

Mushoku Tensei

Paul Gaiden

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Runaway arc

Episode 1 [Paul Notos Greyrat]

[Armored Dragon Calendar - Year 388]

[The long-awaited first-born child of high ranking nobles from the Asura kingdom known as the Notos Greyrat family. The child was named-]

Valentina: Paul... Paul Notos Greyrat. My cute baby... Thank you for being born..

[Paul grew up fast, harboring a deep affection for his mother.]

[5 years later, Armored Dragon Calendar - Year 393]

~Inside the Notos Greyrat Mansion~

Attendant: Young Master! Young Master! Please come out! Young Master! Where on earth did you go... Ah, that maid over there!

Maid: Yes? How may I be of assistance?

Attendant: You haven't seen the Young Master have you? I can't find him anywhere!

Maid: I saw the young master heading towards the stables just a while ago.

Attendant: The stables?! Don't tell me he plans to go outside?! Dammit... Don't do it!

[The flustered attendant left in a hurry. When his figure could no longer be seen, the maid's breathing became heated.]

Maid: Nn... Young Master, he's gone now. Here, come out now please.

Paul: Uh huh, I see.

[A muffled child's voice said as the maids skirt began rolling up.]

[Underneath her skirt was a young boy crouching, from a high ranking nobility of the Asura Kingdom, Notos. He is the only son of the Greyrat Family, Paul.]

Paul: Thanks for hiding me. Your help really saved me.

Maid: I-it's nothing... If it's the young masters wish then it's a servants duty to fulfill it.

Paul: That father of mine, he's way too persistent. Even though I don't want to study, he went out of his way and got me a private tutor. And he's an old man to boot. He has almost no teeth so I can't understand anything, why couldn't it have been a cuter and younger person.

Paul: If it was me I would have gone for a kind older sister type that teaches me while letting me rest on her thighs... That's what I'm looking for at least, what about you?

Maid: T-that's right... Ahn... uuu, Young Master... Could you, please stop, stroking my legs..?

[With a bright red expression and tears on the maids eyes, Paul stopped stroking and came out of the skirt.]

Paul: Ah sorry! It was just so smooth and felt good, it wasn't intentional! However, I can't keep staying there. It gets too hot after a while.

Maid: Hot... No, Such a thing can't...!

Paul: Shhh-

[Paul placed his index finger in front of his mouth towards the flustered maid who raised her voice.]

Paul: Don't talk so loudly. If he comes back I'll get in trouble.

Maid: Ah... I'm so sorry!

Paul: It's fine. In return please take care of me.

[With that, Paul started running down the hallway. Not forgetting to caress the maids butt as he passed by.]

Paul: (Yup, I definitely like them bigger. Now then! I wonder who'll save me tomorrow.)

[Born as the only son to the high ranking nobles. Paul at the age of 5 did as he pleased towards the opposite sex.]

Like Father, Like Son

[The males of Greyrat are known by many for their lechery. However, getting up early is a reputation exclusively within the mansion.]

[Armored Dragon Calendar - Year 388]

[One day when the escape dramas started becoming routine. Paul's father finally decided to summon him.]

Paul: (He looks serious... Father seems a little different from usual today.)

Amarant: Do you know why I called you?

Paul: No I do not.

Amarant:...Hm?

[Perhaps being the first child, The father on the surface may look strict. But when it comes to Paul, he is lenient.]

Paul: I said I don't know. Whatever father is thinking I wouldn't know.

Amarant: Mu...

Paul: (Ah, he looks sad. What, I was worried for nothing! Isn't it the usual father!)

[Paul's father looked sad only for a moment but quickly put up a serious front again. But it was obvious that he was forcing himself]

Amarant: *Cough*...Paul, stop speaking like that. I should be telling you this more. As a child of the Notos Greyrat family, you have to ensure to become a nobility worthy of the name. Despite being the only son you lack self-awareness, you neglected your studies, and even decided to run around the mansion. I don't see any point in giving problems to the servants.

Paul: That's because studying isn't interesting at all!

Amarant: Even then. If the son of the Notos Greyrat family is said to be uneducated, you would feel hurt right?

Paul: It's fine even if I don't study, Some pain won't get to me.

[After Paul finished his statement, his father raised his brows.]

Amarant: From here on, if you're known as the idiot son, you'll have difficulties when you become the feudal lord. No one will respect a feudal lord that's stupid. And I'm not just referring to your studies. I've been hearing about you chasing after our servants' butts. Stop touching the maids so recklessly.

Paul: Huh?! No way I'd agree to that!!

[That was the loudest Paul has been, it made his fathers eyes go wide open]

Paul: You can roll up the skirt! You can hide underneath it! You can even touch the butts! There's no fun without it! You can't take away a child's pleasure! Father is cruel! All I was doing was enjoying myself!

Amarant: !? W-what did you say?!?!

Paul: Oh please, don't play dumb! After all, doesn't father love doing the same thing!!

[As the tension rose. He noticed tears falling down from paul's eyes]

Paul: Just the other day, when the new maid was doing the laundry, father was looking at her butt saying "Not Bad!" While smiling! All while going deredere.

[Incidentally, the father went into contact with the new maid and held her waist with one arm while having something close to the ear.]

Paul: I saw it myself! You were holding her close! Definitely feeling up her butt! I watched it happen!! It's unfair that I can't do it when you can!

Amarant: Wha...?! Don't say such absurd things! T-t-t-that time was um, ah-... Yes! I was just evaluating the way she worked and said "Not bad!" It was... part of Skinship! It was for the sake of getting her accustomed to the mansion quickly! There were no ulterior motives at all!

Paul:...Really?

Amarant:... Yes, of course it is. It's my responsibility both as the head of this household and as a noble to work hard mentally and physically.

[The father clears his throat in order to calm himself down]

Amarant: W-well, it looks as if touching older women gives paul a sense of security. So I can't completely ban it.

Paul: Father..!

[Paul's eyes sparkling, with a face that looks happy inside. Even so, trying to maintain his dignity, Paul's Father kept a stern expression.]

Amarant: I guess it can't be helped that you hold such interest towards females. Albeit young, you truly are a child of the Greyrat family. Still, from now on try to do it in moderation. Also try to do your best in your studies... Do you understand?

Paul: I understand!

Amarant:...Did you really understand?

Paul: Yes!

[To the father who asked a second time, Paul nodded to show that he understood]

Amarant: I hope so... Anyways, Your birthday party is coming up. A lot of nobles were invited. For that reason... Don't forget what your father has said, alright?

Paul: Of course!

[He gave a fine response energetically while stretching. Little did Amarant Notos Greyrat know, his son who answered well would escape once again the very next day.]

Place to relax

Attendant: Young Master! Young Master! Please come out! Young Master!

[After running away from his attendant, Paul started dashing across the hallway of the mansion]

Paul: (That guy never gets tired of this huh?)

[He was heading towards his secret garden, or rather, a skirt.]

Paul: (I'll dive into the first skirt I see!)

[As he thought that, he turned the next corner. After that-]

Paul: Mother!

Valentina: Paul?

Paul: Father's underling is chasing after me! Please hide me!

Valentina: Hey, Paul.

[The mother's slender fingers pulled on Paul's cheeks, not letting him slip underneath her.]

Valentina: It's 10 years too early for you to force yourself into a lady's skirt.

[With his cheeks being stretched, there was no other way. So Paul reluctantly let go of her skirt.]

Valentina: Always be gentle when dealing with a lady, and be sure to pay Her proper respects too. Do you understand?

Paul: Yesh. I'm shorry Gojjesh (Yes. I'm sorry Goddess)

Valentina: That's good to hear.

[She let go of Paul's cheeks and began stroking them, all while giggling.]

Valentina: What's my cute little child doing here? I thought it was already time for your lessons?

Paul: Yup! I have to serve the usual tea and sweets, please excuse me!

Valentina: Wow, as expected of Paul. You're an awfully attentive and gentle child.

Paul: Mother is the one that's gentle. Unlike Father you don't tell me to act like a noble or study.

Valentina: You don't have to force it, It will naturally come to you sooner or later as you live as a high ranking noble. Such is life. Regardless, I want you to always remember. You were born with qualities like kindness, cheerfulness and good health. I love you from the bottom of my heart.

Paul: Mother... I love mother too.

[The mother spread both of her arms out and embraced Paul.]

Valentina: Fufu, you sure have grown big.

Paul: Yes! I'm already 5 years old!

Valentina: How reliable! My husband was all worried but it looks like your birthday party will go fine.

[The mother's smile was a sight to behold.]

[Paul really loved his mother. Sure he liked the maids' skirts, but nothing beats his mothers. It is the best place for Paul to relax]

Paul's 5 year party

TL Notes: (they celebrate birthdays at the ages of 5, 10, and 15)

[After getting away from the attendant, Paul made a dash down the hallway of the mansion.]

[Several days passed, and at Paul Notos Greyrat's 5 year birthday celebration, the day of the party had arrived.]

Amarant: Listen up Paul. A lot of nobles are attending today. Once again, don't go around touching the maids, and not just the maids either. The other nobles wives or young ladies, Never ever EVER feel them up.

Paul: I got it.

[The birthday parties of a nobles child are also used to display a household's wealth as well as their status. Needless to say, the Notos Greyrat family are of a high rank. So their interior design was luxurious.]

[The meal arrangements, as well as the orchestra's musical performance were prepared to be top notch.]

Amarant: Everyone, I thank you all for coming. Paul... Do greet them.

Paul: Yes! For coming to my birthday celebration today, thank you. As the Notos Greyrats eldest son, from here on I will strive to do my best, please treat me well.

[Following the speech he was taught to say. There was clapping, he turned to the side to see his father's looking content.]

[In the splendid looking assembly hall, Paul greeted and met a lot of nobles]

Paul: (There's nothing but people that look like old men... I can't tell which name fits with who's look. Women are easier to comprehend. Their Dresses, Hair styles as well as their physique differ from one another.)

[Paul turned to see the nobles wives and young ladies one by one, smiling brightly.]

Young lady A: Sir Paul! Happy birthday!

Young lady B: If it's alright with you, would you like to join us?

Paul: With you all?

5... 6 well dressed young ladies stepped before paul. One even seemed to be 10 years old. Other [than that, all of them appear to be older than paul.]

Paul: (Ah, how cute)

Paul: Father, would it be alright if I escort these ladies to the garden?

[He put up a smart look as he called his father. It was a look that he rarely made outside.]

Amarant:... indeed, most certainly. Be sure to escort them properly.

[The father looked like he had something to say but there were many people watching him. In the end, he decided to refrain from saying anything else. With that Paul and the young ladies headed towards the Notos Greyrats gardens.]

[The garden maintained constantly by the gardener displays all sorts of flowers in full bloom. As they approached the garden, the daughters' faces shone brightly.]

Young lady A: My! How lovely!

Young lady B: What is that growing there?

Paul: Don't walk so quickly, it's dangerous.

Young lady B: It'll be fine-

Young lady B: Kya!

Paul: uh-oh

When the young lady fell, Paul stopped it and held her in his arms

Paul: (Ah... She smells really nice!)

Young lady B: S-sir Pa-Paul, pardon me!

Paul: No, it's alright. If it's fine with you, take my hand.

Paul: (Um... I think my manners lecturer told me to invite them like this...)

Young lady B: Thank you sir Paul. I'm thankful for your kind words.

[Having taken his hands. A noble girl's hands seem to be soft.]

Young lady A: That's unfair! It can't only be her! Sir Paul. You will escort me too right?

Young lady C: If that's the case then me too!

[The daughters who approached Paul were competing with each other, The daughters' colorful dresses were beginning to flap about.]

Young lady C: W-?!

Paul: (Ah...)

[Conditioned Reflex]

[Because he always does it with the maids, his hands went forward]

Young lady C: U-um, sir Paul..? Just now, my...

[The young lady was bewildered. It did not take long before the rest of the daughters were too.]

Paul: There's dirt!

Young lady C: Huh..?

Paul: Some dirt from the garden appears to have gotten onto you

[His intonation was suspicious. Even so, they appear to have bought it as the women smiled at him]

Paul: I need to put some dirt on her so that I don't get caught.

Paul: As it stands I can't have you go back to the party grounds yet. Order one of your house servants to get rid of the dirt.

Young lady C: Sir Paul... He's still so young yet he shows so much consideration! Oh my!

Young lady B: As expected from a child of the Notos Greyrat family!

[The lovely daughters began to surround him, all fawning over him.]

Paul: What's this? My heart is beating fast. Nobles were supposed to be a pain to deal with and

uninteresting but this... Being Notos Greyrats eldest son might actually be very nice!

[Paul was beginning to see the advantages to being the eldest son of a high-ranking noble.]

~Later that night~

[With Paul's and the young ladies' hands linked, and their arms crossed as they walked through the garden was really enjoyable... Was what he reported to his father]

Amarant: whatever the method... Deepening your relationships with the nobles daughters would be excellent. It will be good to make use of that fact from now on.

Paul: You aren't going to get mad?

Amarant: Even though I told you not to put your hands on them, you still went and did it. But you appear to have made a change of heart, so I will overlook it this one time.

Paul: Really?!

Amarant: Yeah. I won't go back on what I said. Leaving that aside, Paul.

[Oh my? The fathers eyes became narrow, then he held Paul in his arms.]

Paul: Fa, Father..?

Amarant: It seems that Paul is finally conscious about being a noble, even if only a little.

Paul: Being aware of it is, I guess... It isn't so bad.

Amarant: In that case, now seems like a good opportunity. Paul, how about going to school?

Paul: School?

[To his great surprise, Paul's eyes fixed onto his father's face.]

Amarant: Reading and Writing, arithmetic, history and etiquette, of course there's swordsmanship and magic that will be taught there.

Paul: Do I have to go there? I really don't like to study.

Amarant: Still, there are lovely young ladies going to that school

Paul: Eh?

Amarant: Take your time to think about it. I'm worn out from today, so I will be sleeping soon.

[To go to school or not to. Paul was given his options... Still, he gave it some thought.]

Paul: Father... Really, What a cruel person!!

Several weeks go by. The young man Paul went to school within the Milbotts Region (It's in the western continent of the world of Mushoku Tensei, makes sense seeing as how Fittoa Region is also around there)

Paul: Why didn't I think this through more carefully!

[Possibly due to what he was told, he was caught completely unaware]

[After being invited to go outside a bit by his father, he boarded a carriage, by the time he realized it, he was already going to school.]

Paul: You didn't have to go about it like this!!!

Paul: C'mon, I wasn't even able to even greet Mother.

[He was reminded of his mother's smile. Not knowing when he can see her again. He gets depressed just thinking about it.]

[Finally, being the eldest son, Paul who has only lived a life of leisure, as far as he's concerned, will not be able to enjoy life at school.]

Miniature version of the nobles society

[Just a few weeks after his enrollment, Paul had grown to completely hate school]

Mid-Ranked noble son: Hey bastard! You're quite disrespectful despite being only a son of a baron. You're blocking me, so get out of my way!

???: M-my apologies!

Paul: (Ah... It's happening again. Everyone around me is snickering and laughing, but what's so fun about this?)

[The mid-ranked noble son walked away with his followers]

[Paul then headed towards the baron's son who hung his head down. He looked to be a bit older than Paul.]

Paul: Hey you, why didn't you talk back to him?

???:... You are...

Paul: You weren't even blocking his way, I see a space I could even just walk around.

???: There's no way I can say that! If I went against someone like him there's no telling what he would do to my family!

Paul: Hm, why?

???: W-why? This is something you would normally know...

Paul: The norm...

???:... Thanks for that. But I have arithmetic lessons to attend. Please excuse me.

[While watching his figure as he quickly left, Paul furrowed his brows. Paul came to the conclusion that he was unable to understand]

Paul: (Was this normal? Do other nobles really find this normal? Truly... I don't understand)

[Paul cleared his throat as he pondered about what was normal. He stayed there for a while, however, the time for his next lesson was slowly coming. If he recalled correctly, the next lesson was going to be about history.]

[After a short while, Paul shook his head and decided.]

Paul: (Yup, I'm not feeling it!)

[Paul went the opposite way of his class. As always, he does not care about only sitting down in class listening to lectures. Hence, it was why he's been skipping many classes since entering the school]

Paul: (Now then, where will I head to today)

[The school grounds were spacious as the only people going to this school were children of nobility. Towards the left, Towards the right, you can go wherever you please here.]

Paul: (Hm... Exploring this place alone is fine, if that's the case, it should be more fun to explore with someone else... Ah! That's right!)

[Paul did not put much thought into it when it came to mind and instantly started moving, it was about the boy whose name Paul did not know. He headed towards the classroom that had math lessons and waited for it to end.]

[When he caught sight of the person he was looking for coming out, he grabbed onto the person's arm.]

Paul: Yo, been a while!

???: Y-you... What are you doing here?

[The timid boy's eyes widened as his arm was pulled by paul.]

Paul: "Since you mentioned that you had arithmetic lessons, I thought that I could find you if I went to a class that looked to be around your school year and had arithmetics currently."

???: W-what do you want with me..?

Paul: What's your name?

???: My name? It's Seaton Ag.

Paul: Seaton, Seaton right! That's a nice family name, I'm really not interested at all!

Paul: I'm Paul! Nice to meet you!

Seaton: Nice to meet you too...

[Seaton was bewildered. Then Paul began to explain why he ambushed him at this time.]

Mid-Ranked Noble son: You're blocking, get out of the way. What, it's you again. Why do you keep blocking my way, are you trying to tell me that you're tired of living? Huuuh?

Seaton: N-no, It's not that..! My deepest apologies!

Paul: (It's him again)

Mid-Ranked Noble son: Alright, because I am so generous. Let's hear what you have to say.

[The noble son's face broke into a smile and so did the people surrounding them, this made Paul angry.]

Mid-Ranked Noble son: Hey, something wrong? If you've got something to say then say it.

Paul: You don't have to say anything.

[The nobles' obviously condescending attitude made Paul feel unpleasant. So he broke in between Seaton and the noble.]

Mid-Ranked Noble son: What did you say?

Paul: Like I said, he doesn't have to say anything to you. Or could you not hear me?

Mid-Ranked Noble son: Looks like we've got a cheeky little kid here, but did you think I'd forgive your disrespectful behavior just because you're small?

Paul: Why would I care about that, just by looking at you I can tell that we won't get along.

Mid-Ranked Noble son: You bastard..!

[The instant the noble became furious, Paul was pulled by his shoulder from behind.]

Paul: (Eh?)

[And then, in front of Paul was Seaton.]

Seaton: I-i'm sorry! I'll be very careful from now on..! Come on, you have to apologize too!

Paul: Why should I?

Seaton: Why?! Instead of that, what's with your responses?!

Paul: (That should be my line)

[Paul tilted his head at Seaton as whatever he said was not making any sense.]

[It's not like if Paul told his father "It's that angry guy!", he would not go "Alright, I understand. I'll go beat him up a little.", no matter how much of a sweet person his father is towards him. He would not do it]

Paul: (This noble's house seems to be like that then? If that was the case then Mid-Ranked houses are all good for nothing right?)

Mid-Ranked Noble son: "Hey you... You seem to be from at least a mid-ranked nobility. Allow me to repent for my rudeness. Oi, what's your name?"

Paul: It's Paul

[Paul did not hesitate for even a moment. He boldly told them his name.]

Paul: I'm Paul Notos Greyrat.

Seaton: Notos Greyrat, eh..? No way..?

Mid-Ranked Noble son:....

[The noble held his breath, he stayed quiet while Paul looked at him.]

[After a while, the noble spoke up.]

Mid-Ranked Noble son: "Looks like the eldest son of the Notos Greyrat family may be a bit too young. It appears as though you don't know the proper manners as a noble yet. That's fine, it is my duty as your senior to teach you various things."

[Paul raised his hand as he said]

Paul: It's alright. I don't think I can learn anything from you.

[After Paul quickly refused his offer, his face warped while he held his hand out.]

Mid-Ranked Noble son: You'll regret this..!

Paul: Maybe, but I don't think so.

[The noble couldn't help himself. He pushed both Paul and Seaton aside as he rushed out, his followers following close by as they left.]

Seaton: Hey um... You

[After the nobles left, Seaton turned to Paul and spoke.]

Seaton: Ah... So you were from the greyrat family... I didn't know that...

Paul: It's all good, you don't have to treat me differently, just act like you did before.

Seaton: I-i'm really really sorry!

[Seaton energetically bowed his head.]

Seaton: Please don't condemn my family!

Paul: "No no no no, hold up! What are you saying Seaton?! I'm not like that guy, I won't say stuff like that!

Seaton: Th... That is...

Paul: !!

[Their eyes saw each other just as quickly as they separated. Paul's hot-bloodedness struck fear to Seaton]

Paul: (Why, what does he see?)

Seaton: Truly, I deeply apologize. Please excuse me!

[Seaton left in a hurry without letting Paul say even a single word]

Paul: (I really don't understand... I'm only... I only wanted to make a friend)

[Up until now, Paul spent his time in the greyrat household doing whatever he pleased. So he lacks the proper common sense an aristocrat would normally have.]

Paul: (... I knew it, school really isn't all that interesting)

[Really, due to Paul's mood after, he ended up skipping his next lesson. He really hates studying. He is also unable to understand the common sense of nobles in school, really, it was all pointless to him.]

[Since joining this school, he has gone for the lessons the first time, after that he would only attend them or skip them based on his mood.]

[But there was one class Paul has always attended.]

[The swordsmanship class.]

Interest in the Sword

Water-God Style Teacher: Alright, class is over for today. Ah Paul, I need you for a bit.

Paul: Yeeees?

Paul has attended every single one of the teachers lessons, she was a female swordsman that teaches the Water-God style

Water-God Style Teacher: Why do you think I asked you to stay behind?

Paul: Um... To give me extra training?

Water-God Style Teacher: That is incorrect. I have been told by the other teachers that you haven't been going to their classes.

Paul: ? Why did they tell you that?

Water-God Style Teacher: It might be because you have only been coming to my classes, isn't that right? Having said that, please attend your other classes as well.

Paul: Nn... If you say so, I guess I'll try to go for them as much as I can. Ha... But I will not learn magic, I see no point in learning something like that, yup.

Water-God Style Teacher: You sure are honest about it...So why did you come to school then?

[Paul got mad at the teacher]

Paul: I didn't come by choice, My father threw me into this school.

[The teacher sensed Paul's hostility and narrowed her eyes]

Water-God Style Teacher: Stop behaving like a spoiled child. This is why I find noble brats unpleasant.

Paul: T-Teacher?

[The ex-adventurer, now a teacher for the Water-God Style, glared at Paul]

Water-God Style Teacher: Tsk.

Paul: (She just clicked her tongue!)

Water-God Style Teacher: Are you fine like that? You're already here, what's the point in throwing a tantrum now. If you really didn't want to stay, you could've caught a carriage, walk, or even crawled your way back home.

[Her cruel remarks caused Paul to frown. It was as she said, he had not once tried to leave. That was why he could not deny her words.]

Paul: Still... I don't feel like I belong here.

Water-God Style Teacher: ...

Paul: The high ranking nobles here act all self-important, acting like it's entirely normal to treat the lower ranking nobles like they are dirt...It's a bit depressing, that's why I don't enjoy being here.

Water-God Style Teacher: The nobles in this school show exactly how nobles act outside, even if they are only children. However, it's a problem you must deal with the moment you are born into this world. If you don't like that, then find your own path. So, do you have the courage to find your own path even when you can't leave this school?

Paul: Ku... Uuu...

Water-God Style Teacher: ?! W-wait.. Are you crying?!

Paul: I'm not... uu... Crying...!

[She was right, he was just crying. Paul may have been born and raised as a noble, nonetheless, he was still just a little brat that got tossed into school.]

[So when he was reprimanded harshly by the teacher, the result is as one would expect, a little kid would naturally start crying.]

Water-God Style Teacher: Hold on just a minute! Was it me? Was I the one that made you cry?!

Paul: I said I wasn't crying...!!!

Water-God Style Teacher: W-what should I do? The principal repeatedly told me to not cause trouble... This is definitely a problem isn't it..?

[She may have been a teacher, but the school was one of nobility. So naturally, there would be limits to what she was allowed to do]

Water-God Style Teacher: Please stop crying Paul, look, it isn't cool to be crying right? Yup,

definitely embarrassing. So let's pretend that this didn't happen, of course as I am an adult, I will apologize by doing one favour for you.

[Almost instantly, Paul stopped crying]

Water-God Style Teacher: So, what would you like me to do?

[Paul wiped his tears before staring at her]

Paul: (There is something I want... But... Teacher isn't wearing a dress as it would affect her movements, so that's impossible to ask)

Paul: Teacher's secret garden doesn't exist... (TL Note: Episode 3: Secret garden is under the skirt)

Water-God Style Teacher: Hm? What was that?

Paul: There's no place for me to crawl into, so I can't do that.....

Water-God Style Teacher: Crawl.. Into? Sorry, what have you been talking about? I don't understand what you're saying.

Paul: (There's no point since you don't have a secret garden)

Paul: Ah, I just thought of something

[Paul looked straight at her and told her his request]

Paul: Please give me extra lessons for swordsmanship.

Water-God Style Teacher: Extra lessons huh... Sorry your request was a bit unexpected, I didn't take you as the serious type.

Paul: I don't see myself like that. Even so, swordsmanship seems to be the only interesting lesson in this school.

[Seeing Paul smile after saying that, the teacher couldn't help but look at him with confusion. Immediately after that, she gave a grin]

Water-God Style Teacher: Right? The way of the sword is definitely interesting. The road ahead is always moving, only a small handful of people have managed to reach the epitome of swordsmanship. From what I see, your sword shines brightly.

Paul: Then..!

Water-God Style Teacher: About the conversation about the extra swordsmanship lessons, I'll accept it.

Paul: Are you sure!? Thank you so much teacher!!!

[As if by impulse, really, by impulse. Paul embraced the teacher around her hips in joy. Truly, the hips of a well-trained swordsman]

[After that, Paul slowly began to attend all of his lessons, but his main focus was still for swordsmanship]

[Eventually, the school holidays came and Paul was finally allowed to go visit the Notos Greyrat Family household.]

Scolding from father

Paul: I'm home father

Amarant:...

Paul: Father?

[The father's stern look stayed despite Paul's greeting.]

[The mood in the room was tense, Paul's father was acting different from usual]

Amarant: It seems that I have been too soft on you.

Paul: Huh?

Amarant: I've gotten word about how things were going at your school. Needless to say, you have been participating in extremely frivolous activities.

Paul: That's cause... Because um, Studying isn't for me.

Amarant: Don't give me any excuses. It would seem that what I told you before you went to school didn't manage to get through. I've already gotten you several tutors before you arrived, you will be studying at home, maybe fix your attitude while you're at it.

Paul: No way...!!

[After being told as such by his father soon after coming back home, Paul raised his voice.]

Paul: Why do I have to study here even though I just came back home?!? I have school work to worry about so I was looking forward to coming home!

Amarant: Paul... You're the one who will inherit my title. As the eldest son to the family, you have to set a good example for others be it outside or at school.

[By nature, Paul's father may be a naggy person. It wouldn't be a stretch to call him strict. But even so, he still cares about Paul.]

Paul: (His eyes...)

[The look given to Paul right now was not one of a father, but rather one as the head of the family.]

Paul: Why... Why are you looking at me like that?

[For a bit, it seemed as though Paul's father was a whole different person.]

Paul: ...Please excuse me!

[At that point, Paul turned around, and ran out of the room as quickly as possible, leaving his father behind.]

[He ran down a long hallway. He didn't even take the time to touch any of the maids he passed by.]

[Running... And running... He ran until he eventually reached his mother's room.]

Paul: Mother!

Valentina: Paul! I'm glad that you've returned! I've wanted to see you again soon, but... It seems that you have something you want to talk about with me. Now then, let me have a look at you!

[Paul's mother brought him close and gave him a tender hug, gently wrapping her arms around him.]

Valentina: Hmhm, You've grown bigger. My little boy is growing up fast.

Paul: Mother hasn't changed. You're kind, gentle, and most importantly, you smell nice.

Valentina: Oh my! I was beginning to think that you've changed, but it looks like you're the same cute little boy I remember.

Paul: I've always wanted to see you again... I really didn't want to say goodbye...

[Paul began to close his eyes as he was held in his mothers arms.]

Paul: I'm home now mother.

Valentina: Welcome back Paul... My child.

[Well, she can certainly make someone feel at ease]

[Held in her warm embrace, it let Paul forget about everything. His dislike for school, his strict dad. His mom let him forget about it all.]

Episode 2 [Talent for swordsmanship].

Stirring feelings

[It has been 2 years now since Paul started studying at a school in the Milbotts region. As usual though, the only lessons he gave his all in was swordsmanship.]

[Paul's father, on the other hand, appears to be getting more strict with him as the years go by.]

[That day, Paul has returned back home for his vacation, where he was told some surprising news from his mother.]

Paul: Just now... What did you say... Mother?

Valentina: Hahaha, like I said Paul. I'm having another baby, they will be your little brother or sister. They will be born by the time you get your next vacation. Ah, I know you can't wait to meet the nice baby.

Paul: ...

[His mother had a look of motherly love as she stroked her belly, despite it not having grown much at all yet. Nevertheless, The hand that always gives paul pats is now not towards him but the baby.] - TL notes: Paul be jealous

Valentina: What's wrong Paul? Was it that surprising to you?

Paul: Y-yeah, I was just surprised is all... So I'm gonna have another sibling... Congratulations mother. Ah my swordsmanship training is starting soon, guess i'll have to talk to you later... Please excuse me.

Valentina: Oh it's fine. Keep on doing your best. You are going to be an older brother to another child after all.

Paul: ...Yes, please excuse me.

[Paul left his mothers room in a hurry. As he walked down the hallway, he felt something heavy in his chest. He couldn't help but clutch onto his shirt tightly.]

Paul: (Why...? Just why? I'm happy to hear about getting a little sister or brother, but why do I feel this way?)

Paul: (Why do I feel so uneasy?)

[He brought himself to the training grounds for his swordsmanship training, without understanding why he felt that way.]

Talent in the Sword

[The instructor that was called over to teach Paul looks to be a female swordsman]

Sword God Instructor: Your late boy. You're supposed to arrive on time.

Paul: Y-yes, i'm sorry...

Sword God Instructor: Alright, I'll accept your apology this time. Now let's get on with your sword training, get into position. Give it all you've got okay? You're going to get injured if you don't manage to stop this.

Paul: Huh? We're starting already?

Sword God Instructor: Sorry I have something going on with my husband today. Besides you're the one that came late, I don't have all the time in the world for you, you know.

Paul: There's um... various things I need to...

Sword God Instructor: It's nothing too important. Come on, let's get on with it already... Here I come.

[The sword instructor that was invited to teach Paul displayed the power of her sword that contradicts her small stature.]

[The power combined with its speed, with every strike's sole purpose being to kill the enemy, was something that Paul did not learn in school with the Water God Style.]

[Of course learning both the Water God Style and the Sword God Style at the same time is difficult, but besides that, there's no end to learning. That was what made swordsmanship so interesting.]

Sword God Instructor: haaaAAA!!!

[The Sword God Instructor closed the gap between them quickly and started to attack. Paul on the other hand, stood firm, blocking her blow with his sword.]

Paul: Ku... Heavy..!

Paul: (How could she have so much power with such a slender arm?! Why is her strike so heavy?!?!)

Sword God Instructor: Are you focusing properly? If that's the case, then I guess it's time I kick

it up a notch.

Paul: Huh?! You haven't gone all out yet?!

Sword God Instructor: Well you can't learn if you have time to think about useless stuff, Now come on, focus.

Paul: Y-yes!

Paul: (Alright let's calm down! Let's focus on what we're dealing with-)

[Paul's Sword God Instructor picked up the pace, resulting in him falling down onto the ground. Even if he fought with the same instructor again, he still would have lost. In this case, he dealt with her attacks with the Water God Style with counters.]

Paul: Ha... Ha... I lost...

Sword God Instructor: Are you unable to move?

Paul: Yup... My limbs are practically like jelly...

Sword God Instructor: I see. Do you need help?

Paul: ...I'm good. I just need a bit more before I can move again. Though I guess even if I can't move then, I'll just get someone else... Oh but you have something going on somewhere right? You can leave first.

[As Paul laid on the ground, he raised his head towards the instructor, seeing the instructor's arms crossed as her head tilted.]

Sword God Instructor: And just who are you going to call, and ideas? Since your mother is pregnant, everyone here has been prattling about you know.

Paul: ! How do you know about mothers situation?

Sword God Instructor: It'd be weirder not to. What with everyone being noisy about it. "The Second child of the Notos Greyrat Family". Boy or a girl, either one will make everyone feel blessed when it's born I guess right.

Paul: Everyone huh...

Sword God Instructor: Well either way, until the baby is born, everyone in the household won't be able to calm down. So for that reason alone, you will be training your sword arm in the meantime. The young master just so happens to have talent in the sword. From here on, if you

focus on your body's development, your skills can really grow considerably... I can feel it.

Paul: Feel you say... What's up with that... Can't you say something more convincing?

Sword God Instructor: There's nothing more to say.

Paul: ...Why?

Sword God Instructor: Even if someone has the talent now, actually training is a different story. You may have the potential boy, but there's a possibility of you getting tired of the sword and giving up halfway.

Paul: Eh...

[The Sword God Instructor's remarks had left Paul in a daze.]

Paul: (Giving up the sword huh...)

Sword God Instructor: Huh? What's with that idiotic look?

Paul: It's nothing, I just never thought about abandoning the sword before... Training is hard, be it at school or at home, both you and the teacher at school basically beat me up but... How I see it, the sword is still the most interesting to me you know...

Sword God Instructor: I see.

Paul: Instructor... Hasn't your reaction been a little... Normal?

Sword God Instructor: This looks like the usual though. Swordsmanship is all about how serious you are about the sword, of course there are exceptions. You do understand though right? Even if you become good at the sword, you still won't be recognized by the other nobles.

[Paul's expression turned sour as he looked away due to the Sword God Instructor's warning.]

Paul: Please stop nagging at me teach.

Sword God Instructor: I suppose you're right. It isn't my job to tell you all of these things anyways. First of all, anything wrong with you that isn't a part of swordsmanship isn't something related to me, as far as I see it, you are my prized pupil.

[And with that, the Sword God Instructor lifted Paul up in her arms.]

Paul: I-instructor?!

Sword God Instructor: Secondly, I'll be bringing you back to the residence.

Paul: It's fine! I already told you I was fine! Please put me down!

[Paul was being carried by his instructor Princess Style. Any young woman would have been happy.]

Paul: Hey Instructor?! Are you listening to me?!?!

[He couldn't escape no matter how hard he struggled, the Sword God Instructors hold on Paul was rock solid. So in the end, he was carried in an embarrassing hold all the way back to his home]

Philemon

[Several months go by.]

[The baby known as Philemon has been born into the Notos Greyrat Family and has been growing up well with the affection of both parents.]

Paul: Mother, the blooming flowers in the garden are pretty. Why don't we go together to look at them?

Valentina: I'm sorry Paul. But there's thorns in the garden, aren't there? It's a bit dangerous to bring your baby brother Philemon there.

Paul: Well then, what about just me and mother then.

[Paul's lips rose on edge as he watched his mother carry his baby brother in her arms]

Valentina: Oh my, You no I can't do that. Poor little Philemon can't be left alone.

Paul: But, I 'm usually at school, so I can't see mother very often, which is why I want to spend more time together.

Valentina: Paul... Of course. I also miss you too and want to spend more time with you as well.

Paul: Then..!

Valentina: So why don't we have tea here now? You can even get your favourite sweets.

Paul: !

Paul: B-But... (Philemon is still with us so it's no different than not spending time alone with mother...)

[Paul was somewhat depressed, it was a heavy and terrible feeling. He was unable to understand why he felt that way, and all his mother could do was give a troubled smile]

Valentina: Paul, Philemon's your younger brother. You're the older brother so I expect you to be on good terms with him.

Paul: ...Understood. (Philemon, Philemon, Philemon... All my mother thinks about now is him. Is it because he's a baby? Or is it because I'm worse compared to him-)

Paul: (-No! Why am I thinking like this! My little brother is just cuter than me, nothing more!)

[He shook his head to get rid of his negative thoughts, but those thoughts couldn't be rid of so easily.]

Paul: (Mother seems to only think about Philemon lately, that little bastard will grow up eventually...Then he'll no longer be a baby)

[After some feeling of hesitation in Paul's chest nearing the end of his holidays, he eventually had to go back to school]

[And now, until his little brother has grown up, he could only hope in vain. So, as time passed by while he was in school. His mother, father and everyone else back at home began to grow onto Philemon, leading to the eldest son's existence to diminish in the household.]

10 year old Paul

[A few years went by and Paul has now become 10. In that time his teachers have said nothing.]

[Day after day, he has been showing his entire support towards his classes and has also been working hard in his swordsmanship training.]

Water-God Style Teacher: Yup, you're that aren't you.

Paul: Yes?

Water-God Style Teacher: Other than the Water God Style that I teach, you've also been taking Sword God Style lessons back at home and those two styles are coming together in you.

Paul: Is that... So?

Water-God Style Teacher: You haven't noticed it yourself huh? You've figured out a balance between both styles and can also make quick decisions. But you tend to gravitate towards the Sword God Style.

Water-God Style Teacher: Other nobles would lean more towards the Water God Style you know, then again you aren't acting like much of a noble yourself anyways.

Paul: Do I seem that way?

Water-God Style Teacher: Going on the offensive is the basics of the Sword God Style... Simply speaking "The best defense is a good offense". It fits perfectly with how you've behaved up till now these past few years.

Paul: I never really thought of it that way but... If you say that's the case, then it might be. I don't really understand it myself.

[Paul gave the hard shoulder as a way to poke fun at his teacher. But she just brought her shoulder close to him.]

Water-God Style Teacher: You know, when you start talking like that it tells me that you want to change the subject.

Paul: ...Teacher apparently knows me better than I thought.

Water-God Style Teacher: Why wouldn't I be? I've crossed swords with you for 5 years already at this point. I'm just a bit worried about you leaving things unfinished.

Paul: Eh?

[The Water-God Style's way of speaking, as if to make fun of Paul, left him with his mouth agape as he tilted his head.]

Paul: What are you talking about?

Water-God Style Teacher: Well... It hasn't been officially announced yet, but most likely in a month's time I will be retiring from this whole teaching job.

Paul: Huh?! Why?!?!

Water-God Style Teacher: To be brief, I have a child now. Or rather, a baby currently in my stomach.

Paul: W-wait... a... A baby..? - TL: (Paul really do be losing stuff to babies)

[The sudden news left Paul confused, but he kept his eyes on her stomach regardless.]

Paul: Teacher, Got married..?

Water-God Style Teacher: Ah no i'm still single, but even then a single person can have a child

Paul: Th-then what about the father..?

Water-God Style Teacher: Oh yeah, it's the principal

Paul: The principal?!?!

Water-God Style Teacher: Well I didn't plan on that at the start, but he said that he would help take care of the child so I ended up taking his word for it. Oh but it's not like it was one-sided, I didn't intend to force him to do it... It just somehow ended up like that.

Paul: Can't be helped huh... Even so, are you happy about that?

[5 years, the amount of time he's spent watching her swordsmanship. So it isn't just someone else's problem for Paul. Though she just stared back at Paul and smiled.]

Water-God Style Teacher: Don't worry about it, it's not like I hate that man. It's also better for the baby if he and I were there for him, maybe, as a family right?

Paul: Maybe huh...

Water-God Style Teacher: Mhm, maybe. It's not like anything in the future is guaranteed to

happen

.

Paul: That so... Even then, I can't help but feel a bit worried.

Water-God Style Teacher: I should be the one that's worried, what with leaving you behind

[Her words surprised Paul]

Paul: (The teacher already has to worry about giving birth to the baby, I can't have her worry about me too..!)

Paul: Don't worry about me Teacher!

Water-God Style Teacher: Paul?

Paul: I may not have enjoyed a lot of things in life but... Swordsmanship is really fun! It's what I like to do!

[Paul felt that he said enough about what was keeping in his chest. The teacher in response smiled at him and stroked his head.]

Water-God Style Teacher: In the coming month... For your birthday party, the principal was invited. I was going to accompany him to give my final words but-

Water-God Style Teacher: Looks like it would have been unnecessary. You will surely not let what you were taught go to waste.

Paul: Yes, I definitely won't.

[The teacher laughed filled with satisfaction after seeing his strong will. Afterwards she resigned from her job as a teacher and Paul never saw her again.]

The adult world

[One Month has passed]

[The Notos Greyrat family is currently holding their eldest son Paul's 10th birthday]

Paul: (They made it more extravagant than before but...)

Paul: Hm? Is mother already heading back to your room?

