shot from my prosthetic arm. It crackled through the air, flashing so bright that we were momentarily blinded.

“Ugyaah!” Atofe was struck backward, the sword slipping through her fingers.

A numb, tingling sensation shot through my hand, all the way up to my elbow, but it was nothing to worry about. I hadn’t poured enough mana into that spell to electrocute her.

“Hah!”

Not one to miss an opportunity when his opponent was defenseless, Zanoba launched his own attack. His fist landed right in her face.

“Gyahaaaa!”

Her features contorted as she rocketed through the air, slamming into the castle wall. It shattered under the force of her collision, and Atofe went tumbling out along with falling debris.

“Ah, Lady Atofe!” The knights bunched by the hole in the wall like a group of fussy sparrows.

“Hm, I made a mistake. I was so focused on protecting you, Master, that I didn’t hold back. I wonder if that killed her.”

“Nah, I’m sure she’s still alive.” They did call her Immortal Demon King for a reason. The problem was what would happen now.

“Oh, no, now they’ve really done it.”

“Yeah, this is bad...”

“I can’t believe it.”

Twenty or so of the black armored guards crowded us, muttering amongst themselves. I was sure they weren’t going to let us leave after what we did to their master.

“Khh.” I lifted my staff, ready to take them on. This was my fault. If only I had listened to Moore’s warning, this never would have...

Wait, was I really at fault here? *I kinda don’t think I am, actually.*

I couldn't have known she would react like this, and even if I had turned her down from the beginning, the result would have probably been the same.

Anyway, I can save the blame game for later. Right now I have to figure out how to get out of this situation.

And yet, as worrying as it was to have these knights surround us, they didn't draw their swords. They merely stared at us.

Zanoba held up his empty fists. Perhaps I should have conjured a weapon for him before we got here. Now I didn't have the time. Perhaps there was a log somewhere in all the debris from the broken wall.

"You two..." Moore strode over, acting as their representative. He was speaking in Demon Tongue this time. "I must ask you again, on behalf of my lady, are you sure you don't want to join us?"

"We'll pass," I replied, without hesitating this time.

"Lady Atofe has an affinity for strong individuals. Considering you were able to stop her before she used her ultimate technique and you sent her flying through the castle walls with a single punch, I'm sure she'll want you even more now."

Big surprise there. All of the demon kings I'd met or heard of were like that. Not a single one of them was sane. That said, none of the guards made a move to apprehend us even though they knew Atofe would want us. In fact, after watching Atofe sail out of the castle, a few of them had said things like "Whoa, look at her go," and "Well, that's what she gets for letting her guard down," and "Tsk, tsk."

Moore said: "We, of her personal guard, don't make a move unless ordered. However, once she gives us a command, we won't be able to let you go." At that, several of the guards gave us sharp looks. I wasn't about to mock them for not acting until ordered to do so. If anything, I was grateful.

"What will happen if she catches us?" I asked.

"She will challenge you to a duel, I'm sure."

I frowned, confused.

“If you lose in the duel, she will knock you unconscious and force you to sign a contract with her. Once that’s done, you will never be able to defy her again.”

“And, um, how long does this contract last for?”

“Until you die, of course.”

I swallowed hard, loud enough for those around me to hear.

“Although you can have two years off every ten years.”

Breaking that into smaller numbers meant it was essentially one day off every five days. But why did that feel so underwhelming?

“The majority of her guard are here because they want to be, but there are many who were forcibly conscripted. In particular, many of the humans among us lament their fate. Even we feel sympathy for them.”

Several knights lowered their gazes. Apparently, many of them had faced our dilemma and been forced into a contract with Atofe. She called it a reward, but it was basically a contract of slavery.

So that’s why he said not to accept her reward. I wish he had given me more details beforehand.

No, it was my fault for not asking for clarification. There I was thinking we couldn’t let our guard down, and it was me who did, in the end.

“S-so...” I licked my lips. “What happens if we win this duel?”

“Oh, you really think you can win? In the past 5,000 years, not a single person has beaten our master outside of North God Kalman and Demon God Laplace. You really think you can best her?”

“Yeah, probably not.”

They called her immortal and she probably had as much stamina as Badigadi. To make things worse, she seemed far more skilled at battle than he was. Badigadi wasn’t an acolyte of the North God sword style, at least not when the two of us sparred.

“What happens if the duel ends in a draw?”

“If she deems you an enemy, she’ll challenge you again. If she sees you as an

ally, she'll recognize you as an equal."

I wondered how she'd feel in my case. Knowing my luck, she'd probably challenge me again. It was pretty clear that she saw me as an enemy. And if she kept dueling me over and over again, I was bound to lose eventually.

"S-so what should I...?"

"Run." Moore didn't mince words. "Right now, your friends should be finished gathering the Sokas Grass. There's a tunnel below the castle that will lead you outside of town, so you can use that to flee."

The other knights chimed in:

"Please, don't end up the same way I did."

"Hey, if you happen to go to the Holy Country of Millis..."

"Idiot, you'll be able to go back there yourself after another three years of service."

"Yeah, but still..."

More pained voices joined the chorus, but I ignored them. We had our hands full with our own problems right now. Grateful for their willingness to let us go, I started toward the door. But I paused when I caught sight of Kishirika in my periphery. She stared at me pleadingly. After all that happened, the two of us were now fellow runaways.

"You don't mind if I take Lady Kishirika with me, do you?"

"...Well, our job was only to catch her the first time, so go ahead."

So they were willing to turn a blind eye. Atofe hadn't given them any new orders since they fulfilled the first one. I wondered if they would get punished for this.

Oh, well, not my problem.

I used my magic to burn through the ropes binding Kishirika and released her.

"Ahh, much appreciated. You have my gratitude!"

After that, we fled the throne room.

We rendezvoused with Elinalise and Cliff inside the castle. They both had backpacks full of tea leaves as well as potted plants in each arm. The leaves were a yellow ochre color, and they looked like shriveled aloe vera.

“They said these plants are vulnerable to sunlight, so we’ll need to grow them underground. They gave us a memo to take home, but I can’t read what was written on it,” said Elinalise.

“Either Roxy or I can read it later, but we need to hurry.”

“Did something happen?”

I explained the situation, and Elinalise didn’t look the least bit surprised. “I’ve heard something about this. Kishirika gifts demon eyes, Badigadi gifts knowledge, and Atoferatofe gifts power—or something like that.”

“You should have told me,” I grumbled.

“I don’t speak Demon Tongue. You should have interpreted properly for us.”

She had me there. I hadn’t explained things to the rest of them well. In my defense, I wasn’t a licensed interpreter, so I hardly knew what I was doing.

“We don’t have time to stand around and bicker. Let’s get a move on. So, uh, should we take the underground tunnel or go back the way we came?”

Cliff’s words brought my attention back to the pertinent issue at hand. Atofe was probably still rearranging her face after Zanoba smashed it in, but she could come at us at any time. No doubt she’d be even more fired up after what we did to her.

“You should give up on the tunnel,” said a voice from below.

I looked downward at Kishirika. When we first met, we were about the same height, but I had shot up in the years since and had to crane my neck to look at her.

“I thought about not saying anything to pay you back for betraying me,” said Kishirika, “but Badi destroyed that tunnel during Laplace’s War.”

“Seriously?”

“Indeed. That man you spoke with is a turncoat. Moore is Atofe’s right-hand man, after all. He spews nothing but lies so he can rig things in Atofe’s favor. Despite what he said, he probably started plotting against you the moment you fought her.”

I didn’t fully trust anything she said, but she was likely right. He might have deceived us, intending to corner us when we discovered the underground tunnel was a dead end.

Moore, you bastard... I can’t believe you betrayed us.

But hold on, even if he *had* deceived us, at least he didn’t attack us while we were in the throne room. And although Atofe seemed to bully him as well, that didn’t automatically mean he was on our side. Plus he had provided the grass we needed a memo with instructions, so he wasn’t entirely bad. Maybe we were the ones at fault for spurning his good intentions and straining his relationship with Atofe. I should have just handed Kishirika over, flat out turned down her offer, and hurried back home. Maybe that would have soured my relationship with Atofe, but I would have taken that over what we were currently facing.

“If he really is as shifty as you claim, wouldn’t it have been better for him to capture us back in the throne room?” I asked.

“This is Atofe we are talking about. She likes to chase her prey and corner them herself.”

Makes sense. So he’s setting things up for her. That kind of finesse was probably important for a man in his position, serving a demon king like Atofe. Although I wondered if the other knights knew about his ulterior motives.

“So what you’re saying is we should make our escape aboveground, right?”

“Indeed. The rest of her guard should be busy with inspections right now.”

That’s right—they were conducting an inspection near the entrance when we came in. Atofe’s entire personal guard would be gathered inside the castle right now, meaning the entrance was unguarded.

“But considering they let us take you, maybe they figured you would give us this information and lead us aboveground. Or perhaps, unbeknownst to you,

they've actually repaired that underground tunnel."

"If you're overthinking it that much, then it doesn't really matter which way you pick, does it?"

True, it was a gamble either way, guessing which route the enemy would use to pursue us.

"Miss Elinalise." I turned to her. "Which one would you pick if it were you?"

"If it were up to me, I certainly wouldn't pick the route that had a high chance of leading us into a dead end."

"Zanoba?"

"Enclosed spaces are easier for me to fight in."

"And Cliff?"

"I-I'd also go aboveground. I don't like dark places."

Awesome, we'll go with the majority vote then.

"Okay, aboveground it is," I declared. "Miss Elinalise, you take the front and lead us straight to the teleportation circle. Zanoba and Cliff will follow right behind you, and I'll bring up the rear. Zanoba and I can carry all the luggage."

I took the backpack and plants from Elinalise. It was better for Zanoba and I to carry these things. It was okay if I was burdened because I could just use magic, and Zanoba's superhuman strength allowed him to bear a heavy load with ease.

"And what, pray tell, should I be doing?" Kishirika demanded.

"As for you, Your Majesty, Zanoba is carrying all that luggage anyway, so why don't you sit on him?"

"Very well!" She obediently perched on his shoulder.

That was supposed to be a joke... But whatever, that's the safest place for her to be anyway.

"All right, off we go!"

We ran for the castle exit. As soon as we slipped out of it, an angry voice erupted in the distance.

“Mooooooooore! After theeeeeem!”

If I wasn't scared before, I sure am now.

Darkness hung over the town as we scrambled down the main thoroughfare. As much as I wanted to melt into the shadows, the whole area was too well-lit. Light pouring from the crater's walls shone down on us.

Picking the aboveground route had been the right choice. There wasn't a single black armored soldier in sight, and none chasing us. Kishirika had been right on the money. Right now, the guards were probably preoccupied searching the underground tunnels.

If we were lucky, Atofe might give up her pursuit...but that wasn't likely. After all, we had taken Kishirika with us. That only gave Atofe more incentive to track us down.

As we broke away from the main street, we passed by the Adventurers' Guild. I wondered if Nokopara was still inside. I never thought we would leave the city this quickly. We had already paid our lodging fees for the night, and our clothes were still in our rooms. It was a waste to leave those things behind, but they weren't that important. Better to cut our losses.

As we passed through the mostly deserted marketplace, I spotted the alleyway where we'd once dyed Ruijerd's hair. We ended up fleeing the city back then, too. It was hard to believe the same thing was happening again. I honestly had nothing but bitter memories of Rikarisu.

Finally, we arrived at the large crack that made the city's entrance. There were a couple of guards posted there, but no soldiers in black armor. One had the head of a lizard, while the other had the head of a pig. They stared in confusion but let us slip by.

The teleportation circle wasn't far from the city's outskirts. We looped around the perimeter of the crater.

“Oh? Where is it you're going?” Kishirika asked.

“There's a teleportation circle in this direction. It's what we used to get here.”

“Hm, you don’t say. Hard to believe such a thing still remains out here, but then aga—guk! Bit my tongue...”

We had left a marker in the ground to guide us back when it was time to leave. There would be no problem locating the circle. It was dark outside the city, but Elinalise’s elf vision would guide us. We need only turn left at the mark, scale up the slope, and then the teleportation circle would be right in front of us.

As we reached our marker, I skidded to a stop. I had no other choice.

“Hmph. You took your time getting here.”

Above us on the slope, right at the entrance to the teleportation circle, stood Atofe. She was joined by no less than ten of her guard. At that moment I noticed the hole in the ground near the entrance to our magic circle. Perhaps that was the exit to the tunnel that ran under the castle.

“Moore never fails to impress. It was just as he said. I’ll be sure to praise him later,” Atofe mumbled to herself.

He read our movements?

No, that wasn’t it. They managed to head us off. It wasn’t our movements they had read, but our destination.

“W-well, you sure did get here awfully fast, didn’t you?” I said awkwardly.

“Hmph. Flying here was simple. I could see you and your comrades easily from the sky.” As she answered, her wings twitched behind her. “It looks like Moore caught up as well.”

I glanced over my shoulder and a band of black armored knights were making their way toward us. They must have looped around the edge of the crater as well. While Atofe made her way here from the sky, ten of her guards had taken the underground passage, and the rest pursued us aboveground.

So they used every route at their disposal to chase us down.

It was obvious when you thought about it. They weren’t Inspector Zenigata, so they had to split up this way. If they knew our destination, they had every reason to check every possible escape route.

Guards fanned out behind us. We were surrounded. There was nowhere for us to run. Our only way out was sealed off.

“Moore, you did a splendid job. Everything went the way you said it would,” said Atofe.

“If you’re that pleased, I hope you’ll hold up your end and do as I asked you.”

“No.” Atofe’s response was curt as she lifted a hand. At her gesture, the other knights drew their swords. “Now, then...”

The demon king stepped toward us and unsheathed her own weapon. As she towered above us on the slope, she pointed her blade at me and said, “Fwahahaha! I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak! If you best me, I will declare you a hero! If you lose, you will be my puppet until the day you breathe your last!”

The smile on her face was savage, and a stifling aura of bloodlust wafted off her. Despite being shorter than me, she looked like a five-meter-tall titan right now.

Sorry, Sylphie. I might not be able to make it back home after all.

Chapter 8:

Showdown with the Immortal Demon King

IMMORTAL DEMON KING Atoferatofe was incredibly famous. She was the daughter of one of the Five Great Demon Kings, Immortal Necross Lacross, and first made a name for herself during the second Great Human-Demon War.

Atofe was a paragon of the demon race. Although she lacked smarts, she possessed insane battle prowess and stamina. She was feared as a savage demon king. Her subordinates compensated for her intellectual shortcomings with their strengths, but when they had their supply route cut off during the war, they were all wiped out. She was then captured by the humans and sealed away.

It wasn't until Laplace's War that Atofe revived. Laplace was the one who gave her a new life, and she made a name for herself as a demon king, working beside him. When that conflict ended, she lost to North God Kalman and capitulated.

According to one story, North God Kalman left a child with Demon King Atofe, and it was this heir that became North God Kalman II. Another suggested that North God Kalman imparted the wisdom of his sword technique to the demon king. Yet another claimed that Demon King Atofe was the one who taught North God Kalman II all he knew.

If any of these stories were to be believed, then Atofe was a battle-worn veteran who had directly passed on the techniques of the North God founder. On top of that, her body was also immortal. Fighting a woman like that would be a fool's errand.

Atofe stood before us with her retinue of black armored soldiers. Our escape route was sealed off. Based on her expression, she was raring to go, and she had her blade out, ready for the fight.

"Come, I'll take all four of you at once!"

Atofe made no move to initiate the battle, but merely raised her sword and scrutinized us. She meant it. With the power at her disposal, she was perfectly capable of overpowering us before we could react, but she didn't.

"You won't catch me off guard this time," she warned. "I pick up on things quickly." Fire blazed in her eyes as she glanced between Zanoba and me. This time, she was fully alert—ready for Zanoba's inhuman strength and my electrical magic.

Our previous attacks had left no signs of damage. Zanoba had practically smashed her skull in, but her head was perfectly intact now. However, her vigilance indicated our efforts had been effective enough.

"Go on. Try it again. This time, I'll shake it off."

She seemed confident.

