

NOVEL
2

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redundant
reincarnation



Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Let's Make an Automaton!](#)

[Chapter 1: The Day the Doll Walked \(Part 1\)](#)

[Chapter 2: The Day the Doll Walked \(Part 2\)](#)

[Chapter 3: The Day the Doll Walked \(Part 3\)](#)

[Chapter 4: A Day at the Office](#)

[Millis Travelogue](#)

[Chapter 1: Calling at the Latria Household](#)

[Chapter 2: Arus's Vacation in Millis](#)

[Chapter 3: Roxy's Duty](#)

[Chapter 4: Onward to the Holy Sword Highway](#)

[Chapter 5: Hot Springs](#)

[Chapter 6: Talhand of the Harsh, Large Mountain Summit](#)

[The God Who Dwells in the Sword Sanctum](#)

[Chapter 1: Sword God Gino Britz](#)

[Chapter 2: In the Ephemeral Hall](#)

[Chapter 3: Nina Britz](#)

[The Greyrat Children](#)

[Image Gallery](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Newsletter](#)

Mushoku Tensei

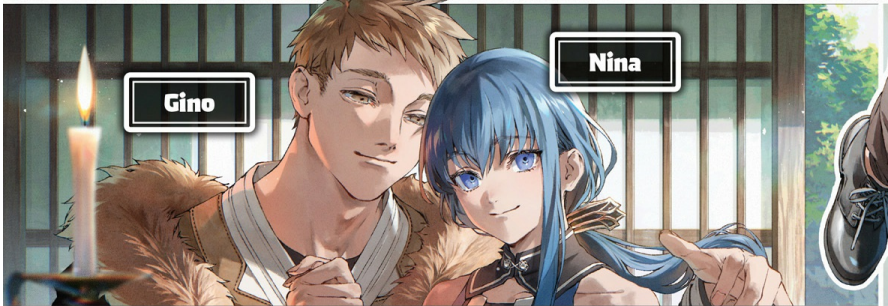
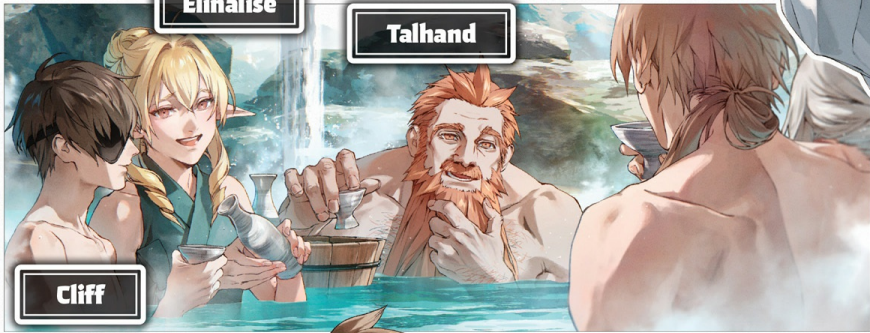
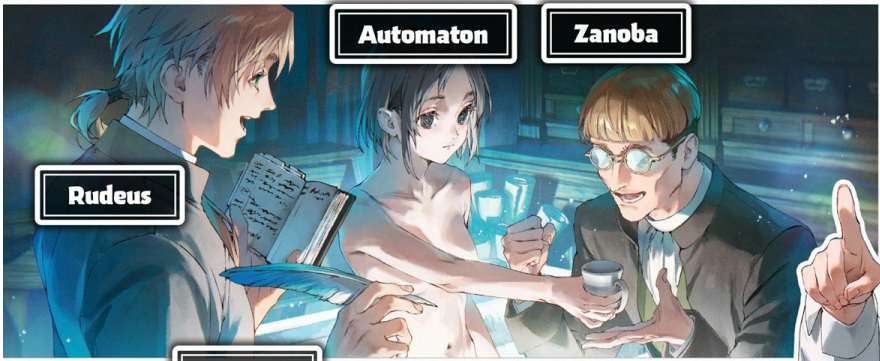
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WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na
Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



“Rudy, hey, pour
me another one.
I don’t mind if my
husband is the
one plying me
with alcohol.”



Mushoku Tensei

redundant
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2

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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CONTENTS

LET'S MAKE AN AUTOMATON!

- CHAPTER 1:** The Day the Doll Walked (Part 1)
- CHAPTER 2:** The Day the Doll Walked (Part 2)
- CHAPTER 3:** The Day the Doll Walked (Part 3)
- CHAPTER 4:** A Day at the Office

MILLIS TRAVELOGUE

- CHAPTER 1:** Calling at the Latria Household
- CHAPTER 2:** Arus's Vacation in Millis
- CHAPTER 3:** Roxy's Duty
- CHAPTER 4:** Onward to the Holy Sword Highway
- CHAPTER 5:** Hot Springs
- CHAPTER 6:** Talhand of the Harsh, Large Mountain Summit

THE GOD WHO DWELLS IN THE SWORD SANCTUM

- CHAPTER 1:** Sword God Gino Britz
- CHAPTER 2:** In the Ephemeral Hall
- CHAPTER 3:** Nina Britz

THE GREYRAT CHILDREN

The Greyrat Children

"Dreams live on through oppression."

—Even when you're angry, follow your heart.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

The image features a dark gray background with a decorative border. The border consists of a double-line rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical corner pieces at each of the four corners. In the center of the page is a large, intricate, light gray decorative ornament. This ornament is symmetrical both horizontally and vertically, featuring a central floral or foliate motif with elaborate scrollwork and leaf-like extensions. The text "Let's Make an Automaton!" is centered within this central ornament.

**Let's Make an
Automaton!**

Chapter 1:

The Day the Doll Walked (Part 1)

THE NIGHT WAS STORMY. Pounding rain drenched the earth, and great bolts of lightning smote the earth with flashes, illuminating a lone house standing on a deserted plain.

Inside the house, two mad scientists were cackling.

“Mwa, mwaha, *mwahahaha*! At last, at last!”

“Yes! At last, it’s finished!” Still cackling, the scientists clasped one another’s hands and danced around the room.

“Truly, but for your genius, Master, we could never have done it!”

“Don’t be silly, Zanoba! It wouldn’t have been possible without your bottomless store of knowledge and inspiration!”

The scientists were Rudeus and Zanoba. Their mutual praise stopped with their dancing. There was something in the back of the room—a stone bed that gave off an eerie glow. On it lay a girl. She was stark naked.

“What a long journey it’s been...” Rudeus reflected on their string of failures.

The first attempt hadn’t even powered on. It had taken dozens of minor adjustments *and* reversing those adjustments until they finished the first prototype. It powered on, only for them to discover it was a golem that could only mindlessly obey. There was a demand for such a thing, but it was a far cry from what they wanted to create.

From the second prototype on, they devoted their time and labor to the development of a core with artificial intelligence and a more lifelike figure. Naturally, they still experienced one failure after another. The body did become more and more passably human, but tweaking the materials so that its movements were also more realistic led to resilience problems. When they tweaked the core instead to compensate, it stopped powering on at all. The two of them were amazed and frustrated by the fragility of the balance that made a

living person work.

Failure chased failure. They repeatedly reviewed the notes of Maniacal Dragon King Chaos and even begged advice from Dragon King Perugius, who gave them hints about magic circles and spirit summoning. Dragon God Orsted offered them a hard-to-find magic stone and shared knowledge about materials. Even so, the failures continued. They'd innovated beyond the Maniacal Dragon King, somehow. As they imagined their goal would be forever out of reach, they wept.

Before the tears from the last failure were dry, they approached the challenge with fresh resolve—only to fail again. Every failure led to small but fresh observations and discoveries.

One month prior, at last, *at last*, they'd had a success, and the prototype doll had powered on. It was the third iteration, with a blank, featureless face, but it'd *powered on*! Rudeus and Zanoba did their little victory dance, and then, once they finished extracting data from the third prototype, they immediately started work on the fourth.

The fourth's specs were almost as good as the final model's. It had a human body and face, its mouth moved when it spoke, and it could move around using its own limbs. However, Rudeus and Zanoba had not run every test they should've on the previous prototype and had moved on without addressing several undiscovered problems. They just couldn't resist the urge to see the doll move as it had in their dreams.

But it would be fine! There was nothing about prototype three that they couldn't simply put off until prototype four. They'd use prototype four to do a system check and review its compatibility with the base body for the final product.

It'll be fine, surely, they thought. This is another step forward. This is what we want. We're doing it for the love of the game, and this, right here, is the automaton we've been striving for.

"It is time!" Zanoba cried. "Powering *onnnn*!"

"Right!"

Zanoba, his face glowing with excitement, reached a finger toward the magic stone nestled between the girl's modest breasts. Behind that stone, in the middle of her chest, was her core. It was engraved with complex and delicate magic circles that functioned as both her brain and her literal heart, like a computer's CPU.

When the core powered on, the figurine would stand up on its own feet, learn by itself, make its own decisions, generate its own mana, and continue to function practically in perpetuity: a fully autonomous doll. Of course, it was also possible that it would end up collapsing from a shortage of mana. If so, it could just be returned to its bed and charged up once more.

When Rudeus first proposed this, Zanoba asked, "Wouldn't its reliance on human intervention to restart it mean it is incomplete?"

"Of course not," Rudeus told him. That was precisely what *would* make it complete. When a person collapsed and couldn't get up again, they also needed other people.

Zanoba's outstretched finger stopped, hesitant. Perhaps someone else would've been reluctant to touch the chest of a young girl, but Zanoba wouldn't be squeamish about a minor detail like that.

"Do you want to do it, Master?" Zanoba asked, after hesitating for some time.

"No," Rudeus replied. "You do it. It was all your work that got us here."

That was it. Zanoba was afraid of this moment, when their dream of nearly ten years would be realized. Nevertheless, it wasn't in his nature to be cowardly. It was barely in his vocabulary.

"Very well. Then, let us begin!"

"Yeah!"

Zanoba slowly touched the girl's chest with his finger. His fingertip ran lightly along her skin, as though she might break, until he reached the core. Powering on the doll didn't take much mana. Anyone could do it.

"Awaken, oh beloved daughter," said Zanoba, intoning the power-on incantation.

At once, there was a crackle as mana began to flow. The red light on the edge of the bed turned blue. Seeing it, Zanoba removed his finger, and for a few moments, everything was silent. The two men waited with bated breath, watching the girl power on. The processes that followed power-on were automated, so all they had to do was wait.

The girl's black eyes blinked open. The only noise was the *click* as she physically disconnected from the bed. When the connection was broken, she slowly sat up. Her skin was smooth and white, and she was so slender it was as though she had no muscle at all. Her breasts were small but shapely, and she was curvy in a way that seemed almost out of place for her body type.

This girl was the culmination of the skills Zanoba and Rudeus had cultivated over long years of figurine making. Her body was constructed from artificial flesh and a skeleton of the same material as the magic armor. The base for the artificial flesh was clay Rudeus made using earth magic, to which they then added mana-rich scales from red dragons and illusion butterfly wings. To round it out, they mixed in the sap of an elder treant and the blood of an immortal demon. The finished flesh was the product of experimentation and the finest materials. It was durable enough to last almost indefinitely while feeling indistinguishable from a normal person's skin. To make it move, it was mounted on a magic circle-engraved skeleton. The magic circles functioned like muscles to move the surrounding tissue. The principle was more or less the same as the magic armor, but the doll's joints additionally incorporated parts made from the bone dust of a deathbreaker skeleton, utilizing the material's particularly high mana conductivity to make the doll's movements even more lifelike.

The girl raised both arms, stretched them out, then opened and closed her hands. The movement of her upper torso—the arm and shoulder, down through the chest, and the sway of her breasts—was smooth. It was incredible: sensually graceful and *real*.

Rudeus gulped.

"I didn't realize it while we were making it, but look at it move. Damn."

Zanoba didn't answer, but from his expression, he felt the same. The girl, without saying a word, lay back down, then raised her legs one at a time,

testing them. One smooth, white thigh rose, followed by the other. Still lying on her back, she bent and stretched out her knees, then spread her legs apart and closed them again, momentarily exposing her delicately constructed anatomy to Rudeus and Zanoba. These gestures were purely practical. The doll was programmed to automatically run an operational check on her joints when she powered on, then spit out errors for any parts the check caught. Literally in this case, as she had a mouth.

Finally, with a shake of her shoulder-length black hair, the doll announced, “I have powered on successfully.”

That meant her checks were complete. The voice her artificial vocal cords produced sounded very familiar.

“Phew.” Rudeus and Zanoba each let out a breath, though their faces were still tense.

They had failed here so many times before. Once, the doll had tried to raise its arm only for everything above the elbow to blast off into the ceiling like a mech’s rocket punch. One time, its knee had bent at the wrong angle with a dull *crunch*. Yet another time, it had split apart at the crotch like a bizarre sculpture, then curled up like a shrimp with dull crunching and cracking. These episodes, which could’ve come straight out of a splatter film if the body had been human, happened too many times to count during the construction of the third prototype.

The root of the trouble was the doll’s skeleton. A person wearing the magic armor could regulate its power, but it took long experience using magic and muscles to have the feel for it. The doll had no experience, so it defaulted to using maximum strength and destroyed itself. Because of this, they had installed limiters all through its body. Even with the limiters, though, the doll’s skeleton still had the same properties as the magic armor, so it had a high resistance threshold, allowing for movement on par with a Saint-tier swordsman.

Suffice it to say, the artificial creation’s power and range-of-motion settings for bending its knees and elbows had failed *many* times before, so Zanoba and Rudeus were relieved that there were no issues.

“All working well, it seems,” Zanoba said.

“Yeah.”

As if in response to their words, the figurine lying on the table turned its glassy, inorganic eyes toward Zanoba.

“May I ask your name, Master?”

“I am Zanoba!”

“Master Zanoba. You have been registered. What are your commands?”

“Register the man there as sub-master.”

“Understood. May I ask your name, gentleman there?”

“I’m Rudeus.”

“Sub-master Rudeus, you have been registered. What are your commands?”

In the course of testing the third prototype, Zanoba and Rudeus had run through this exchange many times. First, the doll had to register its master so that she would do what it was told.

“Good,” said Zanoba. “Now, thou shalt get down from the bed and stand on the floor!”

The figurine got off the bed, then stood up straight. Rudeus punched the air in triumph.

“Great! It registered its master’s name correctly, and it is following commands.” He looked down at his creation and felt a warm sense of accomplishment. This hadn’t always gone well, like when “I am Zanoba” registered its master as “master I-am-Zanoba.” Other times, it hadn’t gotten down from the bed, or hadn’t understood “thou shalt.”

They’d resolved these problems through direct consultation with Perugius. Using his hints, they’d tweaked the magic circles, rebuilding the whole doll from scratch numerous times. Finally, it had all come together. The result of that work was the summoning magic circle engraved into the doll’s core, which covered the many things humans did instinctively.

“Try to jump a little,” said Zanoba.

“Yes, Master.” Keeping its legs together, the figurine jumped up and down. It had a pretty powerful leap. The artificial flesh was capable of generating enough force to break the skeleton, but the limiters seemed to be functioning properly.

“Spread out your arms while you jump.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Spread your legs—okay, stop.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Now start jumping again while spinning your arms around.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Spread your legs on one jump, then close them on the next.”

“Yes, Master.” The doll did just as Zanoba ordered her. Its short hair swished, and its limbs and body bounced dynamically. Its balance was excellent.

“Now make a silly face.”

The doll paused for a moment at this unexpected command, then said, “Yes, Master.” It put its hands on its cheeks and squished up its face. But that was it; without any expression, it was weird, and dubiously silly at best. However, the doll had thought about and executed the order in its own way—in other words, Zanoba and Rudeus had gotten the result they had hoped for.

“Mm! Most satisfactory,” said Zanoba.

“Yeah...” Rudeus agreed, but he had a slight frown on his face as he looked at the doll. His eyes went to its breasts, which were small but jiggled when it jumped, then to the elaborately constructed parts between its legs. For the sake of Rudeus’s honor, let it be clear that there was nothing sexual in this look. The doll was his own creation, after all. He just hadn’t expected this level of perfection. It scared him! Though, it wasn’t his own genius that he feared.

“The similarities are just too glaring,” he said. “It’s not just the face, but the voice too, even if that was a coincidence.” Rudeus regarded the doll’s face. It met his eyes but didn’t smile. They’d built it to be capable of smiling, but it seemed it still couldn’t do it without an order. That, however, was not what

concerned Rudeus.

“We’re going to get in trouble for this,” he said.

See, the figurine’s face bore a striking resemblance to someone they both knew.

“With Miss Nanahoshi, you mean?” asked Zanoba.

That’s right, the doll had a striking resemblance to Shizuka Nanahoshi, their friend from another world who slumbered in Chaos Breaker, the floating fortress. It wasn’t just the face. The doll’s hair wasn’t the same length as Nanahoshi’s, but it was black, and the body was almost exactly the same height and build. Rudeus and Zanoba had constructed a naked doll that looked just like their friend: a doll that happened to have sexy breasts and fit-for-purpose parts between its legs.

“I mean Sylphie and the others, idiot!” Rudeus snapped. It was the wrath of his wives he had to fear.

“Master, did you not say that, given Miss Nanahoshi’s long slumber, you needed someone to stand in for her?”

“Well, yeah...”

There was a reason for the resemblance. In case Nanahoshi’s hypothesis that her friend would also be transported to this world turned out to be true, the best way to ensure future generations knew Nanahoshi’s name was for them to know what she looked like as well.

“Your wives know all that, don’t they?” said Zanoba.

“They knew we were making an automaton, but they don’t know we made it to look like Nanahoshi.” Admittedly, Rudeus didn’t think his wives would have a problem with his intentions, and Nanahoshi herself had given her approval. So long as he explained all that, they’d understand. “The *problem* is her breasts and the bits between her legs.”

It was a doll that looked like their friend and was capable of having sex. If his wives found out, they were not going to be chill about it. Unless he played this right, his bed was going to turn very cold. Sylphie might cry or get depressed,

and he could imagine her puffing out her cheeks and saying, “You put all that work into it. Why don’t you try it out?”

None of these were good outcomes!

“We didn’t have to make them so *elaborate*,” Rudeus said.

“But Master, this marvelous piece of modeling showcases the full range of your skill! The nipples in particular are *most* titillating.”

“Zanoba, you idiot, I’m trying to be discreet! Shut up about nipples.”

“Pardon.”

Why *had* they made her breasts and the parts between her legs so elaborate? It was true that back when they made the plan, Rudeus’s design ideas had gone in that direction—that is, a sex doll sort of direction. However, later, they’d moved in another direction, so they ought to have restrained themselves. They could’ve kept its breasts and the parts between her legs G-rated and avoided this conversation altogether. A doll didn’t need nipples! And this was only the fourth prototype. There was no reason to have it look like Nanahoshi at the prototype stage. Rudeus had gotten carried away.

“We *can’t* tell Sylphie and the others about this.”

“Ah, yes. You are afraid of your wives.”

“I prefer to say I *love* my wives.”

Only a few people knew that they were making a figurine in Nanahoshi’s image: Orsted, Perugius, and Nanahoshi herself. Naturally, they intended to unveil it, notify the relevant parties once it was finished, and make use of it when needed. Once it came out how elaborately constructed the figurine was, Rudeus and Zanoba might be in for some serious side-eye.

Rudeus could picture Roxy’s unimpressed stare as she said, “Your little creation has a much nicer figure than me, doesn’t it?” Or she might just give him a dark look and then take some space from him. If *that* happened, he might as well just commit seppuku.

“Hmm. I doubt your wives will make a fuss over a thing like this,” said Zanoba. “Everyone knows you are a man of strong passions, Master.”

“If it were just a normal doll, I’d agree with you, but I can’t help but think it looking like Nanahoshi is going to have *implications*.” Rudeus prodded the doll’s chest dubiously. It didn’t quite feel human, but it was very soft all the same. If he hadn’t made it himself, it would have gotten him pretty excited. Such excitement could be interpreted as cheating.

If Eris thought he was cheating, the corners of her mouth would turn down as she said “Hmph!” and socked him with a no-holds-barred punch. She’d lay him out, get on top of him, and dominate him so thoroughly that he’d never stray again.

Actually, Rudeus might not have minded that.

As he poked the doll, it stared fixedly at his finger but otherwise didn’t react. It would only sense that it was being touched. They hadn’t given it the ability to experience sexual pleasure. If Elinalise or Ariel had been closely involved in the project, it might have been different, but both of them were busy with the struggles of motherhood.

“In that case, shall we just scrap it?” Zanoba asked, looking grim. The idea of throwing away the doll was not one he relished—the idea of throwing away *any* figurine, for that matter.

“No! It’d be a waste to scrap it when it’s so close to complete!” Rudeus folded his arms and began to mull over the problem. Considering the worst-case scenario, they were better off scrapping this figurine and starting again from scratch. It wasn’t possible to replace only the breasts and parts between the legs with the technology they currently possessed. That would be something to consider if they ever looked at mass production, but at present, this was a one-of-a-kind item.

“But, *if* it were ever discovered, you know?” he went on.

“I cannot imagine it will be. We went to the trouble of setting up our laboratory all the way out here to avoid that, did we not?”

“Yeah, but...”

They were currently on the edge of the Fittoa Domain in the Asura Kingdom. They had rented an area of the still-recovering domain from the Boreas family,

then turned a house there into a laboratory. Not many people knew of its location; it didn't even have an entrance. It was only possible to enter or leave by way of a teleportation circle.

"It's fine for you," Rudeus pointed out. "You won't get in that much trouble."

"I will. Remember, I told you that Julie has been getting angry at me as of late."

"Oh, yeah." Even Juliette, who was in theory collaborating with them on this plan, didn't know about this place. She helped them with creating artificial flesh and bones, but she didn't know where it was all put together. They'd left her out, because lately, she got grumpy when Zanoba bought sexy figurines. She didn't destroy them or anything, of course, but she tried to shut them out of Zanoba's sight.

That's just how it was. Julie was an adult by society's standards and had been for some time, but in terms of years she was still *that* age: *teenage*. Rudeus and Zanoba had enough sensitivity to consider the feelings of a maiden like her.

"But it's possible Julie will find the teleportation circle, isn't it?" Rudeus asked.

The teleportation circle that led to the lab was in the basement of Zanoba's workshop. What if Julie went down there, learned of the teleportation circle, then stepped onto it out of curiosity? She'd end up coming face-to-face with the unclothed automaton—that is, a naked girl. She'd be in for a shock.

"No, for I take care to lock it from the inside, and I have the only key right here," Zanoba said.

"That won't keep Julie out. I taught her how to open locks with earth magic."

"Julie would never open a door that I locked. She promised me as much."

"Ah, right."

Julie and Zanoba were so close that they practically read each other's thoughts, but they were still technically master and slave. Julie knew there were certain lines she could never cross.

"Focusing back on the problem, what can we do?" Zanoba asked. Rudeus folded his arms in thought. Only the nipples and the parts between its legs

posed a problem. They hadn't added any other really dodgy parts. This was only prototype four—they could scrap it once they got all the data from it.

Let us not blame Rudeus for not *immediately* deciding to scrap the figurine. He had put a great deal of money and time into it, and they hadn't done the tests they should have with prototype three. Scrapping it right away just because its nipples were a bit sexy would be wasteful in the extreme.

Then, a lightbulb flicked on above Zanoba's head.

"But, Master!" he cried.

"What is it?"

"We can just have it put some clothes on!"

"Huh? Huh! You're right! Eureka!" Zanoba's idea made it click for Rudeus as well. At this stage, everything was hanging out! No good. But with clothes, the lewd parts would be hidden. Aside from a crazed rapist, no one was going to suddenly rip the doll's clothes off. If they didn't say anything, who was going to find out?

"All right then, hold on a sec."

Rudeus dashed off into the other room. There were clothes there that he'd gotten ready beforehand—a heavy, beige dress of the sort that was common in the magic city, along with brand-new panties and a bra. In fact, they'd planned to put clothes on the figurine from the start. Zanoba and Rudeus had been quaking with fear over a sexy, naked girl for nothing.

"Right," Rudeus said when he returned, turning to the doll that stood there, stock still. "Put these clothes on."

"Yes, Master."

"Once you're dressed, lie down on the bed."

"Yes, Master." It followed his commands. For the time being, with clothes on, it didn't seem sinful anymore. She was simply a girl who looked a lot like Nanahoshi, slotted perfectly into the bed. There was nothing remotely prurient about it. Actually, if anything, she was a bit creepy because her eyes were open and unblinking.

So long as she looked like this, all his problems were solved!

“You know what? After all that, I’m exhausted,” Rudeus said. “It’s a bit early, but let’s call it a day.”

“Indeed.”

For now, they had a plan of action. Rudeus sank into his chair with a sigh. In the end, they hadn’t been able to test anything except the power-on procedure, but the results were excellent. There was no need to panic. They could teach the figurine more tomorrow.

Rudeus tapped his palm with his fist, feeling triumphant. “Now, let’s celebrate the first great leap for our plan!”

“Yes, let’s!” Zanoba agreed. “I thought you might say that, so I have this ready!”

He carried a cask from the corner of the room to the middle, then smashed the boards at the top with his fist. There was a splintering sound as a little of the liquid within spilled out.

“You think of everything!” Rudeus said.

Zanoba picked up one of the cups he’d brought and scooped up the contents of the cask. It came out full of a translucent, purple liquid—Asuran wine.

“Oh, you got any food?” Rudeus added.

“Only preserved supplies.”

“Oh, well. That’ll do.”

The two men brought armfuls of dried food up from the cellar and piled it up next to the cask. That done, they raised their brimming cups to one another.

“To the advancement of the figurine project.”

“To the fulfillment of our dream.”

“Cheers!”

With that, the celebrations began.

“What should we teach it first?”

“Now that we’ve completed a simple operations check, I’d like to run tests on how adaptable it is, how much it can remember, and the limits of the flexibility of its thinking.”

“We’ve got a lot to investigate. Let’s do all the tests we can.”

Rudeus and Zanoba drank as they discussed their future plans. When they’d powered on the doll earlier, it hadn’t outwardly done anything extraordinary, but it *had* interpreted and executed even ambiguous commands. It would learn autonomously, working off the basic knowledge included in its initial settings. However, just how much its intelligence could grow remained to be seen. How much would it be able to remember, and what would it learn to do? Would it be able to think and judge for itself?

“Leave it to me, Master. I shall take responsibility for giving it a broad education.”

“Just don’t teach it anything it shouldn’t know, right?”

“I might say the very same thing to you, Master!”

“When did you become a smart-ass?”

The two of them laughed as they imagined the future, filling their bellies with wine.

Zanoba changed the subject. “The ‘by-products’ you created are selling well, Master.”

“Yeah, I did make a lot of stuff while we were researching. So you’re selling them at the shop?”

“We’ve had particularly positive responses to that, er, one thing. The frog sleeve.”

“Ah, yeah...”

It had taken a lot of trial and error before Rudeus was able to reproduce the texture of human skin. One iteration had used reinforced frog cheek pouches. It was extremely thin and elastic, but tough enough that it took a significant amount of force to tear it. Initially, Rudeus had thought he could make skin for

the figurine from it, but they'd found a better material and hadn't ended up using it.

Instead, he'd made something...different.

"The contraceptive, huh?" Rudeus asked. It was a condom.

"Just so. Master Luke was especially pleased with it. He's pushing on our behalf to build a factory in Asura."

"Asuran nobles really love that sort of thing, huh?"

"You say that, but you use them too, don't you, Master?"

"Well, you know." He did use them—almost every night.

After his third and fourth daughters, Lily and Chris, were born, there'd been an unspoken agreement that the next baby would be Sylphie's. For a while, Rudeus gave the most attention to Sylphie and less to Roxy and Eris. Unfortunately, perhaps because of her race, Sylphie had not yet gotten pregnant a third time. It was possible they'd just gotten lucky with the timing with Lucie and Sieg, or maybe God was being cruel. Who knew? Either way, Eris got restless when they did it less. Her sex drive had settled down a lot compared to how it once was, but it was still a force to be reckoned with, like a wild beast with ravenous hunger in its eyes. Rudeus could easily find himself pounced upon and then Eris might get pregnant.

That was where contraceptives came in. Just use this little guy and hey, presto! He could satisfy Eris the ravenous beast without making any little beasts! No Sylphie scratching her cheek and looking forlornly at Eris's pregnant belly. No Eris looking back with a vaguely guilty expression, defensively saying "What?" No need for any household disharmony. And this miraculous invention could be had for one, that's right, *one* Asuran silver coin!

"I mean, you know," Rudeus said. "It's not ideal having more kids when we don't have more people to look after them."

"Why not simply hire a servant?"

"If we hired a servant, then I wouldn't be the one looking after them. I can't even keep up with six. You might not think it, but I want to watch over every

one of them.”

Zanoba cackled. “That is just like you, Master.”

At this, Rudeus was suddenly inspired to ask something he’d always wondered about.

“Come to think of it, what’s the story with you and Julie?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Well, are you going to remarry?”

“You mean to Julie?”

“Sure, there’s an age gap, and Julie’s pretty low down in society,” Rudeus acknowledged. “But you don’t think of yourself as royalty anymore, right? It’s a sweet life, you know. Getting married, having all your children around you. You tell them how proud you are, sometimes they play tricks on you and you have to tell them off...”

Zanoba slowly shook his head, then said firmly, “I will not get married.”

“Oh?” Rudeus fell silent. Everyone had things they didn’t want others prying into. Zanoba surely had more on his mind than a simple preference. He had a whole lot of baggage—being royalty, his previous marriage, killing his little brother, what happened with Pax...

“It’s nothing exciting,” Zanoba said. “Do you want to hear about it?”

“If you’re happy to tell me.”

“As a Blessed Child, I am incredibly strong and tough, but the tradeoff is that my skin is insensitive.”

“So...?”

“The skin of a flesh-and-blood woman is too soft to provide me with stimulation.”

These words hit Rudeus like a blow to the head. It was obscene, but it explained things—like why Zanoba used a bronze statue for *everything*.

“That isn’t all, of course,” he went on. “There are many other things, like Pax, and Julius. But more than anything else, it would be cruel to take on a partner if

I cannot give her a child.”

“Right,” Rudeus said. “But I mean, you could still ask Julie, if you get the chance. Maybe she’ll say she doesn’t mind not having children, I mean...or you could, like, adopt.” He stumbled over his words because he already had six children of his own.

Zanoba laughed without enthusiasm. “That is true.”

Rudeus decided not to say any more about marriage and returned to their original subject. These were supposed to be celebratory drinks, where they imbibed and had a good time.

“Anyway, enough about the rubbers! What about the other things? They selling well?” Rudeus asked.

“They see a modest trade. It seems they are viewed rather as curiosities, so only certain enthusiasts are looking to collect them.”

“I feel like they were pretty useful,” Rudeus said, disappointed. “Aisha *loved* the vacuum cleaner.”

Rudeus’s by-product inventions were many and varied. They included fans and vacuum cleaners that used magic circles, various waterproof items, and a cooler box. Each was useful, but only a few had caught on. Most of the effects could be reproduced using magic, and because of the somewhat specialized materials, they had no choice but to set the prices relatively high. Further research into the materials might make it possible to sell the items more cheaply, but that wasn’t their goal.

“Useful they may be, but Asura and Millis already have magical implements that produce the same effect, and hiring a servant is both faster and more convenient.”

“I feel like hiring a servant would take more work.” Rudeus downed his drink and sighed. Even though he’d lived long enough in this world that he might as well have been born here, he couldn’t entirely shake his previous life. “Oh, well. How about I at least put together a book on how to make them? Even if I just pass on the technology, people in the future might find a use for it.”

“A very fine idea. No doubt that book will be a marvelous discovery for

anyone who wants to continue your legacy!”

“I could call it *The Book of Rudeus* or something.”

“Ha ha! Never would the magicians of generations to come guess that a tome bearing the name of the Dragon God’s right hand would contain instructions on how to make household goods!”

Rudeus and Zanoba cheerfully worked their way through the cask of wine, their faces growing redder and redder. A whole cask was a little more than just the two of them could handle.

“It’s a shame Cliff and Sir Bardi aren’t here.”

“I imagine,” Zanoba said after a pause, “Master Cliff would have objected to such an indecent doll.”

“He’d have been appalled, but he’d let it slide. Let’s bring him in for the next stage. Heck, we could raise a toast in his rooms in Millis.”

“An excellent idea! Yes, that’s just it! Once we have used this prototype to complete it properly, why don’t we present our first glorious automaton to Cliff as a gift?”

“Good idea! Ah, except it can’t be a girl model,” Rudeus reflected. “Let’s make it a boy.”

“A boy would be nice too.”

“Well, well. Your interests swing that way too, do they?”

“I have no feelings of desire for men, but I can appreciate the beauty of a boy. You understand, don’t you, Master?”

“Oh, I do. I understand so well I wouldn’t have minded if Fitz had actually been a boy.”

“Ha ha ha! You are something, Master!”

By now, their party was in full swing and the two of them were getting drunker by the minute. The wine tasted all the better when sweetened with success.

“Right, okay, next time we make a boy model, and we’ll make it soooooo super

cool that Cliff gets jealous.”

“Ha ha, *ha ha ha!*”

The two of them hadn’t noticed something important. They weren’t aware of the staring eyes watching them as they drank, nor did they realize that their conversation had been overheard.

They didn’t see her smile.

“Urggh,” Rudeus groaned. “My head’s killing me.”

The next day had dawned. As Rudeus got up, he applied an antidote to his aching head. Looking out the window, he saw that the storm had subsided entirely, leaving a cloudless blue sky.

“This late already? I guess I drank too much...”

All the same, there was nothing like having a drink together as men, especially when it was a celebration. The doll’s indecency the previous day had thrown him a bit, but that was what it was. If the prototype was that good, he couldn’t wait to see what the future held. Rudeus felt possibility spread its wings, his heart bursting with hope and love as he turned to peek at the doll’s face—

“Uh?”

It wasn’t there. Only the bed stood there, empty. Doll-less.

“Wait, hold up. Zanoba? Where’d you put the doll?” Maybe, Rudeus thought, Zanoba had gotten up earlier and was teaching it something. As he looked around, Zanoba emerged sluggishly from a pile of blankets in the corner of the room.

“Hrm...? Master? Did you not turn off the automaton once it was in bed?”

“Turn it off?” Just like that, Rudeus’s memories surged back. He’d definitely had it get dressed, then told it to lie down on its bed. He was sure of that. “I... think so...?”

Turning off the doll required either a command to turn off or to go dormant. The user had to put a hand on the magic stone in its chest and say the

incantation. He...had *not* done that.

“F-find it!” Rudeus spluttered.

“U-understood!”

The two of them frantically hunted for the doll, but it was nowhere to be found—not inside the laboratory, nor was it right outside. It had vanished.

Chapter 2:

The Day the Doll Walked (Part 2)

THAT DAY, Elinalise was out shopping with her son, Clive. They went around the shops hand in hand. Elinalise had given birth to and raised several children already, but she still enjoyed going out with her child's hand in hers. Clive looked a lot like her husband, Cliff. His hair was the same color, and he had Cliff's mouth. Even the way he thought he was the best without any particular proof was identical. Elinalise remembered Cliff the way he had been when she first met him and found herself drool—uh, smiling.

"Mooom! It's a pumpkin! Let's buy a pumpkin! Pumpkin!" he cried.

"So it is," she replied. *"Pumpkins are delicious this time of year."*

"I don't care about that! Eating pumpkins makes you grow tall!"

"Who told you that?"

"Lucie!"

Elinalise's son was a beautiful little boy. His eyes were just like Elinalise's, and there was no doubt that in the future, elf girls as well as human ones would swoon over him. The only problem was his height: like his father, he was shorter than average. Clive seemed to have developed a bit of a complex about it. At home, he was always going on about how he wanted to get taller.

"What do you want to be so big for?" Elinalise asked.

"It's a secret!" said Clive, his cheeks a little pink.

Elinalise already knew the reason was a girl two years his senior, the aforementioned Lucie. He wanted her to think he was cool.

"Here's hoping you get bigger soon," Elinalise liked seeing her son acting like a typical little boy. Then, she stopped. *"Huh?"*

Elinalise's long ears had picked up a voice she knew.

C'mon, sweetheart, this is how the world works. I do something for you, you

do something for me.

I'm just dying to hear what sounds that mouth can make.

The voices came from an alley. Elinalise looked in and saw a girl being held by two men at the back of a tavern. Among them was a face she knew. Unusually for her, it didn't belong to either of the men.

"But this is just my voice. You can hear how it sounds."

"That's what you think. You've got a much prettier voice in there."

The girl didn't seem bothered by this, but from what Elinalise knew of her, she wasn't the type to welcome such overtures. Even if it didn't show on her face, she was probably in trouble.

Elinalise put down her shopping bags and called out, "Just a moment, you two."

The men spun around at once.

"What's your problem?" said one.

"That girl is a friend of Rudeus's," she said. "I'd go find someone else to bother if I were you."

The two men slowly looked her up and down. "Someone like you?"

"Heh, and with your baby brother with you. You little slut."

"Baby brother! My, aren't you a charmer," Elinalise cooed, putting a hand to her cheek and smiling coyly. Despite her teasing, she had already picked up that these two weren't from around here. They were probably roaming adventurers. Anyone from here would have backed off as soon as they heard Rudeus's name.

"You two...what *are* we going to do with you?" she wondered.

Suddenly, Clive stepped out in front of her, his face bright red. He had found and picked up a stick while she wasn't looking.

"Don't you come near my mom!" he shouted.

"Clive, that's sweet, but Mama can handle these two by herself. Come back, now."

“Really?” Clive gaped as Elinalise scooped him up and put him down behind her. Making a note to shower him with praise later, Elinalise put her hand on the sword at her hip.

“What d’ya mean, you can handle yourself? We’re A rank, y’know?” one of the men sneered.

“My, how impressive. You must be very talented to make A rank at such a young age.”

“Pah, it was easy. Seems like you’re pretty confident in yourself.”

“Oh, no. I’m afraid I am quite ordinary,” she said.

The men drew their swords. The blades were well-worn. Elinalise had a sword with her for self-defense, but she wasn’t carrying her trusty shield. That was unfortunate. Depending on how competent her opponents were, she could be at a disadvantage in a two-on-one fight.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” said one of the men. “Once I’ve roughed you up a little, I’ll show you a good time.”

Elinalise did not draw her sword. The men, perhaps thinking that she was frightened, approached slowly, leering at her. Elinalise waited until they were away from the girl, then took a deep breath.

“*Eeeeeeeek!* Help meeeeeee! I’m being kidnapped!” Her scream rang through the alley. The two men were startled.

“Oi!”

“W-we ain’t kidnapping no one!”

But the cry did no more than echo through the alley. No one came from the road Elinalise and Clive had been on. Soon enough, the alley fell silent once more.

“Heh, you yell loud, but we’re behind a tavern in the middle of the day. No one’s gonna come.”

“Come to my room, and I’ll make you scream all you like.”

Suddenly, the doors of the surrounding buildings flew open one after another:

bang, bang, bang. A number of men, covered in hair and wearing black coats with a design on the back that resembled a yellow tiger, stepped into the street. *These* were the soldiers of the Ruquag Mercenary Band, and one of their jobs was to deliver the liquor to taverns. Upon seeing Elinalise, the men all began to call out at once.

“Mistress Elinalise!”

“Just who do you two think you’re messing with?!”

“Thought you’d pick a fight with the Ruquag Mercenaries?”

“We’re here to deliver your *beating!*”

Around outlaws or people who threatened one of their own, the well-mannered, peacekeeping mercenaries turned rough. There were a little more than ten of them. Even if this were Rudeus, he would have apologized the moment they threatened him. Yup, he’d have been groveling on the ground by now.

The two men, who stood there rooted to the spot, took about two seconds to throw down their swords.

“Er, sorry ’bout that!”

“We’d no idea you was someone so important. We only got to town yesterday, see.”

Hooray! Rudeus’s honor was safe. If these guys backed down, then Rudeus was no coward. Of course, who wouldn’t apologize if a crowd of extremely hairy men came running toward them?

“How do you want to deal with them, Mistress?”

“They haven’t done me any harm, so go easy on them. Teach them how things work around here.”

“Ma’am!” one of the mercenaries said. “Right, you two, come with me.”

“Um, we were actually—”

“I said come.”

“We’ve sort of got an appoint—”

“Stop struggling.”

The beastfolk men escorted the two adventurers into the tavern. Elinalise watched them go, then went over to the girl.

“Nanahoshi, I haven’t seen you for a while. Is it the day you wake up already? It’s unusual for you to be in town, isn’t it?”

Naturally, this girl was Nanahoshi.

Nanahoshi nodded, looking totally unfazed. “I woke up last night,” she said.

“You did? Well, for now, let’s go somewhere else. It’s terribly dull around here.” Elinalise took Nanahoshi’s hand, but then she noticed something strange. “Nanahoshi, my goodness. Did you cut your hair?”

She remembered Nanahoshi having long hair, but it was trimmed up to the nape of her neck. Elinalise was puzzled. At her question, the corners of Nanahoshi’s mouth curved up in a smile. There was something not quite natural about it. It was the smile of someone uncomfortable, perhaps trying to laugh off something they didn’t want to talk about. Or of someone plotting something...

Elinalise, perceptive as she was, immediately had an idea of what was up. “Is something going on? You’re welcome to talk to me, if you like. Are you free now?”

“I have no critical tasks.”

“Why don’t we go find a cafe and sit down?” Elinalise picked up her shopping and took Clive’s hand. He looked a little sulky. “Dear me, Clive, what’s that pout for? Are you disappointed that you didn’t get to protect me? You should be protecting the girl you like, not your momm—wait, Nanahoshi! Whatever are you doing? Aren’t you coming?”

With Nanahoshi in tow, they headed for a nearby cafe.

“That really was touch-and-go back there. Thank goodness we were in a spot where there’s always someone nearby.”

It was a few minutes later. Elinalise and Nanahoshi were sitting opposite one

another in a cafe, each with identical glasses of fruit juice. Nanahoshi had copied Elinalise's order. Clive, incidentally, had ordered some slightly fancy sweets—the candied fruit that was now affordable thanks to the recent drop in sugar prices.

Nanahoshi's head and eyes turned this way and that as she looked around the shop. Perhaps it was her first time here.

"Now, what's happened?" Elinalise asked.

"Due to the large number of events, I am unable to return a single answer. Please refine your inquiry."

"Did...did you always talk like that?" Elinalise was puzzled, but she reasoned that people who'd had a traumatic experience often spoke differently afterward. When someone felt stubborn, they spoke more stiffly. "Well, then, you should start from the beginning."

"From the beginning?" Nanahoshi asked.

"That's right. The very beginning."

Nanahoshi blinked twice. Then, she began her story. "I awoke last night. When I awoke, Master Zanoba and Master Rudeus were there."

"Oh, my. How very improper of them, trespassing upon the bedroom of a maiden."

"The two of them examined my unclothed body. They appeared extremely pleased."

"They *what*...?"

"Following that, they examined every inch of my body, had me open my legs, and touched my chest. They then had a debate over whether to use me or not, before concluding that once they were satisfied, they would throw me away. They had me lie down on my bed, then left me there and went to sleep."

Hearing this was enough to make even Elinalise's thoughts freeze up for a moment. A scene played out in her mind of Rudeus and Zanoba leering as they stripped Nanahoshi while she slept before forcing her to wake up to service them. Elinalise had known many such men, so it wasn't hard to imagine.

“Y-you didn’t resist?”

“Resistance is futile.”

