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Seven Seas Entertainment

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PUBLICATION HISTORY

The Future Seen Through a Crack

PUPPIES WERE CUTE.

Not just puppies—every baby mammal. Kittens were obvious, but even calves and lambs had clear appeal. Women naturally squealed and rushed to pet a puppy's fluffy head. There were exceptions, but most babies inspired protective instincts as a matter of course.

Adults got a lot out of doting on infants. For example, say a little puppy lay abandoned in a cardboard box, shivering in the rain, and a grown woman passed by. Say she was tired from her job and looking for something to soothe her soul. Fortunately for her, her apartment allowed pets, so the woman wound up taking the puppy home and giving it a warm bath. She tenderly wiped the creature with a soft towel and blow-dried its fur, making it sweet and clean. She served it warm milk and watched it fall asleep, able to relax at last. The woman would gain great satisfaction from doing that. Her heart would feel warm and fuzzy.

Throughout all that, I should point out, the puppy did absolutely nothing. Its cuteness alone cheered the woman right up. See? If something young was there, that was good enough—it didn't have to *do* anything. That was a win-win situation for everyone involved.

There were downsides for the adults, of course. For instance, children were dumb as hell and prone to mistakes. Adults had to wipe their asses and scold them. They also had to address children's lack of knowledge and experience by teaching them what they could and couldn't do. They didn't know any better at that point, after all.

Meanwhile, adults had no way to know what children were thinking. Even if a kid did something bad on purpose, adults had no clue. Forgiveness filled the void of ignorance in their hearts. If an adorable child was total trash at heart, adults shrugged it off as the mischievousness of youth. They were *compelled* to forgive.

Anyway, it sure was nice looking at Roxy while she bathed.

She possessed a junior high school student's not-quite-mature limbs. Her pale skin paired well with her drenched blue hair. Since her back was turned, her most important features were tantalizingly out of view, but that was all the more appealing.

Behold! Her wet hair stuck to her back and small, youthful buttocks. Those mundane features shone even more brilliantly without more private body parts upstaging them.

Aah. I really have to say, what exquisite balance. My eyes were glued to those curves. You only found those proportions in a girl her age. Truly, they were a work of art. A gift from God.

So, where is she washing? Oh, below her armpits? I see, I see. Okay, where next? Her elbows, eh? That made sense—it was all too easy for dirt to cling to one's joints!

Ah. She lifted her elbow, twisting her body. If she turned just a little farther, I'd see...

"Hm? Is someone there?"

Oh, crap!

Okay... Even if children got away with a lot of things, no child wanted to be the target of anger. That didn't just apply to kids; I was pretty sure nobody liked getting yelled at or blamed for things. No matter your age, it just sucked. When you sensed ire coming your way, it was natural to look for an escape route. There were exceptions, but most people wanted to avoid being scolded, even if they'd intentionally done something wrong.

Those were my wise thoughts as I escaped through the door of the room where Roxy bathed.

A "Grey" Nezumi Kozo

HELLO, GOOD SIRS. I'm Rudeus Greyrat, a humble thief whose turf is here in this country village.

I may be a nibbler now, but I've been making my name these past five years. At the port, I call myself the "Nezumi Kozo of Buena Village." It's a nod to both the illustrious Japanese thief and my family name, see? *Nezumi* means "rat" in Japanese. Good joke, eh? The heavens must've thought so too—they laughed and let me be.

And while those all-seeing heavens looked the other way, I applied myself to a little job.

The job, my good sirs, was a heist. I set my sights on the most valuable of treasures. My hands and legs shook, that's for sure. I hadn't pulled off anything so huge before. Nonetheless, my nerves of steel stopped those shakes. I'd spent five years working on that skill, and it didn't let me down for one minute! I willed my fickle limbs into tiptoeing around, all stealthy. With no trembling to worry about, I was ready to take on the world.

The target of my heist was the Greyrat mansion.

The good-looking owner lived there with his beautiful wife. They got on well, and they were up every night trying to make a brother or sister for their only son. I wasn't about to give 'em a talking-to about that or anything. I got a lot out of their efforts, if you know what I mean.

Anyhow, unlike a bona fide legendary thief like Nezumi Kozo, I hadn't got the skill to break in from the front. He'd have pulled a rope out of thin air. But even if my skills weren't up to snuff, I could use my noggin for a thing or two.

Just as I was figuring out my first move, the maid walked down with a basket of laundry. She always cooked and did laundry in the same spot, you see. The sun was nice and bright that day, so I figured the clothes would dry quick.

After watching that maid head to the laundry spot, I trotted to the kitchen.

There wasn't a soul in there or in the living room. The happy couple was away from the house that day. The son's tutor had said she had business too; she'd left that morning, so it was only me and the maid in that fancy little estate. I just had to do something about that maid, and the treasure would be mine for the taking.

Heh heh. That maid didn't smile much, but she was still a real looker, let me tell you. Most of the time, she was a cold fish, but her face let some womanly charm show whenever the man of the house was around. She had a coquettish side is what I mean. When the husband put a hand on that maid, his wife turned into a real ogre—always left me trembling like a rat! But only 'cause I was the Nezumi Kozo, see? "Rat" was in my name.

At any rate, that maid was one tricky customer. If I made any wrong moves hunting that treasure, she'd swat the back of my hand right sharp, like a mosquito. *Thwap!*

This was where I showed off my noggin.

I walked to the water jug with a cup in my hand. No tiptoeing. I just went straight there, like I was innocently trying to quench my thirst. I made sure the water jug was practically my size. That way, I'd be bound to have trouble getting water out.

Goodness gracious. Woe is me, I thought, putting my hands on the jug and pushing it with all my might.

With an earsplitting racket, the jug rolled across the floor. Hearing that noise, the maid came running out of the laundry area in quite a hurry. I suppose she saw me in a sorry state there in the kitchen, sopping wet from the upset jug. In other words, my masterful strategy was proudly on display.

"Er, I'm sorry, Miss Lilia," I told her. "I was trying to pour some water, but... um...that jug tipped over."

Despite everything, that maid didn't even sigh. She was a steely lady, no question. "Are you hurt, Master Rudeus?"

"A-a bit."

"Then why not take off your clothes in the laundry area and put them in the

basket? There are some towels in the usual spot, so you can dry yourself thoroughly and put on a change of clothes. Do you need help?"

"No. Um...Miss Lilia, what're you going to do?"

"I will clean up this area."

"Okay. Um, I'm very sorry to give you more work."

"It doesn't bother me."

"I'll help you when I'm done."

I was meek as a lamb as I made my way to the laundry area with feather-light steps. No one was around to see me sneak my prize out.

When I laid hands on the treasure, it was still damp. To discover it damp before it got washed gave me a mighty thrill. I would bring the treasure to my abode, bury my face in it, and take deep breaths. What a splendid occasion this was, to be sure—beyond words to describe.

That was the story of how—through a momentary flight of fancy—I, Rudeus Greyrat, obtained Roxy's panties.

I Won't Accept the Title of Traitor

BETRAYAL" IMPLIED TRUST, which implied understanding. You couldn't earn another person's trust unless they understood you from the bottom of their heart. Sometimes, however, understanding another person was very, very difficult.

Suppose, for instance, there was a tall mountain with sheer cliffs and enormous ledges. A huge mountain that no human being could ever possibly hope to climb. What would a person with no interest in mountain climbing think if they saw someone attempt to scale the peak, only to fail and lose their life? They'd probably laugh and muse, *Aren't they a fool?* Perhaps they would assume the victim brought it on themselves, or they'd cock their head in puzzlement at the idea of someone going out of their way to tempt danger.

For the most part, climbing the mountain would be impossible to understand. The average person would gaze upon the peak from a distance. From afar, its sheer scale would strike awe in their heart. They'd have no way of knowing that there was *something* you could obtain by ascending the peak using your own strength. Even if they understood intellectually, they would never understand emotionally.

Oh, by the way, Paul was grabbing Lilia's butt in front of me.

He ogled her with such a lewd expression that it strained human limits, while asking her, "What's for dinner?" so Zenith wouldn't catch on. For her part, Lilia blushed and ducked her head, yet she glanced ardently at Paul. She evidently didn't disapprove quite as much of this as one might think.

Going back to my previous analogy—envision a maid with a splendid, curvaceous ass making your food. Assume this maid possessed such spectacular buttocks that most men would like to cop a feel.

Beholding an ass of that caliber, what would a married man think?

If you saw him touch that ass, only for his wife to spot him and hell to break loose, what would you think of him? Would you laugh at his foolishness? Would you sneer, insisting he got his just deserts? Would you shake your head and

wonder why he hadn't just touched his wife's butt instead?

Most people couldn't understand. A nice ass was something your average mortal could only gaze at from afar. The distant sight of that round, smooth shape would strike awe in a person's heart.

I, however, understood what went through the minds of would-be assgrabbers. I comprehended the desire to cop a feel, even if you had a wife. The passion, the zeal—I understood it all.

Paul almost certainly got something out of this.

Zenith's jealousy ran deep. If her husband had a secret affair, she would definitely blow her top. It probably thrilled him to touch another woman's ass, unbeknownst to her. That knowledge likely enhanced his pleasure beyond the usual satisfaction.

I understood all this.

"Mother! Father's touching Lilia's butt again."

"Excuse me?! Explain yourself, honey!"

"What?! Rudy?! You traitor!"

But, at the end of the day, I only understood intellectually. Having never touched a woman's ass myself, I couldn't understand emotionally. Without understanding something from the heart, I was unable to trust it. If I didn't, I certainly couldn't be a "traitor."

Such were my thoughts as I watched Zenith knock Paul flying.

The Oasis of Life

LIFE WAS A DESERT. Scorched by the sun, sweat dripping off your face, throat parched, you trudged ever onward into the unknown. Some people chose never to participate in the journey at all and simply curled up on the spot and died.

Every desert, however, had an oasis, which signified happiness. Indeed, life was all about pursuing happiness.

I was at my oasis. It was very, very soft and pliant to touch, radiating a gentle warmth against my skin. The sweet scent it exuded brought joy to mankind. Two mountains, two peaks, and a single valley were the form of paradise.

I was glued to the spot, already under its thrall. This will be my home from now on, I thought.

Just then, however, a voice emanated from above.

"Oh, Rudeus, you rascal."

That divine voice was cheerful, though a little exasperated.

The heavens above had bestowed this oasis upon me. I would worship this beautiful sky with every fiber of my being.

But then—a twist!

"Oh! Lilia, could you help out a bit?"

Egad! The heavens were trying to pull me away from my sanctuary. By tearing me from the warm, soft oasis and flinging me back into the arid desert, they surely meant to test me. I couldn't let that happen.

Obstinately, I clasped my mouth over the oasis, my very reason for being. As much I screamed and wailed against my fate, however, the unthinkable happened. My feeble arms were unable to keep me fastened to my happiness—I was pulled away.

Before me stood the endless desert: "growing up." My sated heart instantly withered and broke in two. Why would the heavens inflict such a terrible trial

upon me?

I couldn't do it.

This was the end for me.

I would shrivel up and die.

Just as I resigned myself to the worst, a beacon of light shone. "Very well, Madam."

Egad! An oasis appeared before my eyes once more. The heavens had not forsaken me. It was a different oasis from before, though around the same size. Warm, soft, bountiful.

Ahh. This time, I would live here forever.

"Excuse me, Madam. I must say, Rudeus is... Well, how do I put this...?"

"Hm? What is it. Lilia?"

"No, it's nothing."

"Oh, Lilia, sometimes you can be such an odd duck. All right, you've done enough."

"Yes, Madam."

Another trial befell me—a devastating blast. My resistance proved futile against the shock wave. Just like that, I was flung from the oasis back into the desert. The harsh surroundings beat down upon me mercilessly. With that pain came knowledge of the futility of it all.

I couldn't do it. There was no saving me this time. My life was over.

"All right, Rudy. Mommy's here!"

Just when things looked hopeless, I glimpsed it again! The blast brought me to the oasis from before. The heavens hadn't abandoned me after all!

"Good grief. This boy is such a handful."

The oasis's warmth and softness enveloped me once more. Ah—but I knew I would surely be prized away again at some point. The heavens were cruel like that, inflicting the desert upon us. Hence, I resolved to partake in this oasis to

the utmost while I could.

"Hey, Lilia."

"What is it, Madam?"

"I've wondered for a while—is it normal for a child to grope at a woman's breasts so much?"

"No," said Lilia, after a stilted pause. "Not like this, I'd say."

"Still, he gropes like someone I know."

Off in my own little world, I fondled Zenith and Lilia's massive honkers.

Eris's Little Prank

ONE BRIGHT, SUNNY AFTERNOON, Eris wandered the mansion after finishing her self-training, wondering how she would spend the rest of her day off. Maybe she could take Ghislaine to town, even though it was already after lunch. Or maybe she should go visit Father and let him spoil her. Both he and Mother were busy people, but she thought it'd be nice if they played with her every so often.

While Eris wondered what to do, she spotted a specific person lying on a bench in the garden. Judging by the book on his chest, he'd probably been reading outside. His eyes were closed, and he snored softly.

"Oh, Rudeus," Eris said as she sneaked up to the boy. "You're unseemly."

Eris's complaints died on her lips. She peered at Rudeus's sleeping face, feeling awfully restless and fidgety for some reason. It was rare to see him snoozing like this. Normally, he never let his guard down. She recalled what Phillip said—that he was tense because his family wasn't around.

"Heh heh."

Looking at Rudeus as he slept, Eris's heart filled with mischief. He was always waking her rudely whenever she took a nap, whether by shaking her body or tickling her chest and sides. Once, he'd even flipped her skirt and pulled down her panties.

I'll get back at him this time!

A smirk lit up Eris's face as she approached Rudeus.

He looked awfully content as he slept. Eris's heart pounded slightly at that cherubic face, but she didn't relent. Without any hesitation, she placed her hands on his belt and pulled it out slowly so as not to make a sound. Then she unfastened his trousers, revealing his plain underwear.

For some reason, Eris found herself gulping at the sight.

This was just supposed to be a prank—a way of getting back at Rudeus for

what he had done to her—but she had the feeling she was doing something *very* naughty.

Even so, Eris didn't stop.

I-it's Rudeus's fault, anyhow!

As her heart raced in her chest, she put her hand on Rudeus's trousers. Slowly, carefully, so as not to wake him up, she pulled them down.

The lower half of Rudeus's body lay underneath. His white underwear covered his slightly muscled thighs and hips. Eris's gaze, however, aimed squarely at the slight bump in the middle of his underwear.

That was something Eris didn't have. She gulped again. Ever so slowly, she reached for his underwear. With even greater care, she began to pull it down, but then—

She glanced up.

A pair of eyes stared back at her.

Rudeus sat up, looking Eris straight in the eye. "Huh? Uh...what're y—? Ugh!"

He didn't finish his sentence. Right then, Eris's fist swung at his jaw with complete accuracy, knocking him out cleanly. Rudeus's eyes rolled back, and he collapsed into his previous position.

"That was close..."

At some point, cold sweat had broken out on Eris's forehead. She wiped it off, then gingerly returned his underwear to its original state. Next, she did the trousers.

But, first, she raised her head and looked around in trepidation. Once she felt confident that nobody was there, she placed her fingers on the waistband of his underwear and stealthily looked inside.

Her breath got ragged. Steam practically flew out her nose. She replaced the waistband, redid his trousers, fastened them, and put on his belt. Then, beet red, she scampered from the scene as rapidly as her legs could take her.

For a while after that, Eris would turn red whenever she saw Rudeus's face,

and she'd raise her fist instinctively. Rudeus had no recollection of the events that spurred this reaction, since Eris had punched him out before he became aware of what was happening. All he could do was shake his head and run.

The Power of Abs

TODAY, WE'RE DOING ABDOMINAL TRAINING," Ghislaine announced to Eris and me.

We were in a room used as a dance hall. Ghislaine's style of teaching normally had us swinging our swords outside even on rainy days, but today had record rain and hurricane-like winds, so she switched to training fundamentals indoors.

"We'll do this training in pairs. Rudeus, hold my legs. Eris, you watch."

It was apparently common practice in this world to have a second person help with your ab training. Ghislaine sat on the floor, grasping her knees like you would in gym class. I took her legs in my arms and stared straight into the bronzed abs and bountiful breasts before me.

Hoo boy. Ghislaine's legs were rock-solid, like touching steel. Not only were they hard, I could feel their flexibility. These were the legs of a carnivore. I'd never touched a carnivore, but I was certain. I wondered if I would get legs like those if I trained hard enough.

"When you rest, put your hands behind your head. Then lift your body like this." Ghislaine did a sit-up. Her six-pack tightened further right in front of me. "Make sense, Rudeus?"

"Yes... I can see. How incredible..."

Her sit-up was perfect. She lifted her upper body so smoothly, it was like she was on an escalator. She moved just as smoothly back down. This wasn't the sit-up of an amateur working their abdominals out for one brief moment, then recoiling from the effort. Ghislaine was a pro who kept steady, significant pressure on her stomach muscles.

How could she achieve such a beautiful sit-up? Needless to say, it was through the power of her abs.

Ghislaine's toned abdominal muscles hoisted her heavy upper body like a forklift. On the other hand, they lowered her body gently, as if handling fragile

goods. What splendid abs they were!

Slightly above Ghislaine's stomach, two *very* charming mounds swayed with every minute movement. Yet those assets didn't bounce into view—a testament to her abs' power.

I yearned for abs like those. Any man would want abs approaching those sacred, inviolable muscles. And they were right here before my eyes.

"Now you know how to do it. Eris, you try first."

"All right!"

"Rudeus, hold her feet."

Ghislaine stood up. Goodbye, wonderful abs.

"You can help each other build muscle even when I'm not around."

As sad as I was to see those beauties go, I figured I would one day obtain luscious abs of my own if I trained hard. I had to apply myself so that I could gain them, and show them off to the next kid!

"Hold my feet properly!" Eris practically kicked me in the stomach, swapping places with Ghislaine.

"Okay, okay."

I grabbed hold of her legs. They were pretty toned for her age, but they obviously couldn't hold a candle to Ghislaine's. To me, they were soft as slime. Still, not every girl had to be like Ghislaine. Eris was perfectly good as she was.

"Right. Here I go."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Eris began doing sit-ups.

Predictably, she had no idea what she was doing. She threw all her strength into her first sit-up, springing up so fast, she almost headbutted me. She was just as quick on the way down. If this was her routine, she'd hardly build her abs at all.

I second-guessed myself, however, when she passed fifty sit-ups and her momentum didn't slow. I'd had a flabby body in my previous life, so I knew better than anyone that someone without strong abs couldn't do twenty sit-ups at that speed.

Eris wasn't even panting. Regardless of what anyone said, her body was well-honed. Maybe, just maybe, she already had a six-pack. Okay, *six* would be a bit much. But maybe a four or two-pack...?

I fell into pensive silence.

Eris had worn clothes that were easy to move in. Unlike Ghislaine, however, she wasn't showing her stomach, so I couldn't see her abs. What to do? Could I determine the state of her muscles? Was there a way to do that without seeing them with my own eyes?

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Oh, right... I could touch them. "Excuse me."
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"Eek!"

I slipped my hand under Eris's top, reaching toward her stomach. Her skin was warm from the sit-ups. My fingers felt a crevice between her muscles under a bit of belly fat. I counted one, two...

"Where are you touching?!"

The next moment, Eris finished a lightning-fast sit-up by ramming her head against mine, hitting me so hard, I thought my face would fall off.

Now, how had Eris put such force into her headbutt? The power of abs. By concentrating energy into her abdominal muscles, she had lifted her upper body's weight like a winch and performed that extraordinary feat.

Eris had incredible abs. I didn't have to see or touch them to know it. That was my final thought before I passed out.

Sculptor

[Sculpting a God] by Rudeus Greyrat [Foreword]

THERE IS A SCULPTOR said to chant a ritual prayer whenever they carve a god's image. Let us follow their example by offering a prayer to the god. Place the stone you will sculpt the god from in the same direction as the sun and strike the pose you think most pious, expressing the gratitude in your heart.

Gods do not bequeath everything to man. However, they provide guidance for our lives. You mustn't shirk your devotion. Once you have visualized the god's form and carved it into your heart, imagine it on the stone.

All the work that takes place thereafter is on behalf of the gods. Approach it piously.

[Preparations]

Carve the god's body parts from your stone: head, chest, stomach, hips, upper arms, lower arms, hands, thighs, shins, and feet.

Sculpt each and every part carefully. By combining them all, you can create the shape of a god.

[Body, Stomach, Hips]

Only amateurs begin with the god's face. Sculpt the body first. Start with her modest yet delightful bosom, envisioning her hallowed form in your mind's eye. Bring out the charms of her chest without evoking carnal desire. A god, you see, must be respected above all.

Pressing ahead, the god's mole is an extremely noble and dignified feature for which we must be thankful. It may be but a single mole, but ensure you add it diligently.

Her stomach should be smooth and silky. Pay special attention to her belly button and the sloping area around it. It is possible to convey a soft texture, even when working with materials like stone, so be sure to sculpt this part carefully.

Never reveal her hips—not to mention her buttocks and intimate area. Exposing a god's private body parts is an act deserving divine punishment. Endeavor to conceal the godly form.

[Arms and Legs]

Carve her arms and legs next. Gods are by no means fleshy beings. Ensure that her limbs are willowy and retain a prepubescent youthfulness; strive to render that truth faithfully in your art.

[Putting It Together]

When you finish every section, use magic to combine them. If wicked thoughts cloud your mind at this point, you may inadvertently create a sculpture that overemphasizes the nude god's charms, and nonbelievers beholding your sculpture may embrace carnal desires over piety.

At this point, ask yourself: "Is something lacking?" Consider what is necessary to evoke respect over lust. The answer should come to you immediately — elegance. Place one arm covering her breasts, while the other stretches and clasps a ceremonial staff. That will express how dignified the god is.

With that, the god's body should be complete.

[Vestments]

Only heathens keep a god unclothed. Give her garments. At this stage, it is better to create a robe to drape over her than to alter her form directly. A robe will emphasize her godly nature more effectively.

The arm concealing the sculpture's breasts will impede this process; however, you can make the robe loose, so it obscures the arm. Then create another arm and affix it above the sculpture's clothing. While one arm hides beneath her robe, the other arm reaches out in a natural position. Make it possible for this arm to hold the staff too.

Making the robe removable permits dual postures for the god.

[Face]

Finally, create the god's face. Reexamine her body before you commence.

Clothed, the sculpture brandishes her staff with the gallantry of Athena, goddess of war. Disrobed, she covers her breasts with a modest maiden's subtle eroticism. When sculpting the god's face, it is best to consider both attitudes. Give her an expression embodying both shame and nobility.

If you close your eyes, you should be able to envision any number of suitable features for a god. Then, through trial and error, work away until you are satisfied that you have approached the ideal face.

[Completion]

Attach the sculpture's head to its body, and your work is finally done.

Go out there and sculpt Roxy, everyone!