I had a feeling she would evade our attacks. The Water God style allowed a person to counter magical attacks. I didn't know all that much about the North God style, but then again, she was a demon king. I was sure my magic wouldn't have much effect on her this time.

I've activated my demon eye, but will seeing a second into the future really do me any good against an opponent like her?

As I debated how to handle this, I decided that creating an opening was my best bet.

But what do I do after that? And even if I do create an opening, will my magic work against her?

Even the most powerful Stone Cannon I could muster wasn't enough to fully kill Badigadi. Plus, Atofe was prepared for my attack. If she defended, my magic wouldn't—

"Rudeus." Elinalise suddenly whispered into my ear. "Let's at least sneak Cliff through so he can teleport out of here."

I glanced over at Cliff. He was bravely staring Atofe down, but his legs were trembling. He would be useless in battle.

"If we send him off with the tea leaves, plants, and memo, he should have

enough to save Nanahoshi,” Elinalise continued.

“Yeah, you have a point.”

She was right. This was our best option. We had to save Nanahoshi. That was the whole reason we’d come here. Nothing was more important than achieving our objective. Even so, I still wanted to make it home alive.

No, even if I’m defeated, I probably won’t die. I just won’t be able to see my family for at least a decade, and I sure don’t want that.

“We could also call in reinforcements. I am sure Perugia has had dealings with Atofe in the past. Surely he would help us.”

Perugia and his twelve familiars—now that was a thought. Maybe we could get him to back us up. Considering how arrogantly he acted, surely he had enough power to fight Atofe.

“All right,” I said, “let’s do that. Think you can convince Cliff?”

“I’ll give it a shot.” Elinalise slipped toward him.

The three of us—Zanoba, Elinalise, and me—could create an opening for Cliff to slip through and teleport back to the fortress. While he persuaded Perugia to come save us, we would have to hold out against Atofe. Assuming Cliff succeeded, Perugia would then come to our rescue.

But would that work? Could we really hold out that long? And could Cliff actually sway Perugia into helping? If Cliff took too much time, we might lose and be forced into a contract anyway. Still, if Cliff went back, at least Nanahoshi would be saved. That was the whole reason for our endeavor. But I also wanted to go home.

Ah, crap. I’m just spinning my wheels at this point.

I took a breath and told myself, *Calm down.*

First, we needed to immobilize Atofe for a short time. During that window I would disperse the other knights with my magic so Cliff could escape. Depending on how things worked out, the rest of us might even be able to flee with him.

All right, let’s do it then.

We might not be able to beat Atofe, but we could absolutely beat her personal guard.

Let's do it. Let's smash them to bits, murder them all. If that's what it takes for me to get home, I'll do it. Okay, you can do this, Rudeus! This time you're not going to be all talk and no action. Got it?

"Fear not, Master. Even at the cost of my life, I will hold Demon King Atofe in place." Zanoba had nerves of steel, and he was perfectly calm. That was reassuring. Why did he always manage to sound so heroic at these times? Was this some kind of stage play or something? If I were a woman, he'd sweep me right off my feet.

Nearby, Cliff and Elinalise were whispering.

"The problem is, I don't know if I can outrun them. My legs aren't terribly fast, especially if I have to carry all of that with me..."

"Rudeus and I will stop any pursuers you might have," Elinalise promised, keeping her voice hushed. "Just don't look back and don't give yourself time to think. Count your steps and run as fast as you can. Try not to trip."

"But I should join you guys in battle—"

"We can't win, not even with all four of us. We need you to call backup. That's your duty in this fight, and it's an extremely important one."

"Okay... Yeah, I understand."

It was thirty strides to the teleportation circle from here. Not so close, but also not so far. If Cliff ran with everything he had, he would be able to make it.

After a minute or two, Elinalise returned and said, "Okay, I convinced him."

I glanced at Cliff. He nodded, wearing the determined look of a man dedicated to fulfilling his duty, and not that of a man running from battle. Elinalise had done well to tell him that his role was a key part of the fight. She was ever the smooth talker. I wouldn't have been able to convince him so handily.

"Zanoba and I will distract Atofe and create an opening," said Elinalise. "Rudeus, you use that opportunity to disable the guards in the surrounding area."

“Got it.”

With that, our path was set. We turned to face Atofe.

She still had her sword at the ready as she glared at us. “Think you can beat me?”

There were no enemies behind her, but we were standing on a slope and the ground beneath us was unsteady. I worried whether Cliff could really run past without falling. All we could do was believe in him.

“Zanoba, Miss Elinalise, I’ll make the initial attack with my magic.”

“Sounds good.”

I turned to Atofe and I lifted my staff. I was going to use my old handy-dandy Stone Cannon. Perhaps Lightning was a better pick, since it was King-tier magic with the best firepower when facing a single opponent, but at this distance, we might get caught in the spell. I wanted to avoid being a total idiot and wiping us out with my own magic.

“Phew...” I exhaled before concentrating my mana into the staff.

Atofe stood still. She already knew that I could use magic without reciting any incantations, but she made no move to interrupt me. That worked out perfectly for me.

My Eye of Foresight read her movements: *Atofe will deflect my Stone Cannon with her sword.* People said my Stone Cannon was at an insanely high level of magic, but even that wasn’t going to work against Atofe.

Maybe Electric would work better? But can I really use a spell she’s most on guard for?

“Master, I swear I will follow up whatever attack you unleash, so please have faith in me.” Zanoba stared straight at me, eyes brimming with confidence.

“...Yeah.” It was reassuring to hear him say that. Clearly, he had some kind of plan. In that case, I’d just follow his lead. “All right, then here we go!”

“Yes, Master!”

I unleashed my Stone Cannon after packing all the mana I could into it. A high-

pitched sound split the air as it raced toward Atofe.

“I see right through your attack!”

She left an afterimage behind as she reacted. Although calling it an afterimage was an exaggeration; she barely moved her arm, changing her sword’s direction ever so slightly. In that instant, my Stone Cannon connected with her weapon, sending sparks everywhere. My attack was deflected, whipping past Atofe and slamming into a boulder on the slope. Huge plumes of sand shot up.

I knew it. That spell is no good against her.

“Graaaaaaah!”

Zanoba flung something at Atofe.

“Gwaaaahaa!”

The thing he threw screamed as it launched toward Atofe. The latter happily readied her sword to cut it down. “Your attacks are futi—huh?”

Just as Atofe was about to cut right through the projectile, she froze. A second later, it smacked her right in the face.

“Fwah?!”

“Oof!”

Kishirika was glued to Atofe’s face. She had been riding on Zanoba’s shoulder only moments earlier.

“Gross! You smell like shit! At least take a bath, you moron!” Atofe howled.

“Excuse you, it’s not like I wanted to—hyaaaah!”

Atofe didn’t let Kishirika finish. She peeled the potent-smelling demon emperor off her face and hurled her into the air. Kishirika went tumbling, landing in a heap on the ground just outside our fighting radius.

“Disgusting. What were you thinking, throwing something like that at—wha?!”

As Atofe yelled in exasperation, Zanoba clenched his fist and charged at her. Elinalise slipped behind him, hiding in his shadow.

Crap.

I could see where this was going.

“So you slipped past my defenses. I like your spirit!”

“Haaaaah!” Zanoba threw his fist. The strength behind it was enough to make my hair stand on end. His punch cut straight through the air as it closed in on her face. Atofe tried to deflect the blow with her gauntlet...

“Gah?!”

...but she failed. His fist slammed against her glove, causing her to stumble as her armor warped under the force of his blow.

“Haaah!”

Zanoba followed up with another swing. He took a large step and drove a fist toward her torso.

“Weak!” Atofe grunted.

His attacks weren’t enough to force her back. Even with the awkward stance she found herself in, she still managed to swing her massive sword. A loud crack echoed as her legs bent and she drove the full force of her sword into Zanoba’s torso.

“Guh...uuurgh!” Zanoba’s face contorted in pain as he dropped to one knee. Even my Stone Cannon wasn’t enough to make him flinch, yet with a single attack, she had forced him to the ground.

Atofe glared at him and snorted. “You have an impressive body, but don’t forget: there is no such thing as the perfect defense. My husband, Kal, was the one who— gah!”

“Hah!”

Midway through her speech, Elinalise popped out from behind Zanoba, using his back as a kickoff point. Her attack, backed by centrifugal force, sliced through the air as she connected with Atofe’s bare neck. Her blade was deflected with a noisy clang. No skin would make that sound. Atofe must have been using Battle Aura to protect herself.

“I’m not finished yet!”

As soon as Elinalise realized that wouldn’t work, she backed down. She brought her shield close as she redoubled her efforts, thrusting with her weapon. Invisible shockwaves surged in Atofe’s direction.

“Hmph!”

Atofe didn’t even flinch. She only furrowed her brows in displeasure, as though some sand had gotten in her eye. “Your sword is too weak! See, this is how you do it!” Atofe canted from her hips and swung her massive sword at Elinalise. The latter took a step back in an attempt to dodge, but—

“Khh?!”

Elinalise lifted her shield at the last second. In the next instant, a deep sound echoed and Elinalise went spinning through the air. She rolled across the boulder-strewn ground, and leaped back to her feet much like a cat. Fear shone in her eyes. Her attack had been ineffective.

Atofe had created shockwaves merely by swinging her sword. If Elinalise hadn’t blocked them with her shield, they might have sheared right through her.

“Your footwork is impressive, I’ll give you that,” said Atofe. “If you train under me, you might...”

“Graaaaaah!” Zanoba leaped up, throwing his arms open as he charged at Atofe. “Aaaah!” He wrapped his arms around her from the front, binding her in place, then lifted her up until her feet no longer touched the ground.

“Hmph, you bastard, have you no shame? Putting your arms around me like... guh!”

His arms were like a vice squeezing her. Black blood came gushing out of Atofe’s mouth. Apparently, this kind of attack *was* effective! Well, she was still an immortal demon king. Whatever damage she sustained would surely be temporary.

“Master, now!”

“...!”

His words brought me back to reality. He had Atofe restrained. This was our chance.

“Cliff, go now! Run!” I poured all of my mana into my staff. I would use an all-out attack on the area and knock out all the enemy soldiers.

“Okay!”

As Cliff started running, the nearby knights snapped to attention and readied their swords. Sadly for them, it was already too late.

“Frost Nova!”

A chill surged from my staff. The ground crackled as it froze over, and icy fingers sped toward the knights surrounding us.

“Ah!”

“Guh?!”

While confusion overtook them, my spell locked their feet in place. Our victory was assured. I had caught them all off guard; they had no opportunity to shake off my attack.

Or so I thought. A voice sounded out: “...raging flames consume my body. Burn In Place!”

A wave of heat spilled from one man, enveloping the others. That warmth began to counter my Frost Nova. The man who had cast the spell had steam pouring out of his arms as he defrosted the ice.

So it was Moore...

The old knight captain had started his chant the moment I lifted my staff, allowing him to counter my spell only seconds later. I was shocked at the amount of magical power he possessed, as well as how quickly he finished his incantation. I hadn't pulled my punches with that spell. However, his magic only managed to free him and the two guards closest to him. The others were completely encapsulated in ice. There was still a great difference in our magical power, and I'd won that battle.

And now I've killed for the first time.

“I’m impressed at how much magical power you possess, being able to freeze all of us. Everyone, recite the incantation for Burn In Place!”

“As you command! Fire Spirit who presides over all things between heaven and earth...”

As Moore shouted, the other shoulders began to chant the spell from within the ice they were trapped in.

They’re not dead. None of them died.

It had to be the armor. Perhaps it gave them natural resistance to water magic.

Well, crap.

“Grrr...” Atofe snarled as Cliff slipped past her. “Moore, don’t let him get away!”

“Understood!”

At Atofe’s command, Moore sprang into action. A few seconds later, the two other knights closest to him managed to defrost their icy prisons and rush after him.

“As if I’d let you get past!” Elinalise darted out in front of the two, cutting off their path. “Rudeus! You take him!”

Moore chased after Cliff without a single glance backward. He moved quickly for a man in armor. Meanwhile, Cliff was shouldering a huge load. There were only about seven steps between them.

I turned my staff toward Moore. “Stone Cannon!”

Moore will use Earth Wall to try to block my Stone Cannon.

No problem. I could still do this. I poured all the mana I could into my staff and unleashed my spell.

“Earth’s...gah!”

As Moore continued running, he threw his hand toward me as he tried to recite his incantation, but my Stone Cannon blasted right through his arm like some kind of laser. His appendage, along with the armor that covered it, went

spinning through the air. The loss of that limb did cause him to stumble, but he didn't give up his pursuit.

"Bestow upon me thy power, Water Spirits! Deep Mist!" Moore recited another spell, creating a mist that wrapped all around him. He intended to use that as a smokescreen to dodge my Stone Cannon, apparently.

Still, he can pull off those incantations pretty quick. He's learned to reduce his chants considerably, much like Roxy.

"Wind Blast!"

The gust I unleashed dispersed the mist, but Moore remained undeterred. He showed no signs of losing his focus as he pursued Cliff. Perhaps that black armor of his also provided resistance against wind spells, too.

Now what? There was only a short distance separating him from Cliff. I didn't have many more chances left.

As I was wracking my brain for ideas, my Eye of Foresight told me what was going to happen next.

Moore is going to start chanting a spell as he continues running after Cliff.

"Spirits of the barren lands, answer my call and deliver unto me—"

"Disturb Magic!" I'd practiced this with Sylphie innumerable times. The magic shot straight toward Moore and interrupted the spell he'd been trying to cast.

"Impossible! Disturb Magic?!" Surprised, Moore dropped his gaze to his hand. Even so, he kept running. There were only five steps between him and Cliff now.

"Quagmire!"

In quick succession, I launched another spell at him with my left hand in order to cut off his path. Using the magic I was most accustomed to was a good call. My opponent might be a veteran, but the battle skills I had cultivated over the years still worked against them. Plus, I had gone through simulations such as this when I was practicing.

"Grrr!"

The ground between Cliff and Moore turned swamp-like. The mud had the consistency of glue, clinging to Moore's feet. Although it seemed that would be enough to stop him...

"Unknown God, answer my call and raise the earth up toward the heavens! Earth Lance!" Moore launched a spell at his feet. A block of land rose up, and he used it as a kickoff point to fly over my Quagmire.

"Khh!"

He wouldn't stop. He just kept moving. Everything I threw at him, he countered or resisted.

So these are the abilities of a veteran mage...

"Rudeus, help Cliff! Hurry!" Elinalise called from behind me.

"I know!" I shot her a brief glance. She was locked in battle with the soldiers that had been standing next to Moore. It was two against one. She wasn't their target, but it was all Elinalise could do to keep them preoccupied.

"Release me, dammit! Right now! Don't you have any shame as a man? Stop clinging to me! Let's at least trade fists!" Atofe roared.

Zanoba replied, "Even if you kill me, I won't let you go!"

Atofe had already headbutted him. He kept a vice grip on her even as blood poured from his forehead.

Meanwhile, the other knights were slowly defrosting themselves. Steam was filling the area.

"Khh..."

What could I do to throw Moore off his pursuit? He was strong, and he had way more experience in battling with magic. Normal spells hadn't worked against him. *Should I launch something more powerful at him?*

No. Even if a powerful spell stopped Moore, it would be pointless if Cliff got caught in the blast. Plus, Moore was insanely good at responding to whatever I threw at him, and he had that stupid armor, too...

"...!"

That was when I realized that the ground beneath me was wet, a result of the Frost Nova I had used moments ago. The soldiers had used Burn In Place to melt the ice I'd made, and now the ground was puddled with it. Moore was no exception, having been the first to defrost himself. Of course, Elinalise and I also had water at our feet.

If Atofe had never seen *that* type of magic before, then surely Moore hadn't either. No matter how experienced he was, he wouldn't be able to counter a spell he had never seen before. Although if I used it, all of us—Elinalise, Zanoba, and myself included—would get hit by it. Only Cliff would remain unscathed. He was outside my spell's radius. He would be fine.

I made my choice in that instant. No hesitation.

“Electric!”

I poured enough mana into the spell to stun everyone without killing them.

Electricity shot from my hand. It crackled through the air as it enveloped the area before striking the ground. It conducted through the water and hit everyone in the vicinity.