“Yes, if it was Rudeus and Zanoba, I suppose it was... Was Lord Perugia not there?”

“It was only the two of them.”

Elinalise wasn’t really sure what Perugia’s daily life was like, but he surely left his fortress sometimes.

“W-was this the first time?” she asked.

“Yes. However, it seems that Master Zanoba and Master Rudeus planned and prepared in advance, so—”

“You mean they may have been planning it for a long time?”

The two of them would have no trouble finding out when Perugia was going out. If they were lucky and Perugia’s excursion coincided with the day Nanahoshi woke up, they could find that out easily, too.

Elinalise was silent. She was a level-headed woman. Thanks to her abundant experience, she had developed the capacity to think coolly and act without anger. But even she couldn’t help but be shaken by the betrayal of people she’d trusted.

Not Rudeus. Surely not.

Zanoba, who would never be much of a ladies’ man, was one thing, but surely not Rudeus with his wives and his children who loved him—and he loved them right back! This was the Rudeus who was ready to die fighting Orsted to protect his family. The Rudeus who obeyed Eris in the bedroom. Him, do such things to Nanahoshi? Poor Nanahoshi, who was desperately searching for a way to return home?

Part of Elinalise wanted to laugh at the absurdity. There had to be some mistake. Hadn’t he given his wholehearted assistance to her as she toiled away? Hadn’t he kept helping her even when Sylphie got jealous? Hadn’t he gone to the Demon Continent and fought Demon King Atofe in order to rescue her?

But look at Nanahoshi’s face, Elinalise told herself. Apart from that odd smile

earlier, she's been expressionless as a doll this whole time. Nanahoshi wasn't laughing or crying, and her hair had been shorn off at her shoulders. Though she might not have seemed the type, Nanahoshi actually took quite good care of her hair. Now, it was disheveled.

Elinalise had never been *close* with Nanahoshi, but they'd known each other a long time. She was certain she knew Nanahoshi's expressions. Elinalise had never seen her so shocked before. It was, of course, *unthinkable* that Nanahoshi would make up such a story. Elinalise didn't know what to believe. Perhaps it was some trap to ensnare Rudeus and Zanoba.

Yes, of course!

There were any number of magic items that could alter one's appearance. Though, even using such an item, it would be impossible to infiltrate into the heart of Chaos Breaker to have one's way with Nanahoshi. To pull it off, one would have to have some idea of Perugius's movements and be able to freely come and go from the floating fortress. That only left a few candidates. Elinalise was more confused than she'd been in years. She knew only one thing for sure.

"That must have been awful," she said. She moved to sit next to Nanahoshi, then hugged her tight. She could tell that the girl's heart had been damaged.

"Master Elinalise, there's more..."

"That's all right. No need to say any more. You were so brave to tell me all those awful things. Even if it is a little hard to believe..." She trailed off. "Oh, what am I saying? Such a betrayal of trust is quite unforgivable. I shall make sure Rudeus and Zanoba are punished."

Thus Elinalise decided that for now she would comfort Nanahoshi in her anguish and put off getting to the truth of the matter until later.

"Did Master Rudeus commit a crime?"

"Yes, he did a very bad thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"Well, he hurt you. In fact, not only you. It may be that his wives...that Sylphie and Roxy and Eris are hurt too."

“I am unharmed.”

“It’s your heart that he hurt.”

“My heart...” Nanahoshi repeated.

As Elinalise hugged Nanahoshi, she suddenly realized that something wasn’t quite right—there was a *wrong* feeling to the girl. Elinalise had embraced a lot of people, so she ought to know. She’d never hugged anyone like this before. She couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it was, but it almost felt like she wasn’t a person.

A shout rang out in the quiet of the cafe. “I found it!”

Elinalise looked over at the door and saw a man in a dark gray robe pointing at Elinalise’s table. It was Rudeus. Zanoba was right behind him, and they were accompanied by a group of Ruquag mercenaries.

“Seize it!” Rudeus yelled. Elinalise gripped Nanahoshi more tightly and was about to shout at him to wait, when the girl in her arms made her move.

Displaying strength Elinalise never dreamed she possessed, Nanahoshi threw off her embrace, then flipped over the table and leaped out a nearby window. With a crash, Nanahoshi was gone. She was terrifyingly fast, easily as swift as a Saint-tier sword fighter. No one there could keep up with her. Even the mercenaries looked dumbfounded.

“Chairman, Sir Zanoba, it’s too fast,” said one. “We can’t catch it.”

“O-of course not!” Zanoba replied, “It is a doll created by my master. No common warrior could hope to match it in strength or speed.”

“Okay, not the priority right now,” Rudeus cut in. “It seems it hasn’t learned to move covertly yet. For now, send people to hunt for it. Once we find it, Zanoba and I will find a way to catch it.” As he gave his orders to the mercenaries, he came over to Elinalise, looking exhausted. Clive stared up at him wide-eyed, an empty fork in his hand. Rudeus patted him on the head, then checked him for injuries.

Then, he turned to Elinalise and held out a hand. “Sorry about that, Elinalise. Are you all right? It didn’t hurt you?”

“No, of course not,” Elinalise said slowly. Taking his hand, she got to her feet, then asked, “What was all that about?”

“Well, there’s not much to tell...”

Elinalise relaxed a little as he explained.

I knew I’d misunderstood something, she thought.

At home, it was Eris’s job to take Leo and the kids for their walk. She also taught swordcraft to the children, as well as to some of the students at the university, but when it came to housework, her only job was walking. If she didn’t have anything else to do, she went out with them after lunch. Obviously, bringing all the kids would be dangerous, so she usually took two or three of them at most. When Leo was there, Lara climbed on his back as a matter of course, so, in reality, Eris only had to keep an eye on one or two kids at a time.

That day, Lara and Sieg were both on Leo’s back, and Eris had little Lily on her shoulders. They would walk into town and Eris would watch while the kids played in their favorite spots. This was her routine.

Until not so long ago, she’d taken Lucie, Lara, and Arus, and sometimes Clive, too. Back then, the local boys had liked to pull Lara’s hair until Lucie made them stop. Lately, though—maybe thanks to Eris’s training—Lara had started to fight back.

Eris would turn away for a moment, then she’d look back to find Lara standing there with a scratch on her face or a bloody nose, while the boy who’d gone after her was crouching nearby and crying. Her eyes would meet Eris’s, her face stoic but defiant, and she’d hold up two fingers in a “V” for victory.

Eris never knew what to say in response. When *she* was little, she’d often been scolded for getting into fights and making her opponents cry. Nobles’ daughters weren’t *supposed* to fight, they’d told her. If someone said something mean to her, it was best for her to use her words.

So, whenever Lara got in a fight, Eris would hesitate for a second. Should she discipline her?

In the end, Eris usually ended up complimenting her instead. Seeing the quiet Lara, proud of herself after fighting off a bully, it seemed impossible not to say: “Well done! That’s my girl!”

On the other hand, Eris would have been furious if Lara made someone weaker than herself cry, like Sieg. She’d spank her until her bottom was glowing if she did *that*. But the boys in the park were bigger and older than Lara, so praise was earned, Eris thought.

Maybe she should have considered that, given Lara would be starting school the following year, it wasn’t good to *only* tell her she’d done well defending herself—but Eris didn’t have that kind of foresight.

Today, they weren’t heading for their usual park, so no fights for Lara. Eris hadn’t changed their destination for any particular reason; she just felt like it.

“Don’t go too far!” she called.

They’d come to the river on the outskirts of town. Lara and Sieg splashed around naked in the river as they played with Leo. Eris focused most of her attention on Lily, who had recently taken her first toddling steps.

Lily was nervous, perhaps because the river was new to her. Reaching out, she hesitantly touched it, before shrieking at the coldness of the water.

“Aaah! Mama! *Mama!*”

“What? Are you scared?”

“It’s cold!” The non-answer made Eris chuckle. She patted Lily on the head. Lily looked just like Lara, but she was a little quieter. That being said, she was more curious. She was fascinated by anything new or that she hadn’t seen before.

“Mama! Sparkles!” For example, she had just found something.

“Um... Sparkles?”

“It’s sparkly!” Eris followed Lily’s pointing finger and saw something that shone brighter than the light on the surface of the river. A fish. About the length of Eris’s middle finger, wriggling this way and that.

“It’s a fish.”

“Squish!”

“Not squish, *fish*. Fish, got it? Try saying it. Fish.”

“Fish! Mama, get it! Get the fish!”

“Okay, okay... You watch me.” Eris rolled her sleeves up, then fixed her eyes on the river. A few seconds later, there was a whoosh and a slap as spray flew up from the surface of the river. In a blink of Lily’s eye, Eris had the fish in her fist. The fish didn’t seem to know what was going on. Its eyes were wide, and its mouth gaped open and shut.

“Here.”

“Oh! Oh!” exclaimed Lily as Eris put the fish in her hands. At this, the fish seemed to at last realize this was a state of emergency. With a wriggling leap, it flipped out of Lily’s hands and dropped back into the river with a splash. “The fish ran away...”

“Heh heh, you’re right.” Just then, Eris sensed a presence behind her. She turned around. “Hold on. Something’s coming.”

Something was approaching from the direction of the town, and very fast. It might be Rudeus in the Magic Armor Version Two, or else someone as fast as her.

“Leo, get those two out of the river and dressed!” Eris shouted. Leo, perhaps sensing it too, replied with a woof, then nosed Lara’s back. Lara went obediently. She could communicate with Leo, so she understood the situation right away. Sieg whined a bit about wanting to play for longer, but when Lara pulled on his hand, he reluctantly got out of the water, then started to dry off with the towels they’d brought.

“Lara, help Sieg get dressed!”

Sieg had only just learned how to get dressed by himself. He still struggled with each button, so he’d take ages without help.

Eris was tense. She didn’t sense any hostility from whoever was coming toward them, but it was fast enough that, with the kids in tow, she wouldn’t quite be able to outrun it. If it did turn out to be an enemy, she could probably

beat them, but it was still better to prioritize getting the kids to safety.

She'd put the three of them on Leo's back, then hold the enemy off herself. They also weren't far from Orsted's office, where North God Kalman III and Dragon God Orsted lived. If they could get there, they'd definitely be safe.

When Eris saw the approaching figure, she let out a sigh of relief at the familiar face of a girl with black hair. "Oh, it's you? Hey, Nanahoshi."

Nanahoshi had been about to run straight past them, but at the sound of her name, she stopped abruptly and looked at Eris.

"Good morning. If it is not an inconvenience, may I ask your name?"

"It's Eris. What, did you forget?"

"Master Eris. I will remember."

Eris felt something was off. Nanahoshi's hair was short, she was fast, and she didn't sound like herself. But Eris also wasn't that close to Nanahoshi, so she didn't have a good idea of what Nanahoshi's normal behavior was like. It probably wasn't a big deal. She never was one to get hung up on details.

"You're really zooming along there. What's up? Someone chasing you?"

"Yes... Correction, no," said Nanahoshi, looking back over her shoulder. Behind her was a wide and empty plain. "It appears I have outrun them."

"Whoa! Mama, Mama!" Eris glanced down and saw Lily clinging to Nanahoshi's legs. Lily patted Nanahoshi's calves, eyes sparkling. She let out a cry of delight and beamed as Nanahoshi lifted her.

"Good morning," said Nanahoshi.

"Ah ha ha!" Lily giggled. Then, she grabbed Nanahoshi's hair and tugged on it, patted her cheeks, and stroked her nose.

Eris had no idea why Lily had taken to Nanahoshi like this. Whatever it was, she didn't want to impose on her, so she took Lily back from Nanahoshi and put her on her shoulders.

"Hey, Mama! Want some." Lily reached out for Nanahoshi.

"Don't be rude," Eris said.

Lily grumbled, but Eris did not put her down.

Nanahoshi watched them, then lifted up a lock of her hair. "Is it this you want?" she asked.

"Yeah," Lily mumbled with a little nod.

Without warning, Nanahoshi yanked out a few strands of hair and held them out to Lily. "Here you are."

"Yay!" Lily took them happily. Eris had no idea why. She decided it had to be because black hair was uncommon.

"May I ask you a question, Master Eris?" said Nanahoshi, looking at her.

"What is it?"

"Are you the Eris who is Master Rudeus's wife?"

"Yeah, I am," Eris answered, puffing her chest out. It did make her feel proud to be called that. She'd given birth to his first son, and here she was looking after the children. Yep, she sure was!

"Will knowing of my existence make you angry with Master Rudeus?" Nanahoshi asked.

"Your existence? Um, I'm not going to get mad just because you're there," Eris replied tentatively, unsure of what Nanahoshi was asking. Nanahoshi was Rudeus's friend. She wasn't going to get angry just because he talked to her. If he made a move on her, or if he said he wanted her as his fourth wife, then she might be a little bit angry. Only a little, though.

"What about Master Sylphie and Master Roxy, then?"

"They won't... Oh, wait." An old memory of Sylphie suddenly came back to her. "Sylphie did once say she just couldn't, like, 'accept' Nanahoshi."

"Accept? Accept in what sense?"

"No idea. But that girl really loves Rudeus, so she's got to have her reasons."

Eris loved Rudy and had no problem saying so, but she had to respect Sylphie's sheer devotion. Sylphie would put up with anything, even to the point of giving up who she was, if it were for Rudeus's sake. Eris would die for Rudeus

in battle, but that was who she was and what she wanted. She wasn't very good at doing anything that she didn't want to, not even for Rudeus's sake. Sylphie was different. Sylphie would set aside what she wanted for him. Eris respected that.

"Very well," said Nanahoshi. "I wish to talk to Master Sylphie. Where might I find her?"

"Pretty sure she's at home today."

"Understood. Thank you very much for answering my questions." Nanahoshi bowed, twisted her mouth into a smile, then spun around and set off back toward the town at a walking pace.

"What was that about?" Eris wondered to herself. She folded her arms, planted her feet shoulder width apart, then snorted. Arus had started imitating this pose lately.

"Mama..."

Eris turned around. She could just see blue and green hair poking up from behind Leo. Right, it was Lara and Sieg. She'd forgotten to make them say "hello" to the family friend. Had that been wrong? Usually Leo came up to people they knew of his own initiative, and she'd remember to make them do their polite greeting then. He'd hung back this time.

As Eris puzzled over this, Lara said, "That wasn't Nanahoshi."

The words inspired in Eris a sense of unease she couldn't put into words. Her mouth tightened. Up on her shoulders, Lily stretched out the hairs Nanahoshi had given her with a twang. She had to get home immediately. No—the kids were with her.

Change of plans.

"We're going to the office. You two get on Leo's back." For now, she'd get the kids somewhere secure, then she'd go home. Having made up her mind, Eris put Lara and Sieg on Leo's back, then began walking toward the office.

An imposing atmosphere was hanging over the office when Eris arrived. A

number of Ruquag mercenaries she recognized were loitering out front. Along with them, she also spotted Zanoba, Julie, Elinalise, Clive, and North God Kalman III Alexander Rybak, though the usual sense of repulsion she felt was absent. Orsted must've been out.

"Eris?! What are you doing here?!" Rudeus came rushing out from the crowd. Eris was relieved to see him. At the same time, she became certain that she was about to uncover the secret of the unease she'd felt earlier.

"We met someone strange on our walk," she said, not answering his question. A wary look came into Rudeus's eyes.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"She looked a lot like Nanahoshi."

Rudeus made a face like he wanted to shout, "That was Lupin!" He itched to ask what'd happened, but his concern for Eris came first. "Right, but nothing happened to you, then? You're not hurt?"

"The kids are all fine."

Rudeus looked down with a worried expression at Lara, Sieg, and Lily, who was still twanging the black hair.

"What about you, Eris? You're not hurt?" Once he'd seen the kids were unharmed, Rudeus began to check Eris over for injuries. He examined her from head to toe, touched her face, took her by the shoulders, and turned her around. Just as he reached to squish her breasts, her fist hit his chin with a crack.

"I'm fine! As I'm sure you can see!"

"Mmm, yeah."

"She didn't do anything to us. Leo realized she was a fake, so we came here for now." Eris looked at Leo. For some reason, Lara looked smug. She flared her nostrils with a huff. Eris patted her on the head, then turned back to Rudeus. "So, who was that?"

"Um, well..."

Rudeus explained what had happened. The doll he and Zanoba had been

working on had escaped. They found signs that the teleportation circle had been used, so they determined it was in the Magic City of Sharia. They used the magic circle, woke up Julie, who was dozing the day away at the workshop, then had the Ruquag Mercenary Band begin their search. Thanks to Elinalise's scuffle, they managed to locate it, only to lose it again. They got word that it had headed out of the city, so Rudeus had used the Eye of Distant Sight to look out from the city walls. That was when he'd spotted it heading in the direction of the office. Guessing that the office was its destination, Rudeus had gotten here first. Then, as they'd been watching the direction they expected the doll to come from, Eris had shown up.

"She didn't seem that bad to me," Eris said.

"Maybe not right now. But if we don't find it quickly, there's no telling what might happen." Rudeus's voice was resolute.

In actuality, he was convinced that the doll had a flaw. It had several laws inscribed into its core concerning human safety, obedience to orders, and self-protection—the so-called Three Laws of Robotics. It had ignored its orders and run away. That meant that, at the very least, there was a flaw in the "obedience to orders" part. For now, all it had done was talk to Elinalise and Eris. No one had been hurt, but it would be wishful thinking to assume this was because the "safety for humans" law was working. If that was also malfunctioning, there was no way of knowing what might trigger a killing spree.

"Eris, could you tell me more about what you two talked about?"

"I mean, it was just small talk. I think it said..." Eris thought back on her conversation with the doll and answered.

Rudeus's expression grew more and more strained as she talked. When he took his own conversation with the doll together with Elinalise's and Eris's, a theory had come to him to explain its behavior. With Elinalise, it had repeatedly asked about Rudeus's wives. Last night, Rudeus had said they should scrap it because his wives would be angry. The doll had heard him. The "obedience to orders" law might not have been working, but the "self-protection" law was. It made sense, therefore, that it would take defensive action. What would that look like? Eliminating whoever was trying to eliminate it. As far as it knew, the

enemies trying to eliminate it were Rudeus's wives. The ones who would dispatch it were Zanoba and Rudeus, but perhaps the doll hadn't attacked them because they were already registered as its masters. It seemed contradictory, but if the doll had a bug, contradictory behavior was to be expected.

The doll was identifying and locating Rudeus's wives. It had to be considering taking them out first. On the other hand, Eris *should* have been a target for elimination, but it had only talked to her. Did that mean the theory was wrong?

Not necessarily. The questions it asked Eris indicated that it was investigating which of his wives to eliminate—which, in other words, was the greatest obstacle to it. It probably wanted to take care of that one before the others. Its conversation with Eris had made it all too obvious who the threat was.

"At the end it said it wanted to talk to Sylphie and headed back to town," said Eris. Rudeus's face went pale.

"Sylphie's in danger!" he cried, starting to run frantically off toward the house, but he quickly did an about-face and returned to the office, where he took a deep breath.

Rudeus looked around, telling himself to stay calm. Here outside the office were the Ruquag Mercenary Band, Zanoba, Julie, Alec, Elinalise, Clive, and his kids. First, Rudeus nodded to Alec, who looked like he had nothing to do.

"Alec, I'm going to leave the kids and Julie here with you. That all right?"

"Yes, that's fine."

The children's safety came first. If Orsted were around, Rudeus might have asked him and given Alec a different job, but as he wasn't, this would have to do. They ought to be safe with Alec watching over them. Julie would probably be fine given that the doll had walked straight by her as she slept, but he had the feeling he'd also mentioned that Julie was against the doll during their conversation at the workshop. It was better to have her stay behind.

"Eris and Elinalise, you go to the school," Rudeus said. "It's possible it might go for Roxy. Some of the mercenaries are headed there already, so you can rendezvous with them."

"Gotcha."

“Very well.”

Linia was on her way to the school with a search party of mercenaries. Eris had said that the doll wanted to find Sylphie, but really, there was no way of knowing what it would do. It was better to send reinforcements, just in case.

“Half of the mercenaries are to go back to Aisha and report what’s happened. Tell her that if worse comes to worst, I might ask Sir Perugia for aid.”

“Yes, sir!”

If he could get Perugia to help, then Arumanfi could probably have the doll captured in seconds. He hadn’t expected the problem to blow up this quickly! To his regret, he’d delayed getting word out to people—including the ones at home.

That said, there was no guarantee Perugia *would* agree to help.

“I want the other half of the mercenaries to go back to Zanoba’s workshop,” Rudeus continued.

“Understood.”

While the doll was running around all over the place, it was possible that was a diversion, and its real goal was to get away from Rudeus. Part of him wouldn’t have minded letting the danger just run away...but he’d *made* it. He had a responsibility to see this through to the end.

“Zanoba, come with me to my house so we can make sure Sylphie and the others are safe.”

“Very well, Master.”

“All right, everyone! Let’s move!” At Rudeus’s order, everyone dispersed.

The only ones left at the office were the children, Leo, Julie, and Alec. After their parents had disappeared, they looked anxious.

“How about we play a game until your dad gets back, kids?” said Alec, smiling at them.

Chapter 3:

The Day the Doll Walked (Part 3)

MEANWHILE, Sylphie was looking after their fourth daughter, Christina.

“Well done, Chris, that’s it! Let go and come to Mama.”

“Mrmm! Mamaaa, come here!” Unlike Lily, who had started toddling early, Chris still struggled to walk even while holding onto things. The moms had been working with her. Unfortunately, Chris still didn’t seem to like it. She shook her head, lip wobbling.

“Come here, Chris! You know, one step, two step,” Sylphie encouraged.

“Mrmm! Mrrrm... Mama...come here...”

“No, Chris. Look, I’m right here.”

Chris started fussing. She wasn’t actually incapable; she was just being a baby. Finally, with a strangled sound, she closed her eyes and burst into a tottering run into Sylphie’s arms.

“Good girl! Well done, Chris. I’m proud of you.”

“Mrmm...”

Sylphie hugged Chris like she always did and stroked her hair. Chris clung on to her tightly, sniffing. Where Lily was active and full of curiosity, Chris liked to be coddled. Moreover, she didn’t really like going outside. Eris took her out now and then, but usually ended up coming back straight away because Chris stuck to her like glue and started wailing at every little thing. Nowadays, she mostly stayed at home while the others went on their walks.

“Oh, Chris, you do need a lot of attention! I wonder where you get *that* from,” Sylphie said.

She definitely meant Rudeus.

“Mama, Dada home?”

“No, Dada’s not home yet.” Chris was a daddy’s girl. She cried all the time, ever since she’d been born. When Rudeus picked her up she stopped straight away—the total opposite of Arus. Lately, Rudeus’s lap had become her exclusive spot.

“Wah!” Chris suddenly cried out.

“Hm?” Sylphie said. Then she heard a noise from the front door. Someone must have come home.

“Dada?”

“I don’t know...but I don’t think it’s Dada.” Rudeus had been out since the previous day. He hadn’t given her the exact day that he’d be home, but he had said it would be two or three days. Probably not him.

“Sis?”

“It’s a bit early for your sisters, too.” Roxy or Lucie wouldn’t be back from university just yet, and it was also too early for Aisha, who was off with the mercenary band. Could it be Eris, back from her walk? But she’d taken Sieg, who’d want to play, so they’d surely be a bit longer. What about Lilia, who’d gone shopping with Arus along to help her? No, they’d only just left. Lilia *might* have forgotten something and come back to get it. It could also be Zenith. Sylphie thought she was asleep in her room, but maybe she’d slipped out into the garden.

As she ran through these possibilities, Sylphie sat Chris on a cushion and said, “Stay there, Chris.”

Feeling a little puzzled, she headed for the front door. It was ajar, but it wasn’t the door that drew her attention.

Someone was standing in front of it. The afternoon sun shone through the open door, illuminating a black-haired girl from behind. Most people familiar with her might have said, “Nanahoshi?” and offered her a friendly greeting.

But the moment Sylphie laid eyes on her, she frowned.

“You...aren’t Nanahoshi, are you?” she said.

The girl contorted her mouth into a little smile. In the shadow cast by the light

behind her, it looked like an uncanny slit had opened in her face.

“No, I am not. How did you know?”

“Nanahoshi comes to our house a lot,” Sylphie replied. “When she opens the door, she has a routine. She knocks twice, then, if no one answers, she hesitates a little, then opens the door a crack and quietly calls out, ‘Is anyone home?’”

As she spoke, she concentrated mana in her right hand. It was the obvious thing to do for Sylphie. *Something* had invaded her house wearing the face of someone she knew. For the moment, she didn’t feel any hostility from the girl in front of her. She even spoke politely, though there was no feeling in her voice. Sylphie wasn’t naive enough to assume that meant she was a friend.

“Who are you? If you’re one of the Man-God’s servants, you’ll have to get through me.” As she spoke, her mind was racing.

How could she distract the girl in front of her so that she could get Chris from the living room and Zenith from upstairs and escape? She’d run through what she’d do in the event of a home invasion numerous times—could she actually pull it off? She hadn’t noticed any sounds of battle, but maybe Byt, who grew around the gate posts, was already dead. Just now she had put mana into her ring to signal to Eris and Roxy. Would they notice? She wondered if Orsted and Alec over at the office were aware of the situation. Should she run? Or should she stall for time?

Sylphie shoved all these thoughts away behind a stony expression as she stared at the girl.

“I do not yet have a name,” the girl said, in response to Sylphie’s question.

“Huh...?”

“May I ask what *your* name is?”

“I’m Sylphiette Greyrat,” Sylphie replied automatically, taken aback by the sudden question.

“You must be Master Sylphie, Master Rudeus’s wife.”

“That’s...right.” Sylphie confirmed it reflexively. Wondering if it would have been better not to answer, she kept a wary eye on the girl. She didn’t appear to

be armed. In fact, she looked wide open to attack. Still, Sylphie couldn't let her guard down. There were any number of people out there who could overpower her with their bare hands.

"Will knowing I'm here make you angry with Master Rudeus?" the girl asked.

"What?"

"Why is it that you are unable to accept me, Master Sylphie?"

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

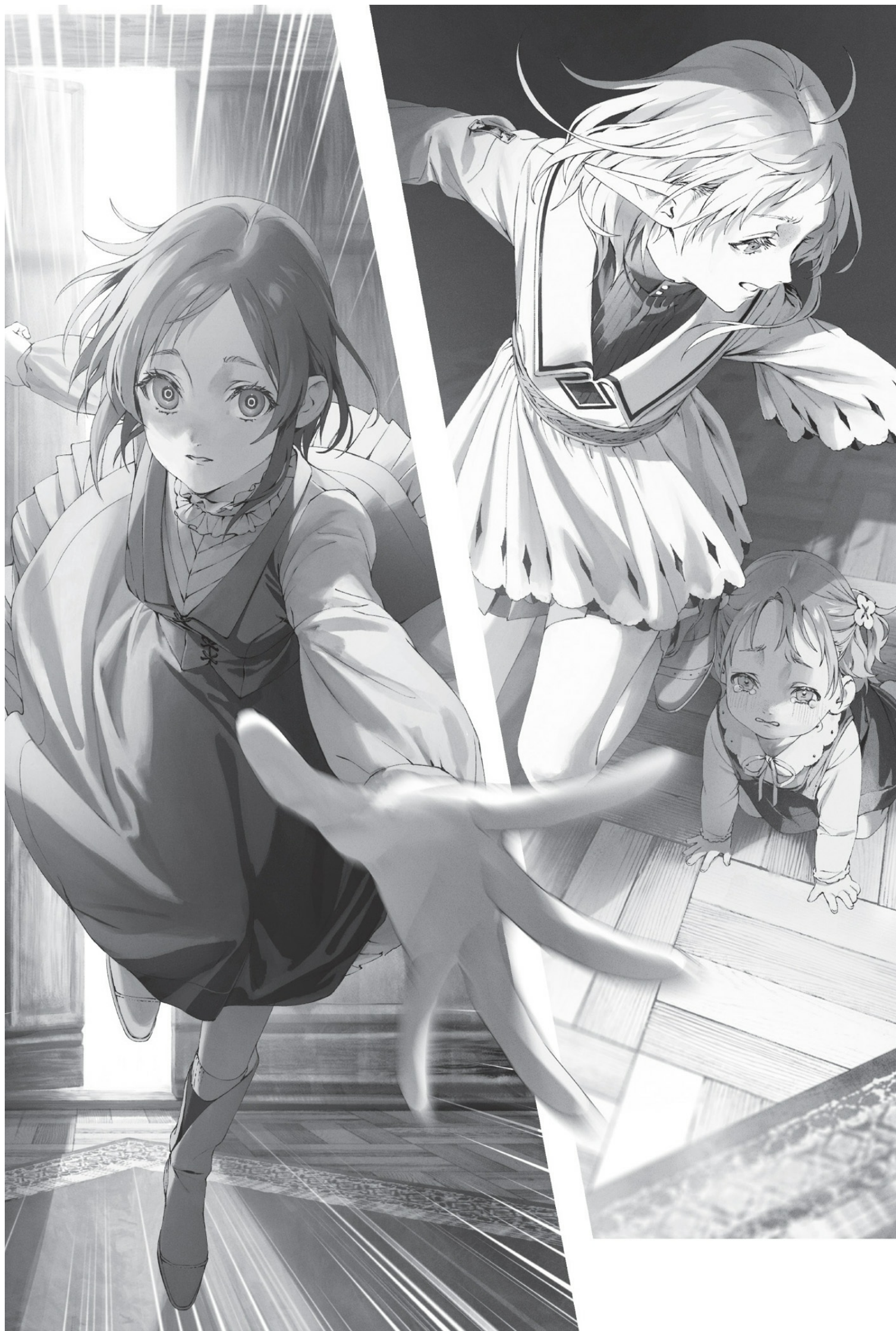
She's trying to confuse you. Don't listen. It could be some sort of trick. The thought flashed through Sylphie's mind. She moved to take a guarded step back.

At once, the girl shouted, "Danger!" Her hand shot out with a speed that surpassed Sylphie's. Her opponent was clearly quicker than her, but Sylphie had anticipated that.

Just because she couldn't see her didn't mean she couldn't fight back. She would finish her step, then, twisting to the side to evade the attack, beat her back with magic. In an instant, she decided what to do—

"Ah!" Then, she saw Chris on the floor at her feet. Where had she come from?

Without Sylphie noticing, Chris had crawled from the living room to the front door. She'd ignored Sylphie's instruction to stay put. By some twist of fate, she was right where Sylphie had been going to step. By the time she realized, it was too late. With a desperate yank, she tried to avoid treading on Chris, but she lost her balance. Her upper body wobbled. She wasn't going to be able to avoid Chris. Then, her eyes caught sight of the strange girl's arm shooting out with terrifying speed.



The house was eerily quiet when Rudeus arrived home. He went past Byt, who was wound around the gate, Aisha's vegetable garden, and Dillo and Leo's kennels. There was no one around. He opened the front door, which was unlocked, to find the hallway sparkling clean and the door to the living room ajar. It was quiet save for the sound of a baby crying: Chris. It was a cry of anguish, full of sorrow, as though she'd suffered a great loss. Rudeus knew that cry well—as soon as he drew near, it would stop.

Even with the crying, the house still seemed unnaturally quiet.

At the front door, he told the mercenaries, "Wait outside for my orders."

He entered. It was quiet in the hallway too. He glanced sideways at the mirror next to the door and saw his own pale face staring back at him. What was that smell? It definitely wasn't pleasant. It was the sort that would make you queasy if you breathed it in too long. The sort of smell that attracted flies if you left it alone. Rudeus let it lead him down the corridor to the living room. That was where the crying was coming from, and he was also sure it was the source of the smell. The door was shut tight. Bracing himself, Rudeus opened it.

An unbelievable scene met his eyes. First, he saw the table. Chris lay on top of it on her back, bawling. Someone was half crouching as it leaned over her—the black-haired doll. Its hands were dirty, covered in something the color of dried blood. The brown substance was still moist and gave off a powerful stench that made him want to gag.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, you've got poop on your hands," Sylphie said.

"It is insignificant. This level of dirt will not impede my functionality."

"No arguing. Here, wipe your hands. Then roll up the dirty diaper like this and put it in this basket to be washed later."

"I see. I have learned that dirt is to be washed off promptly," said the doll. Sylphie wiped its hands for it. The brown stain she was wiping away and the source of the smell wafting into the hallway was apparently Chris's poop.

Chris was lying on the table with her dirty diaper off, still bawling, until she

noticed Rudeus.

“Dada! Dada’s back!” She stopped crying and gave him a sunny smile.

“Wait, what...?”

Rudeus had imagined what he’d find. Sylphie fighting. His family battered and bruised or lying unmoving on the floor. The doll clumsily changing a diaper wasn’t any of the possibilities.

“Oh, Rudy. Welcome home.”

“Sylphie, are you...? I guess you’re not hurt.”

“No. Why would I be?” Sylphie replied. Behind her stood the expressionless doll. It looked so creepy lurking there with its inhuman face that Rudeus half expected a sword to suddenly sprout from Sylphie’s chest. When he looked at the doll, it moved ever so slightly into Sylphie’s shadow. It was like it was using Sylphie as a shield. That gave Rudeus a slightly different impression. It was almost like it was afraid of him.

“Sylphie, I want you to get away from that.”

Instead, Sylphie moved to stand between him and the doll. “Why?”

“Zanoba and I made that figurine, but we lost control of it. I’m not certain, but I think it overheard us talking and came to either eliminate you or replace you.” As he explained that, he realized its current behavior didn’t quite line up with what he’d said. “I mean, it looks like I wasn’t exactly right about that.”

The fact remained that he didn’t know what the figurine wanted. He stared it down, not dropping his guard.

“Huh!” said Sylphie. “That’s not quite the story I heard.”

“What story?” Rudeus asked, unsettled.

Sylphie smiled. “I’d actually like to talk to you about it. Sit down.”

“Okay...” Rudeus did as she said, sitting down on the floor and crossing his legs.

“Hm?” Sylphie cocked her head at him. “Rudy, I think you need to correct your posture.”

“Really?! Oh, um, okay.” Rudeus, picking up on a note in Sylphie’s voice, changed his pose. The note was one of anger, which meant the only way he should be sitting was on his knees, ready to grovel.

Once Sylphie was satisfied, she said, “Go ahead, then,” and ushered the figurine forward.

It looked down at him with its inhuman face. “Master Rudeus, are you going to scrap me?”

“Yeah, of course,” he replied immediately.

The figurine didn’t so much as twitch. Rudeus knew that the doll’s materials—its skeleton made from the same material as the magic armor, and its artificial flesh that allowed it to perform at the same level as a Saint-tier sword fighter—made it so dangerous that he would have to destroy it if it wouldn’t listen to him. Now that he was wearing the magic armor and had opened his demon eye, he was more than a match for it, but he couldn’t let his guard down.

“I...do not wish to be scrapped,” the doll said.

That was when it hit him. The doll was frightened. It was just standing there, its face showing no expression and its voice flat, but it *was* afraid.

The doll turned to Sylphie. Its eyes were cold and artificial, but for some reason, the look it gave her seemed like a plea for help.

“It sounds like Rudy hasn’t worked it out yet,” Sylphie said. “Explain it to him from the beginning.”

The doll looked to Rudeus, then to Zanoba who had also come into the house. Then, it started to talk in a flat voice.

“Master Rudeus and Master Zanoba, you said that Master Rudeus’s wives would be angry if they found out about me. Master Elinalise told me that Master Rudeus’s wives are Master Sylphie, Master Eris, and Master Roxy. Master Eris told me that Master Sylphie once said she was unable to accept Nanahoshi. Master Elinalise called me by the name ‘Nanahoshi.’ I thought about this and concluded that I must closely resemble Master Nanahoshi, and this is why I am to be scrapped. However, I am not Master Nanahoshi. I thought that there must be something I can do to change your mind.”

Its voice was flat as ever, but its distress was palpable. The doll's mind was desperately casting around for a solution.

"I do not wish to be scrapped. Master Rudeus, you and Master Zanoba were happy when I was born, and I wish to be of further service to you both. If I am scrapped, I cannot do that."

Sometimes, magicians using summoning magic brought disaster upon themselves when they summoned something too powerful. As a rule, the beasts called up with summoning magic did not defy the summoner; they were faithful to their master. It was what they *did* for the summoner that brought the disaster. This doll had magic of that sort built into it. Of course it did, since it was based on Perugius's summoning magic. It thought and behaved like one of Perugius's twelve spirit servants, and his spirits had their own consciousness. From the moment they were summoned, their cognizance guided them to act for the sake of their lord, to survive so that they might serve him longer.

"I therefore decided to ask Sylphie, who I predicted from the information I had obtained would take the greatest exception to my existence."

It wasn't that there was a flaw in the three laws of robotics. The doll's nature as a summoned spirit had simply prevailed over them.

"I wished to know what I could do to earn her acceptance," the doll finished.

When it had suddenly wandered into the house uninvited, Sylphie had been more alarmed than necessary. It had never had hostile intentions and had responded to Sylphie's open hostility with a terrible attempt at a smile, hoping they could talk. When Sylphie lost her balance and almost trod on her daughter, the doll had reached out to stop her from falling, then asked her kindly if she was unhurt. The shock of nearly being stepped on made Chris soil her diaper, and again, the doll was considerate and offered to change her. As it helped, it made its case to Sylphie, explaining that it didn't want to die, that it would fix whatever was wrong with it—that it just wanted to be of service.

"So, please, do not kill me," it said. "Please."

Sylphie had been deeply moved.

"Rudy, I'm not angry with you," Sylphie said. "I knew you were making

something like this. She's a lot more human than I expected, but she's a good girl. Even if she is a little flawed, I want you to keep her."

That concluded the doll's story. Now they were just waiting for Rudeus's response.

At some point, the corners of Rudeus's mouth had turned down. His arms were folded, and he was looking at the floor. His shoulders were shaking.

There was a choking noise. Sylphie looked behind Rudeus and saw that Zanoba's whole body was quivering. With a cry, he charged at the girl.

"I had no idea you felt that way! All of it, it was all for *us*! Forgive me! I was wrong to say you were out of control! Forgive me!" Zanoba clung to the doll with tears streaming down his cheeks.

As Rudeus watched, he also gave a sniff. His eyes were glistening. From his pocket, he pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly. Then, he stood and took the doll's hand.

"Zanoba is right. Of course you ran away after we talked about scrapping you right in front of you. Of course you wanted to do something about it. I understand. I don't mind if it makes Sylphie angry. Zanoba and I will complete you, then we'll use you like we ought to."

"I, too, shall face Julie's fury!" Zanoba agreed.

Both of them clung to the doll and sobbed. The expression on her face looked, to Sylphie's eyes, like she was confused as to why they'd accepted her even though she hadn't solved what was wrong with her.

In any case, the matter was settled. Feeling glad, Sylphie let out a sigh of relief, then patted Chris, who was fussy because Rudeus wouldn't pay attention to her. That was when a thought occurred to her.

"Rudy, I just have one last question. Why did you think I'd be angry about this?"

A violent shiver ran over Rudeus. Turning to her, he returned to his knees. He cleared his throat once, then began to explain.

"The truth is, the doll's, uh, anatomy down there, is very elaborately—"

Now, Sylphie was angry.

The scrapping of the doll was called off, and it was decided that any automata manufactured would be maintained for as long as possible. Accordingly, the girl who'd been at the center of the affair became an official model: Automata Unit One.

From now on, she would work on experiments at the laboratory and in the Magic City of Sharia and would be included in Rudeus's various plans.

It was sometime later when the doll's secret became known to Nanahoshi. When she learned that the doll with her face was capable of sexual acts, she didn't hide her look of disgust. Rudeus's groveling and assurances that he'd promised Sylphie he wouldn't use the doll for such purposes appeased her, at least for the moment.

"Oh, whatever. What's her name, anyway?" Nanahoshi asked.

"I...haven't given her one yet," Rudeus admitted.

"Yeah? Can I name her, then?"

Thus, Nanahoshi chose a name, and Automata Unit One became "Anne." She also gave her the Japanese-sounding name "Nanahoshi Hajime." That way, if Nanahoshi's friend ever appeared in the future, they could learn what had happened to her. If Nanahoshi's friend asked Anne's name, she would give the Japanese name and explain her connection to the original Nanahoshi.

Her official name was Automata SS-01 Anne. Rudeus hadn't made up his mind about whether or not to call Unit Two "Betty" or Unit Three "Chloe"—but that was beside the point. SS, the other part of the name, stood for Seven Star. This story was how the historic first model in the Seven Star Series was created. Over many long years, her number of younger brothers and sisters would gradually grow to a whole family.

But, just to be clear, the rest of them didn't have nipples.

Chapter 4:

A Day at the Office

I AWOKE FROM SLUMBER to a beautiful morning. Once, nothing had scared me more than this moment. If I were killed in my sleep, I wouldn't wake up where I'd lain down, but in a dark forest. If I couldn't find somewhere secure, I was too scared to rest my head. On the other hand, I'd died sometimes because I couldn't concentrate due to lack of sleep, though that hadn't been as much of a problem since I learned how to keep my guard up even as I slept...

In any case, I never imagined back then that I'd live and sleep in a place like this.

Focusing on my breathing, I headed for my office. A mountain of papers there documented the points of divergence between this loop and the usual. They concerned "fundamentals" and "divergences."

Fundamentals were history where I did nothing, and divergences were events and changed outcomes that resulted from my actions. I documented these things to defeat the Man-God. To that end, it was necessary to expend as little mana as possible. The Second Laplace War eighty years hence would be especially key. Keeping my mana expenditure to a minimum in that war would lead to the Man-God's overthrow. I therefore had to utilize these fundamentals and divergences to alter history to preserve mana at all costs. Naturally, I could not bring these documents with me into the next loop, so I had no choice but to document all of my actions immediately before the loop, then read them over and over again until I had them memorized.

This time was different. This time, Rudeus Greyrat was here. Every time he acted, every time he interacted with anyone, the world changed. Originally, I had planned to simply document points of divergence, but at some point, it had become a sort of observation journal about him. His name featured on almost every page, and in such massive volume that I couldn't document fast enough. I planned to keep documenting until the next loop, but I expected a lot of information would slip through the cracks. Truthfully, I saw little purpose in it.

Something was strange about this loop, like something special was going to happen.

Given that the chances that Rudeus would be in the next loop were low, all these records might be for nothing. It could be that *this* was the loop in which I must defeat the Man-God. Perhaps that was my destiny.

I would build up my forces, then, saving my mana for the time that was to come, and defeat Laplace using as little of it as possible. After that, I would use it all in the final battle with the Man-God. That was my plan.

That said, there was no harm in making records. If I should be defeated in this loop and Rudeus *was* in the next loop, then this information would surely be a weapon that brought me closer to victory. However, I could not show it to Rudeus. I knew him. If he saw it, he would find some strange way to misinterpret it.

I started my work for the day. First, there was the information that had come via the contact tablet in the night. The tablet had made it significantly easier to gather information. In past loops, whenever I changed something, I had to go there to witness the changes firsthand. I was accustomed to it, but the curse I bore made it extremely challenging work. Now I could obtain ample information without leaving my chair—a marked difference from when I had to go through several loops to learn the result of one change.

On the other hand, if Rudeus did not exist, I would not require an information network of this extent. Things would never have changed this much if I were alone. So much had changed, I didn't even know what my next move was.