A Stealth Mission

AT PRESENT, I WAS crawling on my stomach through a rocky area. I only had to travel fifty meters east of my starting point to reach my destination.

How had I ended up in this situation? It was a long story.

At dawn today, as I was alone preparing our rations, the colonel spoke to me. "Rudeus, you have a mission. You must sneak up to the spring fifty meters from here alone. There, you will find Eris Boreas Greyrat. Snap a picture of her."

Following my orders, I promptly launched into action. *The Colonel's commands are absolute,* I thought. *He won't tolerate any insubordination.*

I moved ten meters from the open-air campfire that was my starting point, then came to a halt. A bald man with a scary face stood there as if to block my path.

"Colonel, I spotted a single security guard. A demon with a white spear and a headband."

"That's Dead End Ruijerd. Do something to make him look away, then proceed to the destination."

"Do something" was such an infuriatingly vague command, it nearly made my nostrils flare, but the important thing on a mission was responding flexibly. I'd done that on countless occasions in the past, proving my ability to survive whatever was thrown at me, even with an incompetent commander who was out of touch with a situation.

I'd show him what I was capable of.

"Mr. Ruijerd, I'm going to the toilet for a bit," I called.

"Sure."

Hell, yeah. Nailed it.

With a nonchalant expression, I walked off from the scene, heading due east. I tried to make the whole excursion look obvious and matter-of-fact. I wasn't up

to any shifty business, so of course there was no issue with me passing through. Ruijerd was simply on the way.

Before I got away, the sentry called out to me. "Rudeus."

My heart almost jumped out of my chest. Had I messed up somehow?

"Don't go too far," he said.

"Of course not," I responded, cool as a cucumber, before resuming my journey.

I had every intention of obeying him to the letter. *After all,* I justified myself inwardly, *fifty meters is just a stone's throw away.*

After that, silence fell. I walked ten meters, then twenty. Halfway to my destination, I looked back over my shoulder. The shadows of a rocky stretch of wall obscured Ruijerd. Rocks also hid the spring ahead, making it impossible to see.

I was still in the clear. Best-case scenario: nobody saw me, I spotted my target secretly, and I made some fun memories by myself.

It would be impossible to leave Ruijerd's sightline, however. Thus, there was a decent chance he could cross the twenty-five-meter gap between us and bring me back to where I'd started.

What to do...? I guess I ought to run for it, huh?

Even if Ruijerd noticed me, I'd only need a brief second to frame the picture and snap it on camer— Just then, I remembered something. "Bad news, Colonel!"

"What's the matter, Rudeus?!"

"I don't have a camera!"

This was a very pressing problem indeed.

In my old world, you could buy a camera that took crystal-clear photos of things far in the distance for just a few thousand yen. Honestly, you didn't even need that much money. You could get a disposable camera for five hundred yen. But this was a fantasy world. Cameras didn't exist here. This task was

impossible.

As I panicked, the Colonel replied, "Rudeus. Your heart lens takes clearer photos than any camera. Carve the memory into your soul."

Carve the memory into my soul. Internalizing that important lesson, I swelled with resolve. "Yes, sir...!"

Since my heart lens's shutter clicked much faster than lightspeed, I would only need a moment—just one single moment—to focus on the target and channel the photo into my soul!

"Let's do this!"

I ran. Twenty-five meters separated me from Ruijerd. I needed to go another twenty-five meters to reach my destination. Regardless of my speed, Ruijerd was guaranteed to catch up to me. I only needed a moment, though. Just one!

I ran. Ran. Ran—without faltering. Ten meters. Twenty meters. Beyond that rock lay a spellbinding vision, something almost out of this world.

The next moment, someone grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and lifted me off the ground.

"Argh!"

"What in the world are you doing?!"

It was Ruijerd. He'd already caught up with me. He was so fast, it hadn't even taken two seconds.

"Sorry, Colonel. I failed!"

"Colonel? What are you talking about?"

"Forgive me, Ruijerd. I gave in to temptation. I just had to see, no matter what!"

Still holding me by the scruff of the neck, Ruijerd replied in a thoroughly exasperated tone, "You really wanted to see *that*?"

"Well, yeah," I replied, as if nothing were more obvious.

In response, Ruijerd lifted me up farther. "Then look."

Thanks to the vantage point his height offered, I easily saw past the rocks. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that a sight was easily *inflicted* upon me. My heart lens shifted to shooting in sepia, if you catch my drift.

"Huh...?"

In the spring, a massive turtle monster was laying an egg.

"Great Tortoises are gentle for Demon Continent monsters, and they're a useful source of food. So you shouldn't disturb them while they're laying. I told you that before."

Oh, right. I vaguely remembered him saying something along those lines. Something about how there were two springs nearby, and since the tortoise occupied one, we should use the other to bathe.

I'd basically gotten those springs mixed up.

"You wanted to see that?"

I did not muster words for a long moment—a very long moment. Then I said, "Well, it's not something I see every day."

Ruijerd and I watched the Great Tortoise lay her eggs together for a while. A massive tortoise laying basketball-sized eggs was honestly quite a mysterious sight. I saved the photo in my heart's camera roll with a sepia filter.

Bikini Armor

BIKINI ARMOR WAS A STAPLE of fantasy worlds. It was generally worn by sexy female warriors, and it covered such a small area you had to wonder what it even protected, besides a lady's naughty bits.

Of course, the world I'd reincarnated into had no shortage of warriors wearing flimsy bikini armor. One in ten people on the Demon Continent wore armor aptly described as a "bikini."

My current location was a tavern. In this world, places for eating and drinking weren't too distinct. In regions where water was scarce, people commonly drank alcohol as a replacement. Perhaps because many people lacked the constitution for it, a lot of drunks were staggering around at midday.

I observed these surroundings as I quietly munched my food, and out of the corner of my eye, I spotted some ladies in bikini armor sitting at a packed table. Most of the warriors had bulky frames, but there were swordswomen with slender builds. At any rate, they were all unquestionably muscular.

Mages never wore bikini armor. You could pick them out at a glance because they donned special robes to reduce the recoil of their offensive magic spells. But why would warriors wear bikini armor, which was flimsy from a defensive standpoint?

I tried to draw conclusions based on the warriors I could see.

First, I looked at the swordswoman on the far right. She was from a cow race, and had a bodybuilder's engorged muscles. On her hip, she wore her weapon of choice—a massive sword resembling a zanbatou.

I peered closer at the woman's bikini armor. She had six boobs total: two huge ones on top, and four regular-sized ones below that. She wore a protective leather garment—in other words, a bikini armor top—over all six breasts. I couldn't see what she was wearing downstairs, but I guessed it was bikini panties, since the garment showed off her log-like thighs.

Frankly, her proportions dwarfed her leather bikini. Still, the armor locked her udder-like boobs in place firmly. I couldn't picture them slipping out due to abrupt movements in battle.

In light of that, I guessed that the leather bikini's purpose was to prevent nip slips. The swordswoman's breasts would be a hindrance in battle—hence the need to secure them. But if that were the case, she didn't technically *need* a bikini. There were any number of clothing options that enhanced mobility.

The reason for the bikini very swiftly occurred to me. The swordswoman's race generally preferred light clothing. The men didn't wear anything on their upper bodies, and many were eager to show off their ripped muscles. Thus, the swordswoman's penchant for bikini armor was a matter of culture.

On to the next case study: a swordswoman with the face of a gecko. Okay, "gecko" was a rather rude descriptor. She was a swordswoman of a *reptilian* race. She had a slender frame and small boobs compared to the cow warrior, but she too wore bikini armor.

The upper half looked a bit like a tube top. But that was only the upper half. On the bottom, she wore regular trousers with metal shielding her joints. Overall, pretty light.

I didn't have to think too hard about this example, since tough-looking scales covered the swordswoman's body. The area around her stomach did appear to lack protection; still, armor would only impede the movements of someone whose skin was tough to begin with. On the other hand, protecting herself against the cold was probably more difficult, since she'd draped a warm cloak over the chair she sat on.

Come to think of it, if the upper half of her outfit looked like a tube top, it probably didn't count as "bikini" armor.

Next up: a lady standing with one foot on her chair and the other on the table, swigging from a massive jug almost the size of a pitcher. Her face and skin were bright red, and her hair was styled into a Mohawk, giving her quite a funky punk vibe. She was yelling something about how cowards could screw off, and that *she* could take on the demon king, no sweat.

Now, what about her armor? It looked like a bikini to me, top and bottom. In

fact, it was a textbook example, since it was made of cloth—no leather or metal to be seen. At first glance, it just looked like underwear.

Actually, maybe it *was* underwear. Other clothes were scattered on the floor beneath her. Moreover, she was yammering that her race *always* stripped after they drank, so everyone should just shut up.

She was less a swordswoman or warrior, and more an ordinary drunk. Thus, her outfit was no bikini, but a humble bra and panties.

She put a hand on her bra. *Oh, my.* Was she about to take it off? She was a little grungy, sure, but she had a sexy body; I was by no means averse to this development.

"Jeez, Rudeus! What're you looking at?!"

When Eris yanked my ear, I snapped out of my reverie.

From that experience, I learned that bikini armor and stripping when drunk were two cornerstones of this world's culture. I felt a little wiser.

Rudeus's Three-Minute Recipe

RUIJERD AND ERIS SAID it was time to think about dinner and went off to hunt Great Tortoises. On the Demon Continent, which was full of carnivores, Great Tortoises were said to have the tastiest meat. That made them a prime food source.

I just couldn't enjoy their meat, though. It was sinewy compared to poultry, plus it had the strong stench particular to game animals. On top of that, I had to say, it just wasn't easy to digest.

I struggled day in and day out to make Great Tortoise meat more palatable. Let me describe today's efforts. First off, the ingredients:

- [Great Tortoise meat]
- [Demon Continent vegetables and herbs]
- [Bigfoot Fish fat]
- [spices]

I stuck to things you could buy in pretty much any town. This would be a long journey, after all. Each region sold its own vegetables, so I wasn't particular about which I purchased.

Bigfoot Fish could be found in any body of water on the continent. They were amphibious creatures that looked like puffer fish with creepy legs. Their poisonous bodies made their meat unfit for consumption, but the fat deposits above their rears were safe for polishing equipment and so on. You could buy Bigfoot Fish for a few pennies at the Adventurers' Guild. They were also sold at marketplaces, which was where I'd snagged a few.

Now then, on to the food-prep stage. The steps were:

- 1. [Finely chop the herbs and sauté them in Bigfoot Fish fat. Herbs tend to taste bitter and astringent uncooked, making them unappetizing, so stir-fry them and the vegetables first. Hopefully that brings out their sweetness and richness!
- 2. Slice the Great Tortoise meat into small pieces and pound it soft. The meat

- is tough and sinewy; to combat that, mince and tenderize it.
- 3. Mix the minced Great Tortoise with the stir-fried vegetables and herbs, sprinkle spices on, and knead the mixture, seasoning as required. Then transfer everything to a bowl or something and knead it thoroughly once more.
- 4. Concentrate the mixture by hand: take a palmful of kneaded meat, vegetables, and herbs and toss it between your hands like you're playing catch, ensuring that you compact it. Otherwise, the meat could crack while you cook it, spilling the juices.
- 5. Cook everything directly on a fire, since there's no cookware like frying pans on the Demon Continent. I could've made a frying pan, but this time, I cooked over a netlike object. A real man cooks directly on the fiercest flames, after all. I definitely wasn't too lazy to put something better together—no sirree.]

Once the meat was cooked through the middle, it was ready to serve. The Demon Continent didn't have nice condiments like sauces, so we just dug in.

"This is good," said Ruijerd.

"Tastes nice," Eris added.

These guys said *everything* they ate was good, so while I appreciated their opinions, I ignored them. I mean, they would probably have chowed down on raw meat and said they liked it, but my discerning tongue set me apart.

Okay. Time for the taste test.

The first thing I noticed when I took a bite was the taste of Bigfoot Fish fat filling my mouth. A powerful flavor like industrial alcohol agonized my nose and shot through my head, threatening to blind me. It was hard to believe that this was even *safe* to eat.

When I bit into the middle, juices spilled out. They reeked, and I could tell at once that the herbs and spices had been utterly pointless. The vegetables crunched in my mouth; every time I chewed, the taste was indescribably off. I couldn't help furrowing my brow and grimacing.

Basically, my verdict was...

That was shit!

My days of eating fine cuisine were a long way ahead of me.

Left and Right

CONSIDER THE WORD "RIGHT." The kanji is written with two strokes over a box that looks like the katakana character "ro." When you face north, east is to your right. A right-handed person uses their right hand to hold chopsticks, and society in general is tailored to right-handed people.

Now consider its antonym, "left." The kanji is written with two strokes over a shape that looks like the katakana character "e." When you face north, west is to your left. A right-handed person uses their left hand to hold a rice bowl, and society in general is biased against left-handed people.

Although there are slight discrepancies between right and left, you can consider them two sides of the same coin, like yin and yang. Where right exists, so too must left. When right is born, left is born. And when right disappears, left will vanish.

When people see two things together, they're automatically inclined to assign those things a hierarchy. They decide which comes first and second, whether they prefer the right or the left. As arbitrary as that sounds, some pairs in this world do warrant appraisal on their relative merits.

Like, for instance, the two things right in front of me.

They didn't make it obviously apparent, but they absolutely *had* to come in pairs. From a functional perspective, one did the job fine—but from an *artistic* perspective, a pair was essential.

According to a certain line of thinking, the left and right were subtly different. The only way to prove that, however, would be to touch them myself. Let me just preface this by saying it was out of pure intellectual curiosity. I had absolutely no ill intent.

"Hm."

Without further ado, I groped Eris, who snored beside me.

Her breasts were still flat, though the bumps I felt were a sure sign they were

growing. Still, I had to wonder whether there was really a difference between her left and right tit. I thought the right one was softer, although only a bit.

Wait, wait. I was right-handed, so maybe my right hand just felt things more sensitively.

I tried crossing my arms and touching each boob with the opposite hand. I remembered perfectly how they'd felt earlier. Both were soft, without a doubt.

"Hm!"

I tried again. The results were...the same. Indeed, these were so soft, I honestly felt I could spend the rest of my life here. The problem was, I couldn't tell the difference between them. Left and right, right and left... What distinguished them?

Ah. I felt like I'd stumbled across a fundamental truth of the world. The heart of the universe—the galaxy! The secret nestled in the words "left and right" was— "Uh..." I realized I shouldn't have let my guard down for even a moment.

Eris snapped her eyes open and knocked me out flat with a blow to the chin before straddling me. Her knees instantly subdued both my right and left hands in a well-honed wrestling-hold-like position.

"What do you think you're doing, touching someone while they're having a good sleep?!"

Her fists descended upon me, clenched hard as hammers. Right, left, right, left, right, left. She pummeled my face without restraint. Perhaps she intended to strike me for each squeeze of her breasts. How many times had I done that? I couldn't tell you. I'd lost track of time comparing her left and right boobs.

I feigned calm, but inwardly, I felt Eris's attack was a threat to my life. Wouldn't now be a good time for Ruijerd to intervene? Then again, I was getting what I deserved. Equivalent exchange was the law of nature.

Right, left, right, left.

Ah... My consciousness was fading.

At that point, the truth I'd stumbled upon moments earlier struck me. In the kanji for "left" and "right," the katakana characters "e" and "ro" were visible.

"Ero." In other words, the concept of "left and right" was inherently erotic.

With that flash of insight, I died.

Then I opened my eyes. "Huh?!"

Next to me, Eris snored as she tossed and turned in her sleep.

My face had no bruises. I was the same old beautiful Rudeus.

With each breath Eris took, her chest gently rose and fell. It was still flat, though I could see the bumps. Normally, the sight of those twin knolls would inspire me to touch them, squeeze them, and roll my tongue over them. Yet now both—left and right—inspired extreme fear in me.

Breasts were erotic because they came in pairs.

Feeling blessed that I'd come to that profound realization without having to touch the breasts, I went to sleep once more. I hoped I'd have an erotic dream that didn't involve getting pummeled this time.

The Maiden and the Unicorn

N THE MIDDLE OF THE HOLY SWORD HIGHWAY, Elinalise and Talhand watched from a distant shrub as Roxy squatted.

"Jeez..." she sighed, as a horse with a white body and a long horn on its head entered her line of sight.

A unicorn.

With its pure white body, helix-shaped horn, and lion's tail, the horse was a dead ringer for the fabled animal of Rudeus's world. Unicorns possessed extremely fierce dispositions, making them liable to charge and plunge their horns into anything in their path, even a lion. For some reason, however, they were docile in the laps of purehearted maidens. Thus, they were known as a symbol of purity—or, alternatively, as virginity-obsessed freaks.

This world's unicorns were similar. The only notable difference was that, in this world, people were generally aware of unicorns as a real species of beast. They got special treatment to an extent, in light of their unique tolerance for unsullied maidens, but they didn't deserve credit for anything else.

When the three travelers had spotted a unicorn on the roadside, they'd decided to use Roxy to draw it out.

"Look! It came for her, as I predicted! I just knew Roxy had no experience!"

Just as Elinalise said, the unicorn that appeared from the bushes made slowly for Roxy.

"Well, it wouldn't show up for you," Talhand replied.

"You needn't state the obvious."

The unicorn's eyes didn't even flit over Elinalise as it made a beeline for Roxy. It lowered its head and bent its knees, as if to bury its nose in Roxy's lap.

Roxy accepted the gesture with the saintly air of the Virgin Mother, petting the unicorn in an ethereal scene. If Rudeus had been there, he would've wept in

awe and knelt to pray to his god.

With an expression of utter clemency, Roxy gently stroked the unicorn's head. Her hand moved down to its neck...and she vanked its mane.

"N-neeeigh!" Startled by the sudden force, the unicorn attempted to spring up.

With practiced ease, Roxy brought her other hand to the unicorn's body. "Majestic spear of ice, I summon thee to pierce my enemy! Icicle Lance!"

In the blink of an eye, the ice spear Roxy had summoned at point-blank range ran through the unicorn's heart.

"Neeeigh! Neigh..." The unicorn whinnied as it coughed blood. For just a moment, its body trembled violently; then it collapsed without another sound.

Silence came over the scene. The wind blew, and the trees swayed. The unicorn's body twitched as its blood gushed all over the ground.

The ethereal sight of moments ago was a thing of the past. Only the macabre carcass of a wild beast remained. If Rudeus had been there, he would've wondered for a moment whether he ought to revere Jesus and the heavens instead. Then he would've wept at Roxy's badassery and gotten on one knee to pray to his god.

Roxy heaved a sigh before pulling some rope and a knife from her bag, promptly draining the unicorn's blood.

When Elinalise saw the aftermath, she emerged from the bushes, a joyous smile on her lips. "You did it! I knew we could count on you, Roxy!"

Roxy gazed levelly at her. "If we'd just gone about our business, it would've attacked us like a regular monster. We could just have fought it normally without jumping through all these hoops."

"Au contraire, Roxy! Denizens of the Great Forest have used purehearted maidens to hunt unicorns since time immemorial."

"And after all you said about not wanting to return to your homeland... Oh, whatever. Don't just sit on your hands, you two. Help me out."

Both elves and dwarves regarded the unicorn as a mystical beast. Yet as long

as it remained a living species, it couldn't escape the rule that the strong ate the weak.

So went the tale of how a unicorn spilled its blood and meat, and eventually became pocket money for Roxy and her traveling companions.

A Small Person and His Small Business

T HAPPENED ONE DAY as we traveled along the Holy Sword Highway. Just when Geese and I reined in our horses and started preparing for lunch, Ruijerd looked up sharply.

Curious, I followed his gaze. Deep within the forest, I heard someone's footsteps rustling. Soon enough, a man emerged. He stood about the same height as me, but he was full-grown and sported a mustache.

He was one of the so-called halflings, and carried a massive bag on his small back. Deciding there was little chance of an attack, Ruijerd didn't grab his spear.

"He's a peddler," Geese said. "Looks like he spotted us and came to hawk his wares."

The middle-aged halfling approached us with a meek smile. "Why, thank you for the introduction. I am Wi Suu, a halfling hailing from Ma Tita Village. I've come bearing rare goods you'd usually only find in a halfling town. Please have a look."

After he gave his spiel, he started unloading his bag, not even waiting for our reaction. Spreading out a large cloth that resembled a bathmat, he plunked all kinds of miscellaneous items onto it. He was borderline shoving his wares down our throats, but whatever. You had to respect the salesmanship. Geese and Eris had already squatted to appraise what he offered.

"What's this?" asked Eris.

"A smokeball. If you throw it at the ground, it will create a smoke veil you can use to escape danger."

"Meh. Don't need it." Eris tossed the ball over her shoulder. Mercifully, Ruijerd caught it before it hit the ground and returned it to the mat.

Mentally tutting at Eris for being so careless with the peddler's merchandise, I looked at it myself. The wooden sculptures, necklaces, bangles, and rings looked locally made. Weapons and armor lined the peddler's cloth too. His

knives and shortswords didn't look awfully sharp, but the hilts were made of some slick, ivory-like material. They looked kind of fancy. *Maybe I should get one as a souvenir...* Nah. It would just be extra weight to carry.

"Hm?"

My eyes happened to fall on an ivory container. It held some transparent bluish liquid that piqued my interest. Was it an ointment? "What's this?"

"A special halfling-made lotion. 'Tis popular in the Holy Country of Millis, among other places. If you apply it after diluting it with water, your skin will become silky smooth."

"Interesting."

When I dabbed a bit on my finger, then cast water magic over it, my finger indeed became smooth. I played around with the liquid experimentally, drawing a goopy line between my fingers. To use it as a lotion, I should probably mix in more water, but the texture was identical to that of a different commercial product.

It sure was smooth. Very smooth. I bet, if I used it, it'd feel very good indeed. Er...don't ask what I'd use it for.

"Does it pique your interest?"

"Huh? Um, uh, no. I was just, um, wondering how it's made."

"The manufacturing method is a secret, but it's made from the sap of a variety of Treant. There are no physical ill effects, of course."

I see. So it wasn't bad for the body. In that case...

No. Wait. I didn't especially want a lubricant or something, I just didn't want to worry about dry skin. I wanted nice, smooth skin to accentuate my charms.

"How much is it?" I asked.

"Since it's undiluted, one bottle costs two Millis silver coins."

Two coins, huh? Hmm. That sounded like a good deal to get some juicy moisture in my skin... Not in a horny sense or anything, of course.

"What, Rudeus?" Eris broke in. "You really want that?"

"Huh? N-n-no, of course not! Why on earth would I? Nothing suspicious here!"

I returned the lotion to where it belonged as if it were a hot potato.

Yep, I had to take good care of my money. I couldn't afford to shell out two silver coins on cosmetics.

In the end, Geese purchased a couple of items that looked like perfumes. The rest of us bought nothing, and the peddler went on his way.

Over the following days, when I gazed at Eris's rough hands and saw how little care she took of them, I found myself wishing I *had* bought the lotion for non-horny reasons. But that's another story.