“Gyaaaah!”

“Aaaah!”

“Ooooooh!”

Smoke rose from the black armored knights as they collapsed. Everyone was caught by the shock, including Elinalise, Zanoba, Atofe, the other soldiers, Moore, and myself.

“Ugh! Gahh!”

It went right through my body, shooting down my spine and joints. Every part of me seemed to bend in the wrong direction. I hadn’t used enough mana to kill, so I knew I’d make it out of this alive. But that didn’t stop the darkness from swallowing my vision as I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was sprawled on the ground. I remembered fainting, but it hadn’t lasted more than two seconds. My entire body was paralyzed. At least I had my vision.

What happened to Cliff?

I lifted my head.

Moore was on his knees, smoking rising from the cracks of his armor. He had one hand stretched toward Cliff, and I could faintly hear him mumbling what I assumed was an incantation.

I need to use Disturb Magic... No, I won’t make it in time.

I concentrated mana into my left arm. Even if my right one was numb from the shock, my prosthetic hand could still move. I unfurled my fingers and launched a spell from my palm.

“Wind Bind!” Moore grunted.

“Arm, Absorb!”

The air whip that Moore conjured disappeared in an instant.

“What?!” Moore’s head jerked in my direction. I couldn’t see his expression

through his helmet, but his surprise was clear.

Cliff never glanced back. He was only three steps away from the magic circle. No one could catch him. Thanks to my magic, they couldn't even try if they wanted to.

My spell had paralyzed Atofe as well. Her eyes were wide open, staring me down like a tiger. "Bastard, you actually got us. That was some weird magic you used."

I remained silent.

"Still, something for me to look forward to. I can't wait for you to be my subordinate. Kehehe. I've been wanting a mage like you. I'll take good care of you, I promise. Kehehe..." She grinned maniacally at me.

I stared back at her, uncowed.

Being an immortal demon, I was sure she would recover quicker than me. There would be no more escape. We couldn't resist her. Zanoba was out cold. Although he still had his arms wrapped around Atofe, they looked ready to give way at any moment. Given his low pain tolerance, he would probably be unconscious for a while.

This...was the end.

"..."

I looked at Elinalise. Her whole body was trembling as she tried to get to her feet. She had probably taken the same amount of damage as me, but she wasn't going to let that stop her. She hadn't given up yet.

Once you give up, it's all over. The white-haired coach in Slam Dunk said that too.

With a little effort, I could do the same.

Come on, let's do it. Let's go home. I want to go back. I have to.

And when I did get home, hm...maybe I would have a little sexy time with Sylphie. And Roxy too, of course. I also wanted to hug little Lucie. Plus, I promised to teach Norn swordsmanship and magic, and I was looking forward to eating Aisha's rice. Lilia had a huge burden on her shoulders, looking after my

mother. Surely Zenith would get her memory back eventually, though. When she did, we could go visit Father's grave together.

Yeah, that's right. We'll keep smiling together, just like we always have.

My life in this world was so insanely enjoyable. I had to protect it. I had to.

Okay, I can do this. Move, Rudeus. I don't care if it's just your arm; you can at least use magic.

What about my staff? Where did it go? I needed that to use my spells.

Ah, there it is.

As it turned out, I had been lying on top of it.

Sorry about that, Aqua Heartia. I'm sure I must have been heavy.

Anyway, I could do this. I just had to hold out until help came. That was all. There was no need to win.

Please, Master Cliff. I know you probably hate Perugius's guts, but I beg of you, please persuade him. I don't care if you can't do it immediately, but if you could at least send some backup within the year, that would be awesome.

"Wha?" Elinalise let out a strangled gasp.

My head jerked up, and I followed her gaze. Cliff had just arrived at the entrance to the underground ruins, where he ran into one of the black armored soldiers.

"No way."

One of them had been inside there this whole time?

"Ah..."

Why hadn't I considered that possibility? That gap was obvious enough. No matter how stupid Atofe was, of course she would investigate the ruins.

A darkness spread inside me. The emotion that overcame me was one I was very familiar with—despair. It made me want to scream, to slump over in exhaustion. Never again would I see Sylphie or Roxy. Instead, I would have to train with that idiot of a demon king until the day I died. As I resigned myself to my fate, all the strength in my body left me.

At that moment, a surprised voice cried out.

“What...?!”

It wasn't me. It wasn't Elinalise or Zanoba. It wasn't Moore, either.

It was Atofe. She was the one gasping as she stared in Cliff's direction.

“Ah, Lady Atofe...” The armored knight pushed past Cliff, hobbling onto the slope. Something about him was...strange. “The magic circle in there—it leads to Peru...”

In the next instant, something cleaved horizontally through his body. He was split in two. The glowing individual who appeared behind him had silver hair, small golden pupils, and white clothing covered in specks of blood.

“Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe, hm?” The man who appeared at the entrance to the ruins spoke fluent Demon Tongue. “I would never have expected you to be here. Though I did consider something like this might happen when I connected my teleportation circle to the one here by Rikarisu.”

A number of people tailed him. Two that I recognized were Arumanfi the Bright and Sylvaril of the Void. I had yet to learn the names of the others, but there were six of them in total.

“Your filthy soldiers have sullied my fortress with their blood.”

Ah, that makes sense. Atofe made it here before we did. She must have found the entrance to the ruins and ordered her soldiers to go in and search. Those who found the teleportation circle would have no doubt entered to see what was on the other side. Thus, demons entered Perugius's floating fortress.

“Peeerugiuuuus!” Atofe howled.

The Armored Dragon King himself stood before us.

The moment Atofe spotted Perugius, the atmosphere around her changed. The hostility that oozed from her was like nothing we had seen before. The way she bared her fangs and glowered almost made me wonder if he'd murdered her parents or something.

“Perugius, you bastard!”

Although her body was still numb from the shock, Atofe pulled herself up and shoved Zanoba away. His body fell, completely limp. She ignored him as she kept her gaze trained on Perugius. Her wings began beating rapidly as she focused her strength into her legs and tried to launch herself forward, but her knees gave out from under her.

“Hah, hah...”

Perugius stared back, lips cracked in a delighted smile. “Oh? This is quite the pleasant surprise, Atoferatofe. Did you let your guard down again? That does seem to be something your immortal demon tribe is prone to.”

“So these people—they were your minions, huh?! This underhanded trick of yours... Was it all so you could kill me? What happened to the oath you made to Kal?!”

Perugius chuckled as he looked down his nose at her.

Overcome with anger, Atofe screamed at him. Moore tried to make his way over to her, feet unsteady, but he wasn’t able to reach her. The only ones who were unscathed from my spell were Perugius and his familiars, as well as Cliff.

The way Perugius regarded Atofe was like a tiger fixed on its favorite prey. “Don’t misunderstand,” he said. “These people wanted to save their friend, so they requested my help. That is all.”

“Don’t you dare lie to me! Graaaah!”

“I’ll keep the promise I made to Kal. He was my best friend.”

“The two of you may have been friends, but I still hate your guts!”

After a long pause, Perugius replied, “I also detest people like you. You’re a fool who won’t listen to reason.” He lifted both arms, palms raised up.

Atofe’s face turned pale. “N-no, you wouldn’t...”

He ignored her protests and began chanting. “This dragon lives only to serve. His claws are so long and sharp, he can never clench his hand...”

I felt like I had heard this somewhere before.

“When rage consumes him, he cannot close his fist. Although his claws may break and his fangs fall out, you shall soon realize what emotion consumes this faithful dragon as he abandons his devotion!”

Perugius bit out each word, one by one. As he did, nearby mana coalesced around him.

“O dragon general, thou who was the third to die, whose eyes were the sharpest, whose body was covered in white scales—I, Armored Dragon King Perugius, summon thee.”

By the time I realized what was happening, Atofe was surrounded by two gates, blocking her off from the rest of us. Both had minutely detailed dragons carved into them and were very ornate. One was silver, while the other was gold. They came rising out of the ground as Perugius continued his incantation.

“Open, Rear Wyrmgate. Beckon forth, Front Wyrmgate.”

As he commanded, they burst open. Something came pouring out of the right one and filtering into the left. It wasn’t wind. It was something that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye—something I knew well.

Mana. He summoned those gates to absorb mana.

My own magical power was being sucked out of me. It wasn’t the same experience I had with Orsted. The drain was faster this time, more intense as it sapped my stamina.

“No, Lady Atofe, please run...” Moore, who had been crawling toward us, collapsed completely.

Atofe’s legs were still trembling violently under her as she pinned Perugius with a glare. “Perugiuuuus!”

Her body looked smaller than it had before. Perhaps those gates were absorbing the Battle Aura she had wrapped around her.

“Do you seriously intend to break your oath?!”

“I won’t break it. However, this *is* an exceedingly rare opportunity that I cannot afford to pass up.” Perugius lifted his right hand. It had turned white, radiating with light so bright that it bathed the entire area. “Armored Dragon

Strike, First Slash.”

He dropped his hand. All of the light pierced straight through Atofe.

“I won’t forget this, Perugiuuuus!” Her entire body froze in place. Time seemed to lag for a second, and then she was hurled back through the air. Her body split in half as she went tumbling out of view.

“Hmph. It’s not as if that will kill you, anyway,” Perugius muttered to himself. Having lost interest, he turned on his heel to leave. “Sylvaril, collect the other four and tend to their wounds.”

“And what of the other soldiers?”

“Leave them.”

“I see the Demon World’s Great Emperor Kishirika is among them as well.”

In the corner of my vision, Kishirika was toppled on the ground. The moment Sylvaril mentioned her, she twitched in place. Apparently, she’d been hit by my electric attack as well.

Sorry about that.

“Leave her as well.”

“As you command.”

Apparently, he was going to overlook Kishirika. Thank goodness.

“Phew.” As Sylvaril and the others approached, I breathed a sigh of relief.

We’re saved.

After that, Perugius’s familiars helped us back to the teleportation circle. All of us had to use their shoulders for support as we walked—except for Cliff, of course. He spoke to Kishirika while the familiars tended to us. By the time I looked in their direction, Kishirika was cackling to herself as she disappeared into the distance, free again. The next time we saw her, I hoped we would have an easier time finding her...but that wasn’t really important right now.

After we had all teleported back to the fortress, Sylvaril severed the connection between their circle and the one near Rikarisu. There was no longer

a path back to the Demon Continent.

We were guided to the sickbay for treatment for electrocution. Cliff looked after us. He actually volunteered himself.

“I’ve never seen burns like this before,” he muttered as he used his magic to heal us. While our wounds weren’t life-threatening, the burns had penetrated deeply enough to permanently damage our bodies if we didn’t receive treatment. I felt guilty for wounding Elinalise and Zanoba that badly, but if I hadn’t, we wouldn’t have disabled that immortal demon king.

Cliff was particularly careful as he healed Elinalise’s wounds. He was probably worried about residual scarring. For her part, Elinalise found his concern so endearing that as soon as he was finished treating her, she carried him off somewhere.

Zanoba remained unconscious even after being healed. He really saved my skin back there. No amount of gratitude could fully repay him for that. As priceless as friendship was, I had to thank him for all he did. I would be sure to convey my appreciation when he woke up.

Once I was fully healed and could move again, I went to see Sylphie. She was lying in bed, reading a book, but when I entered, she looked up and tilted her head. “What’s wrong?”

Without answering, I silently slid into bed and wrapped my arms around her. She let out a cry of surprise, which stabbed me in the heart. It felt like rejection. Although hurt by that, I still hugged her tight.

Atofe’s laughter still lingered in my ears, as did the despair I’d felt when my entire body was so numb, I couldn’t move. I knew I wasn’t going to die in that fight. Atofe was holding back, and even her knights hadn’t come at us with their full power. The magic Moore used wasn’t dangerous enough to kill, either, but that hadn’t made it any less terrifying. If Perugius hadn’t come when he did, Atofe would have captured us and made us sign her contract. I would never get the chance to hold Sylphie in my arms like this again. Nor could I see Lucie as

she grew up. Or Roxy, or Norn, or Aisha—none of them.

That thought alone shook me to my core. Enough that my entire body trembled with fear. There was nothing more precious than the warmth I held in my arms right now.

Suddenly, a hand brushed over my hair. Sylphie was stroking my head combing her soft, dainty, warm fingers through my hair. She happily returned my embrace. She didn't even ask for an explanation; she simply hugged me back. That was enough for me. With my arms wrapped around her, I fell asleep, relieved.

Chapter 9:

A Day in the Floating Fortress

TWO DAYS FLEW BY in the blink of an eye.

After regaining consciousness, Zanoba merrily toured the castle, enjoying all the handicrafts within. Being able to mill about freely had him in high spirits. I was relieved that he'd fully recovered from my electric spell. If he hadn't regained consciousness, I wouldn't know what to tell Ginger.

Cliff, on the other hand, had changed. Immediately after the battle, he'd spoken with Kishirika and I'd wondered what that was about. It turned out they were discussing his reward for helping her before—a demon eye. He got the Eye of Identification from her. It allowed him to look at any item and understand its characteristics. He chose it so that he would be able to help if anything like Nanahoshi's illness ever happened again. As always, Cliff was nothing if not heroic.

That heroism, however, wasn't helping him to master the eye. He was struggling with it. Apparently, everything he looked at came with a name tag and an explanation. To him, the whole world was flooded with text. He couldn't walk around without Elinalise guiding him by the hand. I was sure he would master it eventually. When he did, people would surely call him Cliff the Wise! Until then, he'd probably have to wear an eyepatch.

Next was Nanahoshi.

We decocted the tea leaves we brought back from the Demon Continent and had her drink the tonic. Not too long after, Nanahoshi began complaining that she had to use the restroom. Yuruzu helped her to the sickbay, and...well, to preserve her honor, I'll spare you the details. Let's just say she was on the mend.

"How are you feeling otherwise?" I asked.

Nanahoshi was still bedridden. Her complexion had improved considerably, but the fatigue still remained. She'd also lost a lot of weight. It was as if

everything she had in her stomach had been flushed out, leaving nothing but a skeleton behind.

“I’m feeling quite a bit better.”



To be on the safe side, she would need to rest another month, but at least she was in better spirits now.

Her expression was different from her usual tense one. Rather, she looked like she was dazed from having just woken up. Her hair was a disheveled mess, sticking out in every direction. I used to think she lived an unhealthy lifestyle, but at least she kept her hair brushed every day.

“Thank you for helping me.” She bowed her head, hands cupped around a warm mug of Sokas Grass tea. Her formality and sincerity were a rare display. “I truly appreciate you shouldering so much risk to go get these tea leaves for me. You, um...really helped me out.”

There was something deeply unsettling about hearing her talk like that.

Nah, I'm sure she's just feeling weak, so she's kind of out of it.

“No sweat.”

“You looked after me last time I was in trouble, too. I said some pretty insensitive things to you, and yet you helped me without ever resenting me for it. I don't even know how to begin to thank you...” She gave me an apologetic look.

I'd never witnessed Nanahoshi acting so politely. Maybe Yuruzu of Atonement's abilities could transfer personalities on top of stamina.

“Now that I think about it, I was pretty casual and crude with you, even though you're older than me.”

I shook my head. “I don't mind at all. In this world, I'm only eighteen.”

“And how old were you before coming here?”

“Thirty. But don't worry about it. Let's forget the whole age thing. And you don't have to be so polite. You can talk to me the way you always have.”

“All right.”

Her expression was serene as she slowly nursed her drink, as if she could feel the immediate effects.

I cleared my throat. “I am sure they already told you, but your sickness...”

“Won’t go away entirely. Yes, I know.”

Nanahoshi wasn’t fully cured of Dryne Syndrome. Sokas Grass would temporarily break up the mana building inside her, but if left untreated, it would accumulate to the same levels it had before. Since she wasn’t from this world, she didn’t have the immunity to the syndrome that the rest of the people here did. Fortunately, drinking Sokas Grass tea daily would keep it from building up.

There was also the possibility that even a little magic could make her sick. The next illness she came down with might be something even Kishirika didn’t know—something even more ancient than Dryne Syndrome. As long as she was here she couldn’t entirely avoid mana. It was everywhere—in the atmosphere, in the food we ate.