I was also at a loss for what to do with the automaton that he created. I had seen the figurine that he named "Anne." I never imagined human hands could produce such a thing. Perugia was surprised too. He said it was closer to human than his spirits. I could only speculate, but I believed it was what Maniacal Dragon King Chaos dreamed of. Chaos was dead and gone, but if he'd lived, he likely would have made the figurine with them.

If there was another loop, perhaps I would delay reclaiming the sacred treasure from Chaos.

"Hmm." As I pondered this, I glanced at the contact tablet and saw some

intriguing news. It was from Ariel. Isolde and Dohga had gotten married. To the best of my knowledge, those two had never become husband and wife before. The likelihood of Isolde marrying at all was next to nothing—to say nothing of children! This, too, must be the result of Rudeus’s involvement. What would I have to do to reproduce this? No answer came to me.

The attempt to reproduce it could wait until I saw what sort of person their child became and what part they played. Depending on what happened, I might end up stopping it from being born in the next loop.

I suspected Rudeus would object to that, which would be a shame. I did not want to lie or deceive him anymore, even if I went to the next loop and he forgot everything.

“Good morning!”

I had been organizing my papers when Rudeus appeared.

“Mm,” I said.

“Paperwork today too? Boy, you sure are diligent, Lord Orsted!”

“It is what I always do.”

“Always doing something, that’s what counts! Life is long, after all! Slow and steady! Trust you to know that, Lord Orsted!”

Rudeus occasionally had strange turns like this. Usually, he was a little more composed, but there was a logic to his moods. When he became excited like this, it meant something good had happened. On the other hand, when he became furtive and guilty, it meant there was something he didn’t want to say. He was easy to read.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing gets past you, CEO! Nyeh heh, well, you know Lara? She said, ‘I want to be with Dada all day today!’ Heh. Chris is attached to me, but I didn’t expect to hear it from Lara. It’s gone to my head a bit.”

“Did you bring her?”

“I did. I put Lara and Sieg on Leo’s back.”

Sieg too? That was a little unexpected. The thought must have shown on my face because Rudeus’s expression changed dramatically.

“Um, I just mean, Sieg says he’s a fan of Alec’s! While all that stuff was happening the other day, I think Alec told him about the Biheiril Kingdom. He said, if the North God was going to be here, he’d come because he wanted to hear the story again. Alec’s with him now.”

“I see.”

“I, erm, I suppose I shouldn’t have brought my son to work...”

“I do not mind.”

Rudeus’s family was his weakness. They were important to him—his reason for living. He would do anything for them, and anyone who harmed them became his enemy. He would attack without thought of the consequences. Unfortunately, if it looked like he might lose, he’d change sides as easy as breathing, even if his opponent were the Man-God himself. He’d bow his head and forsake all pride, just to protect them.

I had known many such people. To retain Rudeus as an ally, I had to take care around his family. At the very least, treating them badly had to be avoided. I also kept an eye on them, protecting them as much as I could. So long as I guarded what Rudeus held most dear, he would not betray me. After all, the Man-God could hardly promise him the same.

All such calculations aside, my curse did not seem to affect Rudeus’s children, and I liked them well enough. A little liveliness was not such a bad thing. It almost made me feel like a normal person.

“Your children are lovely,” I added, making an effort to smile. I thought I was complimenting his children, but Rudeus’s expression turned serious. Drat, I’d put him on his guard. This was a man who’d be smiling blandly one minute, only to launch into some outrageous scheme the next. I was fairly sure I would be fine, but it wasn’t impossible that I would find myself buried alive in my sleep. It would be easy to defeat him now, but if he caught me unawares...

“I’m not giving away my daughters, Sir Orsted, not even to you.”

“That is not what I meant.”

Rudeus’s expression returned to normal. “I’ll have them both come say hello to you later.”

“I do not mind either way. Such formalities are unnecessary.”

“All right. Lara can be rude at times, so that’s probably for the best.” With that, Rudeus sat down on the sofa.

“Right. Time for another day hard at work! What shall we do today? We could have a mock battle with the Magic Armor Version One, or should we calibrate the curse-suppressing helmet? I could do a progress report on the development of version three or the adjustments to version zero, too. We could have another meeting about our next moves...”

Everything he suggested was something he could take the lead on. Presumably, he wanted to look good in front of his daughter and son. But, while organizing my papers earlier, I had remembered something. It was minor, but it was better to have it done if we were going to go to war with Laplace.

“About that...”

This year, a persistent drought would cause a famine in a country in the south of the Central Continent. Countless families would starve to death. Such was the natural order of things. What concerned me was one of those families in particular. There was nothing remarkable about this family except for their youngest son. He would grow up to be a talented commander. In the Second Laplace War, he would command the armies in the battle to defend Eastport. His exceptional leadership would allow the King Dragon Kingdom’s army to hold out for a long time. Usually, I did not let it come to war with Laplace, and out of consideration for my remaining mana, I left him alone. This time, there would be war with Laplace, and I had Rudeus. It was better to go now, while there was still time, and save his family.

“That is the situation,” I finished. Rudeus looked disappointed.

“I won’t be able to show Lara what my job is like if we’re on a business trip...”

“It can wait until tomorrow if you prefer,” I suggested.

Rudeus shook his head. “No. If you can’t remember the exact day when this family starves, then we shouldn’t delay. I doubt we’ll be too late, but people are frail—you never know when they might drop dead. I always have supplies ready in case I need to travel. I can leave at once.”

“If you do not mind,” I said at last, persuaded.

“I’ll get things ready now.” Rudeus hurried from the room to get the equipment he kept in the office storage room. Around fifteen minutes later, he returned dressed for travel with a backpack, food, the scroll vernier, and an assortment of other things.

He turned to me, then put his fingers together and raised them up to his forehead in a snappy gesture. “I’m very sorry to ask this, but when you have a moment, please take my kids home. I’m sure they’ll be fine with Leo there, but I’d rather someone kept an eye on them.”

“Very well.” He hardly needed to ask. I was not about to disregard the reason for Rudeus’s loyalty.

“I’ll be off, then,” Rudeus said, then ran straight off downstairs to where the teleportation circles were.

Over the past few years, he had gotten faster at acting when he needed to, and he almost always followed through on the tasks I assigned. I’d had followers in previous loops; pawns. I had *never* had anyone who worked with such ease and competence, doing what I said so faithfully. I now understood a little of what it must be like for the Man-God and his disciples. At this, I frowned. Rudeus was dependable, but it would not do to rely too heavily on him. If nothing else, understanding the Man-God left a bad taste in my mouth. Still, I had few other options available to me at present. My alliance with Rudeus was no reason to be profligate with my mana. I’d already spent too much on this loop.

For the moment, I put on my curse-suppressing helmet and left the study. When I went past the reception desk, Faliastia twitched.

“Oh! It’s you, CEO!” she squeaked. It seemed I had startled her. Thanks to the helmet, though, she’d merely jumped. The difference between when I wore it and when I did not was indeed great. I had already documented the method of

its construction. I might not have been able to improve it, but I could reproduce it. I would make it again in the next loop.

“Chairman Rudeus left just a moment ago. Will you be going out as well, Sir Orsted? Shall I accompany you?”

“That is not necessary. I am only going out briefly. I will be right back.”

“Very well, sir.”

When I stepped outside, I heard voices just off to one side.

“That’s when—*slash!*—Berserker Sword King Eris found a split-second opening and sliced off the third North God’s arm!” The theatrical voice came from a shaded area behind the office. “The third North God was one arm down. In front of him were North God Kalman II and Demon King Atofe! Behind him, Berserker Sword King Eris and Magician King Rudeus! Not one of them was interested in what he was saying! The time for words was over! The battle was over! Everyone thought the third North God was about to meet his end! But then, *whoosh!* He fled into the Earthwyrms Ravine!”

In the shade, a man was sitting on a rock with a young boy on the ground before him. He was Alexander Rybak, North God Kalman III. The boy was Sieghart Saladin Greyrat. He had grown considerably from when I last saw him.

The years pass by so quickly.

“So, the third North God ran. He knew that if he could survive this, he still had a chance to win in the end. Into the ravine he went! Indeed, there were no humans there who would have jumped into the ravine. The only ones who could have done it were his father Alex or Demon King Atofe!”

“They aren’t human?”

“Not those two! They are fearsome warriors in whose veins flows the blood of the immortal demons! But the third North God was sure that if they came after them, he could outrun them! Then—*kabam!* With an almighty crash, a huge shape came flying through the air! Who could it be?! Was it the second North God? Was it Atofe? Was it the Berserker Sword King?! No! It was...*Rudeus Greyrat!*”

“Dada!”

Sieg was enthralled by Alec’s tale, but where was Lara?

I searched the surrounding area until I sensed a presence on top of the pile of straw in the office garden. I looked over and saw a young girl with blue hair sleeping comfortably atop the straw. A huge white beast wandered around the base of the pile, looking up at her. Lara Greyrat and Leo the sacred beast. Although the sacred beast had recognized Lara as the savior, she was an unpredictable child. I wasn’t sure what to make of this attitude from her after she’d said she wanted to be with Rudeus. It was less than an hour since she had left Rudeus at the entrance to the office.

Come to think of it, I had also heard she was fond of pranks. Perhaps she had used her father as a way to avoid the consequences of playing tricks. If so, then it was Rudeus I felt sorry for. He had been so pleased.

“The magic armor had already taken a pounding, but Rudeus fired it up and came after me alone! All alone! They were in midair, where the third North God couldn’t move! Ka-pow, Ka-pow! The massive fists of the magic armor hit again and again! *Ka-baaaam!* Rudeus and the third North God crashed into the floor of the ravine! Rising out of the dust came the third North God with only one arm and one leg left, followed by Rudeus in the cracked and broken magic armor! No one came after them! It was single combat!”

“Single combat!” Sieg repeated. Alec was telling him about the battle in the Biheiril Kingdom. I assumed that Lara, after bringing him here, had promptly fallen asleep, so Alec was keeping him entertained.

“But Rudeus was not powerful enough to defeat the third North God! His blows with his fists had caught the North God off guard, but it was not enough to end the fight. The North God thought that would be Rudeus’s downfall! He watched Rudeus closely, but he underestimated his opponent. He assumed that if it came to battle, the magician Rudeus would keep his distance and use his favorite attack, Stone Cannon. The North God wouldn’t lose to an opponent who was not willing to stand and fight! Then, Rudeus caught him by surprise! He ran in, Stone Cannon blasting! Now, the third North God might have underestimated Rudeus, but he was still a mighty warrior who had fought many

battles! At once, he stepped back out of the path of the rock—only for it to disappear before his eyes! It was a feint!”

“A feint! A feint!”

“*Shinnnnng!* The North God’s sword slashed out! Not far enough! Because of Rudeus’s feint, because of his step back, he didn’t strike a mortal blow! All was not lost. He was about to jump back...when his foot floated off the ground! That’s right, Rudeus had one last trick up his sleeve—he could control gravity! He invoked magic equal to that of the King Dragon Blade Kajakut to lift the North God ever so slightly off the ground! Then—*wham!* Next thing he knew, Rudeus’s fists slammed into him! *Wham bam bam bam!* The hits kept coming! And coming! And coming! It was an onslaught! Rudeus’s almighty magical implement tore the North God to shreds! *Ka-blam blam blam!* The North God began to black out. His leg wouldn’t support him. With a *clang*, the King Dragon Blade fell from his hand. Rudeus had won!”

“Hooray!” Sieg cheered as Alexander finished the tale of his own defeat with an air of satisfaction.

A heartwarming scene, I thought as I approached Alec.

“Alexander Rybak.”

“Oh! Sir Orsted! Are you going out?”

“No. Rudeus just left.”

“Indeed, he left the children with me. He asked that I take them home at a reasonable hour and explain the situation to his wives.”

So Rudeus had entrusted the children to Alec. In which case, there was no need for me to accompany them.

“Very well,” I said. “I leave them in your hands.”

“Yes, sir!” he replied. I nodded, then returned to my office.

It was late afternoon when, having completed a section of my notes, I left my office again. Alec still had not taken the children home. It was not long until sunset, so he ought to go soon. The reception desk was empty; Faliastia must

have finished her shift for the day.

“Usually, your dad acts like a spineless loser. I believe he is a coward at heart. However, when he is angry, there is no one more terrifying.”

Alec was still talking when I went back to them, but he was no longer using his storytelling voice. Instead, he sounded like a lecturer. Sieg hung on his every word.

“He defeated me with his spirit. Sir Orsted experienced something similar, I hear. He wasn’t overcome like I was, of course, but he recognized Rudeus’s spirit, and I suppose that’s why he took your father as his follower. Can you guess why Sir Orsted and I admire your dad so much?”

“I dunno.”

“The answer, my lad, is that he is strong.”

“Dada, strong? But he always loses to Red Mama.”

“Yes, well. He is strong in a slightly different way than most.”

I was curious to hear what Alec thought of Rudeus, so I lingered, listening.

“Your dad has nothing going for him except his mana. He’s never been able to don a battle aura, he’s not especially good at reading situations, and he panics when things don’t go as he expected. His vision is mediocre. Even with the Demon Eye, he still just barely comes in a level below Sir Orsted and me. Even then, his reflexes are so slow that his body cannot keep up with what the Demon Eye sees. He struggles mightily with dealing a killing blow to flesh-and-blood opponents. Little stomach for it. His ability to cast magic silently is a saving grace, and the speed at which he casts spells is unparalleled among magicians, but he could still never keep up with a swordsman like me.

“Really, in the time it took him to fire off a Stone Cannon that could kill me, I could kill him three times over. If we wanted to, we could shut him down, no matter how many clever tactics he might have ready. And it’s not as though I’m the fastest in the world. In terms of raw speed, I’m a rank or two below the very best. He could carefully blast his opponent with magic so long as he could keep his distance from them, but that’s rarely possible. When you consider all the factors, your dad is just not made to be a fighter.”

“Dada...is weak...?” Sieg looked unhappy. Few children would be happy to hear their father spoken of with such contempt right in front of them, especially not those of such a loving father as Rudeus.

“Hey now, don’t look like that,” said Alec. “I haven’t finished yet, all right? Now, your dad’s strong point is this: he knows his shortcomings. Because of that, he came up with a way to cover his defects while capitalizing on his strengths.”

“What way?”

“He made the magic armor, which boosts his speed many times over. Now your dad can survive even if a swordsman like me gets the jump on him. We can’t shut him down anymore. It still wouldn’t be an even match, of course. The odds are against him, same as ever, but it brought him into our league—him, a magician who can’t don a battle aura, who has nothing going for him except his outsized reserve of mana. On top of that, rather than running away, he started standing and fighting. Sometimes he fights head on and sometimes he attacks from behind like a coward. Sometimes he has his allies help him. Sometimes he stands alone. Can you guess why he can stand up to us even when the odds are against him?”

Sieg shook his head.

“To protect you, his family. He loves you so much he wouldn’t hesitate to lay down his life to protect you.”

At this, Sieg’s eyes lit up. He clenched his fists in excitement, then beamed up at Alec. “Dada really is Cheddar Man!”

“Indeed he is! Cheddar Man, a true hero!”

All of a sudden, they began using a word I did not know. What in the world did being a “cheddar man” imply? Was it perhaps the name of a person? Never in my however many thousands of years had I heard of such an individual. It might be something Rudeus had invented. He was always making up new words. I would ask him about it when I next saw him, I thought, adding “cheddar man” to my mental notebook.

“Mister North God, sir! I wanna be Cheddar Man too!”

“You can be. Through hard work, you too can become a true hero. I heard as much from my father, a true hero himself. Hasn’t your father told you?”

“Dada never said that.”

“Oh? Well, I’m sure he will when you get a little older.”

“How do you do hard work?”

“You get stronger.”

“How?”

“Through physical training and studying magic and the blade.” Alec told Sieg all this with perfect composure.

Then Sieg, seeming to pluck up his courage, looked up at Alec and said, “I understand. Mister North God. Please teach me sword fighting!”

“Huh? Me?”

“You...won’t?”

“Isn’t your mom teaching you Sword God Style?”

“I wanna learn North God Style! I wanna surprise Dada and Mama!”

“But, I... Well, I tried to be a good teacher, but I don’t think I have the knack. I was so hopeless that my apprentices usually wanted my father to teach them.”

North God Kalman III Alexander Rybak had painful memories of his youth. When he became North God, he had more than twenty students. In only a few years, they had all left him to pursue their own paths. Alec had not taken an apprentice since.

“But you’re so cool when you fight. I wanna learn North God Style.”

“I don’t know enough to teach anyone else...”

As I watched Alec dither, I suddenly found myself thinking of Rudeus. There was a man who, despite saying he had much more to learn, taught many things to a whole range of people, all of whom were grateful to him for it. Myself included.

“Alexander Rybak,” I said, “you will teach the boy.”

Alec looked up in surprise. It was as though he hadn't noticed me come over. That was, of course, impossible.

"But Sir Orsted, I-I'm still learning to be North God."

"That is why you *must* teach him. In the course of training a single apprentice, you will come to better understand both North God Style and what it is you need to work on in yourself."

In the usual course of history, North God Kalman III Alexander Rybak changed his ways after losing to Sword God Gino Britz. Then, after losing heart, he took on only one apprentice. The child was not gifted by any means, but as Alec watched over him, he came to reexamine himself and thus grew into a true North God. The North God Kalman III who fought in the Second Laplace War was the greatest North God who ever lived. What became of that child in this loop I knew not, but Alec had already tasted defeat and changed his ways. It therefore seemed reasonable to move up the schedule and have him teach someone now. It also so happened that Sieg *did* have a gift for sword fighting. He was stronger than any ordinary child, probably thanks to the Laplace Factor. He might not have been as strong as Blessed Child Zanoba, but in the future, he would have no trouble twirling a two-handed sword with one hand. Being out of the ordinary, his natural destination would be North God Style. This would occupy him to useful ends.

What was more, Alec, it seemed, had failed to understand one thing: Rudeus's mana was not his only strength. He also had friends who would rush to his side when he needed them. He did not forge those friends in battle. Perhaps it was difficult for Alec to see it after losing to Rudeus in single combat, but it might become clear to him if he spent time with Rudeus's children. If he could see that strength and adopt it, he might grow into an even nobler and mightier North God than in the usual history.

"I will make some excuse to Rudeus," I said.

"Well, if you ask it, Sir Orsted, I'll do it." Alec grinned, then turned back to Sieg. "Right, then, Sieg, your training begins tomorrow. If you want to surprise your mom and dad, you've got to keep it a secret, understand?"

"Yeah!" Sieg looked up at Alec, his eyes sparkling.

Alec looked more excited about his tiny apprentice than worried. For the first time in a very long time, he would be teaching real swordcraft. They would surely make an excellent pair. Only one thing bothered me.

“Alexander Rybak, I wish to ask you a question.”

“Anything, sir!”

“What is on your back?” Alec’s back was covered in a large number of burrs, those things that human children often threw and stuck to one another’s clothes when they played. Little ones called them “hitchhikers.”

“Oh, these were from Miss Lara. She must have been bored. She kept sneaking up behind me and sticking them to my back.”

I absorbed this silently.

“It’s one of those things kids do. I’ll pick them off later,” Alec assured me.

Ah, yes. Lara and her pranks. It made sense.

“Where *is* she?” I asked.

“Didn’t she go into the office...?”

For a second, I worried that she had gone down to the basement and jumped onto a teleportation circle. Fortunately, when I searched for her presence, I found her exiting the office. She was with Leo and had a nonchalant look on her face. I also sensed Faliastia inside. Presumably, she had been entertaining Lara up on the second floor.

“Miss Lara! Master Leo! It’s time to go home!” Alec called.

“Okay,” said Lara. She took Sieg’s hand, then boosted him up onto Leo’s back before clambering up after him. Once there, she sat behind him with her arms around him.

“I’ll see them back now,” said Alec. He set off in the lead, with Leo trotting along behind him. Suddenly, as Leo passed by me, Lara looked at me with a triumphant smile and chuckled under her breath. I had no idea why.

After they were gone, I went back into the office and found Faliastia at the reception desk. She must have escorted Lara down. I told her she could go

home, then headed for my study.

“Hrmm.” That was when the meaning of Lara’s smile revealed itself to me. My chair, the chair I always sat on, was covered in burrs. They would have stuck to my backside had I not spotted them. *This* was a prank.

I felt the corners of my mouth turn up as I gathered up the burrs and put them into a bag. As I was about to shut the bag away in my desk, however, I felt something was off.

“Hrm.” It wasn’t a strong feeling. It reminded me of what I’d felt when I’d been poisoned by an assassin some time ago. As I was protected by a magic item and my Dragon Saint battle aura, the poison hadn’t worked, but I had still felt *something*.

Despite that, I casually opened my desk drawer, only to have five live grasshoppers leap out. It had been a two-stage prank: she used the burrs to put my guard down, then ambushed me. She had probably been hiding somewhere around the reception, waiting until I left to sneak inside and carry out the crime.



This explained her look of triumph. I thought for a moment. I really had no idea how Lara would turn out. Just what was it about her that the Man-God feared?

Rudeus returned several days later. He hadn't just saved the family, he'd made rain fall on the entire surrounding area, putting an end to the famine. Competent indeed. Once I'd heard his full report, I brought up the matter of Sieg.

"I wish for Sieghart to come here regularly."

"Uh, can I ask why?" Rudeus gave me a dubious look.

I considered how to explain it. "There is something somewhat intriguing that I wish to keep a close eye on."

Rudeus paused for a long pause. "Is it dangerous?"

"No."

"Can I set a curfew?"

"You may."

"All right. I'll let my wives know."

Despite my vague explanation, Rudeus agreed. Perhaps he trusted me or had given up on getting clear answers out of me.

"You have no other questions?" I asked.

"No. I think I know who's going to be doing what for Sieg...though I'm not sure why it has to be a secret from me."

"Ah."

"I think it's good. Tell Alec to take good care of Sieg."

He had seen through the ruse. I felt grateful. Rudeus and I were going to continue to work together. The easier it was for us to understand what the other was thinking, the better. Transparency was desirable.

"Right, I'm heading home too."

“Indeed. Good work.”

As Rudeus turned to leave, I suddenly remembered something.

“Rudeus,” I called after him.

“Yes?”

“What is Cheddar Man?”

For a moment, he gaped at me. Then, he said, “He’s a hero whose face is made out of cheese. He tears off bits of his face for hungry children to eat, takes out bad guys with one punch, that sort of thing.”

“Was...there such a hero in the world you came from?”

“In my world, it was bread filled with anko bean paste. But no one knows what anko is here, so I changed it to cheese. It’s a story I tell the kids to get them to sleep.”

Cheddar Man tore off pieces of his face and gave them away. Mystifying.

“Why do you ask?” Rudeus went on.

“No reason. I was merely curious.”

“All right. Well, I’ll be off.”

I watched Rudeus go, then returned to my study. The bag of the burrs Lara had left was on my desk. The grasshoppers were gone, having escaped to the outdoors. When Lara got home, I expected she would be roundly scolded for her pranks.

A sigh escaped me.

Lara and Faliastia, Alexander and Sieg, and now Rudeus and his Cheddar Man. This loop was full of surprises.

The image features a dark gray background with a decorative border. The border consists of a double-line rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical corner pieces at each of the four corners. In the center of the page is a large, intricate, light gray decorative motif. This motif is symmetrical both horizontally and vertically, resembling a stylized floral or heraldic design. It includes a central shield-like shape with various flourishes, scrolls, and leaf-like elements extending outwards.

Millis Travelogue

Chapter 1:

Calling at the Latria Household

THE CHILDREN WERE growing up well. Lucie had settled in at the Ranoa University of Magic. Lara hated studying, but hey, she was happy. Arus was like Eris in that he had a bit of a rough streak, but he was unexpectedly diligent, and he didn't bully the smaller kids. He'd be all right. Sieg was still little and as much of a crybaby as ever, but he'd toughened up a bit lately. Almost like someone somewhere was training him. Lily and Chris were still very little, but they'd long since stopped breastfeeding and recently started their gifted curriculum. A seventh was yet to come, but six kids was plenty. Every day was lively and challenging. Even so, with Lara and Arus starting school, and Lily and Chris walking around by themselves learning this and that, it felt like things had calmed down recently. There was no sign of the Man-God plotting anything. The days went by without a worry.

It was another lively night: Lucie looking after herself now; Lara getting in trouble for playing with her food; Arus being scolded for his picky eating; Sieg, his cheeks bulging with rice; Lily, spilling soup on her cute little bib as she ate; Chris on my knee with her mouth open wide, waiting for the next mouthful. Then there were my three wives, my little sister, and my two moms. The dinner table was alive with activity.

It wasn't just mealtimes—our household was like this *all* the time recently. As you'd expect, really. There's never a dull moment with six kids, whether you like it or not! Arus and Lara were wild ones who'd start tussling at the drop of a hat. Lily and Chris were about the same age, which caused some friction, so they shouted all the time. Even Lucie and Sieg, who were comparatively chill, were still noisy from time to time. There was truly never a quiet moment.

It occurred to me that this might not last forever. Who knew what would happen once the kids grew up? They might join Orsted's fight, but they also might leave Sharia for elsewhere. We'd decided to send all of them to the Asura Royal Academy for three years once they came of age, so they *could* settle

there. Then again, they might suddenly decide to storm out of the house and strike out on their own before they were grown. That was what Paul did after he fought with his father, so the same sort of thing could happen in my family.

I had the Man-God to worry about, so I always had the impulse to tell them how to live, but kids don't really listen to their parents. You only had to look at Lara, who hated studying and training and was always plotting to escape her lessons. But that didn't worry me, not in the long run.

This was probably the only time that all the kids would be together under the same roof. I thought we should go on a family holiday.

We only had so much time left.

Obviously, I wasn't planning on a world tour. I just set aside a month or so to take them to see some people who were overdue for a visit. On the way, I would show them that the rest of the world wasn't exactly like Sharia; that was all. To that end, the destination I settled on was the Millis Continent.

Here was the plan:

We'd use the teleportation circle to travel to the Holy Land of Millis, where we'd stay for about ten days. We'd spend the first half calling on Zenith's parents as well as Cliff and the Millis Church. Next, we'd visit places unique to Millis, like the Adventurers' Guild Headquarters and the magic tower. From there, we'd take a carriage north along the Holy Sword Highway, briefly visit the Great Forest, then stop for a soak in the hot springs in the Blue Wyrms Mountains. Finally, I'd set up a teleportation circle and take us home. While we were there, I'd also look into getting in contact with the Ore God, something I'd been putting off for a while.

I floated it with my family six months before I put it into action. There was Roxy's schedule as a teacher to think about, and I had to ask Orsted, the CEO, for permission. Plus, the kids had their studies to think about, and everyone else had plans. Even so, everyone agreed. Lucie, perhaps because she remembered visiting the Asura Kingdom, looked especially excited at the idea of a trip. When I asked Elinalise if she wanted to come, she jumped at it. She was happy to be given an excuse; she saw Cliff a few times a year, but she would have much

rather been with him all the time. Ideally, Cliff would rise quickly in the church so he could bring Elinalise and Clive to live with him, but the power struggles there took time to navigate.

Since we were going to visit the Latrias, Zenith and Lilia were also coming with us. If we got the chance, I wanted to ask the Blessed Child to look into Zenith's mind again. Lara could communicate with Zenith, but she wouldn't tell us much. She always looked like it annoyed her when I asked. At her age, she might not have understood how important it was.

Enough about that, though—even if this was only a personal trip, so long as I made appointments half a year in advance, making appointments to see important Millis folk like the Blessed Child and the Pope wouldn't be an issue. I'd also asked Norn and her family to come this time, and I promised Claire that I'd bring her. Well, "promise" is a strong word. I thought it'd be good to show Claire in person that Norn was happily wedded, and I'd already told her about the marriage. I'd made sure to be clear about exactly who she was married to—including the fact that he was a demon. There'd still been no reply, so it was possible that she was angry or she wanted to pretend she'd never heard about it. But here was the thing: we weren't going to compromise on this.

At first, Norn turned down my invitation because her daughter was still too young, but Luicelia was growing up fast. She'd already stopped breastfeeding, she had all her teeth, and she toddled around with the green hair and cute little tail she'd inherited from her dad swinging behind her. Still, she was young enough that Norn had to watch her at all times.

Ruijerd took her aside. "I'll look after Luicelia. You go."

"But Ruijerd..."

"You should treasure your family."

It was a heavy way to say it, but Norn obeyed. Ruijerd, it seemed, would have liked to join us. He didn't know much about human customs, he said, but he understood that meeting the family was important. Unfortunately, bringing a baby—not to mention a Superd—on a month-long trip was a hard ask. We could put a hat on Sieg, and his hair just so happened to be green. A hat wouldn't hide a tail, nor that Luicelia was a *real* Superd. People would freak out,

which could be traumatic for her. Ruijerd also had his duties with the village and the Biheiril Kingdom to attend to. So, with great reticence, he sent Norn off in our care.

“Very well,” Norn said, “but I’m not going to the hot springs or anywhere else. After we call on my family, I’m heading home.”

“There’s no need for that. You should enjoy your trip.”

“No. I want to be here with you and Luicelia.” She’d agreed to come along, but she was still a lovestruck woman.

I asked the mercenary band and Zanoba to watch the house while we were away. Byt and Dillo would stay at the house too, just in case. We didn’t want a burglar breaking in, and the vegetable garden needed tending.

As a whole, the plan was a bit thinly sketched, but it wouldn’t be any fun if I overfilled the schedule and ended up pressed for time! This amount of planning should be *just* right.

It was six months later. As usual, the Magic City of Sharia was blanketed in snow. We called a carriage to the house. It then took us through the town where snow lay thick on the ground.

Once we reached the office, we said a quick hello to Orsted, then got on the magic circle that would take us to Millishion. It connected to a hideout within the city. Just like that, we’d be on the Millis Continent. I wanted to *travel*; this method really lost what made the experience special. I would have at least liked to use a magic circle that deposited us away from the city so I could show the kids Millishion from the outside. It wasn’t every day you got to see the massive tower or pass through its high walls. Exciting! Then again, the scenery would still be there on our way out of the city. There was no need to rush.

At the hideout, we shifted to the readied carriages, then headed straight for the home of the Latrias in Millishion. Including me, there were fourteen of us, plus one dog. As such, we’d gotten two large carriages. I rode in the first one with Roxy, Zenith, Lilia, Lara, Chris, and Leo. Sylphie, Eris, Lucie, Arus, Sieg, Lily, Aisha, and Norn came in the second. We said a temporary goodbye to Elinalise

and Clive, who were going to see Cliff.

The kids were so hyped up about their first trip that their three moms could barely wrangle them. Lara seemed to especially like the scenery of Millishion. She stared out the carriage window, breathing heavily. That was unusual for Lara, who was unimpressed by everything and always napping.

“Lara, stop hanging out of the carriage like that.”

“Fine,” she grumbled.

Every now and then, she stuck her head and shoulders out the window, and Roxy would tell her off and then pull her back inside. She rested her chin on the window frame and stared wide-eyed out at the surroundings. I worried that she’d suddenly lean out and end up falling, but Leo had the hem of her dress in his mouth, so it was probably fine.

“There’s so many more colors than near us, Blue Mama,” she said.

“There are lots of famous designers who live in Millishion that design clothes for common folk. They all like to be fashionable.”

“There’s no snow even though it’s winter. It’s not even cold.”

“There isn’t much snow in these parts, though they do get heavy rain at one time of year. That big tower maintains the water levels, so the city never floods.”

It warmed my heart to see Lara bursting with curiosity and Roxy explaining it all to her. Lara really was like Roxy. A mini Roxy.

“Dada, I’m hungry,” said Chris. She’d been monopolizing my lap and in a good mood about it the whole time, though she seemed scared either of the city outside or of the shaking of the carriage. She held my sleeve tight. If I made her let go, I suspected she’d start bawling.

“We’ll eat when we get to Great-Grandma’s place, okay?”

“Mmkay.” Chris accepted what I said without a fuss. If I were one of the moms, she’d have thrown a tantrum and said she wanted to eat *now*. It wasn’t fair to Sylphie and the others, but being Chris’s favorite made me feel a teensy bit superior.

When Chris took my hand then used it to rub her empty tummy, I desperately wanted to buy her something.

“You there, fruit seller,” I felt like saying, “I’ll take your sweetest apple. What’s that? You don’t know which is sweetest? Then make it the whole shop. Fear not! I’ll give the rest to the Latrias as a present.”

Speaking of which, I’d brought all sorts of presents for the Latrias to butter them up, but I wondered if they’d be to Claire’s liking. If she turned around and said, “I have no interest in such vulgarities,” what then? How rude!

As I was thinking that, I noticed a tense look on Lilia’s face.

“Lilia? Is something wrong?”

“I’m a little...apprehensive,” she said.

“About what?”

“Lady Claire.”

There was only one difficulty we had to get through on this trip—my crotchety grandmother, Claire Latria. When I told her we’d be traveling in Millis, she’d immediately replied to insist that we stay with her. If only I’d declined. We could have called on her without staying at the house. Given her past behavior toward Norn, Aisha, and Lilia, I had my misgivings.

Despite everything, I didn’t dislike the grumpy old bat *that* much. Claire had some serious flaws, but she wasn’t so bad that I wouldn’t let her spend a few short days with my adorable children. We’d at least go see her. Let her meet the kids. If it all went south, we could find another place to stay. So it was agreed at the family meeting.

Even so, it was true that Claire had saved more than a few unkind words for Lilia in the past. It made sense that Lilia was apprehensive about having to go through that again.

“I know how Claire can be, but she does care about us—even if she is a bit inflexible,” I said. “If you like, you’re welcome to hide behind me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean for myself,” Lilia said. Her eyes were on Roxy and Lara.

Right, the kids. Roxy and Lara had demon blood. Then there was Norn, who

had married a demon. Not to mention the fact I had three wives. Claire, meanwhile, was a devout follower of the Millis faith and a demon expulsionist.

She'd said that she'd do her best to keep her opinions to herself, but that'd been years ago. A few years was plenty of time to forget a little promise like that. I didn't need to tell Roxy, though. At the family meeting, she'd confidently told us that it wouldn't be a problem. It might be a little unpleasant for Lara and Lily, but it would teach them how people with demon heritage were so often treated in places where humans lived.

Norn was prepared to put up with Claire's comments, too. Unrelated to anything to do with demons, I was worried about the strange ways Lara might react if Claire said something nasty to her. Lara's pranks were nerve-wracking. She didn't care who got caught up in them.

"It'll be okay, Lilia," said Roxy. "If it weren't, she wouldn't have invited us in the first place."

"You think so?"

I was skeptical. That's not to say that I didn't trust Claire. She'd extended the invitation, and inviting us just so she could be unpleasant was beneath her dignity as a noble, surely. Not that I knew what the manners of the Millis nobility were like, but spurning people who'd come from far away to visit you had to be an embarrassment. Only, even if you know what's "proper," you never know how you'll act when the thing you hate is right in front of you. Sometimes you just can't behave.

Just then, Zenith squeezed Lilia's hand. No words came out, but it was obvious she had something to say. I tapped Lara on the shoulder.

"What's Grandma saying?"

Lara looked at me like I was being a massive pain, then at Zenith, then back at me. "She says that Great-Grandma worries a lot. It'll be fine."

"Thanks."

For once, Lara actually translated for us! And if Zenith said it'd be okay, then I expected she was right.

The mood was welcoming when we got to the house. The maids were all smiles, and the butler was courteous. They were a lot happier to see us than they had been on my previous trips to Millishion, although that was a low bar to clear. After handing over our luggage, they showed us to the room where Claire awaited us.

“What a long journey you’ve had,” she said when she saw us. She didn’t rise from her chair. I couldn’t call her disrespectful for that. She *was* the mistress of this house, after all.

“Actually, it’s no time at all nowadays,” I said.

“Ah, yes. I still cannot get my head around it.” Claire put her fingers to her temple like she was valiantly restraining herself. It was probably a snide remark about me using the teleportation circles like they were my personal property. Teleportation magic was technically *forbidden*, after all.

“Allow me to introduce my family,” I said.

“Please do.”

I had all the family members line up—the kids, my three wives, and Norn and Aisha. Aisha was wearing a pretty dress rather than her maid uniform today. If you didn’t know her, you could have mistaken her for the eldest daughter. Lilia wasn’t wearing her maid uniform either, but she’d already gone with Zenith to another room.

“Mary,” Claire called to a nearby maid.

“Yes, ma’am.” The maid reached out to put a supportive arm around Claire, helped her to her feet, then handed her a cane. She leaned heavily on it. She was weak and unsteady on her feet. Her regal bearing from the last time I’d seen her was gone. I realized that when she hadn’t stood up to greet us, it hadn’t been out of pride.

“Are you...unwell?” I asked.

“I’m old.”

“Surely you’re not old enough to be too weak to stand...”

Yes, she was old enough to be a great-grandmother, but my parents had me young, and the same was true of my kids. I wasn't going to ask after her age, but Zenith was about forty. Claire couldn't be much more than sixty or seventy.

"I could cast an antidote or healing magic on you, if you like," I said.

"No, thank you. I'm sure you are a competent magician, but here in Millishion, I am a noble."

In other words, if she wanted healing magic, she could get it. Well, I had no reason to doubt her if she said she was fine, but seeing her so weak worried me a bit.

"Rather than fussing about me, I am eager for you to introduce your family," Claire said pointedly.

"Right, of course." With her guidance, I moved on to introductions. First, I introduced Sylphie, Roxy, and Eris. "This is Sylphie. I married her first, and she looks after the household now."

"Sylphiette, at your service," said Sylphie. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for welcoming us into your home."

That was Sylphie for you. A simple greeting reflected how comfortable she was with fine manners. No one would have guessed she was a country girl from the Fittoa Region.

"This is Roxy. She's a Migurd—a demon—so while she looks young, she's actually much older than me. She teaches at the magic university."

"A pleasure to meet you," said Roxy. "I know you may have some misgivings about my heritage, but I hope we will get along."

When Roxy introduced herself as a demon, Claire didn't so much as raise an eyebrow. They hadn't met before, but she wasn't a secret. It seemed that, at least for the moment, Claire wasn't going to pick a fight about it.

"And this is Eris," I said. "She's a master of Sword God Style, and the younger sister of the current head of the Boreas family, an important Asuran noble family."

"Um, hello. Nice to meet you."

Eris, of course, was a bit awkward. Though, she could act naturally at parties in Asura, so maybe the problem was meeting my grandmother.

Claire said...nothing! No snide commentary about my marriages. Great, so far; next up were the kids.

“This is my eldest daughter Lucie,” I said.

“I’m Lucie Greyrat!” she said, curtsying. “It’s an honor to meet you for the first time, Great-Grandmother! I’m looking forward to staying with you!”

Claire smiled a little. She’d been strict with her grandchildren, but it seemed even Claire had a soft spot for her great-grandchildren.

“This is Lara, the next eldest.”

“Hello,” said Lara, managing to sound surly, bored, and like she wanted to be anywhere else. Claire’s brow furrowed a little. Okay, so her soft spot didn’t apply to *all* great-grandchildren.

“Next is my eldest son, Arus.”

“I’m Arus and I’m nearly eight! Nice to meet you!”

In the end, only Lara was sullen. Sieg, Lily, and Chris were introduced without incident. Since they minded their manners, Claire didn’t frown at the rest of them.

“You two say hello too,” I said, gesturing to Norn and Aisha to come forward. They both lowered their heads gracefully—not just Aisha, but Norn as well.

“It’s been too long, Great-Grandmother,” said Norn. “I’m Norn Superdia now.”

“Thank you for having us,” said Aisha. As far as etiquette went, it was a flawless performance.

Still leaning on her cane, Claire stuck her chin out and said, “Indeed. It has been a long time, you two.”

That was all. She didn’t ask anything about Norn’s marriage. Maybe she didn’t think this was the right place and wanted to be considerate. In any case, thanks to everyone behaving themselves, we hadn’t started off on the wrong foot.

Good, good! We—ah. Lara was picking her nose. I'd talk to her about it later.

Next, I turned to the family and said, "This is Claire Latria, your great-grandmother. We'll be staying with her for the next ten days, so be sure to be polite."

Claire gave an elegant bow. Her manners were charming, as usual. I could only hope the kids would learn from her example.

"Good day, all of you. On behalf of my absent husband, I welcome you to our home. The maids and butler are at your service. You may find yourself confused or discomforted by the cultural differences here, but I hope you will think of this house as your own."

"We're very grateful for your kindness. Say thank you, everyone."

"Thank you! We're looking forward to staying with you!" The children bowed as one. Claire sat down with great dignity. We'd gotten through it. The family's Millishion holiday could get started.

"Rudeus, would you stay behind? I would like a word with you, if I may."

No sooner had I thought that than Claire stopped me, right as I was about to leave the room. Her expression looked, well, fine. She didn't seem angry or anything.

"Sit down."

"Thank you," I said. Doing as I was told, I sat down across from her. A cup of tea appeared before me straight away, like the chair had a switch in it. I might have been indignant that she didn't offer my family tea, but then, I hadn't invited them to join us. There weren't enough chairs anyway.

"There's no need to be stiff. I'm not going to scold you." Claire saw right through me. I hoped she'd cut me some slack for being a little guarded, given what happened last time.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"I thought we could chat."

She was sipping her tea with an innocent expression. She did it very elegantly. I guess there was even etiquette for tea drinking. I raised my own cup, imitating

her. *Mmm*, fine tea leaves.

“Speaking of tea,” I said, “Aisha started growing tea trees recently. I brought a bag of the leaves she harvested for you to try.”

“We shall brew it tomorrow.”

“I hope you’ll like it.”

Every few years, Aisha started growing something new. At one point, she was growing herbs or something that she’d added to her cooking, but she’d stopped. Why was that? Oh, yes, Chris had seemed to be allergic. When the herbs grew fragrant, her nose started dripping. You could fix the symptoms of allergies with an antidote, but not the allergy itself.

“Aisha still isn’t thinking about marriage?”

“It doesn’t look like it at the moment.”

“I hear Norn got married.”

“She did.”

“What sort of person is her husband?”

Here I’d thought it was all done and dusted, but it turned out that I couldn’t avoid this subject. Still, I appreciated that she’d asked me rather than Norn.

“He’s a demon,” I said. I’d already told her in a letter. I knew there was no point in trying to gloss over it.

“I am aware. As he hasn’t graced us with his presence, I wish to know what sort of man he is.”

Oops. So, that was what she meant. Fair enough, he was letting his newly wedded wife out and about unattended. Claire wanted to know why he hadn’t come.

“They have a child who’s still young, so he stayed home to look after her, but he wanted Norn to at least come and pay her regards to her grandmother. He definitely didn’t mean any disrespect to you, Claire, or to the Latria family...”

Claire frowned. “I *asked* what sort of man he is, not why he didn’t come.”

“Huh? Oh, um, he’s dependable, of course. I said in my letter, I think. He’s an

upstanding guy who's an ally to the weak and an enemy to evil. His people have a different idea of family and status compared to humans, but he was once the captain of an elite guard unit in a big army, and he's got an important position with his people. Oh, and Sir Perugius, one of the Three Godslayers, admires him. Also—"

"Enough." Claire cut me off midway through, giving me a piercing look.

Had I said something wrong?

"Just from listening to you now, I can tell that you gave Norn away to someone worthy of trust. Whatever I might think about other aspects of the match, it is not my place to say anything more."

"I appreciate you saying so."

"Gratitude is unnecessary. I promised you that I would not interfere in your business."

"You remembered?"

"Of course. I have a bad back, not a weak mind."

That was a relief. But why was she asking? Well, probably because we were chatting.

"Your wife Roxy is very small, isn't she?"