The Lecture

O NE DAY, DURING THE GREAT FOREST'S RAINY SEASON, two men sat together on the side of a wooden pathway in Doldia Village.

"Listen well, Gyes," said Ruijerd. "This is something you should know, as a warrior."

Gyes sighed.

Ruijerd's hands gripped a fishing rod. Its line was sunk in a river in the Great Forest, but that river had turned into mud. There was no float on his rod, but even if there had been, it would've been useless in the relentless mudflow.

"The youths these days call themselves warriors, but they have no inkling of what it takes to be a true warrior," Ruijerd continued.

"Indeed," Gyes replied after a pained pause. "It is as you say."

"Do you know what it takes to be a true warrior?"

"No... I am ill-informed."

Ruijerd sat relaxed, his legs apart, as he held his fishing line. Meanwhile, Gyes knelt stiffly, having just sat down.

"What do you think I refer to?" Ruijerd gazed straight at the muddy stream.

Cold sweat broke out on Gyes's forehead. "I believe a true warrior is strong. Perhaps...the strongest, wildest, and greatest fighter in the village?"

"No. To be a warrior is to possess a stout heart. Even a weak person can become a warrior." At Ruijerd's hard glare, Gyes hid his tail between his legs. "Remember passing that child on the side of the pathway a moment ago?"

"Yes..."

"When you saw her rush to make room for you, you strode right past her shamelessly."

Doldia Village was constructed among treetops, and wooden paths bridged

the spans between the trees, so it was possible to go from one end of the village to the other without descending to the ground.

Here and there, the wooden paths were narrow. Some only fit one adult at a time. A minute earlier, Gyes had passed his own daughter Minitona on one such bridge. Minitona had hurriedly ceded the way to him, and Gyes continued past her as if that were the obvious thing to do. When Ruijerd saw that, he confronted Gyes angrily.

"Erm...what of it?" Gyes asked.

"Is that all you have to say?"

The woefully sharp glint in Ruijerd's eyes made Gyes's ears sag, and Ruijerd caught the sound of a terribly pathetic whine from the depths of his throat.

"You swine!" he continued. "What would you have done if she'd fallen?!"

"I-I would've jumped down to help, of course."

"That's not what I mean! I'm saying a warrior would protect her from falling in the first place! You should've let her go through before you!"

That sounded ridiculous to Gyes. In beastfolk society, it was a fact of life that strong people got the right of way. Strength was justice. Yet the man before Gyes was much more powerful than he was. Gyes owed him a debt as well, and the people of Doldia never forgot those.

Since he couldn't agree *or* object, Gyes struggled to answer. The silence dragged on.

"What do you have to say?" Ruijerd growled.

Someone help me. Gyes gazed away imploringly.

A boy in a gray robe happened to meet his eyes. Accepting Gyes's distress signal, the boy—Rudeus—approached Gyes sheepishly. "What's the matter?"

"Rudeus," Ruijerd said. "Listen to this. Gyes..."

After listening to the story, Rudeus nodded understandingly. "Isn't it also a warrior's duty to demonstrate their strength to children, to make them feel safe?" he asked.

"Hm...you think so?"

"Yes. That's why I feel safe around you, Ruijerd."

"I see... Very well, then. Gyes, I apologize. I was wrong."

The moment Ruijerd casually flipped his stance, Gyes's opinion of Rudeus rose several notches.

"All right. I'll get back to work now," said Gyes.

"Sorry for disrupting you," Ruijerd said.

"It's no problem." As Gyes rose to his feet, he turned to Rudeus, tail wagging ever so slightly. "Please take it easy, Sir Rudeus."

Rudeus looked at him in confusion. "Yes, I'm planning to rest up until the rainy season's over."

Gyes left. As Ruijerd watched him go, he lifted his fishing rod. On the tip of his hook, a single little fish wriggled. Ruijerd gazed at it silently. Without a word, he returned the fish to the muddy stream and resumed fishing without bait.

A Bargain Sale

IN A TOWN IN THE HOLY COUNTRY OF MILLIS, on a populous street slightly off the main road, a young boy shouted at the top of his lungs. "Gather round! Get an eyeful of these goodies!"

He had laid out a selection of stone carvings on a mat in front of him. Some were animals with cartoonish proportions, while others looked human. They weren't terribly expensive; a child's allowance would have covered almost any of the sculptures.

However, one item was significantly more expensive—a detailed figure displayed in a prominent spot. It was a statuette of a young man with an alert expression holding a spear. That single sculpture cost as much as a month's living expenses for an average family in Millis.

"Feast your eyes on this statue of a member of the very rare Superd tribe!"

The boy's words prompted some people to stop and look.

In this world, the Superd were a common symbol of fear. Human parents told their children, "If you're naughty, a Superd will come eat you." Many had been told the same thing when they were children themselves.

However, nobody had actually seen a Superd. They only knew members of the tribe had emerald-green hair and a red jewel in their foreheads. Some scholars even claimed that the Superd were nothing more than fiction.

Hearing that the sculpture depicted a member of that formidable demon race, quite a few people turned their heads.

"Oh, so that's a Superd?" A large man with a broad-shouldered physique crouched in front of the display. He looked like a merchant himself.

The boy sidled up to him, wiggling his fingers. "That's right, sir. It might be hard to tell, since it's all one color, but yes—this is a bona fide Superd statue." There was an unpleasant, insincere-looking smile on his face.

The merchant dismissed him immediately. Ah. That's the face of a liar. The

boy didn't have the slightest dishonest intent, but the merchant was skeptical nevertheless. For some reason, he felt he'd seen through the boy.

How wretched to see a scam artist of such tender age, he reflected. I'll teach him a bit of a lesson.

Pointing at the Superd figure with a terse smile, the merchant raised his voice. "Come, now. If you're saying that's a Superd, where's the emerald-green hair? You can't tell the hair color of a stone statue, so how can you say it's genuine?"

To the merchant, it was clear that this was just a child's line of thinking. He was certain that, as soon as he pointed out the inconsistency, the boy's claims would collapse.

However, the boy's extremely unpleasant smile persisted as his hands gesticulated in the air. "I thought someone would say that, so I brought a real Superd along."

"What?!"

While the merchant stood there, startled, the boy called into an alleyway in his peripheral vision. "Come out, Ruijerd! It's your time to shine!"

At those words, even the others on the street looked to see what was going to happen.

A man emerged from the alleyway. He was a dead ringer for the stone figurine, with its sharp eyes and chalk trident. His clothes were identical too. There was a red jewel on his forehead, and on his head lay sparkling emerald-green...seaweed.

"Er..."

Seaweed.

They were near the ocean, so seaweed wasn't terribly difficult to find—not that anyone wore it on their head.

"You might be thinking, 'Whoa, whoa! You can't be serious! *Seaweed?!*" the boy cried. "But before you get hot under the collar—wait!"

He leaped up and yanked the seaweed off the man's head to reveal...not a crown of emerald hair, but a completely bald head. Even the man's eyebrows

were shaved off, accentuating the eerie sheen of the red jewel on his forehead.

As the onlookers fell into deeper confusion, the boy raised his voice further. "You might be wailing, 'That Superd ain't got hair! What a cruel world!" He grasped the Superd statuette as he spoke. "But this statue's no fake or knockoff. He's a real Superd!"

With that energetic shout, he yanked off the figure's head.

Well, not exactly. The head itself remained. What he did was remove the carving's hair. And now that the boy had tossed away his seaweed toupee, the man looked identical to the statuette; they were alike in every way.

"What do you think, sir? Do you still claim this figurine is a forgery?"

The merchant was dumbfounded. To him, it seemed more than likely that the statue hadn't been based on a Superd to begin with, and that the man standing there in a slight stupor wasn't a Superd either.

The crowd reacted less cynically, however. Seeing the hairless figure's striking resemblance to the forbidding man, they couldn't help but laugh.

This was no scam, the merchant realized; it was a performance. The boy was using this technique to gather crowds, boggle their minds, and draw their eyes to his wares.

But where would that ultimately lead him?

This was the Holy Country of Millis, where the Millis faith had widespread traction. A faction within the church even preached the expulsion of all demons. A Superd statuette was an amusing idea, but none would sell once the Expulsionists caught wind of them. The kid looked smart enough to understand that, but...

At that moment, the merchant's eyes fell on a different item. "Hm...? Kid, could you tell me what that is?"

The toy was shaped like an egg, but a round base propped it upright. Something that looked like a face had been drawn on its surface with ink, as was apparently true of similar figures among the boy's merchandise.

"Oh, that's a roly-poly." The boy said. He flicked the figure. "Even if you

topple it with your fingers, like this, it always stands right back up."

True to the boy's word, the figure looked like it had fallen over, only to spring back to its original position, wobbling.

"Oho!" Now, that's interesting, the merchant thought.

The crowd appeared to agree; they eyed the roly-poly toys with keen interest.

At that moment, the merchant had a revelation. *Aha*, he thought. The boy's Superd statuette was just a way to attract customers. His true aim was to sell his other toys and figurines. That was a commendable business strategy—not a scam, but a well-thought-out marketing plan.

"I see, I see. I take back what I said. That Superd is the real deal."

"Told you so!"

The merchant picked up a roly-poly. "Allow me to buy one of these as an apology."

"Huh? Uh...sure. Pleasure doing business."

Despite having scored a sale, the boy didn't look terribly happy. *That's fine*, thought the merchant, assuming that the boy simply guided customers to other products by making a show of wanting to sell the Superd statuette.

"I'm off now," he told the boy. "Best of luck in your endeavors."

"Sure thing. Thanks for stopping by!"

The merchant walked away from the boy's display. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted other onlookers rushing to buy the toys and figurines. He decided to copy the lad's strategy.

By the time evening rolled around, the boy—Rudeus—had sold all his wares. The stall was devoid of *okiagari-koboshi* roly-polies, faceless *sarubobo* dolls, and *akabeko* cow toys. Rudeus had made those to pad out his selection, since he thought selling just one item would look a bit sad.

Only one object remained unsold...the Superd statuette depicting Ruijerd. That was the thing Rudeus was most eager to sell, yet for some reason, no one had bitten.

"Was something wrong with it?" Rudeus muttered to himself as he crouched, resting his chin on his hands.

Ruijerd, who stood next to him, looked at Rudeus, then at the statuette that rested at his feet. "The seaweed," was all he said.

"The seaweed, huh?"

Yeah. It was probably the seaweed. Next time, he'd have to use something else as a wig.

Those were Rudeus's thoughts as he and Ruijerd watched the sun set together.

Roxy's Ideal

N A TOWN SOMEWHERE ON THE DEMON CONTINENT, two ladies sat together by the roadside.

"This was a bust too, huh?"

"Indeed. Still, we're definitely getting closer."

Roxy and Elinalise gazed vacantly at the road, depressed that they hadn't found any particularly valuable information in the latest town.

They hardly said anything to each other. There wasn't much to talk about. Both women seemingly thought of nothing as they waited for Talhand, the final member of their group, to return with the information he'd collected.

As it turned out, however, only Roxy's head was empty. When Elinalise spotted a man walking along the road, her eyes narrowed lasciviously. She even licked her lips.

"Oh, my. That's a fine man. Roxy, my dear, I'll be back in a bit."

Roxy stopped Elinalise before she could transform into a butterfly of the night. "Don't you dare."

"Goodness. You're such a child, Roxy."

Being called that prompted a vein to bulge in Roxy's forehead. Although her physical appearance was girlish in certain ways, she was very much an adult. "I'm not opposed to the act itself. I'm just saying we ought to wait until Talhand gets back and tells us what he learned."

"Jeez...fine," huffed Elinalise, sitting back down. She was a boy-crazy slut who lived for sex, but she was sharp enough to keep focused on her priorities.

With that, the two ladies went back to staring at passersby on the road in silence. The sun hung high overhead in the noon sky. Sitting in the shade was cool enough, but the sun's rays were strong, and quite a few sweaty people were walking around.

Elinalise's eyes narrowed suddenly. "Roxy, do you see that black-skinned demon to the right? With the big nose?"

Roxy sensed something amiss. "A member of the Pozzo Tribe, I see. What about him?" she responded, gripping the staff underneath her robe.

Tension pulled Elinalise's face tight as she continued, "From his face and his stride, there's no mistaking it..." She trailed off into meaningful silence.

Was he a famous criminal with a bounty on his head or something? Roxy stiffened at the thought. She and her party had no interest in bounties themselves, but anyone would break into a sweat if they knew a mass murderer was walking past in front of them.

"He definitely has girth downstairs." Elinalise was obviously referring to his reproductive organs.

Roxy practically fell over. "How can you say that with a straight face?"

"I always appraise things with a serious eye."

This reply rendered Roxy momentarily speechless. After a very long pause, she said, "You can tell just by looking?"

Elinalise whipped her face back toward Roxy. She looked cheerful, but a rather unpleasant smile like a crude old man's pulled on her lips. "Dearie me! Roxy, have you taken an interest in this topic?"

"I-I suppose it wouldn't hurt to know for future reference."

Elinalise giggled. "Indeed. Of course, you can't tell *everything* just by looking..."

And so Elinalise's lecture began. Men with large noses were big downstairs, men with a graceful stride had good upbringings, men who lacked confidence in their endowments tended to be overzealous, and short men often acted desperate about things.

Roxy listened seriously to Elinalise's observations, which she was totally unable to verify. "I-I see. How enlightening."

"What's most important is finding someone who matches your tastes."

"My...tastes?"

"I'm not terribly picky about people. Still, there are men I couldn't physically stand as partners. If your first partner doesn't fit your preferences, it might have a lasting negative impact on your confidence."

It might? Roxy wondered, taking all this at face value. It was a testament to her studious heart that she didn't doubt Elinalise.

"What kind of gentlemen do you prefer, Roxy?"

"Let's see..."

Gazing at the road, Roxy mused about the question. Almost everyone walking along the street was a demon. She couldn't see any other races—which made sense, since this was the Demon Continent.

"I prefer humans."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Most demons won't partner with Migurd, because they don't find us aesthetically beautiful. But I've heard that there are humans who don't mind this body shape." That was such a pathetic reason, she sighed aloud.

Elinalise, however, didn't criticize Roxy. She saw the importance of choosing a partner based on physical compatibility. "I see. Anything else?"

"Hmm... I suppose I'd like a tall person. Someone I'd have to look up at would be nice. Oh, and he would have a firm chest, though not overly muscular. I'd rather he look slender at first glance, and when you touch him, you realize how manly he is. As for his face, I'm not so keen on the Asura Kingdom's so-called pretty boys. I'd like a face that's a bit more plain and unadorned. I'd also definitely like someone who really loves me. Like, he's always looking my way. Or, when I happen to glance up, our eyes meet, and he smiles. Nothing else in particular comes to mind... Oh, but I don't mind if he's not the breadwinner. If anything, I'd want to keep working, so I hope he could accommodate that. There are men who want to keep a woman cooped up at home after marriage, but I prefer my freedom. Of course, I'll do what my husband says if he tells me, 'You belong to me. I'm not letting you leave the house.' But..."

Just then, Roxy realized something. Elinalise was gazing at her with an ear-to-ear grin. "Roxy, dear... Nobody asked you about a wedding."

Roxy had gotten carried away. Turning bright red, she grasped the tip of her witch hat and yanked it down.

Seeing Roxy in that state, a sudden thought occurred to Elinalise: It'll be a while yet before she finds a man.

Roxy stayed single for many days to come.

The Prince and the Princess

This happened when norn was still but a four-year-old, tender in years.

When her mother, maid, and younger sister abruptly vanished one day, a single worry gripped her heart: what if her father disappeared suddenly too? What if she woke one day to find the bed next to her completely vacant? Wouldn't she be all alone in the world?

That thought made it impossible for Norn to sleep at night. She would cling to Paul as she wept.

As this played out, Paul decided to tell her stories. At first, he mostly stuck to fairy tales his wet nurse had told him when he was growing up. Within a year, however, he ran out of material and started supplementing the fairy tales with anecdotes about his experiences as an adventurer.

Paul wasn't happy with this state of affairs. He was recounting his own youth, after all. Back then, he'd hit on every woman he saw, drunk booze until he exploded, behaved callously because he had a sword, and acted like a brat who didn't know his place. He'd been a textbook example of an impetuous nincompoop.

Talking about that stage of his life embarrassed him. He'd done a lot of things he definitely couldn't mention to his daughter. Sometimes, he'd get carried away with tales of his prouder exploits and almost mention a time he'd seduced a female adventurer or something. It was still too early for Rudeus to hear about those deeds, let alone Norn.

At first, Paul avoided those subjects entirely. Lately, however, he'd found himself running out of stories to tell. When he returned to his wet nurse's fairy tales, Norn pouted in disappointment. She craved a new story, but Paul didn't have any.

At times like this, his old friend Geese's penchant for embellishing events would've come in handy. It was a shame.

That evening, Paul walked along the street, racking his brain.

"Hm?"

He spotted something on the roadside. It was a street stall, but instead of selling food or weaponry, it dealt in sheafs of paper. They weren't bound like books, and they weren't too thick or expensive.

"What're these?"

The man who appeared to be the stall owner said nothing in reply. Far from ignoring his customer, however, he pulled a sheaf of paper from his side and held it up for Paul to see: "I am a former bard. I sell stories."

The stall owner spoke through writing. Paul wondered why he was a *former* bard, but swiftly got his answer when he saw that the man's left hand had lost several fingers, and his throat had a massive scar.

He'd traveled the world, playing his lute and reciting tales, until one day his hand and throat had been injured through some unfortunate misadventure. Struggling to put food on his table, he wrote down all the stories he'd once told and tried selling them in a different form.

"Interesting..."

Paul glanced over multiple titles. There were the usual heroic tales and the current trendy poems about a blue-haired adventurer, but there were also original stories. Many were love stories.

Love stories, huh? That made Paul think. Norn was still a young child, and a girl at that. A love story with a clear beginning and end would make her happier than any crude anecdote from his life.

"All right. I'll buy these."

Satisfied with the conclusion he'd reached, Paul purchased an armful of stories and left the scene.

That night, he sat on his usual chair by Norn's bed to tell her a story. "I've got an interesting tale in store for you today."

As Paul watched Norn's face light up with excitement, he pulled a booklet from his breast pocket. Titled "The Princess and the Demon Prince," it was a

standard fairy tale with a simple plot.

A princess named Eysa played in a field of flowers when the demon king swooped in to take her as his bride. Unable to bear becoming his captive, Eysa challenged the demon king to a battle of wits and scored a resounding victory. That broke a curse, turning the demon king into a prince, whereupon he sought the princess's hand in marriage once more. This time she accepted, and the two lived happily ever after.

Paul had likely heard a similar tale from his wet nurse, but unfortunately, he was unable to recall it. He'd always been a snotty kid. Instead of stories about girls using their wits as weapons, he'd preferred to hear about heroes slaying dragons. Thinking back on that, he was convinced the story in his hands was the most suitable for a girl.

"A long time ago, there lived a princess named Eysa..." Certain Norn would take as much interest as any little girl, Paul began reading from the booklet.

"Aw..." said Norn.

As the story continued, her excited face became steadily more disappointed. *This is odd,* thought Paul. The story seemed like it would be a hit among girls, but maybe Norn was too young.

As Paul wondered what was wrong, Norn verbalized her displeasure. "Hey! When are *you* going to be in the story, Daddy?"

"Huh? Oh, no. Daddy's not appearing in this story."

"I like stories about Daddy."

Unbeknownst to Paul, Norn had developed a fondness for stories about her father. She loved hearing about the reckless adventures of his youth. Although Paul occasionally slipped into rough language in the middle of those stories, he always did his best to use words his daughter would understand. Since he was always busy during the day, story time felt precious to young, lonely Norn.

More than anything, she enjoyed hearing about her father, because she loved her daddy more than anyone in the world.

"That's nice of you to say, but...Daddy's out of stories about himself."

"I like stories about Daddy more than stories about Eysa!"

Hearing this, Paul closed the booklet, dumbfounded. "I'm happy to tell them to you, if you insist, but...are you all right with the stories I've told before?"

"Yeah. Tell me the story about how you met Mommy."

Paul pulled a face, uncertain. However, he commenced his tale, figuring he was fine with it if Norn was too.

A few minutes later, Paul gazed at Norn's content face as she slept. His mouth twisted into a sheepish smile. The money he'd spent on that pile of booklets would probably go to waste, he thought. But, as long as Norn was happy, it was for the best.

Geese Wars

LET ME TELL YOU A TALE ABOUT a great adventurer. His name: Geese. He was such an erudite man, one would hardly believe he was born on the Demon Continent. Furthermore, his brawn far exceeded what one could discern through sight.

There are many amusing tales about Geese the adventurer. Which should I tell you today? Oh, I know. How about the time he met the legendary mage Rudeus? Yes. Let's go with that one.

It happened around the time the evil dragon Natecazalion settled in the Great Forest and started causing mischief. Natecazalion breathed poison that threatened to wipe out the neighboring beastfolk. Many brave beastfolk warriors ventured deep into the wood to slay the fell creature, yet none returned.

Geese was no valiant do-gooder, though he owed the beastfolk a debt. Their knowledge and sense of smell had come in handy when he vanquished the monster Hemomopantamas. To return the favor, Geese resolved to slay the evil dragon.

Unfortunately, the dragon dwelled in the Forest of Flames, a place deep, deep within the woods, surrounded by lava and flaming trees. Geese possessed a tough, agile body along with his sharp wits, yet he knew he wouldn't stand a chance if he braved the dangers alone.

He began seeking allies, and paid a visit to his old friend Paul Greyrat, a great swordsman who'd fought alongside Geese when they vanquished the demon Tanteltelion.

Alas, Paul had sustained a grievous wound in that iconic battle, and his body was no longer in any condition to fight. He turned Geese down curtly. He did, however, say this: "My son Rudeus is a mage. He should be able to freeze the flaming trees and make a path."

Rudeus had set out on a journey several years prior, and his whereabouts

were unknown. But Geese had an inkling of where Paul's son could be. He'd heard a strange rumor going around the beastfolk village about a human mage who'd snuck in to steal their prized treasure. The mage in question was in confinement.

Certain he was onto something, Geese returned to the beastfolk village, where he was welcomed with joy. Unfortunately, the beastfolk were unwilling to let him speak to the prisoner.

Geese came up with a plan. He passed some booze and Penrigi Teringi meat—a favorite among beastfolk—to the sentries that night. They were upstanding men, but they couldn't resist the meat's delicious scent, and one bite of it made them sleep like babies.

Geese patted himself on the back as he strode into the cell. There, he found a naked man lying on a bed.

"Welcome to life's ultimate destination."

It was Rudeus Greyrat—son of Geese's brother-in-arms Paul, and a mighty mage with a wise head on his shoulders—quite literally in the flesh.

"I need your help to defeat the evil dragon Natecazalion," said Geese. "In exchange, I'll break you out of here."