Valentina: Yeah, you will understand right? Philemon has caught a cold

Paul: (A cold... That reminds me, there was a commotion in the morning)

Paul: (...Even then, it's my birthday today. Sure father is busy having a conversation with other people here, at the very least won't mother stay with me..?)

Valentina: Paul...

[Valentina stroked Paul]

Valentina: I'm really sorry, but Philemon's fever has made him restless and he's been calling out to me...

[She stopped stroking Paul before leaving the venue. He clenched his hands into a fist after]

Paul: (It's always about Philemon to mother ever since he was born...)

[Paul started to roam around looking for his father, and he saw him having an enjoyable time talking with the other nobles]

Paul: (How is this my birthday party? I'm not even the center of attention to anyone...)

[It was stupid. Paul began to feel constrained by his surroundings, so he tried to take his chance to leave. However, a young boy stood in his path.]

Philip: Why the long face? You're supposed to be the star today

Paul: Philip?!

[Philip Boreas Greyrat was Paul's cousin who has also been attending the same school as Paul for a few years now.]

[They met one another before due to them sharing the Greyrat family name. But after they

started attending school, they have developed quite the close relationship with each other.]

Paul: What, I didn't know that Philip would come.

Philip: Don't be like that, that'll make me feel lonely.

Philip: Considering that we're all Greyrats, isn't it a given that I would come to the future head of the Notos household's birthday?

Philip: What else would I come here for today if not to celebrate your birthday.

[There were 4 different Greyrat households in the Asura Kingdom each with different names, they protected all 4 directions of the kingdom, North/South/East/West. Their relationships with each other are, to say the least, complicated. However, the Notos and the Boreas Greyrat families were on quite friendly terms with each other.]

Philip: They really outdid themselves with this party, the decorations and the food were quite extravagant and really impressed me.

Paul: Yeah, I felt the same. It definitely surprised me. "Oh, Father went all out!", something like that.

Paul: (Well, I don't know if he actually did this all for me...)

Philip: I see, so he went all out huh. It does seem like a nice party. The thing that stood out the most to me though...

Philip: It would definitely be the maids, they are as cute as always.

Paul: Yeah?

Philip: To be expected from a Notos Greyrat. What they wore definitely fit the occasion, right? Yup, definitely great...

Philip: Paul, as you remember that the maids at my place are all of the beast race. These would look great on them.

Philip: ... Alright, for my birthday party i'll have them all serve you while wearing special attire. Long skirts to hide in... Yup, it'll be very fun.

[Philip's eyes narrowed as he seemed to become enchanted. So Paul gave a tap on his shoulder after seeing how he looked.]

Paul: Philip, the face you're making is quite something right now. Are you aware of the "Secret

Garden”?

Philip: “Secret Garden”?

[Paul gave a look at a maid’s skirt before giving another look back to Philip. Philip then gave Paul a broad smile]

Philip: Indeed, it is like an eternal paradise. A very nice place. It warms my heart.

Paul: (I knew it... We understand each other!)

???: What are you doing over there Philip.

Philip: Esteemed brother is here? Have you done your greetings already?

Paul: Esteemed brother..?

Philip: Ah right, you haven’t met yet right? He’s my older brother by 6 years, he’s James.

Paul: James... Nice to meet you. I’m-

James: I already know it.

Paul: (...Huh?)

[Paul could clearly see it in James’ eyes. He had an angry glower, it was as clear as day that he was unfriendly.]

Paul: (What, I just said nice to meet you so why are you so mean?)

[James snorted as he looked down at Paul]

James: You guys seem to be hanging out at school huh? Philip, even if this was your cousin, you need to at least choose the good ones.

Philip: I’m pretty sure I’ve chosen well, me and Paul really hit it together.

James: Huh? You’re telling me this is who you get along well with? I’m concerned about your future.

Paul: Hey, what are you implying with that?

[Paul couldn’t hold it in any longer. He was very annoyed at James]

Paul: You've been saying whatever you wanted since just now. You aren't like Philip at all, at least he responds back with "Nice to meet you too" first.

Paul: And another thing, you don't know a thing about me. But you look like you have a super low opinion about me.

James: Do you think that I don't know? Mr. Notos Greyrat brat.

[Paul frowned at what he said]

Paul: Are you referring to me?

James: You are pretty famous or rather infamous.

James: "The Notos Greyrat family's eldest son at the age of 10, instead of studying or picking up noble etiquettes. He went and picked up the blade instead."

Paul: That isn't true! I understand at least the bare minimum!

James: Just the bare minimum? Do you think that's enough for a noble, let alone a Greyrat? It seems as though the Notos Greyrats are not as great as I thought.

Paul: Sure I may not know as much as you, but at the very least I don't immediately act condescending towards the other person the first time I meet them.

James: What did you say?!

[Both Paul and James were the eldest sons of their respective Greyrat families. Albeit having a big difference in both their sizes and age, the mood surrounding them was quite dangerous. It did not take long before the people around them noticed.]

Philip: Paul, esteemed brother is just a bit on edge. As cousins we should all get along better.

[Philip who was watching them both decided to jump in]

Philip: Look, it's almost time for the dances. Why don't the both of you go and hang out with the ladies?

James: I'm good. I already have someone with me.

Philip: Ah right, how stupid of me. Esteemed brother already has a fiancée right? You should hurry up and go dance with her.

James: Hm... Well then, please excuse me Mr. Paul. I hope you enjoy displaying your "bare minimum" dancing skills.

[James left Paul with words that were most definitely sarcastic, it caused Paul to be extremely mad.]

Paul: Was that really your older brother Philip?! Why is he such a pain?!?!

Philip: That's correct, he's 100% my brother. I assure you that he's a good person even if he acts like that.

Philip: But enough about that let's not worry about it too much. It's your birthday party so why don't you go have fun with the ladies?

Paul: You tell me to have fun despite me not knowing anyone...

Philip: Well um...Ah, what about the ladies over there?

Paul: Eh?

[Philip line of sight was directed towards a group of beautiful ladies]

Philip: Truth be told, I've been looking at them for a while now. I want you to go over and talk to them.

Paul: Wait, me?

Philip: That's correct! That is why, right! You should hurry up and dance with them.

[Having been forced by Philip who was smiling all the while. Paul ended up approaching the ladies.]

Paul: G-good evening lovely lady...If you don't mind me asking, would you like to dance one tune together with me?

[As a swordsman at heart. Paul managed to show some form of manners that he tried to remember, back when his etiquette teacher tried to teach him but he did not listen]

Paul: (Th-this is fine... Right?)

[He was smiling nervously]

[The young lady he asked to dance with smiled back happily and took Paul's hand]

Young lady: Yes, of course I will, Paul. It would be an honor.

Paul: I'm so glad. Well then, let's go.

[As it was Paul's birthday, he would have to dance at the very center of the party venue.]

[When he started to escort the young lady, his father ushered the famous orchestra to begin playing.]

Paul: (Dance... Dance... Step... Step..?)

[He had never once attended any dance lesson, only escaping them. So in terms of his dancing abilities, it was next to none, he may as well be as rigid as a sword when it comes to it.]

Paul: (Well, I'm sure it'll work out if I just watch how everyone else dances and move to the rhythm!)

[With the reflexes and the observation that he has honed thanks to his swordsmanship instructors. He focused entirely on how the rest moved and it showed in his face, that he was not trying to have fun]

Young lady: Hmhm...♪

[Paul heard a tiny laughter mixed in with the music. It came from the young lady he was dancing with]

Young lady: Lord Paul, please come closer.

Paul: Huh?

Young lady: If I may be so bold, you do not look like one who would dance well... You don't need to pay attention to your surroundings. Here, just follow my lead.

Young lady: Now then, the most important thing you have to remember when dancing is to have a smile. One or two mistakes are fine as long as you smile.

Paul: So it's like that, huh... Well then, I'll follow your advice.

[Paul brought himself closer to the young lady and tried to match her movements]

Paul: Amazing..! Instead of paying attention to my surroundings, this way is a lot easier!

Paul: Really, thanks a lot. Um...

Young lady: Think of it as thanks for what you did for me 5 years ago.

[Paul's head tilted in reaction to what she said. He didn't understand a thing.]

Young lady: It isn't surprising that you don't remember, we met back at your 5th birthday party.

Young lady: At that time you were the one that escorted me around your garden, you even said that there was dirt on my dress.

Paul: Something like that did happen, I think..?

[Paul was 5 years old at the time so he couldn't remember what happened well enough. But as he was wracking his head about what happened back then, the young lady was laughing]

Young lady: It may have been insignificant from the perspective of lord Paul, but it helped me a lot.

Young lady: If a noble family's daughter showed up to the party in a dirty dress they would have been a disgrace to that family. Their parents would be mad too, not only that, their reputation would be ruined.

Young lady: And that is why, this is just me returning the favor.

Paul: Something from back then, that's a long time ago, you remember everything?

Young lady: Yes. I've always remembered that moment.

Paul: (What... am I feeling..?)

Paul: (My chest feels like it's tightening, a bit like I'm suffocating but... it doesn't feel bad, it feels strangely nice... But, why?)

Paul: (For some reason after we danced, she's looking a lot cuter...)

[Looking at the young lady caused Paul's heart to beat quickly. She then drew close to Paul's chest, making Paul's face get dyed a bright red color.]

Young lady: It's quite tiring dancing something you're unfamiliar with. When this ends why don't we go ahead and have a nice night together?

Paul: Ah... That's right! You must be quite tired from standing around for too long!

[Once the song ended, Paul took the young lady's hand and they both slipped away from his birthday party. And now, they could both talk to each other at their own leisure, inside a room no one goes into.]

Young lady: Finally, Lord Paul and I are all alone.

Paul: H-Huh?!

[The young lady embraced Paul, her arms wrapped around him. She was close to Paul back when they were dancing too, but the air around her was clearly very different now.]

Young lady: If I said that I wanted to do this, would that be too improper?

Paul: Well, I don't think it is...I was just surprised because it was so sudden... Your feelings make me feel very happy, my heart is beating a lot...

Young lady: Then, from this point on-

[She caressed Paul while looking at him with a passionate gaze. She closed her eyes as Paul drew closer to her lips and kissed her.]

Paul: (S-soft!)

Young lady: Nn... Lord... Paul...

[The young lady lead them both quickly to a sofa as they were kissing]

Young lady: By all means...Lord Paul can do as you please...That's my wish...

Paul: (As I... want...)

[Coercing him with her bright red expression, Paul couldn't help but gulp at her scent. He knew what was supposed to happen, but he didn't know how to do it, just how it's roughly supposed to go]

Paul: (Want... As I... Want...!)

[Paul got rid of her dress. Whatever was left of his reason was blown away by the existence of a "Female". He moved only by instinct now. What they did next was enough to make him forget about the feeling known as first love.]

[Afterwards, when Paul came back to the party, Philip called out to him]

Philip: So, what did you do with the young lady?

Paul: I've walked into something amazing... Is this what they call the stairway to adulthood?

[Now that Paul has had a taste of what it was like, he could no escape from it]

Skirt-chasing

[When Paul finally went back to school, he had started doing something else other than honing his swordsmanship]

Mid-level Noble Lady: Hey listen Paul. When will I be able to see you again?

Paul: Hm~ It won't be possible for some time. There are others waiting for their turn to be with me, there are even new ones.

Mid-class Nobly Lady: Come on, how cold of you! Just a short while ago we were so passionate with each other!

Mid-class Noble Lady: ...Well anyways, it's fine. Our kind of relationship is very clear to me... Ah but Paul, you may want to pay more attention to your surroundings alright?

Paul: For what?

[Paul tilted his head in confusion after wearing his uniform]

Paul: What should I pay more attention to?

Mid-class Noble Lady: There are many unlike me, who do not understand what their kind of relationship is with you.

Mid-class Noble Lady: Especially from the Nobles from lesser families, there are those that dream about having a connection to the eldest son of the Notos Greyrat family.

Paul: Hmmm... Then you aren't one of them?

Mid-Level Noble Lady: I am of middle class nobility. I have been promised a future. You, on the other hand, are playing with fire.

Paul: Haha, I see I see. That's what I like about you.

Paul: Whether it is a noble that's calculative, or if it's a noble that isn't. Not knowing if they are is what makes it interesting.

Mid-Level Noble Lady:

Paul: What's wrong??

Mid-Level Noble Lady: ...Nothing is wrong. I am just feeling a little under the weather. You can leave first.

Paul: Mhm, yup. Well then, see you later.

[Paul left the empty classroom and headed off to the training ground to train more on swordsmanship]

[As his swordsmanship teacher had already left the academy, Paul had to train his water-god style on his own]

[Meanwhile he would train his sword-god style with his instructor back at home]

Paul: (The new teacher doesn't exactly match with me...)

[As Paul does not like the new teacher, instead of swordsmanship, he has devoted more time towards the art of chasing school girls instead]

Paul: (It's not that swordsmanship is boring for me now but... It isn't as good without someone to go against.)

Paul: (Compare that to chasing after girls, it's a challenge on who gets them so that makes it fun. There's even something more fun to look forward to afterwards...)

Paul: I knew it, not everything can be done by one man. But where can I find someone to spar against...

Paul: (Philip could've been an option, but he's not exactly that great with the sword...)

[He looked around the training ground for anyone while trying not to look weird, but he couldn't see anyone. Since as far as some noble child is concerned, it's more something they had to do while attending the school rather than something they actually want to do]

Female Student: Sir Paul – !

[Paul turned around to see a female student calling out to him outside of the training grounds while waving her arms]

Female Student: Why don't you take a little break, how about having some tea together? I managed to get some tasty tea leaves and confections.

[All of Paul's worries disappeared after seeing the female student]

Paul: (Well, difficult things aren't my forte after all)

Paul: (As long as it is fun, it'll be alright to me)

[He ended up going and having tea with his classmate and enjoying his time with her]

Female Student: Sir Paul, being able to spend time with you is the best thing to have happened to me.

Paul: Hahaha, you're exaggerating. We're classmates, so you can be more relaxed around me.

Female Student: But... isn't Sir Paul always surrounded by many other girls? And they are all very cute as well...

Female Student: I'm not as cute as them... That's why I'm really glad that I mustered up my courage and invited you out today.

[She held her face with her hands as it became a bright red]

Paul: Oh my, the way she's acting... She wants that right?

[Before Paul could give in to his animalistic thoughts, someone interrupted them]

Noble Lady: Stop right there! You are not to approach Paul whenever you want! If you want his attention you have to wait for your turn!

Paul: Senior...

[The strong-willed senior who is accompanied by her group of followers appeared before them]

Female Student: Wait my... Turn...? There's no way that is a thing... Right?

Noble Lady: Don't play dumb with me. Do you honestly think that we would believe that you don't know a thing about the Notos Greyrat family when you invited him?

Female Student: I-I just wanted to.. Get to know Sir Paul better...

Noble Lady: Judging by how you look, you do not seem to come from a high standing family. Anyhow, are you thinking of jumping up the ladder by doing it with him?

Female Student: What are you saying?! There's no way, something so improper, I've never thought of it!

Paul: (Aaaah...)

[What the student said was enough even for someone like Paul understand]

[The noble lady and her followers together with Paul, have a certain "Relationship". Some would

say disgraceful, but that would sound like an attack to them]

Young Lady: ...What do you plan to do then?

Paul: (I've got no choice...)

[He stood up from his chair and got in front of the noble lady]

Paul: Senior, surely you can let her have this

Noble Lady: Paul, this is just between us ladies. Would you kindly keep your mouth shut?

Paul: But I'm involved in this aren't I? This girl is just speaking to me as a classmate. And we were just about to finish too.

Paul: That's why, if it's all good with you senior, how about we spend some time together later? I really want to be with you then...

[He took hold of the noble lady's hands and entwined his with hers while giving her a look with upturned eyes]

Noble Lady: Why yes, I have plenty of time later.

Paul: Well then, why don't we find somewhere we won't get disturbed sometime soon?

Noble Lady: Why of course! There's no need for me to waste my time on her.

[In one way or another, the noble lady's mood seems to have improved. She then glared at the female student, causing her to turn blue in terror]

Paul: (So that's why she warned me... I guess things are in a ugly state with the nobles and students alike)

Paul: (Should've known that this would become a bit of a pain. I just wanted a fun way to pass the time...)

[But his troubles did not end there]

[On the following day, Paul was confronted by a man when he and Philip were heading to class]

Mid-Class Noble Son: Paul Notos Greyrat! I challenge you to a duel!!!

Paul:...Huh?

Philip: What did you do this time Paul?

Paul: Who knows..?

Mid-Class Noble Son: You've not only insulted me, but this time you have insulted my entire family! This is totally unforgivable!

[Paul frowned at the noble sons pointlessly pompous behavior]

Paul: What have I done? Why did you have to suddenly come out and do all that?

Mid-Class Noble Son: Are you acting dumb? You've laid your hands on my fiance!!!

Paul: Your fiance?

Philip: Paul, you of all people... Shouldn't let word get out about this

Paul: What's so bad about others finding out about this? Wasn't there an incident recently involving 3 young ladies and the second son of the boreas family?

[Philip looked at Paul completely shocked, Paul similarly returned a surprised look. The mid-class noble son on the other hand, was completely enraged thinking that he was being ignored by them on purpose.]

Mid-Class Noble Son: hurry up, get your sword out! Or could it be that you want to put your delicate head down to the ground and apologize?!

Paul: I have nothing to apologize for. She agreed to let me do it with her and I have absolutely no intentions of pulling my sword out for you.

Mid-Class Noble Son: So you're running away from me then?

[Paul, completely unfazed by the noble sons provocation, set his eyes on him]

[The noble son may be bigger built, but since he never trained and has a severe lack of muscles, Paul wouldn't lose even if they did get into a duel]

Paul: You've been going on and on about dueling, but have you really resolved yourself to actually duel?

Mid-Class Noble Son: What did you say?

Paul: This duel may be a formality but, it goes without saying, we're allowed to kill our opponent and no one can complain about it. We won't even be punished for killing our opponent either.

Mid-Class Noble Son: Wh-?!

[The noble dropped his sword as he trembled in fear]

Mid-Class Noble Son: I-I didn't hear anything about this...!! I regret this whole thing...!!

[The noble quickly left the place completely embarrassed. Leaving the students in the vicinity to go after him to return his sword that he left behind]

Philip: Are you alright?

Paul: Why wouldn't I be alright? It's not like this was the first time something like this happened, though it didn't really boil down to anything then too anyways.

Philip: Well...

[This time, it was just someone who was all talk. Having said that, Paul headed off for his swordsmanship lessons with Philip]

[But it will only be a week later when Paul receives word from his father to go back home]

Episode 3 [The Bad Boy of the Notos Family]

The Notos Family brat

[A letter came from his blood-related father who is the head of the notos family, Amarant Notos Greyrat. It told him to return home]

Amarant: Now, why do you think I told you to come back?

Paul: Who knows? Even if you asked me that... What was written in the letter only told me to come back.

Amarant: Too many people have seen how you've behaved recently. Are you even aware of your wildish behavior?

Paul: So that's how it is... Well, it is true that I've been playing around a lot.

[Paul experiencing being around all the female students who were all fighting each other over him really dampened his mood]

Paul: But still, It's not like I'm the only one doing it...Some others are also playing around with the girls too.

Paul: That's why you don't have to be such a wor-

Amarant: Don't give me that bullshit!!!

[While Amarant was shouting, he knocked Paul down with his hand]

[Paul's physique against someone with a trained sword arm, he naturally couldn't take it. So with him laying on his back, he could do nothing but look up at his father]

Paul: F-father..?

Amarant: You've come to understand your place in school as a noble, and knew that you were going to succeed me as the eldest son of the Notos Greyrat family. However, you have betrayed the trust I've placed in you.

Paul: Betrayed... You've played around with girls before haven't you? As someone from the Greyrat family, it's definitely impossible to not have an interest towards the other gender...

Paul: Besides that..! Wasn't that the method to get closer to them and become more intimate!? Didn't Father say that this was important for my future!!

Amarant: Don't shift the blame to me. I didn't force you to get close to all those women.

Paul: Then, what ar-

Amarant: You have no eye for people. Someone spread rumors about the eldest son of the notos greyrat family.

Amarant: You've placed your hands on young ladies, those with a family background and more, you've even laid hands on one who is engaged, all while completely disregarding the power balance of the families behind theirs and ours.

Amarant: That is why you ran into trouble with that young lady's fiancée. Just a few days ago I received a letter from that noble's father complaining about this.

Paul: (Is that so...)

[He knew straight away which noble and young lady his father was referring to. And so he couldn't help but clench his fists]

Paul: That guy, because he didn't have the courage to fight me, he went and asked his father for help..! What a pathetic man he is!

Amarant: Pathetic? Is that all you have to say?

[A cold voice. No rage or anger left to be found all of a sudden. Even his father's gaze on him felt like it grew colder and colder]

Amarant: I'm the one that has to clean up after the mess you make, not you. But it wasn't without its costs, I had to borrow from the other nobles.

Paul: !!! You... Borrowed from a middle class noble..?

Amarant: I'll let you in on something my idiotic son.

Amarant: The women that I grew closer with, was to get my hands on information on their families.

Amarant: if YOU are doing it with the women for fun, and are doing it with any woman you see. That only makes you a sexual deviant.

Paul: I'm a... Sexual deviant...

[Paul was unable to retort back at his father. Because he knew in his heart that he did it only because it was "fun".]

Amarant: I feel bad for Philemon for having an older brother that acts the way you do.

Paul: Huh..?

Amarant: He is still quite young and yet he's quite excellent, he's acting like one would expect from a noble and he is earnestly doing his best.

Amarant: Hey!

Male Servant: ...Yes. You called for me?

[As he was waiting outside the room the whole time. The servant entered it as soon as Amarant called]

Amarant: Ensure that Paul stays in his room. Do not let him out even once unless I say he can.

Male Servant: Certainly... Young master, come with me.

Paul: ...

[There was nothing left to say as Paul left. But one thing is certain, the look on amarant was not one of a father]

[Amarant had given up on Paul, it was so obvious that even Paul knew that fact.]

Put into house arrest

[Paul returned to his room with the male servant. Usually whenever he comes home from school, he tends to just report back to his father and come back, so it has been some time since he actually came back to his own room]

Male Servant: Young master, I would sincerely request that you spend some time reflecting on yourself. What the master was enraged about is not a small matter.

Paul: ...Doesn't look like I had any choice but to be obedient.

Paul: Since when did the windows have gratings? So father already planned on locking me up to begin with?

Male Servant: ...I will be back, when it is time for dinner.

[Without responding back to Paul, the servant left the room. Afterwards, Paul could hear the door being locked]

Paul: (Come to think of it, father said something about nobles...)

Paul: (That they have to be able to think of every situation, and to think about whether the most likely outcome would be beneficial for them)

Paul: ...But still, where's the fun in that.

[Whether it was about having fun, or if it aroused Paul, him going into action based only on either one of those two reasons was why he got put into house arrest]

Paul: (Sure I was quite wild and boorish, but still...)

Paul: (I don't believe that i've done anything wrong)

Paul: (Comparing what I've done against the nobles' way of life, which is to act based on how beneficial something is for them. Theirs is quite dull...)

[And so continues his life stuck in his room. Even if the male servant told him to, Paul showed no signs of remorse for what he did]

[Also, despite being locked inside his room, he could still hear voices on the other side of the door]

Maid A: All of the private tutors that were hired had nothing but praise for him. It seems that Sir Philemon is very brilliant and earnest!

Maid B: He is also awfully composed for his age. A gentleman despite how old he is.

Maid A: Very different from his older brother, he's like a little gentleman. From what I remember, when Sir Paul was his age, he was already touching the maids butts and hiding himself under our skirts right?

Maid B: It's how he grew up. It's no wonder why the master locked him up in his room in rage.

Head Maid: Ah, so you were both here. Sir Philemon has called for you.

Maid A: Oh my! Sir Philemon did? we have to go at once!

Maid B: If Philemon is pleased with us, then we might be able to become his personal maids! Come on, let's hurry!

[The sound of footsteps scurrying away could be heard. It appears that they never once thought that Paul could have heard them]

Paul: (Philemon huh...)

//Some time passes by, screen fade in and out the male servant/butler is also present

[Philemon had visited Paul. But this wasn't his first time]

Paul: ...What are you here for?

Philemon: It is natural is it not. I was worried about big brother... You were locked in your room for a long time...

Philemon: Thanks for unlocking the door so that I could speak with my big brother, I would like some time alone with him.

Male Servant: I understand.

[The male servant lowered his head before turning to leave the room, leaving the two brothers alone. Philemon's innocent expression on his face then becomes more evil as he laughs]

Paul: (Ah...)

Philemon: Paul, I have to express my gratitude to you. Thanks to all of the idiotic stunts you have pulled, I didn't have to do anything to get everyone to praise me.

Philemon: Did you know? Everyone has been saying that the younger brother is more fit to be

the new head than the good for nothing older brother!

Paul: Did you really come here only to say that? You even got the servant to help you, you really have a lot of time in your hands.

Philemon: What did you say?!

Paul: Can you not be so loud? People are gonna hear you outside of this room. You have to have that cat-like face in front of the servants don't you?

Philemon: Hmph! I'll just tell them that you were bullying me! If fathers gets wind of this, I bet he won't let you out of this room ever again!

Paul: (So this is my brother huh...)

Paul: (Though I haven't seen him in a while, he seems to be a lost cause...)

[No matter what Paul's younger brother who's 5 years old says to him, none of it concerns him at all. So Paul just went and plopped onto his bed]

Paul: It doesn't look like you have anything of value to say. I'm quite busy right now so I'd appreciate it if you left.

Philemon: Busy..?! Are you mocking me?! How dare a failure like you act like that towards me!

Paul: What more do you even have to say.

Philemon: Father... Mother too, they don't care about you!

Philemon You're a stain to the Notos Greyrat family, that's why both mother and father don't love you at all.

[Philemon laughed at Paul as he left the room, locking the door before he left.]

Paul: (So what did he even come here for anyways? Well... Not like it matters anyways... Still,,,))

Paul: To be expected of Philemon. Your laugh was very much like a noble... I really hate that.

[His younger brother had the same face as those he had met at school and parties. One that was normally used by nobles who looked down on those lower than them.]

Paul: (He was right about one thing though, father is definitely ashamed of me. I've come to think that he doesn't love me...)

Paul: (However, There's no way mother doesn't love me)

[And so ends another day for Paul, locked in his room]

Small sense of discomfort

[When it became night time, clearly seen through the barred window, the door to the room opened up and the person Paul looked forward to seeing the most entered]

Paul: Mother! You came tonight as well!

Valentina: That's right, I certainly have. We live in the same place, but I can only visit you so late into the night without being noticed...

[The male servant himself has the key to lock the door. The only other person who has the key to the door would be Amarant, the head of the household]

[Valentina has gotten Amarant's key to unlock the door secretly every night, this was why she could visit Paul]

Valentina: I've already given a request to my husband. I want him to quickly forgive you... But he didn't want to grant it.

Paul: It's fine because mother still comes to see me anyways!

Valentina: My! That cannot be the case!

[He didn't want to worry his mother, but instead she opposed what he said. And then she held him in her arms]

Valentina: When Paul was little, you were always brimming with energy weren't you? That's why this room is too small for you.

Valentina: Leave it to me. I will definitely get you out of here.

Paul: ...Just don't be too unreasonable please.

Paul: Father wouldn't let me out of this room so easily, from his perspective i'm just the shameful son...

[He hadn't seen his father since he was put into house arrest. But he still couldn't forget about the cold eyes he saw since that day]

Valentina: There's no way that is the case. My husband still sees you as his precious son.

Valentina: Even now, he still hopes that you become a splendid man who will succeed him and become the head of the family.

Paul: Huh..?

Valentina: No matter how much of a noble you are, it is impossible to survive just by only relying on your sword...

Valentina: And that is why, so that you won't become troubled as the future head of the Notos Greyrat family, he is being strict to you.

Paul: Father had that in mind..?

Valentina: Haha, you look like you don't believe it.

[His expression told Valentina everything she needed to know. And so Paul clung onto the now laughing Valentina]

Paul: Certainly, there's no way I can believe something like that, but if mother says otherwise...

Paul: I want to have a talk with father next time. So that I can tell him how I feel ... So that we can understand each other.

Paul: (Just a little bit, I will face the world of nobles... Together with father)

[He wrapped his arms around his mother once more and hugged her again]

Paul: (..?)

[Paul had an uncomfortable feeling for a moment, but the sweet scent coming from his mother as he hugged her made that uncomfortable feeling disappear]

[That feeling that he decided to overlook, his entire life, he would grow to regret it]

[A few days after that night]

[For some unknown reason, Paul's mother never showed up to his room once since then]

Plans to break-out

Paul: (Why hasn't mother come by yet...)

Paul: (Could it be... Father found out and put mother into house arrest..?!)

[He couldn't figure out what actually happened. There was little that could be done when he's just stuck in his room]

Head Maid: Pardon me. I have brought Sir Paul's dinner

Paul: ! Sure, you may come in!

[The once newly hired maid when Paul was still very young has now become the head maid. And so, Paul approached her when she was setting his dinner down]

Paul: Is the male servant outside?

Head Maid: He is not, he has gone back to his own work after locking the door. I believe he will be back when the Young Master has finished his dinner.

Paul: I see... Anyways, there's something I want to tell you...

Head Maid: What is it?

Paul: Well it's... About mother, is she doing alright? I haven't been able to see her since I was locked in here and was wondering if she's in good health.

Head Maid: Well... Um, About that... I sincerely apologize. Master has instructed me to not inform you of any events happening outside of this room...

Paul: Is there no way I could get you to tell me?

Head Maid: ...I'm afraid not.

[Looking at the head maid's expression, it was clear that she couldn't tell him even if she wanted to. Furthermore...]

Paul: (She looks worn out... Without a doubt, she knows about what happened to mother!)

Head Maid: Wh- Young Master?!

[Paul had reached out and caressed her butt]

Paul: Since back then, you were kind towards me. Even when I hid underneath your skirt to hide from the male servant every single time, you never once got mad at me...

Head Maid: I-it's just a maid's duty.

Paul: Is that really all it was? I thought that you did it because you wanted to keep me from getting caught and lectured?

Paul: And once more, I want you to help me...

Head Maid: ...Young master has become big already. You do not need my help anymore.

Paul: There's no way that's the case. Even now, the head maids help is needed. After all, you are my ally right..?

Head Maid: ...

Head Maid: ...I understand. I will tell you about what happened to your mother.

[She was a bit hesitant until Paul gave her a look]

Head Maid: To be frank, the madam... Has gotten an illness that is destroying her body...

Paul: Eh...

Paul: Do you know the source of the illness?! Are you even taking care of her properly?!

Head Maid: The master has already called for doctors but there hasn't been any results...

Paul: N-no way...

[His mother was suffering while he was stuck inside his room... It was impossible for him to not want do anything about it]

Paul: (Why now of all times when I'm under house arrest..!)

Paul: ...I need to go to mother.

Head Maid: ?! Don't tell me you plan on breaking out?!

Paul: ...I have no choice. It's not like father would let me go even if I begged him, but I do have a plan.

[Having been fed up from being stuck in his room for so long. Paul took it upon himself to think

of a way to get out of it]

Paul: I need your help in order for the plan to work. I promise to never disturb you ever again if you help me with it.

Head Maid: ...I understand. I will gladly help out, it's my duty as a maid.

Paul: Thanks! I just need you to tell me the moment when the male servant comes back.

Paul: (I need to act as fast...)

Paul: (Please wait for me mother... I will save you..!)

[Paul told her about what he was going to do, and now, he could only wait]

Terms for lifting the house arrest

[A day later]

Butler: Young Master! Please come out! Young Master!! Young Master!!!!!!!

[His screams could be heard from all over the mansion]

[After ensuring that his voice couldn't be heard anymore, Paul came out from underneath the Head Maids skirt]

Paul: ...I think he's gone now. Thanks for hiding me.

Head Maid: I-it's fine... But are you sure about this..?

Paul: Yup. You're the one helping me out so you'll most likely be reprimanded if we're caught together. So according to the plan, I'll be on my own starting now.

Head Maid: I see... That's too bad...

Paul: Huh?

Head Maid: N-no it's nothing... ! I'm glad that it's going well so far!

[After parting ways with the now embarrassed maid, Paul made his way towards where his mother was]

[According to what Paul was told, he could get in uninterrupted as there was no one guarding the room]

Paul: (Ah...)

[After stepping inside his mother's room for the first time in a long time, there was the smell of medicine present in the air. It was also a lot darker in the room than usual as the curtains were closed, but he could still see his mother laying on the bed]

Paul: Mother... You look smaller than when I last saw you... Did it cause you to lose weight..?

Valentina: ...

[Paul held his mother's hand so as to not wake her up. She was all skins and bones as she was now, nothing at all like her previous self]

Paul: No way... Could it be..?

[He recalled that strange feeling he had back when his mother hugged him]

Paul: It was then...

Paul: Mother was already becoming thinner then..?

Paul: (Then that means... She was already ill then?)

Paul: (Why... Why didn't I notice it back then..?!)

[Paul racked his brain for any ideas at all to do to help his mother]

[After coming to a conclusion, he roughly wiped his tears away, giving his mother's hand a tight squeeze with both hands after]

Paul: (Think Paul... You were taught this at school. The one day you actually went for class and paid attention)

Paul: Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again, <<Healing>>...

[His hand emitted a faint glow]

[But it stopped almost instantly]

[Her condition didn't improve one bit and still had a pained look as she slept]

Paul: (Didn't work huh...)

[Not taking his lessons seriously could've been the main reason, but he had no aptitude for magic to begin with. At least that's what Paul himself thought]

Paul: (I can't heal mother with my own power... What should I do...)

Paul: (...Well anyways, being under house arrest won't do me any good. In that case...)

[After giving his mother a kiss on her cheek, he left the room]

[He then proceeded with only one destination in mind, his father's office. On his way there, there were servants trying to tell him something but he immediately ignored all of them]

Amarant: There was quite some noise in the mansion before wasn't there?

Paul: Could it have just been your imagination? Isn't that right, butler?

Butler: ...That is correct, that might be the case. Nothing has happened in this mansion today.

Amarant: ...Alright. And so? Paul, I'm assuming that you've reflected upon yourself already?

Amarant: I'm quite busy right now so keep it short.

Paul: Well um... I just wanted to apologize to father no matter what...

Paul: I know I've... No that's not right, I was doing whatever I pleased, and that brought shame to the name of Notos Greyrat, that's why I really do apologize.

Paul: I'll watch myself from now on. So please forgive me...

Amarant: ...

Amarant: I believe I said that I was busy. I do not have time to worry about you right now... Do as you please.

Paul: Yes! Thank you so much. The school should know about what I've done by now right, so for the time being I'll be laying low at home.

Amarant: Laying low huh...

Amarant: Fine by me. However, Regarding Valentina... You cannot see your mother.

Paul: Huh... W-why?

Amarant: She spoils you too much. If you can't accept my condition then I can't let you go.

[What Amarant says is what goes, so Paul had no other choice]

Paul: (So he won't say anything about mother, and he won't let me see her..?)

[He had some qualms about the condition, but as he had to show that he was repentful, he ended up accepting]

Paul: I understand...

Amarant: If you understand, hurry up and leave.

[After getting Paul to leave, Amarant returned back to his work]

Paul: (That was easier than I thought)

Paul: (...That's all it amounted to father I guess... We'll not like it matters...)

Resolution to save mother

[After Paul has exited and closed the door to his fathers office]

Amarant: So, where is the doctor?

Paul: (Doctor..?)

[After hearing what Amarant said, Paul stopped himself from completely closing the door. He left a gap as he attempted to hear what was being said]

Butler: About that... On the way here, he apparently wandered off to the slums... We still have yet to find him...

Butler: Furthermore the people living there abandoned their past. They don't take kindly to anyone not part of the slums...

Amarant: Don't make excuses! Bring him here quickly... Get that slum doctor here!!

Amarant: We need his knowledge and skill..! Then we can save Valentina..!!!

Paul: (!!)

Paul: (A doctor in the slums..? Can they really save mother..??)

[Paul never decided on something as quickly as he did now. He gently closed the door so as to avoid being caught eavesdropping, then he went to get changed and snuck out]

The search for a doctor in the slums

[Current location: The slums. An unlawful place but it did nothing in deterring Paul]

Paul: (I'll be alright. I brought my sword with me after all.)

[And so Paul went into the slums determined]

Thug A: Huh, doctor? Like there could be someone like that here in the slums!

Thug B: This ain't no place for kids y'know! Yer just gonna get hurt here!

[No matter who he asked]

[None of them had any info about the so called doctor]

Paul: (There's been zero leads...)

Paul: (...Not yet, it's just the first day so I still have time!)

[And so began his days coming and going between the mansion and the slums]

[He made sure to leave early in the morning, and came back late into the night. Whether it was a good thing or bad though, none from the household ever stopped Paul from doing anything]

[And then... After coming to the slums many times over, Paul eventually established connections with a prostitute]

Prostitute: So you've coming here often because you're looking for a doctor huh...

Paul: Anything you know related to the doctor works. Have you heard any rumors or talks about him?

Prostitute: Well... If I learn anything, I'll let you know... There just isn't much to go off of.

Prostitute: And if they were as good as you make them out to be they wouldn't be here in the slums. They would instead be somewhere that isn't here earning their keep.

Paul: Is there any reason they wouldn't come here?

Prostitute: What a silly person. In the first place, nobles normally don't care about what happens here.

Paul: ...But I don't have much else to go off by.

[Apart from the person's job description and general location, Paul know anything else]

Paul: (Father hasn't found him yet either...)

[Feeling Glum, Paul let out a sigh. Then the prostitute who was with him wrapped her arms around his waist]

Prostitute: Are you feeling down? Do you want me to comfort you? Is a big discount good for you?

Paul: ...Nah, I'm heading home now. Ah, right... If you get any new info make sure to tell me.

[Paul handed over the money he brought from the mansion, in response, she tried to give him a kiss]

Prostitute: You're still giving me money despite me not actually providing anything yet... Say, I think I should give you some of my time after all. I can quickly show you Heaven right now... What do you think?

Paul: ...There's no way it's gonna be a quick one at all right?

Prostitute: C'mon, I can show you why they call me a **Pro, fe, ssio, nal**.

[After letting out all of his built up "Stress" onto heaven, Paul headed out of the slums as it was beginning to get dark outside]

Paul: (What's the time now then? Definitely late for sure...)

[He turned his gaze towards the sky]

Paul: Ah...

[A beautiful starry night sky. The stars shining a bright white, it had Paul's attention and made him stop in place]

Paul: The stars are moving...

Paul: (Were they always this pretty..? I know... I have to show this to mother somehow...)

[The windows in his mothers room were completely covered by the curtains so she wouldn't be able to see the night sky]

Paul: (Father should be asleep right now)

[Just as Paul was about to start heading back again]

???: Paul—...

Paul: ?! ...Mother?

[It was impossible for his mother to be by the slums, and yet, it still sounded like her]

[His heart leapt. Alarm bells were ringing loudly in his head. At that moment, Paul broke into a dash back home]

Disgusting World

[As Paul hurried back home. Despite it long being passed midnight, he could see the lights still being on]

Paul: Mother...!!

[Calling for his mother in distress as he rushed into her room. Flinging the door open as he barged in]

Philemon: Ku.... uwAAaaAAAAAHH!!! Motheeeeeeeeeer!!! Wake up, please, just wake up..!!!!

Amarant: Valentina... Forgive me... I wasn't able to save you... Forgive me..!

[Both Philemon and Amarant were kneeling down next to Valentina's bed. The mother known as Valentina now has a lack of color in her complexion as she laid asleep forever]

Paul: ...No way

[He approached them, his legs trembling]

Paul: Mother..?

[He slowly reached out to his mother with his hand. However, he was stopped and violently shook by someone]

Philemon: Get your hands off mother! This was all your fault!

Paul: ..Huh?

Philemon: You did this! Bring her back! Mother died you know!! Bring mother back!!!

Paul: Ha, don't mess with me! No matter how much you hate me, this isn't something you can just say-

Amarant: Keep your mouth shut!!

Paul: F-Father...

[Paul had stopped moving after hearing his Amarant shout. The father picked up the little brother and held him with is arm]

[Philemon held his father's arm and began to cry. You could see the rage beneath Amarant's ice cold glare piercing through Paul]

Amarant: Where were you?

Paul: About that...

Amarant: Never mind, It's fine, don't tell me. It's too late to hear what you have to say now, since it won't bring her back to life.

Amarant: Paul, you foolish child... A bastard like you caused her death.

Paul: !? Father, what are you...

Amarant: You think that I do not know what goes on in this household..? That every night Valentina would come to your room to comfort you..?

Amarant: She was never that healthy to begin with... But every night she visited you because she was worried and so her stress built up... All of that led to her destroying herself.