"It's because she's a Migurd. She's older than she looks. Oh, but you mustn't call her small to her face. It bothers her."

"I understand. I am a lady of the Latria family. I might have a sharp tongue, but I do not remark on their appearances to their faces." I was half joking, but Claire replied seriously. "Besides, given our history, I am endeavoring to understand as much as I can about demons, beastfolk, and their ilk."

"I think that's great! Like them or hate them, it's important to try to understand them." In some cases, people ended up hating others *because* they didn't understand them. People dismiss what they don't understand as lesser—like when you decide you hate a dish without ever trying it.

"That Lara is a problem, though, isn't she?"

“Well, yeah,” I admitted.

“And I am by no means referring to her mother’s stock. I mean the way she speaks to people when meeting them for the first time.”

“I’m very sorry about that. I need to teach her how to at least greet people properly, it’s just that lately she doesn’t really listen...”

“I don’t mean to meddle,” Claire said, “but children sometimes require a firm hand.”

Underneath that vague turn of phrase, she probably meant that if Lara were her child, she’d discipline her physically. I mean, there were times that was the right approach, but Lara was *clever*. She’d push her luck right up to, but not beyond, what would get her a spanking from Eris. Lara seemed wild from an outsider’s perspective, but she knew right where the line was.

“You of all people must understand why you ought to do so.”

“For her future.”

“Precisely. Those first words of greeting can determine how people see you. A lack of proper courtesy at the start can land one in trouble later. That is why we nobles study etiquette.”

Uh-oh, this was starting to sound like nagging. Though I had the feeling that Claire was enjoying the opportunity.

“That being said, demon or not, her mother Roxy comports herself very well, and in accordance with her station.”

“She does?”

“Indeed. She did right by your first wife, Sylphie, by always standing a little behind her, and her modest way of speaking was excellent. She knows her place.”

Oh, no, surely not. I hadn’t meant for it to look like there was a hierarchy of first wife and secondary wives—wait, no. Roxy was doing it on purpose because she thought there’d be fewer problems that way.

“As for Eris... Well, she’s a warrior. I suppose there’s no helping it.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Claire looked like she wanted to nag some more. I hoped she’d hold off giving Eris too much grief. She was trying.

“In any case, Rudeus,” said Claire.

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For bringing them to see me.” She bowed her head.

She didn’t name any names—not about Norn, or Aisha, or Roxy, or any specific people. I grasped that she meant everyone, then realized that I’d been a little too defensive. I should have relaxed and treated it like a trip to grandma’s house: our family holiday in Millis.

Chapter 2:

Arus's Vacation in Millis

IT WAS BOREDOM that made Arus decide to go off on his own. When they arrived in the city, the first thing he saw was the collection of large towers.

According to White Mama, they were giant magical implements, and it was thanks to them that Millishion was comfortable to live in all year round. There was also the big shining silver building. Red Mama said that was the headquarters of the Adventurers' Guild, and most adventurers went there at least once. Arus really wanted to see them up close.

His dad would have taken him if he'd asked. Just that day, Arus had asked to go see the shiny gold building, and his father had smiled and taken him there. However, once they got there, he hadn't let Arus go wherever he liked. When they went inside, Arus was curious and wanted to run around looking at everything, but his dad held him back, saying "Don't do that" or "You can't go in there." Arus found the restrictions frustrating.

Unbeknownst to Arus, Rudeus was being respectful of the headquarters of the Millis Church. This was the church's cathedral, and you couldn't go inside—especially not into the inner sanctum—without permission. It wasn't a place you could enter with a child itching to get up to mischief.

Arus was still a kid and didn't know how important such rules were. If he'd asked to go to the towers or the silver building, his dad would take him. But Arus's thinking was simple—if he went with his dad, there'd be limits on what he could do, and he'd end up feeling stifled like he had before.

So, when his father and the others went into the center of the gold building along with a heavily guarded woman with big breasts, and the kids were told to play in the inner garden until they got back, Arus saw his chance.

I'm gonna go see the shiny silver building and the towers up close. When he thought about it, his parents had stopped him from doing things his whole life. *Don't go here, don't go there, don't wander around town by yourself.*

Whenever he went out to play, Aisha or Leo always came with him. When he was little, he'd gone along with it obediently. He wasn't about to turn into a total rebel just like that. While he didn't totally understand his mama's instructions, he knew it was important to follow them. He wasn't supposed to go off on his own because there were lots of dangers out in the world. He mostly didn't mind going out with Aisha, but sometimes he wanted to try doing things without someone watching him.

"Hey, Lara? How about we go see that shiny silver building and those towers?"

Needing a companion, he asked Lara to go along with him. Unusually, Lara was by herself that day. Leo had gone off somewhere—something about talking with the white owl guardian beast that protected the woman called the Blessed Child.

Lara also saw this as a good chance. Ever since she was little, she and Leo had gotten on super well. That hadn't changed, really, but she *was* getting sick of how he followed her everywhere, telling her off for little things.

So, when Arus asked her, the corners of her mouth quirked up. She nodded. "I was thinking about it too."

They waited until Aisha wasn't looking, then the two of them slipped away and set their plan into action. When Chris cried, "Dada's *gone!*" and burst into tears, they used the distraction to head for the bushes. Next, concealed in the leaves, they made for the exit—only to be spotted by Sieg.

"Where are you guys going?" he asked.

"We're just going out for a bit, Sieg," Arus said.

Sieg frowned. "You'll get in trouble if you go out without a grown-up."

"You're the one who's been sneaking out back by yourself lately," Arus pointed out. "Don't think we don't know."

"N-no I'm not..."

Arus knew all about it. Sieg went out by himself all the time, and for some reason, he was the only one who didn't get in trouble for it! He assumed that

this was because Sieg didn't have Aisha or Leo watching him. It frustrated him that his little brother was the only one allowed to come and go as he pleased.

In reality, Sieg wasn't alone. Unbeknownst to Arus—and to Sieg for that matter—when Sieg snuck out the back door by himself, the Ruquag mercenaries were there watching over him from the shadows. They were following orders from the ever-anxious Rudeus.

"I keep *your* secret," Arus told Sieg, "so you keep your mouth shut about us."

"Okay, fine..."

"It's no big deal. We're just going to go see the shiny silver building and the humongous tower."

"Huh? You're gonna go to the Adventurers' Guild?" Sieg's eyes lit up. Alec had told him lots of stories about heroes, in which the Adventurers' Guild headquarters often appeared. Since then, he'd taken a special interest in it.

"Yeah," said Arus.

"I'm coming too!" Sieg replied.

So Arus *and* his siblings walked out of the Millis Cathedral, bursting with curiosity and just a *little* desire to cause mischief.

Arus made his way through the city with Sieg and Lara in tow. The houses, so unlike those in Sharia, and the buildings, constructed in shapes he'd never seen before, made his heart race. He'd observed the city from inside the carriage, but it was much different as he walked the streets on his own two feet, though he couldn't say why. Maybe it was the patterns in the cobblestones.

In any case, it was exciting to walk around a town he didn't know, but as a group of children alone, they received many curious looks—especially Sieg and his green hair. Arus didn't care. He'd gotten used to people staring back in Sharia.

"Lara, look where you're going," he said. "It's dangerous."

"Mm," Lara replied, her eyes sparkling as she gazed around them. She was even more fascinated by the neat and orderly town than Arus.

“Hey, why didn’t we ask Lucie to come?” Sieg piped up. “She’ll be mad to be left out.”

“No way would Lucie have come.”

Sieg was being a fraidy-cat, as usual. He’d gotten way better at sword fighting lately thanks to his secret training, so Arus didn’t understand why he was still so timid.

“Hey, Lara! What’s that?” Arus pointed at a mysterious object. It was a true-to-life statue of an owl, similar to the big white owl they’d seen earlier at the shiny gold building, but obviously not the real thing. It was a little bit uncanny.

Lara glanced and said confidently, “It’s a fountain.”

“No one would make a fountain that weird.”

“Well, that’s what it is.”

“Come on, no way that’s it.” Just as he said it, water began to spout from the owl. “Whoa, it totally is! No way! How’d you know?!”

“I saw one that looked like it at Julie’s.”

The fountain was one of Rudeus’s “by-products,” inspired by the Singapore Merlion. He’d modeled it on the Blessed Child’s guardian beast, then gifted it to her when it was finished. They’d ended up struggling to find a place for it within the church itself—more accurately, the Blessed Child didn’t like that it looked like a taxidermy owl and didn’t want it near her. Eventually, it found a home entertaining passersby on a street near the church.

“Wow...”

Lara accepted Arus and Sieg’s impressed stares with a smug chuckle as the three of them crossed the bridge. Once they were on the other side, their surroundings changed dramatically. The buildings grew smaller and there were more people in the streets. Many of them carried swords and wore armor, and Arus thought more of them were muscular and *super* fierce. That meant they had left the Divine District and entered the Adventurers’ District!

“It’s more normal around here, huh?”

“Yeah.”

For Arus and the others, who lived in the Magic City of Sharia, this sort of place felt more like home. Even the mean-faced muscular types looked like delicate flowers compared to the Ruquag mercenaries—and nobody compared to Red Mama.

“Hey Lara, which way’s the silver building again?”

“Hmm. That way.”

“Cool, then let’s go!” Arus strode off enthusiastically. Behind him followed Sieg, who looked excited, and Lara, who seemed bored despite her smile.

“Whoa, amazing!” Arus said, while Sieg echoed him.

In front of them was a gigantic building that gleamed silver. They had reached the main street and come upon the Adventurers’ Guild. The street led straight to it, so it wasn’t exactly hard to spot.

“Come on, Arus, come on!” Sieg called, so excited that he started running. It was hard to believe he’d been against the whole thing a few minutes ago. Whatever he might have claimed, he couldn’t resist the allure of the Adventurers’ Guild Headquarters, the scene of the beginning of so many heroic epics.

“Hey, wait up!” Arus said as he and Lara hurried after Sieg, their faces alight with anticipation. They couldn’t wait to see the place up close.

The people around them who saw three children break into a run thought for a second that this was a bit dangerous. Children who suddenly started running might bump into someone or get caught under the wheels of a carriage. Their worries were quickly put to rest as the three slipped through the crowd at a steady, controlled pace, quite unlike other children. They even kept to the side of the street where carriages didn’t pass. Their daily training had paid off.

Sieg exclaimed in awe again as he arrived at the steps leading to the entrance. He’d never seen such a huge and majestic building. Well, actually, that wasn’t true. The magic university in the Magic City of Sharia was also big, but it just wasn’t the same! The Adventurers’ Guild Headquarters was silver and shiny, while the magic university was red and brown like a potato.

“This is the Adventurers’ Guild, huh, Arus!”

“Yeah!”

“It’s not like the one near our house!”

“Yeah, ours looks like it’s about to fall down!”

“They both stink, though.”

“Yeah, it does smell, huh?”

With these rude observations, the three of them pushed through the doors of the guild, though they did their best to be quiet about it. Blue Mama had told them that dim-witted adventurers would try to pick a fight with kids they saw going in and out of the guild. Arus would have welcomed a fight, but he knew that if he had one after sneaking away without permission, Red Mama would be mad at him. Red Mama was scary when she got mad! She’d spank him until his bottom was bright red. If Sieg and Lara got hurt, it wouldn’t just be Red Mama. If Blue Mama and White Mama got mad at him too...

The thought sent a shiver down Arus’s spine.

On the other hand, the thought that his *dad* might be mad at him tempted him to do it anyway. His dad often rewarded and indulged him, but he hardly ever scolded Arus. He’d *never* seen his dad properly angry.

“Wow!” Arus said as he looked around. The interior of the Adventurers’ Guild was just as spectacular as he’d imagined from the outside. The decor was old-fashioned but stately, and there were lots of reception desks. There were many times more adventurers than back home, and they were dressed totally differently, too. Sharia’s Adventurers’ Guild was full of newbie magicians and veteran warriors and healers. In Millis, it was the opposite.

“Arus,” called Lara from behind him as he drank in the sight. “It says it goes up to the fourth floor.” She pointed at an information board in front of the staircase. She was right! On the first floor was the reception and waiting area, on the second was a guild store selling materials along with weapons and equipment, on the third was a restaurant offering light refreshments, and on the fourth were clan rooms for the larger clans.

“Let’s go upstairs!” Arus said, turning eagerly toward the staircase. Just then, a shadow fell over them. He looked up. A woman with thick makeup and large

breasts stood behind them.

“This is not a playground,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“W-we’re sightseeing!” Arus said quickly, repeating what his dad had told him to say. “We’re from Ranoa.”

“Where are your parents?”

“It, um, it’s just us.”

“Is it, now?” said the woman. “Why don’t I show you around, then? Don’t let appearances deceive you—I work here, and I’m off work at midday. What do you say?” She showed them the patch on her shoulder. It was the same one that the receptionists had.

“Th-that’d be great,” Arus said, feeling breathless. Arus loved big breasts. That wasn’t to say that he didn’t like small ones, but he liked large ones best. The woman in front of them had breasts as big as Aisha’s—big enough to set his heart racing.

“Great, then I’ll take care of you. Ready? The first floor is the reception area.” The woman flashed them a friendly smile and then began her tour. The three trailed after her as she guided them around the guild headquarters. They went from the first floor to the second, then the third, then the fourth. All the while, the woman was polite and thorough, as though they were grown-ups.

Arus had wanted to go where he liked, but they ended up getting a guided tour. While it wasn’t what he’d planned on, everything they saw was new and exciting. The clan room in particular was something the Adventurers’ Guild in Sharia didn’t have, and it was decorated so lavishly that it was hard to believe it was for adventurers. That was enough to thrill Arus and the others.

“And that’s the end,” said the woman after they’d gone around the entire building. She leaned over Arus. “Did you have fun?”

“Yes! Thank you very much!”

“No need to thank me,” she replied. “But what are you going to do now? Will your mom or dad come and get you?”

“Um, no...”

“Oh? In that case, how about I walk you home?”

“No, thank you. We can get home by ourselves!” Arus still wanted to go and see the towers. He could have lied and said they were getting picked up, but if they’d started heading for the outskirts of the city, the woman would have noticed. Arus was not ready to go home before he visited one more destination.

With that, Arus and his siblings left the guild. Their plan had gone a bit awry, but it’d turned out fun anyway.

“Right, on to the next one!” Arus declared, pointing not just at the tower, but also the sun, which, now that noon had come and gone, had begun to dip toward the horizon.

They saw all sorts of things on the way to the tower. First, there was a complicated network of canals with little boats moving through them. Then, they saw carts piled high with materials made from monsters and groups of adventurers guarding them as they trundled along.

The three siblings let out gasps of amazement whenever they stumbled across something new, relishing the experience of seeing it all. However, maybe because they spent so much time seeing the sights, or because the tower that had *looked* so close turned out to be unexpectedly far away, dusk had fallen heavily by the time they reached the tower.

“Whoa, this is humongous, too!” Arus said.

Up close, in the light of the setting sun, the tower left the three of them bowled over. It was a great pillar so wide that it would have taken a child several minutes to walk all around it, and so tall that they had to crane their necks to look up at it. What was more, once they were closer, they could just see the crests engraved into its surface.

The tower itself was not actually a magical implement. Instead, it had powerful warding magic cast on it to protect the magical implement within. Arus didn’t know that, of course, but he *did* think that Lily would be pleased to see it. She liked this sort of thing.

“It doesn’t look like we can go inside after all,” Sieg said.

“Oh, right. That’s too bad.”

Sieg had found what looked like the entrance, but it was flanked by two soldiers who weren’t letting people in. Arus wasn’t surprised. He would have liked to climb up and see the view from the top, but he had enough sense to give up when it was impossible.

“Oh, well.” He sighed, then said, “Let’s go home!”

“Yeah!”

Nodding cheerfully, Arus set off back the way they’d come, with Lara and Sieg walking behind him.

“That was fun, huh, Lara?” asked Sieg.

“Yeah, it was. I want a dragon head like the one they had on the wall in the clan room.”

“All right, when I’m big, I’ll get one for you!”

“I’ll help you get it.”

After seeing things they never usually would have, the three of them were delighted. Sieg was particularly excited and babbling incessantly at Lara. But as Arus walked along, he suddenly felt uneasy. What if...?

No, it couldn’t be.

“Hey, Arus, you know that big sword they had at the Adventurers’ Guild? You know what that is?” Sieg asked.

“No...?”

“It’s one of the forty-eight magic swords.”

“Huh. You sure know a lot, Sieg.”

“I think it’s probably a fake because they had it on display, but Alec drew me a picture once.”

“Huh...”

“Hey, Arus, wait up!”

Arus quickened his pace, barely listening to what Sieg was saying. Sieg,

confused by Arus's sudden silence, chatted to Lara instead. Arus's shift in attitude also bothered Lara, but she listened to Sieg without bringing it up. The three of them continued to walk.

Sieg's regular training had toughened him up, so he didn't complain that he was tired or stop walking just because his feet hurt, but as he watched Arus walking mutely in front of him, he also began to go quiet. Eventually, he stopped talking altogether.

The three walked on in silence, trudging along in through the twilight. Soon enough, the sun went down.

Twenty or thirty minutes later, the three of them stopped in a dark alley. There was no sign of anyone else around. All was quiet.

"Hey, Arus?" said Sieg. "How long till we get back?"

"I don't know," Arus muttered.

This wasn't what he'd meant to happen. He *hadn't* forgotten to think about how they'd get home. On the way, they'd walked toward the big tower. Thus, when they returned, all they'd had to do was walk toward the gold building. It was huge and golden, after all. It stood out for miles, and they only had to go back the way they'd come. It'd be easy, he'd thought.

Then dusk fell, bathing the whole city in yellow light. Not only that, but the long shadows cast by the setting sun made the streets look different. All the things that had caught their eyes on the way to the tower made it really hard to remember the way they'd gone.

"What do you mean you don't—?"

"Shut up! I said I don't know because I don't know!" Arus shouted so loudly that Sieg flinched back. If his dependable big brother was shouting, they were in trouble. Tears began to well up in his eyes. He'd begun training with Alec, but he was still only a little kid. As an obedient kid, he wasn't used to being yelled at.

"Arus," Lara said quietly. Arus turned around with a start. He saw Sieg on the

verge of tears standing next to Lara. She was as blank-faced as ever, but he picked up from her posture that she was angry.

“I’m sorry, Lara. I got lost.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know the way back?”

Lara shook her head listlessly. “No.”

Seeing how helpless she looked when she was usually so confident and fearless, Arus felt the beginnings of despair. Nevertheless, he didn’t whimper or break down crying. He clenched his fists instead.

“I-it’s gonna be okay! Leave it to me!” Arus had gotten them into this, so he would fix it. He took Lara and Sieg’s hands and squeezed them. Then, he thought hard on what little he knew.

Once, Blue Mama had told him, “If you find yourself in a pinch, don’t panic. Think about what options you do have.”

“Um... Okay,” Arus said. “If we get back to the main street, there’ll be people there we can ask for directions. Someone has to know—it’s not like there’s lots of shiny gold buildings.” Night had only just fallen. The main street should still be full of people. It’d be easy to find someone to ask.

It went back to something else Blue Mama had told him: “If there’s ever something you don’t know, don’t be embarrassed to ask.”

“What if they’re mean?” Sieg said tearfully, “What if they won’t tell us?” His pessimism left Arus at a loss for words. Someone would definitely know, but he couldn’t be sure they would answer him.

Blue Mama’s advice hadn’t ended there. “Be careful, though,” she’d said, “because people won’t necessarily answer any question you ask, or they might lie to you.”

“If that happens,” Arus told Sieg, “we’ll, um... Oh, I know! Dada said that if I get separated from Mama in town, I should find a church and mention Uncle Cliff’s name, and then they’ll help me. A priest wouldn’t lie, right?”

“Oh, good idea!”

Priests were very much capable of lying, but Sieg was imagining Clive's dad, Cliff. He hadn't met Cliff many times, but Sieg knew he was very honest.

"We can get home, then," said Lara.

"Yeah, it's gonna be fine. So stop crying, Sieg. Cheddar Man wouldn't cry."

"I-I'm not crying," Sieg said, strength returning to his face. As it did, Arus felt a little more at ease. He smiled confidently at Lara, who had helped him calm down.

"All right," he said. They had two options: the main street or the church. There was no sign of anyone nearby, but if they ran into anyone on the way, he could just ask them. That'd be easy enough, Arus thought. As he did so, another worry reared its head. He, Arus, had run off without permission, gotten lost, and dragged Lara and Sieg along with him. His mamas were going to be furious. Red Mama would be *super* angry. Even Blue Mama and White Mama would be mad at him. Usually Aisha stepped in to mediate when he got in trouble, but this time, it was Aisha who he'd snuck away from. She definitely wouldn't take his side.

He sniffed. At once, Lara turned to look closely at him. "Arus, are *you* crying?" she asked. Arus wiped away the tears welling up with his sleeve and made a face at her.

"N-no way, I've just got dirt in my eye! Stick close, Lara! If we get separated, we're toast!"

"Mm. Got it," Lara said. "I believe in you, Arus."

"Don't be like that. This is all my fault."

"It's my fault too." Lara patted Arus on the head. He blushed a little, turning to look ahead.

It was time to get moving. If they stayed in this dark and empty place too long, he was going to cry for real. He was in so much trouble, but he would be big about it. Aisha might even turn on him, but he'd offer her a real apology.

Right as he thought this, Arus turned the corner.

"Whoops!" He nearly walked straight into a woman. A woman with ample

breasts. The size jogged his memory, and without meaning to, he said, “Oh!”

“Why, if it isn’t you three from earlier.”

The woman was the one who had guided Arus and the others around the Adventurers’ Guild Headquarters that day.

“M-Miss? What’re you doing here?”

“*Me?* I’m on my way home from work. What about *you*? It’s already dark. Won’t you get in trouble if you don’t get home?”

Arus felt a rush of relief that the person they’d run into right at this moment was someone they knew. Like a Buddha coming to them in hell—well, Arus didn’t know what a Buddha was. In any case, she was a ray of light.

“We, um, that is, we got lost. Do you know where the main road...or actually, a church, or the shiny gold building is?”

“The shiny gold building? Do you mean the cathedral?”

“Yeah, that one! The cuh-thee-drill!”

“Of course I do. Everyone who lives in Millishion knows the cathedral.”

Arus and Sieg looked at each other. But then Arus pulled himself together and cleared his throat. He’d learned from White Mama how to behave when asking someone a favor.

“So, um, if it’s not too much trouble, would you please show us the way? I’m sure my father will give you a reward.”

“Silly thing. You’re lost children—there’s no need to be so formal. Come along, follow me.”

Arus thought to himself that White Mama had said connections between people were important. Someone you barely knew might come to your aid when you were in a tight spot. Surely, that was what was happening now.

That day, Arus grew up a little.

“And here we are!”

Arus and the others followed the woman from the guild, and so they easily arrived at their destination.

“Huh?”

Or, so they had expected. Unhappily, Arus instead found himself looking into the depths of a dark alley. There wasn't a soul in sight. The walls were scrawled with obscene graffiti, the ground was strewn with trash, and a bad smell hung over the whole place. Dark or not, one thing was for sure: this was not the shiny gold building.

“Um? Where are...? Huh?”

“You should know better,” the woman scolded. “Didn't your daddy teach you not to follow strangers?”

Arus heard footsteps and spun around. Several men stood there, leering at them. Kidnappers! Even after realizing this, his mind was still all confused. This woman worked at the Adventurers' Guild, and had even kindly given them a tour of the place. How could she be bad? Then, he remembered. She said she was on her way home from work, but this morning, she'd said she finished at midday.

“You lied about working at the guild!”

“I did no such thing. This is my side job. A way of making a little extra pocket money. This city is full of kids like you: orphans who dream of becoming adventurers. They come to the guild, then leave again without getting to live their dreams. So, I follow them. If night comes and they still haven't gone home, they end up like this.”

“Dammit!” Arus grabbed a stick off the ground, then fell into a fighting stance, ready to protect his brother and sister.

“Arus?” Sieg clutched, trembling, at the hem of his clothes. Lara was expressionless as ever, but she looked a little pale. He had to protect them. This was his fault. He'd made the wrong decision. But what could he do at a time like this? What had his mama said? What was it...?

“Help us! Is anyone there?! We're being kidnapped! Help us!” Arus shouted.

If something happens, call for help before you fight. Either Blue Mama or White Mama had told him that—or was it Aisha? It might even have been his dad.

“Cry and shout all you like. No one’s coming,” said the woman. *Of course not,* thought Arus, as he moved on to the next lesson. This one was from Red Mama.

First, carefully observe your enemy.

As Arus braced for a fight, he cast a level gaze around them. They were in a dead-end alley with one person in front of them and two behind. All three had swords. Still, they were way weaker than Red Mama. There was no fire or bloodlust in their faces. Sharia had loads of guys at their level—small fry who’d pee themselves and run if it was Red Mama they were up against. All Arus had was a stick that looked like it would snap if he hit anyone with it, but he’d learned how to fight with his bare hands, and he could do a little magic. As long as he fought just like he’d practiced, he could beat them. He was sure of it. Pretty sure.

Maybe.

“Arus, are y-you gonna fight?” Sieg asked. “I’ll f-f-fight too.”

“You stay back!” Arus ordered him. He’d made up his mind, but his legs were trembling, and his hand shook as he gripped the stick. His breathing was shallow, and tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. He was going to fight three grown-ups under a veil of darkness, and he had to protect his brother and sister at the same time. He’d never felt so much pressure before.

“Ooo, what a *brave* big brother you are,” said the woman. “But fighting back won’t do you any good. These guys might be a little worn out for adventuring—real has-beens—but they still know their stuff.”

“Shut up! Don’t you dare touch Lara or Sieg!”

The woman sighed, then looked at the men. “Don’t rough them up too much. By the looks of it, they come from a good family. You might make some coin.”

The two men muttered their assent, then they moved. Feeling a sickening clenching sensation in his gut, Arus concentrated as much mana as he could into his fist. He spun around, ready to deliver a hit that would blind them—

Clap, clap, clap.

Suddenly, the sound of someone putting their hands together broke the silence. It came from behind the two men. Everyone froze. In the same moment, a white shape leaped over the two men to bound over to Arus. It did a loop around the three of them, giving Lara a particularly long sniff to make sure she wasn't hurt, then turned back to face the men, fangs bared.

"Grrrrr..."

"Leo!" cried Arus, grateful to see the dog. The clapping had to have been someone else, though. Leo didn't have hands.



“Okay, boys, fun’s over!” came a voice—one Arus knew very well. There wasn’t a day in his life that he hadn’t heard it at least once, sometime between when he woke in the morning and went to sleep at night.

A woman with dark brown hair and one cute, pointed canine stepped out of the shadows. Her large bust protruded out from beneath her maid uniform, and she held a roughly constructed lantern.

“Big Sister Aisha!” Arus called out. She wasn’t actually his big sister, but she got mad if he called her his aunt.

“Hey there, Arus. I’m the rescue party.” She flashed him a grin that made Arus want to cry. But Arus and his siblings weren’t the only ones who looked relieved; the men, seeing that it was only a maid and a big dog who’d stepped out of the darkness, looked as cocky as ever.

“Whose maid are you, huh?” one snarled.

“I work for the Greyrat family,” Aisha replied. “Oh, given where we are, perhaps I should say the Latria family. Like Captain Carlisle Latria of the Temple Knights. Those Latrias. You know them, right?”

When Aisha mentioned the Temple Knights, the men flinched. Names of nobles didn’t mean much to them, but they knew the Temple Knights: the Millis Church’s private army, renowned for their religious fanaticism.

“I’d recommend you give up on kidnapping and ransoming these particular kids. It will *not* end well for you.”

“W-we wouldn’t be kidnappers if the Temple Knights scared us.”

Oh, but they *were* scared. There were rumors about the tortures the Temple Knights subjected heretics to. They bound them hand and foot, then, starting at their toes, used a hammer to slowly pulverize them. It would have been more understandable if they were mere sadists, but the knights believed wholeheartedly that their actions were righteous.

In response to the screams of their captives as their legs were smashed to a pulp, the knights smiled and said, “Your sincere cries for intercession will surely be heard by God. That means He will welcome you to His side. Be glad!”

It was all bunk, of course, but these men believed it.

“You’re not scared of the Temple Knights?” Aisha asked. “In that case, what about the Ruquag Mercenary Band? Their super-hot accounting adviser will make sure they never stop chasing you. When they get you, you’ll *wish* you were dead.”

“W-what’s the Ruquag Mercenary Band got to do with anything?” one of them managed.

“Their biggest boss is the father of these children!”

The two men looked at Arus and the others, gaping.

“That’s right, my big bro—ahem, that is to say, Rudeus Greyrat, chairman of the Ruquag Mercenary Band, right hand to Dragon God Orsted, and a magician of prodigious skill who has friends all over the world. Usually, he’s a mild-mannered sort of guy. You could pour your drink out over his head at a party and he’d laugh. But his family is *very* important to him, and kidnappers of his own helpless children? I can’t imagine what he’d do to you.”

“Y-you’re making that up.”

“Are you sure? You know, I’m getting a little bored of talking sense into you.”

“Hah,” one man scoffed. “None of that will matter if you’re dead.”

“Oh, really? Okay, Leo, fetch.”

Just like that, the great white beast descended upon them like a tornado. First, he bit down on the leg of the man facing him and shook him hard. The bones snapped with a loud *crack*, and then Leo released him, sending him flying into the wall. The other man turned around to see what the noise was, but by then it was too late. He didn’t even have time to get his sword out before the dog’s teeth sank into his hand with a *crunch*. Next thing he knew, Leo had dragged him to the ground. With his jaws, he picked the man up by the head, shook him until he was unconscious, then tossed him against the wall for good measure.

“Eep!” The woman from the guild was left with nowhere to run. She tried to climb the wall at the end of the alley, but Leo took her rear end in his jaws and,

same as the other two, gave her a shake before throwing her into the wall and knocking her out.

Arus watched the whole thing in a daze. He'd known Leo was pretty strong and had understood, more or less, why his dada and mamas told him to stick with the dog. This was the first time he'd actually *seen* it. Moreover, he could tell Leo was *holding back*. With that much power, the dog could have bitten their heads off. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd picked them up like he was play-fighting—people Arus had been terrified of—broken their bones, swung them around, and thrown them against a hard surface to knock them out.

"You're all okay, right? No one's hurt?" Aisha said, crouching down beside the three children without so much as a glance at the unconscious figures. She held up her lantern and began to give them a thorough looking over.

"N-no," stammered Arus. "We're fine."

"Yeah? Let's go home."

Still muddled, Arus nodded. Aisha gave him a smile that flashed her pointed tooth.

The roads were dark. Arus, Lara, and Sieg climbed on Leo's back, then, guided by the light of Aisha's lantern, they set off. The three kidnappers had been taken by the Ruquag mercenaries, who had appeared out of nowhere in response to Aisha's dog whistle. They would be handed over to the authorities. As they walked, Arus thought about how much trouble he was in.

Why did you run off on your own? Why did you drag Lara and Sieg into it?

This could have ended so badly.

Aisha almost never got angry, no matter how naughty he was, even when he made trouble for other people. She just said, "Oh, well," then sorted out whatever mess he'd made. Later, she'd scold him gently, saying, "You can't do that anymore" or "Learn from your mistake, okay?"

Even though she always looked after him like that, he'd disregarded her. While Aisha had been the one to come looking for them, he was sure his

parents were angry with her too. She'd let him out of her sight when it was her job to keep an eye on him until his dad and the others came back. After getting in trouble because her charges slipped away from her, even laid-back Aisha must have been really mad.

Since he was a scared child, Arus's actual thoughts weren't that coherent, but he managed to guess that Aisha must be angry.

So, he apologized. "Big Sister Aisha, I'm sorry."

"Hm? What for?"

"I snuck out without telling you, then I put everyone in danger..."

"Hmm? I don't know what you're talking about." To his surprise, Aisha grinned and ruffled his hair. Her body language gave no sign of anger. Arus wondered if she'd forgiven him. But...why?

"Look, we're back."

Arus realized with a start that they'd arrived at the gates of the Latria estate. Looking up at the mansion house, Arus gulped. Aisha might have forgiven him, but his mamas would definitely be mad. They'd taught him to protect his brothers and sisters, and he'd let them down. He was bracing for a spanking from Red Mama. His dad might be angry too, though he couldn't really imagine what that would look like.

"Evening," Aisha said to the gatekeeper. They followed her through the servant's door into the house, then down a wide corridor. Aisha opened the door to the room where the family was staying. There they were. His three mamas and two grandmothers, his blonde aunt, and his great-grandmother, whose expression was stony. His dad was there, too.

"I'm back," Aisha said, bowing. At this, the adults all looked over at Arus and the others.

Any second, Red Mama's eyebrows would point down, showing she was angry. She'd definitely be the first. Red Mama was always the first to get angry.

Somehow, when she spoke, her voice was breezy. "Oh, you're back. You're a bit late, huh?"

“Did you have a good time at the Adventurers’ Guild?” Blue Mama asked mildly.

“You really mustn’t go wandering around at this hour. Even with Aisha and Leo, it’s dangerous at night.”

“Quite so. Aisha, just because you’re there doesn’t make it all right to linger out so late. Couldn’t you have brought them home earlier?”

White Mama and Lilia were a little sharper, but even they weren’t angry. Norn and Claire didn’t say anything, though their eyes showed that they agreed.

“Oh, well, it is a bit late, but we can let it slide, can’t we? We haven’t even had dinner yet. Did you see anything interesting?” As usual, Dada was soft.

Grandma Zenith was silent like she always was, but Arus didn’t get the sense she was reproaching him. He could tell when she was mad even though she didn’t talk.

“Um...” Arus, unable to work out what was going on, struggled to think of how to reply. There was a brief silence.

“There was a dragon head on the wall of the clan room at the Adventurers’ Guild,” Lara said suddenly. The look on her face made Arus think that she’d caught onto something he hadn’t. Leo had probably told her without him noticing.

“Oh, Dada, um, so at the Adventurers’ Guild!” Sieg piped up, his face brightening. “Um, they had a magic sword!” He began chattering away about the guild. Their earlier trouble must have already gone clean out of his mind.

“All right, hold on, you can tell us all about it later. For now, let’s call Lucie and the others and have something to eat.”

The atmosphere in the room lightened. It was time for dinner.

When dinner was over, Arus left the spacious dining hall, then headed back to the room he’d been given. He looked back at Aisha, who had followed him like everything was fine.

When they were alone, the first word that came out of his mouth was “Why?”

Why wasn't anyone angry? Why did they all know he'd been to the Adventurers' Guild? The one word carried many different questions.

Aisha's mouth curved into a small smile. "You want to know?" she said.

"Yeah."

Aisha looked like she'd successfully pulled off a prank, but Arus was deadly serious.

"I saw you and the others sneak out of the cathedral garden," she explained. "I figured you'd succumbed to boredom and were determined to get into mischief, so I told the others I was going to take a quick look at the Adventurers' Guild and followed you."

With that, everything fell into place for Arus. Aisha had seen through his plan. Instead of joining them, she'd let him and his siblings do what they liked. She'd been behind them, thinking that if anything happened, she'd show herself and sort it out.

"I didn't expect you to go all the way to the magic tower, though," she added.

Aisha had watched over them the whole time. Even when he was lost and about to cry, instead of stepping in, she'd stayed hidden.

"Then why didn't you help us when you knew we were lost?"

"Hmmm? I think you know the answer to that, don't you, Arus?" Aisha replied teasingly, making him grit his teeth.

He *did* know the answer. She hadn't helped because he'd been responsible for their predicament. Just like his mamas had taught him, when you got yourself into trouble, it was up to you to find a way out again. In fact, Arus hadn't given up when he realized he was lost. He hadn't given up even though it was scary.

Realizing it still wasn't time for her to interfere, Aisha had watched. She'd only shown herself to come to their rescue when it looked like they might get hurt. If the woman from the guild hadn't been part of a kidnapping plot and had actually shown them the way out of the goodness of her heart, Aisha might not have shown herself at all. He couldn't resent her methods, because it was *his*

fault.

Aisha had sorted out his mess, just like she always did.

“Big Sister Aisha, I’m...I’m sorry...” he said.

“Just ‘sorry’ isn’t enough. What are you sorry for?”

“For sneaking out without telling you—”

“Nope, that’s not it.”

Arus turned around, taken aback. It wasn’t like Aisha to teach him things. When he made a mistake, she shrugged and helped, but she never talked it out like this.

When he turned around, Aisha was looking down at him with her usual easy smile. “Arus, you were annoyed with me and wanted to go off with just your siblings, right?”

“I...I don’t think you’re annoying...well, maybe a little, but...but I like you, Big Sister.”

“Oh?” Aisha chuckled. “Well, thanks. Arus likes me? I think I’m blushing.” She put her hands to her cheeks and made a show of squirming in embarrassment. “Anyway. You thought you’d sneak out while I wasn’t looking to go see the Adventurers’ Guild and the magic tower, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you had to do it.”

“Huh? But I made everyone worry...”

“Making everyone worry is no good, is it?”

“Yeah.”

“But, Arus, that’s the thing—you weren’t trying to make them worry, were you? You’re not a kid who’d do something mean like that.”

Arus nodded. He hadn’t thought it through, but he hadn’t meant to worry anyone.

“You were going to see the Adventurers’ Guild and the tower, then come

back. Then, if I asked where you'd been, you, Lara, and Sieg would all look at each other innocently and say, 'it's a secret,' then laugh. That was the plan, right?"

That was exactly what they'd have done. Arus hadn't thought it out in so much detail, but hearing it from Aisha, he realized that was his ideal ending. Slip out for a bit, have some fun, then come back before anyone had time to worry. Maybe Aisha would have worried a bit when she couldn't find them, but when they got back quickly, she'd breathe a sigh of relief and go, "Good grief, you were right there the whole time!"

"The thing you did wrong," Aisha said plainly, "was not getting away with it."

Arus had set a goal: he wanted to go to the Adventurers' Guild without any hangers-on like Aisha or Leo. Leaving aside the question of why he'd then brought Lara and Sieg along, that goal had been born the moment he'd felt that desire. Aisha was saying that if he had a goal, he better follow through.

"That's all very well," he said, "but how would you have done it?"

"Hmmm," Aisha mused. "I've gotta say, getting to the Adventurers' Guild and the tower in such a short timeframe would've been tricky, even for me. They're just too far apart. I'd have done the guild today, then the tower another time. Actually, you didn't realize you had so little time, did you? So I'd have asked what the schedule was yesterday, then come up with a proper strategy based on that."

"Oh, good point."

"I'd probably also take a weapon and something I could contact people with. Some things you just can't deal with on your own, so you want to be able to quickly call for help."

Hearing her ideas laid out, Arus understood what he'd done wrong. Thinking back with a clear head, he really was too careless and impulsive, and he hadn't thought things through enough. No wonder he got into a mess.

Aisha was kind of amazing.

"I understand," he said. "Next time I'll be more careful and try not to mess up."

“Good, good. That’s the spirit! Don’t get so careful that you’re afraid of messing up, or you’ll end up not able to do anything. Keep making mistakes!”

“Huh? But...but what if it ends up like today again...?”

“No problem!” Aisha said, putting her hand to her heart. “When you mess up, I’ll be right there!”

Arus felt bashful for a reason he couldn’t quite work out, but he smiled at Aisha. “Okay, got it, Big Sister! Thank you!”

“You’re very welcome! Aren’t you just so *cute*?”

Aisha, having heard what she wanted from him, scooped him up in her arms. He nestled into her soft breasts as she ruffled his hair and seriously reflected on the events of that day.

Chapter 3:

Roxy's Duty

I WAS SITTING IN A CHAIR in the garden reading a book. From the corner of my eye I could see Eris and Sieg practicing their sword swings together, even though we'd come here for a holiday. Arus had been with them for a while, but then Rudy's aunt, Therese, had asked him to go somewhere, and off he went. Perhaps he was in her room right now and she was giving him sweets or something. That boy... Put a woman with large breasts in front of him and he was smitten. Women would be trouble for him down the line.

Lara, meanwhile, was loafing around with Leo in the garden. I suspected she was scheming something again. Lately, everything that girl did had me tearing my hair out!

If Arus, Sieg, and Lara all stayed home and behaved themselves, it ought to be an uneventful day. Sylphie and Norn had taken Lucie and Clive to visit the Adventurers' Guild. They invited me to join them, but I declined. I didn't want young adventurers to come up to me in front of the children saying, "Think you'll lure some new party members with your assets, huh?"

Anyway, here in Millishion, a demon out and about was bound to get strange looks. Also, I'd wanted to spend some time with Lily and Chris. Now that they were down for their naps, I found myself with nothing to do, leaving me able to relax for the first time in a long time. I was going to enjoy my book by myself.

Fortunately, I'd found a rather intriguing book in the Latria's family library. It was called *The Origins of Divine Magic*. Its description of necromancy was particularly interesting.

In the Great Human-Demon War, the demons terrorized the people of Millis with the genus of magic known as necromancy: the forbidden art that raises the dead and turns them into servants. Even now, its traces remain in monsters, such as skeletons, wraiths, and moving armor. Divine magic was created to

defeat necromancy. In the middle period of the first Great Human-Demon War, the relationship between humans with their divine magic and demons with their necromancy developed into a kind of arms race. Following the end of the war, necromancy was forbidden, and the art was lost. Divine magic has declined from its height but is still in use to the present day.

The book did not go into detail about magic circles or incantations, and I wasn't planning on experimenting with necromancy, but it did tickle my curiosity as I read. It was epic, this battle of magic from ages past.

"Miss Roxy?" Someone behind me called my name.

"Yes?" I looked up from my book and saw one of the Latrias' maids standing there.

"Her ladyship...that is, Lady Claire would like to see you."

Claire Latria. Technically, she was my grandmother-in-law and so above me in rank, despite us being more or less the same age. She hadn't given me a single unpleasant look so far, but she was a demon expulsionist, so I doubted she was happy to see me. What would she say? In all honesty, I wanted to worm out of it.

As I thought this, I glanced over at Eris.

"Come on, tighten up your form! Pull your chin in!" She was as fired up today about teaching sword fighting as ever. If Claire had something to say about my being a demon, fine, but what if it were something else? What if, for example, she had opinions about how we raised the children? Then she might have words for Eris. Eris had trouble talking about complicated subjects, and she couldn't bite her tongue. If Claire said something nasty to her, she'd respond with her fists. That was just the kind of woman she was.

I could rebut whatever Claire said, but it could easily devolve into an argument.

"Very well," I told the maid. This, I supposed, was another of my duties as Rudy's wife.

Despite my attempt to steel myself for the challenge, I found myself sitting in Claire's room as she quietly sipped her tea, unable to so much as open my mouth in front of her. I just sat there. For some reason, Lilia and Zenith were there too; Lilia was in a similar frozen state to me, and Zenith was as quiet as she ever was.

Honestly, it was agonizing. I couldn't even reach out for the sweets next to the tea. Sweets were my favorite, but I felt like Claire would scold me. "You'll spoil your dinner" or something. Actually, that was something I often said to Lara.

It couldn't be a coincidence that she'd summoned both Lilia and me. We had different husbands, but we both might be perceived (with some truth) as concubines. The Millis faith did not accept concubines. Whatever! I was ready. I'd been a little precious with myself lately, but I was prepared for whatever harsh words people might throw at me.

I glanced at Lilia as I thought this, our eyes meeting. It appeared she felt the same way that I did. Indeed, perhaps she'd anticipated this far longer than I had. The silver lining to all this was that Claire had not summoned Eris. I didn't think she could have handled this with the necessary grace.