“Nanahoshi, you have to return home. You can’t die here.”

“...Yeah.”

“I’ll do anything I can to help you secure a way to get back.”

“But I...”

I shook my head. “I don’t need your gratitude or anything. Although if I get myself into trouble along the way, I hope you’ll be there for me in return.”

Nanahoshi started sniffing as the tears welled up in her eyes. She let out a muffled sob, her voice barely above a whisper as she said, “Thank you.”

I patiently waited for her to stop crying.

She continued sobbing for a bit, her eyes red and swollen. She spoke in a nasally voice as she said, “But I will go home.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you want to get back as fast as you can.”

“No, I mean, I might not be able to repay you for everything before I leave.”

Wait, so she wants to repay me for everything before she goes home? She’s more conscientious than I gave her credit for.

“There’s no need to pressure yourself like that. You’ve helped me out before too, after all.”

“I did that to thank you for helping with my research.”

“All right, then I would like some detailed advice on a small matter.”

She frowned. “What small matter?”

“For instance, what does a girl around my age want? Sylphie and I have a long future ahead of us. We’re married and have a child, but I still don’t know what’s going through her head. Given that you’re about the same age, I thought you might know something.”

“About what Sylphie’s thinking?” Nanahoshi stroked her chin and stared down at her blanket. She seemed to be seriously considering the matter. *She sure is dedicated to paying me back.*

“You don’t have to answer right now,” I said. “You can wait until we have a fight or I want to make up with Sylphie or something.”

“All right.” Nanahoshi nodded, her expression sincere.

Although she was close in age to Sylphie, there was much that separated them; they came from different worlds and Sylphie was married. Nanahoshi couldn’t understand her completely. Even I had no idea what the guys my age were thinking.

“In that case, we’ll leave it at that. I’m sure your body is still weak, so take your time recovering.”

“Yes, I will,” Nanahoshi replied. “Thank you.”

I left the room. If I hung around with just her for too long, I might make Sylphie jealous again. She was cute in that mode, but I took no pleasure in giving her anxiety. I never wanted to make her second-guess my love. The fact that I had yet to succeed in doing that was a failure on my part.

As I strode down the hallway, evening sunlight poured in through the windows.

Ah, the sunset is beautiful no matter which world you live in.

I wasn’t so fond of heights, but the view from the floating fortress’s spacious

garden was tempting. From there, I could look out at the sea of clouds as the sun ducked behind the horizon.

Even I liked a little pampering on occasion. With that thought in mind, I made my way outside.

The shrubbery was perfectly trimmed, and there were dozens of flowers I had never seen before. As the sun sank beneath the clouds, it bathed the area in radiant light, making it look like a mirage.

If I brought Sylphie to a place like this and whispered sweet nothings to her, how would she respond? Knowing her, she would probably turn bright red, drop her gaze to the ground, and squeeze my hand. Surely her reaction would be an adorable one.

All right, once Sylphie fully recovers, let's give it a try!

I wanted to do the same with Roxy, but alas, demons were forbidden from entering the fortress. Also, it probably wouldn't go over very well, considering Roxy's personality. She'd probably stare blankly at me and say, "You know you don't have to use those corny lines with me, right?" She'd be willing to sleep with me regardless. She was frank that way, even though she didn't look it.

But that ain't it! It ain't about sex. I just wanna be lovey-dovey! I wanted us to watch the sunset together. Roxy would say, "It sure is beautiful, isn't it?" And I would reply, "Yeah, but not as beautiful as you." And then she would blush and act embarrassed—that was what I wanted to see!

Well, she isn't here anyway, so I'm outta luck.

"Hm?"

As I walked, lost in thought, I spotted a table at the edge of the garden. Three people sat around it.

"And that was when my master used his magic. This purple light shot out of his right hand, and it charred Atofe's body, paralyzing her in place."

"Aha. So it was his magic that weakened her that much."

"Lord Rudeus's magic does seem to know no bounds."

Zanoba, Ariel, and Perugius were having a nice chat. As the evening sunlight

washed over them, they seemed to be enjoying their conversation. Luke and Sylvaril waited nearby, though they weren't participating. They merely stood and listened in on Zanoba's conversation.

"Master Elinalise and I did get caught in his attack, but I don't think there is another mage in the world that can use such a spell outside of my master."

"I hear it resembled lightning," Perugia replied. "But if it was able to paralyze Atofe, as you say, it must have been quite potent."

"And? What happened after that? How did the battle end?" Ariel asked.

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid I lost consciousness at that point, so I'm unable to... Ah, there's the man himself."

Zanoba's gaze found me, so I had no other choice. I bowed and made my way toward their group. "Good evening. Are you having a tea party?"

"Yes, Master! Lord Perugia said he wanted to know how our battle with Atofe transpired, so I was explaining the finer details to him."

"I see." I glanced over at Perugia. He seemed in much better spirits than when we first had an audience with him.

"I heard that it was your magic that weakened Atofe so greatly, Rudeus," he said.

"No, that was largely thanks to Zanoba locking her in place. If I had aimed my spell at her without his help, she may have deflected it."

"I see, yes. Hehe, that image of her still lingers in my mind." His face cracked into an obscene grin.

Does he really hate Atofe that much? He was in a good mood.

"You seem to be quite chipper," I said.

"Of course I am. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would get an opportunity to exact revenge on someone who has given me grief so many times I have lost count."

"Revenge, you say?"

"Yes. A grudge, if you will, that's lasted a number of years."

He was probably referring to the war that happened 400 years ago—Laplace's War. Perugius was a young adventurer at the time, but he aided the humans, fighting on the front lines. Atofe had also spearheaded some of the demons' forces, acting as a general. Perugius encountered her many times on the battlefield. Since he was young and inexperienced, he wasn't able to beat her, instead sustaining life-threatening injuries at each encounter. Two people who saved him back then: the Dragon God Urupen, an older brother-type figure to Perugius, and North God Kalman.

Perugius could only grit his teeth in frustration at each loss. He planned to eventually take revenge on Atofe, but then North God Kalman married her. When Kalman died, he made the two swear an oath that they wouldn't kill each other. Thus, Perugius never went back to the Demon Continent, destroying his chances for revenge. He had almost given up hope on ever striking back at Atofe, but this timing was more perfect than he could have imagined. He took a shot at her without her coming after him in return. That was what had him on cloud nine.

"I must thank you for that," said Perugius. "You did a splendid job."

"Are you sure it's okay that you broke your oath to North God Kalman?"

"He forbade us from killing each other. I am sure he wouldn't fuss over some one-sided pummeling."

Beating up a defenseless opponent for something they did centuries ago seemed pretty barbaric to me. Although that spoke volumes about the depth of the grudge they shared.

"It appears I may have misjudged you a bit. I should give you some kind of reward," said Perugius.

"I don't really need a reward."

No thanks. Count me out. I do not want power—not like Atofe offered.

"Ah yes, once Nanahoshi finishes recovering, I will personally teach you how to use summoning magic."

I hesitated. "Uh, I'm not going to be stuck here and unable to return home for the next decade if I agree to that, right?"

“Do not compare me to Atofe.”

Oh, well, as long as I could go home, there was no reason to refuse. I did want to know more about summoning and teleportation magic. Plus, I might face a similar crisis in the future. It wouldn't hurt to learn other ways to fight, just in case. I wasn't fond of conflict, but in this world, you needed a modicum of strength to escape danger. I thought it would be enough to protect my family, but after the hydra and what happened this time, it was pretty clear I wasn't powerful enough. I wanted to think that situations where I would have to fight anything of that level would be few and far between, but better safe than sorry.

“Um, Lord Perugius, do you think you could possibly do some training with me or teach me how to fight better? I don't mind if it's after the summoning lessons.”

“Hmph. Was this brought on by your encounter with Atofe? Or are you not satisfied already with the power you possess?”

Ah, crap. Now his mood has soured. This isn't good.

“It's nothing like that. I just thought it would be nice to have better options if I ever got into that kind of trouble again.”

After a long pause, he said, “Very well. I will give you an item so that you can contact me. Sylvaril.” He shot a look over at her.

Sylvaril produced a flute from her pocket, one that resembled a tower with a dragon wrapped around it.

“If you use this in any place I have a connection to, Clearnight of the Roaring Thunder will hear it, and Arumanfi will come to see you.”

I accepted the flute and tucked it away. It sounded like he would come to help me if I ever needed it. That wasn't a bad solution either.

“Hm, seems the sun has set.”

I glanced back; the evening light had faded. Now the moon was hovering in the sky. Strangely enough, the area around us wasn't dark. That was thanks to the blue glow the flowers in the garden gave off.

“This table is made from illuminators,” Perugius explained. “Go on, have a

seat. Why don't we continue to chat for a bit?"

Obediently, I plopped down.

"The dwarves' craftsmanship was really at its height prior to the second Great Human-Demon War."

"Indeed. If the dwarves hadn't lost their homeland during the conflict, they might still be making masterpieces now."

Perugius was actually an interesting fellow once you got to talking with him. He possessed great wisdom and loved the fine arts. He was also a man of culture who had an appreciation for creative work.

"The dwarven race has endured, at least. They possess such dexterous hands, I am sure they will one day produce another craftsman capable of creating superb work."

"Speaking of which," Perugius said, redirecting the conversation, "I believe you said one of you was raising such a craftsman."

Zanoba nodded. "Yes, though he may not look it, my master is deeply knowledgeable about figurines. We thought that if we taught a dwarf such techniques, we might achieve new heights."

"You did show me one of Rudeus's figurines. It was quite interesting. It's incredible that he was able to create a replica of a person with such intricate detail."

The two of them were enjoying their conversation. Sadly, I lacked the level of knowledge they possessed, so I wasn't able to keep up with them. The discussion was still interesting enough to listen in on, though.

"No," I said, "you flatter me too much."

"No need to be humble," said Perugius.

"Agreed. Sylphie has told me many times about how talented you are, Lord Rudeus."

There was actually one more participant in our tea party. While the other two

merrily conversed with each other, she tried to jump in with her own suggestions and knowledge. Sadly, her attempts were fruitless. These two were so hardcore that she, like me, could not hope to keep up.

“It’s not just magic. Lord Rudeus is knowledgeable about the arts as well. He truly is an amazing person.”

“Thank you, Princess.”

Acting as a third wheel in the conversation was none other than Ariel Anemoi Asura. She desperately wanted Perugius’s help, but she was at a loss on how to gain his favor. I smiled uncomfortably as she showered me with exaggerated praise. For the better part of the conversation, she had turned into a robot that awkwardly inserted herself and parroted the same generic lines. It was obvious she had nothing of substance to add to the conversation.

She’s got a long road ahead of her.

“Incidentally, Lord Perugius, we were thinking of putting some of these figurines on the market soon. Might we ask your honest opinion on the idea?” Zanoba blurted out. He reached for a box that he had left at his feet—one I had seen before.

“Oh?” Intrigued, Perugius gazed at it. When Zanoba lifted the lid, however, his mood quickly soured. “A Superd figurine?”

“I should have known you would recognize it at a mere glance.”

Perugius’s lips thinned.

Zanoba lifted out the Ruijerd figurine that Julie had made. Stylistically, it was a little different from the one I’d made, but the pose and overall design made it feel life-like. That wasn’t enough to satisfy Perugius, though.

“You ask me this question, knowing how I detest demons?” He stared at the Ruijerd figure in disgust as he spat, “You had better give up any illusions you have about selling this thing.”

Hopeless, as I expected. Perugius really did loathe demons. He was an otherwise tolerant person but held greater prejudice against demons than anyone I had ever met. Zanoba should have known that showing a Superd

figurine to someone like Perugius would only ruffle their feathers. What was he playing at?

“Nonetheless, the model for this figurine is someone to whom you owe a debt, Lord Perugius,” said Zanoba.

“A debt, you say?” Perugius frowned. After thinking for a moment, his eyes went wide. “Don’t tell me you used Ruijerd Superdia as a model for this?”

“Yes, we did. You’ve told me that in your last battle with Laplace, it was Lord Ruijerd who assisted you.”

The words rolled smoothly off Zanoba’s tongue. He wasn’t bringing this up on the fly. The two of them had enjoyed a number of tea parties without me; Zanoba must have gotten that information out of Perugius previously. Now I could see where this was going—and it gave me hope.

“Of course, I am perfectly aware of your distaste for demons. However, I also believe that if my master’s skills had some public exposure, this type of craftsmanship would take the world by storm. Wouldn’t you like to see that happen? Imagine it—a splendid world overflowing with art.”

“Hmm...” Perugius pulled a face.

We were so close to convincing him. *Maybe I should hop into the conversation, too?*

“I hate the Superd. They move in the darkness, massacring innocent lives. Though it is also true that without Ruijerd’s help, I wouldn’t be alive today. However...”

“Lord Perugius, Ruijerd regrets the things he did in the past,” I blurted.

“He does?” Perugius tilted his head.

Now, how should I best explain this...

“Yes. Laplace deceived him.”

“Laplace, you say...” Perugius’s face clouded over.

Looks like this is a good direction.

“That’s right. Laplace gave him a spear that robbed him of his senses. Ruijerd

was manipulated into dishonoring his entire clan. Worse, he even killed his own family. Now, he feels ashamed of himself and hates Laplace for what he did.”

Perugius listened quietly.

“That’s why he’s traveling the world right now, looking for a way to restore honor to his people. This plan of ours is one way we can help him in his endeavor. I also owe Ruijerd a great debt. If you’re grateful for the help he provided you, then I hope you’ll approve of what we’re doing—as a way to repay him.”

Perugius folded his arms, closed his eyes, and furrowed his brows. After a long silence, he finally said, “I care not for the Superd and their reputation, but I must honor my debts.”

“Oh, then?”

“Do as you like.”

Although he wasn’t pleased, Perugius had acquiesced, at least. Now we could sell our Ruijerd figurines without fear of Arumanfi appearing out of nowhere and destroying our shop. In fact, if someone disapproved of our doing so, we could tell them that Perugius had given us his permission. I had no idea how much weight his name carried, but it was sure to be handy, given his fame.

Anyway, Zanoba sure made a persuasive argument. Being able to wriggle his way through such a difficult topic—he was definitely impressing me more and more lately. I needed to learn from his example.

“We appreciate your consideration.”

Both Zanoba and I bowed our heads. We were one step closer to selling these figurines to the public.

Just wait a bit longer for me, Ruijerd.

“While we’re on the topic, Master, why don’t you give Lord Perugius a taste of your skill?” Zanoba smacked his palm as if this idea had just occurred to him.

“My skill?”

“You know, your special ability to make these figurines out of nothing.”

I glanced over at Perugia, who nodded in approval. “Show me. I am interested in this magic of yours.”

And so started my real-time demonstration of making a figurine. I did the same thing I always did: use earth magic to create the general shape, then chip away at each part until the overall figure came together. This time, I decided to create one around the size of a Nendoroid figurine. It made things easier and meant I could finish it quickly. The quality wouldn’t be the best, but at least the parts were simple to construct. I created a bird’s mask over the figure’s face. This would be a Sylvaril figure.

“This is Sylvaril? You’re quite dexterous.” Perugia’s eyes were fixed on me as I worked, closely observing each step. He seemed greatly interested. I wondered if he could actually see my mana. Or maybe he could just sense how I was manipulating it. He was a legendary hero, after all. “I never dreamed anyone would use earth magic in such a way.”

“If you have a request, I can make anything you want,” I offered.

“Very well. In that case, bring me one high-quality figurine you make, and I will buy it from you.”

Nice, now we had a regular customer. Considering we had no idea where Badigadi had disappeared off to, securing another business opportunity like this was important.

“In that case...” Ariel spoke up, joining the conversation. “We also have some splendid craftsmen back in the Asura Kingdom.” She went on with a spiel about how skilled their craftspeople were, and promised she would have a statue of Perugia installed once she took the throne.

The whole time she rambled, Perugia looked annoyed. When she was done, he spat, “Asura’s craftsmen only create works to satisfy the vanity of the nobility. There is nothing interesting about their art at all.”

“...What?” Ariel was struck speechless.