Paul: No way...

Amarant: All because you couldn't stop yourself from indulging her kindness... My beloved wife... Philemon's only mother... You killed her..!!

[Paul had never known that his mother had a weak body from the start...]

[Not once did he think that he was hurting her]

[And so, as his vision began to waver, Paul fell to his knees]

Amarant: ...Take him out. Do not even let him come close to Valentina's body. This is an order from the head of this household.

Butler: ...As you wish. Young master, please follow me...

Paul: ...

[Being unable to muster any strength left, the now absent minded Paul was being held up and escorted out of Valentina's room by the butler]

[And so, until the day of his mother's funeral came, he was prohibited from ever going near her room. Not once was he left alone as the servants were always with him until then]

Paul: (Mother is dead...)

Paul: (Was I to blame..?)

[Since the passing of Valentina, the gap between Paul and the people of the Notos household only grew, to the point where his relationship with them could no longer be repaired]

[His father Amarant has now completely given up on him. Instead giving his full attention only to Philemon. This treatment towards has also influenced how the servants of the household began to treat him]

Paul: (The place that I was born and raised has now become something I don't recognize, not something that I could relax and feel comfort in...)

[As a means of escaping the stifling atmosphere in his own home, Paul actually went to school willingly. However, with the school being a place with basically nothing but noble children, it was no different from home. In the end, he quit school before becoming 12 years old]

Paul: (Father doesn't even talk to me... I don't think he even thinks about me anymore...)

Amarant: I would like to thank all of you for being here with us today. Philemon, go ahead and say hello to everyone.

Philemon: Yeah!

Paul: (Philemon gives the impression of a prideful son)

Paul: (Compared to him... I am like flowery decoration? Huh? Is that something you should say about men?)

Paul: ..Hm?

Daughter A: ...!!

Daughter A: Sir Paul...

Daughter B: Th-that's no good Lorraine! The senior noble son is over there!

Daughter A: Y-you are correct! Let us hurry and give our greetings!

Paul: (What do I even say to that...)

[A girl that Paul had met several times before now, had run away from him as soon as they met]

Paul: (Even the one who took my virginity...)

[Paul had finally understood how he was viewed by the other nobles]

Philemon: Elder brother, what are you up to over there?

[The star of today's show has appeared before the now background character 'Paul'. Most likely due to all the stares coming their way, his brother looked like he became a different person]

Paul: Should the main attraction be over here?

Philemon: It is just that I saw my elder brother all by his lonesome. Are you in poor health right now? If so then you should go back and rest in your room.

Paul: Nah I'm alright. Don't mind me.

Philemon: Are you sure? Because you don't look...

[As he was talking, he came closer to Paul]

Philemon: ...Like you get it huh? You're just putting a stall on things by being here so I'm telling you to get lost.

[Making sure that only Paul could hear what he said, Philemon smirked at him]

Philemon: It's saddening that my elder brother won't be able to attend the rest of the party. But... Elder brother's health is more important.

Paul: ...Yeah. Well, I'll take my leave... I was starting to get bored anyway.

[Seeing his younger brother's hostility towards him, as well as the other nobles who were so quick to change sides, made him sick to the stomach]

[He spoke so that everyone could hear his reason for leaving, as he didn't want them to know that he wanted to cry. And so, he left the area, as well as his home]

Paul: (I always thought that the world of nobles was boring...)

Paul: (...Rather than being boring, what I know now is...)

Paul: Really, such a disgusting world it is.

[A world filled with nothing but egotistical and self-serving nobles, simple minded to a fault when it comes to profit that they can gain, to the point that they are willing to throw away and abandon those they deem useless to them as if it was the normal thing to do]

[It was the kind of world that Paul himself detested, the exact opposite of where he was heading towards to now]

Thug A: What's a noble brat doing in a place like this?

Thug B: He looks like he has good stuff on him. Hehehe... Let's take everything he has!

Paul: ...Perfect timing. Just so you know... I'm quite pissed off right now. So I wanna blow off some steam...!!

[Though the thugs were the ones that went to beat Paul up, he was the one that beat them up instead with nothing but his fists]

[And so, on the day his younger brother turned five. It would also mark the turning point for Paul as he turned his back on the world of nobles, and instead spent his time in the slums]

Episode 4 [Seeking Freedom]

The eccentric noble brat

Head Maid: Y-young master..!? You're hurt!?

[It was just after midnight. The maid had a ghastly expression when Paul returned home]

Head Maid: You look hurt..! You're even bleeding too! I-I'll tend to you right away..!

Paul: Keep it down. I'm alright.

Head Mead: Young master..? Did something happen? It feels like something has changed about you...

Paul: Haha, there's no way that's true you know. Anyways, I can take care of myself so you can go.

Head Maid: Even so...

Paul: To tell the truth, I want to quickly go to sleep. I'll be busy tomorrow after all.

Head Maid: Is that... So..?

Paul: (That's right... I've something to do tomorrow..!)

[Having left the party without so much as changing his clothes, he wound up in trouble with a gang of thugs]

[Paul was confident that he wouldn't lose in a one vs one. Even so, it was a different story if it was a 1 vs many. That was how he ended up getting beaten up and robbed]

Paul: (I did put up a fight, but overall I still lost in the end.)

Paul: (But that doesn't mean I'll always be on the losing side!!)

[The following day, Paul went back to the slums wearing the same clothing as before. And as he expected, the same thugs came before him without him having to search for them]

Thug A: Whoa there! Back for more? You've brought more gold with you for sure!

Thug B: Hehehe, what a nice little noble brat we got here! I'll thankfully take what you got today too!

Paul: Like I'd let you take from me again!

[Paul adopted a stance ready to crush his opponents as he held his training sword]

Paul: (This is what I've been training for... Let's see where my sword will take me!)

[This was unlike the time with his teacher and instructor where it was a one vs one. At this moment, it was the true test of his own abilities against a group]

[... And also his own perseverance]

Paul: (This is payback for yesterday!)

Thug A: Dammit! This brat... isn't half bad..!

Thug B: Call for the others! This brat... he's a real swordsman!

Paul: (A swordsman? ... No not yet.)

Paul: (Compared to my teachers I'm...)

Paul: (My own sword isn't there yet... But, if it's against these guys I can't lose!)

[After fighting against the thugs of the slum, he managed to get back what was his. Of course it wouldn't be long before they were taken from him again as the following day more thugs would gang up on him and rob him]

[The cycle of being robbed and fighting to take back what was his... Before he knew it, Paul's name became known around the slums as he earned himself the moniker of 'The eccentric noble brat']

The Slums test of skill

Prostitute: Are you a noble?

Paul: Hm? Ah well... I am...

[On a bed in a small room. Paul met up with a prostitute he got acquainted with in the slums to have a good time]

Prostitute: I mean, you don't act like a typical noble at all. You don't have an over-inflated ego or look down on us you know?

Paul: Now why would you think I would do that? I've got no reason to right?

Prostitute: Huh? Don't all nobles act that way?

Prostitute: The ones that just goes and looks for a cheap whore, but preferably one that looks sexy, and yet after they're done having sex they would look at the whore like she's filth that should be honored that they even had sex with said noble.

Prostitute: Even then, Paul doesn't act at all like that? You still treat me like a proper woman even after doing it with me.

Paul: ?? I don't get what you're saying but it makes me happy you think that I don't act like a noble.

Prostitute: Hmhm, me too!

[The prostitute sat on top of Paul and gently traced her fingers along his ripped abs]

Prostitute: Hey, can't we do it 1 more time? You haven't had enough right?

Paul: Of course we can! Ah but will you be alright? You have quite the slender waist.

Prostitute: I'll be fiiiine. Besides, my waist is my pride.

Prostitute: But if you're still worried, why don't we add another? Surely you won't mind another one to have fun with right?

Paul: ?! A threesome...!!!

[Paul felt like he was about to discover new lands. He couldn't help but gulp as he stared at the prostitute]

Prostitute: This girls style is just your taste isn't she? However, I won't lose to her just yet, so we'll start with me, heeey?

Paul: Ah- Umm... Yup!

[Be it as a noble or someone in the slums, Paul still ended up doing it with more than 1 person and enjoying himself]

Paul: (I had a nice time playing around with those girls, but the women here are way more stimulating compared to them!)

Paul: (Also, they won't try to deceive!)

[The grim reality of school comes to him like a revolving lantern*]

[They would already look enticing enough getting ready to get down and squeeze him dry, but when the corset got added into the mix...]

Paul: It's a different feeling compared to just taking it all off straight away! Kinda like imagining what's underneath as they slowly take it off!

[For the sake of their own livelihood, the women of the slums make full use of their own assets]

Paul: You all aren't like the noble ladies i've been with.

Prostitute: Eh~? Whatever do you mean by that? Depending on your answer... I might get a little nasty you know?

[She licked her lips as she looked at Paul, to which he responded with shaking his head and denying any possible ill intent]

Paul: It's just that you guys are more knowledgeable and experienced compared to them

Paul: Furthermore, I don't have to go through all the extra effort escorting, or even chatting as we drink some tea like with the nobles before we get-

Prostitute: Hm~? That's a bit boring. It all leads to the same result anyways don't you agree.

Paul: Definitely, it was quite a while before we even got to the bed.

Paul: (It was quite fun at the time, but now, yeah...)

[Now having experienced the deed with the women of the slums, Paul thinks that he will be unable to go back. After that, he proceeded to spend time with the prostitute as well as the other

girl who came late in the threesome]

[What happened after was to be expected, news travels fast in the slums after all. Word got around that there was some rich kid playing around with women]

Slum Brat A: Hey, you!

Paul: Hm?

[It was around sunset currently. Paul had part ways with a prostitute when he was stopped by someone who looked to be around his age]

Slum Brat A: You've been all the craze recently you know! Don't think that you can do all of these without first giving your greetings to Rudd!!

Paul: Rudd?

Slum Brat A: He's my boss! A real man! Have you never heard of him!?

[After his loud shouting, many other boys appeared before the two]

Paul: (15... no, maybe more people?)

Paul: My bad, I have no idea who this Rudd is... Since I'm not into dudes.

Slum Brat B: What did you say!?

[What Paul said without thinking was heard by the others surrounding him]

Slum Brat B: If you had just said that you would give your greetings to the boss then I would have considered letting you go. But it's a whole different issue now that you've made fun of our boss!

Slum Brat A: All of you! Let's get this guy!

Paul: Haa... Just when I was in a good mood..!

[The slum boys each came out one by one. Attacking Paul with blunt weapons, knives etc. as he protected himself with his training sword]

Slum Brat A: Gah..!

Slum Brat B: Dammit, don't hesitate! Everyone, surround him altogether!

Paul: (They're weaker than the thugs I dealt with but their numbers are a bit worrying...)

Paul: (I'll have to deal with their attacks. For their blunt weapons... it'll be fine as long as i'm not hit on the head! As for the knives, I'll just have to avoid them!)

[Paul hadn't had any chances to practice his swordsmanship lately and there were limits to what he could do by himself. So he used this as an opportunity to brush up on his swordsmanship once more]

Revolving lantern* - Like a flashback, recalling ones memories,

The slum brats boss

[The sun was beginning to now set]

Slum Brat A: This guy... Really, are you sure he's that eccentric noble brat..? Since he is alone, against us...

Paul: Ow ow ow... How's that? You satisfied now?

Slum Brat A: Dammit... Fuck you! Don't underestimate us!

???: From the look of things, it seems that you guys have lost.

Paul: !!!

[Pauleed couldn't help but look at the figure of a young man that brazenly appeared in front of them]

Slum Brat A: Rudd..!

Rudd: This guy's quite strong. I'll have to deal with him myself instead.

Rudd: Still though, if all it took to take you all down was just 1 noble brat, then our image is all but ruined. That's another reason as to why I'll have to deal with him!

Paul: ...

[He had kept staring at Rudd]

Rudd: Oi, you bastard, you hear me or what?

[To be more accurate, he was staring at something behind Rudd]

Paul: ...

Slum Brat A: Oi! Rudd is talking to you! Don't go ignoring him!!!

Paul: Eh? Um? Yeah? About that, who's the girl..?

Slum Brat A: Huh!? That's why you didn't heat?!?!?

Rudd: Stop shouting. You'll scare Mary Anne.

Paul: Mary Anne... Is that your name?

Mary Anne: Y-yeah...

[The girl quickly hid herself behind Rudd]

[Peeking out to look at Paul]

Paul: (I think she looks the same age..? She looks awfully nice though! Also...)

Paul: (Even with her clothes, you can tell that she's growing in all the right places!!!)

Mary Anne: Big brother, is this person that everyone is talking about..?

Paul: Big Brother?!

[When someone compares both Rudd and Mary Anne. Just from sight alone it would be hard to find any similarities between the two]

Rudd: Hmph! You've got guts i'll give you that, you seem to have time to get distracted too don't you!

Rudd: I like you! I'll even let you join my group! So work for me!!

Paul: Join you?

[He thought about what it would be like to become Rudd's henchman]

[Working together in a group. Following the orders from the top, regardless of of your feelings]

Paul: (...Yeah no way, to begin with can something like that even be called a group...)

Rudd: I see... Well then, guess negotiations have broken down. I'll crush this bastard now.

Paul: That sounds dangerous.

Paul: But even then, this is more my style.

[Guessing from his intention, There will be no fighting with his family name on the line or any outside interference, it was just a suggestion to fight with your own strength and nothing more, and Paul seems to like that]

[And so Rudd grabbed hold of his sword]

Paul: Are you a swordsman?

Rudd: I'm not someone that... amazing!

Paul: !!

[Paul had managed to stop Rudd's incoming attack with his sword. Even so, Rudd had the upper hand with the as he was bigger in size]

Paul: Dammit... I can't let him take the advantage...!!

Rudd: Che! Looks like I can't brute force my way! This weird brat has the strength huh?!

Paul: I'm not some weird brat!

[Paul had chosen not to use the water god style he was taught by his teacher, but instead opted to use the sword god style taught by his instructor]

Rudd: You're a slippery one!

Rudd: Dammit, take this..!

[Rudd kicked the dirt from the ground onto Paul's face. This caused Paul flinch for an instant]

Rudd: HaaAAA!!!

[While dodging Rudd's incoming blade, Paul used his sleeves to rub off the dirt from his face]

Paul: What was that?!

Rudd: Unfortunately for you, I don't know any of that fancy swordsmanship...!!

Paul: (A sword style where you use anything you can... It's like the north god style..!?)

[The kind of sword style where if you expect a sword to come at you, you can just react with a kick]

Paul: (Why even is the north god style considered one of the 3 major sword styles?!)

Paul: (Something like this, it's just fighting while using a sword, not a sword style isn't it?!)

Rudd: Ha ha ha! To think there was someone like you! Hey, bastard! What's your name?!

Paul: It's Paul!

Paul: (If I attack him then he'll just come back at me with just as much force. Just hearing the

loud noises as our blades hit each other really leaves quite the impression!)

[Before Paul had realized, he was already smiling. Even Rudd looked like he was enjoying himself]

[Both of them were giving their all in this fight]

[Ultimately though, their battle carried on to the next day. Both Paul and Rudd had continued enjoying their battle against each other to the point that it even went up to the 10th day]

Rudd: Guess I have to teach you another lesson! Paul! Today is the day that I destroy you!

Paul: That's what I should be saying to you! This is all ending today!

Mary Anne: ...

Paul: (I've come for you again Mary Anne!)

Rudd: Paul! You're looking away again!

Paul: Ah! That's because I can!

Rudd: Haha! Interesting! I guess that means I should just hand it over to you!

Paul: Hm? Hand over what?

Rudd: My position as the boss! If you win against me then I'll hand it over!

Paul: Huh..?

Slum Brat B: Rudd?! Are you sure?!?!

[The people around them started to make a lot of noise. What Rudd had said was that surprising for them]

Paul: (The position of the boss doesn't exactly make me interested though...)

Rudd: Shut up! Everyone keep quiet!

[Rudd's loud voice caused everyone to stop speaking. There was tension in the air, to the point that Paul was unable to say that he was not interested in taking the position]

Rudd: Strength is everything here. If you're stronger than me then I'll give you the position. Isn't that right Mary Anne?

Mary Anne: Huh? Ah, yeah... Having a strong boss can bring peace of mind. It'll make me feel safe.

Rudd: You're definitely scared! That's why you stuck with me right!

Mary Anne: Wh-wh-what are you saying! Stop that big brother! Everyone's looking!

[Rudd was roughly rubbing Mary Anne's head. Paul was surprised when he saw this]

Paul: (So you're telling me that feels safe when she's with a strong man..?)

Paul: (I'm not interested in the Boss position, but if i'm the boss... Then Mary Anne will be by my side?!)

Paul: (If we get close enough together then there's a chance to do those stuff?! That's the case isn't it..!?!?)

[Now finding his motivation. Paul took arm and shouted]

Paul: Rudd!! You said that you would give me the position of the boss, don't take it back later!!!

Rudd: A man doesn't go back on his words!

[On that day, their long drawn out battle had finally reached its conclusion. And the winner of said fight was Paul]

[The slums had a new boss that would now lead them]

Ones Unease

[It was now Midnight. Paul had just got back to the notos greyrat household]

Head Maid: Young master..!

Paul: ...So you're still up today too.

Head Maid: If I wasn't awake then who would let you in? And why are you injured again today..!
Where have you been going recently?

Paul: I've just been training, yeah training. As expected though, you need to get to this point to even get better.

Head Maid: Is that... How it goes..?

Paul: Yup, it is. So I'll be heading out tomorrow morning as well.

[As Paul turned around and began to head back to his room, the lady gently pulled his arm]

Paul: What's wrong?

Head Maid: Ah, um, young master... Forgive me if I'm being too forward, if you're heading outside, why not spend it with your father..!

Paul: ...With Father? Why are you telling me this so suddenly?

Head Maid: Actually, tomorrow the master will be doing an inspection around the territory...
Together with sir Philemon.

Paul: !!

[The head of the house doing an inspection with his son. But it wasn't with the now neglected eldest son but rather with his second son]

[It was as clear as day to see what that meant]

Paul: Speaking huh, sorry but that's impossible.

Head Maid: There's no way that's true..! Moreover, please remember what your mother told you, about how she wanted you and the master to get back to how you used to be..!

Paul: !! Mother...

Paul: (Thinking about it, Mother did say something like that...)

[Paul started to remember what his mother Valentina had said, and even now her words clawed at his chest. Losing his mother cased a great deal of emotional trauma to Paul, and there hadn't been enough time yet for him to recover from it]

Paul: Even then I don't think I'll be able to talk to him. Because I don't think that Father even looks my way anymore.

Head Maid: B-but that's..!

Paul: Night, you better head off to sleep too.

[Paul didn't want to think about either of his parents. That was why he stopped the maid from saying anymore before heading off to his room]

Head Maid: Even so, I'll still come get you tomorrow morning..!!

[Paul pretended that he didn't hear her say anything after]

[Despite that, as the Head Maid had said, Paul was now sulking as he stood at the entrance hall of the residence]

Paul: ...You didn't have to wake me you know? Even if you said you would...

Head Maid: Don't make that kind of face young master. The master will be arriving shortly.

Paul: ...Yeah.

Paul: (This lady has always been there for me. That's why I'll do my best to hear her out)

Paul: (As for this...)

Head Maid: Young Master! The master has arrived!

Paul:

[Paul's Father Amarant walked towards him]

[The last time these two had actually talked to each other was back at Valentina's funeral. These days it was just the obligatory speech whenever they saw each other]

Paul: ...Father, Good Morning.

Amarant: Hey, is the carriage ready yet?

Butler: Hm, yes, the coachman is ready to set off at any time.

Amarant: I see. Well then, we'll set off at once.

Butler: Y-yes, however...

[The butler looked over at Paul anxiously. Even then Amarant didn't even look at Paul, the pain he felt seemed to not have healed yet]

Amarant: Is Philemon not here yet??

Butler: Well, about that... It seems that he hadn't had his fill with breakfast, so he's currently having some sweets...

Amarant: What? Sweets? Hahaha, it can't be helped then.

Butler: Shall I go get him?

Amarant: No it's fine, we'll wait until he is done eating. A child needs to eat properly to become big after all.

Amarant: I'll get in first then. I 'll repeat myself, don't go rushing Philemon.

[Having finished what he wanted to say, Amarant headed towards the carriage. From the very beginning he had no intention of ever facing Paul]

Paul: (I guess it's better this way...)

[It was what Paul had expected to happen. It was either him being looked at with cold eyes, or not being looked at at all]

[As Paul was about to leave the area, he noticed the head maid next to him beginning to move. She seemed to have a painful expression]

Paul: (Wait no..!)

Head Maid: M=Mas—

Paul: Father!! I have something to say..!

Amarant: ...

[Paul had spoken out loudly, and yet Amarant didn't even turn around to face him as he continued to walk away]

[There was a snicker. Then laughter could be heard from behind Paul]

[All the servants who had gathered to see the head of the household off were laughing at Paul]

Head Maid: A-all of you..!

Paul: It's fine.

Butler: ...When are you all going to get moving? Come now, let's all quickly get back to work.

[At his words, all of the servants began to leave. Leaving only the head maid there]

Head Maid: Y-young master! I apologize for their behavior! I'll be sure to scold them all later..!

Paul: It doesn't matter what I say anyways. Their acting like that because the head acts like that too aren't they?

Head Maid: Young Master...

[Paul stared at the maid. The only person who worried for Paul]

Paul: Listen carefully.

Paul: From now on, you don't have to cover for me. You don't need to stay up late just to let me in, nor do you have to worry.

Head Maid: No way..!

Paul: My Father... No, what kind of maid doesn't follow the head of the notos family. It wouldn't be odd for that kind of maid to be fired right?

Head Maid: I'm fine, I've prepared myself for that.

[With no hesitation at all, the Maid said what she had wanted. Paul could see it in her eyes, one filled with resolution]

Paul: ...

Satisfyingly Dangerous Life

[In the slum brats hideout that happens to be an abandoned house, their new boss Paul held his head up and sighed]

Mary Anne: You've sighed 7 times now... Are you bored?

Paul: Huh? Ah, it's not that, no way that's the case!

Mary Anne: If you're free right now, it would make me feel relieved if you go with my big brother. It's the role of the boss to be outside...

Paul: It's alright. Between working with men or spending time with Mary Anne, of course I would pick you!

Mary Anne: Hmhm, is that so? If it were me, I think you would prefer being out there having fun fighting right?

Paul: What gave you that idea? Because that's wrong.

Mary Anne: I mean, while you and big brother were fighting, your faces looked like you two were having the time of your lives...

Mary Anne: But now you're just here sighing. It feels like my big brother forced this role onto you now, am I wrong..?

Paul: Not really?!

[Having involuntarily raised his voice, Mary Anne couldn't help but give a small giggle]

Mary Anne: If so then what's wrong? Since you seem to be down and sighing doesn't help your case?

Paul: Well that...

[Paul told her a summary about his family]

[Of course, stuff related to his mother, father, and even his younger brother he had refrained from telling Mary Anne, though one way or another, she was able to kind of guess about the complicated feelings he had towards his family.]

Mary Anne: Still I don't understand. You have someone helping you out... So why aren't you happy?

Paul: Um...

Paul: (That lady was ready to give herself up. With her help, I was able to talk to father...)

[He had remembered a facial expression from before, and it send shivers down Paul's back]

Paul: I... I was scared.

Mary Anne: You were scared?

Paul: She was prepared to lose her job to help me out.

Paul: But even then, there's no way anything could have been done even if she did help, I've realized that now.

Paul: And if she loses her job, I wouldn't be able to help her get a new one, nor would I be able to ensure her livelihood. I... I wouldn't be able to take responsibility then...

Mary Anne: I may not know much about that person, but I don't think they intend on having you take responsibility don't you think?

Mary Anne: I think they care greatly about you, and just wanted to be someone you could count on.

Paul: I don't really understand... I feel happy about it but... Not being able to respond to those feelings makes me afraid...

[It was possible that instead of being seen by his father now, he was more afraid from his sense of responsibility for the maid]

Paul: I'm quite pathetic, aren't I...

Paul: You're disappointed too right? That your new boss is saying that he's afraid of being responsible for people...

Mary Anne: ...I mean everyone has something they are scared of, and you aren't pathetic alright. Also um... I'm glad you told me this.

Mary Anne: I... I was born quite weak, that's why I rely so much on my big brother... Normally I wouldn't be of much help except for stuff like this.

Mary Anne: That's why for the you that seems so strong, having a weak side was quite surprising but it made me really happy.

Paul: Happy..?

Mary Anne: Yup. Your weakness is just another side of you, it makes me want to protect you.

[It was such a gentle smile. At that point, she seemed to resemble his late mother]

Mary Anne: Thanks for talking about this. Hmhm, it's a little weird. It feels like the distance between us shortened quickly.

Paul: I know right... Still, I'd prefer if it shortened more.

[He placed his hands on her cheeks as he brought his face closer to hers. She closed her eyes... As this was happening]

Rudd: Hey Paul! I need you for a second!!!

[The previous boss Rudd came bursting in]

Rudd: The 4-way outsiders are coming here! It's the perfect opportunity to show them all your power as our new boss!

Paul: ...Yeah...

Rudd: What's up with you? You don't look so well you know? Even though I went out of my way to tell you about this.

Paul: (You..!)

Paul: (We had such a good atmosphere going and you had to just come in now..!!!!)

Paul: It's nothing! So where are we supposed to be going?

Rudd: Alright! Let's go!

[Paul tried to hit Rudd's shoulder in frustration, but it didn't affect Rudd who instead held onto Paul. He was unable to escape from Rudd's strength]

Mary Anne: Have a safe trip Paul.

Paul: I-i'm off.

Paul: (I said that but...)

Paul: (It really has been a while since someone ever saw me off...)

[With a warm feeling in his chest. Paul left the base]

Rudd: By the way, I know I didn't say it just now because Mary Anne was there, the people I told you about right, they aren't exactly what I would call the nicest bunch...

Rudd: Well it'll all work out I'm sure! With our powers combined, we'll be able to handle anything!

Paul: ...Yeah that's right. Let's hurry up and settle it so that we can go back.

[There was someone Paul was looking forward to seeing again when he got back. And a very cute one to boot]

[Paul had people who relied on him. People who didn't mock or look down on him, these things helped raise Paul's self-esteem]

[And so, Paul who was now their boss went off to clean up their problems. Albeit he didn't know much about where anything was in the slums so he had to rely on Rudd to guide him]

[It took a little over 2 weeks for the problem to be resolved. It also seemed that Paul no longer acted like a noble, he was perfectly happy living a dangerous life]

The Shame of the Notos Family

Mary Anne: Morning Paul! I've made breakfast. Would you like some?

Paul: Definitely!

Mary Anne: Someone's very happy. My food isn't all that amazing you know?

Paul: It's something that you've made, so even if it's just dirt it'll be the best!

Mary Anne: Hmhm, but I won't give you more even if you praise me.

Paul: But it's true you know. Speaking of, where is Rudd?

Mary Anne: He's still asleep. Could you go wake him up for me?

Paul: You're asking for the impossible. If I wake him up now, then there'll be less time with just the 2 of us.

Mary Anne: Jeez Paul...

[Mary Anne's face was a bright red as Paul hugged her. His arms wrapped around her lower waist, and felt satisfied with the feel of a soft, and supple feel from her]

Paul: (It's a lot nicer here compared to my own house...)

Paul: (Wouldn't I be able to find freedom here in the slums?)

[Paul started having these thoughts more and more as the days went by]

[Until one day. When Paul came back around midnight as usual-]

Paul: Huh? Just now, what did you..?

Butler: The master has asked for you.

Paul: (Father..? Why now of all times?)

[Paul was confused. He had believed that his father had stopped caring about him already. And yet Paul was being called for...]

[So Paul walked into Amarant's office. There he saw both a grim-looking Amarant and his younger brother Philemon even though it was now midnight]

Paul: ...You called for me father?

[Without saying a word. Amarant drew close to Paul and held his hand up]

[Whack! The sound of a slap could be heard at the same time as Paul felt a sting, causing him to take a step back]

Paul: Kh- What are you..!!

Amarant: Shut it! You bring shame to the Notos Family name!!!

Amarant: You weren't satisfied with just taking our light away, now you want to bring our family name down through the mud?!?!]

Paul: Huh?!

[Paul got pissed when he realized that Amarant was referring to his mother as the light]

Paul: You've ignored me all this time, and then now you've suddenly decided to get me to come over, what did you even want to talk about?!

Philemon: Big brother, please stop talking like that. We're nobles are we not?

Paul: Like you would know! I didn't choose to be born a noble nor do I like being one!

Amarant: Paul!!!

Paul: Sh... Gah..!

[A 2nd punch came to Paul. He attempted to dodge it, but Amarant was faster, so he ended up taking another hit]

Amarant: No one gets to choose how they were born. That was why I tried to raise you as the eldest son of this family.

Paul: Tried to? Even though you never bothered to see me once ever since?!

Amarant: You aren't in any position to complain! There was no merit in ever seeing you, and who's fault was it huh?!

Philemon: Please give up big brother. Nothing is going to go your way.

Philemon: I saw it, you know. Big brother has been coming and going from the slums right?

Paul: !!

Amarant: It's completely unthinkable that someone of the Notos Greyrat Family is fooling around in the slums!!!

Amarant: The honor of the family name that our forefathers have protected up until now, and what you're doing is going to destroy it all! Do you even understand that?!?!

[It was all happening so fast that Paul couldn't even get a word in. But a smirk could be seen forming on Philemon's face]

The Search For Freedom

Amarant: You're under house arrest! Effective immediately! You are not to leave your room ever!!

Paul: House arrest?! Don't joke with me!!

Paul: I refuse to be stuck in this house!! I don't belong here!!!

Philemon: Big Brother! Please stop being stubborn! Because of you... Mother had to leave us, you know!

Paul: You little..!

Philemon: Big brother... I do not feel sympathy for you! Mother isn't alive anymore!

Philemon: Father! Give big brother the harshest punishment! The Notos Greyrat Family... I'm a part of it! I will protect the family name!!

Paul: You... Don't mess with me!!!

[Each time Philemon talked about their mother, Paul's image of Valentina would start to shake]

[The older brother held contempt towards Philemon for using their mother's name. Even if it was in Philemon's nature, it still made Paul very pissed]

Paul: Even if you hate me, don't go and bring mother into this!!!

Philemon: Hiiiee!

[Paul threw himself towards Philemon, knocking him down and getting on top of him. Then he proceeded to hurl punches at Philemon's face]

Paul: Don't! You! Ruin! Mother's name!!!

Philemon: Gh! Geh! S-stop.. Bh..!

Paul: Mother..! You can't speak to me about her when you don't even have any good intentions!!!

Amarant: Sh-!!

[After she died, no, maybe even when she was alive, Paul had already viewed her as his

goddess. Even his younger brother hadn't experienced her full kindness]

Amarant: Paul! Stop this!!

[Paul gave Amarant a death stare that made even him hesitate. But he finally started to move and tore Paul off of Philemon]

[When he did, Paul gave his own father another sharp and threatening glare.]

Philemon: Uu...Gh...

Amarant: His nose is fractured... So young and weak, your little brother, what were you thinking, using violence against him?!?!]

Paul: I just decided to! This was for mother! There was nothing else to think about!

Amarant: Don't mess around! What do you know about Valentina!?

Amarant: You were doing it for Valentina? What nonsense!!! So in the name of Valentina, you just decided to punish your little brother!?

Amarant: You're just jealous, that we loved your little brother more than you!!

Paul: That definitely isn't the case! This household, there's absolutely nothing of value for me to be jealous about!

Amarant: Bastard...! Are you making a mockery out of the household name?!

Amarant: We don't need someone like you here! Philemon will be succeeding me! Get out, now!!!

Paul: Sure! Works for me! I'm leaving this household for good!!

[Even if Amarant insulted him, Paul cared none for that, he gladly threw away the name of Notos Greyrat with zero hesitation]

Paul: It's not like I liked living here anyways!

Paul: It's been nothing but trouble, not even enjoyable, and definitely not interesting!

Paul: I refuse to grow up here, living and dying in such a narrow-minded world!

[A butler appeared before Paul as he was about to leave]

Butler: Y-you can't leave...! Master! Please stop the young master!

Amarant: ...

Butler: Disowning the Notos Greyrat family name... no, running away from it, and throwing away the place you live... That's unthinkable!

Amarant: I already gave the order to leave! I'm not changing my decision!

Butler: Both of you calm down! ...All of you! Stop the young master from leaving!

[After giving orders to all of the other servants, they all proceeded to block his path]

[They were attempting to hold him down, trying to restrain Paul by force]

[But Paul charged towards them anyway. Avoiding them with his effortless footwork]

Amarant: ! His moves...

[Efficient Movements, It's easily understood just by seeing how he moves. It made Amarant wonder what Paul's true strength was]

Paul: (Mother, if you had lived, would you get mad at me for abandoning this family?)

Paul: (Or would you smile and let me leave?)

Paul: (Either way, this place isn't for someone like me...)

Paul: ...I'm off.

[With no one there to hear what Paul said]

[At the tender age of 12. Under the starry night, this young boy left the house he grew up in feeling empty]

Training arc

Episode 1 [Water God Style]

Chapter 1: A New Life

[Armored Dragon Calendar - Year 399]

[The now 12 years old Paul, who threw away his nobility and privileges that came with his family name and is now just a commoner]

Rudd: Huh?! You ran away from home?!

Mary Anne: I think that you're taking a big risk...

Paul: Yeah, I am aware of that. It may have been impulsive of me to leave but... I won't regret it.

Paul: Besides, I'm feeling better about myself already. It was going to happen sooner or later anyways, what's stopping me from leaving earlier...

Rudd: What's up? You don't look so sure about your decision

Paul: No, it's nothing... It's just that I realize now, since I ran away so quickly, I only have 1 set of clothes and... Well... Didn't really prepare anything apart from that...

[Paul had run away from home filled with adrenaline, however, after things had settled and he had calmed down, Paul had realized that he was just a kid with nothing to his name]

Paul: So, yeah... You guys don't mind me living with you two for now right?

Mary Anne: If it's just that, then I guess it's fine... Right big brother?

Rudd: Yeah, it's fine! It's a cramped house but we've got space for one more!

Mary Anne: Hmhm~ What big brother is trying to say, you don't need to be so reserved.

Paul: You two... Thank you, that makes me really happy.

[Paul smiled at both of them. Genuinely happy as he felt weight lifted off of him]

Paul: (Meeting father was dangerous, but at least I've got people I can be relaxed around now)

Paul: (That's why...)

[Upon reaching Mary Anne's and Rudd's house, Paul walked towards it. Opening the door,

before turning to look at the both of them. Paul had made up his mind]

Paul:...Rudd, gather everyone tomorrow.

Rudd: Hm? Yeah, gotcha!

[Rudd didn't need to hear anything else before he agreed, this made Paul relieved]

Paul: Haaa... Today's got me all worn out, so i'll go rest now. Sorry about this you two.

Rudd: It's fine, no worries! We're close now aren't we?

Mary Anne: ...

[Afterwards, Rudd tried to offer Paul to sleep on his bed, but Paul politely objected to the idea]

Paul: (Rudd's not a bad guy and it's not like I hate him, but there's no way i'm sleeping in a bed that smells like a dude, sorry Rudd)

[So Paul just borrowed a blanket, and went to cover himself up with it in a vacant room]

[Some time passes by...]

Paul: (...Hm?)

Mary Anne: ...Are you awake Paul?

Paul: Yeah I'm up.

[To be exact, he was sleeping originally, but he woke up when he felt a presence. However, he won't let her know that so Paul tried to ensure that he didn't look like he just woke up]

Paul: What's wrong, can't sleep?

Mary Anne: Yeah... There's just something I've been thinking about a bit...

Paul: What's on your mind?

Mary Anne: So... Um. A while a—*choo!*

Paul: (!)

[Paul was not expecting Mary Anne to sneeze. And she looked like she had just came from her bed with the way she was dressed]

Paul: Come to think of it, you said that you were born with a weak body right?

Paul: Sit next to me Mary Anne. I don't want you catching a cold.

Mary Anne: A-alright...

Paul: Here, have this blanket, sorry for borrowing it

Mary Anne: Thank you...

Paul: You don't have to thank me.

Paul: It belongs to the house to begin with.

[Paul drapes the blanket he was wrapped in over Mary Anne's shoulders.]

[She turned her cheek and thanked him once again.]

[Although Paul himself was not aware of it, no matter how much he abandoned his home, the ladies-first habit he had acquired so far would not disappear.]

Paul: So Mary Anne, what was your concern that brought you to me?

Mary Anne: I've been thinking about how you looked when I asked you to stay with us forever when we talked earlier, Paul...

Mary Anne: Paul... you didn't say it, did you? That you'll always be here..."

Paul: ...

Mary Anne: I knew you'd keep quiet...

Mary Anne: Stay at our house for a while and then, Paul, where are you going?

Paul: I haven't decided yet... But when I'm ready, I'm going to leave the slums, and start traveling.

Mary Anne: !!! Oh no... why...?

[He was unsure whether to answer the question or not.

However, it seemed insincere to play it off like this in front of Mary Ann, who looked so serious.]

Paul: I can't stay in this territory. I haven't told you where my family home is, have I?

Mary Anne: Yeah...

Paul: My full name is Paul Notos Grayrat. I was born the eldest son of the Notos Grayrat family.

Mary Anne: Notos Greyrat is...the lord's...!?

Paul: Yes...well, it's a name I've already given up on!

[Paul tries his best to show a bright smile to the wide-eyed Mary Anne.]

Paul: I don't think they're going to do anything about it because they want me gone and I want to leave...

Paul: But I shouldn't stay in the territory, should I? It's not a proper thing to be in a territory where one's family has influence, even though I left my house.

Mary Anne: Yes, I see what you mean... I understand what Paul is trying to say...

Mary Anne: But then, does that mean... that you'll have to say goodbye to... us?

Paul: That's right, I... Whoa!

[Mary Anne jumped into Paul's chest. As he embraced her body, he noticed that her thin shoulders were shaking.]

Paul: Mary Anne...?

Mary Anne: Just... just... let me be like this for a little bit...

Paul: ...yeah.

[As it was, Paul held Mary Anne in his arms until the end of the night - and he couldn't stay.]

Paul: ...Mary Anne, close your eyes.

Mary Anne: What...?

Paul: I want to touch you so badly right now, I can't help it...

Paul: I hope you feels the same way, Mary Anne...

Mary Anne: ...mmh...I do feel the same.

Paul: It would be troublesome if Rudd wakes up. Do you think you will be able to keep your voice down?

Mary Anne: Hmmm, it's okay. My brother doesn't wake up very easily once he goes to sleep.

[Mary Anne giggles. The pretty girl's expression is mixed with a touch of adult charm.]

[Paul spent an intense night with her, feeling shivers run up and down his spine.]

Chapter 2: Departure

[The next day, Ladd gathered his friends together. Paul, keeping the name of his parents' home secret, told them the same thing he had told Mary Anne last night.]

Paul: So! Thanks for taking care of me for this short time. Until I'm ready to leave for my journey, well, I'll be counting on you for a little while longer.

Rudd: Oh, I get what's up!

Slum Brat A: Rudd-san!? Is this alright?!

Rudd: You can't say that! Don't think the boss can leave the pack that easily!

Paul: It's not like I'm going to tell you what to think... But you're not going to change my mind.

Paul: I'm giving the boss position back to Ladd. So you just go back to before I came.

Rudd: Don't be stupid! There is no way you can give up that easily!

Rudd: Besides... it's too late now! I can't go back to before I met you! You can't just erase an encounter with someone!

Paul: Rudd...

Paul: ...So what do you say we do? Fight with you again? If I win, I'll leave... You want me to do that?

[He didn't want to be sent off with a smile on his face, but he didn't want to say goodbye with a bittersweet feeling.]

Rudd: You want to go at it again? That's not so bad! But... don't we have a better solution?

Paul: Solution...?

Rudd: Take us with you!

Paul: Whuh.....?

Rudd: Just tell us to come with you! Come on! Tell us already!

Paul: N-no, no, wait! What are you talking about!

Paul: I said I'm going out of the territory! Besides! I don't even have a destination! I don't even know what I would want to do!

Rudd: Oh! You say that yourself!

Paul: That's right! I have no planning at all! And you're coming with me on such a journey!? Are

you guys nuts!?

[As he looked around at the youth gathered there, he received nods from not a few of them, but not all of them.]

Rudd: You'll live up to our expectations. These guys' and, of course, also my own expectations.

Rudd: B-but, Rudd...what are you going to do about Mary Anne? Are you going to leave her alone in the slums?

Rudd: !! Th-that's...

[Rudd's eyes swam. Paul noticed the cold sweat on his face and huffed.]