"Rudeus has gone out, I believe," Claire said suddenly. It was the first thing anyone had said since I'd entered the room.

"He went to deliver a gift to Cliff."

"Work, then. He's supposed to be on holiday with his family. He's exactly like Carlisle in that regard."

Early that morning, Rudy had gone with Elinalise to deliver "the doll" to Cliff. I wasn't sure if that was precisely *work*. The doll in question was an automaton he'd built to take care of Cliff. I'd heard about Anne and didn't have any opinion one way or the other about her, but I had to say, this new one was a *little* creepy. Apart from its short, human-like ears, it looked exactly like Elinalise, right down to its body language and tone of voice.

Apparently, that had been Elinalise's idea. Cliff had risen in the world lately,

and his popularity with the ladies had risen too. He'd been inundated with people encouraging him to get married. She was leaving him with the doll, in part, as a deterrent against such pests. The scheme was meant to send the message that *this* was the sort of person Cliff was going to marry, while keeping the fact that she was an elf under wraps. Elinalise had spent months teaching the doll her speech patterns and body language. That being said, Elinalise probably had a less *political* use in mind for the doll.

Either way, she still seemed dissatisfied with it, saying it lacked a key something. It didn't look exactly like her when you looked closely, but at a glance it was so similar it was eerie.

Rudy had once made a figurine of me too, but I hadn't given permission for him to animate it. If he ever asked, I intended to decline. Even Rudy wouldn't do such a thing without permission. He didn't need a doll of me; he could have the real thing whenever he pleased. I wasn't Sylphie, but I wouldn't say no to an occasional request from Rudy—though I preferred that he didn't ask me to do anything *too* perverted.

I wasn't terribly close with Cliff, but I did wonder how happy the devout followers of Millis would be about such a thing. Rudeus said it was a surprise. I thought he might end up with Cliff angry at him instead, but it wasn't my place to comment.

"I wouldn't call it work," I said to Claire. "Cliff is a particularly close friend of his."

"I see. If it were me, I would have one of the servants deliver it rather than going to the trouble myself, unless of course I did not wish others to see it. I suppose that is a difference of custom."

Oh no, she was right. He did *not* want other people to see it. Besides, Cliff probably wouldn't accept the doll unless it was accompanied by Rudy and Elinalise's explanation.

"By the way, Lilia, what is Aisha doing today?" she asked.

"Aisha went out this morning to visit the mercenary band. She said she'll be back in the afternoon."

Aisha had made the decision to spend the day with the mercenaries suddenly, only after she'd heard that Arus would be at the house all day. Did she not want to be in the house? Now that I thought about it, Norn had also abruptly decided to join Sylphie, Lucie, and the others when she heard they were going out. Of course, Lucie had also begged Norn to go with them.

"I imagine those girls aren't fond of this house," Claire said with a sigh. She took a sip of her tea but frowned, as though the taste offended her. Her brow still furrowed, she turned to Lilia. "Lilia, when you were here last, I was quite harsh with you."

"No..." Lilia replied hesitantly. "Not at all, Ma'am."

"I wish to apologize. A man from who-knows-where claiming to be Zenith's husband arrived on my doorstep asking for help, then, just when Zenith was found, a woman appeared claiming to be his other wife with a daughter in tow. It did not put me in good humor."

"I understand, madam. It doesn't bother me."

"Aisha still bears ill feelings," Claire said.

The air almost seemed to crackle. I was getting a stomachache.

"Contrary to my fears, you have served the Greyrat family well. When Zenith became afflicted like this, you could have claimed greater influence, but you stayed in the background and cared for her."

"You give me too much credit. I had no such power."

"You may think so, but what Zenith said yesterday through the Blessed Child made it clear that the Greyrat family is grateful to you."

Lilia was silent.

She had a point. Rudy might not have been aware of it, but he did try to treat Lilia the same as Zenith. Zenith was her equal, but Zenith's condition meant she couldn't properly speak for herself. If Lilia had been so inclined, she could have doffed her maid uniform for the position of his mother and lady of the house. If she had, our family harmony would be strained, and Zenith would be treated differently too. But Lilia hadn't abused her charms; she had kept to the

background, and that was why the Greyrat family was what it was today. Claire was absolutely right.

“The same is true for you, Roxy.”

“Huh?” I looked up, surprised to suddenly hear my name, but Claire wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes moved from her own hands to Zenith. She then proceeded to look out the window.

“For the past few days, I have been watching the children. They are all happy and healthy. Lara takes her pranks a little far, but she isn’t too abnormal.”

“Did, erm, Lara do something?”

“Yesterday, she was kind enough to gift me a frog.”

I felt a wave of dizziness. What in the world was wrong with that girl? “I-I’m terribly sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s no need to apologize. By way of thanks, I had the frog grilled and fed it to her for her afternoon snack.”

The dizziness returned. Now that she mentioned it, Lara *had* been eating something on a stick yesterday. When I asked her what it was, she only said, “It’s a secret.”

“Naturally, my cooks prepared it properly,” Claire continued. “I am not partial to frog myself, but people do eat it in these parts.”

The Millis Continent, which was very rainy, had a lot of cuisine made from frogs and lizards. I myself had been sustained by such food when I was an adventurer. Back before I knew how to use antidote magic, I’d also almost died after eating a poisonous specimen. I was certain the cooks had inspected their ingredients, so they wouldn’t have fed anything dangerous to Lara.

I was surprised. From what Rudy had told me, I had imagined Claire as extremely strict—hardly the sort of person who would do what she’d described.

“This morning, she told me that she loved her snack and would be sure to thank me. I can only imagine what form her thanks will take,” Claire said.

Was she blaming me? Her tone was as acerbic as ever and there wasn’t a hint of a smile on her face, so she probably was. Then, she let out a little sigh. Was

she finally going to tell us why we were here?

“I don’t know why you are so tense, but just so you know, Rudeus has told me very firmly that I am not to interfere in your family affairs. There are things I would like to say, but I will keep my promise.”

It came out like a sharp rebuke, but—if she said so.

“The reason I called the two of you here today,” Claire went on, “is because, compared to the others, you are the most adult. Sylphiette is still young and Eris immature. I can’t say what Zenith was like before this happened to her, but in her current condition, she isn’t capable of looking after anyone. It seems to me that the two of you are able to take a step back and see the larger picture. And so...khh, ahem...”

She broke off coughing, and the maids rushed to her side. I jumped up and went toward her, ready to cast an antidote spell. Claire waved the maids away as though nothing had happened, then drank the rest of her tea.

“I’m quite all right, I only choked a little. Oh—what’s this?” Claire looked up at Zenith. Until a moment ago, Zenith had been staring into space, acting as though she were in another world. But when Claire had coughed, she’d gotten up without Lilia’s help and was now gazing at her with her vacant eyes.

“Perhaps you ought to rest.” It was Lilia who spoke, but it almost sounded like the words were Zenith’s.

“For goodness’s sake, so much fuss over a little cough, and the looks of shock I get from everyone when they see my cane... I might have a bad back, but my lungs are quite all right. Zenith, stop looking at me like that and sit down.”

When Claire said “stop looking at me like that” I glanced at Zenith again, but her face was as blank as ever. I looked quizzically at Claire, who also seemed surprised. I returned to my chair, and Lilia took Zenith’s hand and helped her down again too.

For a while, we sat in silence. The shock gradually faded from Claire’s face, but it seemed her feelings wouldn’t settle so quickly.

“It was her first time out in society,” she said abruptly. “At the first noble party Zenith attended, I tripped and fell on the stairs on the way home.” She

sounded almost fond. I realized she had lowered her eyes, and that another note had entered her voice, like a hidden sob.

“I was not seriously injured, and healing magic fixed me up right away. But it’s strange. Just now, I felt as though Zenith was looking at me the same way that she did that day.”

There was a pitter-patter of something falling from Claire’s downturned face. She picked up a nearby handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

“Zenith was much admired. I was proud to call her my daughter. I didn’t...I thought I had brought her up...well...” Claire’s shoulders shook.

Unsure what to say to her, all I could do was watch. A thought hit me. Had I ever given real thought to my children’s futures? I’d married Rudy, given birth to Lara and Lily, then left them in the care of the family while I went off to teach at the magic university. Sylphie and Lilia looked after the children at home, and I looked after the children at school. This was fulfilling to me, so I’d never questioned how we raised the children.

It did worry me a little that Lara, my own daughter, was less diligent and more prone to mischief than Lucie. I’d wondered if it was because I was a demon or because she was half-human. While I worried, the years passed, and Lara got older. She fit in with the other children and was close with Arus and Sieg. I was sure she’d settle down once she grew up a little more. That’s the extent I had thought about it. Well, mostly.

What I hadn’t really thought about was what came next. Supposedly, Lara was a savior, which sounded like a heavy responsibility. I couldn’t know exactly what it would entail. Presumably, she would take part in the battle against the Man-God. And what about after that? Even after battle, life went on.

In truth, I was well aware that worrying about the future wouldn’t do any good.

“I beg your pardon,” said Claire. “I let my emotions get the better of me.”

“Not at all,” I said.

“One is so easily moved to tears at my age.”

Claire's eyes were red as she laid the handkerchief back down on the table. She'd cried yesterday at the cathedral too, when the Blessed Child relayed Zenith's words.

"Ahem." She cleared her throat. "Here in the Holy Country of Millis, it is said that twisted families raise twisted children. I share that view." She fixed us with a piercing look. "The Greyrat children seem healthy and not at all twisted. Zenith certainly wasn't twisted either. Nevertheless, I entreat you to take care. In the event that something goes awry, it will be you two, observing from the proper distance you've maintained, who notice first."

Something going awry—like when Zenith ran away from home. The possibility was there, of course. With Lara in particular, I had no idea what she was on her mind. Then again, it might not be Lara. The children who seemed the most well-adjusted might be the ones at risk. Lucie, for example, was a model student at school, but would I really notice if something was about to go wrong?

Ugh. The weight of the expectations on me made my stomach clench.

"That was the message I intended to relay to you," Claire finished, then sank back in her chair.

Lilia and I glanced at one another. In contrast to my confusion, Lilia turned to Claire with an air of determination.

"Understood, madam," she said. "I will see that I do." She sounded like a soldier who'd been given a crucial mission. It must have been her confidence from raising Norn and Aisha talking—Rudy too, come to think of it.

"I will also," I added. "As best I can." I wasn't as confident. After all, as a teacher, I'd come to watch over many different people, but I still wasn't convinced I was any good at teaching. Regardless, even if it were just offering an alternative for the children who needed a different education than Sylphie and Eris could offer, I was sure I could manage that. I *had* to.

Something else heartened me. Despite misgivings I was sure Claire had, she treated me as an equal. A demon expulsionist couldn't help but have a distaste for demons, and I was what I was. Claire was compromising for me, and I felt I should live up to her expectations.

“Hm?” Just then, the door opened, and a white dog shuffled into the room. Naturally, Lara was on his back. For some reason she was covered in mud: her shoes, clothes, *everything*. How many times had I told her to wipe the mud off her shoes before coming inside?!

“Lara, you aren’t to ride Leo inside the house,” I said, just to say something.

Lara made a face, but she got off Leo. Even at school, she was climbing on him the moment my back was turned. It was exasperating.

After getting down, Lara slowly went up to Claire.

“Great-Grandma, I found something cool,” Lara said.

“What might that be?” Claire asked.

“This.”

Lara took something round and gold from her pocket. From where I was seated, I couldn’t see it properly, but it looked like a pendant or something similar. When Claire saw it, her eyes went wide.

“Where did you find that?” she asked.

“On the ground in the garden. You were looking for it, right, Great-Grandma?”

“Why yes, I’ve been looking for a very long time...but how?”

“Yesterday, Grandma said that you always wore it, so you must have dropped it somewhere, then hurt your back looking for it.” As she said this, Lara looked at Zenith. That hadn’t come up in what the Blessed Child’s powers had revealed of Zenith’s thoughts...which meant Lara must have heard it herself.



“You went looking for it?” Claire asked.

“I wanted to thank you for my snack yesterday.”

Claire was silent.

“It was tasty, but I’d rather have those for my snack,” Lara added, looking at the table where the sweets that came with the tea were resting.

“You are welcome to them,” Claire said.

“Thank you!” Lara grabbed a biscuit and popped it into her mouth. Another followed, then another, and in the blink of an eye, she had gobbled up everything on the table. I was about to tell her to at least wash her hands first when I realized she’d eaten *mine*.

“Hey.” I grumbled to myself, even though it wasn’t really a big deal. I only had to ask Rudy, and I could have as many sweets as I liked. I wasn’t about to get angry at my child for taking my food. But, you know, my *treats*...

“Mmm!” Lara, her cheeks full to bursting, chewed contentedly before giving a big gulp.

Leo gave her an incredulous look that said, “What about mine?” I probably had a similar expression.

“Way better than frog!” Lara declared.

“Then you shall have them again tomorrow,” said Claire.

“Sick.” With that, she jumped on Leo’s back and the two of them left the room. I was so stunned that I watched her go without telling her off for riding on Leo inside.

“I, uh, I’m sorry,” I said, flustered. “She doesn’t know her manners.”

Lucky for me, Claire was transfixed by the item Lara had brought her. Leaning forward, I saw it was a golden locket with a portrait of a young man inside it.

“Carlisle gave me this right before we were married,” Claire said. When I was silent, she went on in a nostalgic tone. “Such an expensive gift was far beyond his means at the time, but he scraped together the money and bought it for me. He said, ‘Once we’re married, I’ll be a Latria, and I’ll never be able to buy you a

present with my own money again.’ I lost it around a year ago, and I’ve been crouching down searching for it ever since. It’s how I hurt my back. I’d given up on finding it...”

Even the maids seemed surprised by this. Had she not even told the servants that she’d lost it?

“Roxy,” said Claire.

“Yes?”

“Manners are no more than showing consideration for others—there’s no need to rest on formality, is there?”

“Well, I suppose not.”

“Lara is a good girl with excellent manners. I was mistaken.”

Mm, I was pretty sure Lara was *not* that sort of girl, but who was I to disagree? I’d misunderstood Claire. After seeing Rudy’s frowns and Aisha’s open dislike, I’d put my guard up, but she wasn’t at all what I’d expected. Meeting Rudy might have changed her too. It was hard not to be changed by him.

In any case, I felt like this lady and I could get along. Even if she might not live very much longer. Once this visit was over, I might never see her again.

“Keep her on the straight path,” said Claire.

“Yes, madam,” I agreed.

Chapter 4:

Onward to the Holy Sword Highway

TIME FLEW BY, and before I knew it, our ten days were up. On the first day, I went to pay my respects at the cathedral. There, Zenith had met with the Blessed Child, who used her powers to tell us what Zenith was saying. Claire came with us and started crying her eyes out halfway through the meeting. I'd felt a bit tearful myself, but given that Zenith sounded as happy as ever, I controlled myself.

The kids, who looked bored, waited outside, but then I got distracted chatting with the pope and the Blessed Child. It ended up taking longer than I expected. A lesser man might blame the Blessed Child, who'd recounted her training and dietary regime at length. She smirked proudly while telling us how she'd achieved a slimmer figure.

As I'd expected, the kids did get restless, so Aisha took Arus, Lara, and Sieg to see the Adventurers' Guild Headquarters. Judging from how late they got home and the expression on Arus's face, I had the feeling they'd run into some sort of trouble. Aisha seemed to have handled it, though.

You might think Lucie was annoyed to be left behind, but she wasn't. She and Clive, who'd also stayed behind, went around gawking at the inside of the cathedral. That seemed to have been good enough for her. Maybe she liked gardens, or Clive's company had been absorbing. Judging by the fact that she wouldn't tell me any specifics about the flowers, I assumed it was the latter.

I wanted to quiz her further, but I restrained myself. For now, I could only hope that Clive went on being an honest young man.

The second, third, and fourth days were taken up by calling on people. Rudeus, follower of the Dragon God, was in Millishion; I had to do the rounds. This included the captain of the Missionary Knights and offshoots of the Latria family—that is, my aunts and uncles. That included Therese, of course. Alas, it seemed she still wasn't married.

After that, I had a formal audience with the pope. Then, I was introduced to Millis royalty, specifically the prince who was fifth in line to the throne. Despite the image that came with a title like “prince,” he was in his forties. Really annoyingly, my audience with the king ended up scheduled for several days later. That was when I’d pay my respects on behalf of the Dragon God. Orsted had told me that making connections with Millis royalty could wait, but he said that *just* a meeting wouldn’t be a problem.

You might wonder why I’d gone on vacation only to end up working, but the point of this trip was giving the kids exposure to other cultures. I didn’t mind.

On the fifth day, I went to deliver Cliff’s new doll. It turned out he had some good news to share. His work over the past five years had impressed his superiors, and—although it wasn’t official yet—he was going to be made a bishop. His youth would normally have made that impossible, but there were some political circumstances related to the unusual location of Cliff’s diocese.

He presided over an area on the southern edge of the Great Forest that, back when I’d been traveling, had been a nameless inn town. In the past ten years or so, its population had grown, and the town along with it. The town didn’t belong to any country or race, but as it grew, the question of who had what jurisdiction there came into play. Representatives from the various races gathered in the town to hammer out their various interests.

The representative sent by the Millis Church was an archbishop, a member of the demon exclusionist faction who was known as the cardinal’s right-hand man. He was a human supremacist and looked down not only on demons, but other races like beastfolk. Despite his bigotry, he was shrewd and good at his job—the sort the church would have been confident could win over various interests in the town. However, given his tendencies, there was a chance that he would damage their relations with the races that lived in the Great Forest, and that was something that only the most radical members of the demon exclusionists wanted.

That was why Cliff was chosen. Not only was he well-connected, unprejudiced, and a member of the pope’s faction, he was also on good terms with the Ruquag Mercenaries, whose members included many beastfolk, and he was close with blood relatives of the Doldia Tribe. Therefore, it was decided

to promote him to a higher rank and have him accompany the archbishop to keep an eye on him.

Cliff remarked ruefully that we shouldn't assume people were elevating him based primarily on his merits. That being said, once his work in the town wrapped up, he would be a bishop in both name and reality, which would give him much greater authority. If he could maintain good relations with the peoples of the Great Forest, that would provide a pretext for taking an elf as his wife. If that was the case, he could invite Elinalise and Clive to come and live with him in Millis.

When he got to that point, I thought the doll could double as a celebration present for his promotion, so I did the big reveal.

Cliff totally blew his top. Told me it'd be a disaster if anyone knew that he was currently smitten with a woman. Still, he didn't refuse to take the doll, so I thought he was pleased with it. He even looked over the fine details of the magic circles that animated it with interest. Anyway, as Sylphie had pointed out, if worse came to worst we could put the doll in sunglasses and men's clothing. It had combat skills, so I hoped he'd make good use of it for his personal defense during his bishop's duties. The way things sounded, the archbishop might very well try to have him assassinated.

When I got back home that day, Claire was in a good mood. Apparently, Lara had found a locket she'd lost around a year earlier. Sweet story, right? It made me feel proud as a parent to hear what my daughter had done...even if it was probably Leo who'd found the locket. Roxy also seemed extra motivated about parenting. She was saying that with all the kids starting school, it was up to her to keep an extra close eye on them. Roxy was cute when she was energetic, but she was also the type to make mistakes from getting overzealous, so it made me nervous.

Sylphie and Norn had taken Lucie and Clive to the Adventurers' Guild. Lucie beamed as she recounted the spectacular meal they'd had for lunch, though she didn't seem all that interested in the guild itself.

From the sixth to the eighth day, I didn't make any particular plans. We went shopping, showed the kids the sights, and used a carriage to venture out of the

city to see the nearby farms and play in the streams. We just went with whatever everyone felt like on the day.

On the ninth day, I had my audience with the king. The king of Millis was an old man with a kind face. Here, the church held a lot of power, while the monarch was comparatively weak. As I was on good terms with the church, the audience only extended to the expected formalities. I'd wanted to show the kids the inside of the castle but ended up deciding against it. You couldn't have everything.

It was safe to say we made the most of our time in Millishion.

On the tenth day, we departed. The plan was to take carriages north along the Holy Sword Highway to some hot springs.

As we were about to leave, Claire just kept *nagging* me. "You don't get monsters at the border of the Great Forest, but one hears that the inn towns are full of rough types. It may be no difficulty for you, but you must be sure to be careful with the children."

After I'd told her not to interfere when we last met, she'd kept fairly quiet. By the tenth day, she was doing a lot more lecturing. That being said, it wasn't that troublesome. It felt like she'd worked out how not to overstep.

When it was time for us to part, however, she turned once more to Norn.

"You and I didn't have much opportunity to talk during this visit," she said. "Would it be all right if I said one thing?"

Norn, with an expression that said, *Here we go*, said aloud, "Very well."

For the past ten days, she'd been avoiding Claire. So much for Ruijerd's instructions to her to cherish her family. I couldn't blame her. If she got into a conversation with Claire, Claire might insult Ruijerd, and then Norn would have no choice but to talk back. Given how stubborn Claire was, there was every possibility she'd refuse to retract what she'd said, and the whole thing would escalate into a massive fight.

"You are no longer a Latria or a Greyrat," said Claire.

"Yes." There was a hard look in Norn's eyes. No doubt she thought she was

about to get hauled over the coals for marrying a demon. Claire's tone was certainly biting enough. Even I felt sure she was going to say something awful.

"You have married into the Superdia family, and you are now a mother. Bear yourself accordingly, with dignity, and fully devote yourself to your husband and your family."

"What?" Unexpectedly, what Claire had to say was perfectly reasonable. Admittedly, the way she said it made it come out a bit like an order. She went on, "I know little of demon customs, but I imagine that a demon's wife must bear the responsibilities of bearing children and watching over the family, just as ours are."

Norn was silent.

"Do you understand?" Claire asked.

"Y-yes!" Norn gaped like she'd had the wind knocked out of her sails, but she eventually answered Claire with a solemn nod.

Claire nodded back, satisfied, like another weight had lifted from her shoulders. I felt like Claire had changed a little over the past ten days. I'd also gotten the sense that Roxy and Lilia had relaxed a lot in the final few days—maybe in response to the change in Claire. Something had definitely passed between them while I was out of the house. Roxy and Claire in particular seemed a lot closer than they had been when we arrived.

I was just glad that Claire wasn't discriminating against demons anymore. After all, discrimination wasn't a problem you could solve simply by talking someone out of it. Thankfully, a little of the ill feeling between her and Norn seemed to have been resolved—even if things with Aisha were as bad as ever.

We next traveled half a day north from Millishion to arrive at the foothills of the Blue Wyrms Mountains, where we stopped the carriages and let the children out. With a moment to rest, we turned and looked back at where we'd come from.

Green fields extended as far as the eye could see. A blue river flowed through them and into the city of Millishion, where we had spent the last ten days. I

could see the king's White Palace, the gleaming gold of the cathedral, and the sparkling silver of the Adventurers' Guild. Nearly twenty years had passed since I'd looked out on that view with Eris and Ruijerd. Though the smaller buildings and the people who lived there must have changed since then, it looked almost exactly the same.

"Not bad, huh?" I said. Sweeping landscapes like this weren't uncommon in this world, but it wasn't often that you got to see places you'd just walked through from a distance.

Surely *this* would be a profound experience, I thought as I looked back to see the kids' reactions. They all had their own responses.

"Ahhh!" Lucie let out a gasp of pure amazement, a smile breaking out on her face. She'd been taking her role as big sister seriously lately, but at times like this, she was an innocent little girl again.

And—well, well! It looked like Clive was hesitating over whether to take her hand or not. In the end, he didn't. Instead, when Lucie turned back to him beaming and said, "Isn't it amazing?" he turned red and blurted out, "N-not really." Just like a boy.

Watching him, I couldn't help but smile. I'd been like that too, once...or had I? Actually, probably not.

Cliff had actually come with us. Officially, he'd been told to go and take a look at the church in the inn town before his official visit, but I was pretty sure that was just a pretext. The pope had arranged things so that he could spend some time with Elinalise.

"I want to live here when I'm older," said Lara, her droopy eyes widening for a few seconds. "There's so many sweets."

In the carriage earlier, Roxy had told me that Claire had spoiled her. Topped up with sweet treats every day, she'd spent that portion of the trip in a blissful reverie. I felt like she was a little rounder than before we left. Who wouldn't want to live in a paradise where treats appeared before you without you having to say a word?

"Hey, Dada. You and Red Mama came here before, right?" Arus asked.

“That’s right. I was a little older than you are now.”

“Huh.” He nodded, clenching his fists. He was probably fantasizing about his future as an adventurer.

“Hey, Mama! Mama! That’s the Nikolaus River, right?” Sieg asked. “And that’s the forest with the goblins!”

“That’s right,” Roxy said. “And do you know what *that* is?”

“That’s, um, that’s the Arch of Triumph, right? That’s the gate that Saint Millis returned through after the war! That’s why it’s bigger than the others!”

“Correct. You know a lot, don’t you?”

Sieg bombarded Roxy with question after question, beside himself over the view. After all the heroic epics he’d heard from Alec lately, he was uncannily knowledgeable. To me, he seemed more likely to become an adventurer than Arus.

“Dada, pick me up.” Chris reached up to me.

“I guess this doesn’t mean anything to you yet, huh?” I said.

“Mrmm,” she mumbled.

The view didn’t seem to interest her at all. I picked her up, and she rested her chin on my shoulder. Chris never got any less adorable. I looked over at Lily, who was in Sylphie’s arms, fiddling with a magical implement she’d bought from a street stall a few days ago. She didn’t seem interested either. Were they too young to enjoy scenery? Or was it that Lucie and the others were reacting in a way that was mature beyond their years? If anything, Chris and Lily’s reactions were normal for their age.

Suddenly, Eris appeared beside me. “It takes you back, right? Back then, I never thought things would end up like this.”

She looked out over Millishion like she was seeing into the past. The wind tugged at her red hair, revealing the nape of her neck. She was still young, but there was no hint of childishness left in her profile. She might no longer have been cute, but she was unbelievably beautiful.

“How did you think you’d end up?”

“I...I thought the world was a simpler place, back then.”

Did that mean she didn’t think it was simple now? Eris didn’t use her head much, but that didn’t mean she didn’t *think*. Maybe having children had mellowed her—time really changed people.

Then, she turned to face me head-on, looked me in the eyes, and said, “I love you, Rudeus.”

Ah, jeez, my heart was all aflutter! I’d definitely gone bright red.

“I love you too, Eris,” I replied, trying to stay cool. She moved a little closer to me. It would have been a chance to caress her, but alas, my hands were a bit full. I petted Chris.

She cooed but made a face. “Dada, stop tickling!”

“Whoops! Sorry.”

“No more tickling?”

“No more tickling.”

Eris giggled, then kissed me on the cheek. She kissed the top of Chris’s head, too, then walked off.

“Right, move it!” she called. With that, we got back aboard the carriages.

We traveled along a valley that split the Blue Wurm Mountains. If the Holy Sword Highway cut through the Great Forest, then *this* was the sword’s hilt. Steep cliffs rose up on either side, but there were no falling rocks. The dim valley stretched as if it continued endlessly. At first, the kids were excited. Even Lara had let out a rare “Oooh!” The adventure had begun. Who knew where we might end up next? Would there be monsters? There were supposed to be blue dragons in these parts—perhaps they might see one!

Within a few days, however, their hopes were extinguished. The scenery never changed, and it wasn’t the right season to see blue dragons. Naturally, no other monsters appeared either. There was nothing but the endless valley. After three days, the kids were sick of it.

Lara started unabashedly repeating that she was bored to herself. Every now and then, she'd declare she was going to walk Leo, then get out of the carriage to ride on his back instead. If we'd let her, she might have even tried to scale the cliffs. Arus, Sieg, and Clive didn't say anything, but they couldn't wait for the breaks when we stopped the carriage so that they could do their sword practice with Eris, have mock duels with each other, or practice magic with Roxy. It had to be better than just sitting there getting rocked by the carriage.

"We're trapped!" Chris wailed, tears falling down her face, while Lily managed to disassemble her brand-new magical implement so that it fell to bits. The only one who was quiet was Lucie, lost in a book she'd received at the Latria house. I didn't know how she didn't get motion sickness, reading in a moving carriage like that.

Eventually, the inside of the carriages descended into pandemonium despite we adults doing our best to placate the kids. This route was safe, but seeing as we were on vacation, maybe I ought to have picked a course that had more excitement.

By the time we arrived, the children were so utterly bored and strung out that they were unusually manic. In fact, the moment we left the valley and the town came into view, Arus, Sieg, and Lara tried to leap out of the carriage.

"We're heeeere!"

"Not so fast!" Eris and Sylphie gave chase, grabbing Arus and Sieg by the scruffs of their necks before they could run all the way into town. Leo, with Lara on his back, slipped by them to climb up on a slightly elevated rock, but that was nothing to worry about. There was nothing that dangerous on the Holy Sword Highway.

"Lara!" Eris shouted. "We're all sticking together till we get to the inn!" She, too, was acting like she couldn't sit still, as she was weighed down by days' worth of frustration herself. People's fundamental natures didn't change. She might be more grown-up and mellowed out than she had been, but she was not the sit quietly, do nothing type.

Arus and Sieg reluctantly returned to the carriages. Not Lara. She was gazing at the endless expanse of the Great Forest before her.

“Lara, come back here,” Sylphie called. Lara turned around, but Leo didn’t move. Lara looked from Sylphie to Leo, then got down off Leo and gave him a slap on the back. When he still wouldn’t budge, she frowned slightly.

Sylphie, losing patience, approached them. As she reached out, Lara put up a hand to stop her.

“Not yet,” Lara said.

“You’ll have all the time you like tomorrow. Now hurry up.”

“Leo says it’s his first time seeing his home like this. He wants to stay a bit longer.”

“Oh...”

Sylphie looked back at me helplessly. As much as it’d be nice to let Leo stay and look at his home, we were moving as a group, and with the children on the verge of a meltdown, it’d be better to move quickly. It was a dilemma. Even if Leo was with her, we couldn’t just leave Lara behind.

I got down from the carriage, then headed over to them. “Sylphie, I’ll bring Lara.”

With those words, Sylphie seemed to understand. She nodded and said, “All right. Just catch us up before it gets too late,” then returned to the carriages.

I sat down beside the rock Leo stood on. Then, Lara sat down beside me. Side by side, we looked out at the Great Forest. Although the road was mostly flat and straight, it continued up into the mountains, so we found ourselves observing the forest from above. A single, straight brown line trailed away through the green, making for a pretty magnificent view. The last time I’d come this way, I hadn’t looked back.

“Lara,” I said.

“What?”

“Does Leo miss his home?”

Lara paused, then said, “No, it doesn’t seem like he misses it.”

Didn’t seem like it, huh? “I see.”

Lara didn't say anything else. What *was* Leo feeling, then? I couldn't understand him without being bow-lingual like Lara, but she didn't give very detailed answers. After I tried asking a few more times, she eyed me in a way that screamed "Stop using me like a translation machine."

Fair enough. I decided to change the subject.

"Lara..." I said again.

"What?"

"I was going to wait until you turned ten to tell you, but when you come of age, you'll be carrying out the ritual of the Sacred Tree in the Doldia Village."

"I know. I heard."

"Who from?"

"Leo."

From the mouth of the sacred beast himself! "You know Pursena, right?"

"Big Sister Aisha's dog." That was a terrible thing to say; she wasn't wrong, though.

"You'll go with her," I said. At that, Lara looked at me, puzzled.

"Won't you come with me?"

"I want to, but it's a special ritual for the beastfolk, so they might not allow humans to watch." Or did I have it wrong? Could be that Lara was embarrassed and didn't want her dad to come? It seemed a bit early for her to be entering her rebellious phase.

Just then, Leo turned to look at me. "Woof!"

"Leo says it's fine."

Well, if Leo said it, then it must have been. And the fact that Lara had interpreted for me meant, for the moment at least, I wasn't bothering her. Once she was older, she'd probably start hating me. "Don't wash Dada's under-pants with mine!" That sort of thing. For that matter, Chris might be happy to be daddy's little girl for now, but who knew what would happen when she grew up?

“Dada,” said Lara.

“Hm?”

“It’s fine. You can expect a lot.”

“Right. I will,” I said, nodding despite having no idea what I was supposed to be expecting.

Lara nodded back, looking satisfied, then she stood up. I joined her, looking over my shoulder and wondering if it was time to go, when—

“Whoa!” All of a sudden, something heavy landed on my back. Seeing the small shoes bobbing in front of my eyes, I realized that Lara had jumped up onto my shoulders.

“Give me a ride,” she said.

“Am I standing in for Leo?”

“I want my dad right now.”

Did she? I was only too happy to oblige. I, Rudeus, couldn’t say no to my daughters.

“Aroooooo!”

As I stood up, Leo let out a howl that echoed far out over the trees of the Great Forest.

Chapter 5:

Hot Springs

NO TRIP TO THE mountains was complete without a dip in a hot spring.

We headed into the inn town, carving out a path through the throng of beastfolk who swamped us at the sight of Leo, until we reached our inn.

After taking a tour of the town, we met up with Talhand the dwarf, whom I'd asked to be our guide. That night, once the kids were in bed, we headed out to a tavern for an adults-only shindig.

We stayed there one night, then headed out early the next morning with Talhand leading the way to the hot springs. I'd heard that monsters appeared in hot spring areas, but they were closer to the town than I'd expected. What looked like a natural valley that beautiful, milky white water had bubbled up to fill was actually the hot spring, hemmed in by a wall built to keep monsters out. Looking back the way we'd climbed, we could see the town far below.

The bath itself was spectacular, open-air, and allowed mixed bathing. There weren't many people and no other humans. Almost everyone I glimpsed was a dwarf, halfling, or some sort of beast. Hot spring culture wasn't a thing for humans or elves. In the case of humans, only nobles ever bathed in hot water.

So, it was fairly sparsely populated—but there *were* men. Women, too, but that wasn't the point. Was it really all right for me to expose the naked bodies of my wives and daughters to the eyes of strange men? Definitely not. Not to mention, I had someone else's woman with me: Elinalise was here. Sure, she'd once been a sexy stripper who'd set the adventuring world ablaze, but now that she was with Cliff, was it really all right for me to lay eyes upon her sexy body?

Nope, no way.

For that reason, I'd come prepared with bathwear. They were simple tunics made from dark fabric. Despite not being waterproof, they offered the natural comfort of a swimsuit. Design credit went to Aisha Greyrat.

“Big Sister Aisha, there’s a waterfall over there!”

“Oh? Where?”

“There, Aisha, over there!”

“Hey, Mama, wait up—!”

Aisha was with Eris, Arus, and Sieg, who were all excited to visit a hot spring for the first time. They waded through the water, exploring the large baths. The dark color of the fabric meant that it didn’t go see-through, but it still clung to their bodies when it got wet, accentuating every line of their figures. Aisha and Eris wandered here and there, their bodies on full display. Eris probably hadn’t noticed, but Aisha—wasn’t she embarrassed? Well, whatever. So long as the important bits were covered up, it was fine. It’s only embarrassing if you feel embarrassed. I hoped they wouldn’t make trouble for the other bathers, though. Even a place like this had an etiquette to follow.

“Hey, Blue Mama? Have you come here before too?” Lucie asked.

“Yes, I did. A very long time ago,” Roxy answered.

“Tell me!”

“Oh, all right. It was when I’d just left the Demon Continent, after finally graduating from being a fledgling adventurer...”

Roxy, holding Lily in her arms, told Lucie old stories while Clive listened nearby. I wondered if his face was so pink because Lucie was beside him in her thin clothes.

Clive, my lad, it’s a bit soon to be having those sorts of thoughts. Your dad and I aren’t going to let you have a romance this young.

“This is our Lady Savior then, O Great Sacred Beast?”

“Woof!”

“Oh, my!”

Lara and Leo were surrounded by beastfolk. Lara wore the same dull expression she always did, but I saw an undercurrent of annoyance in it. Understandable. This had been going on ever since we entered the inn town.

“Tell me if you get too hot, Miss Chris,” said Lilia. “I have drinks ready.”

Chris just made a grumbly sound. Lilia had placed Zenith at a footbath and was watching Chris. At first, Chris had come into the water in my arms, but she didn't seem to like the hot water because she'd gotten out straight away. Now, she was clinging tight to Zenith. Ah, well! It was probably fine.

“Ahhh, it doesn't get better than this!”

“I've never had dwarf alcohol before. It's pretty potent, huh? Tasty, though...”

Meanwhile, Sylphie, Elinalise, Cliff, Talhand, and I were drinking together in a circle in a corner of the bath. Our drinks were a secret dwarf brew I'd picked up back at the inn town, chilled with ice. I'd never tasted anything like it. I couldn't have guessed what it was made from, but it was damn good, light on the nose with a crisp finish and lingering floral notes. The chilled drink washed through my flushed body before gently warming me from the inside.

“Rudy, hey, pour me another one. I don't mind if my *husband* is the one plying me with alcohol.” It hadn't taken Sylphie long to get drunk. She was leaning on me, a glazed look on her face. She was always so cute like this, but she kissed our kids with that mouth! We'd have to make sure this stayed between us.

“Coming right up,” I said.

I was soaking in a hot spring, my arm around the waist of a beautiful woman as we shared a delicious drink. It really *didn't* get better than this. This was heaven.

Or so you'd think.

See, I kept getting these chills.

Really persistent chills.

I knew where they were coming from, too. The source was the man quietly sipping his drink directly opposite me: Talhand, a former member of Paul's party, Fangs of the Black Wolf, from back in the day. Even now, he was still active as an S-rank adventurer. A real get-it-done type.

I had no reason to doubt him as a gentleman. If he tried to pull anything, I could handle it. I had also interviewed him thoroughly to be sure he wasn't one

of the Man-God's disciples. Of course, I hadn't spotted Geese. *That* bastard had lied through his teeth when I questioned him, then cheerfully torn a hole in our lives. Knowing that, I couldn't completely trust Talhand, but if I started thinking like that, I'd have no friends. I'd decided that I would trust him.

That left the question, what was bothering me? When Talhand looked at me, it sent a shiver down my spine. It had been like this on the road to the hot springs too. While the kids rode in the carriage, the rest of us acted as guards. Eris took the lead in front along with me and Elinalise, Talhand walked directly behind us, and Sylphie and Roxy brought up the rear. As I walked, smoothing out the road with earth magic so that the carriage could pass comfortably, I kept getting chills, only to look around and see Talhand watching me.

I mean, *okay*, we were walking in the same direction. Given that I was right in front of him, it wasn't surprising that our eyes met when I looked behind me. I even wondered if I was just extra on edge because we were taking the kids through an area where monsters sometimes showed up. But he was *still* watching me now, and I was *still* getting chills. It just didn't make any sense.

In the end, I couldn't take it any longer and asked, "Um. Is everything all right?"

"Why d'you ask?"

"You've been staring at me a lot since we got on the road..."

"Oh, that. I was just thinking how much you remind me of Paul these days. Couldn't tear my eyes away."

"Of my dad?"

"Aye. Seeing you walking side by side with Elinalise brought back some old memories." Talhand stroked his beard, his tone wistful. "Elinalise, Ghislaine, and Paul's backs in front of me, the sound of Geese and Zenith's voices behind me...exploring labyrinths with the Fangs of the Black Wolf..."

I wasn't so sure about the resemblance, but I couldn't see my own back, so what did I know? Why exactly did his stares give me the shivers, anyway? It was unusual.

"You'd best watch yourself with that dwarf, Rudeus," said Elinalise, her head

resting on Cliff's shoulder. "He goes for men as well."

"Eh?" I said before I could help myself.

Talhand looked sulky. "Don't say things like that. You'll give him the wrong idea."

Honestly, why did Elinalise's mind always go straight to sex? That dirty elf.

Talhand continued, "I *only* go for men."

That dirty dwarf! But, wait a minute. Was that what the chills were? Did Talhand have designs on me?!

I belong to my sweet Eris, so no touching! She'll cut you clean in half!

Without thinking, I clung to Sylphie, trembling. She gave Talhand a fierce, protective look.

"Relax, lad," said Talhand. "I don't go for married men or men who aren't inclined to it."

Oh, what, he had morals? Well, when I considered it, he just had slightly different preferences from other people. His dating pool was different and smaller, that was all—nothing that weird about it.

"You still ogle men's butts, though, don't you?" Elinalise said. She was teasing, but Talhand frowned.

"A man can't help but appreciate a nice behind," he told Elinalise, then said to me, "You understand, don't you?"

I did understand, of course. Just now, I'd been staring at Eris's butt as she waded around the bath. Uh oh, Eris looked this way. *She* didn't get a chill, did she? Oh no, she covered her chest! She *did*!

Ah ha, but you've fallen into my trap! You're covering the wrong weak point!

"I was telling the truth when I said you reminded me of Paul and the old days," said Talhand. "But, well, if it bothers you..."

"Oh, no, if it's just nostalgia, knock yourself out."

"Ha ha ha. I do apologize." Talhand smiled, then picked up a bottle. "Now, how's about another round?"

“Don’t mind if I do.”

There was no accounting for taste. If he said he’d behave in a virtuous way toward me, there was no need to distrust him. No harm in looking without touching. Though, if he started making comparisons between us, I would come out the loser. Talhand was a musclebound bear of a man!

All of a sudden, Elinalise said, “You know, I didn’t expect you to agree to guide us.”

“Now what do you mean by that?” Talhand replied.

“Well, you’ve been avoiding returning home, haven’t you? This hot spring is within dwarf territory. It’ll be a nuisance for you if you run into anyone you know, won’t it?”

It sounded like Talhand had some of his own stuff going on. Come to think of it, out of all Paul’s former party members, he was the only one I didn’t know that well. I hadn’t taken an interest.

There was a long pause, then Talhand said, “Hmph. Back when we were traveling together, you said you could never settle down with just one man. What happened?”

“Living life changes you.”

“That’s how it is for me. I thought now was as good a time as ever to settle things.”

“Oh, my! How manly.”

“I don’t want your flattery. Looking at all of you made me see what a total disgrace I am, running away from my own family for so long. That’s all.” Talhand downed his drink, a sour look on his face.

“You’re going home, then?” I asked.

“You could say that.”

“Hey, Rudeus?” Elinalise said, a question in her voice.

For a moment, I couldn’t understand why, then I realized she was saying this was the perfect chance to ask him. I wondered if I should, though, given

whatever was going on with his family. No harm in putting out feelers, right?

“Actually, Talhand, I was planning on going to see the Ore God,” I said.

“You are?”

“Yeah, and...I mean, only if you’re open to it, but I’d be really grateful if you could pass along the message that I—uh, the Dragon God’s follower—would like to meet him.”

I didn’t know what sort of pull Talhand had back home. It might be an imposition to make him be my go-between. I’d tread carefully.

Talhand grumbled. “Thing is, he’s not the friendliest guy.”

Orsted had said that too. The Ore God was difficult to deal with and harder to win over. He *was* fond of alcohol, jewels, and ores and metals fit for smithing, but flashing a few shiny presents at him wouldn’t be enough to get him to agree to an alliance.

“Even if I ask him, he may not say yes,” Talhand said.

“Do you know him?”

He nodded, scowling. “You could say that.”

Could it be that they were related? Maybe I should have asked Orsted while I was home, during our meeting.

“I’m not going to demand anything. I know you’ve got your own stuff going on.”