Unfortunately, Rudeus shot down Geese's earnest request immediately. "Just breaking me out isn't good enough. Give me your jacket first. I'm freezing like this."

Geese's jacket was a rare item made from the hide of the massive Scrampazald Bear. There was nothing else like it in the world. If he were to sell it, he'd expect to make a thousand—no, two thousand—Asura gold coins.

"Is that all you want? Sure, be my guest." Geese handed Rudeus his one-of-a-kind jacket with nary a murmur. As far as he was concerned, slaying the evil dragon and rescuing the beastfolk were far more important than money.

Rudeus was deeply moved by Geese's magnanimity. "What a goodhearted fellow you are. Your reputation as a great adventurer precedes you. Very well—I shall happily lend you my strength."

As a matter of fact, Rudeus had heard from an oracle that he would encounter Geese. Thus, he'd concocted a plan to test Geese's character.

"I'm trying to slay the evil dragon Natecazalion as well," Rudeus continued. "I can get past the Forest of Flames, but I can do nothing to pierce the dragon's skin. Steel can't dent his scales, nor do fire or ice affect him."

"I see. Good thing I have a divine sword from the Sacred Beast Sphyncross." Geese drew the blade at his hip.

"Incredible!" Rudeus nodded deeply. "That is Zetes, the dragon-slaying sword! If you use it, Natecazalion won't stand a chance."

Geese, with his divine sword in hand, and Rudeus, who wielded every type of magic known to man, were a match made in heaven. Thus, the legendary duo set off on a journey to defeat Natecazalion.

[* This story was completely made up by Geese. It bears no resemblance to any characters, organizations, or settings in *Mushoku Tensei*.]

The Legend of the Undiscovered Doll

ZANOBA SHIRONE SAW THE DOLL in a nondescript town in the Asura Kingdom while on his way to the Ranoa Kingdom as an exchange student.

"Huh?" Zanoba blurted when he caught sight of the item, which stuck out like a sore thumb in a stall display.

The doll was a bit larger than his thumb. It was attached to a sparkling silver chain that was perhaps some kind of accessory.

"No. The chain doesn't appear to be ornamentation." Zanoba picked up the doll and stared at it closely.

The stall owner was saying something with a bright expression, but it went in one ear and out the other. Zanoba was already engrossed by the doll in his hands. Its chain had a silverish sparkle. Zanoba, who was well-versed in this type of handicraft, understood from the metal's texture that it was an unfamiliar material.

"Hmm. From a distance, it looks like silver, but it isn't. It's not iron, either. Is it gilded? That's strange. The body's also... Hmm."

The material the painted doll was made from, like that of the chain, was unfamiliar to Zanoba. It wasn't metal, nor any stone. When he pressed it lightly, it indented slightly, but its original shape returned immediately when he pushed it from the other side.

"The paintwork's wearing off here."

Anyone could see that the brightly colored doll's paint was peeling in some spots, revealing the original color underneath, which resembled pink flesh.

The techniques the painter had used were beyond even Zanoba's knowledge. He couldn't believe a craftsman alive painted so neatly and consistently. They would have to be a renowned figure with enough skill to work in a royal court.

Yet Zanoba saw slight omissions in the details on the doll, which perhaps indicated that the craftsperson undertook the project simply to amuse

themselves. The line between the doll's clothes and skin was strangely misplaced. That was a rather sloppy mistake for a craftsperson with such exceptional painting skills. Perhaps, for some reason, they'd been unable to turn the doll around while they made it. Perhaps they were ordered not to turn it, or perhaps cost had somehow been the issue.

"Hm."

Zanoba looked around. This was the very picture of an ordinary town with stalls lining the street. Why would such a first-rate handcraft be here? If the craftsperson sold it to pay a debt, would their work really make its way here?

That's plausible, Zanoba thought. Judging by the careless shortcuts in the doll's paintwork, the craftsperson might've deemed it worthless and sold it off.

Does the modeling look like Master's work?

The doll that Rudeus possessed had had a big head in proportion to its body. In the case of a girl doll, one could argue that that was realism, but this doll depicting a male demon was built the same way. It had to be a stylistic choice.

Still, so many aspects are distinct from Master's style.

Zanoba cut his thoughts off there, looking around. The two guards entrusted with transporting him across national borders waited by the carriage, yawning.

Since he'd noticed that Zanoba had been silent for quite a while, the stall owner's attitude inevitably cooled. He gazed at Zanoba with his chin on his hands, a bored expression on his face.

"Sir, how did you obtain this doll?" Zanoba asked. "Do you know the maker's name?"

"Huh?" The stall owner gazed at Zanoba incredulously. His face all but said, You ignored me this whole time, but now you start yapping? "As I said before, I picked it up."

"Where?"

"By the roadside. I'm pretty sure I was in the Asura Kingdom." The merchant seemed totally uninterested.

He's useless, Zanoba realized, gazing at him. Despite being a merchant, the

man didn't know a single thing about the doll's origins or worth.

Another thought occurred to Zanoba. If this merchant didn't know the doll's value, he might sell it to someone who didn't appreciate it either. Thus, it would be better for Zanoba to buy it.

"Hey! You there!" Zanoba called to his guards.

"What is it, Lord Zanoba?" a soldier responded languidly as he approached.

Zanoba faced him. "I will buy this doll," he said as if it were obvious. He was a prince, so he obviously didn't carry money on his person, even during this journey.

Unfortunately for Zanoba, the soldier shook his head slightly. "We cannot purchase it for you."

"What reason have you?! You defy my orders?!"

"No, but your spending money is being transported separately. We have no money to spare during the journey itself."

"But look at this doll! You won't find anything so exquisitely rare anywhere else in the world! If I don't purchase it now, I will never obtain a second chance. It is not so expensive. You ought to use some of our travel funds to buy it!"

"Complain all you wish. We still haven't the money!" The soldier didn't mince his words.

Zanoba turned back to the stall owner as if to say, "You want to make a sale, right?"

The merchant, however, had already given up on this encounter. "Oh, well. Why don't you put this one back? I don't know who you are, good sir, but this doll isn't as cheap as you're implying it is."

A citizen of the Asura Kingdom would have to sweat and toil an entire day to earn the amount the doll was priced at. The stall owner had listed it at that price assuming that the customer would haggle, but today, his urge to teach the man in front of him a lesson about life's harshness won out over his desire to make a sale.

"It's important to know when to quit, eh? This doll would cost your men a pretty penny."

Zanoba wished the doll was a little cheaper, so the soldier could shrug the cost off easily. And if only the paint wasn't peeling, the metal fixture wasn't broken, and the handcraft was in perfect condition. Perhaps things might've turned out differently if *anyone* could tell it was a rare item just by looking at it.

Unfortunately, however, the doll was damaged. To anyone without a discerning eye like Zanoba's, it appeared to be trash.

"Now, Lord Zanoba, let us be off. We've finished acquiring supplies, so we can move to the next town. We have a long road ahead of us."

The soldier's words could be described as adamant, leaving Zanoba no choice but to give up on purchasing the doll. With painful reluctance, he left the stall behind. At the same time, he was certain that the artifact was extremely rare.

Not until years later would Zanoba learn that the doll was truly a polyvinyl chloride keychain.

Eris's Three-Minute Recipe

M MAKING DINNER THIS EVENING!" Eris announced abruptly one day while they were in the forest that led into the Red Wyrm Straggler's upper jaw. "It's my first time camping outside with you, Ghislaine. So, yeah, I'll make something!"

The two women were journeying to a specific destination. As they traveled across the Asura Kingdom's highways, they hadn't had any opportunities to camp outdoors. And, although the villages where they stayed along the road were plain and simple, the land was fertile enough that travelers could eat proper meals. This was their first time camping since setting out.

"Are you sure you'll be fine?" Ghislaine sensed danger in Eris's overly confident attitude. To put it mildly, the Eris she knew was hardly at home in a kitchen. It didn't seem like she would know the difference between holding a sword and a kitchen knife.

But then, one couldn't describe Ghislaine as a particularly good judge of character.

"Leave it to me! When Geese and I were traveling together, there were times I think he tried to teach me about cooking!"

"Geese? The monkey-faced guy?"

"Yep! We met on the Millis Continent!"

Ghislaine had heard from Rudeus that Eris met Geese on her travels. Even though Eris hadn't said Geese *taught* her, Ghislaine felt relieved to hear her rationale anyway. That was naive of her.

Ghislaine knew Geese well. When she recalled his face, she also remembered the taste of his soup upon her tongue. It had a deep richness and a warm, mellow flavor belying its unappetizing ingredients. Even now, over ten years after parting from Geese, Ghislaine still drooled at the recollection of that soothing soup.

"All right. Then I leave it to you," said Ghislaine.

Eris immediately got to work on their dinner. Her first order of business was preparing the spices. Geese and Rudeus always used tree fruit or leaves whenever they cooked, and Rudeus had shown her what seasonings went well with certain dishes.

Eris copied what he'd done on the road, gathering things that looked sort of like what he used: some black seeds, some amber leaves. They were shaped a bit differently from Rudeus's, but she wouldn't nitpick.

At this point, Ghislaine had no reservations. *Oh, right. Geese always did that kind of thing,* she thought in wonderment, nodding repeatedly.

Ghislaine first sensed something was slightly amiss when Eris began stir-frying the vegetables for some reason. Although she was supposed to be making soup, she used animal fat to cook the vegetables over a strong flame, not bothering to add any of the spices she'd collected earlier.

Ghislaine tilted her head, puzzled. *Did Geese ever cook like this?* she wondered, perturbed. But the fat produced such an appetizing smell, it dispelled her concerns. Everything would be fine.

Ghislaine began to think something was *definitely* wrong when Eris minced the meat. She threw in the spices and fried vegetables, then mixed it all together until it was gooey. Still, Ghislaine chose not to speak up at that point.

Back when she'd paired up with Geese, he often hunted birds and minced their meat, saying, "Bird meat makes good dumplings." She'd gotten the impression that he put those dumplings in their soup occasionally.

Eris's prey of choice today was a monkey, not a bird... But Ghislaine wouldn't obsess about it.

When Eris tossed the lump of meat, spices, and vegetables into a boiling pot, Ghislaine inadvertently gasped. "Ah!"

"What? You got a problem?" Eris demanded.

Ghislaine hesitated. "No."

Eris tilted her head in confusion at Ghislaine's reaction.

The meat and vegetables softened in the pot, turning the water brown. At this display, even Eris cocked her head for a moment. Whenever Geese and Rudeus made this meal, the meat had stayed together in a clump, changing color as it boiled.

But Eris was Eris. As she peered at the meat expanding inside the pot, she decided the flavor would hold up.

"There. The soup is done," she proclaimed, picking up the frying pan. She hadn't made the soup she'd planned, but she would succeed at cooking something else: hamburg steak.

She tossed more minced meat into the pan. The heat, of course, was high. Before Ghislaine's eyes, meat spilling from the pan ignited into a pillar of flames.

"The hotter you fry meat, the better it tastes!" said Eris. She'd gotten that line from Rudeus. He said it when he was trying to half-assedly cover up a mistake he'd made when cooking.

"I see." Ghislaine took the explanation at face value. She even made a mental note to remember it for her own cooking.

At last, the food was done. Brown, muddy soup filled the bowls. On the surface floated bits of chopped meat and vegetables.

Charred mountains perched on their plates. Eris had neglected to use anything to bind the clump of meat, so it had fallen apart. The vegetables, which had already been stir-fried, had turned to charcoal.

"You can eat up now!" the chef declared.

"Eris...did Geese really teach you to cook this?"

"Not a bit! I just watched!"

"I see."

Ghislaine regretted not heeding her sense of alarm. Instead, she'd let Eris take over the cooking, drooling all the while. In battle, her instinct for danger spelled the difference between life and death—she should have known this.

But what was done was done.

Before her sat a black lump that instilled a strong sense of peril. Whatever powerful enemy stood in her way, however, Ghislaine knew she had to defeat it.

I'm being tested.

Her unique mindset as a Sword God drove her to that conclusion. Her master was testing her. She had to respond—by eating what was in front of her.

"I'm digging in!"

Scrunching her eyes shut with a prayer, Ghislaine tossed the mystery substance into her mouth.

The next moment, she saw Phillip and Hilda in an unfamiliar meadow of flowers. "Take care of our daughter," they were saying.

Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: "Rudeus, Former Soldier"

THE NAME'S RUDEUS GREYRAT. Thirty-four years old. Single. Former military. I'm a macho nice guy who regrets his life choices.

Not long ago, I wasn't single. Just a married man with former military ties. But one day, before I even knew it, divorce papers were on my table.

I fought my wife over custody of our daughter, but I didn't stand a chance in court. So now I was alone.

Nobody was on my side. I'd gotten PTSD back when I was a soldier, which I used as an excuse to beat my wife time and time again. Even my older sister Jane, a lawyer, sided with my wife over me, her biological brother. And, soon after the court handed down its verdict, the meat-processing factory where I worked fired me.

At the end of it all, I lost it. I exploded into unsightly tears. Nearly all the savings I'd earned as a soldier were taken as part of the divorce settlement. All I had left to my name was the house and a paltry sum of money. Even that tiny nest egg went down the drain to fuel my alcohol problem.

In silence, I staggered through town, a beer bottle in one hand. My wife's words as she left the house still resounded in my ears. "Now there'll finally be peace."

Just thinking about it made me sick. Who did she think was responsible for protecting this *country's* peace?

"Fucking hell!" I cursed, flinging the empty beer bottle. An ugly cat fled into an alleyway, and a kid with a skateboard threw me an accusing glare.

The kid disappeared immediately, but after I saw him, I calmed down a bit. Sighing, I wondered what I was supposed to do from now on. Well, no, I understood that intellectually. First, I had to get a job, because I didn't have any money.

How?

Well, of course I'd have to swing by the unemployment center. I had skills. I was able to drive anything from cars to tanks, helicopters, and airplanes. I also knew my way around firearms and explosives.

That would all have been a cinch if I didn't have PTSD, of course. The way I was now, just hearing an engine or machine roar turned me into a useless wreck. My boss at the meat-processing factory had laid me off because I trembled whenever I heard the delivery trucks.

I sighed again. I was up the creek without a paddle. At this point, my life was a complete dead end.

"Tch. Has even God forsaken me?"

The rain intensified. Summer had ended, and this was the time of year when you felt the chill down to your skin. The cold rain effortlessly drenched my ancient, crusty tank top, mercilessly draining my body heat.

"If only I could redo things."

The words slipped out of my mouth, unbidden, as I gazed at the pouring heavens. There was nothing for me up there in that coal-black sky.

"Hm?"

Just when I'd lost all hope, something leaped out at me from the corner of my eye.

"A Second Life For You."

It was a billboard encouraging people to quit their white-collar jobs to work on a rural farm.

My "second life" started the moment I saw that ad.

Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: "The Saint-Tier Farming Advisor"

[The former soldier Rudeus resolved to restart his life farming in Kansas. At the time he made that decision, he had no agricultural knowledge whatsoever. Just getting into a combine harvester triggered his PTSD. As he grappled with weeds and pests, the agricultural advisor appeared before him—Roxy Migurdia. In the blink of an eye, she'd taught Rudeus the ropes.

She also came to see him at his graduation test...]

TAKE MY HAT OFF TO YOU, RUDY. You pass," said Roxy as her beautiful bosoms swayed.

Before us spread the golden wheat field I'd grown from scratch. Even from a distance, you could see every sheaf droop heavily. This was the textbook definition of an abundant harvest.

"Huh? But you haven't seen my other fields yet, have you?" I asked.

Roxy responded with an exaggerated shrug. "I don't need to. They're in the same condition, aren't they? During harvest season, going around just to look at fields is a waste of time."

"Oh, okay."

I started my combine's engine and began reaping.

On Roxy's recommendation, I'd purchased a secondhand combine. Its specs were adequate but simple, making it easy to use. Before long, it became an extension of my limbs.

Reaping went by in a flash. Nevertheless, Roxy and I were sweating by the end.

"Congratulations. You've become a full-fledged farmer," she declared, brushing her sweaty bangs aside and planting a kiss on my cheek.

At that moment, a peculiar feeling rose from deep within the pit of my stomach.

I knew what it was: a feeling of achievement. I'd experienced it in Vietnam when me and my brothers-in-arms succeeded on missions and hugged each other.

Since I started farming, this was the first moment when I felt as though I was taking my first step.

The next day, Roxy told me she had nothing left to teach me. I cried when I saw her go. She'd given me so many things: knowledge, experience, technique. Without her, I'd still have been grappling with PTSD.

Indeed. The single biggest thing she'd done for me was cure my PTSD. That was how I became capable of driving a combine. It was just one simple thing, but now, I didn't have to fear the sound of machinery anymore.

Roxy had done what no one before was able to do for me. Not my wife, my daughter, my old comrades, or my military doctor.

That glamorous, sexy blonde lady deserved my respect.

As I watched Roxy's back grow smaller in the distance, I swore in my heart that I would never forget my respect for her.

Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: "The Elf of Kansas City"

[Sylphiette was a street child living in the slums of a city in Kansas. One day, while sifting through garbage bins for things to sell as usual, she witnessed a thug murder a police officer. Having seen the crime in action, Sylphie became the thug's target.

As she fled him, a man appeared before her: Rudeus Greyrat, a former soldier visiting the city to settle a contract for buying and selling wheat. He beat up the thug in a flash. Sylphie was saved.]

W HEN I SAW A MAN IN BLACK chasing a young boy, the first thing I did was chuck the apple in my hand straight at the back of the guy's head. It hit him squarely where I'd aimed, and juice dripped down to his neck.

"Shit!" the man in black yelled, promptly fleeing the scene.

Only the little boy remained. "Hey, why'd you help me?"

The boy was dangerously thin, the very image of a street child. He was like an elf from a fairy tale. As that thought occurred to me, it even somehow looked as if the boy's ears were pointy. Unfortunately, he was just a very dingy kid, not an elf.

"I mean...they told me in school to look out for the little guy. Well, in the military academy."

"Won't those guys try to get back at you?"

They probably would, if they were actual mafia or gang members. And if they were in cahoots with the police, my life was in danger.

But I told the boy, "Don't worry. They killed a police officer. They're likelier to face payback from the state-owned gangs first."

Of course, I hadn't acted with that much forethought. If my brain were

capable of thinking that far ahead, my wife and daughter wouldn't have left me.

As I walked along, the boy pursued me.

"What? Don't follow me."

"They might kill me before the police catch them."

"Maybe."

"Hey, could you give me somewhere to stay? Just for a little while?"

He was quite an audacious child. I'd stuck my neck out for him, in a sense, but I wasn't planning to babysit him or anything.

"Pretty please, sir. I beg you."

When I looked at the boy, I couldn't help recalling my daughter's face, even though there wasn't a shred of physical resemblance.

"Okay, fine! Whatever!"

"Really?!"

"But in exchange for sheltering you, you've got to help me out with farming. It'll be just as harsh as training for the marines!"

"Okay! I'll do it!" The boy's face lit up.

It really was nice to see a child's smiling face. How could I understand something so basic, yet still have caused my family such pain...?

Damn it all. "Oh, yeah, I didn't ask your name. I'm Rudeus."

"Syl...phie."

"That's a nice name," I remarked. "It's like you're a wind spirit."

Sylphie blushed as he nodded. "Yeah."

Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: "A Jamaican Hero"

[I'm Rudeus Greyrat, a tough, cool, nice guy. After I resigned from my military job because of PTSD, I worked as a tutor for the daughter of a rich family. It turned out she was one hell of a stubborn tomboy.

I got the upper hand to a degree, and managed to teach her some things, but when she hopped aboard a luxury liner, it was a big mess. The liner got shipwrecked, because of course that shit would happen.

Being the tough guy I was, I took the young lady in my arms and swam as far as I could. If I could only save one person, it had to be her. Eventually, I came ashore in an unknown land.

According to that fucking god who'd appeared in my dreams way back in my Vietnam War days, we were in South America.]

W HEN I OPENED MY EYES, the first thing I saw was a man sitting by a campfire. My body moved on instinct. I sprang up, leaped over the campfire, and aimed my gun at his temple.

"Who the hell are you?! Don't tell me you're one of his messengers!"

"Whoa, whoa! Chill out!"

"What did you do to us?!"

"I helped you! What do they teach you at school in your country? You think a bullet's a good present for someone who saved your life?"

When I heard that he'd saved us, I lowered my gun cautiously. The god in my head got most things right, but other times, he shrugged and turned my apparent hunches into tasteless jokes. I had to be on my guard.

With that thought, I appraised the man's appearance. He had emerald-green hair, a red gemstone nose piercing, a vertical scar down his face, and jet-black

skin. At his hip were a bona fide cassette player and maracas. His appearance brought to mind a particular nationality my military instructor Roxy had told me about during my soldier days: Jamaican.

"What happened...?" I asked.

"I passed by and saw you two out cold near the shore, so I pulled you out and set you to dry by the fire. I helped you. Simple."

That was indeed simple.

My train of thought didn't get any further, however, because at that moment Eris's eyes snapped open. She looked surprised at first to see the Jamaican man, but since he was human like us, she took it in stride. It wasn't like she'd heard stories since she was a child that Jamaicans were demons or anything.

"I'm Eris," she said after a pause. "This is Rudeus. Nice to meet you."

"Jeez!" exclaimed the man. "Why's the kid more polite than the old guy?"

"You ought to introduce yourself too!"

"I'm Ruijerd, a traveling musician. I go around South America playing new songs."

I thought his name would include "DJ," but apparently this guy's name was Ruijerd.

When Eris explained our circumstances, Ruijerd jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I like you, little girl. I'll take you back in my trusty car."

Behind him rumbled an Italian car on which a trident mark glowed dully. It was quite the vintage model.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. But don't diss the music in the car. It's my soul."

As I mulled things over, the conversation proceeded without me. When Eris cheerfully climbed into the car, I figured, *Screw it. Might as well.* I'd just focus on acting as Eris's bodyguard and ensuring she got home.

"By the way, where are we?" I asked.

"Ushuaia. Bottom of Argentina."

"You know what they say. If it's not one thing, it's another."

That was how we ended up crossing South America in Ruijerd's car.

Mushoku Tensei School Arc: Sylphiette's Story

MY NAME'S SYLPHIETTE. I'm a seventeen-year-old girl attending high school!

The new semester started today. Time for second year! I had to act as a positive example for younger students.

"Oh no—I'm gonna be late!"

Motivation had fired me up, but I'd be off to a terrible start if I overslept on the first day! Never mind setting a good example—I'd become a case study in what *not* to do!

I leaped out the door and dashed toward school, toast in my mouth. If I kept sprinting, I'd probably make it *just* in time. But, at that moment—

"Ouch!"

Somebody had come around the corner and bumped right into me.

I fell onto my butt, my eyes glued to my toast flying through the air. It flipped, and predictably, the jam fell off. Now I couldn't eat it! Oh—wait. It would be inedible when it hit the ground anyway.

I heard a groan of pain. "That stung..."