As if to hammer the nail further into the coffin, Perugia continued, “If you truly do become king, will you not have more important things to do than create a statue of me?”

“W-well, I...”

Perugius cut her off. “Or is misappropriating the peoples’ taxes to live in luxury your definition of being king?”

“N-no, not at all. My apologies. I spoke out of turn. Please, forget I said anything.” Ariel dropped her gaze, trying to backpedal. It was hard to believe this dejected person normally overflowed with charisma and confidence.

Still, the way Perugius coldly rebuffed her was uncalled for. Did he really hate her that much? Had what she said really got under his skin that badly?

“Wait, Ariel Anemoi Asura,” Perugius called out as she tried to slink away. His oppressive gaze bore into her. “What does being king mean to you? What does a true king possess?”

“Well...they’re wise, listen to their cabinet ministers, and don’t forget their position in society...”

“Wrong.” Perugius shook his head, not even letting her finish. “The Asuran king I knew was a true king, but he was nothing like you describe.”

“Which king?”

“The man who took the throne in the wake of Laplace’s War, my sworn friend, Gaunis Freean Asura.”

I had heard a bit about King Gaunis before. He was the last surviving member of the Asuran royal family after Laplace’s War. He became a great ruler who brought the country together after it was ravaged during the conflict. The fighting took a great toll on the Asuran lands, but his skills as a monarch kept the country from descending into civil war.

“I have heard that King Gaunis was a great ruler. I doubt I could ever follow in his footsteps.”

Perugius shook his head again. “He was not great. He was a coward who hated conflict and was always running away. He couldn’t study to save his life, possessed no skill in battle, and he was always sneaking out to some pub to ogle the women there. He had no ambition to take the throne, but he had the most important quality a ruler can have. That, I believe, is what made him a

true king.”

“What quality was that?”

“If you can bring me that answer yourself, then I will give you my support.”

Ah, so this is the trial he intends to give her. He’s testing Ariel, to see if she’s someone deserving of his assistance or not.

“The most important quality a king can have,” Ariel echoed, stroking her chin as she stared at the table. She was probably trying to remember the stories she had heard of King Gaunis.

Sounds like to me the guy was just a complete idiot. Or maybe he was a genius in disguise, similar to Oda Nobunaga?

“Rudeus.” Perugia turned to me. “What do you think?”

“I’m afraid I would have no idea how to answer the question, given I’m not royalty.”

“What a dull reply. You don’t have to contemplate the answer, just say whatever comes to mind.”

That’s still kind of a tall order.

A king, huh? What was a king supposed to be in the first place? I knew they appeared a lot in fantasy stories, but what did they actually *do*? They were someone at the top. A country’s ruler—like a prime minister, I knew that. To be honest, I didn’t have much of an interest in politics even in my previous life. All I did was look at how other people online reacted to politicians and followed their lead.

“Personally, I think I’d prefer a ruler who can put themselves in the shoes of the common folk, rather than someone who relies on their own abilities.”

“Aha.” Perugia exhaled, seeming impressed with my bland answer. “Ariel, this boy just gave me a much better reply than you.”

After a pause, she argued, “But a person cannot be king if they only ever think of the people.”

“True. It’s not as though Gaunis only ever thought about the people, either.

However, those around him did lend him their help, and he was able to suppress the potential for uprisings in Asura.”

“So you’re saying a king’s own abilities are meaningless?”

“Is that what you think? Is a country who makes an imbecile their ruler a good country in your eyes?”

Ariel’s expression contorted with sadness and frustration. What exactly was Perugia trying to get her to say? I had no idea. Well, not that I really needed to. I had no designs on any throne. Perhaps Perugia was actually trying to test Ariel’s determination and character. Maybe there wasn’t a “correct” answer.

Still, is a king so great that it’s worth going through all this trouble to become one?

“You should think long and hard about this, Ariel Anemoi Asura.” After a brief pause, Perugia said, “Now then, it is late. Why don’t we return to the fortress?”

With that, our tea party was over.

I would long remember the way Ariel looked as we made our way back inside, her shoulders slumped forward as she shuffled along with Luke close at her heels.

Chapter 10:

Turning Point (Part 4)

THE DAYS FLEW BY after that. Once Sylphie had sufficiently recovered, we returned to Sharia. The sun was setting by the time we arrived at the house. I felt strangely nostalgic standing in front of our estate, even though only a few days had passed since I saw it last.

“We’re home!”

“Yeah, yeah. Welcome home—hey wait, Big Brother?”

The moment we burst in through the front door, Aisha came scrambling into the front room. She looked utterly dumbfounded, which wasn’t surprising after the speech I gave about possibly being away from home for a long time.

“Are you done already? Did you save Miss Nanahoshi? Or...was it hopeless?” Aisha asked anxiously.

I reached over and ruffled her hair.

“Whoa, hey!” Aisha gasped, sounding like a bad actor reading a line from a script. She didn’t look the least bit displeased by my display of affection.

“What’s with you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing. Nanahoshi is fine now. I’ll explain in a minute. Is Roxy already home? What about Norn?”

“Norn is still at school. Miss Roxy is in her room, I think. As for my mo...” She paused and corrected herself. “Mom—Miss Lilia, I mean—is doing the laundry. Mother—Lady Zenith—is resting now.”

“All right, so Norn is still at school. Sorry to add more to your plate, but could you fetch Roxy?”

“Aye aye, cap’n!”

A few minutes later, Roxy came down the stairs. She must have been nodding off at her desk because her hair was a disheveled mess and there was a red

imprint on her cheek. "Welcome home, Rudy. How did it go?"

"I'm about to explain that. But before I do..." I slipped my hands under her arms and lifted her, wrapping her tightly in my embrace. We did promise that I would do this when I came home.

"Wah! Um..." Although initially caught off guard, Roxy gingerly looped her arms around me and returned the hug. "Welcome home."

"I'm glad to be back."

After that whirlwind adventure, I was finally home.

"And that's what happened."

I recounted everything to them; it was a lot. I didn't go into thorough detail, but I did include everything pertinent. I took particular time in relaying everything I learned in relation to Zenith's curse. We would need to keep a careful eye on her.

"I'll continue staying at the floating fortress for now, but I'll come home at least once every three days," I said.

Ariel and Sylphie were also going to stay at the fortress until their efforts came to fruition. Sylphie also intended to return home every few days. None of us would be able to attend school, but...well, as long as we showed up for homeroom, surely it would be fine. I hadn't taken any classes lately anyway.

"Very well, Lord Rudeus. I shall take proper care of the house and Zenith in your absence, so you need not worry," Lilia assured me. I had put quite the burden on her shoulders.

Anyway, that was the end of my report. Our family meeting was adjourned.

"Phew, I'm completely pooped," said Sylphie. "I think I'm going to rest. What about you, Rudy?"

"I'm going to hit the sack after taking a bath."

"Um...should I wait in bed for you?"

"Nah, don't worry about it today."

“All right.”

And with that, I left Sylphie to rest.

I realized I’d had nothing but cold baths for the past few days. I missed soaking in warm water. I headed straight for the bath and used my magic to warm the liquid in it. Manual Water Warming Robot Roombaus: Activate!

I really should rinse myself off before I hop in, but...oh, well.

I peeled off my clothes and slid into the bath.

“Phew.”

The steamy hot water enveloped me, and I could feel the fatigue drain from my body. I hadn’t fully realized how much these past ten days had taken out of me.

Still, ten days. It’s hard to believe it’s only been that long since we went to Perugia’s castle.

So much had happened in that short span of time. Nanahoshi fainted, then we went to the Demon Continent, met Kishirika, and royally pissed off Atofe...

Atofe sure was strong. I got the feeling I could never defeat her. It was foolish to even consider besting an opponent of her level. I was surprised my electricity magic had actually worked against her. Perhaps I had a chance as long as my opponent let their guard down...

Maybe it would be worth doing more research to hone my magic. At least so that even if I was surrounded by water, I wouldn’t get hit with the effects of my own spell. At the moment, I had no idea how I could avoid that.

What if I covered my body in rubber? Like Stretch Man from that kid’s TV show.

Atofe’s subordinate, Moore, was pretty tough too. No matter what spell I threw at him, he always seemed to have a counter. It was like he knew of all the magic that existed and how to defend against it. Up till now, the only other strong mage I knew was Roxy, but she was more of an expert in facing monsters. This was the first time I had ever seen someone who was an expert at fighting other human opponents.

Maybe as long as I had Disturb Magic and my prosthetic arm, I could find a way to deal with an enemy like that. There really wasn't a given strategy for facing strong opponents like him.

Regardless, if there were people that powerful all around the world, I really needed to work on getting stronger. I never thought I'd be matched against opponents like that, but I'd really been running into them every few years.

There was just one issue: how was I supposed to get stronger? I apparently wasn't able to use Battle Aura, so there was a limit to how much I could train myself physically. Still, it didn't matter if I was physically weak, as long as I could triumph over my opponent. In that case, maybe I was heading in the right direction by learning summoning magic from Perugius.

If I kept switching gears without deciding on a solid path, I would wind up being a lackluster jack of all trades. I knew that firsthand from my previous life. Although there was so much going on in this world and so many possibilities that it was actually beneficial to pick up a wide range of skills. I preferred this to how it was Japan, where you had to pick a single profession and stick to it your whole life.

Oh, yeah, I'd also like to learn how to draw teleportation circles. That way, if anything like this happens again, I can get away quickly.

The magic itself might be prohibited and I did think teleportation was quite terrifying, but fear wasn't going to help me learn anything. Knowledge is power, after all. Having a way to communicate long distance would also be nice. Ariel lent us her rings, but we didn't end up using them. Perhaps we could enhance them so they could send simple messages back and forth. While they probably wouldn't work everywhere in the world, they could at least be something like a pager.

Let's see, what else was there... I was pretty sure something else came to mind when I went to the Demon Continent.

"Ah, this always happens," I grumbled.

I was always forgetting things. I would come up with an idea, swear to myself I would do it later, and then come up with something else and completely forget the other plans I'd had in my head. I wanted to think I had a pretty good

memory, but it sure was failing me a lot.

Crap. If I keep going like this, I might end up making the same mistakes again and again.

I was lucky that things had turned out well this time, but I might not be so fortunate the next. If I couldn't remember what I needed to work on, I wouldn't be able to address my weaknesses before the next unforeseen incident.

Okay, but what should I do, then? Hmm...

After a long moment of thinking, it struck me.

That's it! I remember someone telling me you should write things down if you want to remember them.

"All right, guess I should start a diary then."

The idea sounded even better after I said it out loud. I could record the details of what happened, what I'd learned, what I needed to work on, and anything else I needed. Then I could come up with a solution, decide what to prioritize first, make a clear goal, and select my next objective. By doing so, I would no longer have to rely on luck and I could reflect upon any screw-ups so they didn't happen again. This would decrease my chances of repeating past mistakes. That would lead to less serious blunders in the long term as well. Admittedly, keeping a diary wasn't a guarantee that everything would go perfectly, but it wasn't a bad place to start.

Yeah, I think this will work great. Well then, let's get writing. Right now!

With that thought in mind, I leaped out of the bath.

"Although, they don't actually sell diaries here."

I toweled myself off before heading to my study. I sank down in my chair and extracted a sheaf of papers from the bottom of my shelf. While it might not be a bound diary, I could still write on them just the same. Recording things was the most important part.

But just writing on some loose-leaf papers is a bit depressing. Let's make a little project out of this.

Not that starting in style was the be-all and end-all, but it couldn't hurt to

dress up the appearance of my new diary.

I gathered up the loose papers and placed them on my desk. I used magic to punch holes through the edge. Then, I used my earth magic to create rings to insert through them. Next, I needed three boards and a hinge. I could throw them all together in book form, so they could open with my sheets of bound paper inside.

And with that, my binder-style diary was complete. How much do you think it cost me? Nothing, completely DIY! Okay, well, the paper *did* cost money.

Wonder if anyone here would buy a hole puncher if I made one for sale. It was worth writing down at least. If I didn't note all my ideas, I'd eventually forget about them.

So, how do you go about constructing a hole puncher? Uhh...

No. I had more important things to write down first.

"Hm, where should I start..."

How long had it been since I last kept a diary? When I was a shut-in in my previous life, I tried one of those text websites, but I didn't keep up with it for very long. I might go down that same path if I wasn't conscientious about this. Fortunately, this body of mine was pretty receptive to routines, so I would probably do it automatically as long as I made it a habit.

Okay, I should probably stop that. It sounds weird to talk about this body in the third person, as if it's not my own.

What I should have said was: I'm the type who does things diligently as long as I make them a habit, so it shouldn't be a problem.

Much better.

As I had that inward back and forth, I started scribbling down the events from the past ten days. I was yawning by the time I finished. Before I knew it, I was overcome with drowsiness.

The area around me was all white. There was nothing but an utter lack of color. I knew this place well. I had seen it when Perugius used his teleportation

magic to warp me through space.

But where exactly was I? I had never given it much thought before, but I started to wonder if this was an actual place somewhere in this world.

That aside, I wish I wouldn't return to this form every time I come here.

I was back in the body I had before I reincarnated—back to when I was a hopeless, overweight shut-in. I had no intention of avoiding the truth that this was once my life, but it still disgusted me. I didn't look like this while Perugius was transporting me.

“Heya.”

All of a sudden, he was there. His blank white face had a thin smile on it, a mosaic layered over him. In the instant I saw him, it was like the memory of what he looked like was wiped from my mind.

It was the Man God.

“Been a while.”

Yeah, sure brings back memories. Guess it's been two years, huh?

“Has it been that long?”

The last time I got your advice was before I headed off to the Begaritt Continent. So yeah, two years.

“That's not that long, though.”

When I was an adventurer, you didn't show your face once in three years. Now there's some nostalgia... I was quite the degenerate back then.

“Yeah. You seem to be doing comparatively well for yourself now.”

Guess so. I got married, and I'm getting along well with my family. Definitely enjoying my life way more this time around.

“And you got to know Perugius as well, I see.”

Perugius, huh? He sure is amazing. In my previous life, I would have never dreamed I'd someday meet someone like him. And he took a liking to me, too. You know, he said he'd buy a figure off me if I made a good one. I never got close to a level where I could sell my stuff before I reincarnated here.

“Atofe also took a liking to you.”

Uh, yeah, that one I’m much less happy about. Although I guess my training has paid off if she was that interested in me. I’ve worked on my physical strength and my magical skills. If Roxy had never taught me King-tier water magic, I would have been in some serious trouble this time. My Electric spell was pretty effective against Atofe and her guard.

“It sure was. That magic you used was incredible. I’m sure you could even use that against Orsted.”

Against Orsted?

“There isn’t much magic out there in the world that can ignore Battle Aura and paralyze a person’s body.”

That makes sense. I guess people here don’t have a way to defend against electric shocks. But still, this is Orsted we’re talking about. He’ll just use Disturb Magic to render my magic ineffective.

“Even if your power doesn’t outmatch your opponent, that doesn’t mean you can’t still claim victory.”

You have a point... Wait, no. Impossible. Me being able to use a bit of strange magic does not change the fact that Orsted would flatten me like a pancake. Besides, I have no interest in fighting him. I have nothing against the guy.

“Oh, really?”

Anyway, you really helped me back during the whole Begaritt ordeal. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have any regrets, but it wasn’t all bad. Although I didn’t end up following your advice.

“Well, that was your choice.”

Just out of curiosity, what would have happened if I didn’t go?

“If you didn’t go, your father would have found some way to save your mother, and he wouldn’t have died. On top of that, you would have had two beastfolk princesses to yourself and lived happily ever after.”

...What the hell? So you’re saying he only died because I went?

“That’s right. Because you were there, he was determined to show off in front of you, and that’s what screwed everything up.”

Okay, but still, that can’t...

“If you had left things alone, he would have gathered his comrades to save your mother. Roxy, too, of course.”

So...what? You’re saying everything I did was pointless? And hey, when I got to her, Roxy was almost at death’s door. I find it hard to believe she would have been fine without my involvement.

“She really would have been fine without you. She was fated to survive, after all.”

What do you mean by that? What is this fate crap? Explain yourself.