“Indeed.” Talhand said it thoughtfully, then downed another drink. He let out a sigh that stank of alcohol, his face flushed. Then, he gave me a smile. “Mind if I think on it a little?”

“Not at all. I’m sorry to put this on you.” I was about to bow, but Talhand picked up a bottle and turned the mouth toward me. Seemed like he wanted me to stop apologizing and drink. I let him fill up my cup.

After getting out of the bath, we headed back to the inn town. I had the family wait at our lodgings, then went out with Roxy, Talhand, and Elinalise to find a place to set up a teleportation circle. I’d carefully selected companions

who were used to traversing mountains and forests. Eris had wanted to come too, but I'd asked her to stay behind to guard the family.

The four of us set off deeper into the mountains, just a little beyond the hot springs. The best spot for a teleportation circle was somewhere remote. Ariel said she wanted to create teleportation gates to connect the major nations, and the plans for that were in the works, but it was still a long way off. The first step was to lift the ban on teleportation magic, but because I didn't know yet if it would come to fruition, I set up my own personal circles in areas people didn't frequent. If we went too high, we'd risk ending up in blue dragon territory, so we stayed within the bounds of where people ventured.

"Around here should work..."

Once we found a good spot, it was time to construct a building. I would structure it after the dragonfolk ruins with four rooms, one of which would have a hidden staircase that led down to where we'd set up the teleportation circle. I had Roxy and Elinalise keep watch outside, then used earth magic to dig a hole into the ground and began to carve out the room.

Talhand helped with the interior and the size specifications. This wasn't an easy place to find, but the circle was going to link up to the office—on the off chance someone stumbled across it, we'd have a problem. Therefore, we dressed it up like an ordinary old ruin but also put a treasure chest in a corner of one of the front rooms to keep travelers from delving deeper. We also set it up so people could rest there, giving it a vibe that said, "Just a ruined rest stop for travelers from days of yore, nothing to see here!" That was why I needed Talhand's help.

As expected, a dwarf knew how to work with his hands. He used a super-hard chisel I'd made to carve the stone, giving the whole room an antiquated look. By the time the sun set, it looked like it had been standing there for a hundred years.

"Amazing work," I told him. "This'll fool everyone."

"Pfft. There's no moss or mold. Anyone who knows what to look for will see through it."

Oh dear. It seemed the craftsman wasn't fully satisfied with his forgery. But

no one was going to walk up right this minute, so by the time anyone found the place, it ought to be authentically grubby. It wasn't like anyone would maintain it.

"Come to think of it, it's a bit late to ask, but is it even okay for us to just throw up a building here? This is dwarf territory, isn't it?"

"The dwarves believe the mountains belong to the gods, and buildings are our offerings to them. Anyone can build anything they like. It won't be a problem."

So, that was how it worked? In that case, maybe we should have built the whole thing above ground. Putting the entrance underground felt like there was something to hide in there, but the work was done, so there was no point worrying.

"If you're done, let's get moving," Talhand said.

"Just one minute." The last thing I did was to activate the magic circle, then test the teleportation. Once I'd made sure that it was definitely dropping me at the office, I came back.

"All okay," I said. Talhand was silent. "You're welcome to use the circle if you ever need to, Talhand."

He shook his head. "No thanks. I prefer to walk."

Ah, well. The teleportation circle was complete, so it was time to go home.

The next day dawned. We decided to leave the inn town early that morning. This was where we'd part ways with Cliff and Talhand. While they stood to the side, the rest of us piled into the carriages and said goodbye.

Cliff would spend the day looking around the church, then head back to Millishion after that.

"You be good, Clive," Cliff told him.

"I will, Dad!"

Cliff didn't want to part with his son. It wasn't like they'd be apart for years, but it was always hard saying goodbye to family. He continued, "Be sure to

apply yourself to your studies and your sword work. Oh, and don't make the girl you like cry. Be nice to her."

"I-I don't have a girl I like!"

"Then be nice to all the girls you think you might like. Understood?"

"Yes, Dad..."

Cliff gave Clive a pat on the head, then turned to me. "Rudeus, I'm counting on you to take care of Elinalise and Clive for a few more years."

"Don't worry, I know. You do your best, Cliff."

"Yeah." He stepped back as if no further words were necessary, and he wasn't worried.

I hoped I was worthy of that sort of trust. At least Elinalise had it together, so I wouldn't need to do much. I could at least offer guidance to Clive so that he grew up into a good man, just in case he did ask for Lucie's hand when he came of age—though I had the feeling I might do more harm than help. I'd settle for lending a hand when he got into trouble. That should be enough.

Next, I went a short distance away where Talhand was talking to Elinalise and Roxy. Talhand was also going back to Millishion for the time being. He had some things to prepare before going to the dwarves. Whether those things were physical or emotional, I couldn't say.

"Thank you, Talhand."

"Aye."

"I hope it goes well...with your family and your hometown."

"Hmph. I can't say I'm happy having Paul's son fussing over me..." Talhand muttered. Then, he looked down at me, like really stared. I had the feeling he was especially focused on my crotch.

"I had a thought this morning. If you showed him that one thing, that might actually be enough to convince the Ore God to meet with you."

"What thing?"

"The black, hard thing you showed me yesterday."

“The what?!”

A black, hard thing around my crotch?! Could it be that the Ore God was gay too?!

Hold up. Mine wasn't black. I was pretty sure it was plenty hard, though. It *was*, right? Not that I'd ever compared it with anyone else's.

Roxy, stop blushing and say something. "It's mine" or whatever!

“Talhand, when all you say is black, hard, and thick, we don't know what you mean,” said Elinalise. “Speak more plainly.”

“I never said anything about thick. *You* know. The stone thing Rudeus made with earth magic. Ore, rock, metal, I don't rightly know what to call it...”

Stone! He meant stone. I had made a lot of black stone to build with yesterday—really hard stone, to make sure it'd be sturdy.

Ooh, Roxy's blushing. What did you imagine, hmmm? Ooo, Roxy's embarrassed...

Not that I'd imagined anything different.

“If you've got a sample, I could take it to him. What do you say?”

“Can do!” Then and there, I used earth magic to fashion a rod out of stone. It was black *and* hard *and* thick. Naturally, it was also heavy. At fifteen centimeters, it probably weighed more than ten kilograms. With some gold plating, you could probably fool someone into thinking it was the real thing, but it was much, much harder than gold or platinum, so the deception wouldn't last long.

“Will this work?” I asked.

“That's the stuff. Could you do me a few more?”

I made him five more bars which he took, smiling at their weight. Five bars were seriously heavy, but Talhand was a seasoned adventurer.

“Safe travels,” he said.

He was about to turn to go when Roxy stepped forward. “Take care of yourself, Talhand.”

“You keep yourself healthy too, Roxy.”

“I will.”

Talhand smiled at her, which Roxy returned as she bid farewell to her friend.

With that, our family holiday came to a close. I guess I spent all of it working, but I still thought it had been a good trip. I hoped it would be a worthwhile experience for the kids’ enrichment that would lead to them becoming excellent, contributing members of society, and... Wait, that didn’t sound like me at all.

I hoped they’d all grow up happy.

Chapter 6:

Talhand of the Harsh, Large Mountain Summit

TALHAND OF THE Harsh, Large Mountain Summit was the thirty-seventh of fifty-one siblings. He had been born into an ordinary dwarf family and grew up surrounded by his many brothers and sisters. Obviously, not all fifty-one of them had the same mother. A little-known fact about dwarves was that their villages raised all children of the same generation together. It was similar to a school, except that they thought of each other as siblings for the rest of their lives. The villages did this so none of the children knew whose family was rich or poor, which made it easier for everyone to get along when, in the future, they assumed positions of responsibility in the village. Someone would be chief, some would support the chief, and others would be wives. This was only the case for those privileged enough to live in a village. Dwarves who left the villages had no such customs.

In any case, Talhand grew up an ordinary child with dozens of brothers and sisters. He was interested in earth and iron, he liked the taste of alcohol, and he looked up to the smiths and builders. The only thing about him that was a little unusual was that he preferred men to women. One of his siblings, however, was far less ordinary.

The odd one was his younger brother, the thirty-eighth of their fifty-one siblings: Godbard of the Proud Heavenly Peak. Godbard had *talent*. All dwarf children began to learn smithing, crafts, and basic earth magic when they were barely out of the cradle, but Godbard outshone each and every one. Give him a hammer, he'd forge steel as hard as any adult's. Set him to crafting, he'd produce ornaments so marvelous they defied belief. Show him a building, he'd fix everything wrong with it in the blink of an eye.

Dwarves lived longer than humans. Around the time that Godbard's talents started to manifest, there were still old folk alive who remembered the Laplace War. In Godbard, they saw the very image of the Ore God who had died in that battle. Because of that, Godbard was regarded as the Ore-God-in-waiting and

given special treatment. It was impressed upon the other children that they must defer to him as their future leader.

After that, Talhand changed. His interest in smithing and craftwork evaporated. He realized that no matter how much painstaking effort he put into his work, it would always fall short of what Godbard could knock together without a thought. It wasn't that anyone was comparing them, of course. In order to make comparisons, the adults would have had to look at anyone other than Godbard's creations. Then, was he driven to be the best, or did he hate living in Godbard's shadow? No, it was neither.

Actually, Talhand and Godbard got on well. When they all became brothers and sisters, Godbard was his first friend—and his first love. Talhand was happy that Godbard would become the Ore God, and all he wanted was to be useful to him. He imagined that he could make up for what Godbard lacked, acting as his right-hand man.

With that in mind, Talhand devoted himself to magic. He focused in particular on mastering water and wind magic, which the dwarves saw no need for. The first Ore God was said to have been a Saint-tier earth magician who created a marvelous sword from ore he produced with his own magic. However, it was also said that an elf skilled in wind and water magic had been essential to that great blade. A smith needed more than just earth and fire. There had to be air to stoke the flames and water to quench the steel, yet the adults were not interested in understanding these other elements. They brought up every excuse under the sun to try to dissuade Talhand from pursuing water and wind magic: it wasn't tradition; it was against propriety; none of their ancestors did it; dwarves were no good at it.

Talhand *was* more naturally talented at earth magic than water or wind magic, but when Godbard told him, "I think it's a fine idea. The adults of the village are too stuck in their ways," Talhand took courage and devoted himself even more to his magic.

As a result, Talhand found himself growing apart from the other dwarf men, and some of his brothers started to criticize him. They said he was soft, that not smithing was effeminate, unbecoming of a dwarf man. All a dwarf needed magic for was breaking up hard bedrock, they said; for smithing, nature

provided everything they needed. Talhand, though he found these slights tiresome, continued to gradually hone his skills. All of it, he did for Godbard. Once Godbard grew up and became the Ore God, he would need Talhand's powers. He was sure of it.

After he came of age, the critical guidance gave way to resigned incredulity. His brothers treated him like an outcast, and he developed a reputation as the oddest oddball in the village. Even then, his certainty never wavered.

The day finally arrived—the day that Godbard would be ordained as the Ore God. Tradition dictated that the one who would assume the title of Ore God forge five swords. For each, he would select someone from those he trusted above all others to assist him. In doing this, he himself picked out the core leaders who would support the dwarf village after he became Ore God.

Naturally, Talhand put his name forward. This was what he had been honing his skills for. To his shock, Godbard did not choose him. First, he chose the three who were considered the village's most talented at the time, and then he chose his lover. Those weren't so bad. It was the final person Godbard chose that upset Talhand: the old man who had called him a fool.

Talhand protested. It was outrageous, he said. He'd devoted his life to Godbard!

Godbard asked him, "Can you even forge a decent sword?"

Of course. Talhand said, "A sword is nothing. I can do it. Just give me a chance."

Godbard didn't look happy about it, but he agreed to humor Talhand's plea. The narrow-minded old man and Talhand would each forge a sword. Whoever made the better sword would win. To ensure impartiality, Godbard opened up the contest to anyone who thought he could win.

To Talhand's alarm, a great many people came to compete. For all that he had trained in water and wind magic for this moment, he hadn't picked up a smith's tools since he was a child. He could count the number of decent swords he'd forged on one hand. His disadvantage was too great.

"Wait," he begged. "I want to help *you* forge a sword."

To his shock, Godbard turned him down. “How could a man who can’t even forge a proper sword on his own understand what I want? If you can’t understand that, you can’t help me.”

This made no sense to Talhand. He thought he knew Godbard better than anyone. How could this happen?

His mind was still reeling when he entered the contest. He had no plan—and he lost. Talhand walked away from the contest devastated, feeling the others’ cold gazes like a weight upon his shoulders. A few days later, after watching the ceremony to name the Ore God from afar, he left the village.

In time, he became an adventurer, never staying in one place. He found it hard to trust anyone following Godbard’s betrayal, so he spent his time alone. Being an outcast for so long made it hard to relate to anyone, and he also felt inferior to others because of his preference for men.

Although he was one of the lousiest dwarf smiths around, his many years of honing his skills had made him a halfway decent magician, even if he was no great talent. To suit his skills, he had to fight wearing heavy armor somewhere between the style of a warrior and a magician. Still, the life of a solo adventurer was not so arduous.

It was around when he moved up to B rank that Talhand met Elinalise Dragonroad. At first, her interest in him had been physical. She thought she’d bring a young dwarf into her bed for a change, but he wasn’t interested in Elinalise. No matter *how* hard she tried to tempt him, he didn’t bite. But she was too persistent to just give up, so he finally told her he wasn’t interested in women.

Elinalise gaped at him, then she cackled with laughter. It grated on him, but he put up with it, thinking he’d now be rid of this amorous elf. Only, Elinalise didn’t leave. Why, he didn’t know, but he suspected that Elinalise thought that at least she wouldn’t have to worry about him keeping his hands to himself.

Following that, Talhand and Elinalise teamed up a few times. Elinalise, a skilled fighter, was a good partner for a magician in heavy armor like Talhand. It was strange but, despite the fact that he’d found her irritating, Talhand didn’t mind being in a party with her. It might be because Elinalise lived unconstrained

by any norms, traditions, conventions, or rules.

That being said, they never discussed making their party permanent until the appearance of a young man shook things up a little: Paul Greyrat. At the time, Elinalise, Talhand, Geese, and Ghislaine were all solo, but Paul brought them together to form a party, which they named Fangs of the Black Wolf. There was a bit of a squabble over that name, but that's a story for another time.

All the members of Fangs of the Black Wolf had been cast out from their former lives. Although Talhand was the only man who liked men, they were free to pursue their desires. Paul in particular was uninhibited and free-thinking. When he found out Talhand liked men, he simply laughed it off.

"So I'll bed the women, Elinalise the men, and you'll take the rest—no one goes to waste!" Paul said.

He was a rascal, easy to read, and constantly getting up to antics that made Talhand want to put his head in his hands, but his behavior was never restricted by anything, and he liked to dream about the unconventional. Even when society said what he did was wrong, Paul just followed his instincts, spitting on the ground and saying, "I don't give a damn."

Paul bore things with a smile that felt revelatory to Talhand. While his behavior made the Fangs of the Black Wolf notorious, Talhand found it fun. In true dwarf fashion, he guffawed at everything Paul did. His feelings toward the other man resembled falling in love but weren't quite the same. It had to be trust. These members of his party were the first friends he'd ever trusted.

His trust, however, was eventually broken. It shattered when Zenith joined the party. The formerly uninhibited Paul started sticking to the socially acceptable in an attempt to win Zenith over. No doubt, these changes helped Paul to grow as a person. But nothing was the same after that. The strife he caused by marrying Zenith left deep scars on the hearts of everyone involved.

To an outsider, it might have seemed trivial, but it made Talhand decide to never join a party again. For a while after that, he traveled on his own. Then came the incident that decimated Fittoa. He reunited with Elinalise, got to know Roxy, and they formed a party together. His determination not to be in a party faded...but his feelings around Paul were as fresh as ever.

It wasn't until they traveled to and from the Demon Continent that he saw Paul again. When he laid eyes on Paul after all that time, there was no sign of the young rascal Talhand had known. Paul had become a man, a *father*, and was now devoting everything he had to search for his family. He'd changed, Talhand thought. He'd grown up.

He met Paul's son Rudeus for the first time on the Begaritt Continent. With Paul as a father, he'd expected the boy to be a little bit useless, but he turned out to be unexpectedly mature. Then again, perhaps that wasn't so surprising—his father was the Paul who'd grown up.

When Talhand looked at Paul and Rudeus, he felt his chest grow tight, but he could never understand why.

Then, Paul died. It was an unspectacular end. Talhand was shocked, but he recognized that for Rudeus, the shock was even greater, so he avoided letting it show. He went on like nothing had happened, drinking like always. In the aftermath, he left the Begaritt Continent.

Later on, he met Rudeus's family. He saw that the boy was living well, in a house he'd built, with a fine family he'd created. Talhand visited Paul's grave and had a drink there, then set off from the Magic City of Sharia once more.

As he traveled, something inside him finally gave up the ghost. It was something that had been with him ever since he'd set out as an adventurer. In the midst of the emptiness he was left with, Talhand had an idea.

He was going to learn to be a smith.

He couldn't quite say where the idea came from, but he immediately headed for the Asura Kingdom. Once there, he rented a blacksmith's forge to train with while continuing to work as an adventurer. He didn't even take a break when he set off to Millis to earn some money after losing nearly everything he had when Geese was arrested for gambling.

He used all the magic at his disposal in his smithing—fire, earth, water, wind. He supplemented everything he did with it. He forged swords, gauntlets, shields, more swords, armor, helmets, and still more swords. He began to understand what Godbard had said to him back then. He grasped finer details that couldn't be expressed in words, like how to breathe, the timing and

rhythm, and the right amount of force to use. Talhand improved rapidly. The way that Godbard had smithed was burned into his mind's eye and, thanks to his life as an adventurer, he knew what made some weapons and equipment superior. His mastery of magic was also a level above what it had been back in the village. Talhand's time adventuring had made him stronger.

As he continued to work on his skills, the Ruquag Mercenary Band started asking after his wares. Thanks to his acquaintance with Rudeus, the mercenary branch chief became his patron, allowing Talhand to set up his own forge in Millishion.

But just as before, Talhand didn't know *why* he was doing all this. What was the point of an adventurer playing at being a blacksmith in his spare time? It was only when Rudeus brought his whole family from Sharia to visit that it made sense.

When he saw the son of Paul (of all people) on better-than-equal footing with the Latrias, all while raising children of his own, it came into focus.

He had to go back to the village. He had unfinished business. *That* was why he was smithing.

After Rudeus gave him the pieces of black stone, Talhand returned to his forge. For a long time, he'd had an idea of what he'd make if he were able to craft stone like this. He'd thought through the theory. Once, it had been no more than a dream, but now, he had all the experience he needed.

First, he shattered Rudeus's black stone with earth magic and a hammer. This he mixed with iron sand, then heated the combination in the forge. Because the normal heat of the furnace wouldn't be enough, he applied fire and wind magic to raise the temperature as high as it would go. Using the superheated powder, he made both the core of the blade and the metal that would form its outer skin. The ratios differed, but they were essentially the same materials. With the scales of a red dragon or the hard bones of a hydra, he could have forged a yet more formidable blade, but Talhand did not use these—if he had, all this effort would have been meaningless. Next, he thoroughly quenched and tempered the blade, then worked vigorously through the night, pouring into it a steady

flow of energy and mana.

In the end, he was left with a single sword, its blade both strong and black. Although it had no special adornments or properties, Talhand was satisfied with his work. He crafted a scabbard for it, then wrapped it in a cloth of fine wool and strapped it to his back. That done, he packed the remaining blocks of black stone into a bag and left Millishion. His destination was the dwarf village he hailed from.

He had been away for a long time, but the village hadn't changed at all. Its stone-hewn buildings were set into the side of a cliff, and the sound of hammers on steel rang out from within the high stone walls that surrounded it. No one challenged Talhand at the gate, and he passed through. He was no longer one of them, but the dwarves didn't keep such tight security that they'd question an unfamiliar dwarf.

Talhand saw a great hole in the cliff where pulleys worked in constant motion. Men, naked to the waist and dripping with sweat, hauled out coal and iron ore, while women walked to the rest area in front of the mine with mountains of steamed sweet potatoes balanced on their shoulders. The scene filled him with nostalgia. Time hadn't changed them, even though it had turned most of them into strangers. He got a few curious looks as he walked around, but no icy stares. Either none of them knew him, or they'd all forgotten him. Either way, Talhand was unfazed. He had only one destination, and he hurried there: the chief's house.

But, of course, there were *some* who remembered him.

"Harsh, Large Mountain Summit? Haven't seen you for a spell. What are you doing here?"

One of his brothers stood before him, blocking his path. This man was one of those who had laughed at Talhand when they were children, and who had been chosen for the Ore God's inner circle.

"I came to see the Ore God."

"Don't put on airs. He'll never stoop to seeing the likes of you."

Without a word, Talhand reached for the bundle on his back. He unwrapped the fine woolen cloth, then pulled the sword from its scabbard. The man gasped. The blade was jet black, so black that it seemed to absorb every glimmer of light. Despite that, it didn't feel at all vile or sinister. If anything, it exuded pride and the freshness of a cool breeze. The beauty of it gave him chills.

"What *is* that?" the man asked.

"I forged it."

"The hell you did!"

For a dwarven smith, swords were everything. Great dwarves forged great swords. This could never be *Talhand's* work.

"It is an offering," Talhand said.

The title of "Ore God" was regarded as another name for the world's greatest smith, and a source of pride for dwarfkind. When any smith in the world forged something they thought was exceptional, it was incumbent upon the Ore God to view it—though any submissions first passed under the expert eyes of another dwarf who turned away anything subpar. The man who stood in front of Talhand now was that dwarf. He held no love for Talhand, but swords told the truth. The black blade had no adornments, nor did it utilize any shortcuts. It was probably immensely hard, and not a blade that could be easily broken. It was, in short, a masterwork. No dwarf could lie in the face of such a sword.

"I will permit it. You may pass, Talhand of the Harsh, Large Mountain Summit."

"I thank you, Doutor of the Flaming Blade Steel," Talhand replied, finding the name of his brother of old in his memory. With a bow, he returned the sword to its scabbard, wrapped it in the woolen cloth, and put it once more on his back. He was stopped several more times like this before he reached the Ore God, but the sword always earned him passage.

The Ore God—Godbard of the Proud Heavenly Peak—looked a little older than Talhand remembered. That was no surprise. Many moons had passed

since Talhand left the village.

“You’ve gotten old, Talhand,” said Godbard.

“I could say the same to you,” Talhand replied.

“I thought you’d died in a ditch long ago.”

“It wasn’t for lack of trying.”

They exchanged only brief greetings. At Godbard’s side sat his wife and his inner circle. They didn’t conceal their alarm at seeing the village’s greatest eccentric back after all this time, but there was no crackle of tension between Talhand and Godbard. As Talhand faced Godbard, his heart was at peace.

Neither of them spoke. Talhand might have been calm, but he had no intention of talking to Godbard. There was plenty he might have said—the things he had seen, the experiences he’d had outside the village, but there was no need for words. Instead, he silently proffered the sword to Godbard, who took it and just as wordlessly slid it from its scabbard to look at the blade.

“Oh, my.” No sooner had Godbard laid eyes on it than he let out a sigh of admiration. He raised the black blade up to the light to appraise it. “A fine blade, full of conviction... There is nothing uncertain or halfhearted in its make, but your inexperience shows in every part. A blade I forged with the same materials and methods would be far superior.”

At this, Talhand smiled faintly. Naturally. No matter how much work he had put into forging and smithing over the past few years, the idea that he could match the Ore God, who had been honing his craft for over a century, was laughable. Talhand knew that well. He chuckled.

“Something funny?” Godbard asked.

The thing was, that wasn’t the point to Talhand. “Would you like to know what those materials and methods are?”

“I *am* curious. It is a strange sword.”

It was normal for a smith to tell the Ore God the materials and methods by which they had forged their offerings. The reason they offered the swords to him was so that their techniques would be passed on to future generations.

There were many who wished to leave a record of what metals they had used, their process, and their tweaks and improvements for posterity.

“I made it from rods of stone created with earth magic,” said Talhand. “With magic, I turned them into a powder, which I mixed with iron sand. With fire and wind magic, I stoked my forge to a temperature hot enough to melt the powder. After that, I hammered it out and quenched it the usual way. I cooled it with water magic.”

“Stone made with earth magic, hmm?” These words caught Godbard’s notice, and he suddenly recalled why: the process was one he had heard of before. The crackpot dwarf in front of him had told him about it many times when he was young. “This is your revenge, then?”

“Nay,” replied Talhand. “I only wanted to settle something between us.”

“Did you think that when I saw this sword, I’d tell you to return?”

“Nay. But you said what I wanted to hear, and that’s enough for me.”

Godbard had said that he could forge a far superior sword, and that alone had satisfied Talhand. It was as if the feelings that had festered in his heart since he was a child had been excised. Oh, yes, if he used the same materials and method, Godbard would undoubtedly produce a far finer blade. But without magic, he couldn’t crush the stone, and the heated iron could not be fully cooled by water alone. Indeed, without a magician with the requisite skill, he’d be lost. That being said, a genius smith like Godbard could probably find a clever way to work the stone without using Talhand’s methods.

“And this ‘stone,’” Godbard went on, “can you make it, Talhand?”

“Nay,” Talhand admitted. “It was made by my friend’s son.”

He took three pieces of stone from his bag and placed them in front of Godbard. When Godbard reached out to pick one up, his eyes widened at the weight. He tried to split it to get a look at the cross-section but couldn’t, and he had no more success trying to smash it with a hammer. The hardness and toughness of the material astounded him.

Talhand could see a desire bubble up within him to use it. A smile tugged at Godbard’s mouth.

Talhand saw it and nodded, pleased. Godbard's expressions hadn't changed since they were children. He had no trouble reading his face.

"In a few days, he will come and present himself to you." Godbard was silent. With Rudeus's face in his mind's eye, Talhand asked softly, "Would you meet with him?"

He had already achieved what he set out to do. He had heard the words he'd hoped for from the person he wanted to say them. Now, he just had to repay the man who had made this possible.

"I'll admit he doesn't look too dependable, and you can be sure he'll have some beastly request that isn't worth the trouble...but even so, he's got guts," Talhand continued. "You won't regret meeting with him. I'll swear that on that sword."

Godbard looked from the sword to the stones and back. His wife and advisors at his side were holding in their own opinions, but Godbard didn't plan on asking them. Talhand was barely recognizable as the man he'd been. Godbard suspected this magician who created the stone had been involved. His curiosity was piqued.

"Very well," he said. "What is his name?"

"Rudeus Greyrat."

"I see." Committing the name to memory, Godbard nodded.

With that, Talhand rose to his feet. It was only a verbal agreement, but that satisfied him. Godbard wasn't one to break a promise. Talhand had once felt as though he had, but there'd been no promise between them to break. Talhand had been inexperienced and overreached. That was all.

"You're leaving?" asked Godbard.

"Aye."

"No one will object to your presence here."

"I've my own forge in Millishion. I mean to stay there for the rest of my days," Talhand said.

With that, he left the house of the Ore God. At some point, his former siblings

had gathered outside. Their gazes were hard, and some didn't bother to hide their scorn.

"If you'll excuse me," said Talhand. As he started walking, they parted to clear his path. Looks of confusion and contempt followed him on his way out of the village. No one spoke to him. No one came after him. Yet Talhand walked with a spring in his step, his heart as clear as a cloudless sky. At last, his curse had been lifted.

One month later, the Ore God would agree to an alliance with the Dragon God in exchange for a large supply of the dark stone.

The image features a dark gray background with a subtle, intricate pattern of stylized floral and foliate motifs. A decorative border, composed of thin, parallel lines, frames the entire page. At each of the four corners, there is a larger, more complex decorative element resembling a corner bracket or a stylized floral ornament. Centered on the page is the title text in a bold, white, serif font.

The God Who Dwells in the Sword Sanctum

Chapter 1:

Sword God Gino Britz

SWORD GOD GINO BRITZ was said to be the weakest Sword God who ever lived. He never once left the Sword Sanctum, nor were there any tales of him defeating mighty foes. Of all the Sword Gods, his name was the most obscure, and future generations said that he only earned the title thanks to the aging out of the old guard. Few ever made the effort to find out the truth of whether he was really the weakest, but one thing was beyond doubt: of all the Sword Gods in history, he lived the longest.

Gino Britz was born in the Sword Sanctum. His father was a Sword Emperor, and his mother was the Sword God's younger sister. His earliest memory was of sword practice when he was three years old, holding a child's wooden practice sword while his father taught him how to swing it. This memory was the blueprint for the rest of his childhood, which was dominated by the sword. After waking up, he went on a run, then practiced his swings; after breakfast he had practice; after lunch, he had more practice; after the sun set, he fit in a short break before dinner, then did his sword swings again before bed. That was his life.

Gino didn't actually like sword fighting very much. He kept up his practice, but only because his parents made him do it. He'd never once said to himself, "I want this."

When he was little, that hadn't mattered. Everyone around him was either a sword fighter or had been once. All the other children did it, and whenever he learned a new technique, his mother and father were proud of him. Even the retired old man who lived nearby called Gino a good boy when he ran by carrying his practice sword. He had no reason to question it; the sword was life.

As he advanced in years as well as in rank, things began to change. His Sword Emperor father had been happy just to see a sword in his hand when he was a

child, but once Gino reached the advanced tier, he grew stricter, saying “When you swing your sword, you should try to best your opponent,” and “You’re still weak. You might have a bit of talent, but don’t get cocky.” He trained Gino harder than ever.

At first, the adults at the training hall where he’d been born and raised treated him with fondness, but Gino advanced steadily first to intermediate tier, then to advanced tier. As they lost to him in duels, they began to look at him with overt dislike. Around that time, Gino stopped enjoying sword work.

It was not as if he wanted to do anything else with his life. A child from another country might have said he wanted to become an adventurer, but the idea of “leaving home” never occurred to him, because his parents had never taught him that such a thing was possible. There was no need. The whole world outside of the Sword Sanctum was a place that Gino knew nothing about—and so, he continued with the sword.

Nina, the Sword God’s daughter, grew up alongside him and was his only friend. At the Sword Sanctum, no one below Saint tier was permitted to enter the main training hall. All other people, children included, trained in a location close to home. Nina was no exception despite her parentage, so she trained alongside Gino. She wasn’t the only other child who was Gino’s age, but she was the only one whose skill with a sword matched his own. The two of them spoke the same language, and every conversation was about sword fighting. Despite Gino’s ambivalence about sword work, he was more or less a genius. Even as a child, he came up with somewhat outlandish battle theories, and Nina was the only one among their peers who could keep up with him.

Nina was the ringleader among kids, rounding up the other children her age and ruling over them. That didn’t just mean the kids at the same training hall, but all those in all the training halls throughout the Sword Sanctum. Skill with a sword was the measure the children of the Sword Sanctum used to judge everything, and she was the strongest of them all. Nina, in part thanks to her father, had the ability to back up her authority.

In her spare time, when she wasn’t drilling sword skills, she organized the other children into a kids-only secret organization. Gino was also a member, and he ended up being Nina’s lieutenant, partly because he was the second

strongest, but also because he and Nina understood each other best.

Nina and Gino seemed to see sword fighting in a different way than the others. For example, none of the other children under Nina's command ever advanced beyond the rank of Sword Saint. Nina's organization lasted about five years, but it petered out when Nina became a Sword Saint around the same time Gino did. They were among the earliest in history to do so. Gino was exceptionally young—only twelve.

When it happened, people were shocked. "Is he the youngest?!" they exclaimed, and his mother and father both praised him to the heavens—but Gino didn't really feel happy about it. Doing what he was told didn't seem like much of an achievement. Besides, Nina, who was four years older, was stronger than him.

When Nina and Gino became Sword Saints, they were permitted to practice in the main training hall. Even then, nothing really changed. Their sword training continued, day in and day out.

Just like before, he and Nina always practiced together because they were close in age and skill. As always, Nina treated him like her underling, dragging him everywhere with her. Nina was still the ringleader, even if the group around her was now composed of older swordswomen. The only thing that changed was how far his new training hall was from his house. Actually, there was one other thing. He also had more opportunities to learn from Nina's father, Sword God Gall Falion.

Gino's father was always saying things like "Wield your sword to be strong" at the dinner table. What Gall told Gino was the total opposite of what his father had said. The gist of what Gall said was "Wield your sword for yourself."

Gino could more or less grasp the difference in philosophy there, but he wasn't quite sure of the specifics, nor which was *right*. Neither quite clicked for him. Whatever he chose, so long as he did his assigned practice, no one got angry with him, and as long as he didn't lose too many of the occasional mock duels, no one bothered him. He didn't win the mock duels as often now that he'd moved to the main training hall, but he was up against adults more than a decade his senior. No one blamed him for losing a duel here and there. There

had been changes, but for the most part, it seemed to Gino that everything was the same.

That changed the day she arrived: Eris Greyrat.

Eris wasted no time in making a spectacular debut. She took down Gino and Nina before they knew what had hit them, leaving everyone present thunderstruck. It was a crushing defeat.

That in and of itself didn't feel like a big change to Gino; losing was an everyday occurrence. His peers revered his genius, but he lost to Nina all the time. He'd never been caught off guard like that before, but it would end similarly if he were to cross swords with his father or the Sword God, so it didn't feel worse than that. He wasn't entirely without any bitter feelings, but those faded quickly that night, when the Sword God told him flatly, "You're too green," and his father scolded him. He learned Eris had done exactly as she should have by beating him.

Still, he thought, *They wouldn't look kindly on me imitating her at the training hall, so I'd better not.*

It was Nina who really changed. Unlike Gino, her bruised face flushed deep red with mortification, and she didn't say another word that day. When Gino went home after finishing his practice at the training hall, he found her hiding and bawling while she swung her sword, muttering the same thing over and over: "You'll pay, you'll pay, *you'll pay...*"

Gino was afraid to interrupt her. The experience of losing to someone their age was new for Nina. Even worse, she hadn't lost with an ordinary sword. He'd heard that they'd fought with wooden practice swords with iron cores. It wasn't even a graceful defeat. Eris knocked her down, then jumped on top of her and laid into her with both fists until Nina wet herself out of fear and pain. No defeat could have been more humiliating, and Nina had never experienced anything like it.

Following that, Nina's assault on Eris began. In the beginning, she conspired with the other swordswomen to shun Eris, but this proved unsuccessful as Eris didn't care to be around them in the first place. Eris wanted to be strong and

didn't care one bit about the internal dynamics of the Sword Sanctum.

Nina, unable to get Eris's attention, grew more frustrated by the day. She never missed a chance to publicly bad-mouth Eris, and sometimes she even complained to Gino about her. Gino didn't like this new Nina very much. Back when she'd been their ringleader, she was more honest and direct. She wouldn't have shunned someone just because she didn't like them. Even Gino, who'd known Nina for years and years, started finding her unbearable.

Then one day, without a word to anyone, Nina suddenly disappeared. Though, no one was *worried* about her. Nina had almost never left the Sword Sanctum and knew nothing about the world, but she was a Sword Saint. Maybe, people said, Eris had kindled in her the desire to set out on a journey to grow as a warrior. Rather than worry, many were impressed.

"I wonder if it isn't high time *you* went and got a look at the world out there yourself," Gino's father said to him. "Slaying a red dragon or two might wipe that slack-jawed look off your face."

Maybe I will, Gino thought, but he didn't actually go through with it.

He'd never seen the outside world before, and it didn't especially interest him. Also, he was a little scared. Most of the adults at the Sword Sanctum knew something of that "outside world," but their knowledge only extended to neighboring countries or the countries where they'd lived. It was rare that someone had actually traveled the world. Sometimes those people told Gino their stories, but they mostly just boasted—they'd vanquished such-and-such an opponent in such-and-such a place.

There was only one who not only didn't boast, she told him about her *failures*. She was Sword King Ghislaine Dedoldia. She'd traveled the world as an adventurer, she told him, but had nearly been killed many times by her own stupidity.

"Even the greatest sword master can be killed. If you don't know magic or arithmetic, or at the very least your letters, you'll be dead before you know it." Ghislaine said this with a look of utmost solemnity, so Gino believed her.

Like the other children at the Sword Sanctum, Gino didn't know how to read, nor could he do arithmetic or magic. He felt no interest in learning them; only

terror that with his sword alone, he wouldn't stand a chance. He had no desire to venture far.

The days went by, and Gino did not go after Nina. Then, two months later, she returned.

Gino asked her what had happened on her journey, but Nina wouldn't tell him anything. However, something *must* have happened because Nina came back different. She stopped harassing Eris and became even more devoted to her sword. Her arrogant attitude faded away, and she almost entirely stopped spending time with the other swordswomen.

Nina also began to spend almost all her free time on intensive training—if you could call it that. She simulated endless bouts with Gino. She pressed him into it, like she was his boss. They crossed swords over and over again, scarcely speaking a word to each other, just fighting.

Things continued in this way for some time, and it was during this period that Gino began to develop feelings for Nina.

Many years went by before he realized he was in love. A lot happened in the meantime. North Emperor Auber came to them, as did Water God Reida. None of that held any interest for Gino. Nina, on the other hand, was different. After Eris kindled that spark in her, she rapidly grew stronger. Gino, as her partner for her intensive training, couldn't help but get stronger too.

Eventually, he found it impossible to compete with her. She'd usually beaten him before, but the number of wins he eked out now plummeted. Slowly, a yawning gap opened between them. That in and of itself didn't bother Gino—losing to Nina came easy. Going from winning one bout in five to one bout in ten wasn't such a massive change.

It was funny, though. He felt like she'd left him behind.

Then, one day, Eris, Nina, and Gino were summoned by Sword God Gall Falion. He put the question to them of what differentiated a Sword Saint, a Sword King, and a Sword Emperor, then had them give their answers. Gino had absolutely no idea. Nina, on the other hand, gave a carefully considered reply. Eris, when told that her answer was wrong, insisted that she was right. The Sword God accepted this, then had Nina and Eris fight. Whoever won, he

declared, would be made a Sword King.

The battle went to Eris.

While Nina sobbed, Eris was made a Sword King. Gino felt something strange as he watched her cry. Before he knew it, his fists were clenched and his mouth tightened into a thin line. He didn't recognize this emotion. He didn't know why he was feeling it. Nerves? Disappointment? He wondered why it wasn't him standing out there. Why hadn't he even been granted the right to fight the other two? What would happen to him if he carried on like this?

Gino didn't know what to do with these new feelings, but he did realize something. When he'd heard the Sword God Gall ask Nina, "If I told you that you have to choose between marrying Gino and becoming a Sword King, which would you pick?" Gino had felt his face grow hot—that there was nothing he could pipe up with in denial.

He'd fallen for her.

Gino was a little different after that. He didn't start acting like a new man, and he continued to do the practice his father and the Sword God assigned him as well as the intensive training with Nina. On the outside, Eris's departure from the Sword Sanctum changed nothing for Gino. His bouts with Nina grew more advanced, but that was all. The change was internal; how he thought about these things was new. He became much more motivated. He gave serious consideration to the point of their regular practice, as well as each individual technique, and began to experiment.

The results were dramatic. In no time at all, he was on an equal footing with Nina. That wasn't surprising. Gino had always had a gift, and his daily drills had given him a strong foundation. Nina changed too. After Eris departed the Sword Sanctum, Nina, now a Sword King herself, started to frequent the nearby villages and towns. Rather than simply improving her own sword skills, she applied herself to hunting monsters and teaching at the training halls in the larger towns.

Gino, meanwhile, stayed shut up in the Sword Sanctum. The outside world didn't scare him anymore, but he still had no interest in leaving. He couldn't say

why. Did he need a reason to stay when there was no reason for him to leave? When Nina wasn't around, he devoted himself to practice, sometimes training by sparring with his Sword Emperor father. Despite his increased interest in training, he was no match for his father. Sword God Gall told him that he would be recognized as a Sword King soon, but that was all. In terms of technique, he had already caught up with his father—the same was true of Nina, and probably Eris and Ghislaine, who were also sword kings—but he couldn't *beat* them. He was convinced he was missing some final step.

Though he knew what he needed to do in order to win, he didn't act on it. For all that he'd become more proactive, he still balked at throwing himself into unpleasant situations.

He had tried to put himself in such situations in the past, but every time, he'd thought, *Why is this important enough to suffer for?*

No answer ever volunteered itself.

During that time, Nina, who had gone to see the coronation in the Asura Kingdom, came back to the Sword Sanctum.

"Hey, Gino," she said. "What do you say we get married?"

Without thinking much about it, Gino accepted. He'd just had the feeling that this would happen one day. After all, he had feelings for Nina, and there'd never been any sign that she was involved with any other man.

With her usual impetuosity, Nina took him back to her room, where they immediately went to bed. It was the first time for both of them, so the experience left a lot to be desired, but they were compatible enough to keep each other preoccupied the whole night.

In a daze of giddy pleasure, Gino thought, *I want more of this.*

That might have been the first time he'd wanted anything so badly.

The next day, Gino took Nina with him to see the Sword God. *He* took Nina, not the other way around. It was a rare occurrence for Gino to take the initiative like that, but he wanted to marry her.

“No,” the Sword God immediately said.

The Sword God had never interfered with his daughter’s upbringing before, but here, for the first time, he said no. The reason was simple to him: Gino had no attractive qualities. Not a scrap of independence, adventurous spirit, or ambition. He was a doormat who did what he was told. The Sword God didn’t know that they’d already spent the night together, but he figured it had been Nina who brought up the idea of marriage as well. Gino had no desires of his own, nothing he was striving for—and he “wanted” to be married? *Absurd*.

Still, it occurred to Gall that this might be a good turn of events.

“You want to marry her? Defeat me. Do that, and I’ll give you permission.”

The Sword God was trying to light a fire under Gino. He thought that throwing an obstacle in his path might motivate the boy a little.

Ah, that’s what it was, Gino thought. *All along, it was this. It was that simple.*

It all made sense—what the Sword God was always saying, what he was missing, and the source of his many doubts. The fog lifted, and he had it, the final step he’d been missing—he had a *purpose*.

“I accept!” he said.

The rest was easy.

Gino changed completely. He was a new man. He stopped doing the practice that he’d always been ordered to do. He even stopped doing his intensive training with Nina. Was he slacking off? Not a chance. No, Gino had started training on his own. For what he was doing, he didn’t need a partner. Thanks to his intensive training with Nina, his practice with his father, and the many other mock battles he’d fought, he already had all the sparring practice he needed.

Gino had theorized a way to win; he had a vision of a sure path to victory against the Sword God. In order to realize that vision, he would have to work unbelievably hard, overcoming hardship and pain in the days ahead. That’s why he hadn’t done it before. There’d been no reason to. The frustration and impatience for no reason would have been unbearable. But now, he had a

purpose—he wanted Nina. Wanted her more than anything. He wanted her even if he had to suffer. Purpose transformed the hardship and pain into pleasure and anticipation.

All that remained was to hone himself. In order to prove his theory, he had to condition his body to increase the speed and weight of his sword swing. They had so many words for it—drills, intensive training, practice—and yet none of those fit what Gino was doing. If he'd had to choose a word, he would have called it “work.”

Gino calmly went about doing what he had to do, spending his days carrying out his work in order to mold his body into a form that would allow him to defeat the Sword God. He pushed himself to the very edge of his limits. His efforts would have made an ordinary man give up or physically break, but Gino could handle it. If he had any talent, that was it. He had his motivation, his plan he'd thought up over many hours, his flawless work, and that unbelievable perseverance that allowed him to tie them all together. These four elements joined to sharpen and hone his sword.