Paul: (You can tell by looking at his face...)

Paul: (This guy didn't think that far ahead!)

[He remembered the soft body and sweet scent that had been in his arms until this morning. Paul grabbed onto Ladd without a second thought.]

Paul: You...! If you leave a pretty girl like Mary Anne alone! You don't even know what some stranger is going to do to her, do you!?"

Rudd: Huh? I won't let that happen!

Paul: How! You said you were coming with me!

Rudd: Well, then...! Why don't we take Mary Anne with us?

Paul: What? What do you mean by that!

[Paul and Rudd were grabbing each other by their shirts and arguing with each other—and then...]

Mary Anne: I'm coming with you!

Paul: M-Mary Anne...!?

[She would not have been here moments before. When did she come and listen to them? She looks at Paul with straight eyes.]

Paul: I'm serious. I'm going with Paul.

Paul: But...

Mary Anne: It's not because big brother is following you. This is an answer I've given serious thought to since the first time I heard you talk about it.

Mary Anne: Take me with you. I want to be with you...

[He is entreated by a girl who doesn't hate him, trusted by a young man who recognizes his strength, and admired by many...]

[After receiving their feelings, Paul made up his mind. He took a deep breath and looked around at everyone.]

Paul: Okay. I'll say it.

Paul: I'm going out of the territory! It's an aimless journey! If you still think that's a good idea, you can all follow me!

Slum Brat A: Oooh! Of course!

Rudd: Then let's get ready to head out! You guys! Get your money and gear ready! We're leaving in the morning!

Paul: Tomorrow morning? Are we really going to be okay on such short notice?

Rudd: I don't know what's going on, but you got a reason for wanting to get out of here sooner rather than later, don't you?

Paul: ! Right...

Rudd: Some will stay, but most will go with us. You won't be bored.

Paul: ...you could say that. This is going to be a very interesting trip.

Paul: (After all, Mary Anne will be with us.)

[Glancing at her, he can't help but smile with a shy look on his face. Ladd tilts his head at Paul, who smiles at her deliriously.]

[Early the next morning, as Paul and his friends were about to leave the slums and leave the Milbots territory, ruled by the Notos Greyrat family—.]

Paul: Those guys are looking for me?

Rudd: Yeah. There seem to be armed men surrounding the slums, you know? They are looking for a son of a nobleman.

Paul: But that doesn't necessarily mean it's me, does it?

Rudd: Huh? There's other noble kids who hang out in the slums besides you?

Paul: ...No. If anyone had the guts, we'd be best friends by now.

Mary Anne: Are you making jokes...? If they followed you as soon as you left the house, they must be trying to drag you back...?

Paul: Well, if they wanted to get rid of me, they wouldn't have surrounded the slum with impunity.

Paul: It's easier to clean up after yourself if sneak up on your target is already on the road.

Mary Anne: Don't. Paul, please, don't use that kind of talk! Paul, please, can you not joke about that kind of thing...?

[Seeing Mary Anne's anxious face, Paul realized that he had made her worry.]

Paul: Sorry, Mary Anne... But it's okay! The guys at home are no big deal!

Paul: Rudd, can you tell me where the most of those armed men are?

Rudd: Hmm? Yeah, I think it's at the south exit.

Paul: All right, let's break through there. We're going to keep going south and out of the territory.

Rudd: What? You got a destination in mind?

Paul: No. Nothing specific. Nothing is set in stone, so that means it won't make any difference where we leave from.

Rudd: I see. Okay, you got it, boss. I'll go get all the guys.

Mary Anne: Wait a minute. You're going through the middle of all these people chasing us?

Paul: Yes, of course! I don't want to be sneaking around at the start of our journey. Why don't we just go out with a bang?

Rudd: Ha ha! That's right!

Mary Anne: I don't understand... boys, even my brother...

[Mary Anne looked stunned, but Ladd was on board.]

[Paul then left the slum with the boys who said they would follow him. The pursuers get in their way, but they break through head-on.]

Pursuer: Please return to the house, young master!

Paul: Who would ever go back? We all are satisfied with the situation, and now it's time to go! Don't get in my way!

[The other side is well armed. But Paul was also willing to use force.]

[He dodges the man's attack and slams the hilt of his sword into the man's stomach. The man choked and collapsed to his knees.]

Pursuer: Guh!

Paul: I will not take your life. But if you come back again, I won't give you mercy.

Rudd: Paul! Over here!

[A short distance away, Rudd punches out his pursuer and calls for Paul.]

Paul: I don't know who sent you guys, but tell them to stop because it's pointless.

[Thus, having easily driven off their pursuers, Paul and his companions leave the slums and head south through Asura kingdom.]

Chapter 3: Growth

Taking breaks as they went so that Mary Anne could keep up with them, they arrived at a small town before nightfall.

Paul: We'll spend the night in this town. Well, we don't have a lot of money, so we'll either stay at a cheap inn or out in the open.

Rudd: No, Paul...

Paul: Hm? What's wrong?

Rudd: Uh... let's not go into this town, okay?

Paul: What? Why not?

Rudd: ...Before you started coming to the slums, I had some trouble with some of the thugs in this town. I had a run-in with the boss here..."

Paul: He beat you? And they wouldn't let you into town?

Slum Brat A: No way! Rudd-san wouldn't have lost!

Paul: Then why?

[Paul asked curiously, and Rudd scratched his head as he let out a sigh.]

Rudd: We were just about to... Both me and my opponent were wounded to the point of needing weeks to heal."

Paul: "Well then, you don't want to get the same injuries as soon as we start our trip. So you don't want to go into town and provoke them?"

Rudd: That's the idea.

[Paul's gaze sharpened at Rudd's answer. I didn't think he would just tiptoe around for that reason.]

Paul: Are you chickening out, Ladd...?

Rudd: Huh?

[Paul gave an exaggerated shrug and shook his head, then approached Ladd. Then he grabs him by the collar of his chest.]

Paul: I don't know what happened before, but this ain't like before, right? I'm here, so don't freak out.

Rudd: !!!

Rudd: Hmm... you're starting to feel like the boss now?

Paul: Well, I don't know...

Paul: Well, let's go see him. Let's go talk to him about it, and we'll stay in town tonight.

Rudd: What if he refuses?

Paul: Hmm? Isn't it obvious?

[Paul grins, and his intentions are precisely understood by Ladd and the others. Paul takes Ladd and a few other boys to the hideout of the boss who runs the town's underside with impunity.]

[When he tells them that he has decided to stay in town tonight, the man claiming to be the boss, as expected, refuses.]

Boss: If you insist on staying here, leave me all your money! If you do, I'll let you stay at the edge of the slums.

Paul: I'm not going to pay you. The place isn't worth it, is it?

Boss: That's too bad! Negotiations have broken down! Hey, fellas!

[He shouted, and a number of men came out in droves. They surrounded Paul and his men with weapons in their hands and smirks on their faces.]

Paul: Rudd, now that it's come to this, I don't think we have a choice.

Rudd: Yeah, well, I guess it can't be helped.

Paul: We're going to fight back because we've been attacked. If we do that, there will be no one left from this hideout, so that we can have our lodgings in peace...

Paul: We have to clean up well so that the pretty girl can sleep in peace...

[As soon as he finished, he punched a nearby man in the jaw from below. He took the weapon from him and when he looked at Rudd, he saw that he too had gotten a weapon.]

Boss: You're underestimating us...! You louts! There are only a few of them! Get them all together!

Paul: You'll get your asses kicked by a handful of people. We can all laugh about it later!

[Paul cleaves a path through the men and closes the distance with the boss in a single bound.]

Paul: (Rudd, who had a run-in with this guy, says he was so close...)

Paul: (There's no shortage of opponents!)

Paul, as taught in the Sword God Style, strikes the first blow. Just like in Ladd's case, he can

fight a blood-boiling battle.

Paul: Eh?

[Such expectations held by Paul were easily betrayed. The man who was hit by Paul's blow falls backward, unable to avoid or block it.]

Rudd: Don't tell me... in a single blow...! Impressive as ever, Paul!

Paul: What? No, you're kidding! Isn't he too weak!?

Rudd: Paul will not be defeated! We'll take care of his minions!

Paul: Why are you being so extra motivated...? Even though I'm not in the mood for this...

[The group that lost its head broke up. Paul repeatedly closed and opened his hands as some were so upset that they began to flee.]

Paul: (Too dumbfounded to see it...)

Paul: (You mean that guy was weaker than when I fought Rudd before?)

Paul: (Or could it be...)

[These days, he was mostly wielding a sword in actual battle instead of training alone.]

Paul: (Am I stronger than before or...?)

[My sword skills have improved. That alone was worth leaving my position as an aristocrat and leaving home.]

Rudd: "Paul, we've taken care of everything.

Paul: "Yeah, all right. Then I'll go get Mary Anne and the others.

Paul: "Then we'll look for loot. I'm sure they have some hidden somewhere in their hideout.

Rudd: "Yes, sir. Any amount of money for the trip is good for us.

[They would take money from whomever they could and use it to fund the trip. If it had been Paul Notos Greylat, he never would have been able to do it.]

Paul: (That's how I'm going to live my life from now on. Have fun and be free without being disturbed by anyone...!)

Paul: (To do that, I have to be stronger. If I lose, I'm finished... like this guy.)

[Paul nudges the enemy boss, who remains unconscious and fallen, with his foot.]

Paul: Hey.

Slum Brat A: Hmmmm? What is it?

Paul: Let's tie them all up tight and leave them outside. We don't want to get in trouble if we get into trouble in the middle of the night.

[Thus, Paul had a place to stay for the night and enough money to last him for a while.]

Chapter 4: Their own way

[Paul's journey, which began in this way, continued to progress more smoothly than he had anticipated.]

Adventurer: Tsk, the kids are crawling all over the place... You're getting in my way.

Slum Brat A: Oh? What did you say? Hey, Paul!

Paul: Yeah, I know... Now, it must be fated to happen. As a man, I can't overlook it. Hey, right? Don't you agree?

Paul: I'll have to make sure he apologizes.

[They would not have day jobs, and the way they earned money for the trip was simple.]

Slum Brat A: Ouch! Hey, you! You just bumped into me on purpose!

Rudd: And you didn't even apologize? Now we've been taken for fools, haven't we?

Paul: Yeah, I guess we should buy what we're offered.

Paul: (I was bumped into, stared at, and had my tongue lashed out at... (Any reason is good enough for me.)

[They used all the strength they had and picked fights at random. Paul and his men beat up their opponents and used the money they took from them to finance their journey.]

[One day, about a month after the start of the trip.]

[The sunny morning turned to heavy rain in the afternoon. Paul and his friends rushed to a two-story inn, got a room, and started eating at a bar on the first floor.]

Paul: Auntie, keep 'em coming!

Landlady: Alright! But I hope you guys have money after ordering so much?

Mary Anne: Yes, of course we do. As you can see, we can pay you.

[Mary Anne glanced at the bag of money, and the landlady's eyes lit up and she turned to go back to the kitchen.]

[As she does so, she casually whispers to Paul.]

Landlady: 'If you have money, would you like to call a woman?

Paul: !!!

[Paul nodded silently but emphatically. The landlady nodded back with a look that said she

understood everything, and disappeared into the kitchen.]

Chapter 5: Brawl

[When the meat-centric dishes were soon brought out, the still-young Paul and his friends began to chow down with gusto.]

Rudd: So? We've come a long way south. Where do we go from here? Should we just leave the country?

Paul: Hmmm... that might be a good idea. If we leave the country, there will be no one after us.

The Milbotts Region ruled by the Notos Greyrat family has long since been left behind, but there are still pursuers out there.

Paul: They're not that big of a deal, but it's a pain in the ass to deal with every one of them... I didn't think they'd chase us outside of the territory.

Mary Anne: That's how much they want to bring you back...

Rudd: I'm not sure I've ever seen a man who is so eager to get out of his own territory. Did you really get kicked out of the house, or did you just run away in the heat of the moment?

Paul: I really got thrown out. I guess they've already decided to disinherit me and my younger brother is going to take over the household.

Paul: Well, it's not good for the eldest son to run away from home. It will be treated as an accidental death or death from illness, and a funeral will be held.

Paul: (If that's the case, if they catch me, I'll be stripped of my possessions and executed.)

Paul: (If someone sees the body, will they smash my face so that they won't know that I'm related to the Notos Grayrat house?)

[If so, he can't be caught at any cost. As Paul was steeling his feelings, the ragged door of the bar opened vigorously.]

Thug: Damn, I'm soaking wet... hmm?

Thug: Hey, hey, hey! There are only kids here! Since when did this place become a hangout for kids?

Rudd: Huh?

Paul: I don't care if you're a customer of the bar, you shouldn't be making a fuss over other customers. It's not polite to do so, old man.

Thug: What did you say? What did you say, just now? You little brat! Are you kidding me?

[The furious man kicked a nearby table, and the plate on top fell off.]

[It must be one of the man's friends. A group of strong men enter the restaurant.]

Thug: You little shits who underestimate adults need to be taught a lesson about the harshness of the world!

Slum Brat A: UGH!?

[A man grabs a nearby boy by the head and slams him down on the table. Paul and Ladd stood up at the same time.]

Rudd: You asshole! What the hell are you doing!?

Paul: You look like you're ready to fight. You're the one who sold the fight. Don't regret it, okay?

Mary Anne: Are you sure about...? There seem to be a lot of them...

Paul: Mary Anne, go to the Landlady.

Paul: Well, these guys don't look like they'll be much trouble, so don't worry, we'll wrap this up quick.

Thug: What the hell, man? No mercy! I'll fucking murder you!

[Pushing Mary Anne back to the kitchen, Paul faces the men with his sword at the ready.]

Rudd: Don't try to act cool in front of Mary Anne.

Rudd: What's the big deal? This is going to be a real pain in the ass, isn't it?

Paul: Oh, yeah? I don't think it's a big deal to me, though, right?

Rudd: Oh yeah... Ooooooh!

[Rudd lifted a chair that was close at hand and threw it at the men. That was the signal to start the fight.]

[Paul accurately aimed at their vital points.]

Paul: (They are all using forceful techniques that rely on their arm strength. They are no match for me...!)

[The opponent was a strong adult, but Paul was at ease and did not feel the slightest sense of fear or danger. But Paul was the only one who felt that way.]

Slum Brat A: Dammit! These guys are too strong!

Rudd: You guys! Don't fight by yourselves! You've got to stay in a group!

Paul: (Is Rudd the only one who can fight properly?)

Paul: Tsk...!

[Paul clicks his tongue and swings his sword. With a flash of his sword, he knocks down his opponent and avoids the attack of another man who comes up behind him.]

Thug: Hahaha! The kid is a kid! Go home and beg your mama for a titty!

Paul: You go to your mommy. You're not going to get any other girls with that ugly face of yours, are you?

Thug: Huh!?

[Paul used the table as a foothold and leapt, closing the distance between him and the thug at once.]

Paul: No matter how big you are, it doesn't mean you're strong.

[In fact, the instructors who taught Paul how to use the sword were not physically strong women. But they were powerful.]

Paul: (Maybe now I could...!)

[A thug stopped Paul's blow with his sword. But the man's face is distorted.]

Thug: You're not an amateur, are you? Don't tell me you're from the dojo of the water god style...?

Paul: Water God Style? I'm sorry to disappoint you... I'm using Sword God Style...!

[If they cannot be defeated with a single blow, you retreat and immediately unleash a second blow. The heavy blow, using the rotation of the body, hit the thug in the stomach as if it were sucked in.]

Thug: Ugh, Kak...!

[The man's body falls to the floor. It was so sudden that the whole place fell silent.]

Paul: ...

Rudd: Hey, Paul. Don't just stand there. We're not done yet.

Paul: ...I know. They treated me like a kid just because they're adults. They must be carrying a lot of money.

Paul: I'm going to have to take it all.

[From that point on, Paul was in control. Before his opponents, who had been stunned, could even begin their attacks, he was able to conquer them with superior strength.]

Chapter 6: Differences in Upbringing

[It wasn't long before the thugs fled and Paul had his money.]

Landlady: You guys made my store look like this!

Mary Anne: I'm so sorry...

Landlady: You think an apology is going to make this go away? Get the hell out of here!

Paul: ...Eh!

[The landlady is furious at the disastrous situation in the restaurant. It was Mary Anne who was apologizing, and Paul rolled his eyes at the landlady's words.]

Paul: "You told me to leave, it's raining hard outside. Besides, we were supposed to stay the night. And I've given you the money for our accommodations in advance.

Landlady: How can I let the people who are making such a mess of my bar stay the night?

Landlady: Do you really think I can fix the bar with just the cost of their stay? You'll have to pay for the repairs too!

Slum Brat A: Hey, old bag! You'll getting on my nerves if you don't shut up and listen to us!

Landlady: Eek...!

Paul: Stop it!

Paul stopped the boy who was about to grab the landlady.

Paul: Manners... don't raise your hand against the lady.

[As he said, "Don't raise your hand to the lady," Paul wrinkles his brow as what he was born and educated to do was about to come out.]

Slum Brat A: "Lady!?" She's just a money-hungry old hag, isn't she!? You're going to do what you're told to do and leave your money behind and go out in the rain like this!

Rudd: Hey, calm down a bit, man. When the boss tells you to stay out of it, stay out of it.

Slum Brat A: But, but, Rudd-san...!

Leaving Rudd to calm the boy down, Paul takes a step toward the Landlady.

Paul: Landlady. We'll pay for the repairs, we'll pay for our lodging, and we won't let these guys mess with the store or with you.

Paul: But if you're going to kick us out, that's a different story.

Landlady: W-what do you mean...?

Paul: We won't pay for the repairs, we won't pay for your accommodations, and we can't guarantee your safety.

Paul: It's raining hard outside. We have to get a place to stay.

Landlady: Kh...

Landlady: ...all right. But as I said at the beginning, it's only for one night! No extensions! You'll have to leave tomorrow, even if it rains!

Paul: Yeah, that's fine.

[The Landlady is indignant and disappears from the scene. Paul turned back and looked around at the disgruntled faces.]

Paul: What do you have to say for yourself?

Slum Brat A: Why do you let the old lady say whatever she wants to say? Why don't you just knock her out and shut her up!?

Slum Brat B: Besides, we wouldn't even have to pay for the repairs... If you have that much money, you could've traveled easier for a while, you know?

Paul: So? So you want me to skip out on repairs and lodging, beat up the landlady, and become a wanted man?

Paul: I don't mind being wanted, but I don't want to be wanted for such a lame reason.

Slum Brat B: ...Is that really the only reason?

Slum Brat A: Paul, are you really... thinking of returning to the nobility someday? Is that why you don't want to be a wanted man—

Paul: Bullshit.

[Paul's voice came out lower than he thought it would. A number of doubtful eyes. He looks them over one by one.]

Paul: I became just Paul because I wanted to. I have no intention of going back to that place.

Slum Brat A: S-So, why then? Why are your people still after you!?

Paul: Don't ask me. I don't know what's going on back there.

Paul: Just don't talk nonsense to me again. I won't tolerate it, even from you.

Slum Brat A: Hm!

[The atmosphere was tense. In the midst of this, Mary Anne made a move. She gently pulled Paul's hand.]

Mary Anne: Everyone is tense after the battle, aren't they? Let's take the rest of the day off. Paul, may we go to your room?

Paul: What? Oh, yes! Sure!

Rudd: He's such a changeable guy...

[He lightly raises his hand to Rudd's dumbfounded face. Paul then hugged Mary Anne around the waist and headed upstairs to his room.]

Chapter 7: Splitting up and taking another step

[The next day—. It had been raining since morning.]

Paul: ...? What did you say?

Rad: Uh, it's... well, you know...

Rudd: Some of our guys, they left...

[Rudd hemmed and hawed about how many, but looking at the number of people gathered, about half of them seemed to have vanished.]

Paul: And? Why did they leave?

Rudd: Er... ah... nn...

Slum Brat A: Rudd-san, let me lay it out for ya.

Slum Brat A: They left because they realized that Paul had no intention of returning to the nobility.

Paul: What do you mean?

Rudd: ...I don't know where you come from, but I know you're a pretty high-ranking nobleman. So they thought they could get a nice seat at the table if they stayed with you.

Rudd: They thought that the reason you came south was because you knew a nobleman and wanted to rely on him... Besides, your family seems to be obsessed with you.

Paul: That's... nonsense. Is that why they've been following me all this time?

[Paul didn't get angry. He just felt cold and chilled.]

Paul: (So it's not just aristocrats who can be calculating? It is more like...)

Paul: (I didn't quite get it... is this what friends are all about after all?)

Mary Anne: Paul... don't get too down, okay? It's okay. We'll be with you the whole way.

Mary Anne stands close to Paul. The sweet scent of her soft body in his arms calms him down.

Paul: Thank you, Mary Anne.

Mary Anne: No need to thank me. I just want to...

Rudd: ...have you both forgotten that your own brother exists?

[Paul's group was reduced to less than ten people. As promised to the landlady, they left the inn]

in the pouring rain and bad weather.]

Paul: ...but it's a bad idea to leave town in this weather, isn't it?

Rudd: Shall we look for another inn?

Paul: I'm sure people know that we went on a rampage last night. I don't think they'll let us stay the night unless they're in desperate need of money.

Mary Anne: What are we going to do then?

Paul: Hmmm... let's go to...

Rudd: So, where to?

Paul: That's it, yeah, dojo-busting.

[Paul chuckles.]

Paul: A dojo has a roof, just right for sheltering from the rain, don't you think? Besides, if we win, they'll gladly let us stay.

Mary Anne: Is that so...?

Paul: Yes, yes, yes. As long as you win, you can use the magic words. If you want your dojo sign back, say...!

According to the thug from yesterday, apparently there is a dojo of the water god style in this town.

Paul: (I've been out of touch with the water god style sword ever since I lost my sensei at school...)

Paul: (I couldn't help my sensei back then...)

Paul is proud to say that he is more suited to sword god style than water god style.

Paul: (I've been in real fights, and I'm not going to be defeated by some swordfighter just swinging a sword in a dojo.)

Paul: "Rad, let's go break down this dojo for a minute!"

Rudd: "That's a lighthearted invitation... Well, it sounds like fun!"

Paul's steps were light as he headed for the dojo of the water god style in the cold rain. The thought of his missing friends was no longer on his mind.

Episode 2 [Meeting with Lilia]

Chapter 8: Dojo-busting

[Paul and his friends were about to eagerly enter a dojo that teaches the Water God style of swordsmanship in order to break the dojo.]

Paul: Hmmm... I'm not an expert on how to dojo-breaking, but as I recall this is how you do it?

Paul: Well pardon~ me~

Rudd: Hey, Paul!

Paul: Rudd... don't call me out to discourage me when I'm just getting started...

Rudd: Sorry, my bad! I just wanted to ask you something!

Paul: Yeah? What is it?

Rudd: I just overheard that there are a lot of water god style dojos in this town. Are we going to hit all of them?

Paul: What? There's a mountain of them? Why?

[Paul's eyes fluttered again. Rudd's words were completely lost on him.]

[He was going to get into this dojo because it was the first one he saw, but if there were multiple dojos, that would be a different story.]

Paul: (If I'm going to prove my swordsmanship, the dojo breaker has to do it at the strongest dojo.)

Rudd: I heard that this town produced a Water God. I heard that's why dojos of water god style started popping up one after another.

Paul: Hmmm, a Water God, huh? That means that the dojo where the water god started out is the most prestigious one, right?

Rudd: Well, is that right...?

Paul: Then it's settled! Let's go to that dojo right away! We'll have to split up to find out where it is.

Rudd: Look for it, in the rain?

Paul: Eh? Isn't it obvious? It's not raining as hard as yesterday. Don't ask me something crazy.

Paul: I'll ask at this dojo. You guys gather information on your own. So, all right, let's break up.

As Paul ducked down and walked to the dojo, he heard Rudd's sigh behind him.

Rudd: Haa... Mary Anne, follow Paul. I don't want him to go alone.

Mary Anne: Oh, yeah, I got it. I'll be looking out for Paul.

Paul: (What is it? Am I being treated like a child?)

Paul: (... Well, if I get to be alone with Mary Anne, I don't really mind.)

Then Paul and Mary Anne knocked on the door of the dojo of water god style.

Paul: Scuse me! Could you tell me which dojo is the best around here?

[No one would ever name any other dojo as the best when asked in such a manner.]

[Sure enough, Paul ended up breaking into the dojo he had just come to talk to.]

Mary Anne: ...

Mary Anne: Paul, you are really strong... I can't believe you beat someone who practices every day at the dojo...

Paul: Did you think I could lose? Besides, I've been taught by a Water God style practitioner. I can handle guys of this caliber.

[Paul actually took over the dojo by himself and lazily waited for Rudd and the others to bring him information.]

Paul: The way of the sword has no end, and you have to train for a long time before you can master it. But training is not always rewarded.

Paul: Like these guys here, some genius may appear one day and make them realize how helpless and talentless they are in an instant.

Mary Anne: Paul... somehow you've changed.

Paul: What? What do you mean, changed?

Mary Anne: I don't know how to say it, but it's like...

Slum Brat A: P-Paul...! We're in trouble! Come quickly...!

[Mary Anne was about to say something when a boy came running in with panicked footsteps.]

Paul: You're making a lot of noise... eh? Are you hurt? What's wrong?

Slum Brat A: I don't care if I'm hurt or not! It's about Rudd-san...! Rudd-san is in trouble...!

Paul: ! Rudd? Where is he?

Slum Brat A: A dojo just a little ways from here! Please hurry up...!!!!

Paul: Yeah, okay. Mary Anne. You stay behind just in case.

Mary Anne: No, I'll go with you. If something happened to my brother, I can't just wait here.

Paul: ...I see, that's right... Okay, we will go together. Hey, show me the way.

Slum Brat A: This way!!!!

Chapter 9: Dojo-busting 2

[Led by the boy, they arrived at the dojo where the men were cheering.]

Paul: (That's...)

[At the edge of the dojo, the youths who accompanied Paul were laying on the ground, and in the center, Rudd was fighting, covered in blood.]

Mary Anne: Brother...!

Slum Brat A: We rode in to ask for information and they said they'd tell us if we won... Everyone got done in except for Rudd-san...!

Paul: Why is Rudd struggling? Sure, he seems to have a good opponent, but not as good as Rudd, right?

Slum Brat A: I don't know how many more... we have to fight...

Paul: What?

Slum Brat A: The students! They're all betting on how many people will get knocked out by Rudd-san!

Paul: You don't have to deal with that. Why is Rudd fighting?

Slum Brat A: Don't you get it! Rudd-san is not the kind of guy who would back down quietly after his buddies get beat up!

Paul: ...

Paul looks at Rudd. He is moving slower than usual, perhaps because his strength has been sapped.

Paul: (Water god style is a defensive sword art. If you keep on fighting, your strength is going to weaken.)

Paul: (And Rudd's fighting style is similar to North God Style, using what's around him...)

Paul: (In the center of a dojo, where there is almost nothing to use, he can't bring his full strength to bear.)

The students were shouting excitedly. Rudd was swinging his sword doggedly, as if he had no time to care.

Paul: Hey.

Slum Brat A: What's up?

Paul: Take Mary Anne back to the dojo where we were.

Mary Anne: ! What are you going to do?

Paul: I can't do it if you're here. That's why you have to leave quickly.

[Mary Anne looks at Rudd and Paul in turn, as if lost. There is no time to hear the answer. Paul shoves Mary Anne against the boy.]

Paul: Take her away. You don't have to come back after that. Mary Anne's safety is your first priority.

Slum Brat A: A-All right...! Take care of Rudd-san and the others!

Mary Anne: Paul...!

[As if dragged by the boy, Mary Anne leaves the dojo. When they were completely out of sight, Paul gripped his sword and jumped between Rudd and the others.]

Rudd: ! Paul...!

Paul: That's because you're foolishly and naïvely taking them on one on one. If that's your way of fighting, you'd better start taking them into mixed battles and brawls.

[At the same time he tells Rudd. Paul attacked and blew away the student in front of him.]

Paul: I'll be your opponent from here on out! If you can do it with your dojo swordsmanship, come at me!

[It's a mixed battle. A melee. The students had learned some rough fighting techniques at the dojo, but they lacked the experience to deal with it.]

[The students' faces, which had been smirking at first, turned into ones that showed no room for complacency when Paul instantly knocked down a few of them.]

Paul: Use whatever you have! Whether it's a tub, a vase, or a picture frame, it's a weapon for you!

Rudd: Shut up! I didn't have anything on hand, so I had no choice!

Paul: Then jump out of the way! In the center of the dojo? Don't fight like a fool in the middle of some empty space!

[This dojo was filled with more skilled fighters than the one they had just been in.]

[Even so, while they were forced to fight in a battle they were not accustomed to, the students did not raise a shout of victory in front of Rudd, who had come back to life, and Paul, who showed overwhelming power.]

Chapter 10: Holding back

[With the sign broken in half, Paul and his followers left the dojo.]

Mary Anne: Brother...!

[When they arrived at the dojo they had taken and made their home, Mary Anne ran up to them and hugged Rudd.]

Paul: (Sheesh. You could have hugged me instead of Rudd.)

Rudd: Sorry to worry you...

Mary Anne: I hope you'll be ok... You're all covered in wounds! We need to patch you up.

[The dojo was well-equipped with supplies to treat the wounded. Mary Anne moved around and patched up the kids.]

Mary Anne: Yes, that's better. But you need to rest for a while, because if the wounds open up, you'll be in trouble.

Paul: (... this isn't funny)

Paul: (Why is it that a guy who just got hurt and didn't fight much gets cuddled up to?)

[There was a sense of déjà-vu in this irritation. It was similar to the feelings that used to nestle in my chest when my mother was constantly fretting over young Pilemon.]

Paul: ...tsk, you guys are just pathetic.

Rudd: Hey, Paul...

Paul: Rudd was the only one who was able to compete with the water god style guys. The rest of you got beat up in no time, didn't you?

Paul: You guys are too weak. You can't even gather a shred of information, you're all useless.

[Paul let his mouth run off. Silence fell in the dojo, and the air became heavy.]

Mary Anne: Alright, alright, that's enough!

[Mary Anne raised her bright voice as if to dispel the bad atmosphere in the place.]

Mary Anne: Paul, we're all hurt, okay? I would feel sorry for them if I spoke too strongly. Let's leave the blame at that, shall we?

Rudd: Yeah, Paul. It's my fault that I put you through all this. I'm sorry...

Paul: It wasn't your fault, was it, Rudd?

[He was fighting to the end, and he didn't lose to anyone.]

Rudd: I was still assigned by the boss to gather information, and I took the job. I should apologize for my failure, shouldn't I...?

Paul: If you feel that way... you better get your shit together next time.

Slum Brat A: Dude!

Paul said as he looked at Rudd, and one of the boys spoke up.

Slum Brat A: Shut up and listen to me, you've been talking like that for a while...

Rudd: Stop it! Paul didn't say anything wrong!

Rudd: We screwed up, and the boss had to clean up the mess. That's clearly our fault. Am I right?

Slum Brat A: That's...

Paul: (It's like...)

Paul looked at the youth and noticed that they all looked the same.

Paul: (All of them have this look of frustration with me...)

Rudd: Paul, I'm going to make sure these guys know what you're talking about. I'm really sorry about today...

Paul: ...it's fine. You don't have to apologize any more.

[Paul said that, but there was still a smoldering irritation in the pit of his stomach. Paul was about to go away to freshen things up a bit—.]

Mary Anne: "...aa..."

[Thud.]

[There was the sound of something crumbling behind him. When Paul and the others looked in the direction of the sound, they saw Mary Anne lying on the ground.]

Paul: "!" Mary Anne!?"

Rudd: "W-What's wrong!?"

Paul rushes over, kneels down beside Mary Anne and holds her in his arms.

Mary Anne: "It's nothing... nothing... I'm just a little dizzy..."

[She says this, but she is breathing hard and sweat is on her forehead.]

Paul: It's not nothing. You have a terrible fever...!

Rudd: ! Mary Anne! How long have you had a fever!

Mary Anne: Brother... I'm fine... Really, I'm fine, so...

Mary Anne: ...

Paul: Mary Anne! Mary Anne!!!

[He calls her name, but she doesn't answer. Mary Anne seems to have fainted and her body weakens in his arms.]

Paul: (Unconscious? Why? Why? How long has she had this fever?)

[Questions came and went, one after another, and my heart was beating uncomfortably fast.]

Paul: Mary Anne, why...

Rudd: Oi, give her here, Paul! I'm taking her to a doctor!

Paul: Oh, right...

[Rudd picks up Mary Anne to take her from Paul and runs out of the dojo.]

[The others followed Rudd with their injured bodies. Paul was the only one left.]

Paul: (Mary Anne, who had fainted for a moment... looked like my mother...)

[Valentina, his mother, was not physically strong and died prematurely because of her late night visits to Paul, who was under house arrest, having exhausted herself.]

Paul: (Speaking of which...)

Paul: (Didn't Mary Anne also say that her body was weak...?)

[The blood drained from Paul's face.]

Chapter 11: Defeat

[With a huff, he was about to get up and go to Mary Ann, but...]

???: What's the matter? Aren't you the one who's the "hot dojo-busting kid?"

Paul: Huh!

Paul: (This guy never showed any sign of...?)

[He didn't notice the man's presence until he was very close to him.]

Paul: (If he hadn't called out to me, I might not have noticed him even now...)

[He holds his sword with caution. As he was measuring the distance between himself and the opponent, the man laughed funny and said, "Ha ha ha".]

???: Good vigilance. There are no signals to start outside the dojo. It means you know how to fight a real battle.

???: You were looking for me, weren't you? —Or, to be more precise, you were looking for my dojo.

Paul: What? So you're the guy from the dojo where the Water God was?

???: No, no, the dojo where the Water God used to be has long since gone out of business. In any case, the person who inherited the Water God's seat had left the dojo.

???: The remaining members argued over who would be the next Master, and as a result, the dojo was split up.

???: I'm a fellow student of the Water God. After the split and the dojo went out of business, I opened my own dojo, and here we are.

[The man opened his arms, still holding his sword. Although he was looking like he could be attacked from anywhere, there was no opening at all.]

???: Not to brag, but it's the best dojo around here. ...Or something like that? That's what you've been looking for, right?

Paul: I was looking for it, but it doesn't matter now.

Paul: (I'm not interested in that right now!)

[Now I wanted to get to Mary Anne as soon as possible. Rudd said he was going to take her to the doctor, but I had no idea where that was.]

[As Paul was trying to figure out how to break through the man and get out of the dojo, the man wrinkled his brow in disapproval.]

???: It doesn't matter? Huh? What are you talking about?"

???: "I'm old enough to know better, but I've been looking for you with great excitement. I can't just say goodbye to you as soon as I find you.

Paul: You were looking for me? You want me to pay for breaking the dojo?

???: What? Why would I be the one to make you pay for breaking into someone else's dojo? Even if it's a friend's dojo, there's no reason to take care of them that much.

Paul: What? I don't understand any of this... Then why were you looking for me?

???: Because I was interested in you, of course.

???: The master of the dojo where you cut the signboard in half is an old friend of mine. We hadn't seen each other in a while, so we were going to have a drink at his dojo.

???: So! When I went to the dojo, I found it in a state of disarray. The dojo was in shambles, the signboard was cut in half, and all of his students had been taken out.

???: He was angry because he was the master, but I was shaken to my core. I thought, "There's an interesting guy here!" That's what I thought!

[A man who is older than his own father is looking like a child.]

Paul: (He's a creepy guy.
I can't read his purpose at all...)

Paul: "... is it even worth thinking about?"

Paul: "Whatever! Get out of there!"

???: "What if I say no?"

Paul: "I'll push through!"

[Paul kicked the ground hard. He jumped at the man in a straight line and swung his sword. His aim is sharp.]

Paul: (There is no time. I'll decide with a single blow!)

[The sword rips through the air.]

???: "I see! This is beyond anything I imagined!"

Paul: "What the...?"

[Paul's strike was easily caught. The man smirked with a relaxed expression on his face. Paul's sword slipped in an unexpected direction.]

Paul: (Did... what was just...?!?)

[He doesn't understand what just happened. Before he can think, his sword is played and a sharp blow is returned.]

Paul: "Dammit...!"

[It was a counter. He managed to avoid it and jumped backward, but his heart was beating fast.]

???: Hahaha, you dodged that one! There is no way that a student of that dojo could have been a match for you!

Paul: This guy is... He's not just a talker, is he?

Paul: (But I can do it. One more step and my blade will reach you!)

???: Are you coming?

[Faster and stronger than before. Paul launched his attack.]

Paul: What? Eh...?

[He didn't know what happened. Paul found himself blown to the wall.]

Paul: "Ghh...!"

[His belly ached as he tried to raise his body. Then, for the first time, Paul realized that the man had countered with a blow to his stomach.]

[Paul was shocked and felt a pain in his abdomen as he tried to raise his body.]

???: Hm? I'm surprised... I thought I could completely knock you out with that... You move well, don't you?

Paul: What...?

???: Still conscious? Hmm...

???: The way you move and the way you use the sword are from the Sword God style. But you must also be a student of Water God style, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to take evasive action so quickly.

Paul: ...then why?

Paul: I don't care... get out of there!

[The blood was rushing to his head completely. Paul jumped in without any countermeasures.]

???: 'Then why,' just because? What if that's what it is?

???: I'm just saying I want it more and more!

[That was the end of Paul's consciousness.]

[He did not know what had been done to him, but the next time he became conscious—.]

Chapter 12: Instructor Augusta

[What came into Paul's vision was a strange ceiling and the face of a girl he did not recognize.]

Paul: What?

???: Eek!

[Before he could grasp the situation, Paul jumped up, restrained the girl, and held her down on the bed where he had been lying down.]

???: Ah, please let go of me!

Paul: Shut up! Who the hell are you? Who was that guy? Where am I? How did I get here?

???: You're being too noisy! Get away from...!

Paul: Answer my question!

[Paul was confused. He was supposed to be in the dojo, but when he woke up, he was in a room he didn't know.]

???: Oh? I heard a voice, but you're already awake...?

[The door opens and a man walks in. He smiles, but when he sees what's inside, his eyes widen—?]

???: What? You and Lilia are already in that kind of relationship? Hahaha, I get it!

Lilia: Father! Stop talking nonsense and do something about this guy!

Paul: Lilia?

???: Yes, she's my daughter. I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Augusta.

Augusta: The man who beat you to a pulp and scared the hell out of you!

Paul: Kidnapped... You mean I've been kidnapped.

Augusta: That's what I'm saying. So? What's your name?

Paul: ...Paul.

Augusta: Paul! Paul, is it! Mm-hm, isn't that a nice name!

Augusta: We have a lot to talk about. So, for now, will you let my daughter go?

Paul: ...

[Paul hesitates. Without weapons and without a clear understanding of the current situation, having the enemy's daughter in his hands is a big deal.]

Paul: (Letting go means I'll have no more cards in my hand against that guy.)

[He looks down at the girl he is holding. The girl, who looks defeated but has a well-defined face, is staring at Paul with eyes that have a strong will.]

Paul: (... Damn it!)

[Paul half-heartedly gets off of Lilia and releases her. Then he faced the man who had brought him here.]

Paul: Where am I?

Augusta: My home, and dojo, I suppose.

Paul: What did you bring me here for?

Augusta: It's simple.

[Augusta laughed with a childish grin that Paul found creepy.]

Augusta: I will take you as my apprentice. From today on, you will live in the dojo.

Paul: What about...?

Lilia: "Father! Are you kidding me? Why do you let this guy in? He will bring shame to our dojo!

Paul: No, no, no! Why are you assuming I'm going to join? There is no way that I am going to join!

Paul: I'm traveling! I'm not staying in any one place!

Paul: Besides, I am suited for Sword God Style swordsmanship. I have no intention of learning Water God Style swordsmanship!

[Paul, sensing that he was about to be told something outrageous and that he was about to suffer a terrible fate, raised his voice in opposition.]

Augusta: How old are you anyway, my boy?

Paul: Twelve, but...

Augusta: Twelve? You're still a kid! At that age you don't even know what kind of swordsmanship is right for you, do you?

Augusta: You will grow taller and heavier from now on. As your physique changes, so does your aptitude for swordsmanship.

Paul: That's...

Augusta: The most important thing to remember is that you can't just take a little bit of time to learn a few things and then decide if you are a good swordsman or not. I'm offering to teach you swordsmanship for free.

Augusta: Paul, you don't think that's a bad deal for you, do you?

[There is a flip side to every good story. It was a vague sense of danger that he had acquired during his life as a nobleman.]

Paul: (He's a talkative guy, but he's not likely to spill his guts...)

[It was a proposal from an untrustworthy partner, but he would not be able to refuse by force. After all, the other party is powerful enough to kidnap Paul.]

Paul: (Still, I can't stay here forever.)