“Remember that merchant you saved? If you hadn’t been there, his delivery would have been greatly delayed. The day he arrived, a certain adventurer went walking around the marketplace and bought his merchandise—magic stones. However, if the merchant hadn’t arrived, that man would have bought something else.”

Such as what?

“Such as a map of the Teleportation Labyrinth.”

Oh, come on, why are they even selling something that conspicuously convenient?

“After failing to entice people to join him at the guild, Geese would have come up with a scheme to bolster their numbers so they could conquer the labyrinth. In the process, he’d sell a map of the Teleportation Labyrinth for cheap.”

Now I get it. You’re saying he’d sell the map he made. It’s true that there are few people who would want to go in with Paul and the others, but there might be some who would think they could navigate it themselves. So you’re saying the guy who bought the map would gather up his comrades, go into the labyrinth, and save Roxy?

“Precisely. He would run into your father there at the entrance, and they

would all go in together. As luck would have it, they would find Roxy, too.”

And you’re saying that because they would have more people with them, it would make it easier for them to get through the labyrinth, and they would be able to rescue my mother?

“Correct. Although it would have taken them much longer than it did you. About two years, to be precise. Since it’s been about that long since you went, it’d be right about now that they’d be getting her out of there.”

That’s kind of hard for me to believe. It all seems way too convenient.

“Maybe, but such is the way of fate.”

All right. I guess you have a point. They do say truth is stranger than fiction. I guess that means it would have been better if I hadn’t been there. Dammit, that’s depressing. Although if that happened, I guess I wouldn’t have been able to marry Roxy.

“True. She would have fallen for the man who rescued her instead. Although he would have turned her down.”

Well, it doesn’t seem so bad when you think of it that way. I do love Roxy, after all. Though it did result in Paul’s death. It makes me feel pretty conflicted to think I had to lose him so I could get married to Roxy. It’s not like I regret our marriage... Just that, if I had a similar relationship with Linia and Pursena, I imagine I would have been happy with that outcome, too. Not that I’m fine with being partners with just anyone, but if I had gone down that route, I probably wouldn’t have known any better—wouldn’t have known that I could have been with Roxy instead. Ah, dammit...

“It’s in the past now.”

Yeah, you’re right. Regrets won’t do me any good. I decided to go to Begaritt and that’s it. Right now, I am happy. The choice I made might have been a mistake, but that doesn’t change how things are now. I have regrets, but I don’t think it was all bad.

“You sure are optimistic.”

Anyway, what’s the reason for your visit today? Something else troubling

coming my way?

“No, nothing too big. It’s less advice and more like a favor.”

A favor? From you? Now that’s unusual. You’ve never asked me for anything before.

“Even I sometimes need to call in a favor.”

Hmm. Okay, then. Whatever it is, say it. Doesn’t seem like it would be bad to listen to what you have to say and follow your advice every now and then. I think I’ve been a little too distrusting of you.

“Oh, really? It pleases me to hear you say that.”

Well, you have gone to great lengths to help me. In fact, I feel bad for doubting you so much before. I just thought you were getting your kicks from watching me suffer, that’s why I acted that way.

“You wound me. Given my name, you should realize I’m a god, after all. True, I do get bored and want to watch when something entertaining is going down, but I’m not in the habit of leading people astray just to take pleasure from their misery.”

Yeah, I thought so. There aren’t many people like that.

“Agreed.”

So? What is it you want me to do?

“Nothing too important. I just want you to go down to your basement when you wake up. Check and make sure nothing odd is down there. If you don’t see anything, then don’t worry about it.”

Anything odd? Why would... Nah, never mind. I got it. I won’t question you this time, I’ll just do it.

“Hehe, all right, then. You have my thanks.”

As my consciousness began to fade out, a sickening smile split across the Man God’s face.

My eyes cracked open. A candle flickered at the edge of my vision. I glanced

through the skylight and saw the moon in the sky. There were no other sounds. The house was silent. I had fallen asleep in the midst of writing my diary. A bit of drool had dribbled down my chin and onto the half-written page.

Guess I'll be rewriting this.

I ripped the page out and left it on the corner of my desk. I'd copy what I had written on a new sheet later.

Wonder how long I was asleep for. My body feels so sluggish, it's like I've been out for days.

As I got up, something fell from my shoulders—a blanket. Sylphie or Roxy must have draped it over me. Whoever it was, I appreciated the gesture.

“All right, then...”

I still remembered the contents of my dream. The Man God had told me to go check out the basement.

Kinda weird advice.

Regardless, I felt there was nothing wrong with going along with it. He had never steered me wrong in the past, so I was compelled to fulfill his wishes occasionally. It would benefit both of us. Plus, the Man God must be tired of me mouthing off every time he tried to give me advice. Even if our relationship was the give-and-take sort, it would behoove me to get along with him in case I ever needed his help.

As I made to head for the basement, I let out a huge sneeze. “Achoo! Phew, sure is cold...”

The spring was still far off and snow continued to blanket the ground, so it was chilly. I shouldn't have let myself doze off here. I needed to hurry up and get to bed so I could cuddle under a warm blanket.

I grabbed my robe off a hook on the wall, where it had been hanging, and pulled it over my arms.

Wonder what time it is right now.

It had to be around midnight, considering I didn't hear any other sounds in the house. If I sneaked into either Roxy or Sylphie's bedroom and slid under the

covers with them, they would probably cry out in surprise. I didn't mind if we didn't have sex; I just wanted some warmth. In fact, I just felt really lonely right now. It was probably thanks to the Man God. I should never have asked him what would have happened if I hadn't gone to Begaritt.

No, I'm the one who asked. It's my fault. And if all of the blame lies with me, I should just sleep alone.

I was preoccupied with those thoughts as I nudged the door open.

"Hm?"

I suddenly sensed a presence behind me and whipped around. All I saw was the empty chair I'd left behind. No one was there.

Of course not.

"Must have been my imagination."

The only things in the room were a desk, a chair, and a bookshelf. There was nowhere for anyone to hide. There was a window, but it wasn't large enough for someone to sneak in and out of. The only entrance was the door I was standing in front of. The room was small enough that one candle was enough to illuminate every nook and cranny. The only person who could possibly be in here was me.

Then why did I think someone else was here, even though it's practically impossible?

Despite my skepticism, I continued to sense a presence in the room. It was odd. Maybe there was a bug under my bookshelf or something?

"...?"

Something about it was off-putting. My heart beat erratically. Was it anxiety? What was it I was feeling anxious about?

"Well, whatever. I'll just hurry to the basement and take a look..." I pulled the door open the rest of the way and started out. And then I instantly spun back around and exclaimed, "Aha, now I've got you!"

There was no logic to my actions; I'd just done it on a whim. I was only trying to reassure myself that no one was there. Yet—lo and behold, someone was

there.

“Huh...?”

A man in a tattered old robe sat in my chair—the only chair in the room. He was aged, wrinkles lining his face, hair white as snow. The beginnings of a beard covered his chin, giving the impression that he didn’t invest much in his appearance. He had the air of a seasoned veteran, but there was something rough and unrefined about him, like he had come out of a long, long battle. The light in his eyes was sharp, and the color of his right and left pupil differed from one another.

His lips trembled in surprise. “So...I succeeded?” He glanced around, eyes narrowing as his expression filled with emotion. However, he then looked down at his hand, touched his stomach, and flinched. His smile turned self-deprecating. “Nah, this is a failure. Guess there was no hope of me succeeding...”

I felt like I had seen him somewhere before, but I had no recollection of him. There was something familiar, though, as if he resembled someone. Who could it be? Paul, maybe? No, not him. Sauros then? But he didn’t exude the same level of boldness as Sauros. This old man seemed much more timid.



“Wh-who are you? Um, are you the Man God perhaps?”

The moment I said that name, his eyes turned toward me and went wide.

I recognized that reaction. Orsted had the same overexaggerated response when I said that name. They were the same. Yet this man looked nothing like Orsted.

“No.” He slowly shook his head, staring straight into my eyes. There was strength in his gaze. He refused to look away. It was like I was being sucked in, almost like I was staring into a mirror.

The old man gazed at the door behind me and frowned. He pointed a gnarled, bony finger at it, and the door slammed shut. I jumped at the sound it made.

How did he do that?

Confused, I turned toward him. There was a glint in his eyes as he glared back at me.

“Don’t go down to the basement. You’re being deceived by the Man God.”

“What?” Deceived? What was he talking about? I didn’t understand. “Hold on a second here. Who the heck are you? And how did you get in here?”

“I am...” He opened his mouth to speak but suddenly closed it. After a moment of contemplation, he finally said: “I am _____.”

That name gave me a shock the likes of which I had never felt before. I was the only person in this world who knew that name. It was one I would take to the grave without ever sharing it with anything else, one I wanted to forget, one that shouldn’t exist in this world.

My name from my previous life.

“I came from the future,” he said.

Chapter 11:

An End and a Beginning

THE OLD MAN CAME from the future. That was what he said. Honestly, I didn't understand what he meant. True, he did kind of look like me.

"The future...so you're me from the future?"

"That's right. I am you, about 50 years from now."

He sure didn't beat around the bush, but it was all so sudden. I didn't know if I should believe him or not. On the other hand, he *did* know my name. I had never mentioned it to anyone and I never would. Maybe there was a way to use magic to read a person's mind.

Having said that, I *did* reincarnate into this world with all my memories intact. It wasn't that far-fetched to think time travel might exist too. I had no way of distinguishing whether he was telling the truth or not.

"Sorry, but I don't have time to explain the ins and outs of time travel magic to you," he said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. I know it sounds like a phrase straight out of a Hollywood film, but I really don't have much time. You need to listen."

He made that Hollywood reference without missing a beat. That meant he *had* to have some connection to my previous life. Maybe he really was me from the future.

There was a glint in his eyes and a darkness lurking within. Frankly, he looked like someone who killed people daily. There was such a coldness to his gaze, as if he cared very little about other people's lives. Was this the person I was destined to become in the future? It couldn't be. It was too hard to believe. Yet the expression on his face was earnest.

Okay, let's just assume that he is me 50 years from now and at least listen to what he has to say.

“There is nothing in the basement,” he blurted. “At least, I went down there and thought there was nothing. I felt at ease in the following days because the Man God said there was nothing to worry about if I didn’t find anything.” The old man’s face contorted in disgust. “But I was wrong, and I can tell you why now.”

He tapped a finger—his left index finger—against his forehead, as if recalling the incident.

Wait, what? Is that a regular hand?

“Listen up. I think there’s probably a rat down in the basement. A sick one. It probably has purple teeth, almost like a magic stone. I have no idea where it came from or when it got down there. Most likely, it sneaked into my luggage while I was in Perugius’s floating fortress. It doesn’t really matter where it came from, though.”

The old man opened his hand and smacked his fist against it. “You’ll startle the rat when you go down there, and it’ll run to the kitchen. There, it’ll rummage through the leftover food you’ve got sitting out. Aisha will find it dead there the next day and dispose of it.”

I remained silent and simply listened.

“Aisha will get rid of the leftovers by feeding them to a stray cat.”

His left hand isn’t a prosthetic. Is this guy really me after all? Or did he find some way to restore his lost arm in the intervening 50 years?

“However, before then, Roxy will get peckish and come downstairs to grab a little bite of those leftovers. As a result, she’ll contract the illness the rat carried.”

“What? Roxy will get sick?” The mention of her name brought my focus back to the conversation.

“Petrification Syndrome.”

I felt like I had heard that name before. *That’s right. It’s supposed to be an illness that one can only cure with God-tier detoxification magic.* It was an incurable disease that would slowly turn the infected into magic stone. But

where exactly did I hear of it?

“We didn’t realize at first. After all, it’s exceedingly rare for someone to be infected with Petrification Syndrome. The pathogens can only take refuge within a life budding inside another person.”

“Wait, do you mean...”

“Yes, an unborn child. The disease only affects pregnant women. I was shocked when I discovered that later.”

“What? B-but Roxy isn’t...”

“She *is* pregnant,” he said. “But that’s not surprising. The two of you have had sex, it’s only natural.”

Wait, Roxy is pregnant?

Wow. It was extremely joyous news, and yet, it was being delivered in the grimmest way possible.

“For some reason, some rats are resistant to the disease and act as carriers of Petrification Syndrome. You’ll recognize them at a glance. Their teeth have turned into purple crystals. They transfer pathogens to anything they bite into. It can only be orally transmitted, and the pathogens don’t survive for very long after leaving their host. It takes half a day at most before they die out. Plus, it’s not very contagious since only pregnant women are affected.”

“...”

“The pathogens take up residence inside the fetus and transform it, thereby turning the mother’s body into stone.”

And Roxy was going to come down with this disease?

“If you carelessly go down to the basement and drive that rodent out, Aisha will complain to you the following day that she found strange rat remains in the house. Two weeks later, you’ll hear about a cat who was infected by Petrification Syndrome. Roxy will come down with a fever shortly after.”

I hesitated before finally asking, “And what will happen to her?”

“She will die.”

His reply was so blunt and to the point that it left me speechless.

“Roxy will slowly lose her mobility, until she’s confined to a bed. Her feet will begin to turn to stone, and it’s then you’ll realize she has Petrification Syndrome.”

“And she never got better during your time? Didn’t you try to cure her?”

Sadness washed over his face as his eyes dropped to the floor. “I was so desperate to help her, I even went to the Holy Country of Millis. I learned the incantation necessary to cure her, but so much happened along the way and it took me too much time. When I finally got back, it was too late. Her body was already halfway gone, and she was dead.”

“No, that can’t be...”

He immediately lifted his head, that fierce glint back in his eyes as he stared me down. “The incident will be linked to something that happens 30 years from now. It’s all because of what the Man God says. Don’t be misled by him. You have memories of your previous life, so you should understand. He is the root of all evil in this world. The final boss.”

“But why is he after Roxy?”

“I still don’t know the answer to that. However, I do know that he is moving with some objective in mind. The last thing he said to me was this: ‘Thanks to you being such an idiot, everything went exactly as I planned.’” He clenched his teeth. “Dammit.”

The Man God actually said that? Still, hmm...

“As for what his goal is, maybe Orsted or Laplace might know. I didn’t get a chance to meet them these 50 years. There’s a high chance you won’t be able to either, even if you look.”

“Even Nanahoshi didn’t have a clue where to find him?”

At the mention of her name, his face sank. Maybe she really didn’t know.

“I never asked her, but maybe you could give it a try. Even if she doesn’t know exactly where he is, she is intelligent enough to think of all kinds of contingencies, so she may be able to come up with something.”

“What ended up happening to Nanahoshi?”

His lips thinned, and he didn't answer. The sad look on his face said all I needed to know already, but after a pause, he finally replied, “At the very, very end, she failed. I messed up trying to comfort her, and then...”

So she never managed to make it home? Then she must have fallen into despair and taken her own life.

“Okay. I don't need to hear any more.”

“Yeah. I don't want to talk about it either.” He lifted his chin, trying to regain his composure. “There is something else, and it's important. You'll learn about this 10 years from now, but the Man God isn't actually called that here.”

“What do you mean?”

“He's a god of the humans—in other words, the God of Men. Everyone who's heard of him knows him that way—as ‘the God of Men.’ Only those who have actually met know his name, the ‘Man God.’ Why he's chosen to refer to himself that way is beyond me. I assume it's his way of messing with people.”

That made sense. So that was why some people (Orsted) had such an exaggerated reaction to the name. The only people who knew it were those who had met him and been deceived by him.

“On the surface, he only seemed to say things that benefited me.” The old man clenched his hand again. Hatred burned like a raging fire in his eyes. Intense bloodlust radiated off, and yet for some reason, I didn't find it terrifying. “He hasn't told you a lie yet, up until this point. Not as far as I—or you, rather—can tell.”

His fist began to shake. Something sparked inside of it, crackling like electricity.

“But it was all for one purpose: to make someone as guarded as you let your defenses down so that you would obey him without question.”

Although I stared in mute amazement at the sparks shooting from his hand, I also steeled myself in case he tried anything.

“Don't be fooled! You've read manga, haven't you? You know that the people

who talk about trust the most are the ones who always tell lies.”