Looking up, I saw that the guy who'd bumped into me was also on his butt. He had light-brown hair and attractive features... Oh, gosh. He was kind of a hunk!

"Er, um, sorry. Are you okay?" I asked hastily.

"Huh?" He looked up and saw me. "Ah." His face lit up in a flash.

Why that expression? I wondered.

"It's been ages!"

Ages?

"It's me! Remember me?"

Was this one of those impersonation scams? I doubted I'd forget someone this good-looking. On the other hand, he wore my school's uniform, so it wouldn't be weird if we were acquainted. Truthfully, I had the feeling we'd met somewhere before.

"Huh? I guess you've forgotten," he added. "Um, you are Sylphie, right?" "Mm-hmm..." Sylphie was my name, yes.

The boy scratched the back of his head. He looked as though he was trying to find the right words to say. As he thought, his eyes wandered—but at a certain point, they stopped.

Oh, crud!

When I fell over, my skirt had flipped up, exposing my panties to the world. I hurriedly crossed my legs. At the exact moment I covered myself, he looked away. Judging by that reaction, I didn't even need to ask whether he'd seen.

"Eeeeeeeek!"

I was late to school that day, and missed the beginning of the opening ceremony, but I didn't have to stand in the hallway or anything.

When homeroom started, everyone introduced themselves in front of the class by seat order; that was a tradition. Some combined junior and senior high schools might see it as unnecessary and forego it, but I liked it.

"My name's Sylphiette," I said briskly, voice slightly raised. "I'm good at water and wind magic, and I'm in the Invocation Magic Club. Nice to meet you all!"

My classmates clapped. Despite the incident that morning, I'd introduced myself cheerfully, starting my life as a second-year high schooler with a clean slate.

Thinking back, I hadn't been good at public speaking in the past. I'd been bullied in the early years of elementary school. That was partly because my family was poor, and my hair color was different from the other kids', but the key reason was my insecurity.

A boy named Rudeus had dragged me out of my shell. I remembered him even now. Rudy had stood up to those bullies for me. He'd taught me magic,

and how to feel confident in myself. He'd also taken off my panties out of the blue because he thought I was a boy. I *did* kind of want to forget that last memory...

At any rate, he'd transferred away when we were second-graders. *Oh...* Now that I was thinking about him, that guy this morning had sort of looked like Rudy.

My ears suddenly registered a classmate's speech. "I'm Rudeus Greyrat. I transferred from Asura High School. I'm good at earth and water magic. I still don't know what club I'm going to join. Hope we all get along."

"Huh?" Hearing the name the boy introduced himself by, my head instinctively swiveled in his direction.

"Hm?" The speaker was the guy I'd bumped into that morning. I hadn't noticed that we were in the same classroom, maybe because I'd been late to school.

"Rudy?"

"Oh, you remembered? Sorry about this morning." The boy—Rudy—smiled brightly.

The sight pierced my heart. The Rudy I'd always loved as a child had turned into such a hot guy! He grinned, looking me right in the eye.

"Come on, Sylphie! You'll make the transfer student feel awkward, staring at him that passionately!"

The class burst into laughter at Luke's words.

I clamped my mouth shut, turning to face the front. Rudeus smiled awkwardly as he took his own seat.

I couldn't restrain the grin tugging my lips. Rudy had transferred to my school. Now, I'd get to spend a year with him. My heart pounded helplessly in my chest at that thought.

Mushoku Tensei School Arc: Roxy's Story

MY NAME IS ROXY. Roxy Migurdia. I'm an eighteen-year-old high school student attending Sharia Private Academy. Despite my age, I haven't grown taller since middle school, so people always say I look childish.

Regardless, I was a third-year student this year, so I would finish my club activities for good this summer. Thus, I'd make this year my swan song.

"Or so I planned...!" I gasped.

Here I was, running to school with toast in my mouth.

When I woke up that morning, I realized the clock hands were pointing to a time way past normal. That jolted me out of bed and set me scrambling into my uniform. I grabbed my schoolbag, which I'd packed the night before, and snatched up a piece of toast before flying out the door.

Despite my best efforts, it looked like I'd barely make it on time. In other words... "I'm gonna be late for my first day of practice!"

If I wasn't on time, my carefully constructed image as an academic elite would fall apart. I'd never made any major mistakes before. I was always top of my class, plus a national-level athlete in club activities, and younger students admired me.

Then again, I'd always been like this. Just when I thought I had things in the bag, I'd screw up with some idiot mistake.

That had happened the summer of my final year of junior high. As a rear guard with a water affinity, it had been my responsibility to stop the vanguard, who had a fire affinity. If I'd only been able to block my opponent then and there, we would've held on to our lead until time ran out.

My mind was stuck in the past, so I failed to notice something in the present: a boy flying around the corner, right into my path.

"Ah!"

He must've noticed me at the exact same time, because our eyes met. At that point, it was impossible to avoid what would happen next.

Bam!

A frontal collision. The impact sent me flying backward and knocked the toast I'd been chewing into the air.

"Ouch... You should watch where you're running!" That was a rather hypocritical thing for me to say, admittedly.

The guy seemed apologetic, though. "I'm really sorry. I was in a hurry."

Like me, he'd landed on his butt, so I got a direct look at his face.

"Ah...!" I couldn't help gasping. He had the sort of features you didn't often see these days.

He likewise stared at me wordlessly, his expression stunned. Maybe I was his type as well. No—that couldn't be it. With my scrawny junior high school-looking body, I was nobody's type.

Wait. I realized he'd never actually looked at my face this whole time. His gaze was pointed lower.

"Yikes!" I hurriedly adjusted my skirt, which had flipped up in the kerfuffle.

"S-sorry!" the boy apologized with a beet-red face. Despite everything, I really liked his expression.

"I forgive you. I-it's not the end of the world." If anything, I wanted to apologize for subjecting him to such a miserable sight. As I stood up, a strange mood came over me. "I have morning practice now. So, um, see you!"

"Oh, wa-"

I dashed off, cutting the conversation short, but I still wound up late for that morning's practice.

That evening, after classes wrapped up, I met with my club again. The captain got mad at me for running into our first morning practice late. For their part, the more junior members laughed at me, though they were distracted by the

incoming members.

"Okay, let's welcome our new members today. Line up, everyone." prompted Jenius, the club advisor. The first-year students stood in a row. "Introduce yourselves, starting from this end. If you have experience, I'd like you to state your position and affinity."

The newcomers took turns introducing themselves. Quite a few had prior experience, and it was nice to see so many skilled players. However, several seemed to have big heads from their junior high school clubs, and acted quite cocky around their seniors.

As a first year, I'd been just like them, often disrupting the team's harmony because I was just so full of myself. Now, however, I was a third-year playing on the national level. I'd present the new members with a dignified attitude befitting a senior.

That was the plan, at least. But I couldn't keep a poker face when the last person in line stepped forward.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Rudeus Greyrat, a middle guard balanced between earth and water affinities!"

He was the guy from that morning—the one who'd seen my panties. So much for my imposing presence.

"I'm sure many of you know this already, but young Rudeus here was MVP at the national junior high tournament. Of course, high school's a completely different kettle of fish, so he won't get special treatment," Jenius said, probably for our benefit. "Still, the second-and third-year players better keep their training up so Rudeus doesn't steal their positions!"

The junior-high MVP. He certainly wouldn't lack firepower, although he didn't seem like the type who would gel well with a team.

"Any remarks, Rudeus?" asked Jenius.

"Yes! I'll do my best on this team! It's always been my dream to play alongside Roxy!"

At those words, every third-year snapped their head toward me in unison.

Some people even whistled.

"What?" I mean, I was a national-level player, and I had some fans...but still.

"I started playing this sport because I always wanted you to teach me, Roxy! We went to different junior highs, so we couldn't be teammates back then. But that's always been a goal of mine!"

His words reminded me of something. Back in elementary school, a kid showed up to the club I attended for one day, and I'd taught him a tiny bit of offensive magic.

"I hope we can work together in the future, Roxy."

My heart started pounding at the sight of the boy's bright smile. He was just my type.

Mushoku Tensei School Arc: Eris Greyrat's Story

Y O! MY NAME'S RUDEUS GREYRAT. I'm seventeen years old, and a nice guy!

The new semester started today. Time for second year! I had to act as a positive example for younger students.

"Oh no—I'm gonna be late!"

Motivation had fired me up, but I'd be off to a terrible start if I overslept on the first day! Never mind setting a good example—I'd become a case study in what *not* to do!

I leaped out the door and dashed toward school, toast in my mouth. If I kept sprinting, I'd probably make it *just* in time. But, at that moment—

"Ouch!"

Somebody had come around the corner and bumped right into me.

My toast spun through the air and landed flat on the side spread with jam. Rest in peace, breakfast. Wait—I had more important things to think about.

"That stung..."

As I nursed my butt, I looked up at the girl who'd bumped into me. We'd collided head-on at a blistering pace, but she stood perfectly uninjured.

I recognized her uniform, but her vibe was totally different from any other female student's. She had blazing-red hair and a slightly longer skirt. On top of that, her eyes glared at me with a ferocious glint that would probably have daunted a tiger. There was no question—she was a delinquent!

What a disaster. I'd led such an ordinary, unobtrusive life as a student, only to bump into a bad influence completely against my volition.

"Er, um, I'm really sorry," I told her. "My eyes aren't great at this early hour, so, uh... Are you hurt?"

The first order of business was to apologize. When you encounter something scary, apologize—even if you're not at fault. That was my secret to success in life.

What? You'd argue that I didn't have any pride? Ha! Which was worse for your pride— apologizing from the start, or apologizing on your hands and knees with a black eye, plus a nose running from bawling? The answer's obvious, when you think about it. I was apologizing of my own free will in this case. See?

Perhaps my apology spooked the girl. Her mouth curled into a grimace. "Hmph," she snorted after a pause. "Whatever."

Her eyes traveled downward, then stuck on something that provoked a somber expression.

What was it? I wondered. Was she interested in my toned body? I wasn't so ripped that you could see it through my clothes, but...

Wait. What if... Was my fly open?

"Oops...sorry." It had indeed been open. I closed the zipper. Man, that had been unfortunate timing. It'd be best to make myself scarce. "Oh, jeez. It's late. If I don't pick up my pace, I'll miss the train. See you later."

"Hold it, you," she called out.

I turned stiff as a statue. I only had five hundred yen in my wallet, you know—enough to buy my school lunch, and no more.

"You and I go to the same school."

"So it seems."

I'd recognized her uniform because students at this school wore it. In light of that, I could pretty much predict what she wanted from me. She was going to make me her gofer, for sure.

"I'm a bit lost. Show me the way."

Or not.

In the end, I wasn't late for school. I'd thought I was, but it turned out I'd misunderstood, drowsily misreading the clock hands.

"Leave it to Master to put in the effort to show up on time right from day one," my best friend Zanoba said.

Anyway, I'd avoided that crisis. The opening ceremony ended without incident, and everyone split up and headed to their respective classrooms. I was a little sad to be in a different class than both Zanoba and my childhood friend Sylphie, but whatever. We were in the same club.

"Hello, everyone. I'm your homeroom teacher, Roxy Migurdia."

Personal gripes aside, I was happy that I was in Roxy's class. I loved her as a teacher. She'd tutored me at home back in junior high, and she was a big reason I'd chosen to enroll in this school. I'll spare you the finer details about that, though.

"Okay, let's introduce ourselves," she said. "Why don't we do it by seat order?"

Although Roxy was kicking off self-introductions, I had a large circle of acquaintances, so I knew pretty much everyone's names already. Even the girl who spoke next, I knew on sight.

"I'm Eris Boreas Greyrat. I transferred here from the Fittoa Region."

"Hey!" I stood up without thinking. "You're the delinquent who saw my undies this morning!"

Everyone in the classroom stared at me.

"Did he say 'undies'?" I heard one person murmur.

"Isn't the word 'delinquent' kinda old-fashioned?" another asked.

Eris said nothing. As her classmates' gazes fell upon her, her face darkened by the second. With a scowl, she stomped over to me, and...

"Hmph!"

With a single snort, she punched me in the solar plexus.

"Oof..." I took my seat, clutching my stomach.

"That ends my self-introduction. Thanks."

With that curt closer, Eris also sat down.

That's the story of how I met Eris. At that moment, I couldn't have imagined that we'd team up in the Offensive Magic Club's doubles section and earn a ticket to the national tournament.

Ghost Stories of the University of Magic

WE SAT IN A CIRCLE in a dimly lit room. My room in the boys' dorm, to be precise.

There were five of us: me, Zanoba, Julie, Linia, and Pursena. Faint light from several candles cast shadows across our faces.

Sitting in the darkness, Pursena picked up a candle. "My name is Pursena Adoldia. I am a candidate for the next Doldia chieftain, and an extremely beautiful healing-magic user. Allow me to tell you a frightening story from my life."

It was summer, so it was time for some good old ghost stories.

Of course, that tradition didn't exist in this world, but I'd proposed we give it a shot. Basically, I suggested we have fun telling spooky stories and give Julie a good scare. I hadn't gone out of my way to invite Linia and Pursena, but they ended up attending too.

At the start, Julie had clutched Zanoba's sleeve with a scared look on her face. That made sense, since the point of this exercise was to rattle her. Now, however, she was the picture of serenity. You see, none of the stories thus far had been particularly scary.

FYI, I'd told a story from my old world, while Zanoba had talked about a oneeyed giant. Linia recounted how she'd eaten an unfamiliar fish in the Great Forest during the rainy season and been sick to her stomach. She'd spent a whole day in agony, and the day after she took medicine from town, a twometer parasite had erupted from her butt.

That sure was a scary story, albeit in an unconventional sense. It genuinely freaked me out. Julie seemed totally unmoved, though. She said something about hunger pangs being worse than stomachaches.

Frightening Julie would be up to our last storyteller, Pursena. Frankly, I wasn't holding my breath. Of the two delinquents, she was the soft, cuddly-looking one; I didn't expect a scary story out of her mouth.

"One day," she began breathlessly, "I went to the butcher in town to pick up meat I'd ordered."

"What do you mean, 'one day'?" Linia interjected. "You're such a pig, you go every day, mew."

"Quiet, you!" Pursena puffed out her cheeks, affronted. "This is an *especially* scary story. In fact, you all ought to go to the toilet first, so you don't soil yourselves!"

For all Pursena's vehemence, Linia's comment had added realism to the tale.

"I guess the butcher wasn't getting foot traffic that day because of the rain," she continued. "They gave me a little unsold stock."

I more or less saw where the story was going, since it sounded just like Linia's tale. Pursena would eat rotten meat and end up with a stomachache. Jeez, these guys were pretty single-minded about food.

"Having received a big pile of meat, I walked home feeling very pleased. On the way back, though, I suddenly realized something. If I had *that* much meat to spare, I ought to share at least a little with Boss."

"A wise judgment for you, mew," Linia said.

"My judgment's always good."

The story had taken an unexpected turn. How was I a character?

"I carried the meat to Boss's room... In other words, this very place!"

Aha. She intended to set up some kind of plot device in this room. Come to think of it, this place *would* be way creepier if Pursena linked it to some uncanny event. At the end, she could tell Julie something like "Look behind you!"

Maybe I *could* buy into this story.

"Girls generally aren't allowed in this dorm," Pursena continued. "So I climbed in from outside and clung to the window."

Linia blinked in surprise and said nothing, mouth clamped shut. She might know this story already.

"I opened the window, trying not to be noisy, and peered inside. That was when I saw it." Pursena cut herself off, and her gaze swiveled to me. "Dressed in his underwear, dancing like a maniac around a pair of panties...was Boss!"

Oh, right. I remembered something like that happening not long ago. Pursena had climbed through the window as I finished my post-training prayers.

"As I stood there, frozen, Boss turned to me and said..." Pursena's eyes widened, and her tail stood up stiff as a stick. In an eerie voice, she cried, "'So you saaaaaw!'"

Come on. I hadn't been that intimidating. It was more like "Oh, you saw? Gosh, Pursena. You're such a perv, ha ha!"

"Eek!" Alarmed squeaks came from Linia and Julie.

Eyes still wide, Pursena slowly shifted her gaze away from me, toward the shrine containing God's divine form. She sucked in her breath, staring directly in front of her. Then, abruptly, she stood and flung open the altar doors.

Roxy's holy idol rested inside.

"Aaaaaugh!" Pursena screeched eerily.

"Eeeeeeek!" Julie followed suit with a bloodcurdling scream. Tears streamed down her face, and she clung to Zanoba. Judging by her expression, she was on the verge of peeing herself. Why the over-the-top reaction?

"That was majorly spooky, mew..." Linia had scampered to the corner of the room, her expression twisted in fear. But, again, how come?

"I would never anticipate *that* sight..." Zanoba was also pale. He gripped Julie's shoulders, as if shielding her from me.

Somebody please tell me why!

"That concludes my story. Just recalling it sends shivers down my spine." Pursena closed the door. Her face, like the others', was deathly pale.

"Hey, Pursena," I said.

After a beat, she said, "What is it, Boss?"

I scowled. "Did it occur to you that I might get mad at you for sharing that?"

"Ah." Pursena stiffened briefly, and her tail curled between her legs. She must've been so fixated on her goal that she forgot everything else. "Eek! D-don't get the wrong idea. I wasn't trying to make fun of you. I-I'm so sorry."

Pursena's frightening experience was only just starting.

Cliff Goes to a Brothel

This happened not long after Elinalise and Cliff started dating. I'd gone into town to buy some shoes. Too much running had worn holes in my current pair, and I needed to ensure the replacements were durable enough for an adventurer, hence my need to trek into town.

After browsing the stalls for nearly an hour, I picked a pair made of good material. They were secondhand, so they were cheap enough for my budget. I walked home in a cheerful mood, feeling the satisfaction of a good purchase.

On the way back, I happened to see it. My eyes were inadvertently subjected to the sight of Cliff emerging from a certain establishment, smiling brightly. It was the sort of place where you paid money to have a pretty lady do something nice for you.

In other words...a brothel.

Cliff had started dating Elinalise just a short while ago—yet he'd emerged from one of those places. Could pure, serious Cliff really have...?

No way. Elinalise was one thing, but I couldn't imagine Cliff pulling that kind of stunt.

Wait. I was being hasty. When I thought about it rationally, Cliff was a young man. Surely there were times when he gave in to temptation. He was just having a bit of fun. Right. This wasn't *infidelity*. Elinalise herself probably gave him the leeway. Right. Yeah. Anyway, I'd pretend I hadn't seen any of this.

As I wavered, Cliff spotted me.

"Hm?"

When his eyes fell on me, he jogged over with a slightly awkward expression. Oh, hell. Why was he approaching me? I'd decided to pretend I saw nothing!

"Hi," he said.

"I won't tell anyone." I managed to muster. Those words were all I could

really say.

"Huh? Oh... Well, I suppose it *would* cause trouble if you went around telling everybody."

"You can trust me. I mean...despite my condition, I'm a guy, so I get where you're coming from."

If my ED was ever cured, I might also frequent that kind of place. I had once before, even without all the working parts. Sure, it had ended pathetically, but it wasn't a bad experience, all in all. Of course, if I had a special someone, I was pretty sure I wouldn't go... Nah. People were weak. I couldn't even trust myself.

Either way, curiosity overcame me. "How was it?" It was human nature to ask.

"Uh...good." Cliff's cheeks turned as red as mine probably were. Still, he'd given his review, for what it was worth.

I see. It was good, huh? "Better than usual?"

"I guess so. A bit better than usual."

Holy hell. Better than doing it with Elinalise, a veteran among veterans? That was, well... I had to say, it piqued my interest. When I was an active adventurer, I'd often heard people say Elinalise was top-tier, although I hadn't heard any gory details. Then again, Elinalise wasn't a *prostitute*. Maybe she was a step below the pros?

"Oh. Still, if you keep this up, you might yawn in front of Elinalise."

"Yeah, that's obvious. Too much, and my body won't hold up."

It "wouldn't hold up," huh? Well, that made sense. He'd just had his fun here, and Elinalise would be waiting for him when he got home, so he'd be planning on another round. At that point, yeah, it was debatable whether his body would hold up. To be honest, Cliff didn't seem inexhaustible.

"At any rate, let's get out of here quickly," I urged. "If we get caught in this kind of place, there'll be drama."

"What do you mean by 'drama'?" Cliff looked confused.

"I mean, you know... If the two of us stand here, it looks like we just went into

a brothel. If Elinalise spots us..."

"What will happen if I spot you?"

"Yikes!"

When I swung around, *she* was there. A beautiful, slender elf with gorgeous hair. Elinalise.

"Er, uh, it's, um, not what you think. Cliff definitely wasn't doing anything wrong. I, um... Yeah, it was me! I was trying to drag Cliff down a seedy path! He's not the bad guy! It's all my fault!"

Making up these panicked excuses, I glanced in Cliff's direction. It'd be over for him if Elinalise found out he'd visited a brothel. If she dumped him, that'd be one thing, but she wasn't the type to leave someone over something like that. Instead, she'd almost certainly say something like "I'll make sure to satisfy you completely!" and transform into a succubus when evening fell.

If that happened, Cliff would soon be doomed to mummification. Elinalise would suck him dry morning to night, and he'd turn into a bony husk and perish.

"What are you saying, Rudeus? I just left the brothel and bumped into you."

Oh my god. This guy was incapable of taking a hint!

"Oh?" At this point, Elinalise seemed to catch on. A knowing grin spread across her face. "Rudeus, are you perhaps under the mistaken impression that Cliff hired a woman?"

At those words, Cliff's face turned sullen. "I'd never do anything of the sort. You're the only one I love, Lise."

This had taken a weird turn. What the heck was going on?

"Cliff and I rented a room at the brothel for role-play," Elinalise explained. "I can arrange that kind of thing because I have connections at this establishment."

So, uh...basically, they'd pretended to be a prostitute and her customer, and Elinalise had left the brothel to rejoin Cliff from a direction I wasn't looking in.

"But, oh, my dear Cliff, I'm ever so flattered to hear I'm the only one for you, given my past."

"H-hmph. It's the truth."

"Aah. I love you so much. I'll give you my heart and body anytime..."

"I-I'm happy to hear you say that, but you should be, um, more reserved. And maybe tone it down in public."

They virtually radiated love hearts that bounced off my cheek, threatening to give me heartburn.

"Oh, that's the story, huh? All right. Guess I should, uh, be off." I didn't want to get in the lovebirds' way, so I left the scene.

Cliff's "cheating" turned out merely to be a misunderstanding on my end. I sighed. When my ED was gone, and I found my own partner, I resolved to treat them as well as possible.

Reflecting on that, I hurried down the path home.

The Boss of the Academy

This story happened one day like a bolt out of the blue. Since I had the title "academy's biggest baddie" in hand, most ordinary students gave me a wide berth. Day to day, even the rough-looking ones avoided eye contact and cleared the way for me.

I wasn't acting like a blowhard, though. I really did want a humble existence. Other people did their thing around me, but I didn't let that go to my head. I just wanted to live my life.