The fateful day arrived. That morning, Gino got up, then went to the house of his childhood friend who lived next door to propose once more.

They faced each other down, wooden swords raised. After totally demolishing Nina, he asked her to be his. She accepted, then he went to meet the Sword God.

It was afternoon, and right then, a mock duel was underway at the main training hall. It was a simulation of a real battle, the sort that was regularly held at the Sword Sanctum. These were not only a chance to show off how one's technique had improved, but also a place where it was permitted for groups of two to challenge a higher-ranked opponent. Gino slipped casually back into the hall. As a Sword King, Gino had either gone up against two Sword Saints or Nina, who was the same rank as him, or he had teamed up with Nina to challenge a Sword Emperor. Nina wasn't here, in which case he would usually have automatically ended up fighting two Sword Saints.

However, no sooner had Gino stepped out into the center of the training hall

than he pointed his wooden sword at the Sword God. For a moment, the hall fell silent.

“Gino! What do you mean by this?!”

Gino’s father, Sword Emperor Timothy Britz, was on his feet before anyone else. He seized the wooden sword at his side and struck at Gino—or he tried. As he rose on one knee in preparation to stand, it shattered. At the same time, his sword arm was broken, sending the wooden sword clattering to the ground. His eyes bulged in astonishment. He was used to pain, so no other trace of it showed on his face, but he still broke out in a sweat. He saw Gino reach the end of his sword swing. Gino glanced at his father, then turned back to the Sword God.

“Great Sword God. I have come to claim Nina’s hand,” he said, pointing his sword at the Sword God as he had before. Sword God Gall Falion took one look at the sword, then roared with laughter.

“Fine by me. Come at—”

Gino was already moving before Gall could finish. But Gall moved too, and faster. He had already been ready in his stance. When the Sword Emperor had been knocked down, Gall had picked up a wooden sword from the floor, risen to a crouch, and shifted into a low stance with his hand posed over his sword. It was a weaker position, but that was no disadvantage to Gall. No matter what stance he was in, his sword was faster than his opponent’s—that was what made a Sword God.

Somehow, he couldn’t swing faster than Gino, as the young man matched him with almost the same speed. When the two swords moving at almost equivalent speeds clashed, they met in the air slightly closer to Gino. There. The Sword God had the edge. He struck again, even more swiftly.

But something was wrong.

The way their swords had met had been, from the Sword God’s perspective, close to perfect. The motto of Sword God Style was “one-hit kill,” so if your strike was blocked, that meant you’d misplayed. But they also had another philosophy, which was to throw the enemy off balance with the first blow in order to be sure of finishing them off with the next. No one could hit back at

Gall Falion after he seized the advantage with his first strike. That was how it always went. But Gino's sword struck with a weight that Gall had never felt before, and he maintained his balance.

That wasn't to say that Gall lost his. They were evenly matched. It had been a long time since anyone had matched Gall blow-for-blow.

Gall had leaned in further with his strike, so the next strike went differently. Gall's sword was fully extended, and it took him time to bring it back. Not Gino's. He was positioned so that he could parry Gall's blade, then immediately swing his sword back. Neither Gall nor Gino was off balance, and there was only a fraction of a second's difference between them. Gino, with the precision of one threading a needle, had created that difference.

Gall Falion did not strike a second blow.

That day, Gino attained everything he'd ever wanted.

Sword God Gino Britz attained his dreams when he won Nina Falion. She was the sum total of all his desires. Taking the title of Sword God, marking him as the greatest swordsman alive, was no more than a bonus.

So long as he lived, he never left the Sword Sanctum, and thus his name was the most obscure of all the Sword Gods. It was even rumored he was the weakest. Even the Sword Saints who trained under the former Sword God treated him with disdain. Gino didn't begrudge that. Rumors meant nothing, for when opponents came to challenge him, he defeated them. They were just faceless opponents—sword fighters who came hoping to be the next Sword God, or those who had come to challenge the man they'd heard was the weakest Sword God to ever live. Gino crushed them all.

From the moment he became Sword God, he was undefeated. If he had left the Sword Sanctum, he might have even defeated such mighty foes as Water God Reida and Death God Randolph, but he didn't. The Sword Sanctum was his world, and he wanted nothing from outside of it.

That being said, there was no denying that, after he became Sword God, the horizons of his world expanded. Many people, not just opponents, came to

strengthen their bonds of friendship with Sword God Gino Britz. They didn't want to fight, and they instead asked him to instruct them in sword fighting or do business with them.

One such visitor was Rudeus Greyrat. He came one day without warning—with the all too familiar face of Berserker Sword King Eris at his side. Not only that, but he brought North God Kalman III and Dragon God Orsted as well.

Chapter 2:

In the Ephemeral Hall

THAT DAY, I visited the Sword Sanctum's training hall, though I'd heard it was called "the Ephemeral Hall" of all names.

Alec was on my right. He was smiling and didn't give off the slightest hint of hostility. At his waist, he had the two-handed sword the Ore God himself had forged from the black stone I'd created. It didn't have any special powers but—as you'd expect from the "god" in its maker's name—it was a fine blade. Alec had taken a liking to the nearly two-meter blade and now carried it regularly. Orsted was on my left. He kept his black helmet on and didn't say a word. He stood so perfectly still that you might mistake him for a photo cutout. I half-expected a fly to land on him, but he was so intimidating that even a mosquito wouldn't have tried. The other people here besides us weren't looking at me or Alec or Orsted. Their gazes were all fixed on the person in front of me: Eris. She was standing with a wooden practice sword in her hand. Her expression was serious, and she didn't seem angry, but anyone could see how tightly she gripped her sword.

Eris in the center of the Ephemeral Hall. At her feet lay a Sword Saint with a broken wrist.

"I yield," they muttered at last. Looking bitter, they got to their feet and bowed. Without waiting for Eris to respond, they went back to the side of the hall.

At the side of the training hall stood a whole row of Sword God warriors, about twenty by the looks of it. It sure was a small world when I considered that all of them were Sword Saints. Like a whole world crammed into a small space.

Across from Eris sat a young man and woman. The man was probably about the same age as me, though I didn't know for certain. Put like that, I wasn't quite sure whether I could call him "young" or not. Then again, lots of the Sword Saints were in their thirties and forties, so I guess he did count as young.

He had his arm around the woman sitting beside him, and compared to the Sword Saints, he seemed relaxed—even with *Orsted* in front of him. Orsted was still Orsted, even with the helmet reducing the effect of the curse, and this guy was *relaxed*.

Nothing less from Sword God Gino Britz. As he radiated authority with a girl hanging on his arm, it was hard to believe we were the same age. At the very least, I could never have faced Orsted while putting my arm around my wife and running my hand down her back. I'd get punched for that—by Eris, mostly—anyway. Not that I minded the sight of Eris smacking me when I reached for her breasts now and then.

The woman's name was Nina, and she was a friend of Eris's who held the rank of Sword Emperor. However, she wasn't really giving off "Sword Emperor" energy. Instead, she was leaning happily against her husband, Gino, and only smacking his hand away whenever it ventured too close to her chest. It was like they didn't even see us. They were disgustingly in love.

Right, I should explain how we'd ended up in such a tense situation.

Previously on *Mushoku Tensei*!

Gather round, girls and boys! My name's Rudeus Greyrat! Let's have some fun!

Today, we were visiting the hottest and *coolest* sightseeing spot in the Northern Continent: the Sword Sanctum! Thinking about the future, I needed to have a talk with the Sword God, plus there was Eris's history with the former Sword God to contend with! Thus, I decided to go pay my respects and set the record straight, so to speak. I didn't get to talk to the current Sword God last time, so this was my *official* visit.

Along with me for the trip was—you guessed it—Eris! From what I knew about Sword God Style, its practitioners tended to be the type to slice you in two first and ask questions later. I thought it'd be best to bring as few magicians along as possible, same as last time. I was sure they were all people of good moral character, of course, but Eris had since killed Gall Falion in the Biheiril Kingdom, and he'd been the current Sword God's father-in-law!

What do you think? After that, could I waltz in and ask him for a favor?

Admittedly, depending on the atmosphere there, I was prepared to go home without raising the subject. Anything could happen! That's why I planned for just the two of us to go.

At least, that was my plan, but there was a shocking twist in store. When I said I was heading to the Sword Sanctum, Orsted said he'd come along with a real air of significance. That significance was *probably* that he was worried I'd run my mouth off and make the Sword God angry. In other words, he was coming in case I botched it. Either way, I had no reason to say no, so I agreed. Orsted was a reassuring guy to have around.

Since Orsted was going, Alec insisted on going too. You know, the guy just a bit too obsessed with becoming a hero, who'd proved he was just as bad at reading a room as Cliff had been back in the day? Yeah, that Alec!

Personally, I'd have liked to say, "Sorry, can't have anyone who's going to cause trouble." I was grateful to Alec for looking after Sieg so often, but that was a whole other matter.

Sir Orsted said, "As you please." Thus, it was decided. Eris, Orsted, Alec, and I would all go to the Sword Sanctum together.

So we went! When we arrived, the peaceful sight of a country village blanketed in snow welcomed us. I had some jitters, but I'd been here before, and this time, I had three reliable companions with me.

"What a great view. They sure have a great selection of swords for a country village. Oh, I spotted our first villager!"

Shivering beside my stoic companions, I carried on a conversation with myself right up until we arrived at the Sword God's main training hall.

A group of smiling Sword Saints showed us to the Ephemeral Hall. Everyone was pleasant, and the atmosphere seemed friendly. Yet, for some reason, I had this prickling sensation down my spine.

It's all in your head! I told myself. *Focus on the Sword God!*

Just then, one of the Sword Saints spoke. "If it's all right, I would first like to see the sword of Berserker Sword King Eris who slayed the former Sword God."

How's this for "hello"?!

Before I could even turn around, the Sword God shrugged. "Whatever you like," he said.

All hell broke loose after that.

Still smiling but radiating hostility from behind their eyes, the Sword Saints moved to challenge Eris. Oh, they looked friendly, and they were using practice swords, but I could see their ill intent. They'd use those wooden swords to beat Eris to death under the pretense of practice. It was obvious at a glance that they wouldn't hold back.

But then, Eris was still technically a Sword God. It'd take more than a few Sword Saints to get the better of her. She easily turned the tables on her would-be attackers. As she beat down one, then another, the Sword Saints' smiles turned into hateful snarls. They weren't hiding their malice anymore. In the middle of all this, only one person looked totally serene—Gino. Even Nina looked a bit troubled by the murder in the Sword Saints' eyes, but it was clear from Gino's face that he couldn't have cared less.

Anyway, I did my best to put on a cheerful face and explain what was going on. For all the good it did!

Haah. My stomach hurts. How did it come to this?

I had the feeling I'd screwed up right off the bat. With the vibe in here, it was a lost cause. I just wanted a chance to explain, but any chance at a conversation was totally shot now.

I didn't have time to stop her! She's just, you know, really fast!

Seriously, before Gino finished saying, "Whatever you like," Eris had stepped forward without hesitation, her wooden sword in hand. More Sword Saints were waiting in the center of the training hall. In the instant it took for me to lower my weight to where I now stood, Eris had already beaten one of them. Then, another round of Sword Saints stepped forward.

"My turn!"

"It is I you shall face next!"

What was this, whack-a-mole?

I felt like it was past time to end this little farce. There were a little over twenty Sword Saints, and Eris had already taken down almost all of them. No, she was actually fighting the last one, which meant it'd be the Sword God Gino's turn next. For now, he was sitting above it all, but if his people were taken out, he'd have no choice but to come forward himself. The Sword Saints were probably anticipating that moment when the Sword God struck the red-haired swordswoman dead. They wanted revenge against the one who'd killed the former Sword God. They'd basically declared they were itching for it. This was the prelude to an execution.

I was regretting my choices. Maybe coming here was a bad idea. Even Eris wouldn't leave a bout with the Sword God unscathed, and there was no way I could fight him myself at this range. At least things weren't all bad. My reflexes might be too slow, but Orsted and Alec would stop the Sword God's blade for me. Eris might get scratched up a bit...but so long as she was alive, I wouldn't complain. Eris was ready for whatever happened. Either way, I was grateful they had come with us.

The only thing was, if I interfered in a duel between Eris and the Sword God, negotiation would be out of the question. I wasn't sure exactly what would happen...but whatever it was, I could already feel the stomachache coming on. I had to stop this, then figure out some way to get us into a position to talk. That was my job here.

Listen up, Rudeus. They're a hot-headed lot, but you can make them listen if you just really try to talk to them. Give it your all, you hear? Up and at 'em!

"Urgh...I yield."

Just then, the last Sword Saint fell. Just like the last one, he clutched his wrist. Come to think of it, they'd basically all been holding their wrists. For some, it was the left, and for some the right, but Eris hadn't even bothered to switch up techniques. No wonder they were extra furious.

Was Nina up next, then? But Nina didn't look like she'd be moving anytime soon. I couldn't have said why, but I had the feeling it'd probably be the Sword God. When the Sword God acted, that's when I'd make my move.

Watch closely. This is the art of Go-no-Sen. As soon as the Sword God gets up, that's when I swoop in, ready to abase myself! "Gee, those sure were some spectacular battles. I got thirsty just watching. What do you say we stop for a break, have a cup of tea?"

That's how I'd make my entry. Was it smooth enough? It wouldn't sound like I was trying to provoke him, would it? It'd be better to say something in praise of the defeated Sword Saints.

My word, you folks at the Sword Sanctum really get fired up about your training!

Yeah, I'd go with that. That way, they could tell themselves, "Oh, well, it's training. Sometimes you lose."

Okay, okay. Let's go. Let's do this thing.

There was a pause. The Sword God didn't move, and Nina didn't come forward either.

"Done?" said Sword God Gino Britz, his tone breezy amid the crackling tension. "Now, what was it you came to see me about?"

Huh? It sounded like he was going to hear me out before the fight. That wasn't very Sword God Style, but it suited me. I stepped up.

"First, I'd like to apologize," I said.

"For what?" Gino asked.

"The previous Sword God." As I said this, there was a shift in the air around the Sword Saints, as though we'd finally gotten to what they'd been waiting for.

He's handed us a chance! Now's our moment! It's revenge time! If they'd been dogs, they'd have been barking and ready to pounce. For a moment, I wondered if I should have been less direct, but it would have ended the same way. There was no avoiding the truth.

The Sword God had a dubious look on his face. Seeing it made me hesitate too. Had I said something strange? I almost started glancing around nervously. Then, Gino nodded with an air of understanding.

"Now that you mention it, Nina said something ages ago about helping you, I

think. I suppose if you kill the father of an ally, you have to apologize, huh?”

He sounded like it had nothing to do with him at all. The Sword Saints looked more shocked than I did.

“But my master...that is, the previous Sword God Gall Falion, went to fight you of his own free will, right? If anything, shouldn’t we be the ones apologizing? If this concerns all of Sword God Style and he attacked you, then we’re the ones who broke the agreement. What’s going on with that, anyway? I don’t know anything about it.”

I would have liked to ask *him* what was going on. Was I really talking to the top guy in Sword God Style right now? I was expecting someone more, you know, unwilling to listen to reason, along the lines of Atofe. This guy was maybe *too* chill. It was a strange feeling, more like I was talking to someone from North God Style, if anything. Atofe excluded, of course.

“Um...” *Calm down. Just answer his question first.*

“That was just a conversation between Nina and Eris—it was before any formal agreement was reached. I actually came here once before but was told you were otherwise engaged, so I left again... I thought Nina would have mentioned it to you?”

“I did,” said Nina, nodding vaguely, “but it hasn’t come up since.”

“Mm,” agreed Gino. “I’ve never heard anything about us standing against Dragon God Orsted. That being said, if he fought you...” Gino’s eyes narrowed. “It sounds like my predecessor opposed you?”

The fervor of the Sword Saints mounted. I could practically hear them thinking, *All right, you heard him! Time to draw our swords and fight! Come on, hurry up!*

“Wait,” I said hurriedly. “If you’d just calm down...”

Gino raised his eyebrows. “Do I look upset to you?”

“Not at all! You’re the very picture of calm! Look, the thing is, we came here to apologize and to ensure that you and I don’t stay enemies. A hostile relationship with the powerful warriors of the Sword God Style isn’t what we

want at all. We like to be on friendly terms with powerful people. We're here ready to offer friendship to you. We can offer help with distribution channels for swords and food supplies, infrastructure maintenance, and even construction. Conversely, if you stand against us, we can cut those things off. It'll be bad all round. Right?"

After I finished blurting all this out, Gino sighed.

I might have gone on a touch too long. Given I'd been imagining Atofe, I ought to have trimmed it down. But this guy didn't seem so simple that he'd turn around and say, "Sure, I'll be your ally!" just because I got him a really rare bottle of wine.

Gino regarded me, then spoke. "Do I have to spell it out for you to understand? My predecessor didn't say anything to me about a grudge. That means his decision to fight you wasn't on behalf of all of Sword God Style—it was personal. It has nothing to do with us, and so I have no interest in fighting. *This* is more important to me than that."

As he said this, he pulled Nina close and buried his face in her hair. Nina's cheeks went pink, but she didn't stop him.

I get you're hot for her, but maybe you should consider not doing that in public? Look, Eris is bright red! Her eyes are popping out of her head. She also had her arms folded and her feet planted apart like she was ready to fight.

Seriously, *was* this the Sword God I was talking to? His intelligent answers were freaking me out. It was *creepy*. High-ranked Sword God Style practitioners were more the sort to shout something like "What the hell are you talking about? Enough yapping! You'll die for what you did to my dad!" Then they'd attack you. Right? Wait, scratch that. That was Atofe—so, North God Style. But they were pretty much the same, weren't they?

There was a thought. Maybe this guy in front of me was a body double, like someone from the office in charge of diplomatic relations.

Regardless, I *was* grateful he felt that way. Even if it was odd that he was so unconcerned by one of his relatives getting killed... I guess he'd considered the situation and decided to prioritize the future over his own feelings. That made sense to me. I bet he'd thought things over and made up his mind long ago.

“In that case, allow us to—”

“Hold on!” shouted one of the Sword Saints, jumping to his feet. He was red in the face and pointing at us—no, at *Orsted*.

“All of us revered the old Sword God! Through watching him wield his sword, we learned, studied, and grew stronger! And they *killed* him! Those people right there! Are we supposed to stand by?! They killed the man we owe everything to! Do you want to make Sword God Style a laughingstock?!”

“All right, go ahead then,” Gino said without missing a beat. “Go fetch a real sword. I’ll watch you.”

The Sword Saint froze. “What...?”

“I’m sure they came here ready for a fight. Look, that’s Berserker Sword King Eris, Dragon God Orsted, and North God Kalman III, with Rudeus Greyrat behind them to support them with magic. Even if all of you attacked at once, they’d wipe you out before you landed a single blow.”

“But...”

“Come on, get to it. I’ll make sure your body is well taken care of, and I’ll even give you a funeral. I can’t say if your deaths will do anything to preserve the honor of Sword God Style, but I’m sure your corpses will be satisfied.”

The Sword God stood there in silence for a moment after this, then sat back down, fists shaking with repressed frustration. Then, he said in a trembling voice, “Do we...have no choice but to follow them? Without fighting, without avenging the old Sword God...”

“That’s what I’m telling you—if you don’t like it, go get your sword. I’m not going to force anything on any of you. Do what you like. Just like my father and the others.” Gino sounded tired of this.

I liked the idea of quickly bringing them around rather than letting any grudges fester—though it seemed harsh for that to be a matter of life and death.

Just then, Eris spoke up. “All the Sword Emperors are gone, huh?”

Gino shifted to face her. “My father left the Sword Sanctum along with the

others. It seems they were displeased by my becoming Sword God.”

Apparently, “Sword Emperors” didn’t include Nina. Gino’s phrasing suggested he was talking about the two Sword Emperors who’d been the direct disciples of the previous Sword God. Now that Eris said it, I realized I couldn’t see anyone who fit the bill.

“I expect that by now, they’ll have started their own training halls in Asura or Millis, or perhaps the King Dragon Kingdom. I mean, I suppose I could have left too.” Gino shrugged. “Anyway, did you come just to apologize? It was nice of you to do that, but I’m honestly not sure why you bothered.”

Oh, man. Not to speak ill of anyone, but Gino was a little too—how to put it? Cold, philosophical, or just bizarre.

“No, there’s more,” I said. “It’s a long story, but we’re actually fighting a being called the Man-God...”

I laid out the details of the battle between us and the Man-God. All else aside, Gino seemed like a guy I could reason with. If we could come to an agreement without any bloodshed, so much the better! It felt anticlimactic, but that was fine. Once I stopped looking at him through Sword-God-colored glasses, Gino was a nice young man with a good head on his shoulders. After securing his cooperation, we could go sit down for a cup of tea and get to know each other better. I was sure he’d stop seeming so creepy then.

“In conclusion,” I said, “I’d like to formally request the cooperation of the Sword God School in our future endeavors.”

“I decline.”

You...huh? For real?

“I will not work with you.”

There was an “Ooh!” from the Sword Saints, but they looked as confused as me.

“So, you’re going to side with the Man-God, then?” I asked tentatively.

“No. I won’t work against you either.”

Okay...? “You mean you’re staying neutral? May I ask why?”

“I mean to stay true to my master’s teachings.”

“What teachings?”

“The master always said to be strong for your own sake. Honestly, I didn’t understand what he meant for a long time. I doubt anyone here did. Even the Sword Emperors like my father didn’t get it. When I realized I wanted Nina, it became clear to me. A sword is something you wield for yourself—purely for the sake of fulfilling your own purpose. Nothing else.”

Gino spoke rapidly and fluently, and there was conviction in his voice that told me he believed in the unshakable truth of its wisdom.

“Because of this,” he went on, “I will not work with you. I wield my sword for myself alone. Everything I do, I do for myself.”

“Even if your family were in danger, you wouldn’t pick up your sword?” I asked.

“I would. If I loved them, I would,” Gino said. Then, for the first time, he looked straight at me. His gaze was strong and commanding, nothing at all like the picture Eris’s description had painted of him. “Or are you saying you’ll kill my family if I refuse to work with you?”

A chill fell over the training hall. Gino’s voice was as cold as ice and borderline murderous. I felt a cold sweat break out all over my body. If I’d been alone, I probably would have wet myself. This was the Sword God, the one who’d taken that title after defeating Sword God Gall Falion in an instant. A weird guy, yeah, but one of the world’s best swordsmen—a power to be reckoned with. I *felt* it.

“No,” I told him. “I love my family too.”

“Oh? I’m relieved to hear it.” The murderous note faded from his voice. “It seems you’re everything I heard you were, Rudeus.”

“What’ve people told you?”

“That you became the Dragon God’s follower for the sake of your family, and that you laid a whole country to waste.”

“Uh, that’s true, broadly speaking. I didn’t lay any countries to waste, though.”

“You have more nerve than I expected.” Gino’s gaze flicked to either side of me, to Eris, Alec, and the Sword Saints. All of them had their hands on their swords. Some had even already drawn. I turned to look behind me but saw that Orsted hadn’t so much as twitched. As I might have expected. I hadn’t moved either, but that was only because I was still shaken by Gino.

“In other words, you are a man I can trust,” Gino went on.

What’s “in other words” supposed to mean?

“It is because you are such a man that I feel safe in saying that I will not work with you. My sword fights for me and those I love, and no one else.”

“Oh... All right.”

I understood Gino Britz better now. He just wanted to protect the people he loved with his own hands—not unlike myself. I’d failed to do so and thrown myself on Orsted’s mercy instead, but I was sure Gino thought he could pull it off. What’s more, he wasn’t wrong. He just didn’t seem motivated to do anything else. Of course, he was still the Sword God; even if he declared his neutrality, that wouldn’t stop enemies from coming to him, but it seemed he didn’t have it in him to go make more.

I wasn’t sure why he didn’t include the previous Sword God among the people he loved, but I supposed that was different. That man had lived and died on his own terms. Gino didn’t seem to object to that.

“Hmm...”

I couldn’t see how else I was going to sell this to him. Gino was complete with himself. Unless we gave up on fighting the Man-God, or he—like me—felt like he couldn’t protect his family through his strength alone, he wouldn’t change his mind. No matter how I tried to persuade him, I’d only be grasping at air. He’d made his decision and could not be moved. It was just as you’d expect from the top dog of the Sword God school.

“Okay,” I said. “In that case, at least be careful if the Man-God appears in your dreams. He’ll lie, saying it’s all for your family, but if you listen, you’ll lose everything.”

“I understand,” said Gino.

I didn't want to, but...it was time to back down. Gino wasn't going to work against us, so that was something. He wouldn't be our ally, but I also hadn't made an enemy. After learning the kind of man he was, I took him at his word that he was trusting me enough to be honest. That was good enough for me.

"If I die and someone else takes my place," Gino added, "be sure and come back. This is no more than my personal decision, you see."

"Thanks, I'll do that." I turned back to look at Orsted. Who knew what was going on under that helmet? "Does that work for you, Sir Orsted?"

He nodded slowly. "It does."

Once that was over and I healed up the Sword Saints' wounds, things moved on to a training session with Alec. That meant I was seated at the front of the training hall in the place of honor, watching as Alec sparred freestyle with the Sword Saints. The Sword Saints only had practice swords, but they were clearly fighting to kill. I bet they thought they could get away with it if they killed Alec in the heat of training.

Alec brushed them off without any trouble. Having said that, maybe because these *were* Sword Saints, or maybe because he was distracted, some of them did occasionally get a hit on him—with the Sword of Light. In the end, though, their swords were still only wood. The moment they hit, the wood splintered, and Alec took zero damage. That battle aura was too OP.

Though, they used unusual practice swords at the Sword Sanctum. It seemed they had a core of something like iron to give them something closer to the correct weight. Without battle aura, a hit in the wrong place would probably be enough to kill. Hey! That explained why there were only Sword Saints here. Only the advanced tier and above could call up a battle aura.

"By the way, Sir Orsted, why did you come with me?" I whispered to Orsted, who was beside me.

"I wished to get a look at Gino Britz."

"You mean what's different about him than usual?"

"Indeed."

Gino silently watched them spar, with Nina at his side like always. Beside her sat Eris, and the two of them were talking about something. Every now and then I heard the name “Gall Falion.” I assumed they were talking about the death of the previous Sword God.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“He is unchanged. He is single-mindedly obstinate in his determination to live only for himself.”

“Huh.”

“As a child, Gino was unstable, liable to be swayed by the Man-God’s words. Now, from what I’ve seen here, we need not be concerned.”

“All right.” Depending on how you thought about it, a neutral party who wasn’t an enemy was sort of like an ally. It made it unlikely that he’d become a disciple, for one thing. He wouldn’t help us prepare for the future, but it wasn’t like all the other nations were putting all their energy into that either. The important thing was that he wouldn’t become a pawn of the Man-God. Of course, he might still turn against us whether he wanted to or not...but once you started thinking like that, there was no end to it.

“I-I yield...!” There was a *thud* as one of the Sword Saints went down.

“My turn next!” said another, getting up straight away and heading for the center of the training hall...

Next thing I knew, all the Sword Saints were either sitting or sprawled on the ground. Every Sword Saint was down. For the second time today. North God Kalman III sure was something, eh?

There was a lull in noise that filled the hall.

“Then, right at the end, he said, ‘the strong live free.’” Eris’s voice rang out clearly through the silence. She looked up, taken aback by the sound of her own voice. Her mouth immediately formed a tight line, and she glared threateningly at the Sword Saints who’d drawn closer to her.

They looked down, muttering and shooting glances at Gino. I heard comments like “Making his apprentices fight his battles...” and “Does he even care about

the honor of Sword God Style?”

Gino’s expression was as unconcerned as ever. For all I knew, he heard stuff like this every day.

“Won’t you join in our training, Sword God?” one of the Sword Saints asked, taking advantage of Gino’s silence. The man, who had a massive bruise spreading across his face, was the one who’d first challenged Alec. He was also the one who’d asked Gino to hold on earlier.

“No. I’m fine here,” Gino replied.

“Why?!”

“Why would I? I asked him to train with you because you requested it of me. If you’ve all had enough, then that’s that.”

The Sword Saint’s face twisted, and he shook with rage. Unable to bear it any longer, he shouted, “Things were better with the old Sword God! He upheld the honor of Sword God Style! He wouldn’t have let them swagger in here no matter who they are! No wonder the Sword Emperors left! You’re Sword God, yet you won’t even teach us your skills! You sneak off alone to do all your training, then sit in the training hall flirting with your *woman* day after day after day! It’s the same thing here, with these people. You ought to seek revenge yourself, but instead you entertain them while they ask you to be their servant! If you’d swallowed your pride and submitted to a stronger enemy, that would have still been better than this! Instead, you make some half-baked declaration of *neutrality*?! Do you want to make enemies of us, your followers? What is *wrong* with you?! What good is a Sword God like you?!”

A hush fell over the training hall. Gino’s expression hadn’t changed. He looked just as unconcerned as before—vacant, even. Like he was wondering what this guy was going on about.

The man, on the other hand, had gone pale, like he knew he’d said too much.

“Each person’s sword is their own. A victory for me isn’t a victory for you, nor would it uphold your honor,” Gino said softly. “I defeated the last Sword God because I wanted what Nina and I have now. That’s why I act this way. I didn’t do it to uphold anyone’s honor, and I didn’t do it because I wanted to be your

nursemaid. If you don't like it, you're free to leave. I wouldn't mind stepping down as Sword God, but if I turned over the title to you, you'd drive me out, wouldn't you? I have no strong objection to leaving, but it's a bad time for me right now, while our children are still so young."

There was a sigh from the Sword Saints as they looked at the floor again. I half expected someone to call out, "That's not the problem! Why can't you understand?!" The energy in the hall was atrocious. Apparently, things weren't going too well between the Sword God and his students. Was it because Gino was still young himself? If he didn't work things out with these guys, he could easily find himself surrounded by enemies.

"There's no need to be like that. You could at least give them a show." It was Nina who broke the silence. She raised her head from Gino's shoulder, sat up straight, and tucked her legs underneath her. "I'd like to see you fight too," she said.

"All right! Just for you, Nina." Just like that, Gino got to his feet, as though all his reluctance so far had been no more than an act. Did Nina have him *that* whipped? More to the point, if he could change like that, was he even stable? To me, at least, he looked anything but. Was this guy *okay*?

"How about you, Eris?" Nina said. "Gino's stronger than he was."

In response, Eris rose to her feet too. "Okay," she said. She looked at me, then tossed something. I caught it without thinking, then saw it was her sword—the magic sword Windpipe. It was the sword the previous Sword God had used.

Gino and Eris moved into the center of the training hall, where Alec stood.

He shrugged. "All right, who do I fight first?"

"The weaker one, obviously," Eris said, pushing Alec back. He nodded in acceptance, then came back over to us. There wasn't a drop of sweat on him. I'd never seen him sweat, not even... Wait, that wasn't true. In the Biheiril Kingdom, I'd seen him drenched.

"What a bunch of good-for-nothings," he whispered as he sat down beside me. "Here they have the chance to learn from those better than themselves, but they're not interested in learning."

“Yeah, even I could see that.”

“Right? They’re even worse than that gang that hangs around my grandmother.”

To be fair, it was a little different for Atofe’s personal guard. For them it was learn or die, so they had no choice but to get stronger.

With that thought, I looked up just in time to see Eris raise her wooden sword. As usual, she held it above her head in an offensive stance. Sword God Gino dropped down over his back foot, his hand on his sword. The stance reminded me of Ghislaine, but Gino’s was far more tranquil. When Ghislaine dropped into that stance, she wagged her tail with a fearsome glint in her eyes, like she was waiting for the right moment to sink her teeth into her prey. Gino, meanwhile, was empty. Like Orsted earlier, he was so still it seemed as though time had stopped. Nothing could get by him.

Eris slowly edged toward him. If it hadn’t been for our earlier conversation, I’d have my heart in my mouth. He might hit her, but she wouldn’t *die*.

This *was* going to be okay, right?

Maybe I should open my Eye of Foresight, just in case. But even with the demon eye, I still wouldn’t be able to see his sword move. Could I count on Orsted to stop him if he were about to go for a killing blow?

“I assume you don’t need a start signal?” Gino asked Eris.

“No,” she said.

And then, it was over.

Eris takes a blow to her sword hand and drops to one knee. Her wooden sword spins away through the air to hit the wall of the training hall with a clatter.

That was all I managed to see with the demon eye before, scarcely a second later, it became reality. To me, it looked like Eris moved first. Before she finished saying “No,” the tip of her sword was already a blur, but she’d lost. Gino had been faster, and his strike had broken her sword arm. Except, it wasn’t just her sword arm. The big toe of Eris’s front foot was bent in the wrong direction. So he’d struck twice? A multi-hit attack?

Eris's arm and toe were broken, but she didn't back down. It'd take more than that to stop her. She charged forward with her one good leg, a savage grin on her face...and then, all of a sudden, she relaxed and yielded.

"That's enough," said Orsted, his voice ringing out through the hall. At this, people began to let out admiring "Oohs" and saying things like "Incredible!" But they were the minority, and even then, their voices carried a note of confusion.

The Sword Saints whispered among themselves.

"What happened? Did she dodge the first strike?"

"He struck at her ankle first. She didn't fully dodge it, so her toe..."

"But what about the second strike?"

It was over so quickly that they couldn't tell who the winner was, but it was obvious at a glance. Eris sank to the ground, sweat pouring off her, while the Sword God, still standing, languidly lowered his sword. Gino had agreed to the Sword Saints' demand for a demonstration, yet they couldn't even work out what he'd done. What was the point? Perhaps frustrated by this very thing, the Sword Saints' faces were stony. Underneath that, I saw a hint of relief. The honor of the Sword God school was safe. If their egos were satisfied, then that was a win for me.

"Incredible, Sword God!" Alec said a bit too loudly. "Your first strike was aimed at her ankle, but then you swung up along the shortest possible path to hit her wrist. It didn't matter if you hit her ankle or if she dodged. Either way, you delayed her first strike just long enough that you created an opening at her wrist where you could counter. Only a fighter with total confidence in the speed of his sword could perform such a feat!"

It sounded like he'd heard the Sword Saints' confusion. They nodded, saying, "Ah, I get it now."

Thanks for the commentary, Alec.

Alec remained sitting, but there was a hint of reproach in his eyes as he looked at Gino. It was a look that said, *You're their master. You should teach them.*

“In the old days, you would still have attacked me, even in that state,” Gino said.

“If this were the time to stand my ground, I’d still be fighting,” Eris replied.

“You really are something, Eris.” With a hint of a smile, Gino nodded slowly.

In response, Eris laughed, but there were beads of sweat on her brow. A broken wrist or ankle wasn’t enough to make Eris cry, but it still had to hurt. I stood and dashed over to her.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said slowly. “I’m fine. Hurry up and heal me. But *don’t* get any ideas about touching anything else! We’re in public.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I promptly cast a healing spell to mend Eris’s broken bones. Since I’d been duly warned, I didn’t try to cop a feel. Despite it being a mock battle, Gino had hit hard enough to break bone. I shuddered to think what would have happened if he’d hit her head or neck. At least Orsted was here, so as long as he didn’t actually take her head off her shoulders, there was no permanent harm done.

The Sword God sure was something. I hadn’t seen his sword move at all, just like his predecessor. I did not want this guy as my enemy.

“Well?” I asked Eris.

“He was devastating. I hate to say it, but I never had a chance.” I’d been asking about her injuries, but that was the answer I got. She sounded genuinely regretful and she was frowning. Being a mother hadn’t made Eris less serious about her sword work. In the context of that, she—oh, who was I kidding? She was just frustrated because she’d lost. Eris had always hated losing.

“It must be my turn, then.”

As I led Eris back, Alec got to his feet, his face aglow with excitement—but before he could rush in, he looked back at Orsted.

“Sir Orsted, may I?”

“As you like.”

Was Orsted giving him permission to beat the crap out of Gino? That could change the order of the Seven Great Powers. Gino had declared his neutrality, and Eris’s defeat just now had satisfied the Sword Saints’ egos. As of now, the Sword Sanctum was neutral. If the Sword God lost, the equation changed. Not only Gino, but most of the Sword Sanctum might turn against us. This was tricky. Should I put a stop to it?

Nope! I couldn’t say anything, not after Orsted had given the go-ahead. All I could do was think about how to repair it if it went wrong.

“En garde!” Alec stepped forward. This was a mock battle with wooden swords, but the fighters were still a North God and the Sword God. It was no exaggeration to call it a battle between Great Powers. Seven was just an arbitrary number. Which would win?

In terms of experience, Alec had the advantage. The Sword God had beaten his predecessor, but he was still young. He hadn’t done enough yet. And Alec had his pride as North God Kalman III. He’d also gotten a preview of his opponent and could follow his moves.

Alec stood with his sword held out in front of him. Gino dropped down over his back foot. Who would move first? Usually, you’d expect Gino, the Sword God Style fighter, to attack, and the North God Style fighter to counter. But I had the feeling the opposite could happen.

It was Alec who moved first.

This time, I saw it: a thrust from the center, moving so fast it was like no-motion rather than slow-motion. Gino’s sword was even faster. He timed his slash perfectly to meet the tip of Alec’s thrust, deflecting it a scant few degrees...and that was as much as I saw. The next thing I knew, Gino’s sword had vanished. A moment later, I saw Alec’s left hand hanging limp and broken. Simultaneously, Alec stepped back. A black line remained on the floor of the training hall where he’d stood. Gino must have used the same simultaneous attack he’d beaten Eris with, but this time hit the wrist first.



Alec readjusted his grip on his sword with his broken hand. Well, I'd *thought* it was broken, but it had healed almost instantly. That'd be his immortal demon blood at work. There was a fire in his eyes that seemed to say, "In North God Style, this is where the real fight begins."

Stepping forward, Gino launched into a ferocious attack. With every swing of his sword, he broke one of Alec's arms or legs. It didn't take Alec more than an instant to recover, so the attacks didn't disable him, but that was the only upside. Alec was probably trying plenty of moves, but none fazed his opponent. Gino didn't allow a single opening for Alec to go on the offensive.

At last, Alec lowered his sword and said, "I yield."

He was unwounded, but his clothes were in tatters, and the tip of his wooden sword was in splinters. Gino, meanwhile, was unscathed. He was damp with sweat, but it was still an overwhelming victory. I hadn't expected there to be such a wide gap, not against an opponent as strong as Alec. Gino could have rivaled the Great Powers—wait, scratch that. He was *already* one of the Great Powers.

"My word, you're strong!" Alec exclaimed. "This has been a reminder that no matter how strong you are, there's always someone stronger."

"Ah, but you fought one-handed. Who knows what would happen in a real battle?"

"If this were a real battle, I expect I'd be in pieces," Alec said, graciously accepting his defeat.

This was what the Sword God could do with a practice sword without a scabbard. With a real sword, he'd be even faster. The gap between them might be even greater then.

"Right." Still gripping his wooden sword, Alec came back to where we sat. Despite losing, his expression was bright. There was a touch of disappointment there, but nothing like how he'd yelled and cried back in the Biheiril Kingdom. I guess he'd grown too.

"Hm?" I glanced over and saw that all eyes in the training hall were on me. Even though the sparring was over, Gino was still in the center of the hall. He

was watching me too.

I heard the Sword Saints talking in hushed voices.

“The Seventh Great Power...”

“We get to witness a battle between two Great Powers!”

“Not that the Sword God will lose, of course.”

“We might even get to see some of Dragon God Orsted’s powers.”

Wuh? Huh? Say what now?

“Sir Rudeus,” Alec whispered in my ear, “by all means, demonstrate for them the might of the Magic Armor with which you defeated me!”

At that, I responded automatically. I already had my speech prepared.

“My word, you at the Sword Sanctum really get fired up about your training! But would you look at that? The sun’s about to set, and I’m starving! What do you say we wrap things up here?!”

It didn’t go over so well.

I wrapped up my visit to the Sword Sanctum. The Sword Saints all thought I was a coward, but what did I care? The Sword Sanctum—or, rather, Gino Britz—would remain neutral for as long as he lived. That was good enough for me.

Chapter 3:

Nina Britz

IT WAS DECIDED that Rudeus and the others would stay the night at the Sword Sanctum. They were given a room in the main training hall to sleep, while Eris alone was invited to Nina's house. She'd intended to stay at the training hall with Rudeus, but Nina insisted.

Nina's house meant Gino Britz's house. When Eris told Rudeus she was going to stay over by herself, he was worried and tried to delicately talk her out of it. He'd seen how the Sword Saints had acted; Eris had killed Gall, and they were out for blood. The atmosphere had gotten to Rudeus. Eris, on the other hand, remembered that the Sword Sanctum had always been like this. Sword fighters wanted to be *seen* as strong more than they wanted to *be* strong. There wasn't anyone with enough guts to attack a higher-ranked opponent outside the training hall. Only Eris might have tried it, and only when she was much younger.

She left Rudeus and the others at the training hall and went along to the Britz household alone. They lived a short way from the hall in a little house that didn't look like what you'd imagine for a Sword God.

"Here we are. Come in. This is when Gino does his training, so he's not home yet."

"Right, um, thanks." Eris nervously went inside. Thinking about it, this might have been the first time she'd ever gone to hang out at a friend's house. She saw Isolde, who lived in the Asuran capital, every time they visited the Asura Kingdom, but Eris had never visited her house. She'd been to the training hall attached to Isolde's house, but that wasn't quite the same thing.

"Hellooo!"

As Eris wrestled her nerves, a cheerful voice called out to greet her. There was a pitter-patter of footsteps as two children came bursting out from the back of the house.

“Welcome home, Mom!”

“Hi, Mom!”

One was a boy, full of energy, with a practice sword in his right hand and a big grin on his face. The other was a girl. She was still practically a baby and came hurrying after the boy with tottering steps. The two of them ran to the front door, only to stop short, gaping at the sight of Eris.

“This is my son, Nell, and my daughter, Jill. Kids, this is Eris. She’s a friend of mine.”

“Um, nice to meet you.” When Nina introduced her as her friend, Eris frowned a little, but she bowed her head.

When Nell heard her name, his eyes went wide. “You’ve got red hair! Are you *Berserker Sword King Eris?!?*”

“Wed heah!” burbled Jill. She seemed like she didn’t understand and was just echoing her brother, though it seemed *something* had caught her interest. She approached Eris, her eyes sparkling. Maybe red hair was rare in the Sanctum. Jill’s little hand reached out for her wavy hair, but before she got there, Nina scooped her up in her arms.

“Stop that,” she scolded.

“Bwight wed!” Jill whined, kicking her legs up and down.

Nell, seeing this, quickly said, “No, Jill! That’s the Berserker Sword King! If you touch her, she’ll gobble you up!”

“Bite?” Jill gazed fearfully up at Eris. At the sight, Eris let out a small laugh. The way they acted reminded her of Arus and Sieg a few years earlier.

“I won’t eat you,” Eris said.

“You’re just saying that to make them let their guards down before you snap them up.” Nina narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Eris. Eris scowled at her, at which point a smile broke out on Nina’s face.

“I’m only joking,” she said, holding out Jill. “Want to hold her?”

“Sure.” Eris took Jill. At first, the little girl looked scared, but she quickly

perked up, perhaps sensing that Eris was much more accustomed to holding babies than her own mother.

“Wed! Pwetty!” she said happily, grabbing a handful of Eris’s hair and stuffing it in her mouth.

“Oh, no, Jill! Don’t eat that!”