“Yeah, I know that, but...”

He spat back, “No, you know nothing. After you lose Roxy, you’ll lose Sylphie next. You’ll be so broken in the wake of Roxy’s death that you won’t even think about her for a while. Hurt by this, she’ll fall into depression. The Man God will take that opportunity to manipulate Luke.”

“Luke? Seriously?”

“Yes. Afterward, you’ll hear about it from the girl who was dating him at the time. She’ll say, ‘He suddenly woke up one morning in a panic, claiming to have heard the word of God.’”

“And...what happens after that?”

“Luke counsels Ariel to make haste to Asura. Sylphie abandons you to go with them. After having failed to garner Perugius’s support, Ariel is at a disadvantage. She hedges her slim chance at victory on starting a civil war. But she is defeated, and Sylphie dies in battle.”

Sylphie...dies?

“You’re going to lose them both.” The man shook his head, grinding his teeth together. “I can still hear the Man God’s voice when he revealed all of his trickery to me. That high-pitched laughter...the way his hand felt as he clapped me on the shoulder and told me, ‘Nice work.’ Dammit... Fuck!”

He slammed his fists on my desk. Electricity sparked around him, flashing bright as the midday sun. The light vanished in an instant, but the burn marks on my desk remained. Having finally regained his composure, the old man let out a steady breath.

“I’ll say it again: Do not trust him. You will regret it.” After he finished speaking, the old man clutched at his stomach. His complexion was worsening as I watched. “I don’t have much time left. But I guess even having said all this, you probably don’t know what to do now.” His face was deathly pale. Dark circles were appearing beneath his eyes.

The old man sucked in a breath, struggling to exhale. He almost looked like he

was on death's door. Was he sick with something?

"First, let's see...yes, Eris."

Hearing that made me frown.

"I want you to write her a letter as soon as you can. Tell her you may have cheated on her a little, but you still love her."

"No, I don't," I quipped. "She's the whole reason I had ED before."

"Forgive her for that. You're a man, right? You should be able to do that much."

I scowled.

He let out a self-mocking laugh. "Well, I couldn't forgive her. The two of us didn't get along so great for a couple of years."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She nearly killed me countless times. She would follow me wherever I went, and each time she found me, she would go on an all-out attack. Well, still, she did pull her punches. She was perfectly capable of killing if she truly desired it. But she never targeted me when I was at my weakest. In fact, when I was in trouble, she would lend her help from the shadows. Almost like Vegeta from the Dragon Ball series."

Vegeta, seriously...

"Anyway, she's not like the prince of the vegetable kingdom. She just wants to be with you. She's always loved you. Because of those feelings, she's always poured maximum effort into everything she does. However, she is also terrible with words and doesn't know how to express herself, so all she can do is talk with her fists."

That's all well and good, but I already have two wives and a kid. Sure, I may have loved Eris at one point, but that's...all in the past now. It's a past I still need to settle maybe, but it's over now.

"I already have Sylphie and Roxy."

"No problem. Sylphie is pretty open-minded. As for Roxy, she doesn't even

think she's worthy of you, so she'll forgive you for it. Eris will be fine too, if you explain things beforehand. Besides, you really do still love her, don't you? Oh, but I should warn you: Expect a punch from Eris. That's just the type of woman she is."

"I get what you're saying, but..."

"You get to surround yourself with three women who love you. Sounds wonderful. What's wrong with that? Don't tell me you're not man enough."

"Don't talk about it so flippantly, as if it has nothing to do with you."

"I have no one left," he said. "I'm telling you this because you *are* me."

His words carried a strange weight to them, but...

"I still have a responsibility to look after Roxy and Sylphie."

"If you wanna talk about responsibility, you owe Eris some, too. She's been doing her utmost for you this entire time. She's just crap at expressing herself so you haven't realized it, but she's never stopped trying for your sake. If you think you owe responsibility to other people, then what about her and all the effort she's put in? Ghislaine will hit you with those words...as you stand in front of Eris's corpse."

Eris's...corpse?

"So Eris dies too...?"

"Yeah. Protecting me. Think it was...when I was challenging Atofe again. That demon king was more fearsome than I expected. I let my guard down." He spoke as if they were distant memories, his lips curving into a frown.

Just how strong am I in the future if I can afford to let my guard down against someone like Atofe? Is this guy really me? It's starting to feel even more suspicious.

"You have to send that letter. Understand? If you don't want the same regrets, do it. It might not be too late if you start now."

"Uh, okay. I guess if you feel that strongly, I can send it. But where to?"

"The Sword Sanctum. You've probably realized that's where she is by now."

The Sword Sanctum wasn't all that far from Sharia. He was right: I did have a feeling she might be training there.

"All right."

"Don't write anything that might push her away," he warned. "If she falls into despair, it'll be the death of you."

"I know."

I knew exactly what kind of person Eris was. Or at least, I used to know. If what he was saying was true, then she never intended to abandon me. I simply didn't realize that this entire time. Now that I considered what he was saying, she was pretty awful with words. It wasn't surprising that her feelings didn't get through in that letter she left me. And that was the reason the two of us had this misunderstanding and I lost my way.

"...Phew." The old man choked out a breath, then flinched with a realization and lifted his chin. "Also, I forgot to say one important thing: don't treat the Man God as your enemy."

"What? But you said he's been deceiving me."

"Yes, but he's not someone you can defeat. I certainly wasn't able to. I could never reach him." His voice was thick with anguish.

By saying he couldn't reach him, does he mean physically? So that space where the Man God resides—it really is somewhere here in this world?

"When I realized that, my entire body quaked. I knew I would never be able to get vengeance for Roxy or Sylphie. I poured everything I had into beating him, but I couldn't even get to him. I can manipulate electricity and gravity, but the Man God would never come anywhere close enough for me to use my magic against him."

The man pointed to the pot of ink on my table. It lifted into the air for a moment before falling back to my desk with a clatter, scattering a few stray ink droplets.

"I can make things levitate. I can send messages to people from a distance. I can even regrow an arm. More than that, I managed to leap through time and

return to the past.” He paused. “Although this magic was actually a failure.”

A failure? What part of this was a failure? He was here right now, right in front of me, wasn't he?

“I am sure you have begun to realize it, but the magic in this world is all-powerful. Once you understand that, you can accomplish just about anything. Though it will take time, research, and practice to accomplish.”

As he spoke, he lifted his left hand. The way he flexed it made it seem like he was bragging, but his face had gone past the point of deathly pale and was now completely white. The circles beneath his eyes were darkening, and his lips were turning blue.

“But none of this power has any meaning. It was all too late. By the time I got strong enough, the people I wanted to protect were all gone.”

There was still a glint in his eyes, but the power had already fled them. His breathing was erratic and raspy.

“Do you understand what I've said? I'll tell you one more time: I hate the Man God, but I also can't triumph against him. There is no way to beat him. I could not find a way to reach him by myself. The things I required to get to him didn't exist while I was alive. So don't try to fight him. I have no idea what he's after, but even if you have to act like his toady, do it. Don't oppose him. Let him do as he likes. Then, while all the people you love are still alive...”

All the strength fled his hand and it fell limp. He lifted his chin, his gaze wandering to the ceiling.

“There are three things you have to do: consult Nanahoshi, write Eris a letter, and doubt the Man God without opposing him. That's all.”

I didn't respond to him. It was all so sudden that I didn't have anything to say. One thing was clear: he was desperate to try to tell me something.

“C-can't you give me any more concrete advice than that?” I asked.

“Advice, huh? Ah, this brings back memories. That's right. I used to be a slacker when I was your age... Well, you know, I would love to give you more details and tell you as much as I can...but my time is up.”

“You keep saying that. That you’re out of time, that your time is up. What’s with that? Are you in a hurry to catch a midnight anime special or something?”

“No. I mean it’s over. And while we’re on the topic, don’t rely on others. If you remember when you first came to this world, you didn’t rely on anyone.” He gazed at me with the same emotion in his eyes as if he were looking at his grandchild.

Now that he mentions it, I have been leaning on other people a lot recently.

“Also, with me coming here, your future should have already changed. The things I say now might not come to pass anymore. But me traveling back to the past like this won’t change the history I lived through...”

In the next instant, the focus faded from his eyes. Both of his arms hung limp and he threw his chin up, painfully gasping for air.

“Guh... You will...lead a life that’s...different from mine... You’ll succeed...and fail...just like you always have. You’ll reflect...on your mistakes...and regret them too...”

The old man stirred, and the movement caused him to fall out of the chair.

“Hey, are you okay?!” I rushed to his side and pulled him into my arms, only to shudder in horror. As muscular and tough as he looked on the outside, he was unbelievably light. He probably didn’t even weigh 40 kilograms.

What the heck? What’s wrong with his body?

“Don’t for a second...believe that me coming from the future...means you can rectify your mistakes the same way. This magic was a mistake... There’s no such thing...as being able to redo your life.”

His lifeless eyes swam from side to side as he slipped a trembling hand inside his robe. “I used this diary as a guide...for what date to return to...and I brought it with me. I’ve written...all my experiences in it. Please...do what you can...to make sure you don’t regret... Don’t let that bastard laugh at you...like he did to me...”

Tears welled up in those hardened eyes as he fished a thick file from his ratty robe. The thing was pretty worn from years of use, but it looked familiar. It was

the same folder I'd made for myself just moments before.

As I took it from him, the man's hand slipped and struck the floor. That wasn't what caught my attention, however. When he pulled out his diary, I caught a glimpse at the inside of his robe. Where there should have been a stomach, there was nothing.

"What is that? What's wrong with your body?"

"Heh, my magic was...incomplete. I wasn't able to bring my entire body... when I traveled back in time."

"What? B-but you just said you could even regrow your arm."

"I don't have any mana left. Sorry... If only Cliff were still alive, then maybe this would have gone smoother... Just a little bit longer... I have some more info..."

"Sorry. You've already done enough. You don't have to say any more."

"I don't want you...to have regrets...or for things to go the way the Man God wanted... Why, at a time like this... When there's so much I still need to say... But I came all the way back here, if I could at least have a glimpse of..."

The man's eyes were no longer looking at me—or anything else, for that matter. What he was saying made no sense. It was just a stream of vague babble now. A black shadow spread beneath his eyes, as if the shadow of death was hanging over him.

So this is what a person looks like before they die... No, as they're dying.

"Ah."

For an instant, his eyes regained focus. They were looking at something over my shoulder. The old man lifted a trembling hand past me.

"Aah, Sylphie, Roxy... Dammit, you're both as adorable as ever..."

A single tear spilled down his cheek as the light disappeared from his eyes completely. All the strength left his body, and his neck fell limp.

He was dead.

I glanced over my shoulder, but the door was still shut tight. The man had

made quite a ruckus, so I wondered if someone had woken up and rushed down to see what all the fuss was. The old man must have just been hallucinating as he took his final breaths.

No sooner had I thought that than thundering footsteps came down the stairs.

“!”

I hurriedly exited the room, just in time to see Roxy and Sylphie coming to investigate, each with a candle and weapon in hand.

“Rudy, I heard voices and some noise. Is someone here?”

“Is it a thief, perhaps?”

The two of them looked relieved the moment they saw me, but they still had their guards up.

Should I tell them about the old man? I hesitated. *No, I shouldn't.*

“No, sorry,” I said finally. “It was just me being half-asleep. I had a weird dream and used some magic. That’s what caused all the noise, I think. My bad.”

“It was just magic you used in your sleep?” Sylphie asked in disbelief. “But I thought I heard someone shouting. Are you okay? Um, if you’re having a hard time, should we sleep in the same room? You know, my grandmother did say that when one is in pain, feeling the warmth of another human is the best remedy.”

“No, I’m good. Pretty sure I’d try something dirty if I slept with you. And you’re not quite back to full health yet, are you?”

As I refused Sylphie’s tempting offer, Roxy pulled a face. “If it’s really that bad, you can sleep with me. Although, I have begun to suspect I might be... At any rate, if you could keep it to just some touching...”

“Nah, I’m really okay today.”

Although Roxy hadn’t finished what she was saying, her words triggered memories of what the old man mentioned. He said she was pregnant. Judging by the way she spoke, she thought as much, too.

“It’s really, truly all right,” I assured them. “You two go back to bed. I’ll get to sleep after I tidy up my office.”

Sylphie nodded slowly. “Well, if you’re sure, okay. But if you need one of us, feel free to say, okay?”

“We are husband and wife after all, so please don’t hesitate. Anyway, good night.”

The two of them still looked deeply concerned as they headed back up to the second floor. I watched them leave before turning back to my study.

First, I needed to confirm the veracity of what the old man told me. I still had no idea who he really was—whether he was actually me from the future or someone else entirely. Considering he risked his own life to get here and warn me, what he said seemed believable. The bigger problem was it was so sudden that it was hard to digest.

“...”

There was one thought that wouldn’t leave my head, though.

I don’t want to lose those two.

And I didn’t want to die with regrets like that old man did, either.

I followed the two girls to their rooms to make sure they were safe, and I expressly forbade them from coming out again tonight. I went to every room on the second floor and locked them from the outside to keep everyone from leaving. After that, I descended the stairs and swept the first floor to make sure no one was around. Once I was sure the coast was clear, I went back to my study to strip the old man.

“...Wha!”

He didn’t have a stomach. Beneath his rib cage was an open hole where all you could see was bone and skin. He had almost no intestines. That spot aside, the rest of his body was pretty incredible. It was hard to believe these were the muscles of someone in their late sixties. He was covered in battle scars. There was a particularly unique one on his chest, as if his skin had been welded back

together there. Even his freckles were in the exact same places as mine.

As far as I could see, he was exactly like me. The only thing that set us apart was that he had a fully functioning left hand. He did mention he'd regrown it himself.

He must have been pretty skilled at healing magic to manage that.

Other than the diary, he wasn't really carrying anything else. He didn't have any accessories or even a staff. All he wore under his robe was a shirt, underwear, and pants. There was nothing in any of his pockets, either.

Pretty sure if Sylphie and Roxy died, I'd be carrying around some kind of keepsake.

On the other hand, if 50 years had passed, perhaps he'd been through a lot and lost those mementos.

After setting his articles aside, I wrapped the old man's body in the blanket that had been lying nearby. I carried him out through the kitchen, heading for the back door.

I paused as I spotted some leftovers from last night on the counter. They were left piled on a plate. These were the ones he claimed that rats would nibble at. It was probably best to get rid of them.

I slipped through our rear garden and carried the old man's body to a nearby vacant lot. There, I dug a grave, set him inside, and set fire to it. My magic was powerful enough to turn him to ash and bones within seconds. The stench of burned flesh hung thick in the air. It was all the more nauseating knowing it was coming from my charred corpse.

"Urgh..."

The thought made my stomach lurch. I raced to the edge of the lot and vomited.

Once I finished cremating him, I used my magic to conjure a pot and put his bones inside. I would bury him in the same spot where I put Paul. If he really was my future self, that was the spot where he'd be happiest.

I refilled the hole after I finished collecting his bones. Next, I returned to the

house, slipping through the back door before heading straight to my study. I left the old man's remains beside his clothes and grabbed my staff.

My destination this time was the basement. I'd already activated my demon eye.

The old man had told me not to go. He warned that the rat would run out, nibble at our leftovers, and that the disease it carried would then be transferred to Roxy. But I had to be sure. I had to know if that rat was really here or not. If I didn't see for myself, I wouldn't be able to believe what he said. Plus, if he was right, I couldn't leave that rodent unchecked.

"..."

The stairs leading to the basement were dark. I pulled out a Lamplight Spirit scroll to illuminate the area. After descending, I took a deep breath and placed my hand on the door.

"...Hm?"

Dust had collected in a corner of the stairwell. I spotted what I was looking for—tracks. Rat footprints, to be precise. I could also see where its tail had dragged behind it. These footprints only went one way: into the basement. There were no tracks to show it had left.

I couldn't bring myself to open the door. Instead, I used magic to make a hole in the door about the size of my fist. Then, I poured mana into my staff and pushed it through the opening. I pictured ice in my mind, enough to fill the entire room. Inside were magic items and Aisha's fertilizer that she used in the garden, but all those things were inconsequential.