"Oh! Hey, Boss! You're here!"

Unfortunately, some people couldn't read unspoken cues and did their darndest to puff me up.

Case in point: Linia. After spotting me from a distance, that chick came running to me. If she was this happy to see me, it couldn't mean anything good.

"Weren't you supposed to be with Pursena today?" I wanted to heed my instincts and ignore her, but that was bound to cause trouble in its own way.

"She went to pick up some meat she ordered from the butcher, mew."

"She's always got something ordered, huh...?"

"She even makes requests for adventurers, mew," Linia said, shaking her head in exasperation.

I doubted Linia had come to me for light chitchat. "So, what do you want?"

"Come with me for a bit, mew. There's this pesky newcomer who won't listen to me at all, 'cause they wanna meet you. You gotta show them you're imposing and make them understand who's boss."

See? I'd known this was coming. "Please stop. I can't show off by being imposing. I bet this newcomer will browbeat *me*, if anything."

"It'll be fine! Don't sweat it. You've got this in the bag, Boss." Linia showed absolutely no inclination to respect my refusal.

She wound up dragging me to an area behind the campus. This place was heaven for felines, and Linia often napped there. The sun was high in the sky, casting lots of shade, and almost ten cats lazed in the warm sunlight. When Linia approached, they sprang awake and mewed sweetly as they cozied up to her legs. That was the Doldia Tribe's charisma for you.

"Where's this newcomer?" I asked. No way was she talking about a cat.

"Right here, mew."

She was, apparently. Linia pointed at the warm spot where the sunlight was strongest. A single cat sprawled out there. When it caught sight of Linia and me, it took on a very impudent demeanor indeed, snorting and glaring at us with a face that said, What do you punks want?

"Hey, you dirtbag! You think you can get away with taking that attitude with the Boss? You think you got your little corner there by aggravating him? Mew?"

I wasn't sure whether to consider this conversation between a cat and a catgirl heartwarming or cringey. At any rate, the newcomer (or whatever) rose with a sour expression. Although it couldn't talk, I felt like it was giving me some sort of greeting.

That was when I saw it.

Oh...!

Something lay underneath the impudent cat's belly—a shape I remembered distinctly. The shape was pure white, yet tattered in places.

"Isn't that your treasure, Boss...?" Linia asked.

I felt my hair bristle in the silence that ensued.

Wait. No way. That couldn't be the holy idol. I was sure I'd prayed to it only that morning. Then I'd left it safe and sound inside the altar. Did this mean that, in the few hours between then and now, the cat had sneaked into my room, intent upon thievery?

"Freakin' cat burglar...!" I muttered.

The other cats scuttled away like baby spiders. As for the incriminated cat in question, its tail shot up menacingly. It tried to run off, only for Linia to

immediately grab it.

"Too bad, mew... You did something you weren't supposed to. But Boss, seeing how this thief's got my face, I want your heart to spare it some forgiveness. It just likes stealing panties as a hobby."

"I'll skin it alive and use it as a doormat."

"Yikes! Just, uh, calm down a bit, would ya? You're not acting like your usual self, Boss..."

"Don't worry. I learned to skin animals on the Demon Continent. I can do it quickly and cleanly."

The cat went stock-still, looking like it was about to pee itself. But I sure wasn't shrugging this incident off. You could say the holy idol was an extension of my soul. It had helped me through so many tough times. To think that it was now in tatters... Wait.

"Hold on. These aren't the holy idol, are they?"

I could tell, since I'd gazed upon it every single day. These panties looked similar, but they were subtly different in parts.

Linia averted her gaze, silent.

Spotting its chance, the cat wriggled out of her grasp and jumped to the ground, then sped off like a frightened rabbit.

"W-well, now it knows who the scariest one at the school is, mew! All good, huh? Thanks for pitching in, Boss."

Oh—now I got it. To teach the cat a lesson, Linia had given it a similar-looking pair of panties she'd ripped up. The audacity of this chick...

"Seriously, Linia...? All good indeed."

"Yep! Now we've restored peace to this school, mew!"

"That's not what I meant. If those panties had been the real holy idol, the doormat would've been you."

Linia literally turned tail and ran.

From that day forth, even the cats started avoiding me. But sometimes, when

I woke in the mornings, there was a dead rat on my pillow. I took that to mean the cats didn't have it out for mehopefully.

The Demon King's Counseling Room

O NE DAY, AS I WALKED down the hallway to class, Master Fitz appeared in front of me.

"Ah, Rudeus. I finally found you. I've been searching for you."

He rarely came looking for me, so I wondered if I'd done something wrong, although nothing came to mind.

"I've got a bit of a favor to ask you. Is now a good time?"

"Sure," I answered promptly. "Leave it to me." Master Fitz helped me a lot. If he was coming to me for a favor, there was no way I could turn him down.

"Thanks. I'm relieved to hear that. You're the only one I can rely on for this."

I was the only one he could rely on? Uh-oh. At that point, I had a bad feeling. What now? I wanted to do whatever I could to help Fitz, but I'd need to refuse if he said something like, "After the demon king's onslaught, the Dragon God's come to attack. Please defend us." Actually, I'd probably piss myself before I could even form words.

But it'd be fine, right? Master Fitz wouldn't push some ridiculously insurmountable task on me.

He led me to the courtyard. "Look over there."

One section of the courtyard—or the center, more like—was blocked by a throng of people. Amid them stood a familiar giant with black, steely skin.

"Demon King! I'm a demon, but I was born here and don't know anything about the Demon Continent. What kind of place is it?"

"Bwa ha ha! The monsters are dangerous, and they move in packs. Still, they have pleasant sides too! You should go there when you're strong enough to handle yourself!"

"Demon King! I find it hard to study. What should I do?"

"Bwa ha ha! I've survived thousands of years unable to study! Most

knowledge is make-believe. Only a handful of things are truly important! Don't pressure yourself about your studies!"

"Demon King! How do I find a partner?!"

"Bwa ha ha! Go around telling all your romantic interests that you like them! Then bend over backward for whoever reciprocates!"

Badigadi was answering questions for the demonic children crowded around him. He sure was popular, like a star or something. I mean, he was a star in a certain sense—he was the demon king. And, despite his scary face, he was an amiable guy. No wonder people liked him.

"What about it?" I asked Fitz.

"Well, they're right in the middle of the courtyard, so it's hard for people to get through. And there's a lot of intimidating-looking demons, you know? Some girls complained that they're scared. Could you do something?"

I contemplated the dilemma for a moment. "I think I get the picture," I said finally.

It was hard to deny that plenty of demons looked scary. Assemble them in a crowd, and their aura was guaranteed to intimidate people. On top of that, if you gathered enough people in one spot, things tended to escalate. Badigadi was a pacifist, but he loved chaos; if trouble broke out, he wouldn't lift any of his many fingers to stop it. It was only a matter of time before there would be commotion.

"All right. You can trust me to handle this," I said.

"Really? Thanks a bunch." Fitz paused. "If a fight breaks out, I'll be sure to provide backup."

"Don't worry. It won't turn into a big drama."

I had a plan.

The next day, the courtyard was in a completely different state. The crowd in the middle had disappeared, for starters. Instead, a long line snaked around the courtyard edge. At the very end of the line, a student held a sign that read "line up here." Each time a new student joined the line, the sign got passed along.

Students loyal to the Demon King were busy managing the line. When I told them this was for the sake of His Majesty and his followers, they'd gladly started helping out.

At the front of the line sat a plain stone table and chairs. The gigantic Badigadi took up an equally massive chair. In front of the dark-skinned demon king was a sign that read "demon king's counseling table."

"Um, Demon King... This is a little hard to talk about..."

"Bwa ha ha! My ears are sharp! You may whisper your query if you please!"

"Okay. So..." Whispering ensued.

"Bwa ha ha! Make sure you get your nutrients and pray to a god! You might not understand this now, but in time, you will see there are things more important than size!"

"Thank you so much!"

"No problem! Next!"

Badigadi dispensed advice to each student who sat in front of him. Their reactions were all over the place. Some students looked eager to apply what they'd heard, others not so much. Most left the table looking happy, though.

When the bell rang to signify the end of the consultations, Badigadi stood up. "Hunh. Would you look at the time? No more today, you lot!"

"Everyone still in line, grab a numbered ticket! You can keep your place in the line next time!" The students managing the line handed out numbers so that those who hadn't consulted Badigadi would leave without causing a ruckus.

Gazing upon the scene from a distance, I asked Master Fitz, "How's this?"

The Demon King's popularity drew people in. Since those people didn't gather for any particular purpose, they didn't recognize that they were hindering others, nor that they were physically in the way. In light of that, they probably wouldn't be receptive to a scolding. Thus, I'd had the idea to flip the premise around. If a gathering was bad because it was disorganized, all you needed to do was introduce a system.

"Um...this is kind of different from what I expected," Fitz remarked.

"Is it a bad solution?"

"No...I think it's good. I mean, I doubt there'll be any commotion." His face was rather strained.

The Demon King Badigadi kept running his counseling table until the day he disappeared from the academy.

Nanahoshi the Gourmet

MY NAME IS NANAHOSHI SHIZUKA. I arrived in this world some years ago.

It was full of ridiculous things. People had strange ethics. Massive creatures walked around, looking like they'd collapse under their own weight. And, for some reason, I never got any older.

Think going to another world is all fun and games? Jealous because I didn't age? Don't make me laugh. I was all too aware that my existence was nothing but an aberration in this world.

I wanted to get back to my home world as quickly as possible. I thought about that every single day. And anyway, despite my unageing body, I still got hungry. If I didn't eat, I'd die of starvation.

Here's the thing, though: this world's food tasted awful. Since I'd been born and raised on Japan's cuisine, this food was mind-blowingly bad to me. Astringent beans, smelly meat, bitter vegetables—people fried them or threw them into a pot without even basic preparations. Of course it tasted rancid.

I wasn't trying to replace the cuisine here, naturally, but I asked professional chefs to make dishes based on my old world's recipes. Unfortunately, my personal experience with cooking had been restricted to classes. I hadn't even made Valentine's Day chocolate. Since I couldn't convey what I wanted clearly, the chefs only ever botched the dishes.

"Oh boy..."

I sighed, not for the first time, as I sipped a soup based on curry. Not to diss the chef, but it gave me the urge to retch.

I pined for a hamburger, wanting to experience the flavor of cheap junk food one more time. That forlorn thought was at the front of my mind as I swallowed the soup, taking care that none got on my tongue.

At that moment, a guy sat in front of me—Rudeus. "Excuse me."

He'd loaded his tray with the same dish I had and abruptly joined my table,

Zanoba and Julie at his side. Cliff also sat down next to me.

"Hey, this is my spot," I blurted.

Rudeus looked around and shrugged. "It's fine, isn't it? Everywhere else is full."

Now that he mentioned it, yeah, the rest of the cafeteria was packed. This was the only table with empty seats. Still, these guys normally ate somewhere else. I was pretty sure there was a terrace outside...

As I was about to voice my annoyance, Cliff unfurled a drawing on the table. How rude of him. "Take a look at this," he said. "It's a magic circle to suppress curses. Connecting these parts makes a curse a couple times less powerful."

"Oh, nice."

"Where? Where?"

Rudeus and Zanoba ignored me, focusing on the drawing. They began swapping opinions as I said nothing. Eating a meal while three boys boxed me in felt mortifying. I wanted to hurry and finish so I could get back to my room.

However, since I'd spent the last few years researching magic circles, I understood the drawing. By pouring magic into the outer ring, then channeling it into the inner ring, you could nullify something like a magic item. I also noticed that pushing the magic to the smaller ring would produce irregularities between the two circles.

"The results didn't come out as I expected," Cliff said. "I want to hear your opinions."

"Let's see," said Zanoba. "It's hard to say. The design looks adequately connected to me."

"I'm just a beginner in magic circles, but maybe there's a barrier you can't see," Rudeus remarked.

"Doesn't using that bypass cause your circle's excess magic to overflow?" I was just muttering to myself, but everyone's eyes turned to me.

For a moment, Cliff froze. His face reddened in seconds. "That can't be! I wouldn't make such a rookie mistake!" he exclaimed.

He gazed sharply at the spot where I'd pointed. Before long, his red face paled. His eyebrows, previously twisted in anger, settled into a serious, intent expression.

"Right. There *is* an overflow," he acknowledged, frustration evident in his voice. He turned back to me. "Heh. You've earned your reputation, Silent Sevenstar. Looks like you've got a slight edge when it comes to magic circles."

Being praised felt awkward. "Well, I look at them every day." Averting my gaze, I carried some soup to my mouth.

Cliff's eyes fell to the drawing once more. "If there's an overflow there, I can't use this design." He groaned. "I don't have an alternative one, so this entire line of research is a bust."

"Not at all. If you used bypasses on these two spots, you could create an additional magic circle to consolidate excess magic."

Cliff blinked. "Whoa! That makes sense!"

After that, he asked me for input on parts of the diagram he was focused on. As I sipped my soup, I answered his questions. For better or worse, the years I'd spent researching this topic meant I knew quite a lot.

"Ah..."

Suddenly, I realized I'd completely run out of soup. I normally left a little food on my plate, but this time was different from usual—I'd finished the entire bowl at some point.

I felt someone's silent gaze upon me. When I snapped my head up, Rudeus was looking at me with a grin. "Doesn't food taste better when you eat while chatting with someone?"

I looked away at his words. Somehow, I had the feeling that he saw right through me. Still, it was true I'd gotten through my entire meal.

If I'm with someone, even this awful food might be okay, I thought as I finished at the cafeteria that day.

A Newlywed Wife's Home Cooking

MY NAME IS SYLPHIETTE. I'm a bodyguard for Ariel, the Asura Kingdom's second-oldest princess. Recently, I married Rudeus Greyrat, and we're living a sparkling life as newlyweds.

"Newlyweds," I repeated to myself, reflecting on my situation. "I'm going to wait for my husband to return to our newly bought house, and then he's going to eat my cooking. Tee hee...hee hee hee...ooh...!"

I couldn't restrain my smile. I was a *newlywed*. I'd married Rudy, the boy I'd always loved. I was his wife! We lived together in this house, just the two of us. Helping each other, loving each other. This was the life I'd dreamed of since I was little!

"Now then..."

I couldn't afford to get complacent. My ideals would clash with reality in a matter of just years. Real life wasn't as pretty as stories or daydreams. The knight and princess I'd dreamed of might've looked nice on the outside, but you couldn't describe them as realistically beautiful inside, however generous you were being. I didn't *dislike* them, but that point stood.

Married life wouldn't be all roses, either. Something small could unbalance it, so I'd have to be careful to cover all my bases.

In reality, an important part of maintaining a happy marriage was...cooking. Rudy's mother Zenith had once told me "You need to keep a firm hold on your spouse's stomach once you're wedded."

Yes, I had to hold on to Rudy's stomach!

Today was my first day of married life, and I would spend my first "average" night with Rudy. It was no exaggeration that this would prove definitively whether I could cook delicious food for him, now and into the future. That was why I was really grateful to Princess Ariel for giving me time off. I thanked her silently as I went into town and bought ingredients.

"First, I have to prepare."

I wouldn't do much prep for this meal, though. I'd already demonstrated that I could prepare a banquet, and as a married woman, I wouldn't necessarily make time-consuming meals all the time. In fact, I'd make simple dishes more often than not.

I figured it was best not to overexert myself today. I wanted this first dinner to set a precedent, so I'd limit myself and show what I could do with the bare minimum. I kept that in mind as I seasoned the meat, cut the vegetables, and seasoned the soup.

I was familiar with Rudy's palate, thanks to what Zenith and Lilia had told me. He apparently had a discerning tongue. He liked spices and subtle additions that brought out flavor, and he was also fond of food that was rich and salty overall. Zenith and Lilia told me they'd gone to a lot of trouble finding seasonings he liked.

When I finished prep, I moved on to actual cooking. This kitchen was so new and unfamiliar to me, it was a little tricky to use. Fortunately, I had magic on my side. Fire, water, and wind magic were essential to any cooking style.

I adjusted the heat under the water. At school, they'd told us you couldn't cook with magic because its intensity was difficult to modulate. However, I'd found that easy once Rudy taught me silent spellcasting. In fact, my magic was a good fit for cooking.

"All right. This looks good."

Preparing the meal methodically, I produced a standard dinner of bread, soup, and salad.

I placed the food onto plates and carried them to the dining table. The table was quite big for just two people, so it felt lonely in a way, but I was pretty sure our family would grow in time.

"Family, huh...?" Recalling what Rudy had done with me, I felt kind of fidgety. He'd been passionate, but also gentle, and I could tell that he'd really thought about me. "I wonder if we'll do it again this evening. I'm pretty sure we will."

Rudy would get home, see my cooking, and exclaim, "Oh, wow! Time to dig

in!" We would face each other as we ate. Our eyes would meet...

Wait. Maybe it'd be better to eat side by side? *Yeah. I guess so.* If we were next to each other, we'd be closer. I'd have to rearrange the food.

All right. We'd sit next to each other as we ate. I would spot sauce on Rudy's cheek and tell him: "You've got something stuck on your cheek, Rudy." With my finger...no, with a kiss...I'd clean it off. Then Rudy would put his arms around me, and...

"Hee hee hee..."

I wasn't just getting carried away by my imagination. It was going to happen. Rudy would gently pick me up and carry me to the bedroom... Wait. That would leave the food on the table. I wanted him to at least finish his plate. After dinner, we'd go to bed. No, we'd bathe first. Rudy was always handsy in the bath...

My train of thought stopped. Bright-red evening light was seeping through the window into the house.

"Rudy's late." He'd normally have been back by now. "Don't tell me he got into some kind of trouble...?"

My brain churned with worry. What if he'd gotten hit by a carriage on the way home? Or gotten tangled up with a shifty adventurer and suffered a major injury? And I was just overthinking, but...what if he was eating dinner somewhere else?

"Oh, no. Should I go look for him?" I wondered aloud. I started pacing the house restlessly. "Yeah. Probably. I'll go find him."

I stood up straight, having made a decision. I returned to my room, put on my usual outfit, and headed for the front entrance. Mustering my determination, I opened the door.

It swung open to reveal Rudeus. "Hey, I'm back." Naturally, he was perfectly fine. There wasn't a hint of injury on him. "Huh? Are you heading out?"

For a moment, I said nothing. I could feel my cheeks expanding, the telltale sign of a pout.

"I was about to go look for you, Rudy. Where were you?"

"Oh, sorry. Just when I was about to come back, I got caught up in a conversation with Zanoba, and it kind of rambled and held me up. I wanted to get home straight away, though."

So, he'd been with Prince Zanoba. Oh well—these things happened. Rudy and Zanoba were very good friends.

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"Sorry. Are you mad?"

"No, I'm not. Are you hungry?"

"Yeah. Starving."
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This struck me as a very "husband-and-wife" conversation, and I couldn't help but giggle.

The two of us walked back into the house, where dinner awaited us.

Pillow Talk

This happened not long after Sylphie's name changed from just Sylphiette to Sylphiette Greyrat.

"Hey, Rudy, what story are you going to tell me today?"

Lately, after she and Rudeus were intimate, Sylphie enjoyed lying in bed with him and listening to his stories.

They'd developed this ritual after doing the deed many times. It all started when Sylphie said, "I want you to tell me about your adventures, Rudy."

Although the stories were interesting and amusing to Sylphie, it took her a bit of courage to ask this. Rudeus tended not to speak much about his experiences prior to attending the University of Magic. And Luke had told her, "Don't blame a man if he's blasé after doing the deed. It's not a sign that he doesn't love you."

Of course, Rudeus was anything but blasé. In fact, he often embraced Sylphie gently after the act. That was what led her to snuggle against him and make her request.

Rudeus looked slightly reluctant at first, but didn't hesitate to whisper his response: "Well, okay."

He started telling Sylphie about his travels with Eris and Ruijerd. By his account, the three had been thick as thieves.

That got Sylphie wondering why *she* couldn't have been there for Rudeus. Why had Eris left him after spending so much intimate time with him? A key reason Sylphie could handle her complicated mix of anger and jealousy was no doubt because Rudeus told her about all that in bed. It was their pillow talk.

"Um..."

One day, Rudeus ran out of stories about his travels. He was bound to, eventually; he recounted them constantly, and he only had two years' worth of anecdotes. He exhausted the stories he'd heard on the road too.

Yet Sylphie requested a tale again at the next opportunity. It wasn't because she was eager to see him try to think of one, or anything. The request simply slipped off her tongue, since the storytelling had turned into a ritual.

At that point, Rudeus got to thinking, and decided to tell stories that were effectively made-up. These tales were entertaining in their own way, and inspired Sylphie to continue the tradition. Sometimes, the plots were incoherent, but when she reflected on how Rudeus put in the effort for their time together, she found all the stories' flaws endearing.

It delighted Sylphie that Rudeus was so considerate in such small, subtle ways at a time when a man normally retreated into himself. She didn't want him to dislike her, and she certainly didn't want her selfishness to smother him, but during that time—and that time only—she allowed herself to be spoiled.

"Okay. Let me tell you about a story that happened a long, long time ago..."

[Rudeus's POV]

I was in a pickle.

It was all because I'd spent each night with Sylphie. Wait—let me correct that, in case it gives off the wrong impression. I had no problems in our intimate life. In fact, every day felt like the best of my life lately. It was no exaggeration to say I'd peaked. Nothing after I got ED had come close. Every day, I relished the comfort of knowing that someone loved me.

The problem was the pillow talk that came after. For some reason, Sylphie kept asking me earnestly to tell her stories.

To be fair, I was the one who'd started it by telling her about what happened after I left Buena Village, and about my travels after the Displacement Incident. Even after I wrapped up recounting those, however, she kept begging for stories, which inevitably caused me to run out of material. In fact, when she said to me, "It doesn't have to be about your journey. Just tell me a story," I started offering complete nonsense.

Of course, subjecting Sylphie to my mediocre storytelling wasn't fair to her, so these days, I trawled the library for suitable heroic stories and fairy tales. Yet even that well was drying up.

"Now what...?"

I wanted us to have the best possible pillow talk. Although it was something I had scant knowledge of, I had a theory that some ladies placed a great deal of significance on interactions before and after the deed. I didn't want to overwhelm Sylphie with my lust, only for postcoital clarity to turn me into an apathetic slob afterward. Her love for me would disappear.

Of course, I doubted Sylphie would jump to divorce if I screwed up pillow talk, but it was important to keep a good track record. That was why I was in the library today as usual, staring at the book spines for good material.

"Hey, Rudeus, what's up? You look troubled," Cliff happened to call out during my predicament.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just looking for some reference literature." I made up an excuse, since I didn't want to leak specifics about my marital life to other people.

Then it occurred to me. This man here was a sex god. Elinalise sucked him dry every night, and he lived to tell the tale. It was possible that Cliff, in his unending love for Elinalise, had mastered the art of pillow talk.

"Actually, um, Cliff, I want to ask you an earnest question..."

"What is it? Something I would know?"