“Aw...” When Nina told her off, Jill immediately took the hair out of her mouth. Red or not, it was still hair, so it couldn’t have tasted good. Now, Eris’s hair was all sticky.

“Guess I’m the one who got eaten,” Eris said, smiling. She patted Jill’s head.

A look of surprise came into Nina’s eyes. *Is this the same Eris?*

She’d seen this once before in the Asura Kingdom. Eris was a mother now, just like her; she knew how to handle children.

“That didn’t taste good, did it? So it’s not for eating. Okay?” Eris said to Jill.

“Kay.”

She put Jill down, and the girl bounced away into the house.

“I’m Nell Britz!” Stepping up to take her place came Nell. He knelt, then bowed. “You’re the real Berserker Sword King, huh? It’s an honor to meet you!”

“I’m, um, Eris Greyrat. You don’t have to bow.”

“Oh, no...! Um! It’s, um...! I’ve always...” Nell looked up at Eris, his eyes sparkling and his face full of excitement as he tried to get his words out.

“Nell, that’s enough,” interrupted Nina. “How long are you going to keep Eris standing in the entrance? At least wait until we’ve had dinner.” She put a hand on his head and ruffled his hair a little more forcefully than usual.

“*Fiiine.*” Nell cast his eyes down, looking disappointed. He wanted to hear more, to do his sword practice with her if he could...but his mom would definitely say no. She always said no. No matter what famous sword fighter came to the Sword Sanctum, she never introduced Nell to them.

Leaving the disappointed Nell behind, Eris let herself be led inside the house.

“Everyone’s changed, huh?” After dinner, Eris relaxed in the living room while talking to Nina. Gino wasn’t there. After they’d eaten, he’d taken the children to a different room. Based on the sound of children’s laughter, Eris assumed he was playing with them.

“I never expected things to end up like this.”

Out of Nina, Eris, and Gino, Gino had always been one step behind. He was the one who always looked sulky as he swung his sword and couldn’t answer the Sword God’s questions. That same Gino had married Nina and taken down Eris in a single strike. Eris couldn’t hide her surprise. She’d heard about it from Gall, but seeing him with her own eyes, it really was as though he were a different person.

“Nina, back at the training hall, you didn’t even pick up your sword.”

The same went for Nina. After she’d pushed herself so hard to become strong, she’d only watched Eris. Not only that, she’d let Gino do whatever he liked. Eris couldn’t imagine the old Nina ever doing that.

“Our next one is already on the way,” Nina said, stroking her stomach. It was hard to tell, but if you looked closely, the slightest swell was visible there. Ruefully, she added, “Gino told me to take the title of Sword Emperor, but I think I’ll probably retire.”

“And that’s enough for you?” Eris asked before she could stop herself.



Nina glanced down, but there was a look of satisfaction on her face. “Yes... I’m happy. Of course, I’d have liked to keep going with the sword a little longer, but I don’t know. Funnily enough, I don’t have many regrets. I think maybe I stopped being a swordswoman when I lost to Gino.”

“You lost?”

“Yes, before he challenged the Sword God, he told me, ‘If I win, be mine.’ I fought him without holding back, and I lost.”

“That’s a beautiful way to propose.”

“Isn’t it?” Nina laughed softly, thinking back on that day. Up until then, Nina had wanted to be the strongest sword fighter in the world—the Sword God herself. That desire had vanished in an instant. Gino was just that strong. He’d shut her down in a single strike, a pure mockery of her efforts, just as he’d done to Eris today.

If it hadn’t been Gino, if it hadn’t been her childhood friend whom she’d made follow her around when they were little, maybe she would have felt differently. She might have thrown herself into her sword training with tears streaming down her cheeks and renewed determination, just like she had after losing to Eris.

Instead, it had been Gino. He’d become strong just to marry her. He’d beaten her, then gone toe to toe with Sword God Gall Falion and won. When he returned with the title of Sword God, he swept Nina up and kissed her forcefully, then pushed her to the ground then and there. That day, Nina had become Gino’s in both mind and body. Nina knew that it was impossible to become Sword God without extraordinary effort. Neither hard work nor talent alone was enough. Even both might not be enough. Up until then, Gino had let Nina lead him, putting in as much effort as she did. On top of that foundation, he’d gone even further than she had, pushing himself hard enough to spit blood.

He made it. He attained the rank of Sword God, reaching a place that vanishingly few ever achieved. Nina thought he ought to have a reward to match—in the words of Gall Falion, to do what he liked, so she said nothing. She had her own thoughts about it and things she’d liked to have said, and Gino

would probably have listened. But she was gripped by the fear that if she did, he would suddenly become weak. Nina couldn't get in the way of the person she'd come to admire. Thus, she decided to give up her sword and throw herself into her next challenge: being a mother.

"What about you, Eris? Are you happy now?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Even though you're one of three wives?"

"Yeah. It's normal. My father only married my mother, but my grandfather had plenty. Rudeus's father had two wives too."

"I mean, I don't follow the Millis faith, but I just... I can't imagine being one of many," said Nina.

Eris had her share of frustrations, of course. She wondered, sometimes, what it would be like to be Rudeus's only wife. She'd be happy, of course. Just the two of them all day long, with no one to get between them. That was the thing, though—it'd be *just* her and Rudeus. What would that be like compared to the Greyrat household they had now? If there were no Sylphie and Roxy, that meant no Lucie, Lara, Sieg, or Lily. She'd still have Arus and Chris, and instead of the other kids, she might have had more children herself. But she couldn't imagine better kids than the ones they had now.

Comparing what could be to what she had, there'd be no one to hand her a towel when she came in drenched in sweat after a day of training; no one to say "Take her into the bath with you" as a mud-covered Lara was pushed into her arms; and no one who'd leave a change of clothes and underwear for her when she came out after bathing the kids.

They gave each other just the right amount of space, not clinging so tightly it got annoying, but not hesitating to share little tasks. Eris couldn't imagine what her life would look like without Sylphie and Roxy—and life was *good*. Watching their children grow up felt fun and rewarding. Soon, she'd start more serious sword training with them. Lucie was more focused on magic than swords, and Lara was still a bit spaced out, but Arus and Sieg seemed keen. For that matter, Sieg was already learning North God Style. Thinking about how she'd teach them and how they'd grow filled Eris with happiness.

“You’ve changed too, Eris,” said Nina.

“I have, huh?”

“Back in the day, you’d have drop-kicked a kid out of the house.”

“Excuse you! I’d never kick a kid.”

“You were like a kid yourself back then. Now, you’re looking after them.”

“I’ve had two.”

“What about a third?”

“No, I’ve had enough.”

“Have you had enough of the fun part?” Nina asked.

Eris’s cheeks burned scarlet. “N-no, that part I want more of,” she answered honestly. It was feeling heavily pregnant and unable to move freely that she just couldn’t bring herself to like.

“You know, you’re much easier to talk to now,” Nina said.

“I like you better too. You were a bit of a pain in the butt.”

“I bet I was.”

The old Nina had been all sharp edges. She’d thought she was the best and could treat everyone below her however she liked. Being humbled by Eris had brought her down to earth a little, but marrying Gino had made a bigger difference.

Eris suddenly remembered another person. “Oh yeah, did you hear? Isolde got married too.”

Isolde Cluel, the master of the Water God school who now went by the name of Water God Reida.

“Yes, I got a letter about the wedding, but I was pregnant, so I couldn’t go.”

“What about her baby?”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of that. A girl or a boy?”

“A girl. She can’t have many kids as Water God, so she was disappointed that she didn’t produce an heir.”

“That’s rough. Isn’t her husband a North Emperor? Wasn’t he angry or disappointed that she had a girl?”

“Dohga would never say anything like that. He’s a good guy.” As she spoke, Eris rifled through her memories.

The one who’d spoken up the most against Isolde and Dohga’s marriage was Rudeus. Dohga had saved Rudeus in the Biheiril Kingdom, so Rudeus owed Dohga his life and really trusted him. Dohga was innocent, honest, and seemed like an easy mark. When Rudeus heard he was marrying a superficial woman like Isolde, he’d wondered if she was after money or if she was going to cheat on him. He’d even secretly done a background check on her. Maybe he’d forgotten that Isolde had saved him as well.

In any case, there was no way he’d ever be disappointed about his daughter. Not innocent Dohga, whom Rudeus trusted so much. The last time Eris had seen him, he’d been smiling from ear to ear as his daughter, who was the spitting image of her mother, sat on his shoulders. Isolde said he even did the cleaning and washing and looked after the children, all of his own initiative.

Even Eris, who didn’t do much around the house as a rule, couldn’t help but say to Isolde, “Shouldn’t you help out a bit too?”

She’d never forget how Isolde had looked away sheepishly and muttered, “But he’s better at it...”

“I hope our children can inspire each other to grow,” said Nina.

Eris nodded in agreement. “Same here. If you like, you could send yours to study at the Magic University too.”

“I like the sound of that, but Gino wouldn’t allow it. He always wants to keep those he loves close to him.”

“In that case, they’ll never be able to leave the Sword Sanctum.”

“If they want to leave, I’m sure they won’t wait for his permission.” Nina giggled a little. She couldn’t imagine ever having a conversation like this with the old Eris.

“Hm?” Eris, suddenly sensing someone, turned around. A child stood at the

entrance to the living room. It was Nell, holding a book in his hand. When his eyes met Eris's, he strode forward, looking determined.

"Um, Miss Berserker Sword King?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"Y-you know this person, right?!" He held out the book to her. It was *The Superd's Adventure*, a book Eris knew very well. Norn had written it, Rudeus had turned it into a book, and Zanoba and Aisha had sold it.

"You mean Ruijerd?" she asked. "Or Norn?"

"Norn...? You mean you know the writer too?! Oh, right, I guess you have the same last name!"

"Norn's my sister-in-law. Rudeus's little sister."

"Right, 'Quagmire' Rudeus! Number seven of the Seven Great Powers! Also known as the right hand of the Dragon God and Rudeus the Magician King!"

"That's right. You sure know a lot."

"I asked my mom about the Superd and about you, Eris! And I heard about the Quagmire and the Berserker Sword King from the bards! I wanted to meet you, even just once!" Nell looked up at Eris, his eyes sparkling. To him, she was a character from the songs of bards, straight out of a legend.

Unlike his father, Nell was itching to know more about the "Outside World." One day, he dreamed of venturing out into it and becoming someone the bards sang of.

"Did you? I'm honored," said Eris. She felt a grin spreading across her face, but forced herself to look serious before nodding gravely, thinking she couldn't ruin the boy's dream. In her mind, she pictured Roxy's serene expression.

"Rudeus and Orsted are both here, too," she added. "You should go see them before they leave. Oh, and North God Kalman III!"

"Can I?!" Nell's head snapped up to stare at Eris. Number seven and number two of the Seven Great Powers, and Kalman from the Epic of the North God all towered as tall, if not taller, than his monstrously strong father in his mind. He'd never imagined that on such an ordinary day as this his dream of meeting them

would come true.

“Um...” Nell tucked the book behind his back, then rubbed his knees together nervously. “You’ve traveled all over the world, right, Miss Berserker Sword King?”

“Yep, from the Demon Continent to the Millis Continent to the edges of the Central Continent. The Divine Continent too. I haven’t been to the Begaritt Continent, though.”

“If you don’t mind, I was wondering, if...if you’d tell me about your adventures...”

“*My* adventures? Not Rudeus’s?”

“Yes, I want to hear about the Berserker Sword King!”

As Eris nodded, a smile spread over her face. Thinking back, she used to love those sorts of tales, always begging Ghislaine to tell her about her adventures. She’d never dreamed she’d be the one telling the stories. Nowadays, she told Arus and Sieg lots of stories whenever they asked her, but this felt different. This time, she wasn’t being asked as a mother, but as a hero.

Not that Eris thought of it like that. She just felt a bit pleased.

“Let’s see, then... How about the story of when I was teleported to the Demon Continent?” With that, Eris cheerfully began her tale.

Watching her, Nina felt a smile tug at her mouth. “So different,” she murmured.

Nina had changed, and so had Eris. They couldn’t claim to be inspiring each other to improve anymore, but she felt that if anything, she and Eris were closer now. When they first met, she’d been sure they would never get along. Even when Eris had departed the Sword Sanctum as a Sword King, Nina had respected her, in her way, but their relationship had been too confusing to call it friendship. This was new. Nina didn’t have the same level of admiration for Eris anymore, but she felt something she’d never felt back then. It’d been a long time since she’d seen Isolde. If they met now, perhaps she’d feel the same thing. It was an unusual experience for Nina, who’d hardly had any real friends.

“Eris?” she said.

“Then, just like that, Ruijerd cut off the head of the pet kidnapper, and—what?”

“Let’s take our kids to see Isolde together.”

Eris blinked, then nodded. “It’s a plan.”

After becoming Sword God, Gino had changed. With a Sword God like him, the Sword Sanctum itself would start to look different soon. Nothing ever lasts. For all she knew, someone might show up who’d defeat Gino just like that. That was part of being a sword fighter. They were fragile creatures.

However, Nina thought this friendship would endure. After all, she was no longer a sword fighter.

The image features a dark grey background with a decorative border. The border consists of a double-line rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical corner pieces at each of the four corners. In the center of the page is a large, intricate, light grey decorative ornament. This ornament is symmetrical both horizontally and vertically, featuring a central floral or foliate motif with elaborate scrollwork and leaf-like extensions. The title "The Greyrat Children" is centered over this ornament.

The Greyrat Children

The Greyrat Children

A SERIES OF *clacks* rang out. The bright tap of wood hitting wood intermingled with the sound of breathing.

“Oof!”

“Hwup!”

In the garden of the Greyrat house, two youths faced each other, each with a wooden sword in hand. One was a girl with chestnut brown hair. She swung with surprising ferocity for her age, making full use of her angular momentum, her cape billowing around her. Her left hand, the one not gripping the sword, was of note. It was slightly open, and now and then she used it to slap the air. When she did this, she bounced away like a ball hitting a wall, making it impossible to predict how she would move. She approached, swerving from side to side, occasionally shifting up and down, and got one—*two* good hits on her opponent. Her ever-changing movements were unpredictable yet graceful and beautiful.

Her opponent, a boy with red hair, was dressed in a slightly grubby practice uniform. He resolutely gripped his sword. Compared to the girl, his movements were a little stiff. He was trying to fend her off with only his sword rather than using magic like her. He kept his feet planted firmly on the ground, steady and powerful as he parried the girl, then struck back bravely. His moves imitated Sword God style: a basic, straightforward technique. He also struck faster than the girl. Despite this, he never hit her. Sometimes she dodged, sometimes she parried then hit back, smartly taking advantage of a critical opening.

“That’s one point to me.”

“Not yet, it isn’t!” Despite the obvious difference in their skill, the boy was undaunted and ran at the girl again.

Nearby, three other children were watching, most with their eyes glazed over. A girl with blue hair and a boy with green hair sat side by side accompanied by a blond boy, who stood beside them. There was also a big white dog. The blue-

haired girl had her face buried in its fur and was dozing off. She didn't seem interested in the fight.

The chestnut-haired girl and the redheaded boy faced off for a while, until the girl lunged forward.

"Yah!" she shouted fiercely, bringing her wooden sword straight down on the boy's forehead. There was a satisfying *thunk*.

"Yooooow!" The boy went down, rolling around on the ground in pain as bright blood trickled from the split in his forehead down to his chin.

"Oh no, sorry, that was a clean hit." The girl rushed over to him then, without another word, laid a hand over his forehead. Green light blossomed, and the wound closed.

"Ahhh," the boy sighed, accepting the healing magic without protest. He flopped down on the ground. "I'm still no match for you, Lucie."

"What did you expect?" the girl replied. "You're only ten, Arus."

"That's only three years younger..."

"Three years is plenty. You wouldn't lose to Sieg, would you?"

This was Lucie and Arus. Since getting back from Millis, Arus had thrown himself into his sword practice with even more intensity than before. Eris taught swordcraft to all the children, but ever since Arus had gotten the itch to fight, she'd been bursting with pride and taken great pains to teach him everything she knew. Arus had an abundance of talent, so he received special attention. He absorbed everything Eris taught him and was well on his way to becoming a fully-fledged swordsman—but nothing short of that felt good enough to him. That was why Arus had started getting the kids together for secret training sessions like this one.

Eris would probably have said that his swing needed more work before he started thinking about combat experience, but he was *her* boy—he found just swinging his sword boring and wanted a partner. Eris had been the same way when she was his age, so it was only natural.

"Hey, Lucie," said Arus, "you're super good at that thing where you shoot

wind out of your hand to spin around. Did White Mama teach you?”

“Nuh-uh. I heard Dada used to do it, so I taught it to myself.”

“Whoa. You think Dada fights like that too?”

“Probably not now. He said it was when he was a kid.”

“You think I should try it too?”

“Hmm,” Lucie pondered. “I think you’d be better off developing your Sword God technique. What I did wouldn’t be powerful enough in a serious fight with real swords. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t have sword practice. I mean, I’m a magician.”

“But it’s so cool. Lucie’s magic swordcraft! Clive was impressed as well, you know.”

“Mm...” Lucie seemed to brush it off, but she glanced furtively at the blond boy over with the observer, who was chatting good-naturedly with Sieg on the ground beside him.

His name was Clive. He was also a relative, so from time to time he tagged along on the secret kids-only training sessions. That was why Lucie wore her favorite cape over her uniform even though they were training, and why she’d used magic to set it fluttering rather than concentrating on her sword. She’d wanted to look like a wind fairy—a sylph, one of the four great spirits from a fairytale her father had told her long ago. He said the beautiful sylph had green hair and danced through the air, always garbed in the wind.

When Lucie talked to her friends at school, they said they’d never heard of anything like that. When she asked her teachers they didn’t know anything either. She’d scoured the library but found no mention of the name. Until that moment, she’d believed the sylph was real. It turned out the sylph was just as imaginary as Cheddar Man—what a shock! All the same, Lucie still adored wind fairies, and she dreamed of the boy she liked seeing her that way.

“Enough of this. Push-ups!” Lucie cried. “We agreed the loser had to do push-ups, remember?”

“Aw *man*.” Arus got down into a push-up position in front of Lucie then

began, shouting, “One! Two...!”

It was a rule of the children’s secret training that the loser had to do a basic workout.

“Right, you’re up next, Lara! Hurry up!”

The next opponent was supposed to come out while the loser did their exercises, but Lara said sleepily, “You’ve done five rounds already. Let’s take a break.”

She was slumped against Leo, disinterested in fighting, though it was honestly better when she ignored them by pretending to be asleep. An extremely talented magician, Lara fought using cunning to outwit her opponents. On the flip side, she wasn’t motivated when it came to swordcraft. That didn’t mean she didn’t like to move around; she was pretty energetic when up to her own mischief. Sword fighting just wasn’t her thing.

She’d still come along, though, however reluctantly. Maybe she had her reasons.

“What about you, Sieg?”

“Mm, I’m out too.” Sieg was only eight and had the lowest win rate of the four. That being said, he had unbelievable strength for a boy his age, and when the fight was close, there were moments when that was enough to carry him to victory. His style was also different from Lucie and Arus. Like Arus, his fighting style prioritized his fencing, but from time to time, he moved in ways that clearly were not what Eris taught them.

Of course, the other three were well aware of who was teaching him swordcraft and where.

“Okay, break time,” Lucie said. She sat down next to Arus, who was still doing push-ups. Going over to Clive would have been too embarrassing for words. It was *that* period in her life. Besides, right then, Clive was talking to Sieg. Lucie didn’t know what they were saying, but Clive, who was calm for his age, was extremely knowledgeable and interesting to talk to. He was probably entertaining Sieg with whatever book he’d read recently.

“Hey, Lucie,” Arus said suddenly as he continued to do push-ups, “What’re

you gonna do after you finish school?”

“I’ll go to the next school,” Lucie responded breezily to Arus’s serious question. “It’s like Dada said. After I graduate from the Ranoa University of Magic, I’ll start at the Asura Royal Academy. I don’t know why I have to go there, but I guess because we’re Asuran nobles, I’m to learn about the nobility or something.”

“No, I mean after that.”

Lucie looked at Arus again. His eyes were on the ground as he continued his push-ups.

“You’re going to follow in Dada’s footsteps, right?” she asked him.

“I dunno, but that’s what our mamas say.”

It was mostly Eris saying it. She’d occasionally proclaim, “Arus is the Greyrat heir!” Since then, it’d been assumed that he was. Sylphie and Roxy didn’t seem to have a problem with it. It wasn’t clear what he had to do. Would he work for Orsted like Rudeus?

“What do you mean you ‘dunno’? Arus, everyone is looking to you to be the heir. And Lara is supposed to have some important role too. It’s serious.”

“If you’re going to be like that, why don’t you just be the heir? You’re better than us at sword fighting *and* magic.”

“I’m not. No one’s expecting anything from me.”

“That’s not true,” Arus blurted out.

“It *is*!” Lucie said, her voice rising. “I’ve never once had Dada say he expected anything from me or tell me what he wants me to do in the future. Nothing like that! You two got swords and magic staffs for your birthdays, but I...I...!”

Not just Arus but the other three standing away from them all stared wide-eyed at her. She instantly felt a rush of shame. What was she doing saying all this to her little brother? Dada didn’t expect anything from her because she wasn’t working hard enough. It was that simple.

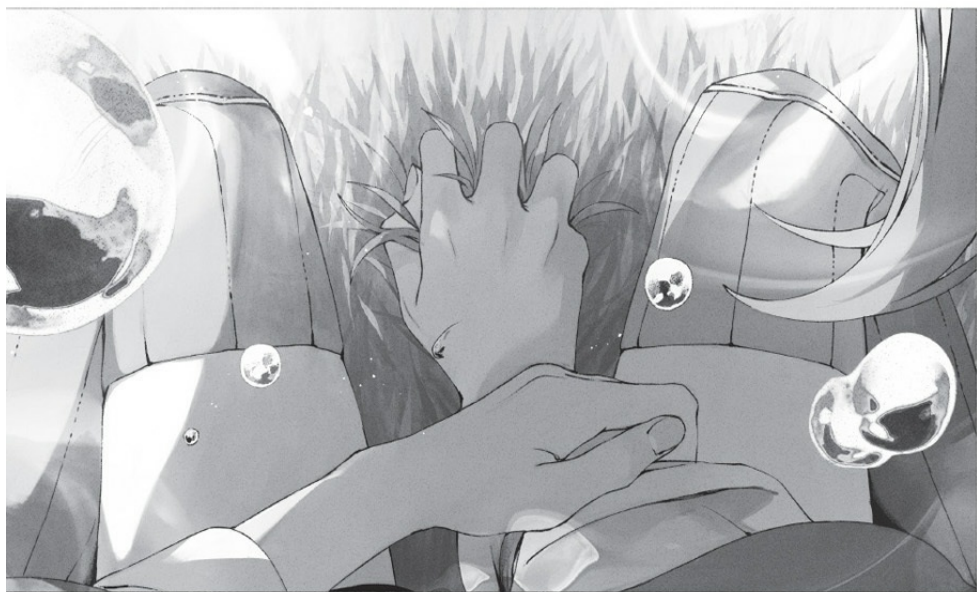
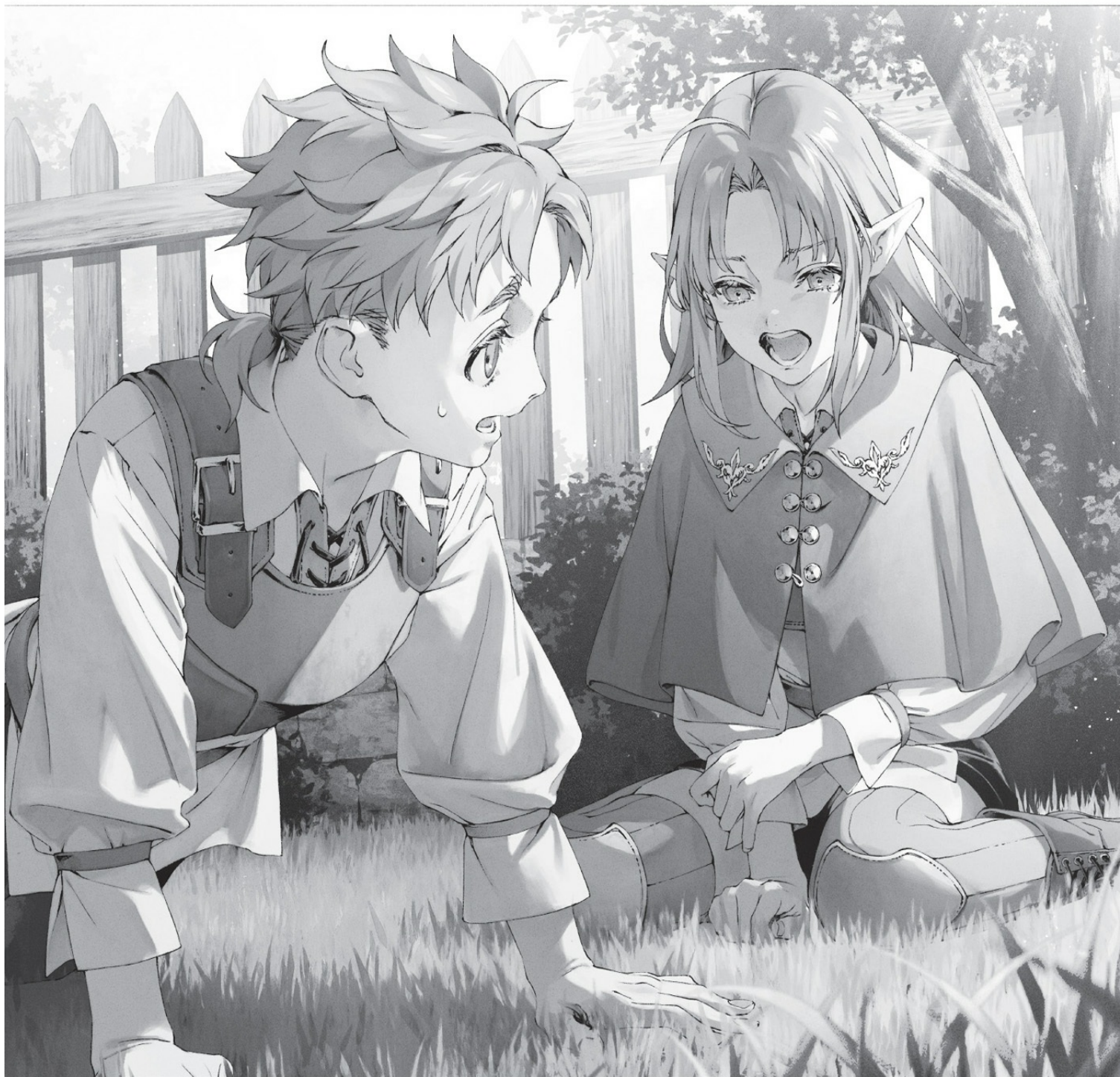
“Oh...!” Tears welled up in Lucie’s eyes. Crying wouldn’t help anything, but they came streaming down her cheeks regardless. Why didn’t Dada expect

anything from her? She'd never understood. She tried so hard at both swordcraft and magic. She got nothing but good grades at school. She was a good big sister, but Dada had never once told her what he wanted her to do or what he wanted her to be. He always brushed her off, saying that she should live the life she wanted or she didn't have to worry about that just because she was the eldest.

"I-it's not like Dada told *me* he expected anything," Arus stammered, glancing around helplessly. To him, his big sister was perfect.

She was the most accomplished of her brothers and sisters. Her being a whole three years older made her seem like a grown-up. Arus couldn't do the things she'd been able to do at her age, and he didn't know how to look after their younger sisters Lily and Chris either. Apart from swordcraft, Arus didn't think there was anything he did better than Lucie. Even then, he couldn't beat her in a mock battle when she used magic. If no one expected anything from *Lucie*, they definitely didn't expect anything from any of the other kids.

But if Dada really didn't expect anything from Lucie, didn't that mean he didn't expect anything from Arus either? Dada had never told Arus he wanted him to be his heir. He sort of assumed it because Red Mama and Aisha said it, and the other mamas didn't say they were lying. This was how it worked. With Asuran nobility, the oldest boy was the heir.



Usually, if someone talked to him like Lucie had, Arus would have shot back with a heated retort. Even if he hadn't seemed mad outwardly, he would have quietly seethed; it was his nature. But he'd never heard Lucie talk like this before—never seen her this upset. When she got angry with Lara for playing a prank on her, it almost seemed like she was putting on an act, like she was only mad just long enough to scold Lara. Lucie was a perfect big sister. The extremely cool sort who never vented her feelings, never did anything bad, and never whined or complained.

"Hey, um, Lucie?" Arus hesitated, more confused than angry about the outburst. He didn't know how to respond. If it had been Lara or Sieg, who he had practice bickering with, he would have said something, but what was he supposed to do here?

Then, Clive came over to them and sat down beside Lucie. "You okay? Lucie?"

Lucie was silent. The other boy was only a year older than Arus, but he seemed much more mature. He was diligent and got good grades in school, and he was also kind and skilled with people—though he could be strict with younger students when he had to be. He seemed far more adult than Lara, who was the same age.

"All of us know how hard you work," Clive said.

"Mm." Lucie sniffed. Clive put an arm around her and patted her head.

"You'll apologize to Arus later, right?"

"No, now's good." Lucie gave another wet sniff, then turned to Arus, who was frozen in his push-up position, and bowed her head. "I'm sorry, Arus. I was rude."

"No! I mean...I'm sorry too," he said. He wasn't sure what he'd done wrong, but he was pretty sure that someone had told him that if he made a girl cry, he'd better apologize. Maybe it was Blue Mama or White Mama. Could it have been Aisha? In any case, he shouldn't have asked Lucie about what she'd do after finishing school. He was just curious and wanted to hear what his cool sister had in mind for the future. Maybe he'd also hoped that he'd get an idea for himself from her perfect-big-sister answer. He never in a million years

thought she'd yell at him like that.

"Sorry, Arus," said Clive. "I'll take Lucie and head back to the house."

"Oh, uh, yeah. Okay."

Clive, his arm around Lucie's shoulders, went inside.

Left behind, Arus was speechless. He simply stood, frozen in disbelief. Just then, Lara and Sieg came over to where Lucie and Clive had been. Leo joined them, looking worried.

"That was a lot," said Lara.

"I didn't know Lucie could get angry like that," Sieg agreed.

Arus was close with his brother and sister, and talking to them usually helped him think about things. He nodded. "I guess, I dunno, Lucie must worry about the future, too."

He'd assumed that Lucie was too perfect to worry about anything. Clearly not.

Lara opened her mouth. "Lucie..." she began.

Arus never knew what the younger of his older sisters was thinking, but sometimes she opened up with something that got to the heart of things. Arus listened closely so that he didn't miss anything important.

"...is definitely going to marry Clive," was all she said.

"Oh, right," Arus nodded, feeling let down. Lara just as often said something anticlimactic. She wasn't interested in the same things as Arus and the others. She was in a world of her own.

"That's not what we were talking about," Sieg said.

But Lara hadn't finished. "Clive is an only child, so when they get married, Lucie will live in Millis."

Now that Arus understood her train of thought, he knew what she was getting at. "So, she's leaving when she gets married?"

"Right," said Lara.

Their family and Clive's family, the Grimors, got along well, helped by the fact

that they were related. Arus didn't really understand why, but noble families married their children to each other to build stronger bonds. The grown-ups could already be making plans for Lucie and Clive. They'd be "betrothed."

"You think Lucie's unhappy about that?" Arus asked.

"I bet she's not mad about it."

"Yeah, she does like Clive, but then why'd she yell like that?"

"Girls are complicated."

Arus felt pretty lost. Lucie was obviously unhappy about something. It even seemed like she thought *she* was the one who had to be the Greyrat heir. Arus *also* thought she was the one who deserved it, though that might have been his own inadequacy talking.

Thinking that he'd ask Aisha about it later, he tried to change the subject. "What about you, Lara?"

"I'm going to marry a capable man who'll cook and clean and do everything else, allowing me to lounge around all day."

"Going to'? Wait, are you betrothed to someone?"

"No."

"Ah." He wanted to ask where she thought she was going to find someone like that but restrained himself.

"It won't be too hard," Lara added.

"Sure. Good luck." His less cool big sister was starting to get on his nerves, so he turned to his little brother. "What about you, Sieg?"

Sieg stared down at the wooden sword in his hands. "I'm gonna be the strongest swordsman in the world." He was being even more ridiculous than Lara. "Once I'm the strongest, I'll defend world peace."

Well, Sieg *did* like Cheddar Man and the Epic of the North God, but Arus was trying to talk about serious things, not dreams for babies. He sighed and said, "Try beating me first."

"I will."

“Oh yeah? When?”

“One day!”

“Well, take your time, but don’t call yourself strongest until you do!”

Sieg puffed his cheeks out sulkily. Arus didn’t see himself losing to Sieg for a while yet, but his brother was getting stronger by the day. Sieg really might take him one day, even if it seemed ridiculous at the moment. Maybe Seig’s dreams of heroism weren’t so childish. Of course, beating Arus wouldn’t make Seig the strongest. There were a lot of seriously strong swordsmen out there.

“Don’t you want to be heir?” Sieg asked suddenly.

Arus screwed his mouth up and mumbled, “How should I know?”

He *was* the Greyrat family heir...except he wasn’t sure what that meant, including whether it was good or bad. However, their conversation had given him a different perspective on it. The Greyrat family served Dragon God Orsted, but they were also a branch of the Asuran nobility. Being heir to the family would mean mixing with other nobles. That fit with what Lucie said about having to attend not only the Ranoa University of Magic but also the Asura Royal Academy.

“Hmm.” What did nobles *do*, anyway? Arus supposed he’d learn the answer at school, but for now, it was a mystery. Ties between families were important, so maybe he’d have to marry a woman he didn’t know or something.

“I guess I kind of don’t,” he eventually said. Arus had certain kinds of girls he liked, so he didn’t want to marry just anyone. Actually, while he was too embarrassed to admit it, he had someone he liked already.

Still, he couldn’t make a fuss about how he didn’t want to if it was already decided. Lucie would definitely get angry at him for that. She put up with it all, she’d say, so what made him so special that *he* could dodge it? If nothing else, Lucie would be unhappy if he didn’t put everything into being the best heir, but he didn’t know how to do that. He didn’t want her to hate him.

Aisha might tell him what he needed to do if he asked, but ever since he’d turned ten, she hardly ever gave him a straight answer. Usually, she’d just give him a hint and then tell him to think it through himself—something he *wasn’t*

good at. He'd reflected a lot after going to Millis and was starting to think a little harder, but he was struggling. His mind immediately went to solving things with his sword or magic.

Arus looked wordlessly down at his hands. Lucie's magic was so beautiful, and she used it skillfully. It was so effective, even though it was only simple wind magic. It shifted and changed, just like her. She was strong. If Arus could only learn that magic, he'd be strong too.

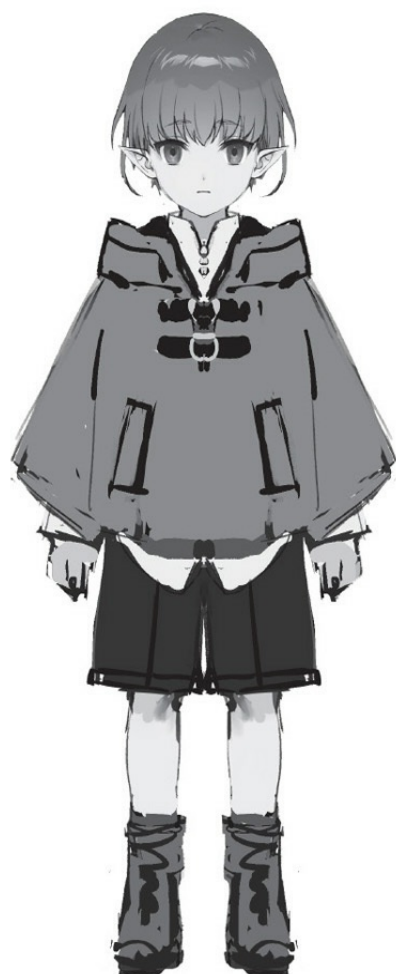
"All right," he said decisively. He still wasn't sure what he ought to be doing, but for today, he'd try to copy Lucie. Still thinking, Arus rose, sword in hand.



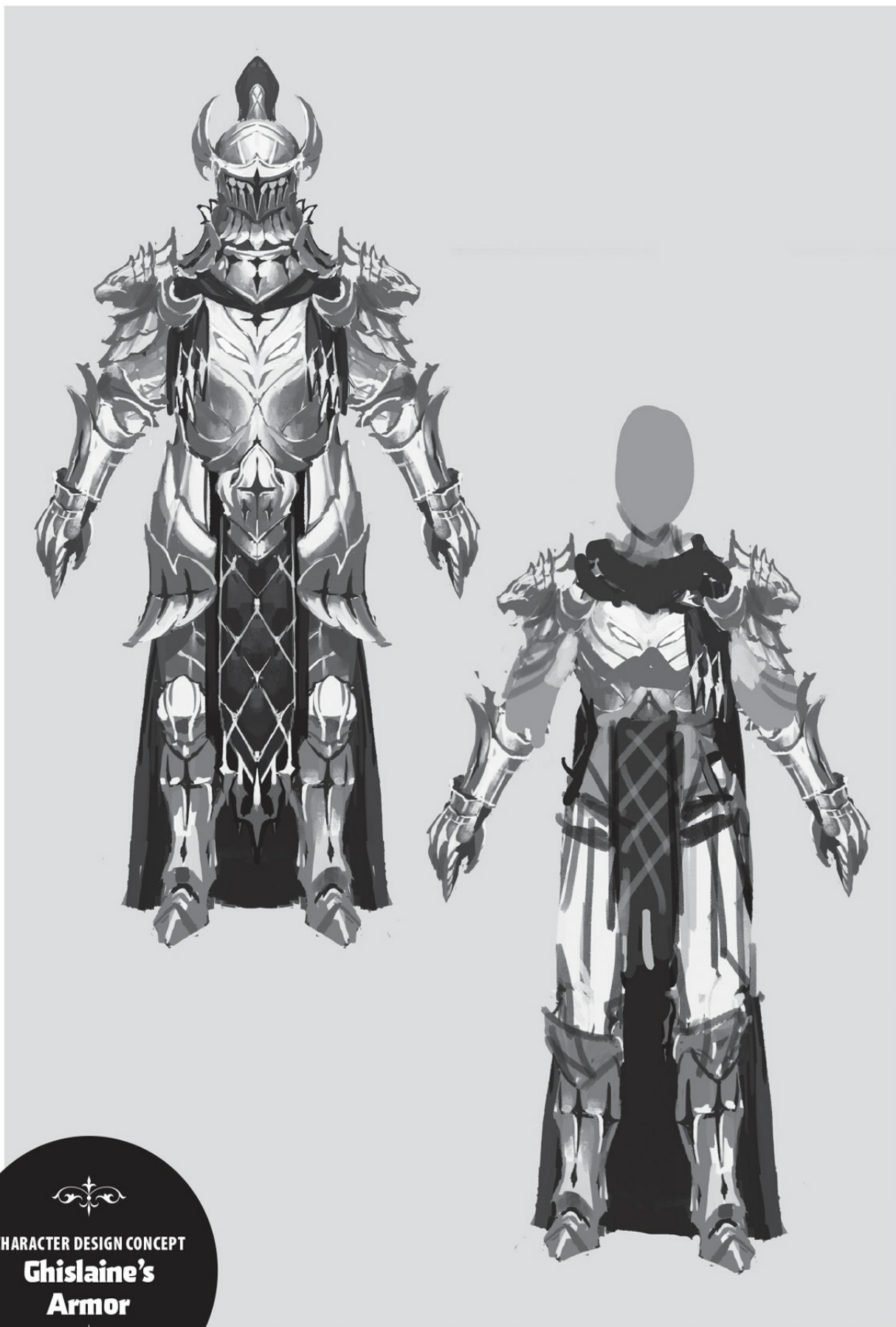
REDUNDANT REINCARNATION 2
**Rough Alternate
Cover 1**



REDUNDANT REINCARNATION 2
**Rough Alternate
Cover 2**





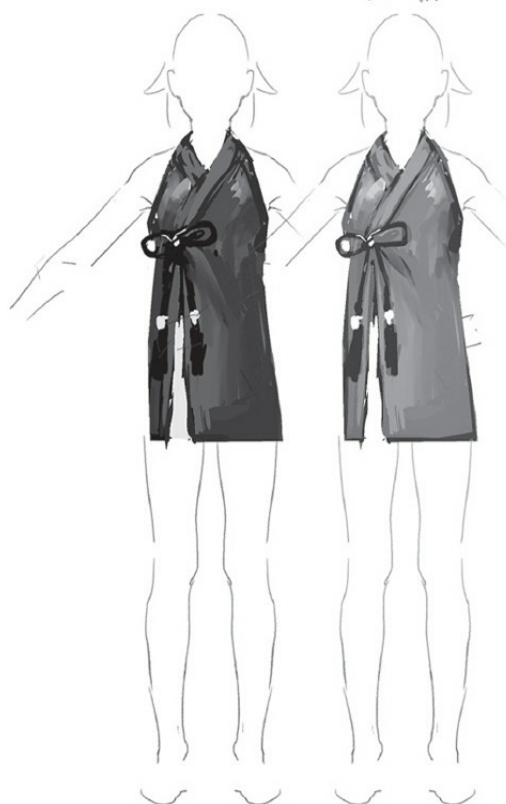


CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

**Ghislaine's
Armor**

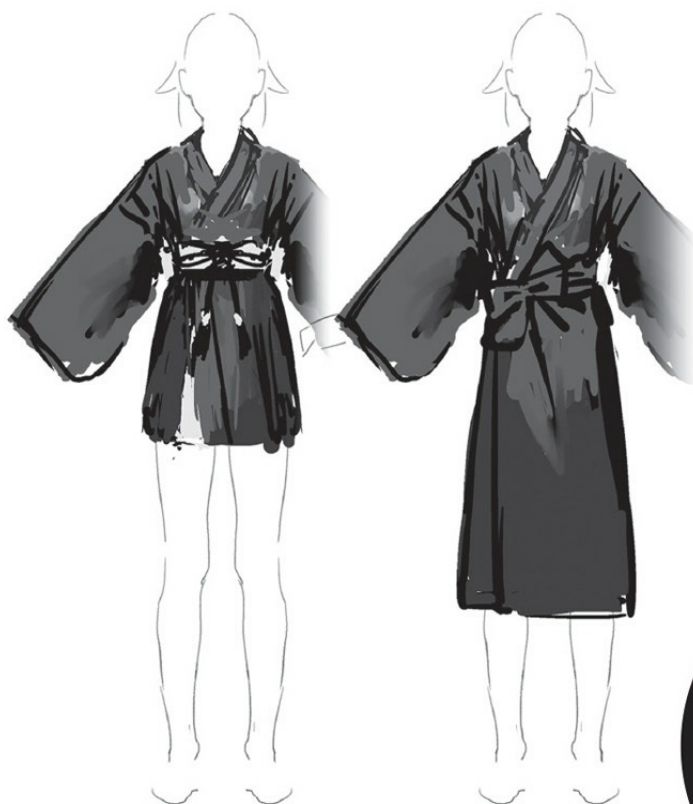
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About the Author

Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. In 2022, the 26th and final volume of the main series was released, and from 2023, they began *Mushoku Tensei: Redundant Reincarnation*, a collection of stories set after the main series.

“This year, I decided to build a house,” said the author.



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