"Frost Nova," I whispered. In an instant, ice rippled through the room. Just to be on the safe side, I repeated the spell. "Frost...Nova."

A chill spread from my staff, enveloping every nook and cranny of the basement. I sent my Lamplight Spirit through the hole and looked in to make sure the entire room was iced over. Finally, I opened the frozen door, stepped inside, and immediately closed it behind me.

"..."

I found the rat instantly. It was dead, frozen solid as it stood near the hidden door that led to my personal shrine. The creature's mouth was half open, purple teeth peeking out. They really did look like magic stones.

I did a thorough sweep of the area to make sure a second one hadn't sneaked in. Once I was certain it was safe, I created a box with earth magic, used two sticks to safely pick up the rat's corpse, and placed it inside. Then I sealed it so no one would inadvertently open it.

Would it be best to burn this thing and be rid of it? Or maybe I should send it to the Magicians' Guild for study?

The latter seemed the best option. If I reported what I'd heard from the old man about Petrification Syndrome when I handed the rat's body over to the guild, they could check the veracity of his claims. Although I had no idea whether they could extract the pathogen from a frozen corpse.

I locked the basement door behind me and sealed the hole I'd made. The old man said the disease didn't have airborne transmission and wasn't very contagious, but it was better safe than sorry.

I returned to my study. I was fully awake after all of that, so I wouldn't be getting shuteye any time soon.

So what should I do first? Or rather, what is it that I can do right now?

Should I read this weathered diary the old man had brought with him? Maybe it could warn me about future events. Although, he also said that history had already changed. In sci-fi terms, I was already in an alternate timeline—one created by my future self traveling back in time. Even if I read everything contained within this journal and prepared for it, it was likely that many of the things he'd faced wouldn't come to pass.

My eyes fixed upon my ink bottle and the black stain it had left on my desk. Burn marks also remained from where the old man had concentrated mana into his fists and slammed them down. Seeing it triggered the memory of what he'd told me: *"There are three things you have to do."* There was one thing in his list I could do right now.

I sat down, took out a piece of paper, and grabbed my pen.

“ ... ”

First, I wrote Eris a letter. She was my first partner in bed and someone I had once loved before she disappeared out of nowhere. I still had complex feelings about her.

What should I even write? I wondered as I set my pen to the paper.

Extra Chapter:

The Birth of a New Sword King

THREE SWORD SAINTS were gathered in the Sword Sanctum's Ephemeral Hall, each one of them on one knee. There was Nina Falion, Gino Britz, and Eris Greyrat. Standing before them was the Sword God, Gall Falion.

He stood with at ease as he glared down at his pupils, who all had their hands over the swords at their hips. Slowly, he said, "Your swordplay has already surpassed the level of sword saint."

Gino's shoulders twitched.

"It's almost time to recognize the first sword king since Ghislaine."

Gino's eyes went wide. He clenched his fist, trembling. An indescribable emotion swept over him. He wanted to jump up and shout, but he tamped down on the urge. He had yet to identify what this sensation was. It wasn't a bad one, that much he knew.

The Sword God, however, wasn't finished.

"Before we do that, I have a question."

Everyone waited silently.

"What do you three think separates a sword saint, a sword king, and a sword emperor?"

"Strength?" Nina blurted.

It was clear from their collective expressions that they couldn't fathom any other answer. Yet at the same time, they also knew it wasn't that simple—the Sword God wanted to know what came *after* that strength. What *else* separated them?

"Nina. What did your teacher tell you to do before acquiring the Sword of Light?"

Nina's teacher wasn't Gall Falion. The person who had mentored her was

Gino's father, Timothy Britz. She reflected on the man's teachings and replied, "He said, 'Since you're right-handed, train your left hand.' He told me I wouldn't be able to release the Sword of Light until I could perfectly wield a sword in my left hand."

"That's right. Your non-dominant hand is important for using the Sword of Light. Do you understand why?"

"If you tense your dominant hand, it will cause the blade to shift to the side."

"Yes. You need to invest all of your Battle Aura into the attack and cut in a straight line. It's simple, but that is the innermost secret of the Sword of Light technique."

Swordsmanship was all about cutting down a moving target. If you charged straight in and used a frontal attack, anyone could dodge it easily. That was why sword-wielders attacked from below, the side, or diagonally—using unpredictable moves to catch their enemy off guard.

However, the first Sword God was different. He didn't need those tricks. Instead, he cut down everything by moving faster than his opponent could react.

"This secret is embedded in the Sword God style's history." Gall struck his nails against the hilt of his sword. "Each generation of Sword God has worked to slowly unravel the inexplicable techniques the first Sword God cultivated. That is what led us to the current form of the Sword God style. Once you understand the innermost secrets of the Sword of Light, the principle behind it, and how to practice using it, it's very simple. Anyone with a little talent can easily learn to wield it. That led to the age of the Sword God style being considered the strongest. We can hold our heads up proudly thanks to the first Sword God and his predecessors who unlocked the secrets of his techniques."

Again, his fingers drummed against the hilt of his sword.

"The Sword of Light is the Sword God style's best technique. Practitioners of other styles would call it our secret technique. However, there are some who grasp the essence of it better than others. Sword saints, sword kings, sword emperors, and the Sword God... Kinda strange, really. We're all doin' the same thing, but some of us are stronger and some of us are weaker."

Gall turned his gaze to Gino. “What do you think makes the difference, Gino? Answer me.”

Gino lifted his chin, face pulled into a nervous expression. He had no idea what the answer was, but he felt pressured to answer quickly. “Th-the ability to think logically, to move skillfully...uh, body strength...or m-maybe weapon quality...?”

“Weapon quality?! How many years have you been training for, boy? You sure you don’t need to go back and start from the basics?!” Gall barked at him.

“M-my apologies!” Gino’s face went pale as he dropped his gaze.

What Gino really wanted to say was ‘talent’, but he knew well that wasn’t the response the Sword God desired. There was no way a question that complex could be answered in a single word. After all, they were discussing the intricacies of talent right now. If Gino said something that stupid, Gall might drive him out entirely.

“You don’t know ’cause you’re still just a kid, huh? Doesn’t matter. The strong are still strong, whether they understand it or not. All right, Nina, you answer.”

Nina considered her answer carefully. Most likely, he was asking what separated them from those who outranked them. It had to be something Sword Kings and the like had that Nina and her fellow sword saints did not.

Come to think of it, the people in those positions—Sword God, sword Emperor, etc—all had life partners. She wanted that, too. A boyfriend or a husband...

Nina glanced over at Gino. He still had his gaze glued to the floor, a vexed look on his face. He was younger than her, but lately, she’d taken quite an interest in him...

Suddenly, a word occurred to her that she often heard the Sword God use.

“Is it desire?”

“Huh, well, you sure have been maturing a lot more lately, acting more feminine. Just what I’d expect from a daughter of mine.”

He laughed, seeing straight through her. Nina didn’t react. She had practiced

to make sure that these kinds of things wouldn't get under her skin.

"Desire...well, you're not wrong there. But how long can your own desire endure?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"For instance, if I told you that you have to choose between marrying Gino and becoming a Sword King, which would you pick?"

At the mention of marriage, Gino and Nina traded glances. Her cheeks flushed slightly.

"...I would pick becoming a Sword King."

In other words, she would abandon the chance to marry Gino. That showed the limits of her own desires. She realized belatedly that her answer had been a mistake.

"Naive as ever." He snorted with laughter as she dropped her gaze. Gall then turned his attention to the last member of their group. "What about you, Eris?"

"Determination."

"Determination, huh? Nope, that's wrong too." He chuckled and dismissed her.

Eris, however, merely glared back at him and said, "No, it's not. Determination is the right answer."

In the back of her mind, she saw Orsted stabbing Rudeus through the chest. She remembered lamenting how powerless she was as he crumpled to the ground.

She had become stronger since then. Her power and speed were on a completely different level. However, it wasn't enough to beat Orsted. After years of training, Eris had glimpsed the limits of her abilities. No matter how much she trained, she would never reach Orsted's level. It wasn't an exaggeration. She knew she would never be able to defeat him on her own.

But it would be a different story if she was with Rudeus. Together, they might be able to accomplish it. With his magic and her sword skills, they could win.

Even if I had to sacrifice myself to pin Orsted down, Rudeus would land the final blow.

If Rudeus won, that would also be a win for Eris. She would die, of course, but Rudeus would live on. It meant she would lose out on sharing a future with him, but she didn't mind that. Dwelling on the future would only make her lose her nerve, and losing her nerve would make her sword dull. A dull sword meant they would both die. If anyone was going to lose their life, it would be her. Eris was determined to pursue that outcome—or perhaps one might say she was resigned to it.

“Then you don't care if you can't become a Sword King?” Gall asked.

“That doesn't really matter to me.”

“I thought you wanted to get stronger.”

“Yes, I do. But a title doesn't change how strong a person is, does it?”

Pleased, the Sword God muttered, “All right. Eris and Nina, whichever one of you can beat the other will be named Sword King.”

Gino's shoulders slumped in defeat.

Nina and Eris faced one another.

“...”

Each of them wielded a wooden sword. Although it didn't seem like a lethal weapon, in the hands of two sword saints, it could easily be used to end another's life.

“This brings back memories of the first time I came here.”

“Indeed.”

It had been several years since Ghislaine first brought Eris to the Sword Sanctum. Eris had been like a wild animal, and because of her Nina had tasted humiliation. After all, she had wet herself in front of Gino and the other sword saints. Just remembering the incident was enough to make Nina want to cover her face and writhe in agony.

That said, she held no hatred for Eris. Thanks to Eris, she had become

stronger. She discarded her pride and immersed herself completely in her training. Her humiliation was what motivated her.

Nina confidently asserted, "Today I will be the victor."

Bloodlust spilled off Eris in waves, but Nina didn't flinch. She was like an enlightened monk-in-training the way she stared at Eris with a cool, composed expression.

"Hmph."

In the next instant, all hostility from Eris vanished. Her expression was the polar opposite of Nina's; she was smiling maniacally, like a predator staring down its prey. The way her disturbing grin stretched from ear to ear was enough to make anyone shiver.

An instinctive fear sparked inside Nina. Many times had they traded blows under Water King Isolde's training, and Nina had lost. Of course, there were times when she won, too. But memories of defeat stood out sharpest in her mind. Particularly because each time Nina lost, Eris had that grin on her face.

"..."

Eris wasn't moving. She remained deathly still, that bestial smile on her face. This was rare for her, considering she was always the first to make a move. She was waiting to counter her attacks, Nina thought. She had faced counters numerous times when she fought Isolde. Eris couldn't use Water God style techniques, but the North God style also possessed counters. That was most likely what Eris was aiming for.

"..."

Silence hung in the air. Eris held her weapon at shoulder level, while Nina held hers above her head. They both stood perfectly still, only one step away from the other. Nina's face was expressionless, while Eris wore a big grin on hers. The two resembled a couple of eerie statues, the way they stared at one another without so much as flinching. This stillness was unusual for two students of the Sword God style, which preached that the first to make a move would be the victor.

Neither one of them dared move. It was Gall Falion who finally breathed a

sigh.

“How long are the two of you gonna stand there and stare at each other?”

Those words were the trigger. Nina was the first to move. She took a confident step forward. Footwork she had done some ten thousand times over the course of her training. The way she moved her legs was logical—optimal, even—and energy surged through her torso. Nina blended this energy with her Battle Aura, sending it down her arm and into her blade—Sword of Light. This skill, touted as the fastest of all, rushed toward Eris.

Nina’s technique was impeccable. Anyone who saw it would be amazed, struck speechless by its perfection. But...

“Graaaaah!”

A heavy force slammed into Nina’s stomach, rocketing her backward. Her body crashed into the wall before crumpling to the ground. Her uniform was shredded, leaving her toned stomach visible. A large red welt slowly spread across her skin. A burning sensation shot through her body.

“Enough!” declared the Sword God.

Nina stared blankly at Eris. Sweat dripped off the latter’s forehead. Her uniform was slightly split at the shoulder, but she was otherwise unscathed. That smile had also disappeared from her face. She stood there proudly as the victor.

“...Khh.”

Nina understood what had happened. Eris stepped forward at the same time that Nina made her move. And while Nina swung down from above, Eris dropped her body low and released her own Sword of Light from the side.

What Nina didn’t understand was why. Her own technique should have landed first. She’d made the opening move, and her sword was ever so slightly faster than Eris’s. Moreover, she had swung from above, which was the fastest attack position. Even accounting for some slight miscalculations, her attack should have landed before Eris’s. But their battle didn’t even end in a draw. Why was she slumped against the wall while Eris remained standing?

“You don’t need overwhelming power to beat a person,” Eris said quietly.

Nina didn’t understand.

Eris had used a North God-style technique. Ordinarily, Sword of Light was overkill on most opponents. Eris had diverted its power into speed instead. She made it so her attack was only just lethal enough to knock down her opponent, which made her execution that much faster. It wasn’t just brute strength but the distribution of her Battle Aura.

This was a technique she learned from her training with the North Emperor. The added speed it gave her was honestly negligible, compared to how much attack power she sacrificed to achieve it. Yet this difference, little more than a hair’s breadth, was what it took to claim victory.

“Magnificent, Eris. I give you the title of Sword King.”

Nina slowly peeled herself off the floor. Her face contorted as her stomach throbbed with a dull pain.

She completely outdid me.

Because they were using wooden swords, she had merely been thrown back and bruised. If Eris had used a real sword, it would have plunged right through Nina’s heart. A comparatively weak attack, considering the normal power of a Sword of Light could cleave a person’s body in two, but it was still enough to kill. As Eris had only sustained a tear in the shoulder of her uniform, that was more than enough to qualify her as the victor. Nina had lost completely.

Nina sighed and sat on the floor, stretching her back out. She’d lost this duel in every way. The opening move was hers, and she was still defeated. *I lost, completely and utterly. It’s over.* A heavy, oppressive weight settled on her chest.

“Feeling vexed, Nina?” asked the Sword God.

“Yes.”

Large tears rolled down her cheeks.

“You still have room to grow. Buck up.”

“Yes, Father.”

That day, for the first time in a very long time, she called Gall her father rather than her master.

“...”

The Sword God waited quietly for her tears to dry. Eris returned to frowning, crossing her arms over her chest as she stood nearby.

Once Nina finished sniffing, Gall turned to Eris and said, “I will give you the title of Sword King, but I have nothing more to teach you. You are a Master.”

A Master, as the name implied, was someone who had achieved complete mastery in the style. Nina and Gino traded looks. The two sword emperors and even Sword King Ghislaine had never received the title of Master. That was how exclusive such recognition was.

“I can also give you the title of sword emperor while I’m at it...but in that case, you will have to battle Ghislaine. If you want to go further and call yourself Sword God, you will need to kill me.” He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword as if challenging her to answer.

Eris shook her head. “The title of Sword God doesn’t matter to me.”

“Figured you’d say that. Well, then, what are you gonna do now?”

“First, I’ll return to my family.”

As the Sword God gazed into her eyes, he was struck by how bright they were. Eris had always carried a sense of loss with her. If she continued her quest to become stronger and didn’t lose sight of her original objective, perhaps she could actually bring down the invincible Orsted. Such was the potential that Gall sensed in her.

“Come, Eris. As proof that you are a Sword King, I shall give you one of my seven blades.”

“...Okay.”

That day, Eris Greyrat’s long years of training came to an end.

As Eris and the Sword God left, the ceremony to determine the new Sword

King officially ended. Only Nina and Gino remained in the room.

For a while, they sat in silence. Both were overcome with frustration and envy, but neither one would let it show on their faces, nor would they speak of it.

Silently, they both stood up and walked shoulder-to-shoulder over to the edge of the Ephemeral Hall where the wooden swords were kept. Each of them reached for a weapon.

Shortly thereafter, the clang of their blades could be heard echoing through the room. It was a common symphony that rang through the Sword Sanctum daily, and as the two trained, so too did that rhythmic tune continue.

About the Author:

Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

"If you base your actions around the benefit of the group rather than your own self-interest, then the people you help will in turn lend you their support when the time comes and you need it," said the author.



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