Paul: I'm sorry, but I have to decline your offer. I have somewhere to go.

Augusta: Somewhere to go? Where?

Paul: ...to the doctor's office. The young girl I'm traveling with is sick, and she's seeing a doctor.

[Deciding that he could neither force his way through nor backstab Augusta, Paul told him honestly why he was there. Then Augusta's face grew tense...]

Augusta: Well, you should tell me that earlier! Where is it? What doctor did you go see?

Paul: Whuh...?

Augusta: The closest place to the dojo you were at is just around the corner from...! Lilia! Go guide him there!

Lilia: Guide him there? Father kidnapped him, didn't you? Father is responsible for him.

Paul: Am I like some dog or a cat?

Paul: You don't have to take me to... just show me the way to where you were. I'll find the rest on my own.

Augusta: Haha, that's a funny joke! You're just going to say that and run away, aren't you?

[He was right. Paul frowned.]

Paul: You're reading into it that I'm going to run away, and you want your daughter to show me the way?

Augusta: Hmm? Is that strange?

Augusta: If you think it's no big deal because you were able to push her down, you're not looking hard enough. If you put a sword in her hand, Lilia is a first-rate swordswoman.

Paul: This girl?

Lilia: You have a problem with me?

Paul: I have nothing to complain about...

[When he calmed down a little and took a closer look at her, he found that she has a lot of curves at all the right places, she has the kind of body that Paul likes.]

Paul: (She's very pretty.)

[When he stares at her, she stares back at him with sharp eyes.]

Augusta: ...Well, if Lilia doesn't want to go, I'll have to take you. Okay, let's go, Paul.

Paul: ...

[Since he didn't know where he was, he had no choice but to follow Augusta. Paul silently followed his back.]

Chapter 13: Farewell

[They passed a familiar dojo and then a small private hospital at the end of a four-cornered street. There, he found Rudd and the others with pale faces.]

Paul: Rudd.

Rudd: Isn't it Paul?...

Paul: ...how's Mary Ann doing?

Rudd: They don't think her life is in danger right now. But they say she's pretty out of it...

[The chatty man, perhaps reading the mood, disappeared without entering the hospital. Paul stood next to Rudd and listened.]

Rudd: She never had a strong body to begin with. We didn't have parents, so when we were in the slums, I was always there to protect her...

Rudd: I was relieved when she grew and became healthier and stronger. The sister who would get a fever and almost die was no more...

Paul: You mean she wasn't?

Rudd: Yeah. This was our first time traveling. I guess she was pushing herself physically and mentally... And then came yesterday's rain.

Paul: I'm sorry... Because I left in the rain...!

[Paul bites his lip. Unable to control his anger at himself, Paul punched the wall of the hospital as hard as he could.]

Paul: (Not only Mother, but even Mary Anne, because of me...!)

Rudd: It ain't your fault!

Paul: Uh...

[I was ready to be yelled at and punched. And yet, Rudd did not speak up but stared into the void with a pale face.]

Rudd: I'm the one to blame," he said. I put my own greed before my sister's health.

Paul: Your greed...?

Rudd: Before you came along, I was the boss. I had to protect my sister, protect my friends in the slums, and always be the strong one.

Rudd: But when you beat me in a fair fight, that was the first time I was able to relax. I felt much

better after I gave up the boss's position.

Rudd: I was relieved to be able to leave my baggage in the hands of someone stronger than me. "Now I can be free!", I thought...

Rudd: What kind of lousy boss and lousy brother do you have to be to feel that way?

Paul: ...No, it's not true. We all have times when we just want to be free and throw it all away.

Paul: Actually, I did throw everything away... but you didn't throw away everything did you, Rudd? You're still protecting something.

Rudd: You think so?

Paul: Yeah.

[Rudd's feelings were painfully clear. Perhaps he is caught between responsibility and freedom. Paul had a similar experience, and that time he took his freedom.]

Paul: (Rudd is probably...)

[Paul exhales with a huff. He is faced with a decision he will regret either way.]

Paul: (I only got this far because of Rudd. What can I do for someone like him...)

Paul: Rudd, take Mary Ann and go home. Our journey together ends here.

Rudd: Paul...

Paul: I don't need you anymore. Oh, you can take all the money you have as parting gifts. Go to the slums, some farm village, wherever you want.

Slum Brat A: Hey, man! What the hell is that talk!

[The boys, who had been a short distance away, must have heard what Paul and Rudd were talking about, because they started to come in droves.]

Slum Brat A: Rudd-san was there for you, and now you're cutting him off so easily!?

Rudd: ! You guys, stop!

Slum Brat A: Rudd-san! Why are you always defending this guy! This guy is trying to make Rudd-san—

Rudd: That ain't so! Why don't you understand? Paul is trying to—

Paul: Shut up for a moment, will you. Don't you know where you are? Don't make a scene in the hospital.

Paul: Oh, that's right. Rudd, take those guys with you. It's hard to move with the weak ones with you.

[Paul snickered, "Hun..." with a snide smile. It was a deliberate sneer, but it was effective for the boys, whose blood was rushing to their heads.]

Slum Brat A: We didn't come with you because you asked us to! We're not following you, we're following Rudd-san!

Paul: Oh... I knew that. I knew you guys didn't recognize me as the boss. Only Rudd did, didn't he?"

[Even the way they addressed them had staid the same. Paul wasn't sure if it was intentional or not, but they address Rudd with honorifics, and Paul without.]

Paul: "Well, it doesn't really matter now.

[Paul shrugs and turns his back on Rudd and the others.]

Rudd: ! You're going? Without seeing Mary Anne?

Paul: There's no reason to see her. Tell her to forget about me quickly and go live somewhere more peaceful.

Paul: Rudd, the sooner you forget about me, the better. We were born and raised different from each other. We were never meant to have anything to do with each other.

Rudd: Don't talk like that. We are friends.

Paul: Well, technically, we were buddies, but...

Paul: See you around... I don't know if I'll ever see you again, but take care.

[I couldn't see Rudd's face until the end because his back was still turned.]

Paul: (Mmhm... this was for the best)

[Choosing between Paul and Mary Anne... Rudd was faced with a tough choice, and Paul was not sure if it was right to take the choice itself away from Rudd.]

[But Paul could think of no other way to reward Rudd.]

[As Paul left the hospital, Augusta appeared without a hint of his presence.]

Augusta: You look like you've had a breakthrough. Does that mean you're feeling lighter?

Paul: I don't know.

Augusta: Well, that's good, that's good! Now you can become my apprentice without any worries!

Paul: Huh? How could I be your apprentice?

Augusta: Alright! You're going to start your training today! Let's go back to the dojo!

[He grabbed Paul firmly by the arm. He tries to shake it off, but the man was too strong.]

Paul: (He's not budging at all...)

[Paul was dragged to the dojo where Augusta was the master.]

[As the dojo is a prestigious one, there are a lot of students there. Among them was Lilia.]

Student A at Lilia's house: Master! Good morning!

Augusta: Ah, good morning. Looks like everyone is already here.

Student A at Lilia's house: ? Um, Master? Who is that kid...?

Augusta: Oh, let me introduce you. This is Paul. He's going to be a student of ours starting today.

Paul: No, no, no, what are you talking about? I never said I was going to be your student. I have no interest in dojo swordsmanship.

[A candid and honest feeling. The moment he said this, the air in the dojo became tense.]

Student B at Lilia's house: Master, he is a child with a very cocky mouth. Are you sure, Master, that you want to admit someone who doesn't know anything about manners and courtesy?... I am against it.

Augusta: Hahaha, a dojo is a place where not only swordsmanship is taught, but also courtesy.

Student B at Lilia's house: That is... true, isn't it? I apologize for being so glib...

Paul: (You're going on and on, ignoring the people involved... Well, I don't care.)

Paul: (Even if I become a student in name only, then all I have to do is not participate in the training...)

[Paul did not show as much rejection as he did at first, but was a little more positive in his thinking.]

[After all, Paul was currently without a copper to his name. If they were willing to let him live here, he was willing to use this as a base to earn money.]

Paul: (That will probably happen after those guys leave here, though...)

Paul: (Mary Anne... I have no right to wish you happiness, but at least may you live a healthy life...)

[I had to break up with her without ever seeing her face, she was the one I had to say goodbye to. Paul, who could not say goodbye to his mother, could not help but pray for her.]

[Now, turning to...]

[Mary Anne, who had been sitting up in bed listening to the story, silently cast her eyes down. A single tear trickles from between her closed eye lids.]

Mary Anne: So... you wouldn't even let me say "goodbye" or "thank you—"

Rudd: Mary Anne, I think Paul is doing this for us...

Mary Anne: I know. Paul didn't want you to have to choose whether to cut off your sister or your friend.

Mary Anne: So you chose... instead. Isn't that right?

Rudd: Yeah...

Mary Anne: ...heh, you are a sweetheart.

Mary Anne: You know, I thought Paul had changed lately.

Mary Anne: Even when he was an aristocrat, Paul never looked down on people in the slums. But lately he seems to be looking down on... everyone.

Rudd: That guy was probably wasn't used to being around other people all the time.

Rudd: And then suddenly he's put in the position of being the boss, and he's being told to take care of people who are less powerful than he is, and he's just a little tense.

Mary Anne: Yeah, right...

Mary Anne: You know... brother... I... wonder if I could have supported him a little...?"

Rudd: "I'm not surprised. There is no other woman like you anywhere! I guarantee it!"

Mary Anne: Heh, heh, heh... heh... Brother, you can't guarantee that, can you?

[The small hospital room was filled with the tearful laughter of the siblings.]

[After that, the two returned to the slums of Milbotts territory, but a few years later they moved to a peaceful farming village.]

[The village chief took a liking to Rudd, and he married the chief's daughter. They have three sons and a daughter.]

[Mary Anne was proposed to by many men, but she never accepted any of them and remained a single woman for the rest of her life.]

Episode 3 [Rebellion]

Chapter 14: Delinquent student.

[Putting aside his own intentions. Paul, who had been accepted into the prestigious Water God Style dojo, was staying at the home of his teacher, Augusta.]

[Paul was a live-in student, but early in the morning, he was not in the dojo, nor in the room he was given, but in the home of a young widow who is reputed to be one of the most beautiful women in town.]

Paul: hn...?

[Paul woke up when he heard a hard banging on the door.]

Woman A: Hmmm... who could it be this early in the morning? I'm going out for a minute. So, Paul, let me go, will you?

Paul: Don't answer it. Let's just take another nap together, ignoring the insane people who make noises in the early morning.

Paul: Besides, it's too much trouble to get dressed, isn't it? I'm going to take off your clothes again anyway...

Woman A: Oh, gosh, Paul, that tickles.

Paul: Hmmm... Let's not have another nap after all, let's have some fun...

[Paul holds the widow in bed and caresses her waist as he enjoys the softness of her skin. Just as they were about to get down to business... the door blew open.]

Woman A: Kyah!

Augusta: Oh, I'm sorry for that, sweetheart. I'll have my apprentice fix the door, so cut me some slack.

[Augusta came stomping in through the blown door, sword in one hand.]

Woman A: What is going on, dear!?

Augusta: I'm sorry for the delay in saying hello. I am the master of this naked boy over here.

Paul: No, no, no, no, don't fuck with me! I don't recognize you as my master, okay!?

Augusta: "Whether you admit it or not, you are our student. Come on! Let's go for morning practice!

Paul: What? How could I possibly go?

[As soon as he answered in disgust, Augusta instantly closed the distance between him and Paul. Paul found himself with a sword in front of him.]

Augusta: Let's go, shall we?

Paul: What if I say no?

Augusta: I'll take you with me even if I have to knock you out. If that happens, the next time you wake up, you'll be rolling around naked in the dojo.

Paul: What?

Augusta: Would you like to show off your pride and joy in front of your fellow students?

[Paul grits his teeth.]

Paul: (This guy will do it when he says he will...!)

[Paul has no choice.]

Paul: (... my pants, where are they?)

Augusta: Uh-huh, that's it.

[Accompanied by a satisfied Augusta, Paul was made to join the dojo's morning practice.]

Paul: (What am I doing here in the early morning, shoulder to shoulder with sweaty men?...)

Paul: (... anyway)

[Paul's eyes caught sight of Lilia wielding a sword among the male students.]

Paul: (Hmmm... yesterday's girl had great style, but Lilia can't be beat for having something rocking and bouncing...)

[Time flies when you don't have to be serious about hitting the ground running. After morning practice, Paul went to Augusta and Lilia's home, which is on the same property as the dojo.]

Augusta: Flute, I just got home. Smells good. What's for breakfast today?

Flute: Welcome home, darling, Lilia. I see you are also here...

Paul: Well, unfortunately?

[She greeted her husband and daughter, and the moment Paul came into view, she looked uncomfortable, not hiding it at all.]

Paul: (What a waste of a beautiful woman)

Flute: Paul, you go and change your clothes. I won't allow you to sit at the same table looking so dirty.

Paul: I don't mind if we don't eat together as long as I get my meal.

Flute: What? Don't talk back and do what I say!

Augusta: Now, now, Flute. Leave it at that. Paul, you, too, go and get changed quickly.

Lilia: "Mom, I'll help you set the table.

Augusta and Lilia intervened, so Paul and Flute did not exchange any more words.

Paul: (Ugh, they're still staring at me!)

Paul slinks away from the scene.

Flute: How could you take a boy like that as a live-in apprentice? What were you thinking!

Augusta: Haha, I guess so...

Augusta: Paul is a gem in the rough. If you polish him, he will definitely shine. That's why I want to be the one to polish him up if possible.

Flute: A gem in the rough? Is he really that good? You may have an eye for swordsmen, but you don't have an eye for people, do you?"

Flute: He looks like a child from the slums, and he has no manners at all. And yet he has no shame in that either.

Flute: He has no positive attitude, no desire to learn or change. Isn't he the same with the sword?

Augusta: He is like that now, but he'll change. That's where my skills come in!

Paul pretended not to notice the conversation coming from behind him and changed his clothes as Flute told him to.

Paul: (Flute doesn't like me, and I don't like Flute either. But...)

Paul: (The meal is delicious, no question about it.)

[After finishing his mountain of food, Paul leaves Augusta's house at once. That had been his daily routine since he started living in the house.]

Chapter 15: Swordsmanship of the Water God School.

[Paul is looking around the town's market. He looks at the stalls selling flowers and baked goods, but he is not looking to buy anything.]

Paul: (The girl who came to buy flowers... She has a pretty face, but she's pretty tight around the waist...)

Paul: (I can see she's wearing a corset, but... her face is cute... Hmmm, that's a dilemma.)

[Checking out the girls as part of his daily routine. Looking for someone who might be willing to let him stay over for the night.]

Paul: "..."

Paul: "I guess I'll have to take a shot at her. Alright, then! Let's go!"

When Paul was about to call out to the woman with the bouquet of flowers with great enthusiasm—

A student from Lilia's house A: "I found him! Hey, Paul!"

Paul: "Geh..."

[A group of fellow students with angry faces came running toward Paul and surrounded him, blocking his way.]

A student from Lilia's house B: "Why do we have to run around, day after day, looking for you!"

Paul: Why do you ask me... I didn't ask you, did I?

A student from Lilia's house A: "The master asked us to do it, not you! In the first place, what the hell is with your tone! Use honorifics for your seniors!"

Paul: "What? Honorifics? I don't even use it with your teacher, so I don't think I need to use it with my fellow students either, you know?"

A student from Lilia's house A: "Huh? Use them for us! And use them more for the master!"

Paul: (You're so noisy...)

Paul: (You're attracting a lot of attention because you're so loud in a crowd like this...)

[Looking around casually, Paul suddenly realizes. The woman he had been trying to talk to earlier was watching the situation from a distance.]

Paul: (This is...)

Paul: ...may be an opportunity for me?

A student from Lilia's house B: Eh? What are you talking about?

A student from Lilia's house A: "Anyway, let's hurry back to the dojo! There is a joint training with another dojo in the afternoon. You're supposed to participate in it.

Paul: Joint training:...

Paul: (Which means that even if I participate, my opponent will be a student from another dojo...)

[It was an unappealing proposition. Paul was not excited to test his skills against another dojo's student, even if it was someone of Augusta's level.]

Paul: I'm good. I'm not interested in playing games with weaker players.

A student from Lilia's house A: What? You dare to mock us? ...we've had enough of your bullshit."

A student from Lilia's house A: We have been trying to save our master's face, but with you here, the morale of the other students is at stake. We are going to make you leave the dojo!

Paul: ...I would love to leave, but I haven't repaid my debt yet.

Paul: "If you think I'm an eyesore, you're welcome to try and force me out!

[When Paul said this in a voice that could be heard by those around him, the disciples flushed and held their swords at the ready. Paul sees this, smiles, and draws his sword as well.]

Paul: (Normally I wouldn't bother with them, and I wouldn't take them seriously, but...)

Paul: (If they're serious about coming at me, then that's good for me. I know what kind of swordsmanship that man teaches.)

[If someone doesn't come at you seriously, there are some things one can't be able to recognize just by practicing.]

Paul: (And...)

[Paul made the first move in the Sword God Style form and cut at one of his brothers. The opponent catches the sharp blow with his sword.

Paul: (Whoa? Are they taught to catch these attacks instead of avoiding them?)

Paul understands He immediately attacks again with conviction. In no time at all, he has defeated one of them, and has the others in his sights.]

Paul: "Is this how it's going to be?"

A student from Lilia's house B: "Damn... not even close to being done yet!"

[The Water God Style is basically a passive form of swordsmanship. Paul was the first to boldly take the initiative.]

[It did not take him long to defeat all the disciples. The moment he defeated the last one, there were cheers from everyone around him.]

Man: Amazing! You beat them all by yourself! That was a brilliant move!

Woman B: What a strong lad! So cool!

[With a face that was not too full of praise for himself, Paul threw a glance at the person he wanted to see. The woman holding a bouquet of flowers flushed her cheeks with a pout.]

Paul: (As expected...!)

[He was able to get the girl he had his eye on interested by showing her how cool he could be. Paul approaches her.]

Paul: I'm sorry for calling on you so suddenly. Actually, I was thinking how beautiful you are since a while ago... I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me?

[He pretended to be a good and sincere boy, and she nodded her head, looking embarrassed.]

Paul: (Yes! Got her!!)

Paul: (Now all I have to do is make the date work and I'll manage to stay in her room!)

[The disciples were no longer on his mind. Burning with a sense of mission, Paul walked out to escort the woman.]

[The next day—.]

[Paul awoke to find his face buried against two soft mountains. He remembers the intense night and winces.]

Paul: ("We can have another round this morning, can't we?")

[Paul moves his hand mischievously, trying to wake her up, when he hears a knock on the door.]

Paul: ""..."

Augusta: Paul-kun~~! Come out and play—!

Paul: ...today again, eh...?

[Paul lets out a sigh. He took his hands away from the soft bulges and looked for his pants, which he had taken off somewhere in the room.]

[He was hauled back to the dojo to participate in morning practice. The disciples he had knocked out yesterday were nowhere to be seen.]

Paul: (Maybe I broke their little hearts.)

[As he was thinking about other people's problems, Lilia's figure came into Paul's sight as she was practicing her sword swings.]

Paul: Good morning, Lilia.

Lilia: ...

Paul: What's for breakfast today? I'm totally hungry already.

Lilia: ...

Paul: I want to eat meat. Not ham or anything thin, but some meat that you can bite into!

Lilia: ...are you still going on with that nonsense?

Paul: Oooh! You finally responded.

Lilia: Don't make fun of me. I'm a serious practitioner.

Lilia: It's one thing if you're unwilling or unserious. But don't interrupt those who are serious.

Paul: Sorry, sorry. But it's important to take a break, isn't it? If you are always on your toes, you will get tired.

Paul: Oh yes, that's right! Let's have a date this afternoon! We can go out for a nice meal. I'll escort you back home in the morning.

Lilia: D-date? Don't be silly! I'm not going anywhere out alone with you!

[Lilia turned red and angry, and Paul nodded his head.]

Paul: "What are you so angry about?"

Lilia: Do you think I don't know? I know what you're always doing with women... I know exactly what you're doing!

Lilia: I would never go on a date with you if I knew what would happen!

Paul: You know what's going to happen? Does that mean... you've imagined what it's like doing it with me?

Lilia: "Hah?!"

[Paul smirked and deliberately cocked his head. Lilia's face turned red and she swung the sword she was practicing with toward Paul.]

Paul: Hahaha, nice swordsmanship. It's such a waste to continue Water God Style. Why don't you switch to Sword God Style?

Lilia: "Of course not!"

[Lilia swung her sword, and Paul dodged it easily.]

[It was a quick sword swing, but not so quick that you couldn't follow it with your eyes. Paul was more interested in Lilia's footwork.]

Paul: (What is it? Her foot movement seems peculiar...)

Paul: (Is it a little different from what I had learned in school?)

Lilia: "I can't hit...!"

[Lilia bites her lip in frustration and swings her sword. But before it could reach Paul, it was stopped by another sword reaching out from the side.]

Augusta: Hahaha, we're all good friends now. Mm-hmm, it's very good to see our students getting to know each other.

Lilia: Father, no... Master! We don't get along with each other at all!

Augusta: What is it? Are you embarrassed?"

Lilia: I'm not embarrassed! I'm done! I'm going to wash my face!

[Lilia runs out of the dojo with great vigor. As she looked away, Augusta tapped Paul on the shoulder.]

Augusta: Isn't she a pretty girl? Earnest, naive, forthright, and... I can see why you'd want to mess with her."

Augusta: But... consider the time and place. This is my dojo. You face the sword, not the woman.

Paul: !

Paul: (You can even make a face like that?)

[Sharp eyes that send chills down your back. 5Paul can't stop getting excited at the face of the master of a prestigious dojo—Augusta's.]

Paul: (I didn't have any plans for tonight, but... yeah, I've got it now...!)

[That day, for the first time since he came to the dojo, Paul did not go out during the day to hook up with girls.]

Chapter 16: Conviction and Victory.

[After breakfast. Paul was cleaning his sword when he suddenly sensed someone looking at him. When he looked up and looked that way, he saw Flute.]

Flute: If it's so unusual for you to be here, don't you think you could at least clean up? It's a nuisance to have a meal-wasting freeloader living in your house.

Paul: Tell that to your husband. Cleaning was never a condition of living in this house.

Flute: You don't have to be told to do it! It's something that people who ask to be taught do voluntarily!

Paul: Oh, so that's how it is. But I didn't come here to ask to be taught, I was just dragged along by force...

Flute: Don't try to make excuses! If you don't want to be kicked out, tend to the garden!

Flute: No meals until you finish! You have until the end of the day to finish!

[With that, Flute leaves, his footsteps echoing.]

Paul: No food... Well, I guess it's just as well.

[I have no intention of cleaning or tending to the garden at all. I spent my time tending to my weapons and doing some light physical exercise.]

[When dusk fell, Paul went to the dojo. Augusta, his teacher, is sitting alone in the quiet dojo.]

Augusta: I knew you would come...

Paul: Eh? Why?

Augusta: When you looked at me at morning practice, you had a certain glazed look in your eyes. It was the face of a man who wants your head.

Augusta: "When you learn to hide your emotions better, you will become a better swordsman.

Paul: Hiding your emotions... Haha, you look like a nobleman.

Augusta: That's putting it nicely. Most of the nobles who carry swords learn Water God Style. Maybe Water God Style suits aristocrats.

Paul: I see... then Water God Style is not for me after all.

[Paul says with a sneer. He then pointed the tip of his sword at Augusta.]

Paul: If you know what I want, talk fast. Now get up... it's time for revenge.

Augusta: Fine. It's my role as a teacher to accept challenges from my students.

Paul: That's. What. I'm. Telling. You! I'm not your disciple!

[Before Augusta can get up and get into position, Paul attacks him.]

Paul: The fight is on! Don't say I'm a coward!

Augusta: Haha, I wouldn't dare say that. You're a spoiled brat to tell me to wait when you're holding a sword.

[Paul's blow was dodged with a light movement. A flash of counterattacks is immediately delivered, which Paul avoids by pulling his body backward.]

Paul: Hn!?

[However, the tip of the sword, which should have been avoided, ripped Paul's clothes.]

Paul: Did that just come through...?

Augusta: What's the matter? You want to stop now?

Paul: No way!

[Paul kicks the ground again.]

Paul: (I thought there was nothing to learn in the dojo, but it was useful... is what that means!)

[—Paul swung his sword. Augusta dodged it and launched a counterattack—.]

Augusta: !!!

Paul: "... I win."

[Paul's sword tip was at Augusta's throat.]

Augusta: ...

Paul: When I first got hit, I didn't know what had happened, but now I know.

Paul: You have a very unique footwork. That's why I couldn't gauge the distance.

Augusta: When did you notice?

Paul: I think it might have been this morning. I noticed it while watching Lilia's movements during morning practice.

Augusta: ! Lilia's?

Paul: You didn't teach it to anyone else? Lilia was the only one who had that unique footwork in this dojo.

Augusta: ...the movement has not been perfected yet. That's why I didn't think to teach it... not to my students, not even to Lilia...

[Augusta chuckles. He seems to have lost his will to fight, but the game is not over yet. Paul kept his sword at his throat.]

Paul: She seems so fucking serious, you know. She was probably copying your moves she probably saw somewhere.

Augusta: I see... It means that when blood was rushing to her head, she lost her cool, and it came out at the spur of the moment...

Paul: Yeah, maybe.

Paul: So? What are you going to do?

Augusta: ...Okay, okay, I get it. It's my loss, I yield.

Hearing Augusta's words, Paul finally lowered his sword.

He thought Augusta was a strong fighter, but once you realize what he's trying to do, it's a bit of a letdown.

Paul: (What is it... I didn't know it was like this...)

[More than satisfaction, he only felt a tiny bit of disappointment. Here, for the first time, Paul realized that he had expected something from Augusta.]

Paul: I have no more use for... this place. I'm leaving tomorrow.

Augusta: Hmm? What are you going to do for money? You don't have any for your trip, do you?

Paul: "That's...

Augusta: You can stay a while longer. Besides... we're still in a tie.

Paul: A tie?

Augusta: We have one win and one loss each, don't we?

[Paul rolls his eyes at Augusta's words. This chatty guy is saying that he just clearly lost and now he's calling it a tie?]

Augusta: Hahaha, can't wait to see what happens next. Honestly, I think I may have underestimated your abilities.

Augusta: I didn't think I'd be able to notch up a loss so quickly. I was definitely outsmarted, but in a good way.

Augusta: I'm getting more and more drawn in by your talent. I want to make you a full-fledged

Water God Style practitioner with my own hands...

Paul: You know, I have already told you many times that I prefer Sword God Style to Water God Style.

Paul: I'm not saying that randomly. I have tried both and I have chosen Sword God Style.

Augusta: Why are you so stubborn, Paul? Is there a reason?"

[Paul doesn't answer that. He just decided to ignore me, as if he didn't want me to step in.]

Augusta: ...Well, even if I forced you to answer, you're not the kind of guy who talks...

Augusta: All right, let's have a meal for now! It's best not to make any big decisions while you're hungry.

Paul: A meal...?

Augusta: Yes? What's wrong?

Paul: "I forgot that Flute told me not to eat.

Augusta: Flute? Why are you talking about that? You two don't even want to see each other, do you?

[Augusta seems to have noticed the feud between Paul and Flute.]

Paul: (You're aware of it and you're leaving it alone?)

[As Paul feels dumbfounded, Augusta pats him on the back with a laugh.]

Augusta: A swordsman's body is his capital. You have to eat your meals properly. Especially you, whose body is in the process of developing.

Augusta: I'll tell Flute. Eat as much as you like.

Paul: (Why don't you just kick me out of here? I can't be held responsible for any trouble with your wife, can I?)

[Augusta pushed Paul to go to the house, and when she appeared at the dining table with the food, Flute, as expected, looked disgusted.]

Flute: You, why did you even come here? I thought I gave you enough time, but it looks like you haven't finished tending the garden or cleaning the house.

Augusta: Flute, don't be like that, can't you prepare some food for Paul?

Flute: You can't be serious, can you? Why do you favor this boy so much?

Flute: You suddenly brought in a live-in disciple, and he's a crude child with no manners or anything... He's a poor example to the other students.

Augusta: Paul is not like the other students.

Flute: I don't understand. What makes him different?

Augusta: I guess it's just that...

Augusta: I just lost to Paul with the sword. Would you believe me if I told you that?

Flute: !

Lilia: What...? Father lost...?

[Flute was astonished and Lilia was stunned. They both looked at Augusta, their eyes pleading with him to tell them it wasn't true.]

Augusta: Yeah, I lost. He's that good.

Augusta: But as you pointed out, Flute, he's not ready yet. I want him to make up for that and eventually master the techniques of the Water God Style.

Lilia: Is this guy... Paul, really that talented...?

Augusta: I think he may become a swordsman who can even surpass the Water god.

Lilia: Tsk...

[Lilia sat up briskly. She glares at Paul and then just leaves the room.]

Flute: ...I'm going to go get ready.

[Flute also leaves the room, leaving only Paul and Augusta.]

Paul: (ahhh...)

Augusta: Come on, Paul, take a seat. Let's eat.

Paul: You don't mind if I say so, do you? I'm going to get in trouble with your family, aren't I?

Augusta: If the family gets upset and the relationship is strained, we can fix it. It will take time and effort.

Paul: Fixing it...

[For a brief moment, the image of the family he had abandoned flashed through Paul's mind.]

Paul: ...I knew I wouldn't be able to understand you.

[Paul says so as if he is about to throw up. Later, Flute returned, but Lilia did not appear at the table until the end.]

[Night falls—.]

Chapter 17: The Final Battle.

[Augusta did not come to pick up Paul for morning practice that day. For the first time in the dojo, he was excused from morning practice.]

Paul: (What should I do for now...? At least, I'm going to try to improve my record quickly.)

Paul: (Once that's done, I can leave anytime. I'll be able to get the money any way I want...)

[When he's at home, he and Flute come face to face. Paul grabbed some bread from the kitchen and went to town.]

Paul: (I know what I'm going to do.)

Paul: What sort of girl shall I play with today? Do I choose by face or by body... That is the question.

[He looks around the market with a cool look on his face. A girl a little older than Paul, a sexy beauty, a classy young lady type...]

Paul: (Mmhm, so this is what they mean when they say "spoiled for choice.")

Paul: ...hmm? That woman...

[A woman who had just come out of the weapons store suddenly came into Paul's sight.]

Paul: She's a tremendously beautiful woman...! And even from a distance you can see her nice body...!

Paul: "I'd be a fool to let her go!

[Paul approached her and called out to her. As he got closer, he could see that her body was looking more and more toned.]

Paul: Well, hello there! You don't look like anyone I've seen around here. Are you a traveler?

Female Adventurer: Traveler? I am an adventurer!

Paul: An adventurer...?

Female Adventurer: Are you from this town? I'd like you to tell me about a restaurant that serves good food.

Paul: No, I'm not from here. But I've been here long enough to know a good place to eat. I can show you if you want.

Female Adventurer: Oh, you don't mind? I'll count on you then!

[Paul nodded with a smile and casually sat down next to the adventurer.]

Female Adventurer: Hmm? Are you going to escort me?

Paul: Of course. You are beautiful.

Female Adventurer: You're a smooth talker. It's not every day that someone says such a thing to a lady adventurer without a hint of ulterior motive.

Paul: Oh, is that so...? What if I told you that I actually have ulterior motives?

Female Adventurer: You do?

[She looks at Paul as if to price him out and smiles.]

Female Adventurer: Are you sure you can satisfy me?

Paul: I wouldn't have asked you if I wasn't. If you choose me, I will give you my best tonight.

Female Adventurer: I'm looking forward to it.

[Her lips touched Paul's cheek. The corners of Paul's mouth lifted at the immediate flirtation.]

[The night with the adventurer woman was amazing. A daring, active, mutually indulgent, intense night...]

[When he awoke the next morning, Paul's mind was made up.]

Paul: (I... will be an adventurer)

Paul: (If I decide to do so, I'll get it done today.)

[After parting with the female adventurer, who said she would leave in the afternoon, Paul went to the dojo on his way. At the dojo, there was a training session going on.]

Augusta: Oh, Paul! You finally came!

Paul: I didn't come here to practice... Nah, forget the pleasantries. Let's just get this over with."

Augusta: I see... So you're here to fight with me.

Augusta: All right... you guys! Practice is suspended! Make room!

[Augusta calls out to his students, who, bewildered, move away from him to the wall.]

Student from Lilia's house A: Master...? Don't tell me you're going to duel with Paul?

Lilia: ! Are you serious...?

[Lilia's complexion turned pale, perhaps because she knew that Augusta had already lost to Paul once.]

Paul: Is it really necessary to have so many disciples around?

Augusta: There's no reason not to show the disciples a fight they can learn from. Please give me the... signal.

Student from Lilia's house B: Y-yes...!

Paul: (Do you want your disciples to see you lose?)

Paul: (I don't know what you think you're doing, but his fame doesn't matter to me)

Student from Lilia's house B: ...let's get serious; begin!

[On cue, he kicks the floor of the dojo.]

Paul: (This guy will catch this blow and deflect it upward...!)

[Augusta moves as Paul assumed. The sword was parried and flicked upwards.]

Paul: (I can handle that unique footwork. If I deal with it, and then follow up on it...)

(He shifts his gaze downwards to follow the movement of Augusta's feet.

Augusta: Hahaha, still so young.

Paul: !?

[Augusta's foot wasn't moving. Something unexpected happens, and for a moment Paul is upset.]

[Just for a moment, just a brief moment. But the master of the dojo, which is known as a prestigious place, did not miss that moment.]

Paul: Ugh...!

[Paul's body is blown off, and he is crushed into the students who were surrounding him.]

Augusta: Now, what's the verdict?

Student from Lilia's house B: ! The master wins!

[Paul listened to the cheers of the students as he looked at the ceiling of the dojo.]

Paul: (What just happened...?)

Paul: (Didn't I see it? No, no... I couldn't read it...)

[As I was stunned, Augusta came into view. He is grinning with a delighted look on his face.]

Augusta: Ha ha... Hey, Paul. Do you know what's different between last time and this time?

Paul: ...It's the way you... carried your feet, isn't it?

Augusta: That's not what I mean. I'm not talking about the technical side. I'm talking about the mental aspect.

Augusta: Last time you were a challenger, coming at me with everything you had. This time, you honestly thought you could take me down, didn't you?

Paul: !!!

[Augusta was right. Paul's face contorts in frustration.]

Augusta: Well, whatever. Now I've won the battle.

Augusta: You're not going to run off with your tail between your legs, right?

Paul: Of course not!

[Paul picked himself up, stood up, and turned his back to the dojo. Behind him, he could hear the voices of his students praising their master.]

Paul: (Mental aspect? What's that!)

Paul: (If you can become strong just by your feelings, then what's the point of having a dojo!?)

[Staring at the dojo sign, Paul went to town with a sense of irritation in his heart.]

[But perhaps his irritation was not hidden, for only on that day, he could not catch a girl.]

Chapter 18: Determination and...

[Midnight—. Paul came back to the dojo as if sneaking in.]

Paul: (! Who's there...?)

[When he heard a noise and looked inside, he saw a figure wielding a sword.]

Lilia: Huff... hah! Yah!

Paul: (Is that Lilia?)

Paul: Are you practicing on your own at this hour?

Lilia: !? Paul!?

[When he called out to her, she turned around with a start and dropped the practice sword she was holding in her hand. When I approached and picked up the sword, I saw that the handle was smeared with blood.]

Paul: Are your hands hurt?

Lilia: It's none of your business.

Paul: What good is it to swing a sword if you can't hold it properly?

Lilia: !!

Paul: Let's not waste time, why don't we go and have some fun together?

[Paul pulled Lilia's arm and held her close. When he put his hand around her waist, her body tensed up.]

Paul: I have a game that can only be played at night. I'll show you how to do it.

Lilia: Don't mess with me!

Paul: Just...

[He grabs Lilia's hand as she raises it. He didn't get hit. Lilia glared at Paul hatefully.]

Paul: Dangerous... What, getting slapped by a Water God Style practitioner?

Lilia: Shut up! What's the matter with you? You suddenly came to my house, and all you do is playing without training...!

Lilia: But my father expects a lot from you and admires your skills! You should be serious about your training, like all of his students...!

[Since Paul's appearance, Lilia must have been filled with resentment. Paul's arrival has also made things awkward at home.]

Lilia: And yet, you're...! Don't you ever think you'll live up to his expectations!?

Paul: ...I know what you mean, but I don't think of it that way.'

Paul: It bothers me when people put their hopes in me without my input, and when they get disappointed in me.

Lilia: I don't know why I should be disappointed with a guy like you! Why should a guy like you...!

[Lilia pushed Paul away from her. Paul pulled away from her and took a few steps back.]

[Paul's heart jumped when he saw her eyes glaring at him.]

Paul: (What the hell is this?...?)

Paul: (Obviously you don't like me, but you're looking at me with eyes that aren't just disgusted or uncomfortable)

Lilia: Get out of my way!

Paul: Uh, yeah...

[While I'm upset, Lilia leaves the dojo, leaving Paul behind.]

Lilia: ...Why does a guy like you have the talent that my dad would approve of...!

[The words she spat out as she was leaving reached Paul's ears. He heard it and it became clear to him.]

Paul: Oh, I see... You don't like me, and you're not just jealous...

[Lilia probably admires Paul's talent in swordsmanship at the same time as she dislikes him. That's to the point where she was jealous of him compared to her.]

[When you think about it, the mixed feelings in Lilia's eyes may be quite comforting.]

Paul: (If I could look into those eyes, I might even show up here a little more.)

Paul: ...and then Augusta will be beaten in a heartbeat! Next time I won't let my guard down. I'm going to beat you for sure...!

[Paul was so enthusiastic that he began to show up at the dojo relatively frequently from the next day. Although he was... late almost every time.]

[A short time later— Paul and Augusta had fought more than 20 matches.]

Augusta: Hahaha, I win today. Now my record is 11 wins and 10 losses. Again, I'm the winner...

Paul: Dammit!

Paul: What's that move he pulled off today? I've been doing this every day and I've never seen that before! He's been hiding it from me all this time!

Augusta: Water God Style has a mountain of basic and advanced techniques. Did you think you had seen it all in just twenty fights?

Paul: ...

[He couldn't even think of anything to say. Augusta has a lot of cards in his hand. Paul could not read his hand and was unable to win.]

Augusta: Mm-hmm, that's a good look. Are you frustrated at being shown a sword you don't know? I can teach you if you ask me to, you know?

Paul: That means... you want me to officially become your apprentice, right? Absolutely not!

Augusta: Haha, that's a shame. I'll wait for you to change your mind. While I'm beating you to a pulp.

Paul: You...! You enjoy hurting me, don't you!

Augusta: Oh, of course not! I don't deny that I am having fun, but that's not my intention.

Augusta: As a swordsman who has been training for a long time, how could I not enjoy the opportunity to test my skills? You should be able to understand that.

[It is true that he understands the feeling. But Paul did not answer the question, because he did not want to answer honestly.]

Paul: ...tomorrow we'll even the score at five.

Augusta: Hmm? Yeah, I can't do it tomorrow. I have somebody coming over.

Paul: Somebody?

Augusta: Do you care? You do care, don't you?

Paul: No, not really.

Augusta: Well, well, well! If you care so much, I'll tell you! What a surprise, tomorrow! She'll be at this Dojo...

Augusta: The Water God will be here!

[Augusta declared proudly with his chest puffed out. Silence fell over the dojo.]

Augusta: Nn, nn? What's this reaction? It's a little different from what I expected...

Lilia: And, father... n-no, master... Ah, aah, tomorrow, um, will the Water God Reida be there...?

Augusta: Oh, yes! I've been keeping it a secret until today to surprise everyone, but—

Lilia: W-w-w-why were you keeping it a secret? The Water God is coming, and you're not prepared for her!

Student from Lilia's house A: We're going to clean up the dojo! Yeah, we also have to clean the street to the dojo!

[Lilia and the other students begin to scramble about. Augusta doesn't seem to have any idea what's going on.]

Paul: (Water God... the strongest in the Water God Style... What kind of person is she?)

[His grip on the sword naturally tightens. Without being aware of it, Paul was smiling.]

Episode 4 [Excommunication]

Chapter 19: Water God Reida

[Water God Reida—.]

[There is no one who has mastered the art of swordsmanship who does not know that great name. Even more so if you are a Water God Style swordsman.]

Paul: (Ooh...)

Paul: (I wondered what would happen when I overslept, but I guess I timed it just right.)

[When I came directly from the woman's house to the dojo, it seemed that the person whom everyone had been waiting for had already arrived.]

Paul: (Wow, that's a lot of people... So people other than dojo people are gathering here too)

Paul: (What is that? The ceiling of the dojo is broken? Did something happen?)