"Yeah. It's something I'd say you have a lot more experience in than I do."

"R-really? Hearing that from you makes me nervous. What are you referring to? Healing? Barriers?"

"What do you talk about with Elinalise after doing the deed?"

Cliff made an awful grimace. Without saying a word, he spun and attempted to flee the scene.

Okay, yeah, that had been intrusive of me. I didn't want to leak specifics about my marital life to other people, and he didn't want to do that either. Just as I recognized my faux pas, however, Cliff stopped in his tracks and turned back around in a very mechanical fashion.

"Well, if you went out of your way to ask about that, it must be important."

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"It is to me, yeah."

"Tell me the details."

"Okay. You see..."
```

Cliff listened to my dilemma with a sullen look on his face. Eventually, that expression gave way to an uncertain one.

"That's why I wanted to know what you talk about afterward," I finished.

"Lise talks about what she liked about me, and what I was doing, during the act."

"And what do you talk about?"

"Me? Well, I..."

"No, uh, you don't have to spell it all out for me." I figured he clamped up like a turtle. Postcoital clarity was like that for a lot of people, and in Cliff's case, his body was probably dealing with simple fatigue as well. "I'm sure everyone's the same way. Anyway, I'm looking for entertaining stories to satisfy Sylphie."

"I see. If that's what you're asking about, I don't mind helping," Cliff said.

He told me three whole yarns he'd heard from an adventurer a while back. Nice. It sure was good to have friends. I'd go home, revise the tales in an interesting way, and attend to my wife at night with fresh stories.

Then Cliff shook his head. "No. Those aren't enough."

"What? You don't think so?"

"Those stories I told you were things that'd happen to pretty much any adventurer, you know?"

"Well, yeah. What about it?" All three tales were entertaining.

"You were an adventurer, so you probably experienced similar things."

"Hmm..."

Now that he mentioned it, yeah. All three stories were along the lines of "The client's order got mixed up, and we were almost wiped out, but something miraculously saved us." That was such a regular thing for adventurers, it

wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it an everyday occurrence. I'd heard similar stories during my stint as an adventurer *and* experienced such escapades myself. They were particularly common in guild branches with an absent receptionist, making those something of an in-joke among adventurers.

"Well, I suppose so."

"See?" Cliff latched onto my agreement. "So I was thinking. Instead of commonplace stories like mine, maybe you ought to seek out genuine legends."

"Genuine legends...?"

What was he talking about? Did he want me to head into some unexplored dungeon and only return when I'd traversed the whole thing? Or defeat a demon king plotting to take over the world, then venture into the underworld to defeat the *true* demon king and become the ancestor of the heroes in past installments of the series?

"I'm ruling out anything dangerous," I said.

"It's not dangerous. You'd just need to visit the demon king."

So it was dangerous. The demon king in the underworld healed his own HP every turn. He'd be tough to beat for just two mages.

Wait, the demon king?

"I'm sure Badigadi would have plenty of interesting stories to tell," Cliff said.

"Oh. I see."

That seemed plausible. Since he'd lived tens of thousands of years, the demon king probably *would* have great stories up his sleeve. And Badigadi himself seemed like the kind of guy who could spin a good tale.

"Aren't you curious too? About what stories the demon king Badigadi knows...?"

"Yeah, I am."

Unconnected to Sylphie, pure curiosity tugged my heart. I mean, this world's legends weren't generally based on fiction, which made them interesting. Something about fantastical-sounding stories that were potentially based in

reality appealed to me. This was a world where a demon empress could give you an eye with magical powers, and a castle floated in the air, you know? I was just the right age for my heart to leap at the thought of personally coming faceto-face with a legend. I was young, after all.

(I won't mention that, when I did brush up against those legends, I usually came out disappointed. Like when I came across that kid who whined about being hungry in the backstreets...)

Anyway, real-life legends were different from those I looked up in the library, or created by letting my imagination wander. Kind of like having a separate stomach for dessert.

"He's usually at a tavern, regardless of the time," I noted.

Without further ado, Cliff and I headed to the tavern where Badigadi frequently lurked.

The Demon King operated on a vastly different time scale from us. When he started drinking, he was known to do so for ten days and nights. People were free to join or leave his parties as they pleased. All they really needed to do to fit in was sing and make some noise.

Nobody knew what Badigadi did with his time beyond that. He was technically a University of Magic employee; perhaps because of that, he sometimes appeared in front of students at random moments and dispensed advice. "The demon king's wisdom," he called it—although it was mostly the kind of things your grandma would tell you.

Badigadi was happy to see us. He came running over and took a swig of his drink. "Bwa ha ha! So you came all this way to see me! Well, don't be afraid to drink up!" He smiled as he listened to our woes. "You desire for me to tell you a special story? Very well. Before the start of the Second Great Human-Demon War, I was but a foolish demon king who knew nothing of the world. Kishirika brought me an unusual spider..." Badigadi started with gusto, but abruptly cut himself off right in the middle of his tale. "No. There is an even better story than anything I personally experienced!"

"I'm listening," I said.

"Instead of telling a story you heard from another, you will make a stronger impression with a tale forged directly from your own experiences! If you head due north from here to the Northern Sea, then sail even farther north, you will find Acaholt Island. There is a place there called Luta Hill."

The Northern Sea... He made it sound like it was just around the corner, but it was quite a distance away.

"The flowers that bloom there exude gentle light, like moonlight. Those flowers do not wither, even after a thousand years. They are a symbol of love on the island. You ought to pick one of them. You will encounter many difficulties on your journey, but you will experience an adventure worthy of legend by overcoming each trial with your wisdom!"

Probably, yeah. Just reaching the Northern Sea would take several months. There was no port town there, and the presence of merpeople or fishpeople—whichever it was—made the sea virtually impossible to cross, so arriving at Acaholt Island would take a year. On top of that, to acquire a vessel to sail, you'd need to network and build connections during your journey.

I had no idea where Luta Hill was, but you'd need to gather the right party members to navigate the area, and be sure to prepare good equipment. All in all, in the time it took to retrieve a flower, some dramatic events would almost certainly take place.

Well, that would be an epic adventure, for sure. It did seem to have the makings of an interesting story.

"I see..." Cliff's eyes sparkled. I'd always gotten the impression that he was a realist, but he possessed a surprising love of adventure. "Rudeus, you were an A-rank adventurer, right?"

"For a bit, yeah."

After a beat, he asked, "Do you think you could make the journey?"

"Hmm. I wouldn't say that's impossible, but...are you really serious about going?"

"I would go to show my true love for Lise." That was Cliff for you. A man among men.

But...hmm. How should I put it? Something about this felt kind of off to me. I mean, yeah, if you told me to go pick a bouquet for Sylphie as proof of my love, sure, I could do that. You wouldn't have to tell me twice! But, well...something told me that this wasn't it. I couldn't explain it very well.

"Bwa ha ha! That said, you should accept a pearl of wisdom from me—the all-knowing Demon King."

"Let's hear it."

"Think carefully about your goal before you venture on a journey! Bwa ha ha ha!"

Cliff gazed at Badigadi with surprise at those words. Being the smart cookie he was, that single utterance probably pointed Cliff toward what was bothering me. I realized it too.

"Thank you so very much, Your Majesty," Cliff said after a respectful pause.

"You are welcome! Come to me when you have other woes! And bring some good booze next time! Bwa ha ha ha haaa!"

We left the tavern, the Demon King's laughter booming behind us.

That night, as I rested my head on Sylphie's arm, I told her about the day's events. "And that's what happened."

"Whoa... So are you going to look for those flowers, Rudy?" Sylphie asked, sounding perturbed.

"No way," I answered immediately.

"Why not?"

"If I want to show you my love, doing it face-to-face like this is way better."

"Hee hee." Sylphie buried her head in my arms. Maybe she felt embarrassed, but her reaction was frankly adorable.

"I should admit that I'm out of stories, though. Can I just tell you about stuff

that's happened lately?"

As soon as I said that, Sylphie stopped pressing her forehead against me. She looked up at me. Her eyes gave me a vague idea of what she was thinking, but I couldn't tell what exactly. "Oh? Your love only goes that far, Rudy? What if I say I want a flower?"

"I'll go get one right now."

She quickly stopped me. "W-wait! That was a joke! It's sure hard to tease you..."

I wasn't trying to be tough to tease or anything, but I really would've gone if she told me to.

"You know, it is kind of a shame. I did like your stories, Rudy."

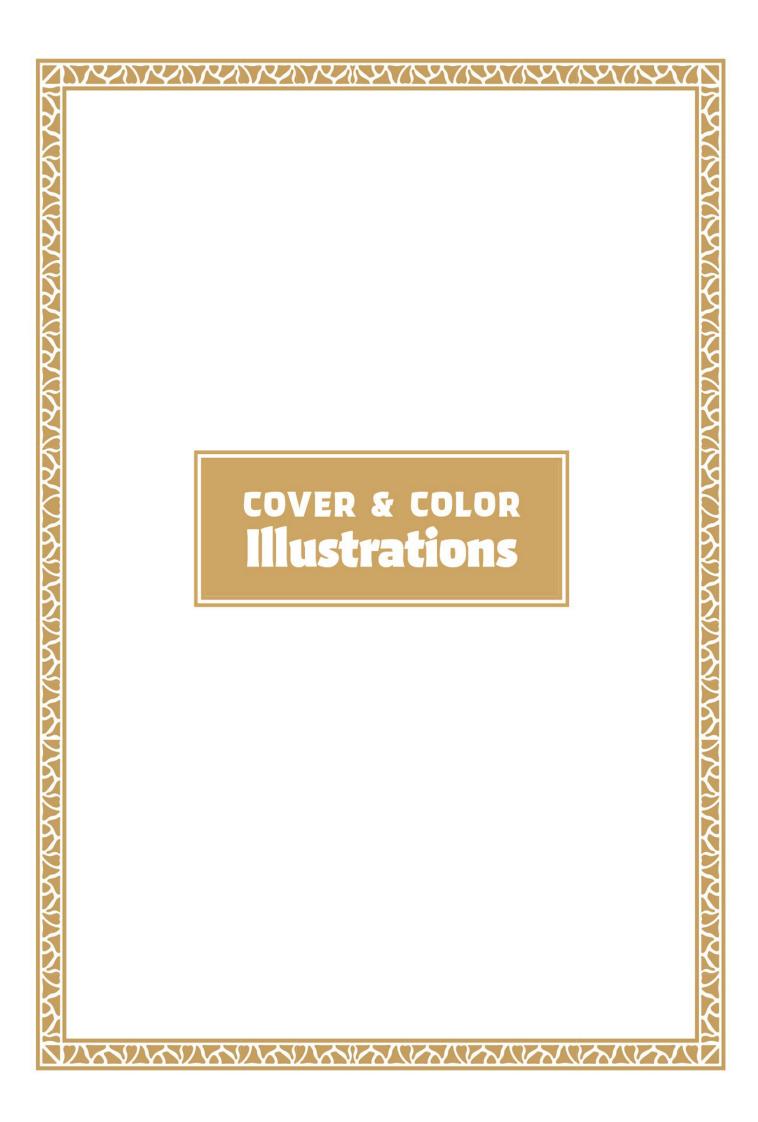
"Then I'll try to make time to stockpile more."

"Really? You're so sweet."

And so the night went by.

In the end, going on a journey would've been a means, not an end. My goal was to make Sylphie happy. Rather than spending months away from home and ultimately giving her a rare trinket, it was infinitely better to spend my days chatting about frivolous little things with her.

The Demon King's wisdom went to waste, I thought, as Sylphie and I passed another uneventful night together.





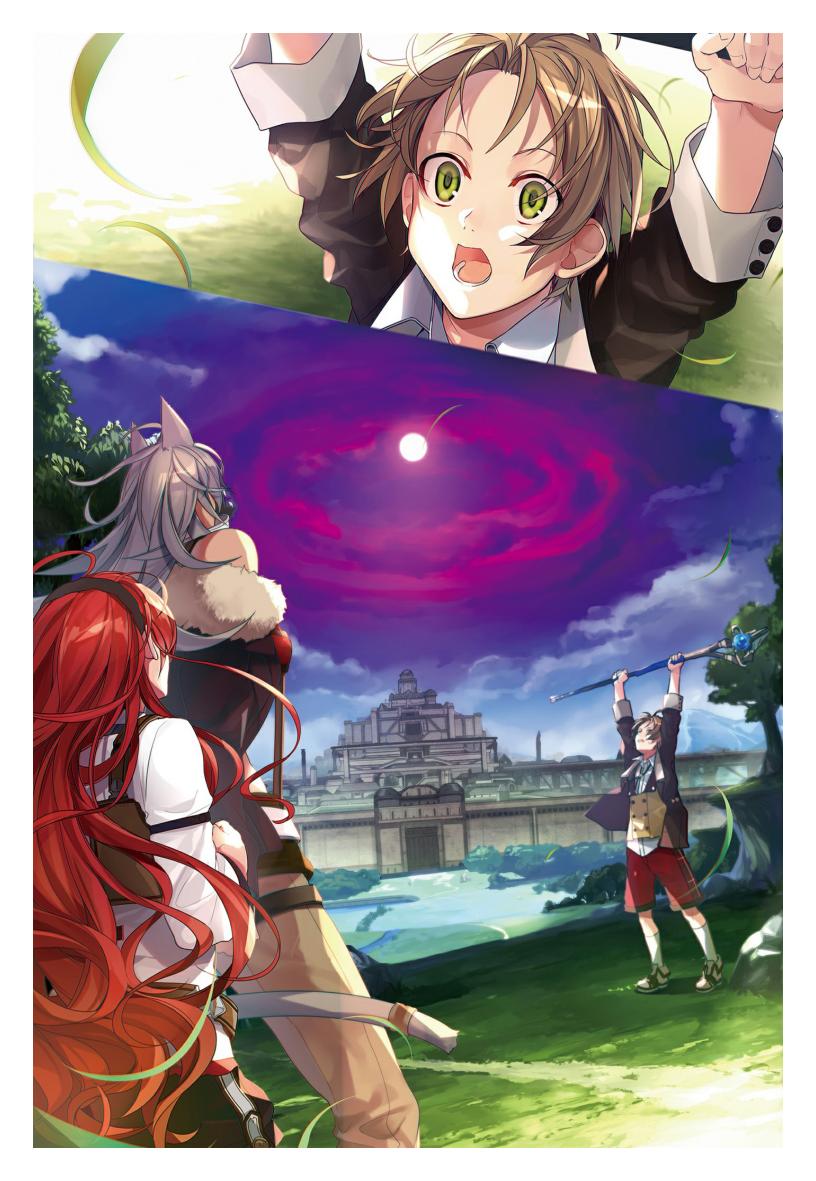




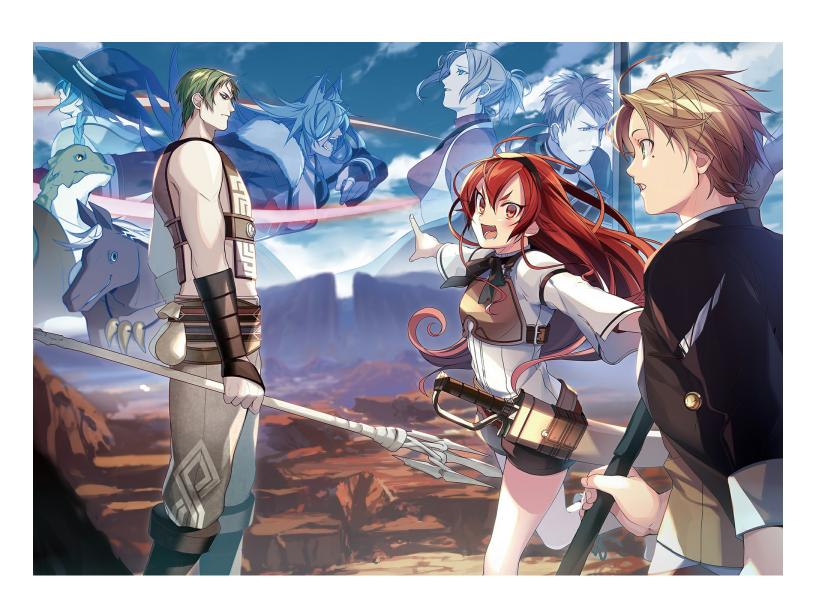


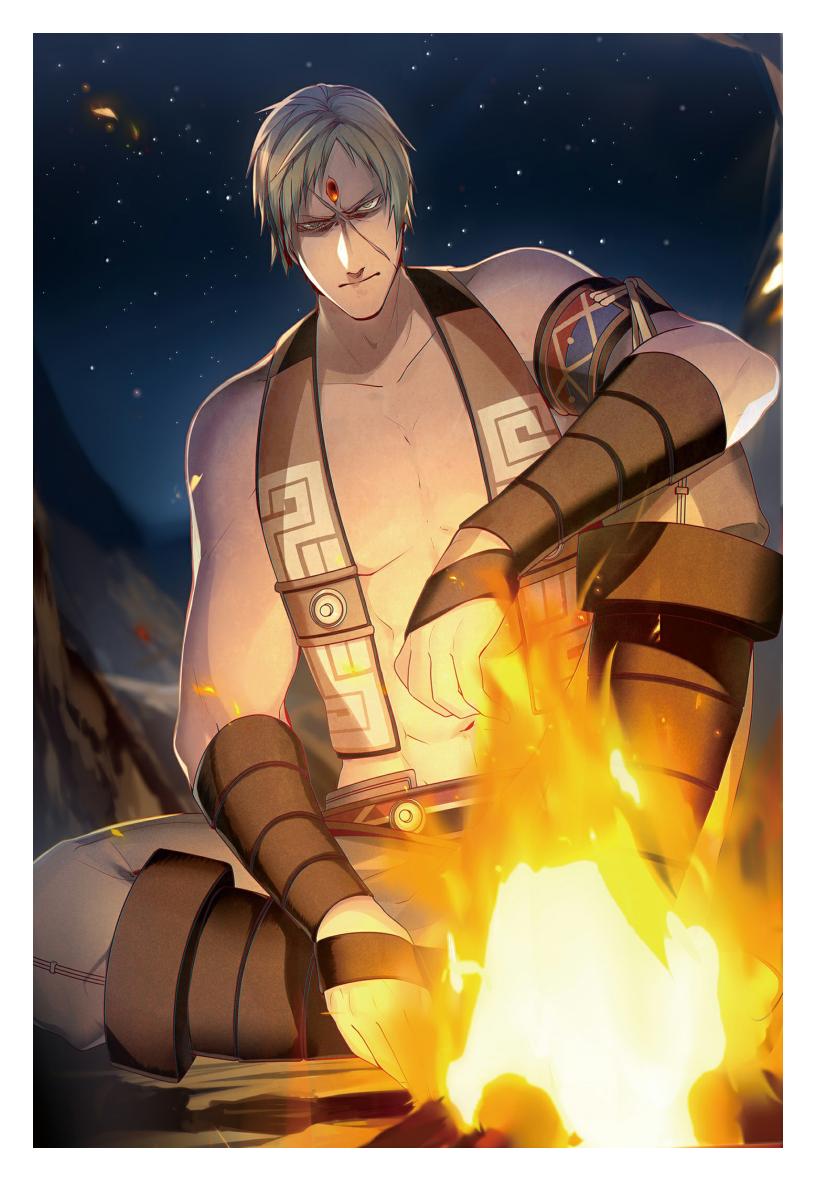




















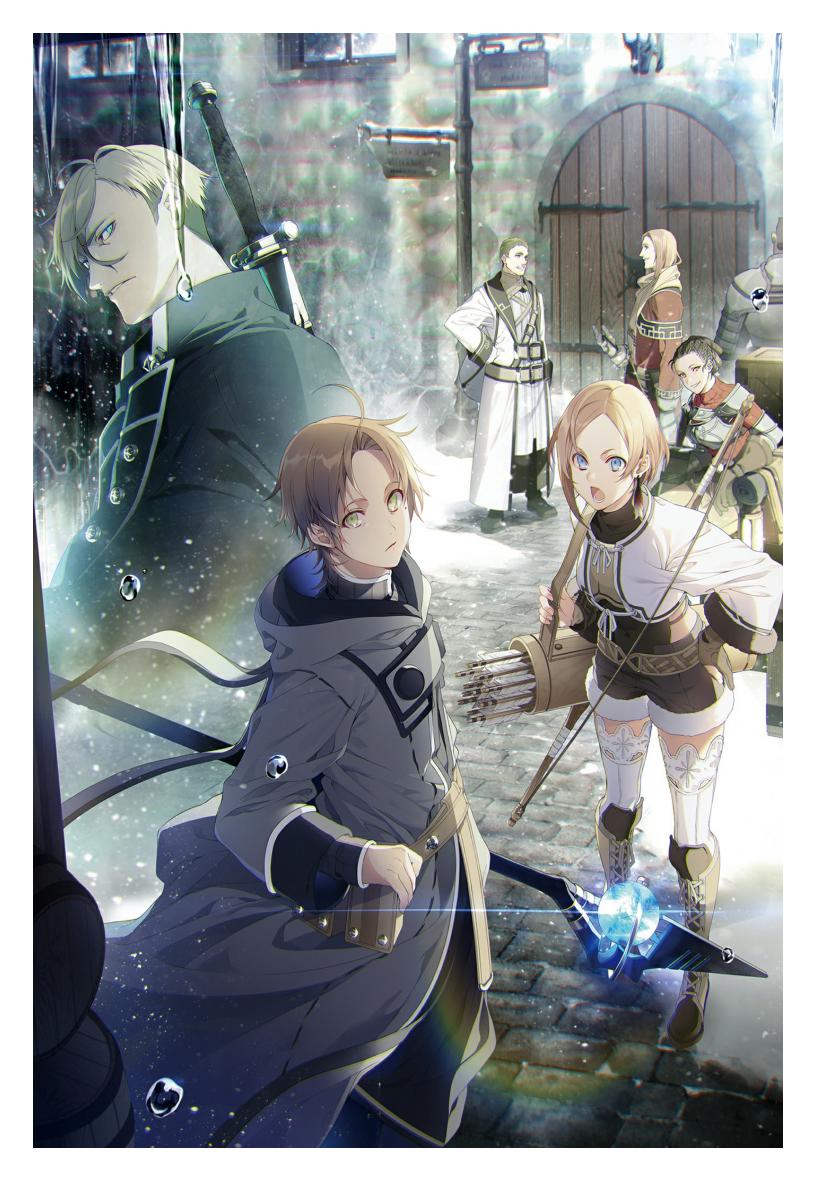


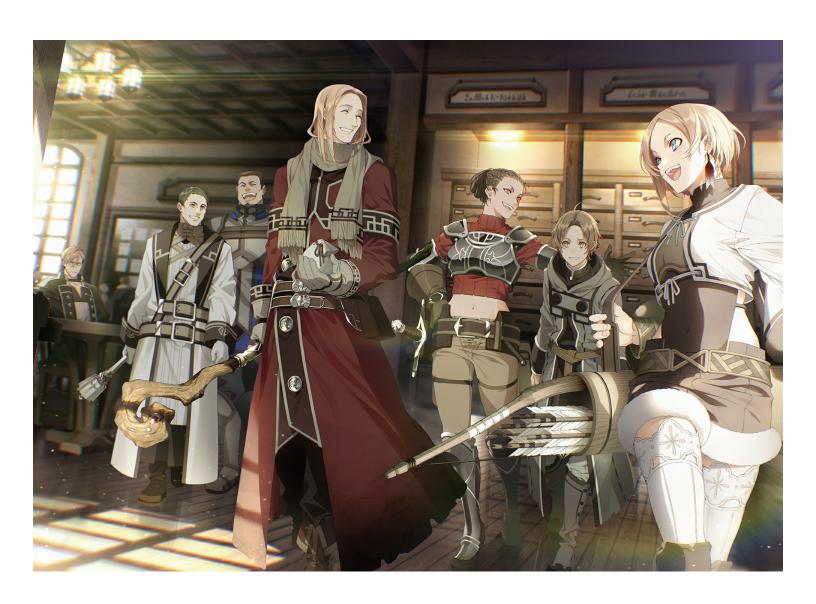












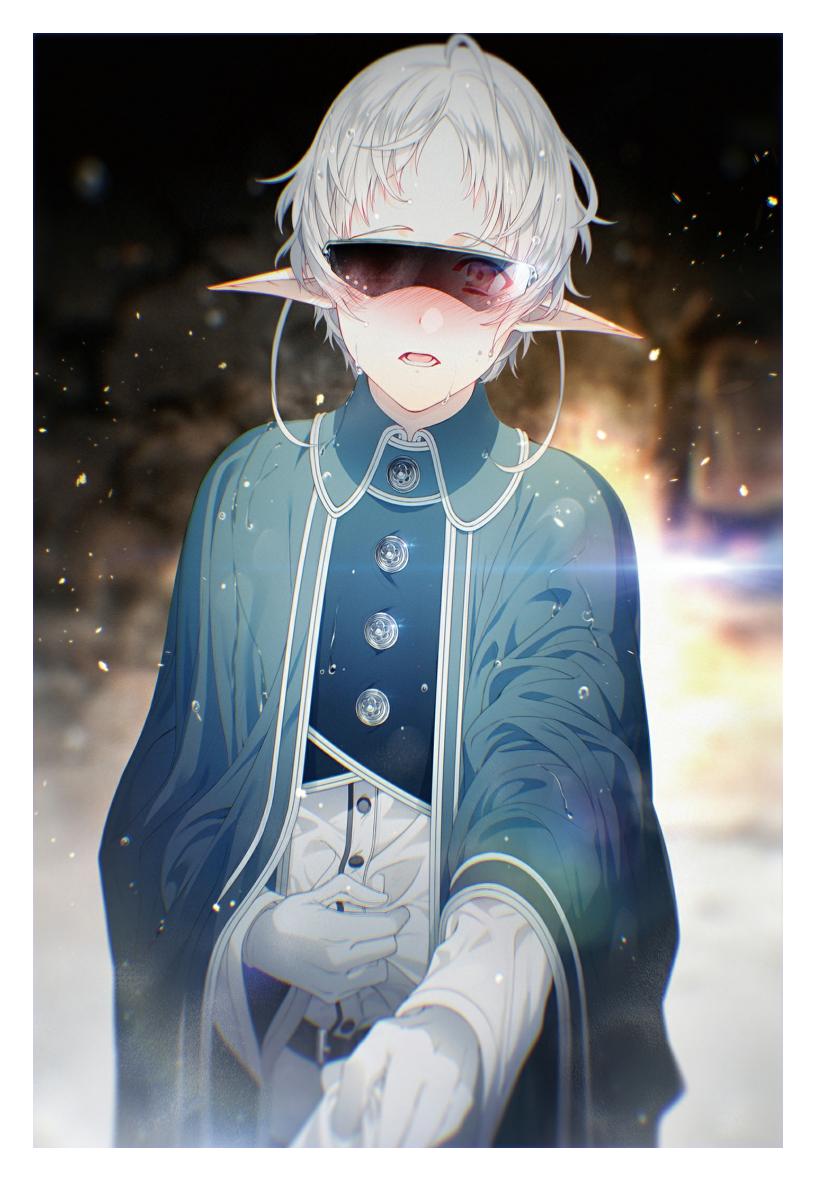








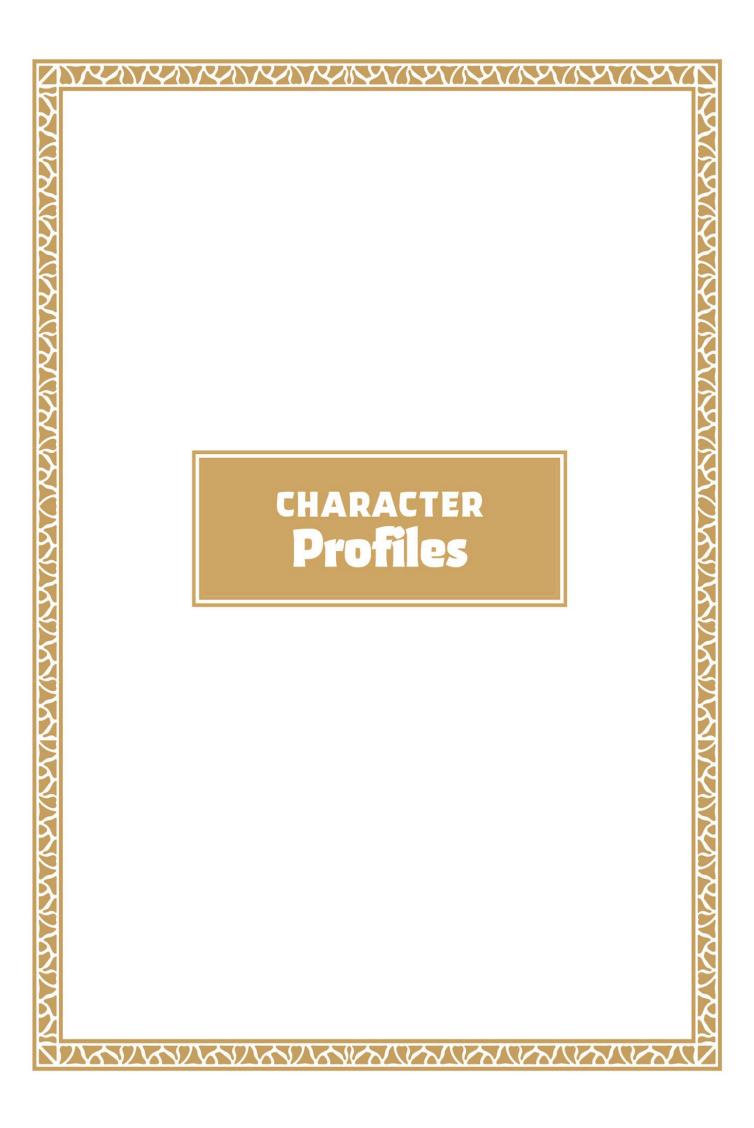




















Paul Greyrat

FAVORITE THING

Busty women

LEAST FAVORITE THING

His father

MOTTO

"Grasp the sword in your heart."

AUTHOR COMMENT

When I asked myself, What kind of father would the reincarnation of an unemployed thirty-four-year-old man end up with? this guy came to mind. The previous Rudy would definitely have avoided this kind of man!



Zenith Greyrat

FAVORITE THING

Gardening

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Adultery

MOTTO

"Live honest and right."

AUTHOR COMMENT

Truthfully, in the early stages, I hadn't nailed down what kind of character she'd be. Zenith's very cute and lively in the anime, so I wish I gave her more appearances in the original story.







Lilia Greyrat

FAVORITE THING

Her daughter

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Evil spirits

MOTTO

"Live stoically."

AUTHOR COMMENT

I wasn't going to give her glasses at first, but the design was so good, I went with it. Behind her polite demeanor, there's an incongruous mischievous side.

FAVORITE THING

Competent people

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Incompetent people

MOTTO

"Live stoically and skillfully."

AUTHOR COMMENT

I had two ideas for a littlesister character. One was talented, apparently flawless, and doted on her brother. The other was a gloomy crybaby full of flaws who had a complex about her brother. I couldn't decide, so I thought, Why not use both? Thus, Norn and Aisha were born.

Norn Greyrat

FAVORITE THING

People with a relaxing presence

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Being compared to others

MOTTO

"Apply yourself to everything"

AUTHOR COMMENT