[Paul decided to avoid the crowded place and peeked into the dojo from a little distance away.]

Paul: (She's facing Augusta... Is that person the Water God, Reida?)

Paul: (They said she was in the same class as Augusta, so she's in her... fifties! And she's that beautiful!)

[Paul opens his mouth with a sigh of shock. Seeing the woman who reigns at the top of the Water God Style, one of the mainstream schools, he was awed.]

Augusta: Ahh... I ask you, was there any point in breaking through the ceiling to make an appearance?

Reida: No, there was no reason. It's just cool, don't you think? It would be cool to appear from above in case of an emergency.

Augusta: Well... you're getting old, you know. Can't you relax a little bit?...

Reida: Have you calmed down enough to talk about me? Where is the old you...?

Reida: Well, never mind. Let's end the long, hard talk here, shall we?

The air in the dojo suddenly changes, as the two old friends are having a casual conversation.

Reida: Two swordsmen have met each other. There's only one thing to do, right?

Augusta: You want me to take on Water God? I know how strong you are. After all, I watched Water God's succession up close and personal.

Reida: I don't need to hear your nonsense. Get your sword ready. It's been a long time since I rubbed you in it.

Augusta: Hahaha, I see... please be gentle with me.

[It is not a sword for training. Augusta and Reida held up his dull, shiny, martial sword and her golden sword, respectively.]

[And then, sparks fly. The sound of swords clashing with each other echoed belatedly.]

[There were many people gathered at the scene, but how many of them could follow the entire exchange with their eyes?]

Reida: It's interesting. Did you catch that attack too?

Augusta: Hahaha, thank you very much! I am honored to be praised by the Water God! It makes the Dojo even more famous, no?

Reida: You are as talkative as ever. You're the only one who is this talkative when he's fighting with me.

Augusta: I take that as a compliment. I'm the one who seduced Flute with my talkativeness!

Reida: I am a dismayed to hear a swordsman talk so much. Why didn't you seduce her with your swordsmanship? You're not so bad with a sword.

Augusta: "Not so bad," huh...? Well, I'll just have to be careful what you say!

Reida: If you weren't, you'd have been cut in half by now.

[Paul was speechless as the crowd cheered the two of them as they clashed.]

[The crowd cheered as the two practitioners of the Water God Style clashed with each other, with Paul simply watching on.]

Paul: (Augusta is getting a bite out of the Water God. He and I have a 50/50 record...)

Paul: (So, if I were to go toe-to-toe with the Water God, would I be able to do this much?)

[His heart is beating fast. His hand is trembling in a tight grip without his realizing it.]

Paul: (Water God Reida...)

Paul: (Sword streaks look like golden flashes of light... Is this what you mean by lean movement...)

Paul: (This is the movement of one who has mastered the Water God Style... And she says she isn't being serious, which is astounding.)

[Paul's eyes, which had been staring at Reida, caught her huffing and laughing. And then another pause.]

Paul: Huh?

[Reida's body blurred, and Augusta's martial sword flew off.]

Paul: What was that...?

[No one picked up Paul's muttering. On the contrary, he wondered how many people had noticed that Reida's movements had changed...]

Augusta: ...huh, I yield. I knew I was no match for Reida.

Reida: Ha, you knew that from the beginning, didn't you? And yet, you went after my neck.

Augusta: Did you think I was serious... about defeating the Water God?

Reida: Did you not?

Augusta: I'm still a good-natured and modest teacher, though. That's why I'm an old friend of yours...

Reida: It's a swordsman's nature to want to catch a strong opponent by the neck. That means you are a full-fledged swordsman before being a master.

Reida: ...I've made up my mind. I'll help you get my head.

Augusta: "Help me? You're talking nonsense again..."

Reida: I, the Water God, will train you. I'll be bothering you for a while.

[For a Water God Style dojo, it is an honor to have a Water God stay. When Augusta readily agreed, Reida laughed in amusement.]

Chapter 20: Signs of Turmoil

[That evening... The dining table was filled with a curious atmosphere.]

Paul: (I'm nothing but air. Just air.)

[Paul takes a bite of bread.]

Reida: I thought you were going to stay single and live by the sword. You looked like you didn't care about women.

Reida: I'm surprised that you got married and even had a beautiful daughter.

Augusta: Haha, don't bring up the old days. Well, you are right that Lilia is pretty. It is even more so because she was born when I was old.

Reida: You're an easy parent to read, aren't you? Is Lilia also a swordswoman?

Lilia: Y-yes! I-I-I am s-studying under my father!

Reida: Don't be so nervous. Your father and I have been friends since we were kids. Oh, right. Tomorrow I'll watch you use a sword.

Lilia: Really? I'm honored to be instructed by Water God-sama!

Augusta: Haha, good for you, Lilia. Hey, you, you'll have to get into the swing of things for tomorrow's morning practice.

Reida: She's your daughter. I'm sure she'll be good.

[Paul bites into his second loaf of bread while the three of them chat amiably in cheerful voices.]

Flute: ...

Paul: (Oh, whoa... great temperature difference...)

Paul: (... Well, I don't know...)

[A husband and daughter who live by the sword. For Flute, who has never wielded a sword, it would be incomprehensible, something not easily approached.]

[Then a woman enters the picture. And she and her husband are old acquaintances, and their daughter adores her.]

Paul: (No matter how much you say that Reida is a Water God, it doesn't matter to Flute, does it?)

Paul: (Because Flute doesn't know anything about swordsmanship just because her husband is a master swordsman.)

Paul: (Flute only sees Reida as a woman.)

Flute: ...

[She must feel left out. It's like she's uncomfortable but holds back because it's rude to show it, and as a result, her expression is grim...]

Paul: (I don't doubt you know the feeling.)

[But she doesn't dare to interject. Paul bites into his third loaf of bread.]

[The next day, the dojo was full from the morning. With that aside, Paul goes out into town.]

Woman A: I didn't expect to be approached by such a young boy. To you, I must be an old lady, right?"

Paul: No, of course not. It doesn't matter how old you are, I just saw someone so beautiful that I couldn't help but call out to her.

Woman A: You say such cute things. Then I'll do a lot of good things for you today. I will do things to you that young girls don't know how...

[The dojo is full of swordsmen who are looking for Water God Reida, and the house where she lives is filled with a tense atmosphere.]

[Paul himself was interested in the Water God, but his feet naturally wandered away to avoid the trouble. That day, Paul visited the dojo for the first time in a week.]

Paul: Hn...?

[As soon as he passed through the dojo's gate, he noticed something strange.]

Paul: (Seems like there are less people than on the first day...? Don't tell me the crowd already had enough of the Water God?)

[Tilting his head, he went inside and was approached by Lilia, who had a look of indignation on her face.]

Lilia: Paul! Where have you been all this time!

Paul: I don't know where you're talking about. I've been going from one house to the next with a very nice women who treated me well, so I can't answer that question for sure.

Lilia: We've had a hard time while you were gone!

Paul: What do you mean? Did you have a hard time dealing with the guests who wanted to see the Water God? If that's the case, it's the same with or without me.

Lilia: That's not true! It wasn't the Water God, it was people who came looking for you!

Paul: I have guests?

Paul: (Could they be...)

[The faces of the people he had left in this town came to Paul's mind. He had caught wind that they had left town the other day.]

Paul: (No way! Did they come back?)

[When Paul is unable to react, Lilia gives him a hard glare.]

Lilia: You know, there's a gang of thieves who come here every day to visit you. They are here to pay you back.

Lilia: You've been on a rampage since you came to this town, haven't you? Didn't you go around beating up all the thugs in town?

[He had an inkling of what she was talking about. It was when he was making money by robbing people and using it to finance his travels.]

Paul: I see. You mean they found out I was in this dojo and came to pay their respects?

Lilia: What do you mean "I see"?! It's a disgrace that a bunch of lowlifes come to break into the dojo when Water God-sama is here!

Paul: Don't yell at me like that. There was no harm done, was there? Then it doesn't matter.

Paul: Your father and Water God are in the dojo. The two of them can handle the situation.

Lilia: Don't be so blase about it! This is all your fault!

Lilia: I can't take it anymore! I want you out of my house!

Paul: You can't ask me to leave. It's your father who's holding me back.

[Lilia's face was red with anger. She held the sword in her hand against Paul.]

Lilia: "Then I'll get rid of you myself.

Paul: With force, Lilia? I hate to say it, but isn't it impossible?

Lilia: Don't be ridiculous!

[Lilia launches an attack. Paul had no choice but to meet her with his sword at the ready.]

Lilia: You may be more talented than me... But I work so much harder than you!

Paul: Oh, I don't know, I haven't even heard a peep! Training in the middle of the night? I would never do that!

Lilia: ...I hate it! I hate depraved people like you!

[Lilia's sideways cleave flashed. Paul, having seen the line of her sword, leaps up from under her opponent's sword. The sword leaves her hand and falls to the ground.]

Paul: I'm shocked to hear that you don't like me. I actually like you, Lilia.

Lilia: Don't be ridiculous!

Paul: I'm not kidding. I like your face and your body so much, Lilia. I want to touch you right now, you're just my kind of girl.

Paul: Oh, and now that I've won, let's see what you can do for me. Oh, yeah... I'll be in Lilia's room tonight—

Reida: That's just about enough.

Paul: !!!

[Surprised by the voice he heard behind him, Paul swung the sword he was holding while turning his body around. However, it was easily blocked.]

Reida: As Augusta told me, you sure are a skilled little boy. That was a good move, so..."

Reida: I think you need to start hurting a little bit.

Paul: What!?

[A golden sword moved at the edge of his vision. He quickly catches it with his sword, but his arm goes numb from the sheer weight of it. Still, he quickly turned to fight back, and Reida grinned at him.]

Reida: "Is that all you got?"

Paul: "I?"

[Before he could realize what had happened, Paul was knocked to the ground.]

Paul: (You've got to be kidding me... I could see it coming way ahead, but when we were exchanging blows, I couldn't see any sword streaks at all...)

[He managed to raise himself up and looked up at Reida while kneeling on the ground. Paul bit his lip as he looked down at her with a smug look on his face.]

Reida: You have talent. But you don't seem to have the thirst for strength.

Reida: At this rate, your talent will decay. Sooner or later you won't be able to beat anyone.

The top master of the Water God Style. Reida, the Water God, said it so clearly that even Paul was speechless.

Paul: (I'll never be able to beat anyone...? What are you talking about?)

Paul: (Are you saying that I will become weak? That can't be true.)

[He doesn't understand the truth behind Reida's words. Paul distorts his face and stares at Reida.]

Reida: You come to the dojo every day starting tomorrow. I will personally correct your rotten spirit.

Reida: Augusta! I'll be taking care of the boy.

Augusta: He's my treasured pupil... Well, I can't go against the Water God's advice. Give him a good wringing.

Paul: Hey! Don't go on discussing me on your own!

[The discussion was going on without Paul's participation. Unable to stand it, he yelled at them.]

Paul: The Water God may be a big deal to the Water God Style guys, but it has nothing to do with me! Don't fuck with me!

[Paul, in an unusual move for a man who is generally courteous to women, turned his fangs on Reida. The good impression of the older beauty is gone, and now she is a loathsome opponent.]

Reida: If you can bark that much, don't be shy. Just get your sword up and come at me."

Paul: ...

Reida: If you so much as give me a scratch, I'll let you go in a heartbeat.

Paul: A scratch?... you're really taking me for a loser, aren't you?

Reida: Are you the one who is taking advantage of me? You think you can scratch the Water God? Don't be silly.

[Reida's lips turned up in a smile. Paul's annoyance grew at the expression on her face.]

Reida: So what are you going to do? Are you going to tuck tail and run away?"

Reida: If so, it suits you. You have the face of a loser, don't you? You've run away from something before, haven't you?

[Reida's words made Paul's blood rush to his head.]

Paul: Shut the fuck up! I'm not running away from anything!

[In a fit of anger, Paul reflexively launched himself at Reida, kicking the ground and leaping toward her.]

Chapter 21: Paul VS Reid

[A few days later, Paul regretted his shallow action from the bottom of his heart.]

Augusta: Good morning, Paul! It's another beautiful morning! Come on, let's go to the dojo!... Oh, young lady, I'll have them bring you the money for fixing the door later, so pardon me.

[Augusta came kicking in the door as the morning started at the house of a woman Paul had just made acquaintance with last night. Paul curls himself up in his blankets.]

Paul: I'm not going...

Augusta: Don't be silly. Reid is waiting for you, okay?

Augusta: Didn't you bring your sword to bear at Reid with the intention of beating her, too?

Paul: It's just the first day. I just don't feel like it at all right now. I can't deal with that monster...

Paul: (At that time, I was so provoked that my blood was rushing to my head and I couldn't make a calm decision.)

Paul: (I thought I could at least get a scratch in, but now I don't feel like I can win at all...)

[With his body curled up, he embraces the soft naked body of the woman beside him.]

Augusta: You have no idea what an honor it is to be personally trained by the Water God.

Paul: Yeah, I don't get it. I'm not a Water God Style swordsman like you.

Augusta: ...are you still talking like that? If you have as much sense as you do, you already know some of the techniques of Water God Style, don't you?

Paul: I guess so.

Augusta: Well, I don't care what kind of an answer you give me. I'll take you to the dojo by force!

Paul: ...I don't get it. Why are you so motivated?

Paul: Every day in the morning you look for me and bring me in... You want to see me get beat up so bad?

Augusta: You're just being cynical. Your hand-to-hand combat with Reid will teach you something, and will certainly make you a better swordsman.

Augusta: And someday you will be...

Woman A: ...Hey, whatever you want to talk about, do it after you leave my house. I'm not even wearing anything other than a blanket.

Paul: ...sorry.

[The woman was angry... and rightly so. Paul was kicked out of the room along with Augusta, as if last night's affair, in which they exchanged honeyd words, had never taken place.]

[And when Paul was brought to the dojo and stepped in, he was met with intense glares from the students who had already begun their training.]

Paul: (I went to call for Reida, but Augusta is not here... These guys are so transparent in what they are up to)

Student from Lilia's house: Paul! You've been so rude to keep the Water God waiting. Bow your head and apologize!

Paul: There is no need to keep her waiting, she's in the dojo all day long. What does it matter when I come?

Student from Lilia's house: Oh, you dare to speak like that? That's disrespectful! This is unforgivable!

[The students sympathized with his accusations against Paul. He knew they hated him.]

[The thugs who had a history with Paul were vandalizing the dojo, not only disrespecting the master, but humiliating him, and even disrespecting Water God.]

Paul: (You're weaker than me, but you turn your hatred on me and see me as an enemy...)

Paul: (Reida has been beating me up and humiliating me in front of these guys every day for the past few days.)

[The stress is getting to him, and he is getting irritated easily. In addition to this, being looked down upon by those around him reminded Paul of the time when he was at home.]

Paul: (Should I just beat all these guys down before Reida comes at me again?)

[Just as he was about to let loose with the wild idea and let his sword sing, there was a rustle behind him, and then the woman in question appeared.]

Reida: What are you guys playing at? What do you do when you come to the dojo and don't swing your sword? Take a lesson from Lilia.

[Reida pointed to Lilia, who was swinging her sword single-mindedly.]

Paul: (She's as earnest as ever.)

Paul: (Hopefully I'll learn to be the same, but so far it doesn't look like it.)

Augusta: The Water God is right. I hope you've finished your preparations? Let's get on with it."

Student from Lilia's house: Yes!

Paul: (Hah! You're so obedient, as if you're different from when you were pecking at me just a moment before!)

As Paul was letting his bile rise, Reida approached him. Even though she was right next to him, he didn't hear her footsteps.

Reida: I wonder how long you'll last today?

Paul: ...tsk, I don't know.

Paul: You're in complete control of the situation, aren't you? You're going to go easy on me until the middle of the day, and then you're going to beat me up when you get bored, aren't you?

Reida: If you don't like it, be strong. You're a hundred years too early to complain about being weak.

[He didn't feel like he could win, but he didn't feel like he could escape either. Paul, driven to the brink, slashed at Reida as if to vent his frustration—.]

Chapter 22: Plague God

[When Paul opened his eyes, he was in the room that Augusta had given him. It was dark outside the window.]

Paul: I must have passed out...Ouch!

[The back of his neck ached dully. Paul guessed that he had been hit in the neck by Reida, who had gone behind his back, and he guessed the circumstances of his defeat.]

Paul: I don't remember at all...

[He does not remember anything before or after he lost consciousness. There was pain in his abdomen and legs as well as his neck, and he realized that he had been beaten to a pulp in an instant.]

Paul: So even if you go at her with all your might, it's still just a game to that woman...
Hahaha, I can't do it...

[As he smiled dryly, Paul's stomach growled with hunger. It seems that even with that pain, he still gets hungry.]

Paul: ...well my body is honest.

[Paul heads to the kitchen in search of food.]

Paul: (Ah?)

[There was a prior guest in the kitchen. No, one should say the lady of the house, not a prior guest. She was drinking wine.]

Paul: (Is the bottle empty... is she drunk?)

Flute: ...what do you want?

Paul: Well, I mean, if you have any food, I'll take it.

Flute: Meal time is over. There is nothing left for you. That woman and her flock have already eaten everything.

Paul: (This woman...)

Flute: As soon as Augusta and Lilia finished eating, they went to the dojo with that woman.

Flute: Since she came, our house has been in disarray! They both talk about swordsmanship, swordsmanship, swordsmanship... every single day! It's like they don't care about spending time with me...

Clasping her hands tightly in front of her chest, Flute spews out her frustration with a bright red

face.

Flute: Everything... has gone wrong since you came!

Paul: I'm not sure if it's my fault or not. If anything, it's Augusta, isn't it?

Flute: Stop it! You don't speak ill of that man!

Paul: (You mean you can say bad things about him, but not about others?)

Flute: You are a plague on...

Flute: You make everyone you interact with unhappy...

Paul: !! You don't know anything about me, so you are just going to say whatever you want to say!

Flute: I do know you! Because, I'm thoroughly unhappy! You damn plague god!

Paul: Whoa!

[A wine glass flew at him. Paul avoids it with light steps, and the glass breaks behind him.]

Paul: You've had too much to drink, haven't you?

Flute: Shut up!

Paul: Ooh, scary!

[Flute was angry, lifting her eyes. Next she would throw an empty bottle at him. Paul decided to leave quickly.]

Paul: (It's a pain in the ass to get caught up in the family thingy. Maybe it's time for... to move on)

Paul: (I should start getting serious about earning some money for the trip. But before that, for now...)

Paul: (I need to pay for food and lodging for the night.)

[Paul was about to leave the house for a while, but he stopped as if suddenly remembering.]

Paul: That reminds me... where's my sword?

[It was not in the room where he was carried unconscious. Had it been left behind in the dojo?]

Paul: (Reida and the others are there now. Can't I go to the dojo?...)

Paul: (Well, I could go tomorrow.)

[Paul went out into the city at night without weapons, but he was able to greet the morning

without any major problems.]

[When the sun was high in the sky. Paul went directly from the last night's woman's house to the dojo. Reida and Augusta were apparently absent.]

Paul: (Hmm? Lilia is not there either? It's so rare that that serious girl isn't here.)

[While the students were training, Paul was looking around for his sword...]

Paul: (This is strange... I can't find it anywhere in the dojo, either?)

Paul: (It's not here? Maybe Augusta is keeping it or something...)

Student from Lilia's house: Hey, Paul. What the hell do you think you're doing, coming to the dojo empty-handed?

Paul: It's none of your business. Leave me alone.

[When he was approached by a student, Paul showed a blatant dislike for him.]

Student from Lilia's house: You can't leave her alone, can you?

Paul: What?

Student from Lilia's house: You are insane to come to a swordsmen's dojo without a sword! Or are you going to train swordsmanship with your bare hands?

Student from Lilia's house: If so, I will help you! After all, we are... all brothers!"

[The young man suddenly swung his sword. Paul avoided the surprise blow and kept his distance.]

[Looking around, he saw the other students surrounding Paul with grins on their faces.]

Paul: ...so that's how it is.

Paul: "Where is my sword? You guys hid it, didn't you?"

Student from Lilia's house: "Don't know! Stop spouting nonsense!"

[One strike, two strikes, three strikes... one after the other. Even without a sword, it's easy to just avoid them. But he cannot counterattack.]

Paul: How can you point a sword at an unarmed opponent? A student of a prestigious dojo would be appalled to hear that!

Student from Lilia's house: Whatever you say! Master isn't here to cover for you! Today is the day we'll cut you down! Plague God!

Paul: !!!

Paul: (Did you say "Plague God"?)

Paul: (Don't tell me that these guys are in a good mood because they have their master's wife behind them or something...?)

[Otherwise, there is no way a swordsman who attends a prestigious dojo would be so brazen as to attack his opponent after hiding his opponent's weapon.]

[Paul clicks his tongue and clenches his fists.]

Paul: ...all the better! I'll get you all at once!

[What he recalls is Rudd's way of fighting. Fighting with whatever you have around you—]

Paul: (First I'll take one of you down! Then take his sword and fight back!)

[Paul attacks the students with his bare hands, though he does not have any hand-to-hand combat techniques.]

Chapter 23: Augusta's true intentions

[Unable to parry the attacks, he avoided them with nimble movements and swung his fists out, aiming at the vital points. Eventually—.]

Paul: ...

[Paul was the only one standing.]

[The students were lying on the ground, covered in blood. Paul grabbed one of them by the chest.]

Paul: Haah, haah... I win. Where did you put my sword?

Student from Lilia's house: ...ff...uu...

Paul: Beaten up so bad you can't talk? You look so pathetic!

Paul: That's a good look for those who were beaten up because of their dirty tricks, like hiding people's swords!

[Paul took his hands off the student, threw him on the floor, and opened the door to leave the dojo.]

Lilia: !!

Paul: It's you... Tsk, get out of my way !"

[Pushing Lilia aside, Paul walked straight out with his back to the dojo. He did not go back to the dojo or even to the house.]

[Every day he played with girls while saving money for the trip. Ten days passed before he realized it.]

Augusta: Found you!

Paul: Augusta?

[While looking for a place to eat dinner after a hard day's work, Augusta appeared in front of Paul.]

Paul: ...I'm surprised you found out where I was. I haven't left town, but I've been moving around a lot.

Augusta: You seem to have been on a rampage. I went to see the locals thugs, and that's how I found out where you are.

Augusta: I hope you enjoyed your vacation. It's time for you to come back to the dojo.

Paul: You've got to be kidding me. I'm not going back. When I have enough money, I'll start traveling again.

Augusta: ...I heard about what the students did. It seems that Lilia saw the whole thing... Lilia found your sword and has it.

Augusta: I've given them a stern talking-to, so this won't happen again. So, would you be willing to stay on?"

[Paul raised his eyebrows at Augusta's words. He was uncomfortable, but most of all, he could not understand.]

Paul: I've always wondered. Why are you so obsessed with me?

Paul: (Don't tell me you know who I am? You want the name Notos Gray Rat?)

Augusta: ...I and Flute got married early, but we couldn't have children. We had Lilia when I was older...

Paul: Hm? What are you talking about all of a sudden?

Augusta: We are known as a prestigious dojo, but unfortunately I have no heir. Lilia is doing her best, but she is not strong enough to carry the dojo's name.

Augusta: Lilia was going to eventually be given some son-in-law to take over the dojo. The condition for that is that he must be more skilled than Lilia...

Paul: Are you telling me... to marry Lilia?

Augusta: You have the talent! But that's not all!

Augusta: Paul's sword caught my attention! It still does! I'm sure your swordsmanship will shine even brighter in the years to come as you continue to hone your skills!

Augusta: So much so that... even the golden glow of the Water Gods will be blurred!

[Augusta had a dream about Paul. Whether it was as a father or as a swordsman, he did not know.]

[Paul realized this and understood why Augusta was so obsessed with him.]

Paul: I can't keep up with you.

Augusta: I still have more to teach you. Come back to the dojo!

Paul: ...No, I won't. I have nothing more to learn from you.

[Paul holds up his sword. It's a cheap one he rolled up from a street thug.]

Augusta: You're the kind of guy who would not listen to me with your mouth... Hahaha, fine. I'll drag you back by force, as usual!

[First move, first win. That style never changes. Paul heads toward Augusta.

[It was easily avoided with a flick of his sword, and a counter flew in.]

Paul: (It's fine, I'm still calm after all the talk I've heard.)

Paul: (I can clearly see the path of his sword. I won't lose to him!)

[His personal training with Reida, which seemed like a torture, had become a blessing in disguise.]

[He was no match for her, even though they had previously competed against each other.]

Augusta: What?!

[He swung his sword in time with Augusta's counter. Paul had the advantage in sword speed.]

[It took only a few seconds. Paul flicked Augusta's sword away and put the tip at his throat.]

Paul: This is the last time we will be fighting in the same battle.

Augusta: I never... expected you to have acquired so much strength in such a short period of time. Hahaha, I didn't realize the gap in ability had widened so much...

Paul: There's no way I'll ever be taken to the dojo by force again. Also, I will never go there myself, so our relationship ends here.

[He lowered the sword that had been holding in his hand. In that instant, a shiver ran up and down his spine.]

Reida: Then I'll take you with me.

Paul: !

Paul: (She'll cut me down...!)

[Reflexively, he turned around and swung his sword, and it clashed with the golden sword. At the same time, Paul's sword breaks with a resounding crack.]

Reida: That's because you use a cheap sword. Losing your weapon in front of your enemy is not even second-rate.

Paul: ...Damn it!

Reida: Tomorrow I will give you another lesson. You should be thankful for that.

Paul: (Starting tomorrow, will I be... beaten up again and laughed at by those cowardly bastards?)

[He bit his lip, saying he would never do that, but with no weapons and the Water God present,

he could not escape.]

Chapter 24: The Worst Farewell

[Paul was unceremoniously sent back to Augusta's house. But that was not the end for Paul. That night...]

Paul: (Is everyone asleep yet?)

Paul: (If I'm going to leave, it's now or never.)

Paul: (First we have to get the sword back... I'm pretty sure Lilia has it, right?)

[Paul sneaks into Lilia's room, making no sound of footsteps, and making no sign of her.]

[Her disposition and her room were tidy, and the sword was quickly found. Lilia was lying on her bed, asleep.]

Paul: (Me and Lilia getting married...)

Paul: (...as long as she doesn't talk, she has a face and body I quite like)

Lilia: ...mmhm...

[Lilia's breath escapes. Paul couldn't take his eyes off her lightly tinted lips.]

[He had been playing only with older women lately, partly because they provided him with food, clothing and shelter.]

[The sight of a girl of his own age, with the looks he liked, sleeping with him was very sensual and irresistible. Paul mounted Lilia.]

Paul: "... From the moment I came to this house, it's only been hell for me... Before I leave, even if it's this much—"

[As he nuzzled his face against her neck and touched her still-growing bumps—.]

Lilia: ...nnnn... nn...?

Lilia: ...e...eh, ah...? Paul...?

Paul: Oh, so sorry about that. Did I wake you up?

Lilia: hn...W-what do you think you're doing? Get away from me...! I'll scream—

[Before she could finish her pleading, he covered her mouth with his hand. With his free hand, he grabbed Lilia's wrists and held them over her head.]

Paul: I'll tell you something for future reference, in a situation where you have to scream, you shouldn't loudly say you're going to scream.

Lilia: !! Mnh-mnh! Mnnnh!!

Paul: ...you know, I hate troublesome things. But I've had to put up with a lot, haven't I?

Paul: I was dragged to the dojo, forced to participate in training from sunrise to sunset, and had to deal with those weak but prideful assholes...

Paul: I've had to endure being beaten up by too strong opponents, and I've had to bear with the abuse of a woman who tries to get closer to her husband...

[Just remembering all this makes him angry. Paul looked down at Lilia in frustration.]

Paul: I've had enough of it all, okay? I'm getting out of here.

Paul: But before I do, I'm going to vent all my irritations.

[Lilia, probably realized what he was going to do to her. She tried to resist by thrashing her body, but...]

Paul: You can't beat me with force.

Lilia: !!

Paul: Well, let's enjoy each other's company. I hear I'm pretty good at it.

[As if to relieve his pent-up frustration, Paul took Lilia's virginity that night. A few hours later...]

[Just before dawn—. Paul woke up and saw Lilia sleeping next to him. He thought back to his actions last night and broke out in a cold sweat.]

Paul: (I fucked up...)

Paul: (...halfway through, Lilia started getting into it, so that means it was consensual... doesn't it!?)

[Flute would definitely be fuming if she found out that I had messed with Lilia.]

Paul: (As expected, Augusta would be pissed... or maybe he'll force me to take responsibility and marry her...?)

Paul: I'm getting the hell out of here.

[The answer came to him easily, without even having to think about it. He had originally planned to leave. He put on his scattered clothes and retrieved his sword.]

[In the clear, pre-dawn air, Paul was about to leave the premises...]

Reida: I knew you were going to run away.

[The Water God stood in Paul's path.]

Paul: ...You didn't stay out here all night, did you?

Reida: Of course not. I came here because I felt your presence.

Reida: Is something upsetting you so much that you can't hide your presence so easily?

Paul: ! No, not really! Not at all... yeah, not even a little bit!

Reida: ...I see. Well, whatever it is, I'll put a stop to it.

Reida: I owe Augusta a debt of gratitude. If he wants to raise you as his heir, I won't let you go.

Paul: He had been talking to you about it... And that's why you were training me until you beat me to a pulp...

Reida: Don't be silly. I beat you up simply because you were cocky. I'll do it again right here.

Paul: I'm not going to let you catch me!

[He did not feel like he could win at all today. Still, in order to get out, he had to break through the too-high wall in front of him.]

[Paul kicked up dirt on the ground. Grains of sand flew at Reida, but were easily deflected.]

Paul: Ha, you're pathetic. You think you can do anything with a little trick like this—

Paul: Yaaaah...!

[Paul rushes toward her. Reida's body blurred faintly.]

Paul: (Here it is...!)

[He has already seen the Water God's movement many times. He has crossed swords with the Water God many times already.]

[He doesn't expect to win. But if he abandons the option of attacking and concentrates only on evading and escaping—]

Reida: !!

[Paul dodged Reida's sword just in time and ran by her.]

Paul: "I'm out of clothes... Oh no!

[There was no sign of anyone slashing at him from behind or chasing after him. Paul runs away without looking back.]

Reida: Even though he wasn't using all his strength, he evaded...?

Reida: ...that kid, he could turn out to be quite a fearsome swordsman.

[Water God Reida's words, which would have moved anyone who heard them to tears, did not reach Paul's ears as he fled frantically—.]

Adventurer Arc

Episode 1 [Paul the Adventurer]

Chapter 1

Paul: Should I become an adventurer?

[It was a long, quiet afternoon one day. Paul abruptly muttered to himself as he rocked on the back of a wagon on his way to the Wishiru Region.]

Woman A: You want to be an adventurer?

Paul: Um, yeah, yeah. Being an adventurer feels free, and I feel like it suits me.

Woman A: I guess you are right. Paul doesn't suit to be tied down.

Woman A: But... you don't mind being tied up, do you?

[The woman leans in closer. Paul lays his hands on the hands on his lap and brings his face close to her soft bosom.]

Woman B: Ohhhh! That's not fair, sister! You had me lead the horse, and now you go and enjoy yourself alone!

Woman A: There is nothing unfair about it! You had enough fun with Paul last night!

Woman B: Huh? After all, you did join us halfway through last night!

Paul: (It's tough being a popular guy)

[Paul, who was about to run out of money for his trip, met two peddling sisters who were on their way back to the Wishiru Region, and they decided to accompany him for three days.]

[Thanks to the good food and the beautiful sisters, Paul is able to live a carefree life.]

Paul: (It was just as well that he met these girls when he was wondering where to go next)

[He cannot stay in the Millbotts Region, where his birthplace is located, nor in the Asura Kingdom's Royal Region, where he has been rampaging around and is sure to spread his notoriety.]

[Although it is unlikely, he cannot rule out the possibility that he is still being hunted by Water God Reida.]

Paul: (The world of nobility is cramped, but training in a dojo as a swordsman is too much trouble...)

[Paul has considered becoming an adventurer several times in his life.]

Paul: (So the time has finally come to make a move.)

Paul: (If I become an adventurer, I can make money, and above all, there is the freedom I have been looking for.)

Woman A: ...!! Pa...!! Paul!

Paul: ! Huh? What?

Woman A: What “what?” Don’t start with that! We need you to decide, Paul! Who are you going to play with, me or my sister?

Woman B: It’s me, isn’t it? He told me that he would never forget the night he spent with me!

Woman A: What do you mean?

Paul: Uh, well, it’s...

Woman A: Which one!

Woman B: Say it clearly!!!!

[A look of anger that obscures their beauty. The sisters are pressing him so hard that Paul is in a cold sweat and backs away.]

Paul: I can’t choose between... and...

Paul: How about we try again, all the three of us, so I can choose more fairly?

Woman A: ...

Paul: (I can’t choose which one is better. Because they were both so good together!)

[Needless to say, Paul was then knocked out of the wagon.]

[The money, which wasn’t much to begin with, was completely gone within a few days, but Paul managed to enter the Wishiru Region.]

Paul: (The road trip with the sisters was so fulfilling that I can’t help but feel a little lonely...)

Paul: (After all, it’s important to stay hydrated. But first things first:...)

Paul: Let’s go to the Adventurers Guild.

[Paul went to the Adventurers’ Guild, which was the nearest place from there, and spotted a beautiful female employee and approached her.]

Female staff member: You want to register as an adventurer? Please fill out this form.

Paul: Name and occupation...

Paul: Can I just use my first name on this form?

Female staff member: Yes, it's fine. And there is no penalty for using a false name.

Paul: I see.

[The family name, Notos Greyrat, has long since been discarded. So he filled in only 'Paul' as his name.]

[Then he looked over the precautions and terms and conditions. Although he was fed up with the stiff sentences that had escaped him as a child, he read them to the end anyway.]

Female staff member: When you have completed the form, please place your hand here.

[A transparent board with a magic circle engraved on it was prepared, and Paul put his hand on it as he was told. A female staff member tapped the edge of the board with her finger.]

Female staff member: Name: Paul. Occupation: Swordsman. Rank F.

[She read out the contents of the form and tapped her fingertip once more. Then the magic circle glowed red and disappeared immediately.]

Female staff member: Here you go, this will be your Adventurer Card.

Paul: This is...

[It's an ordinary steel plate. There are some words written on it with letters that glow in the dark.]

Name:	Paul
Gender:	male
Race:	Human
Age:	13
Occupation:	Swordsman
Rank:	F

Female staff member: I see that you have no other companions, would you like to hear about parties?

Paul: Uh, yes, I would.

Paul: (I'll be working with women in a dignified manner. That's what I'm registered as an adventurer for.)

Female staff member: Well, let me explain.

[He asks the female staff member for the details of the party. The words coming out of the beautiful woman's mouth, rather than the formal sentences, entered Paul's head easily.]

Female staff member: —and that will be it. This concludes your registration. Thank you for your cooperation.

Female staff member: When you are ready to accept a request, please peel it off from the

bulletin board over there and bring it to the reception desk.

Paul: Yea, I'll bring it to you.

Female staff member: Excuse me? I mean, I am responsible for receiving requests, but I'm not the only one who can do it here.

Paul: I don't mean that. Every time I take a request, I'll be seeing you, won't I?

Female staff member: I...I see...?

Paul: Yes, that's right! I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me tonight? I'm new in town and I would've liked to hear if you knew a good place to eat.

Female staff member: !... I'm at work right now, so I will have to decline such invitations.

Paul: Well, that's too bad...

Paul: Then I will invite you next time when you are not at work.

[The female staff member rolls her eyes, probably because she was invited by a child.]

Paul: (Not a bad touch.)

Paul: (Besides, even if she turns me down today, I'm sure there will be plenty of chances in the future...)

[Paul left the reception desk with a feeling of relief, and immediately started looking for a woman who might be willing to party with him.]

Paul: (As expected of adventurers...
All the women have a great figure, all of them!)

[Impressed by their natural curves, which were not made by corset, Paul spoke to a woman who caught his eye.]

Female Adventurer: Party up? With you?

Paul: Yes, what do you think?

Female Adventurer: I don't know, you just registered as an adventurer, didn't you?

Female Adventurer: I can't fight with an F-rank... especially with a kid like you at my back."

Paul: ..."

The most important thing to remember is that they can't let a kid like him fight at their backs. No matter how good you are with a sword, there is no one here who would know that.

Female Adventurer B: "I'm not going to join a party with you.
Are you kidding me?

Paul: I'm not kidding. I'm serious.

Female Adventurer B: ...that's what they all say... What can I tell you... you're not much of an adventurer.

Female Adventurer B: "You don't seem well-behaved, but you don't seem like a scoundrel, either. I don't know, you're somewhere in the middle, and it weirds me out."

Paul: ...

[Paul went around to all the female adventurers in the Adventurers' Guild, calling out to them from one side to the other. However, he received no colorful replies from any of them.]

[He lost one battle after another. Finally, he was rejected so badly that laughter broke out from nowhere.]

Man A: Ha-ha-ha! Boy, give it up already! Female adventurers are not the kind of women that kids can hit on easily!

Man B: F-grade kid, don't get carried away just because you may have a pretty face!

Paul: Huh? What did you say?

Man A: You're a hundred years too young to hit on a girl! If you're so puffed up about women, go back home and suckle on your mama's titty!"

Paul: Good one! A guy like you calling me a kid! I'm gonna beat you to a pulp, so get out there!

Man A: Taking this outside? Who do you think you're picking a fight with? Don't get so cocky!

Paul: "Who?" I'm talking to you!

[Paul drew his sword and instantly closed the distance between him and the man with a quick strike to the side.]

[Though he was being unreasonable, no ordinary adventurer could keep up with the speed of Paul's sword, which had been trained by the Water God.]

Man A: Guhah!

[The man's body was blown away and hit the wall.]

[The event was so instantaneous that silence filled the Adventurers' Guild.]

Paul: Wow, the wall got broken. That's why I told you to get outside.

Paul: Who's next?

Man B: Y-you bastard...! Don't think you get a free pass just because you're a kid!

[It seems that a group of bloodthirsty adventurers had gathered. The murderous crowd left their seats and went outside. Paul followed them and left the guild.]

[And then—.]

[Within an hour, Paul had made his abilities known to all around him. Then the situation changed.]

Female Adventurer: "I've noticed that you're very strong. Would you like to join our party?"

Female Adventurer B: "If it's all right with you, why don't you come and meet some of the members of our party?"

Man C: "I didn't expect you to be this strong! You are a promising newcomer! What do you think? Want to improve your skills with us?"

[This is what it means to have a large number of admirers. The same parties that had dumped Paul once, as well as various other adventurers in the guild, were now asking him to join them.]

Paul: (If you show strength, you will be accepted. That's easy to understand!)

[All-male parties were, of course, immediately refused. After being invited by several female adventurers, Paul was troubled for three days, more than ever before...]

Chapter 2

In the end, he decided to join the party that had the biggest-breasted woman as a vanguard swordswoman.

Female Adventurer: Welcome, Paul. We are glad you came to us.

Female Adventurer: I don't doubt your ability, but this is your first job as an adventurer, isn't it? Let's start with an easy request.

Paul: Oh, I understand. I'm willing to do any kind of work with someone as beautiful as you are.

[Paul's first job was to find a lost pet, an E-rank request.]

Paul: I said I'd be happy with any job... But don't you have any more fancy requests? This kind of thing has nothing to do with how good you are with a sword or anything like that...

Female Adventurer: You are still low in the ranks. You need to steadily raise your rank by completing simple requests like this.

Paul: Hmmm, steadily...

Paul: (I'm glad to be with a beautiful woman, but what can I say...)

Paul: (It's not what I thought it would be.)

[The party of adventurers are running around town looking for some pets.]

[Paul, with them by his side, shuts himself in an inn with one of the party members. He abandoned his mission from the very beginning.]

Paul: Looking for pets is no fun at all. I thought being an adventurer was supposed to be more fun.

Paul: Fighting monsters, searching for treasure, and fighting ridiculously strong guys...

Paul: At least for the next commission we'll go outside the city! Can't we ask our leader?

[He asks while pushing the woman down on the bed, as she giggles and hugs Paul's head and kisses him.]

Paul: (If you do this kind of thing out of dereliction of duty, there's no way they'll listen to you for a favor.)

Paul: (Well, if that happens, I'll just ask to join another party!)

[Paul thought comfortably, and now just indulged in the pleasures in front of him.]

[Paul was kicked out of the party, but was soon picked up by another party.]

[The request was to go out of town and gather medicinal herbs in the mountains. Even at a low rank, he thought he would have no problems, but...]

Adventurer: Haah, haah... Damn it! I ain't heard that the gathering site is a bandit stronghold!

Paul: ? Why don't we just beat them all down and start collecting?

Adventurer: That's why you rookies are so bad! You don't have any intelligence!

Paul: What do you mean?

Adventurer: That bandit bigwig is a wanted man! He's already killed dozens of people! We're no match for him!"

Adventurer: ...All right, everyone, let's head back to the guild for the time being. Report that there is a wanted man and have them deal with him.

Paul: You mean run away?

Adventurer: An adventurer who overconfidently believes in his own strength and misjudges the time to withdraw will soon end up dead. Remember that, newbie.

Paul: (He tries to sound all cool and confident, but the bottom line is that if you see a strong guy, run, right?)

The party leader decides to retreat, and the members seem to have no objection to following his decision.

[Paul, however, is not convinced.]

Paul: "Then you guys should just hide here.

Adventurer: "What?"

Paul: From what I saw, he's not that tough.

Paul: You say he's killed dozens of people, but he's just a bum who killed people one way or another who didn't know how to fight, right?

Paul: So let's just catch him quickly, collect the medicinal herbs, and return to the guild.

[Everyone was stunned by Paul's words. No one said anything.]

Paul: (What's the point of saying anything to those who were all ready to run away?)

[Paul gave up easily, and headed for the stronghold where the bandits were, sword in hand, by himself.]

Paul: —that's about it. So, I've tied up all the bandits, so the Guild can take care of the rest.

The party members had long since returned to the guild, leaving Paul behind.

They had reported that something unexpected had happened and were selecting adventurers to handle the situation, when Paul returned to find that he had finished the job.

Adventurer: Hooh, were you really... all by yourself?

Paul: They were all freaked out and ran away, so there was no one else around.

Adventurer: !! W-what did you just say? Are you trying to accuse us of being cowards?

Adventurer: We made the right decision and decided to retreat!

Paul: "The right decision." ...No matter how you put it, in the end you just ran away because you were scared.

Adventurer: Gh...! I am the leader! Don't talk like a man when you go ignoring orders and decisions and acting on your own whims!

Adventurer: You're fired! Get out of our party!

Paul glares at the furious man with cold eyes.

Paul: You don't have to tell me, I'm already leaving. I'm not going to party with a coward.

Later, word spread through the guild about the disturbance. The newcomer who was acting arbitrarily and ignoring orders... And he was quick to make a move on women in the party.

Paul began to work as a solo adventurer, taking requests on his own.

Paul: (It's nice and easy, but I don't have time for girls...)

He was sometimes invited to join a party when he needed strength, but he repeatedly joined and then got kicked out...

Chapter 3

[Without ever being a permanent member of any one party, Paul continued to accumulate achievements. Then, one year after registering as an adventurer, he was invited to join a party and was eventually kicked out.]

[Paul, age 14. He had become a D-rank adventurer—]

Paul: (Oh? Oh, that's a pretty good request. If it's a C-rank... yeah, I can handle it)

???: Are you going to accept that request too?

Paul: Ah?

[He had noticed that someone had come next to him, but he didn't expect to be approached.]

Paul: That's the plan. You got a problem with that? I mean, who the hell are you, man?

[During his year as an adventurer, Paul's language has become somewhat rougher, inspired by his surroundings, becoming more and more tinted with the adventurer spirit.]

Geese: Me? I'm Geese!

Paul: Don't know you.

Geese: But I know you. Paul, right?

Paul: Have I ever seen you before? You have one of those faces you see once and never forget, but I don't remember you.

Geese: No doubt, but it's nice to meet you. But you're a bit of a topic of conversation, Paul. I only know you from one side.

Geese: A lone adventurer. Crazy talented for a rookie... I wanted to talk to you for once.

Paul: If it had been a pretty girl who said that, I would have asked her out to dinner.

Geese: Hm? You could have asked me out, you know? Actually, my wallet's a little lonely...

Paul: Dream on.

Paul: (What's with the monkey face?... He's strangely familiar.)

[He has no use for men. Paul tried to leave Geese posthaste.]

Geese: This request is quite reasonable, isn't it? Hey, Paul, why don't you take it with me?

Paul: Huh?

Geese: So, why don't you form a party with me? You can be the leader!

Paul: Are you kidding? Why would I partner up with you? I can do this on my own.

Geese: Oh, you think you're good enough on your own? Don't say that, take me with you!

Geese: We'll split it 7:3... and of course I'll take 3, eh!

Paul: You're persistent... what are you up to?

[Paul asks with a quizzical look on his face and huffs.]

[The way he said it, as if he had been watching him for a long while, and the insistent manner in which he wanted to accompany him...]

Paul: (Maybe he has a thing for me...!)

Paul: Cause I ain't into guys!

Geese: Hm! What are you talking about? I'm not interested in you either!

Paul: Then why... no, it's fine. I'm not going to work with you for any reason you give me.

Geese: You're a stubborn guy. This is why you float around everywhere.

Paul: Ah?

Geese: What do I have to do to get you to partner with me? What are your party requirements?

Paul: Requirements?

Paul: A woman.

Geese: Well, I don't know if I can do anything about that! What else?

Paul: (He's persistent...)

Paul: Then, having a higher rank than me.

[Paul, fed up, utters a condition that he thought of at random in order to quickly get out of it.]

Geese: What?

Paul: So, as long as it's with a Guild rank above mine... C or above, then I'll partner up with you.

Paul: (I can tell how good you are by looking at you)

Paul: (He's not that good. This guy is probably an E-rank adventurer at best.)

[Paul observed his opponent and made a guess.]

Paul: That's why I can't wor—

"That's why I can't work with you" was what Paul was about to say, but hearing that, Geese smiled.

Paul: Hm?

Geese: I can work with those terms no problem!

Paul: What do you mean?

Geese: I'm a C-rank adventurer!

Paul: ...

Paul: Huh!? You're a C-rank adventurer!? Are you saying you're better than me!?

Paul exclaims in disbelief. No matter how seriously I look at him, he doesn't seem competent or intimidating in the slightest.

Geese: Hahaha, that's what I mean! You wouldn't be going back on your word, would you, Paul?

Paul: gh... Alright, fine! But if you slow me down, I'll leave you here! Besides! It's only this one time!

Thus, Paul and Geese decided to form a party and accept a request on one-time-only terms.

Chapter 4

[Their request was to carry cargo. The request was to carry a crate large enough to fit a person to a village beyond the mountains.]

[The party leader was Paul, but it was Geese who actually talked to the client.]

Geese: Mm-hmm...

Paul: I've finished tying the crate to the wagon. Let's get going.

Geese: We're going to take the route over the mountains...

Paul: Why don't we just go straight? It's the widest road and the shortest.

Geese: Nope.

Paul: Oh? Why not?

Geese: Because at this time of year, that route gets very foggy and humid. You know the client said the luggage was filled with preserved food, right?

Paul: Yeah, what about it?

Geese: You didn't listen, did you? He said that he wanted us to bring some preserved food that would last for a long time to a depopulated village.

Geese: Most preserved foods are dried. The best route is a bit of a detour, but... it's the southern route.

Paul: ...

[It was something Paul had never thought of. Alone, he would have transported it without regard to the environment, or worse, he would have ruined the contents.]

Paul: ...whatever! Let's get a move on!

Geese: Heh heh heh. I'll pull the reins on the horse, you handle the cargo... hey, you're already mounted up?

Paul: Shut it! Hurry up!

[Paul was frustrated.]

[Geese was not a strong man, weaker than he was, but he was clearly the more experienced adventurer.]

[Paul did not speak a word during the ride in the wagon, and Geese talked all the time by himself.]

Geese: —and that's when he... and the sun is setting. Let's set up camp before it gets completely dark.

Paul: Encampment? There's a town a little further down the road.

Geese: Hmm? Have you ever been to that town?

Paul: Yes, I have.

Geese: Have you ever stayed there?

Paul: Hm? No, I haven't. I'd just stopped for a while to get to the end of the road.

Geese: It's common knowledge among adventurers not to stay at the inns in that town. The whole town will try to rip you off.

Geese: Well, if you've never been in a proper party, you probably wouldn't have asked anyone to tell you.

[Geese grins with that monkey face of his and begins to prepare the encampment with a deft hand.]

[Paul, looking frustrated and flustered, tended to the horses pulling the wagons with a sulky look on his face.]

Geese: Hey, Paul. Let's have some food!

[When it was getting dark, Geese called out to Paul, and Paul sat around the campfire in a daze.]

Paul: ! This is...

Geese: Hmm? Is there something you don't like?

Paul: No, I mean, what the hell is this? Did you cook all of this?

[Paul drooled involuntarily. Steam was rising from the beautifully colored dishes, and there was a large number of them. The delicious smells lured his appetite.]

Geese: The ingredients are almost the same. If you change the cooking method and seasoning, you can make many dishes with few ingredients.

Geese: Come on, eat it before it gets cold.

Paul: Ah, yeah...

[Geese had his reasons, but he was hungry. Paul took a sip of the bowl of soup.]

Paul: !! Oh, it's so good...!!!

Geese: I know, right? The trick is to cook it slowly over low heat.

[It was not only the soup. The baked bread was not hard at all, and the main dish was excellent.]

[He couldn't stop eating. His impression of Geese was instantly blown away, and Paul devoured the food in front of him.]

Paul: (Why is this food so good!?)

Paul: (Did this guy really make this?! Over an open fire with no way to control the heat!?)

[As his stomach filled up and his appetite was satisfied, the petty irritations faded away.]

Paul: (... that's enough, I have to admit)

Paul: (He's not beneath me. He's a great adventurer.)

Paul: Hey, Geese. Another drink.

Geese: Right-o! Have your fill!

[Perhaps because he no longer had hostility toward Geese, he was able to proceed smoothly on the way to the designated village without any unpleasant feelings.]

[They handed over their cargo, and on the way back—well, that's when it happened. Since they did not have to worry about the luggage, Paul and company followed the shortest route.]

Paul: It's getting foggy. You were right.

Geese: Right? It's dangerous to go on in a hurry. We have horses, so let's go slowly.

Paul: ! Wait.

Geese: No, we're just going slowly, we don't have to stop, okay?

Paul: No, we do.

Paul: ...we're being watched. I can feel their eyes on us through the fog.

Geese: What?

Paul: 9, 10... more. A lot of them.

[Paul grasps his sword at that. Geese stops his horse and looks back at him with a blue face.]

Geese: I've heard of them. I've heard that bandits who drifted in from somewhere have been spotted every now and then... Could it be them?

Paul: I don't know about that, but I'm sure they're planning to attack us under the cover of the fog.

Paul: What about you, have you ever been in a fight?

Geese: Well, at least...?

Paul: I knew you'd say something like that. Don't leave my side... but I guess that's not happening.

Geese: What? Why?

Paul: Because I was going to say that as a closing line when I'm going to be working with a female adventurer or escorting a beautiful client someday.

Paul: It's a waste to use it on you. So, let's not talk about that.

Geese: Okay, what about me then?...

Paul: I'll help you if I you stay where I can see you.

Geese: Within sight in this fog?...

Paul: Oh, here they come.

[Paul jumps off the wagon with his sword at the ready and takes down the assailants who appear out of the fog.]

Paul: (Not much of a challenge, there's just a lot of them.)

[He got tangled up with his fellow students in the Water God Style dojo on numerous occasions. He is used to fighting against more than one opponent at a time.]

Paul: (My experience has come in handy! Thanks! ...I'd never have thought of you like that!)

[Apart from encountering the assailants, nothing went wrong and the request was successfully accomplished.]

Chapter 5

[Paul, the party's leader, received his reward at the guild and gave Geese's share from there.]

Geese: Huh? You gave me too much. Isn't this a clean 50-50 split?"

Geese: I said 7:3 is fine. Besides, I didn't do anything in the fight... I'm not complaining if it's less...

Paul: I don't think the amount of reward should be determined only by whether or not you did well in the battle.

Paul: Take it. It's your just reward.

Geese: !!

[Geese accepts the bag of money awkwardly with a surprised look on his face.]

Geese: ...you sure you want to do this? You don't know it, but I'm called a baggage handler or something, right?

Geese: No one who works with me ever splits the money evenly. You could have done the same.

Paul: Don't be silly. If the guy who did the work doesn't get the reward, who has the right to get paid?

Paul: Listen up! I'm only going to say this once! Your food was great and your knowledge was useful.

Paul: So we're splitting the reward. If you keep talking like this, I'm gonna kick your ass.

Geese: Hahaha... what's with... that's... You really are something...

[Geese smiled an ugly smile, as if he was very upset.]

[Then he was silent for a moment, and then he spoke timidly.]

Geese: H-hey, Paul...

Paul: What is it?

Geese: You said we could only work together on this one job. Can you please cancel that? Can we continue to work together from now on?

Paul: ...

Geese: I'll work with you when you feel like it. Give me a shout when you're ready.

Paul: Are you kidding me? I've decided I'm only going to accept advances from women.

[Paul snickered and left the guild.]

[Paul casually refused Geese's invitation, but the two of them worked together many times after that to fulfill requests.]

[Sometimes Geese would invite him, and sometimes Paul would be reluctant, really reluctant, to accept his invitation.]

Geese: Paul! I'm glad you got promoted! Now you're a C-rank adventurer too.

Paul: Yeah, I'm right there with you. Well, I'll catch up with you soon.

Geese: I'm sure you will... but do you think it will be that easy?

Geese: I heard it! You got kicked out of a party again! What did you do this time? Hmmm?

[Paul frowns in disgust at the grinning monkey-faced man.]

Paul: I shacked up at the inn with a member of the party, and she was the party leader's woman.

Geese: You're in a hell of a mess, aren'tcha? So, they kicked you out.

Paul: Yeah. He tried to hit me, so I beat him up.

Paul: I can't believe a weak guy like that has a beautiful girlfriend...! And as members of the same party, he can have his way with her anywhich way, anytime, anywhere!

Geese: You're also going on a rampage for... some stupid reason, aren't you? That's why there won't be any party that wants to include you.

Geese: If it's just your sword skills, you're good enough to be B-rank... or even A-rank, but all that's wasted...

Paul: ...shut up.

Geese: The problem is your conduct, you know, your conduct.

[Ignoring Geese, who was mumbling sullenly, Paul stood up from his seat.]

Geese: "Hm? Where are you going?"

Paul: "Pampua."

Geese: "Pampua is a town at the north end of King Dragon Realm, right?"

Geese: It's a town on the outskirts of the country, so there are a lot of mid-level adventurers there. Is it too much to ask... not to cause trouble?

Geese: All right, then! I'm coming with you!

Paul: What? I didn't ask for it!

Geese: I just didn't get the request! I'm going to get ready, so wait for me at the town entrance!

[Geese runs out as if he had just said that. Paul, who was left behind, let out a sigh.]

Paul: (... Well, that's okay.)

[Unexpectedly, Paul and Geese were going together to Pampua in the King Dragon Realm.]

Chapter 6

—After completing the request without any problems, Paul and Geese had dinner at a bar in Pampua and checked the reward they had received.

Paul: Take half if you like.

Geese: “If you like,” he says...

Paul: I’m busy right now. Let’s talk later.

Geese: Busy, eating a meal. Where are you looking...?

[Paul’s gaze fell on a group of women, presumably adventurers, who were happily enjoying a drink.]

Geese: Are you going to call out to them? Just let it be, man, let it be. You can tell by looking at her, can’t you? That one is quite feisty.

Paul: You don’t understand. From the scratches and stains on their clothes, it’s a victory celebration at the end of a fight.

Paul: After a fight, you’re supposed to be elated, and if you throw a drink into the mix, you’re sure to get open and uninhibited.

Geese: You’re thinking of a nasty idea. I can smell trouble brewing.

Paul: Don’t be ridiculous. I’m going to just play it safe, since you’re sure something’s going to happen...

Geese: I’ve never seen anything that didn’t happen. Don’t take it so easy because nothing good will come out of it.

Paul: ...

[Paul does not heed Geese’s advice. A few hours later, he was lured into an inn with a group of female adventurers, as his desires dictated.]

[As a result, Paul, as expected, got into trouble.]

Geese: I told you so!

[Naturally, as a matter of course, Geese got involved and took care of the problem.]

[In the meantime, three months passed, and the two of them stayed in Pampua during that time, using a tavern in town named Otori-tei as their base.]

Geese: Huh... I didn’t know I’d have to run all over the place to deal with a problem that doesn’t even cost me money...!

Paul: Why don't you just find the right request and make a killing?

Geese: At our rank, we can't take on requests that will make us a lot of money.

Geese: The lucrative requests from B-rank and above are basically for parties.

Paul: I guess we'll have to join the party...

Geese: Nobody in this neighborhood wants you in their party, though."

Geese: Why don't we get a bunch of stragglers just like you together and form a party? I'd be happy to join you.

Paul: You're out of the question. If I'm going to have a party, I'd rather be with a cute girl or a beautiful girl.

Geese: "You're a hard guy to please. Because you look at every girl in your party like that, you won't get into any one of them.

[Geese sighed in disgust. Paul shrugged his shoulders.]

Paul: Well, it's not like I really want to form a party. I just need to get to a higher rank solo so that I don't have to form such a party.

Geese: I told you that ain't easy, didn't I? Or what? You got a better idea?

Paul: Yes, I do. Look at this sword.

Paul said, pulling the sword from its scabbard at his waist and placed it on the table.

Geese: Nice sword, ain't it? What's wrong with this one?

Paul: It's a good sword, but that's all.

Paul: Since ancient times, heroes have been wielding sacred or magical swords and slaying vicious demons and giant monsters. All by himself.

[In fact, Paul saw Water God Reida's sword shining brightly, as if it was something special.]

Geese: What do you mean?

Paul: If I have a great sword to match my greatness, I can aim for the top, even solo.

Geese: ...You have a point, but what are you going to do with it? Do you have any idea what a great sword is?

Paul: I'm going to get it from Reida, the Water God.

Geese: What? The Water God? The moment you point the sword at her, she'll kill you and that's the end of it.

Paul: ...I guess.

[Paul scratched his head when the joke was answered with a serious argument.]

Paul: (Partying up is such a pain in the ass!)

Paul: (For the sake of argument, it would be nice if I could be partnered with an attractive girl.)

[On the other hand, he knew that the best way to quickly raise his rank in the future was to form a party and accept high-ranking requests.]

[At that moment, the door to the Great Bird Inn opened with a bang and an adventurer came running in.]

Adventurer: We are in trouble! The ruins! It was an ancient temple of the Millis Church after all!

Adventurer: Not only that! There was a Guardian in the depths of the ruins, and what, what a surprise! And behind that Guardian, there was a Holy Sword!

Adventurer: The Lost Holy Sword of St. Millis!

[The other adventurers in the tavern were in an uproar at the man's mention of the sword. Paul and Geese were no exception.]

Paul: The Lost Holy Sword of...! Hey Geese, did you hear that!

Geese: Of course I did!

Paul: It's a godsend. I feel like the Holy Sword came out for me!

[The Armaments of St. Millis. It is the most powerful armaments in the world, said to have been given to St. Millis by God.]

Paul: Geese! Let's go! We can't not get it!

The tavern erupts. Paul got up from his seat vigorously and was about to jump out of the bar—.

???: All of you, shut the hell up!

[A man's rebuke quelled the excited adventurers. The man was sitting at the best table in the tavern, leisurely sipping his drink.]

Paul: (He's got... a bunch of beauties over there!)

Geese: Thorsman...

Paul: You know him?

Geese: Rather, you don't know him?

Geese: That's Thorsman, the leader of the A-rank adventurer party "Lord of Judgment"...

[Paul quietly stared at Thorsman, feeling the air in the bar change in an instant, and waited to see what the man would say.]

Episode 2 [Formation of the Fangs of the Black Wolf]

Chapter 7

[The Holy Sword... the most powerful armaments in the world, is said to have been given to St. Millis by God.]

[The adventurers gathered in the tavern were excited at the suggestion of the existence of this relic, which was thought to have been lost.]

[The excitement was quelled by a man's rebuke. The man was Thorsman, leader of the "Lord of Judgment" party of A-level adventurers.]

Thorsman: Hey, you guys. Forget everything you just heard.

[He had an intimidating air that matched his rank. He glared at his surroundings and his voice was chilling.]

Thorsman: Lord of Judgment will get the sword. I've memorized the faces of the people in this bar...

Thorsman: You should remember that, too. If I see you in the ruins, you'll be in for a world of hurt.

[The adventurers, who were not raising their voices, were all shrugging their shoulders at Thorsman. While everyone else kept their mouths shut and tried to comply, he stood up.]

Paul: I'm sorry, but I'm going for it.

Thorsman: Ah?

Paul: Don't you think we've heard enough from you to know that you just say whatever you want to say?

Paul: The relics and the holy sword are not yours. You have no right to tell me what to do!

Geese: Oi, hey, Paul! Do you know who you're messing with!?

Paul: Yeah. This guy is... a nasty guy.

[He pulls his arm away from Geese's hand. Paul stepped forward and had a head-on stare-down with Thorsman.]

Paul: No matter how much you want the Holy Sword, it's not right to pressure people around you, you know.

Thorsman: ...you, I know you. I'm pretty sure you were that C-rank kid, Paul or something. What did you say?

Paul: I said, "You're not cool." You're pathetic.

Paul: So I'll say it again. I'm going for the Holy Sword. It's too good for a guy like you.

Thorsman: What the...?

[Thorsman's face shows his displeasure.]

Paul: (Is it coming?)

Thorsman: Ha ha ha ha!

Paul: ...?

[Just as Paul was on his guard, Thorsman started laughing out loud.]

Thorsman: You're the one who's trying to look so cool!

Thorsman: Paul, I've heard rumors about you. You're a good swordsman, but you can't even make friends!

Paul: What are you saying?

Thorsman: You're just a kid who pretends to be a lone wolf, but lacks the qualities to be an adventurer, so don't come and bite me, an A-class guy!

Thorsman: What can you do on your own? How are you going to go deep into the ruins filled with monsters, defeat the Guardian, and get the Holy Sword?

Paul: You won't know until you try!

Thorsman: Ha ha! That's a funny joke! Maybe you should quit being an adventurer and become a clown?"

Thorsman: You think so too, don't you? Ha ha ha ha ha!

[At Thorsman's words, the Lord of Judgment's crew began to laugh. The ridicule spread to the other adventurers in the bar.]

Paul: (Why... even you guys are laughing? Are you saying you agree with what Thorsman said?)

[His eyes turned red with anger. Paul clenched his fists.]

Paul: (Adventurers are supposed to be free, right? If a strong guy tells you what to do, you obey him?)

Geese: Hey, calm down, Paul!

[Paul is about to jump on him, but Geese stops him by pinning him down from behind.]

Paul: Geese! Let go of me!

Geese: If I let you go, you'll get into a brawl! Calm down! That's right, just take a breath! Take a deep breath!

Thorsman: Ha-ha-ha-ha! You're just a little boy if you lose yourself at this level!

Thorsman: I don't have time for this stupid kid. Hey, you guys, let's go! We'll have a strategy meeting tonight!

[He called out to his companions, and Thorsman left the bar.]

[Geese finally relaxed, and Paul was released. Then, someone walked up to him.]

???: ...

Paul: You...

Paul: So you're the woman who were hugging Thorsman. What do you Lord of Judgment members want with me?

[When the long-eared woman approached Paul, she put her face close to his ear and let out a huff of laughter.]

???: I don't mind a brave man like you.

Paul: What?

Elinalise: "My name is Elinalise. We will meet again.

[Paul felt the touch of her lips on his cheek. Before he could grasp the situation, she too had left the tavern.]

Chapter 8

[Perhaps because of the bad atmosphere, the adventurers in the tavern leave one by one.]

Geese: Hey, what are you going to do? We've been completely spotted, haven't we?

Geese: He's an A-rank guy, you know, A-rank. You make an enemy with actual power... You're going to have a hard time staying in this town.

Paul: If you don't feel comfortable, you can leave. It doesn't matter where you're based.

Paul: But first, the Holy Sword. I'm going to do everything I can. I'll be thoroughly committed.

Geese: I'm glad you're willing to do it, but do you have a plan?

Geese: I don't care what Thorsman's attitude is, he's got a point. Doesn't he, Lone Wolf-kun?

Paul: I know what you mean! In short, there it is!

Paul: I'll just form a party, right?

Geese: You can't do that, that's why you're in the situation you're in now, isn't it?

Paul: ...

[Paul looked uninterested, but quickly turned his back to Geese, looked around the tavern, and shouted to the others.]

Paul: Hey, guys! Are you all right with this? You let him say all that shit!

Paul: I'm going! The Sword of St. Millis, the real Holy Sword! You get it, and you can be a hero or a rich man!

Paul: I'm not going to let those guys monopolize that kind of treasure! Who wants to go with me to the ruins?

Paul: I'm not going to ask for anything extravagant at this point! I don't care if you're a guy who doesn't look pretty! How about it?

Geese: I didn't think you'd give in... Well, if you put conditions on party members at this point, no one will join, right?

Geese: But then again, who would want to work with you?

Paul: Oh? What was that?

Geese: Look around you.

[Looking around as he was told, the adventurers have similar expressions on their faces. "Eh?

Teaming up with you? The hell are you thinking?"]

Geese: Needless to say, most of the adventurers here have their own parties. If you're going, you're going with your own party, right?

Paul: Gnngh...

Geese: So if you're going to invite someone, it's going to be a solo adventurer.

Paul: ! Oh, yeah!

[Geese had a point. Paul addresses the solo adventurers once more, this time one by one.]

Paul: Hey, are you guys sure you want things to go on like this?

Paul: Don't you want to be an adventurer and rise to the top?

Paul: Don't you want to walk around with your shoulders held high like those guys just now?

[The response of the adventurers was rather poor. It was not because Paul's persuasion did not reach them.]

[Paul's reputation had been so bad when he had been with the previous parties that they were reluctant to agree with him.]

Paul: (That doesn't mean you can give up!)

Paul: 'I want the Holy Sword! So help me!

Paul: In return, if you help me now, I'll help you next time! Whether it's getting better equipped, raising your ranks, whatever!

Paul: I'm not going to let them take my for a damn joke! I'm angry, damn it! So why aren't you guys? Huh?

???: It's different.

???: I'm angry with what he said, as well.

[The first response came along. He was a middle-aged man.]

Geese: A dwarf...

Paul: Do you know this old man?

Geese: ...He's a famous guy. Dwarves are usually skilled in handling metal, stone, and jewels, and make for excellent warriors.

Paul: A warrior? But he's holding a... staff, right?

Geese: That's why he's famous.

???: I'm a magician.

???: I have no interest in the Holy Sword. But if you want to give them a piece of your mind, I'm in.

Paul: Really? Thank you. I'm Paul.

Talhand: I am Talhand of the Great Craggy Peaks. You may call me Talhand.

[Paul and Talhand shake hands. Geese sighs.]

Paul: What is it?

Geese: Talhand is a famously stubborn man. I hear that's why he has a hard time getting regular party members.

Talhand: Indeed. Are you unhappy with me as a member?

Geese: I'm not unhappy about it. You're a pretty decent solo adventurer.

Geese: It's just that... I feel sick to my stomach when I think of my role in bringing the two of you together...

Paul: What? Are you coming too?

Geese: Hm?

Paul: You said something about not wanting to be spotted by Lord of Judgment?

Paul: If you come with me, that means you're going to fight alongside me, right?

Geese: You're the one who's going to get in a fight with them...!

[When Paul tilted his head, Geese shivered and barked.]

Geese: You were going to leave me!

Geese: I thought I was counted as a member without even saying a word!

Paul: Sorry, sorry.

Geese: Your apology is too mild! I don't feel any sincerity!

Paul: Hey, hey, calm down.

Paul: At any rate, there are three of us now. A swordsman, a magician and a thief.

Talhand: I see, so this guy's a Thief. Is there a problem with just one vanguard?

Paul: Yeah.

Geese: No way. We have to have at least one more. What if we get attacked from behind?

Swordswoman: You need more people? Then I'll join you.

Geese: Hm! Who are you? A swordswoman?

Swordswoman: Yes, I'm a pretty good swordswoman. I'll help you if you're going to make that miserable bastard go ape-shit!

Geese: ...seems to be the name of the game, so what are you going to do?

Paul: I'm in!

Paul: Geez, I know I said I'd be okay with a mousy guy, but I still think it's better to have a girl! It's more energetic! It motivates me! It's so motivating!

Talhand: ...

Geese: That's just the kind of guy he is...

[Despite the dismissive and resigned stares, Paul was able to put together a hasty party.]

Chapter 9

[The next day—. Paul and his party moved out early in the morning.]

Talhand.

Even though we're in a hurry, it's only been a few hours since the party was formed... Are we going to start moving already?

Paul: Of course! If we're going to get to the ruins before these guys, we have to move first, don't we?

Talhand: I understand your logic, but do you know where the ruins are? We haven't done a very good job of gathering information.

Paul: I've got it covered. Hey, Geese.

Geese: Yup. I've been gathering information on a regular basis. The location and the route are already clear.

Swordswoman: Then let's get going! We won't be defeated by the Lord of Judgment!

Paul: Whoo!

Geese: ...glad you're having fun, yeah.

[The ruins are in the woods about three days walk from the town.]

[On the third night, Paul and his friends reached the ruins and started to conquer them—.]

Paul: What... the heck is this place?

[Cutting down the Killer Maul that had attacked them. As they proceeded through the ruins, the number of monster attacks increased. Their number is unusual.]

Swordswoman: Fugya!

Geese: "Oops! Be careful! There's a trap on the floor!"

Paul: Not only are there traps everywhere, but the ruins themselves are a nest of monsters!

Geese: They say there's an amazing monster as a Guardian at the deepest level...

Paul: Don't be scared, Geese! You have to keep moving forward! We'll get to the deepest part before they catch up with us!

Talhand: Easy for you to say. "How do you expect us to get through this many Killer Mauls?"

Paul: What? You can't do it?

Talhand: Hunh... I haven't the time.

Geese: !! Hey! They're coming from behind us!

Swordswoman: Leave the back to me!

Paul: Alright! I'm counting on you!

[Paul and his group were so strong that it was hard to believe that they were a hastily prepared temporary party.]

[They disarmed the traps, defeated the Killer Mauls, and even took on its higher species, the Killer Hedgehog, as they advanced through the ruins.]

Paul: Is this iron door the innermost one?...

Paul: (The air is heavy. I don't need to see it directly to know.)

Paul: (A powerful foe is waiting for us.)

Geese: Oh, hey, Paul...

[Paul, who was in the lead, stopped and fell silent, and Geese, who had noticed the anomaly, opened his mouth timidly.]

Geese: We're going to... obviously, head for trouble, right?

Paul: Yeah.

Geese: But you're still going, right?

Paul: Of course... We've come this far and we're not turning back.

Paul: Guys, let's confirm our tactics. If they try to attack us from a distance, I'll back off a little.

Paul: If they are mainly attacking at close range, it's not safe to stay away from them. Talhand also supports us swordsmen and fights in front with us.

Talhand: No problem.

Paul: Geese, in case of emergency...

Geese: Yeah, I know. When the time comes, we'll use the smoke screen, right? I'll give you the signal to retreat. Don't miss it, okay?

Swordswoman: I understand! I'll definitely get the Holy Sword! So when we get back to town, its... ehehe...

Paul: Yeah, I'll do that.

[Geese sighed deeply as the swordswoman's cheeks flushed red.]

Geese: Even if it's temporary, don't try to mess with your party members...

Paul: Shut it. It's fine.

Paul: (The party will be disbanded when we get back to the city.)

[The air that had been tense and heavy with tension loosened. His body relaxed.]

[Paul pushes open the heavy iron door that leads to the innermost part of the room.]

Chapter 10

[There was a space, and at the far end of the room was a statue of a maiden.]

Geese: Pure white dress... means it's a statue of the "Holy One!"

Paul: Then the sword that the statue is holding as an offering is...

Paul: The Holy Sword!!

Talhand: Don't get excited! Look at the feet of the statue. That is...

[At the feet of the statue, there was a monster. A large six-legged beast with a whip-like tail that radiated a strange presence. Someone knew the name of this distinctive figure.]

Geese: A Fenris Wolf...

Geese: That's the Guardian? No, it's impossible! We can't win!

Paul: Is it that dangerous?

Geese: This thing, you know! It's a cunning monster, feared as a S-rank monster on the Demon Continent!

Paul: But that doesn't mean we can't pull it off anyway! Let's go! Let's get up close and personal!

[Paul jumps out, and Talhand and the others follow.]

Geese: He's in a hurry, damn it!

[Geese jumps out a little later. By then, Paul's sword had crossed the Fenris Wolf's claws.]

Fenris Wolf: Gaaaaaaaah!

Paul: Damn... oh... hey... wait here...!

[He swung his sword and played it to catch the claws and timed his attack. But...]

Paul: ("I can't go on the offensive...!")

Paul: (My sword won't get through?!)

[Paul has crossed swords with sword masters and even with the Water God. Of course, he has fought monsters as well.]

Paul: (Why?!)

Talhand: Earth Lance!

[A sharp earthen spear shoots out from under the Fenris Wolf's feet, and aims up at its heart.]

Fenris Wolf: Goaah!

[The Fenris Wolf jumped up and avoided the Earth Lance. It immediately saw who was attacking it and leapt at him with one foot.]

Talhand: Nuuuuh!?

Swordswoman: Move back!!!!

[The swordswoman followed up. Paul also moves quickly and tries to get into formation, but the monster jumps up faster than that.]

Geese: Eh!

[The monster has set Geese as its target.]

Geese: Oi, why me!?

Paul: Geese! Don't stop running!

Geese: I know, I know! But where do I go to...?

Paul: Get over here!

Talhand: Stone Cannon!

[Talhand tried to distract the Fenris Wolf by releasing magic. Paul moved at the same time.]

[The Fenris Wolf avoided the attack and attacked Geese.]

Paul: (Let me through...!)

[He manages to slip his body between Geese and the Fenris Wolf's claws.]

[They are on the defensive. After all, they were back to square one. The formation is broken and there's no breakthrough in sight.]

Geese: "This is it, Paul!

Paul: "Damn it!

[Behind him, Geese announces his limit. Paul shouted with frustration on his face.]

Paul: "We're retreating! We're retreating at once!"

[Retreat, however, was no easy task.]

[He sent Talhand, who was not very fast on his feet, and Geese, who did not have any fighting

skills, ahead of him, and Paul and the swordswoman acted as the rear guard.]

[They managed to run out of the room and closed the iron door. When they hid themselves in a place where the monsters would not attack them, the party was terribly tired.]

Paul: Is everyone all right?

Geese: ...hehehe, somehow, phew...

Talhand: But what was that...? We can't handle this on our own.

Swordswoman: Do we get out of here and ask for reinforcements?

Geese: Who's going to help us? I have to tell you, you'd be surprised how unpopular Paul is.

Paul: Shut up! You guys are no different!

Paul: Anyway, we just need to think of a good plan!

Paul: You may come up with a great plan, but for now, rest your body to be ready for anything.

Talhand: Yeah, that's right.

[Everyone took a rest, racking their brains. But no one could come up with anything, and time just kept passing.]

Chapter 11

[How much time had passed? Suddenly, the sound of a heavy iron door being opened was heard.]

Paul: !!! That was...

Talhand: Did someone go inside with that thing?

Paul: Whoever it is... they're the only ones who could have done that.

[We ignored the presence and went back to the iron door and peeked inside.]

[As expected, Lord of Judgment was fighting a battle with the Fenris Wolf inside.]

Thorsman: Dh...Dammit!

Paul: (Thorsman's sword... Hn. Looks like he wasn't all talk.)

Paul: (But even an A-rank party led by a guy like that is struggling?)

[I can see that Thorsman's power is outstanding. The other members also seem to be competent, but not as much as the leader.]

Adventurer: Hii... hiii...

Elinalise: Don't stop! Move around more! Come on, over here, you big oaf!

Elinalise: Geez! Why don't you turn around and look at me?

Paul: (Fenris Wolf avoids strong opponents and chooses weak ones to target.)

Paul: (Their formation is breaking up and they're not moving fast enough.)

Paul: (... I get it! We were also being disrupted like this, weren't we?)

[By targeting Talhand and Geese, who were not good at close combat, the vanguard had shifted their original position considerably.]

[Seeing Thorsman's movement, the Fenris Wolf changes his target.]

Elinalise: !? Kyaaaah!!!

[The Fenris Wolf's fangs attacked Elinalise. She managed to dodge the attack with magic, but she was faced with a formidable enemy.]

Elinalise: Thorsman! If we don't hurry—

Thorsman: Yes, I know. We'll be wiped out if we don't!

Thorsman: We have no choice... we're retreating!

Adventurer: How are we going to get away from this monster?

Thorsman: We'll use decoys.

[Thorsman's line of sight was one of the party members.]

Elinalise: eh...

Thorsman: It's for my friends! You understand, don't you? Don't you, Elinalise?

Elinalise: Thorsman! What are you talking about?

Elinalise: You've seen how strong that Fenris Wolf is! I can't handle it on my own!

Thorsman: Shut up! It is the leader's role to make decisions that require the least amount of sacrifice!

Elinalise: So you're going to cut me off?

Thorsman: You're damn right I am! If it's between a comrade of the party and a mistress, of course I would cut off the mistress!

Elinalise: Wha!? You're saying I'm not your comrade...?

[Thorsman did not answer that question. He just smirked and began to retreat, leaving Elinalise alone.]

Adventurer: Oh, hey, Thorsman! Are you seriously leaving Elinalise behind!?

Thorsman: Oh? If you have a problem with that, you wanna stay too?

[The party members looked at Elinalise and Thorsman hesitantly, but eventually they agreed in a whisper, "I'm with you..."]

[Lord of Judgment begins to retreat. Someone blocked their path as they tried to escape through the iron door.]

Paul: You guys really are a bunch of assholes.

Thorsman: You... Hn, get out of there!

Paul: You're going to use your woman as... bait, and you're just going to run away!?

Paul: So, is this what an A-rank party is all about?! Are you guys even men?! Do you even have balls?!

Thorsman: Shut up! When you're an adventurer for a living, sacrifices have to be made!

Thorsman: And retreating is sound strategy! Look at that monster!

Thorsman: It's ridiculously strong! It's not like you can't read the enemy's strength! We can't afford to get wiped out!"

[With that bark, Thorsman pushed Paul out of the way and left.]

[The Lord of Judgment members turned their pale faces to look behind them, but followed Thorsman.]

Paul: You fucking assholes!!

[He is furious. Geese taps Paul on the shoulder as he snaps.]

Geese: Hey, what are you going to do?

Paul: That's obvious, isn't it? But this is my selfishness. I won't force you to come along.

Geese: ...Sigh. Your love for women is really annoying, too. But I'm used to it by now!

Talhand: We have fought together up to this point, and I won't quit in the middle of a fight. I will stay with you until the end.

Swordswoman: I'm in! If we part ways at this point, I don't think I'll be able to have my fun with Paul!

Paul: You guys...

[Paul bit his lip and gripped the hilt of his sword tightly.]

Paul: Let's go...! We're going for round two with the Fenris Wolf!

[Elinalise is a skilled fighter, but she cannot deal with a Fenris Wolf by herself.]

[Paul rushed to them, kicking the ground hard, and flew into the air, swinging his sword.]

Paul: Ooooooraaaaaaa!

[The monster evades Paul's blow. The attack missed, but he was able to get closer to Elinalise.]

Swordswoman: Haaaaaaaaah!

Talhand: Stone Cannon!'

[The swordswoman followed up, and Talhand covered her. The Fenris Wolf kept its distance, and Paul and the others immediately established themselves in formation.]

Elinalise: You guys...!

Paul: Didn't I tell you at the bar? I told you he was pathetic. I'm going to join you on behalf of your heartless leader!

Elinalise: Why...

Paul: I don't know anything about parties and friends, to be honest. I'm not good at teaming up with anyone.

Paul: But I'll do my best to protect them and be there for them while they're with me, even if it's only for a short period of time.

Paul: Even I'm like that, and yet an A-rank party uses their members as decoys? That's bullshit! That's not how adventurers are supposed to be!"

Elinalise: Are you angry... ? For my sake...?"

Paul: Not for you.

Paul: For myself!! One's comrades... And a woman at that!! I'm not going to stand by and watch someone use them as bait to get away!

Elinalise: ...!

Paul barks. His words are clumsy, straightforward, and only self-centered, but they strangely struck Elinalise's heart.

Paul: Don't go on crying about it. If you can fight too, then do what it takes.

Elinalise: ...Yes! Of course I will!

Paul: Here we go!

[With Paul's shout, the battle resumed.]

Chapter 12

[It was a back-and-forth battle. They now knew what the Fenris Wolf was aiming for. Geese, with his low fighting ability, and the slow-footed Talhand.]

Paul: (If you know what the enemy is aiming for, you can deal with it!)