Between a gifted and an ordinary sister, an ordinary one worked better for the plot of Mushoku Tensei. A lot of my personal favorite stories involve Norn.

Ghislaine Dedoldia

FAVORITE THING

The young lady

LEAST FAVORITE THING

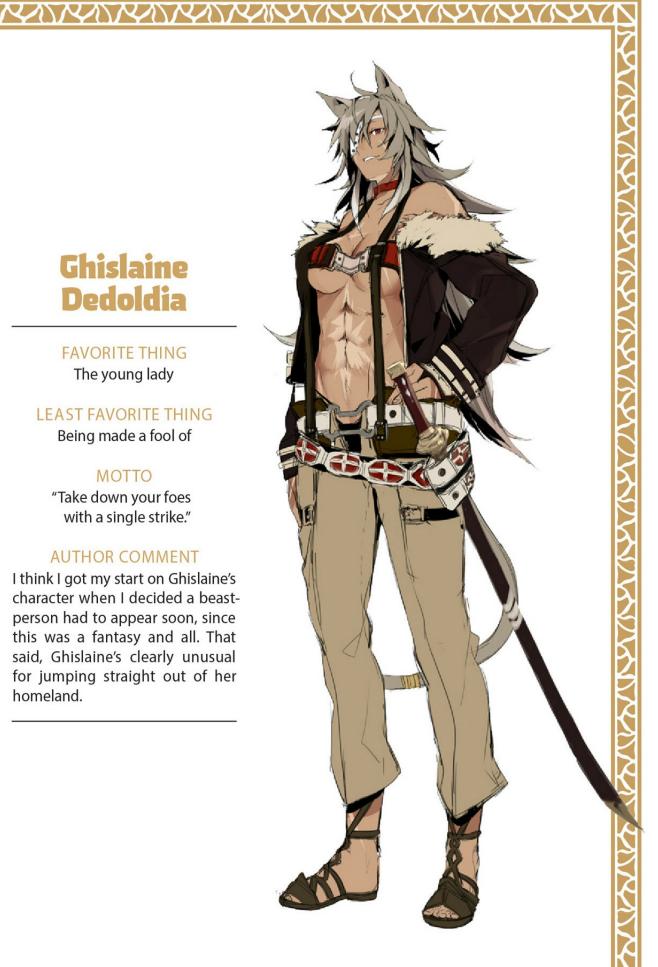
Being made a fool of

MOTTO

"Take down your foes with a single strike."

AUTHOR COMMENT

I think I got my start on Ghislaine's character when I decided a beastperson had to appear soon, since this was a fantasy and all. That said, Ghislaine's clearly unusual for jumping straight out of her homeland.



Ruijerd Superdia

FAVORITE THING Kids

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Demon God Laplace

MOTTO

"Act in a manner befitting a warrior."

AUTHOR COMMENT

I came up with Ruijerd because I wanted a guardian to accompany the main character from early childhood to the end of childhood. I toned his protectiveness down, though. He seems more like an ally on equal terms than Paul or Ghislaine do.





Geese Nukadia

FAVORITE THING Money

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Jinxes

MOTTO

"Where there's life, there's a way."

AUTHOR COMMENT

The concept behind his character was that he weathered a stormy life using what he had on hand. At his core, he's Rudeus's polar opposite.

Elinalise Dragonroad

FAVORITE THING Good men

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Paul MOTTO

"I should delight all the men I make love to."

AUTHOR COMMENT

I tried to push the envelope with this character's sexuality, but I didn't just want to be provocative, so I added flavor by making her very caring toward other women. I think she experienced that friction herself and grew from it.

Talhand

FAVORITE THING

Alcohol

LEAST FAVORITE THING

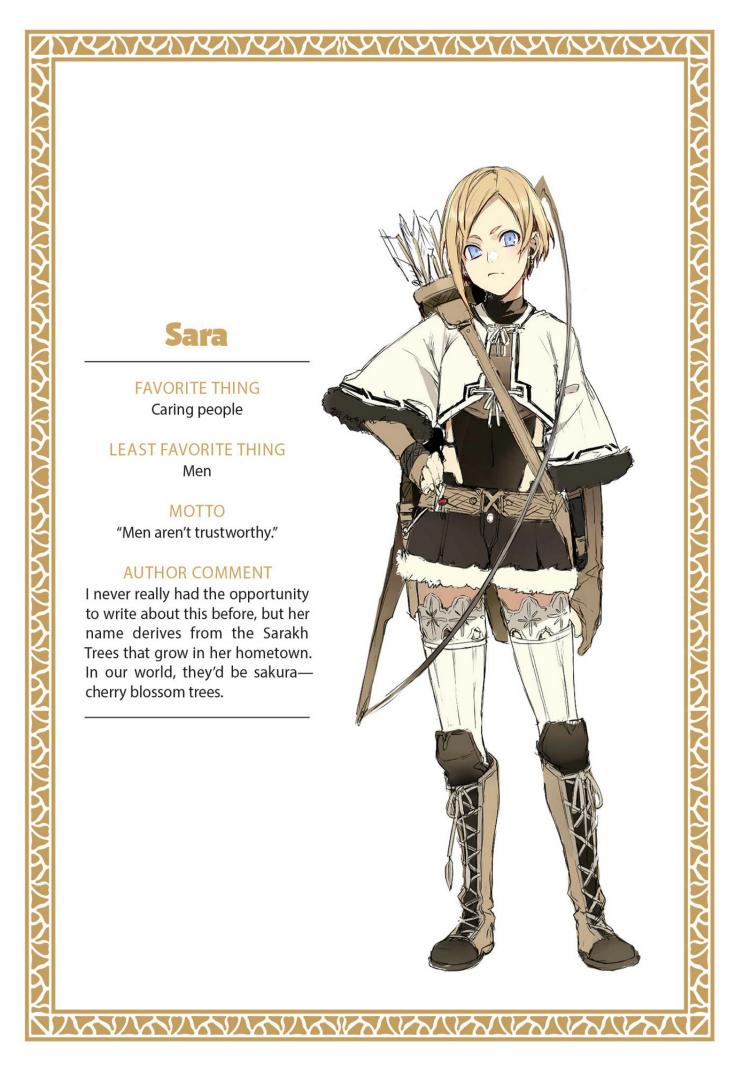
His hometown

MOTTO

"Enjoy your own company."

AUTHOR COMMENT

He is gay, but I didn't spotlight that in his depiction. Since he himself keeps it quiet, I figured that would be realistic.



Soldat Heckler

FAVORITE THING

Good-natured companions

LEAST FAVORITE THING

People who ruin the vibe

MOTTO

"If you diss me, it's over."

AUTHOR COMMENT

"Caring punk" was my concept for him. A bit like Paul, but not as egocentric. Soldat cares about the group and tries to ensure everyone's in a good mood.



Zanoba Shirone

FAVORITE THING Dolls

LEAST FAVORITE THING

People

MOTTO

"The arts come first."

AUTHOR COMMENT

He shows up during Rudy's boyhood, but I initially devised him as a character who'd appear for the university arc. The fact that he's a prince with superhuman strength and a love of dolls is unchanged.



Cliff Grimor

FAVORITE THING Studying

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Being looked down on

MOTTO

"Effort determines results."

AUTHOR COMMENT

My initial idea was simply for him to be a prodigy, but then he'd never get along with Rudeus, so I made him a hard worker who ultimately grows to be widely respected.





Pursena Adoldia

FAVORITE THINGS

Red meat, naps, clout

LEAST FAVORITE THING

People who nag

MOTTO

"Never forget a debt in a hundred years."

AUTHOR COMMENT

Like Linia, I devised Pursena as a female character who isn't a love interest. But it'd be boring if chemistry *never* developed, so I tried to show how she and Rudeus could be superficially compatible.

Linia Dedoldia

FAVORITE THINGS

Fish, naps, clout

LEAST FAVORITE THING

People who scold loudly

MOTTO

"Winning means having fun."

AUTHOR COMMENT

I always planned to have her and Pursena appear in the university arc. Linia's just a female friend, not a love interest, but it's possible something could've happened under different circumstances.

Kishirika Kishirisu

FAVORITE THING

Food

LEAST FAVORITE THING

War

MOTTO

"Oh ho ho! I've had enough of war."

AUTHOR COMMENT

One or two people in the world will give you an amazing power if you bump into them and treat them to a meal. That was the idea behind this character, but I think you'll find someone like that in any world.







Ariel Anemoi Asura

FAVORITE THING Dirty jokes

LEAST FAVORITE THING

Her older brothers

MOTTO

"A person's dying wish is worth carrying out."

AUTHOR COMMENT

She's the prettiest character, so when describing her appearance, I was always careful to write some synonym for "beautiful" or "pretty."

Luke Notos Greyrat

FAVORITE THING

Busty girls

LEAST FAVORITE THING

His mother

MOTTO

"Always be a gentleman around women."

AUTHOR COMMENT

The biggest stud in the Asura Kingdom. He's the kind of character who makes the most of his looks and charisma, so I wanted him to look superficial at first glance.





Interview: Author Rifujin na Magonote

Q: What made you decide to start this novel?

A: I felt encouraged to write *Mushoku Tensei* when I read stories on Let's Be Novelists and thought, "I won't get bashed if I post my own work."

Q: How did you feel when you got the publishing deal?

A: I was happy, of course. I also felt, "This seems about right." There was a publishing boom at the time, so things that made it high in the rankings usually got an offer.

Q: What kind of fictional works (novels, manga, anime, games, plays, etc.) influenced your novel?

A: I've been influenced by everything I consumed in my life, but for writing specifically, I drew heavily from the prose in Akiyama Mizuhito's works, such as *E. G. Combat, Neko no Chikyuugi,* and so on.

Q: What's most important to you when creating stories?

A: Making them easy to read and understand. Every writer comes up with things they feel are interesting; conveying those to a reader is what takes skill. When I write, I try to make sure I get what's in my head across.

Q: Did you struggle with, or feel uncertain about, anything while writing?

A: I'm always uncertain when I write. With *Mushoku Tensei* in particular, every storyline has parts where there isn't any neat and easy solution. Rudeus always worries and feels uncertain, so the stories often reach a conclusion where you can't say whether they made the right decision. As the author, I often struggled with that same uncertainty.

Q: Looking back, what were you doing before your debut? What changed afterward?

A: Before my debut, I was unemployed. Afterward, I stopped having to worry about a job.

Q: What's your writing environment like, and what kind of tools do you use? Also, how do you think up plot ideas?

A: I use my computer at home to write. I also keep a notebook so I can write easily, no matter what computer I'm using. Notebooks aren't that functional, but they compensate for that by making it easier to start writing. I recommend using one so you can focus on getting the prose right.

Q: Do you use anything to relax when writing? Are you engrossed in anything new?

A: Lately, I haven't been writing so much that I need to relax. When I'm not writing, I'm usually playing video games.

Q: Do you have a favorite food, or a local food you absolutely need while writing?

A: I love cream puffs. As for local stuff, I'm always having chashu ramen from the nearby ramen place. I don't literally have it at my side while I write, but I do start gnawing tissues when I'm stressed.

Q: Are any characters (the protagonist, etc.) modeled on anyone you know, or on parts of yourself? How did you create these appealing characters?

A: Generally, I get my ideas by looking at other people or characters from another work. When I see a character I like, I often try to write my own spin on them. That said, when it comes to a character's philosophy or motivations, I

can't write them unless I understand them myself. In that sense, I take the characters from aspects of myself.

Q: Who's your favorite character? Which characters are easy or difficult to write?

A: I don't have any particular favorites. If you're asking who's easy to write, I would say Kishirika Kishirisu and Atoferatofe. The other characters have various inhibitions restricting what kinds of actions they'd take, or what they'd say. In contrast, anything goes with those two girls.

Q: Looking back, which storyline stands out most to you? Is there one in particular that you're fond of?

A: The first thing that comes to mind is Roxy's graduation test, followed by the reunion with Paul. Other than that, I have a strong memory of the teleportation labyrinth arc and the story about Zenith and the Blessed Child of Memory.

Q: Do you have a message for your fans?

A: Thank you so much for all your support! I'll keep working hard!

Publication History

The stories compiled in this e-book were originally issued as retailer bonus items.

"The Future Seen Through a Crack"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*, Volume 1: Melonbooks bonus item

"A "Grey" Nezumi Kozo"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*, Volume 1: general bookstore bonus item

"I Won't Accept the Title of Traitor"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 1: Gamers bonus item

"The Oasis of Life"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 1: Toranoana bonus item

"Eris's Little Prank"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 2: Gamers bonus item

"The Power of Abs"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 2: Toranoana bonus item

"Sculptor"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 2: Melonbooks bonus item

"A Stealth Mission"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 3: Gamers bonus item

"Bikini Armor"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 3: Toranoana bonus

item

"Rudeus's Three-Minute Recipe"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 3: Melonbooks bonus item

"Left and Right"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 3: general bookstore bonus item

"The Maiden and the Unicorn"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 4: Gamers bonus item

"A Small Person and His Small Business"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 4: Toranoana bonus item

"The Lecture"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 4: Melonbooks bonus item

"A Bargain Sale"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 5: Gamers bonus item

"Roxy's Ideal"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*, Volume 5: Gamers Comics joint bonus item "The Prince and the Princess"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 5: Toranoana bonus item

"Geese Wars"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 5: Melonbooks bonus item

"The Legend of the Undiscovered Doll"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 6: Toranoana bonus item

"Eris's Three-Minute Recipe"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 6: Melonbooks bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: 'Rudeus, Former Soldier"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 7: Animate bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: 'The Saint-Tier Farming Advisor'"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 7: Gamers bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: 'The Elf of Kansas City'"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 7: Toranoana bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei Hollywood Adaptation: 'A Jamaican Hero'"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 7: Melonbooks bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei School Arc: Sylphiette's Story"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 8: Animate bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei School Arc: Roxy's Story"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 8: Melonbooks bonus item

"Mushoku Tensei School Arc: Eris Greyrat's Story"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 8: Toranoana bonus item

"Ghost Stories of the University of Magic"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 9: Animate bonus item

"Cliff Goes to a Brothel"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 9: Gamers bonus item

"The Boss of the Academy"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 9: Toranoana bonus

item

"The Demon King's Counseling Room"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 9: Melonbooks bonus item

"Nanahoshi the Gourmet"

From Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation, Volume 10: Gamers bonus item

"A Newlywed Wife's Home Cooking"

From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volume 10: Melonbooks bonus item

"Pillow Talk"

Original story

Cover & Color Illustrations From *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation,* Volumes 1–10

The epic fight is over, but their story is far from done!



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