[Besides, this time, there was Elinalise.]

[Paul attacked, the swordswoman followed up, Talhand caught up with his magic, and Elinalise staved off any counterattacks.]

Geese: Wow... this is the first party you've put together? Hehehe, beautiful, that's some coordination..."

[One blow, then another, and another attack. Blood spurted from the monster's body and its movements gradually slowed down.]

Elinalise: Yaaaaaah!

Fenris Wolf: Ggaaaaaaaaaaaa...a,aa...

[The final blow was delivered by Elinalise. Her estoc was thrust into the Fenris Wolf's brow.]

Geese: Ugh, it stopped moving...

Paul: So, did we win...?

Elinalise: We won!

Talhand: We won!

Swordswoman: We won!

All of them: Oooooooooooooooooohh!

[They all lifted their weapons and shouted a victory cry. It was unmistakably a victory for Paul and his companions.]

Paul: Ah!

[In his joy, Paul remembered his original goal. The Holy Sword. That is what he came all the way here for.]

Paul: This is...

[The Guardian has been defeated. Paul reaches out to obtain the Holy Sword that the Maiden's statue is dedicated to—.]

Thorsman: Wait a minute!

Paul: Thorsman?

Paul: I thought you ran away.

Thorsman: The sword is ours. Don't touch it.

Paul: ...the fuck?

[No response was given. Instead, Paul looked at Thorsman, stunned by the words he spat out.]

Paul: Are you insane? Don't be talking nonsense now, you're the one who was running away.

Thorsman: You're the one who's talking nonsense, aren't you?

Thorsman: Paul, you know what I'm talking about.

Thorsman: When two or more parties fight the same monster, the party whose member is killed the monster gets the materials and the reward. It is an unspoken rule between adventurers.

Paul: What about it? It's none of your business.

Thorsman: No, it is my business.

Thorsman: I watched the whole thing, and it was Elinalise who put the final nail in the coffin. Elinalise is in my party. So if anyone has the right to the Holy Sword, it's me!

Paul: You... are you for fucking real...?

Elinalise: Thorsman! Are you sure you have it right?

Thorsman: Ha! I'm sure I'm right. You're the one who actually put the finishing touches on him, remember?

Thorsman: Elinalise Dragonroad of the Lord of Judgment topped him off!

Thorsman: Then, as the leader of the Lord of Judgment, I have the right!

Paul: You! Have you forgotten what you did to Elinalise!

Paul: You used her as bait, didn't you!? And now you want to take the credit for everything!? Don't you have any pride?!

[Even Paul, who had no connection to the party, knew about the unwritten rule. Still, Thorsman's attitude made him angry.]

Thorsman: Shut up! You talk of pride!

Thorsman: The party'd been decimated, and if they find out I was running around like a pussy at the end, the reputation I've built up will go down the drain!

Thorsman: I'm bringing back at least the Holy Sword, or else it's not worth it! If it's pride you're talking about, this is my pride!

Elinalise: Stop with this foolishness! I'll bring down the name of Lord of Judgment if you keep talking like that!

Thorsman: What?

Elinalise: You abandoned me! I am not such a weak woman that I would cling to you forever after you abandoned me!

Elinalise: You say I am in Lord of Judgment! Then I'm leaving the party right here!

Elinalise: I don't need the leader's permission to leave the party! I thought you were a rough but interesting man, but what a small fry you are!

Adventurer: ...I-I'm out, too! I can't keep up with your bullshit any longer!"

Thorsman: You fucking bastards!

[Elinalise and the others declare, and Toothman's face turns red with anger. He pulls out the sword at his waist.]

Thorsman: If you won't give me the sword, I'll finish you all off right here!

Paul: It's five against one. Are you really going to do it?

Thorsman: Ha! You tired bastards are no match for me!

Paul: (Sure, he's almost unharmed.)

Paul: (I got us out of a tight spot with the Fenris Wolf, but someone might die because of this...)

[Paul's decision was quick.]

Paul: I get it... If you insist, the sword is yours.

Geese: Paul! What are you talking about!

Paul: We couldn't have beaten it by ourselves. If it weren't for Elinalise, we might have died out here in the wilderness.

Paul: Besides, there is also the unwritten rule. And it's not out of line for the Lord of Judgment to take the sword.

Thorsman: Heh heh heh... you're a very understanding guy.

Paul: I just thought it would be boring to come all this way and have someone die because of your selfishness.

Paul: I'm just going to give you the Holy Sword. I'll take the Fenris Wolf's materials.

Thorsman: Hehe. Yeah, fine, have it your way...

[Thorsman rushes past Paul to retrieve the Holy Sword. Geese runs up to Paul.]

Geese: Are you sure you want it? You wanted the Holy Sword! That's why you came all the way here!

Paul: It's okay. We got the rare material. So it's not a waste of our time, is it?

Geese: "That's not the point.

Thorsman: No, it can't be...!

[Geese was about to continue when he heard Thorsman's voice. When he looked at him to see what was going on, he was stunned with the Holy Sword in his hand.]

[He pulled the sword out of its scabbard.]

Thorsman: The sword, hey...? It's just a sheath! What the hell is going on here!!!!

Talhand: A replica.

Paul: A replica?

Talhand: Perhaps they were only originally imitations of the original.

Talhand: Nothing unusual. Replicas or not, they are sacred enough for those who believe in them.

Thorsman: That's... ridiculous... such horseshit!

[Thorsman was so stunned that he collapsed to his knees on the spot. He had just lost his fame and his pride, and he had nothing to show for it.]

Elinalise: Oh-ho-ho-ho! The poor fellow got his just desserts for trying to abandon us!

Adventurer: Heh, that sucks, "leader."

[The two former party members mock Thorsman, but he no longer seems to have the energy to be angry.]

[Eventually, Thorsman wandered off. Paul and his party decided to leave the ruins after collecting materials and other items.]

Paul: (A replica... You risked your life for this? And he lost everything...)

Paul: (If he'd at least taken care of his friends. At least there would have been a party left)

[Paul picks up the replica of the Holy Sword that Thorsman left behind.]

Geese: Hm? What are you going to do with that?

Paul: I thought I'd take it as a memento.

Geese: A memento? What kind of memento?

Paul: "Don't be like him!"

Chapter 13

[A few days later.]

[After returning to the town, Paul and his friends sold the materials and took their money to a tavern.]

[Paul, Geese, Talhand, and the swordswoman gather around a table with a mountain of food and drink.]

Paul: Ah... we made it this time. I didn't get the Holy Sword, but it was a good experience.

Paul: The party is now disbanded. That's what we were talking about to begin with.

Geese: ...Well, yeah, right.

Paul: So, I'm asking you again! This time it's official! Form a party with me!

[Paul shouts out. Geese and the others were wide-eyed.]

Paul: The name of the party is... hmmm, yeah... I can't think of one right away, so I'll take "Lord of Judgment" for now.

Paul: Right! Let's keep on adventuring together!

[Paul invites them forward, and Geese and the others look at each other and shrug their shoulders.]

Geese: ...Well, we've known each other for a while now, you know. I know it's fun to be with you.

Geese: That's why it's okay! I'll go along with you!

Geese: Well, I don't want to call the party by that name.

Paul raises his eyebrows as he is denied with a sharp point of the finger.
The female swordsman pulls his arm.

Swordswoman: Umm, I'm... sorry. Having an adventure with Paul sounds fun, but I'm tired of these fights.

Swordswoman: But! You have to keep your promise! Tonight, its... ehehe...!

Paul: Oh! Of course!

She fidgeted and looked embarrassed, and Paul gave her a leering grin.

Geese: Hey! Don't you have a reaction for me? Anything at all? Something like thanks or reassurance?!

[Paul tilts his head at Geese's bellowing.]

Paul: You're too late for that. I knew you'd come in.

Geese: Oh, oh...!

Paul: ...what about Talhand?

[Talhand, who had been quietly listening to the conversation, downed his drink in one gulp without replying.]

Talhand: ...I don't know Paul well yet. So... let's compare drinks!

Paul: A drinking contest?

Talhand: What will you do? You want to try me?

Paul: Yeah! I'll take it!

Geese: Are you serious? It's a well-known fact that Talhand drinks like crazy.

Paul: No problem! It's not like I have to win to join the party or anything.

Talhand: Well, yes. I just want to see what kind of man you are.

Paul: Then I'll show you plenty. But that doesn't mean I'm going to lose!

[Paul and Talhand began a drinking contest, but it was hard to settle.]

[They drank so much that they ran out of money earned at the ruins... On this day, for the first time in his life, Paul was unable to fulfill his promise of an evening with a girl.]

[In any case, in a bar filled with the smell of alcohol, a party (tentatively) called "Lord of Judgment" was formed by three men, who, according to Paul, were not pretty—]

Episode 3 [Breaking through the labyrinth]

Chapter 14

[It has been five full days since Paul and his friends formed the party "Lord of Judgment" - although the name is still tentative.]

[They have been fulfilling several requests based at the Great Bird Inn, but Paul has his own thoughts on the matter. After finishing distributing the rewards, he spoke out gravely.]

Paul: ...this is a grave matter. Don't you guys agree?

Geese: Yes, yes, yes, I do. Whoa, this meat dish is yummy!

Talhand: Mmm... not enough booze. Proprietor! Another round of drinks!

Paul: You guys...!
You didn't listen to anything I said!

Paul: "I'm the leader of this party and I'm talking about the future of this party!
Will you listen to me more seriously?"

[Paul stood up from his seat and raised his voice. Geese and Talhand sighed and looked at each other.]

Geese: Paul is the only one who has a problem with that. We don't have a problem with it, do...right?

Talhand: Yeah, how true. But I'm not against it. You can do whatever you want about it.

Geese: More importantly, let's do something about the name, shall we? I mean, why don't we just keep the name "Lord of Judgment?"

Geese: I can't tell you how many times I've been mistakenly told that we're with Thorsman...!

Talhand: We can't keep borrowing the name of another party, even though they've disbanded.

Paul: That's not the point! We have more important things to do!

[Paul slammed the table, stood up, and barked at his cool-headed companions.]

Paul: Geese, Talhand! You don't get it, do you? We're missing something important!

Paul: We lack... beauties!

[Paul was dissatisfied with the party he had formed with only three men after being rejected by the swordswoman he had invited to join him. It was just too much.]

Paul: If the male/female ratio was going to be skewed anyway, I would have preferred a party

that was overwhelmingly female!

Paul: When I'm fulfilling a request, when I'm drinking afterwards, when I'm staying at an inn, the only people around me are mousy men!

Paul: You know what I mean! You know what I'm talking about! This is a problem that needs to be solved as soon as possible!

Geese: Well, you know... There's no shortage of skilled female adventurers. They're already in a party somewhere, aren't they?

Talhand: I don't think anyone would want to join a new party now. And what's more, the name is...

Geese: Yeah, yeah, it's a bad name. Both before and now, 'Lord of Judgment' has a bad reputation. That's why it's not well-received.

Paul: Well, then... maybe we could recruit new adventurers who have never heard of Lord of Judgment!"

Geese: That's good, but... Are there any newbies who can keep up with you?

Talhand: How about... that girl over there, for example?

[Talhand looks at a female adventurer who looks like a newcomer.]

Paul: She's so cute. She has big breasts, too!

Talhand: I'm sure you can hold her as a woman. But can she have your back as a companion?

Paul: I'm not sure! That's...

Paul: The girl is absolutely adorable. But... she can't take care of her weapons. I wouldn't trust her with my back...

Talhand: I know you're level-headed enough to see that, so I said you can do what you want Paul.

Paul: ...I see, is that so?

[He knows what Talhand means. It would be difficult to find adventurers who match the party's strength, despite gender boundaries.]

[Even just the men here are the ones who had a hard time just finding the right party members.]

Paul: (A female adventurer who matches our strength...)

[A woman's face suddenly appears in Paul's mind.]

Paul: How about her...?

Geese: "Her" who?

Paul: You know, that adventurer woman! That Elinalise from Thorsman's party!

Talhand: She's at...

Paul: I wonder what she's doing now?

Paul: I know that Elinalise is a good fighter, having fought with her at the ruins. Besides, she wasn't bad with us.

Paul: She's not really my type, but I think she fits in well with us! So why don't we invite her to join us?

[The more we talked about it, the more it seemed like a great idea. Not Paul's type, but Elinalise would definitely be a "flower."]

Geese: Well, if you say so, I might as well give her a shout.

Paul: Where can I find her?

Geese: Hmmm... she was a fancy woman...maybe you can ask her at a tavern or restaurant...

Talhand: ...

Talhand: I can guess where Elinalise is.

Paul: What?

Geese: How do you know? You're coming across as being better informed than I am!

Talhand: ...we know each other.

Paul: An acquaintance? If you know her, you should have told me first!

Talhand: Ummm...

[As Paul presses on, Talhand awkwardly stirs his drink.]

Talhand: But you're going to make /her/ one of us...?

Paul: You got a problem with that? I told you you could do whatever you wanted.

Talhand: ...that woman is cursed.

Paul: What? What do you mean cursed...?

Talhand: You'll understand when you see her and talk to her. You can ask her about the details.

[After saying this, Talhand got up from his seat.]

Paul: (What do you mean Elinalise is cursed...?)

[Inwardly craning his neck, Paul followed Talhand.]

[With his short stride, Talhand headed for the adventurer's inn in the town.]

Talhand: She uses the west corner room. If you go there, go alone.

Geese: What? What about us?

Talhand: Stand by.

Geese: Is it bad if I go with him?

Talhand: Nine times out of ten.

Geese: All right, Paul. Go on!

[Perhaps sensing the danger in Talhand's mood, Geese easily agreed to let Paul go alone.]

Paul: I don't really get it, but okay! I'll go talk some sense into her!

[Paul goes to the west corner room and knocks on the door.]

Paul: (... no answer? Is she not here?)

Gently listening, he hears a faint sound of someone inside.

Paul: (I wonder if she's there.)

[Frowning, he knocked two or three times. Paul doesn't want to let her use the stay-at-home service. He knocks on the door as many times as he can until she comes out...]

Man: Shut up!

Paul: !

[The door opens and a man punches at him. Paul dodged the attack and unintentionally hit back. His fist slammed into the man's stomach.]

Man: Ugh...

Paul: Ah... oh, hey, are you awake?

Paul: ...no. He's passed out.

[He tried shaking the man, but there was no sign of him waking up. As he was scratching his head wondering what was going on, he felt someone approaching.]

Elinalise: Paul...? What are you doing?

Paul: Yo, Elinalise. I came here today to talk to you.

Elinalise: ...there's nothing to talk about, why is he out cold? Did you have something to do with it?

Paul: It was self-defense.

Elinalise: Whatever, it doesn't matter. Well, goodbye.

Paul: !!!

[Paul stops Elinalise from closing the door by putting his foot in the gap.]

Elinalise: What are you doing?

Paul: Because! I told you I need to talk to you!

Elinalise: I don't want to listen! You have the gall to interrupt people's fun!

Paul: What? Fun? You mean... *fun*? A man and a woman having fun! With this weak and dull man?

[Pointing at the man collapsed at his feet, Paul looks astonished.]

Elinalise: It is none of your business who I have sex with!

Paul: No! But I do have business here!

Paul: I'm here to recruit you!

Elinalise: ...excuse me?

Paul: Elinalise Dragonroad. Would you like to join my party, "Lord of Judgment?"

Elinalise: Lord of Judgment... I was wondering why I've been hearing this name again recently, even though all the members quit and the group was disbanded.

Elinalise: So you were the ones calling yourselves that. And so you asked me to join you...

Elinalise: Are you... being serious?

Paul: I'm not asking you as a joke.

[Elinalise looked at Paul with straight eyes.]

[They stare at each other for a while, but suddenly the door between Paul's legs loosens its grip on his foot.]

Elinalise: ...all right.

Paul: Really?

Elinalise: However!

Elinalise: Only if you can satisfy me.

Paul: That means...

Elinalise: My body is on fire because you knocked out my...

Elinalise: If you're not sure, I won't force you.

[Elinalise smiles bewitchingly and Paul smiles back at her. He opened the door, stepped inside, and hugged Elinalise tightly around the waist.]

Paul: "Can I satisfy you?" That's the one thing I'm confident about.

Elinalise: Oh, I'm looking forward to it.

[As soon as the door closed, the test by Elinalise began.]

Chapter 15

[The next day...]

Talhand: Calm down, Geese.

Geese: I don't know if I can relax! Paul didn't come back after last night, something must have happened!

Geese: I can't fight! When the time comes, I'm counting on you, Talhand!

Talhand: Well... I don't think you need to worry about it...

Geese: Let's go!

[First thing in the morning, they rode into Elinalise's room, and what they saw was their leader... Paul, squeezed out on the bed in a heap.]

Geese: Is he dead...?

Talhand: Don't jump to conclusions. He is still breathing.

Elinalise: Hmmm...it was a fun night. Geese, Talhand. I look forward to working with you as friends.

[Thus, the four members of Lord of Judgment became a small, elite group of talented individuals who were able to complete their requests smoothly.]

[When they had accomplished several requests and were beginning to work well together, the leader of the group suddenly said something to the group.]

Paul: Let's go to a labyrinth.

Geese: What ? A labyrinth?

Talhand: Hmmm...

Elinalise: Now that we know each other better, it's not a bad time.

[A labyrinth is a natural dungeon created by the earth. An ordinary cave or underground cavern is transformed into a labyrinth by the accumulation of magical power.]

[At the innermost part of the labyrinth, there is a huge jewel called a mana crystal, the presence of which attracts monsters. The labyrinth is said to grow larger by absorbing monsters and humans who die inside.]

Paul: Isn't that right? And it's part of the adventurers' romance to traverse a labyrinth!

Geese: But do you think it's that easy? Isn't a labyrinth a more troublesome place than the ruins

where we went to search for the Holy Sword?

Paul: That's why it's okay!

Paul: If we could conquer a real labyrinth, we would get a big prize and our rank would go up! We can go one step higher as adventurers!

Talhand: I see. Completing low-ranked requests is not for you, is it?

Paul: That's what I mean! So, let's go to a labyrinth!

Elinalise: I understand. But do you know where to find a labyrinth?

Paul: Geese will do his best on that.

Geese: Hey!

Elinalise: We have to be prepared with our equipment, and of course, we have to be very careful in our preparations for the capture.

Paul: Geese will do his best on that too.

Geese: Aren't you going to listen to my opinion?

Paul: ? What the hell? You're not going to do it? Or are you just not interested in conquering a labyrinth?

Geese: No, that's the case! It's that I'll end up doing everything myself, while you guys wait around on the sidelines!

[One week after the leader Paul's sudden proposal, "Lord of Judgment" left the town to go through a nearby labyrinth.]

[They we're not as pressed for time as they were at the Ruins of the Holy Sword. They took about a week to carefully make their way to the labyrinth, checking their coordination and tactics.]

Geese: We'll camp around here for the night. Let's finish getting ready before it gets dark.

Paul: Hey, Geese. How far is the labyrinth from here?

Geese: Three days if we hurry, five at this rate.

Paul: Oh... it's still quite a ways to go, isn't it?

Elinalise: So how much longer until we reach the next village or town?

Geese: There is a small town a day from here. I'm thinking we should stay there tomorrow.

Elinalise: One more day... that's about right.

Talhand: ...man-hunting.

Paul: It's all right, you know. I've got to get my energy up before I tackle the labyrinth too!

Geese: Whatever you do, don't cause trouble...

[Geese looks dumbfounded, but gets to work preparing the food.]

[When the sun had set, Paul and the others sat around the campfire and enjoyed the evening meal Geese had prepared.]

Paul: Hmm?

Geese: What? Surprised it tasted so good?

Paul: I'm not surprised at... after all this time.

[Paul puts down his plate, pulls out his sword instead, and steps in front of Geese and the others.]

[Elinalise and Talhand were getting ready, but Geese was the only one who didn't understand what was going on.]

Paul: (I can feel a faint presence...)

[The air was tense, and the bushes in front of them shook.]

???: Oooh...

Paul: ! A beast...?

???: ...uuuh, guh...

Paul: Hey! Are you okay?

[A Beastfolk woman appeared in front of the party. As she wobbled closer, she collapsed in front of Paul and the others.]

Geese: W-what the hell? What's going on!

Elinalise: Are you hurt?

Talhand: Before we do that, we have to be vigilant about our surroundings. If she was attacked by something, there may still be assailants nearby.

Geese: Was she attacked?! Was it an animal, bandits, was it monsters!?

Paul: ...hmm?

[While the party members were fussing, Paul held the beast woman in his arms and winces as he tilted his head.]

Paul: Well, she doesn't look as if she's injured.

Elinalise: What? Let me take a look.

Elinalise: ...oh, that's true.

Geese: Then why did she fall over?

Paul: "I don't know. I'll have to ask her... Hey.
Are you conscious?
Can you hear me? Hello?"

???: ...oooh, gh... gru...

Paul: What? What are you trying to say?

???: ...I'm... hun...gry...

Paul: Meaning... she passed out?

[No one answered Paul's question, and only the sound of the crackling bonfire echoed through the silent forest.]

Chapter 16

[An hour later—.]

???: Phew... I'm full.

???: The meat and the soup were delicious.

Paul: That's all well and good, but can't you at least tell me your name? You were so busy stuffing your mouth you couldn't get a word out.

???: Oh, I haven't told you my name yet. I am Ghislaine. I'm pretty much an adventurer.

Geese: Ghislaine? Could you be... The Black Wolf?

[Geese reacted when he heard Ghislaine's name.]

Paul: Do you know her?

Geese: "Only by name. I hear she's pretty good.

Paul: Hmmm, Ghislaine... you're a swordswoman by the looks of it. But anyway, what do you mean "pretty much"? You're a registered adventurer, right?

Ghislaine: I travel to better understand the world. My master told me that if I wanted to travel, I should be an adventurer, so I became one.

Paul: I see. So, it's just a title, but it's only for the sake of it.

Paul: No wonder you went hungry and passed out. A real adventurer wouldn't make such a fool of herself.

[Paul laughed, and Ghislaine looked away awkwardly.]

Ghislaine: I couldn't buy food. ...I didn't have any money.

Geese: That's exactly where you use your title of adventurer, isn't it? If you get paid for your work, you'll have enough money to eat, right?

Ghislaine: I accepted a request. I was asked to join a party, we defeated a monster, and we received our reward.

Elinalise: If it was a request that involved fighting monsters, then the reward should have been reasonable. What did you do with the money?

Ghislaine: It was gone after one meal.

Talhand: You didn't have the policy to save enough money to last a day with?

Ghislaine: PO-LUH-SEE? What's that? And which was more valuable, a large copper coin or a copper coin?

[Ghislaine asked with a serious face, and Paul and the others all had the same suspicion.]

Elinalise: Ghislaine, what ranked requests did you accept and how much money did you get for them?

Ghislaine: I'm sure—

[Hearing Ghislaine's reply, the premonition held by everyone in the party becomes a certainty.]

Paul: Ghislaine, you got ripped off.

Ghislaine: What?

Geese: I'd be willing to pay you ten times what you're getting paid.

Ghislaine: !?

Geese: Unless you say you didn't take part in the battle or you were useless, but that's not the case with you, is it?

Ghislaine: I cut the most.

Paul: Then you've been cheated after all.

Paul: You must be a very good-natured person or a complete moron not to notice that.

Ghislaine: !!

[Ghislaine freezes, as if in shock.]

Talhand: It's not the first time you've been taken advantage of, it seems.

Elinalise: If you're on the road, you don't have to worry about the aftermath, do you? You get cheated, and then you get kicked out of the party... I suppose this was a repeat occurrence...

Ghislaine: Stop that! Don't look at me like that!

[Ghislaine stood up, perhaps uncomfortable with the genuine warm stare.]

Ghislaine: ...thanks for your help. I'm going to—

Paul: What, you're leaving already? If you're broke, you don't have a place to stay, do you? Why don't you just stay here?

Ghislaine: I don't want to get into any further debt with you.

Elinalise: You seem to be in a hurry. Is there somewhere you want to go?

Ghislaine: A labyrinth.

[Paul's eyes widen at Ghislaine's words.]

Paul: By labyrinth, do you mean the labyrinth in the jungle area up ahead?

Ghislaine: Yes.

Geese: You're not even in a party, and you passed out a bit before didn't you? So going into the labyrinth by yourself is like going to throw away your life, right?

Ghislaine: Don't underestimate me. I'm not that weak.

Elinalise: All this reckless and foolhardy attitude, doesn't it remind you a lot of Paul?

Geese: Haha, yes! No wonder he can't form a party.

Paul: Shut up! Leave me out of it!

After barking at Geese and Elinalise, Paul turned to Ghislaine.

Paul: Anyway, Ghislaine. You'd better stay here after all.

Ghislaine: What?

Paul: We are going to the jungle labyrinth, too.

Paul: So why don't we go together? Why don't you join a party with other adventurers?

[Paul had seen many swordsmen. As soon as he saw Ghislaine, he knew she was in a class of her own.]

Paul: (The more skilled swordsmen we have, the more we can work together, and our party will be stronger.)

[As a leader who thinks about the tactical aspects, and as a man who simply responds to Ghislaine, Paul recruits her.]

Ghislaine: You guys have taken care of me. But that's not what this is about.

Ghislaine: I won't join your party. I can conquer the labyrinth by myself.

Paul: I don't think it's that easy.

Ghislaine: ...thanks for your help.

[Ghislaine said that much and walked away without looking back once.]

Elinalise: She's gone...

Talhand: Do we go after her?

Paul: She doesn't seem to want to listen to anything I have to say to her right now. Besides, it's not a good idea to move around too much at night.

Paul: Whatever the case, we have an early start tomorrow. Let's get some rest.

Chapter 17

[—There are ruins that have turned into a labyrinth in the jungle area.]

[The party of adventurers, Lord of Judgment, left the town based on the information obtained by Geese and arrived at the entrance of the labyrinth that day.]

[As soon as they stepped inside, Paul and the others noticed something unusual.]

Paul: They're monster carcasses.

Talhand: Hmmm, they're all cut up. The cuts are clean and precise.

Elinalise: I wonder if Ghislaine did this?

Paul: Who else would have done it? But... she's pretty strong.

[The monsters had been cut down with a single cut each, and Paul, as a swordsman, was impressed.]

Paul: ...seems like she's pretty good at saying big things about being able to conquer the labyrinth all by herself.

Talhand: Don't tell me that Ghislaine has taken on every monster that comes towards her?

Geese: Maybe. There are carcasses all the way to the end of the road... Does she have bottomless physical strength?

Paul: No one is without limits.

Paul: It's my first time in a labyrinth. I think it's better to proceed with caution, but... we'd better hurry ahead.

Elinalise: For Ghislaine?

Paul: We can't leave her alone, can we? She's such a beautiful woman with a nice ass.

Geese: Oh, you really are something... It was like that, after all!! Don't tell me that's why you invited her to the party!?

Paul: Am I wrong? That's an important thing to consider, isn't it?

Elinalise: You are a man without any sense of propriety.

Paul: As if you're one who to talk.

[Paul and the others carried on as usual, so much so that it was hard to believe that they were taking on a labyrinth for the first time. They had no worries.]

[Paul stopped talking for a while and looked around at all their faces.]

Paul: ...Alright, let's go.

[With Ghislaine ahead of them, there were few monsters to attack Paul and the others.]

Paul: (Well, as one would expect, the path isn't completely clear!)

[He cuts down the compound-eyed monster that was approaching him from the front. At the same time, magic flew left and right of Paul and attacked the group of monsters that were camped in front of him.]

Geese: Huh, oops...

Talhand: So this is how it's going to be.

Elinalise: There aren't many of them, and it shouldn't take too long to get to the deepest part.

Geese: The traps have all been triggered. That's it. Most of the people who went before have been caught in them.

Paul: (Ghislaine.)

Paul: ...I think we'd better hurry up.

[Paul fights as an attacker, while Elinalise is a solid vanguard. Talhand would attack from the rear with magic.]

[Paul and his team's tactics are simple. For a party full of talented individuals who excel at individual play, however, the simple division of roles had a great effect.]

[While Geese kept an eye out for traps, Paul and his party continued to advance through the labyrinth, reaching the deepest part at a surprisingly fast pace.]

Paul: ...

Geese: "What's the matter, you suddenly got all quiet?
You're not scared, are you?"

Paul: Of course not. But from now on, it's not going to be as easy as before.

Paul: There is a guardian protecting the mana crystal. It may be a more troublesome monster than the one at the site of the Holy Sword...

Talhand: Shall we wait and see? Or should we go into battle right away?

Paul: It depends on Ghislaine... Elinalise

Elinalise: Yes, I understand. Depending on Ghislaine's situation, we may have to rescue her. I hope her injuries are not so bad that we can't treat them.

Geese: Whatever the case, you guys need to focus on the monsters. I'll make sure there are no traps or anything like that.

Paul: Right. I guess I don't need to tell you that. All right... let's go!

[When Paul and the others stepped into the innermost part of the labyrinth, they found themselves in a wide open space.]

[Perhaps because it was in the middle of a dense forest, ivy grew from the cracks in the walls and ceiling, and moss grew on the ground.]

[In this slightly damp space, Ghislaine was engaged in battle with a giant snake monster.]

Geese: Oh, that's a... Red Hood Cobra!

Paul: Do you know it?

Geese: It's a dangerous A-rank monster that lives on the Demon Continent...

[The Red Hood Cobra is huge, and its entire body is covered with hard scales that are resistant to fire. It is also extremely agile and was dodging Ghislaine's attacks.]

Geese: Fire magic is useless. And watch out for the fangs.

Paul: Snake fangs... are poisonous. That's all we need to know for now.

[Paul looked at each member's face in turn, then readied his sword. He swiftly kicked the ground and jumped at the monster.]

[His sword swings down. Paul's blade reaches the Red Hood Cobra.]

Paul: What?

[The sword bounced off the scales. Paul put strength into his hand that was gripping the hilt. If he hadn't, the sword would've recoiled and he would've dropped it.]

Paul: It's damn tough!

Ghislaine: ! Hey, what are you doing? It's my prey!

Paul: Don't give me that crap, you've been struggling here!

Ghislaine: N-no, I haven't!

[It was obvious to everyone that this was a bluff.]

Paul: (She had broken through on her own, and had come all the way here. How could she not be exhausted?)

[The Red Hood Cobra was already agile, and Ghislaine was slowed by exhaustion and clearly struggling against it.]

Talhand: Stone Cannon!

[The monster deftly moved its huge body to dodge Talhand's attack from behind.]

[The Red Hood Cobra changed its target to Talhand and attacked him, but Elinalise swung her estoc as if aiming at that point.]

Ghislaine: Hey! Get out of my way!

Paul: Do you really have time to complain?

Ghislaine: It's my prey!

[Ghislaine barked at Paul and the others and headed toward the Red Hood Cobra.]

[Her swordsmanship was so refined that it was obvious to anyone who saw it.]

Paul: (Sword God Style... and she's is pretty strong in it, too)

Paul: (She's more skillful than any other Sword God style user I've ever seen.)

[Ghislaine was the second swordsman Paul had met who he thought was stronger than himself.]

[One was, needless to say, Reida, the Water God. She and him never fought shoulder-to-shoulder, but he only got beaten one-sidedly.]

Paul: (Fighting with a swordsman stronger than me. And the opponent is a powerful monster...)

Paul: ...this is fun!

[Unknowingly, Paul laughed.]

[The Red Hood Cobra lunged at Paul. He flew backwards to dodge it, and its poisonous fangs dug into the ground, melting the surface.]

Paul: Haaaaah!

Paul: (His scales may be hard, but his eyes must be soft!)

[He swung his sword at it, but it didn't reach him. Ghislaine was ahead of the monster as it dodged.]

Paul: (Did she read its moves?!)

[Ghislaine slashes her sword, but the Red Hood Cobra shakes its head and deflects the tip of the sword.]

Ghislaine: Kuh...!

Paul: Ghislaine! Step in even further!

Ghislaine: Don't tell me what to do!

Paul: Just listen!

Paul: In your normal state, you could have gouged out its eye with a single blow. But in your exhausted state, you're holding back!

Ghislaine: !

Paul: We'll try it again, and you'll have another go at him! And this time, you're going to have to go deeper and cut its head off!

Ghislaine: What the hell?

Ghislaine: Why are you talking to me like that?

Paul: I want to conquer the labyrinth! I need your power to defeat this thing!

[Because they are swordsmen who have studied the same style, they can see their opponent's ability more clearly.]

Paul: So lend me your power!

Ghislaine: Kh...!

[Ghislaine looked at Paul hesitantly. For being a talented person, she would never have thought of relying on anyone or cooperating with anyone before.]

Paul: (I know, because I was like that too.)

Ghislaine: ...only this one time.

Ghislaine: And I don't know how hard it is!

[Paul grinned at Ghislaine's reply.]

Paul: What didn't I tell you earlier? I only ask you for one thing:... take his head off!

Ghislaine: Yeah, okay.

[The quality of the technique, as well as Ghislaine's character, is suited for the vanguard. The movement of the party has changed.]

[Paul, who had been moving around as an aggressive vanguard, took up a position connecting the vanguard and the rear guard and became involved in a wide range of situations.]

Elinalise: Talhand! Do it now!

Talhand: Understood!

[With Paul stepping away, Elinalise is now able to concentrate on her rear guard protection and see more of her surroundings.]

[Talhand is also firing magic attacks steadily. With Ghislaine in, everything was going in the right direction.]

Paul: Oraah! Ghislaine! Go!

Ghislaine: Ooooh!

[Ghislaine steps in deep, and flashes her sword. The head of the Red Hood Cobra, covered in hard scales, fell off.]

Ghislaine: I...did it...!

Paul: ...Yeah! You did it!!

Paul: We won! We did it! We beat the Guardian...!!!

Geese: That means...

Paul: We've conquered the labyrinth!

[The party members shout with joy. Elinalise, Geese, and Talhand embraced each other, and Paul impulsively hugged Ghislaine, who was also by his side.]

Ghislaine: "H-hey!"

Paul: "Hahaha! We've conquered the labyrinth! No average adventurer can do that!"

Paul: That's what we've done! There's no reason we shouldn't be happy about it!"

Ghislaine: ...

[Ghislaine didn't respond to Paul's words, but kept her mouth shut...]

Ghislaine: !!!

Ghislaine: Stop!

Paul: Gghhhh!

[Paul's arm is twisted up, and almost at the same time, he is hit in the jaw with a fist. With a fluid motion, Paul falls to the ground.]

Ghislaine: What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Paul: ...I've got the devil in me.

[Paul holds his hands, as if remembering the feeling of her well-trained and toned buttocks as he lies on the ground.]

Geese: What the hell are you doing, you...?

[The member's stunned gaze stung.]

Elinalise: Let's get on with retrieving the mana crystals and the treasure.

Talhand: Mm. Even at a cursory glance, the amount is enough to pay for itself even if the five of us divide it equally.

Ghislaine: "Do I get the same amount?"

Geese: Yes, of course. We split the money equally to everyone. It's the leader's decision.

Elinalise: And the most meritorious of all is Ghislaine.

Ghislaine: I'm not formally in the party. And you'd still do that?

Talhand: Needless to say, this is the right thing to do

Ghislaine: ...you guys are weird.

Ghislaine: I've never been treated this well before.

Ghislaine: ...

[Ghislaine's eyes looked as if she wanted to say something, but in the end she didn't.]

Paul: (This woman isn't honest with herself.)

Paul: Hey, Ghislaine.

[Paul gets up and faces Ghislaine, with his friends at his back.]

Paul: Don't tell me you're not an official member. We're all members now, aren't we?

Ghislaine: ! Eh...

Paul: We need you, Ghislaine. With you, we can be stronger!

Paul: That's why I've decided, that I'm willing to change the name of the party if you'll join us.

Ghislaine: Whuh...!

Paul: You're called the "Black Wolf," right? In honor of that... the name of the party will be "Fangs of the Black Wolf."

[Fangs of the Black Wolf. Everyone in the party accepted the name and no one raised an objection.]

Geese: I like it, "Fangs of the Black Wolf!"

Elinalise: Yes, it's a much better name than "Lord of Judgment."

Talhand: But where did the "fangs" come from?

Paul: That, of course, is in honor of the Red Hood Cobra, the first monster we ever teamed up to fight.

Talhand: I see.

[Everyone was in agreement. Ghislaine was puzzled by the warm atmosphere.]

Ghislaine: Ah... why do you speak to me like that?

Paul: Well, of course it's because...

Paul: I want to work with you. Because I really want to work with you.

Paul: So, Ghislaine, if you feel the same way, nod your head this time.

Paul persuades Ghislaine with a serious face. He looked at her with the desire to ask her to take his hand as he held out the one that held the sword, the one that was precious to him.

A swordsman offering his dominant hand. It was impossible for someone as skilled as she was not to see the trust that was put into it.

Ghislaine: ...yeah. Make me one of you.

[Their hands clasped. Ghislaine's expression was soft. Paul pulls her hand and holds it gently.]

Paul: I told you. We are partners now.

Ghislaine: Paul...

Ghislaine: ...what's your other hand doing?"

Paul: ...if I see some nice ass there, I'll always give it a rub.

Ghislaine: I see... Well, clench your teeth.

[It's better to be gracious and accept the fist. Paul's body flew through the air.]

Geese: I really can't stand it...

Elinalise: He deserves it.

Talhand: I'm sure it won't be any different in the future. I guess you could call it "heroic, but amorous."

[The mood is somewhat awkward, but whatever the case... is a good place to start.]

[On that day, Lord of Judgment disbanded, and the newly born party, the Fangs of the Black Wolf, had completed its first foray into a labyrinth.]

Chapter 18

[The party members had always excelled individually, but with the addition of Ghislaine, the Fangs of the Black Wolf rose through the ranks at an alarming rate.]

[By the time they had risen to the rank of adventurer A, Black Wolf Fang had become a well-known name among adventurers and non-adventurers alike.]

Paul: Here's the booze! Keep them coming!

Elinalise: Hmmm, that waiter boy has a cute face, don't you think?

Geese: What do you mean, "He's cute, don't you think?" I'm not interested in men.

Ghislaine: !! This meat is delicious.

Talhand: "Yes, it's good with liquor. More drinks over here, please!"

[As the now famous Black Wolf Fang began to drink at the bar, the gazes of the customers at the surrounding tables began to turn at them.]

[Paul and the others, however, did not seem bothered by this and were enjoying their drinks in a lively atmosphere.]

Paul: (A-rank... We've come this far.)

Paul: (Wield as many swords as you like, hold as many women as you like, drink as much alcohol as you like...)

Paul: (Every day is fun. After all, adventurers are, above all else, free creatures.)

[Paul looked around at the faces of his companions. Paul's heart leapt at the thought of continuing his adventure with this group.]

Geese: Hey, Paul. Do you know what kind of request we'll be taking on next?

Paul: Hm? No, not at all. If it looks interesting, I'll take it.

Paul: Whatever, let's just go around the whole world and play around all we want!

Elinalise: Play around...? You sound like a child.

Talhand: It seems that the only thing that has changed since we first met is your appearance.

Ghislaine: He's still the same on the inside.

Geese: He hasn't changed too much, has he? He hasn't grown at all.

Paul: Y-you guys...! You say whatever they want about people...!

[The vision that Paul spoke of was somehow passed over. But although no one spoke of it, all were convinced that this party would make it happen.]

[Paul, 18 years old. The boy who ran away from home at the age of 12 had grown up to be a fine young man—.]

Episode 4 [Obituary]

Chapter 19

Promoted to an A-rank party, Black Wolf Fang was steadily making a name for itself by completing difficult requests while moving from place to place—

Paul: Oooooohh!

[Paul's sword slices through the Assault Dog's body, and the monster falls to the ground with a strangled cry.]

[Shaking off the blood on his sword, Paul turned his attention to Ghislaine, who was positioned in front of him.]

Paul: Ghislaine! How's it going over there?

Ghislaine: No problems. I'm done.

Paul: Thanks for your help. You work fast as usual.

[Paul was inwardly impressed by the beautiful swordsmanship. At Ghislaine's feet, the Terminator Boar was dying.]

Paul: Talhand! We're done here, too.

Elinalise: There were more Assault Dogs than we expected.

Geese: Well! They're not even a match for us!

Paul: You didn't do anything!

Geese: Ow!

[Paul kicked Geese's butt as he approached, seeing Geese puffing out his chest with pride.]

[The request this time is to defeat a Terminator Boar that had been spotted near in a forest near a village.]

[For the Fangs of the Black Wolf, it was a low-risk monster. However, the fact that it was leading a large number of assault dogs increased the danger level and they decided to accept the request.]

Paul: (And the reward wasn't too shabby either.)

Paul: All right, mission accomplished. Let's get the hell out of here and go have a drink.

[After receiving their reward, the members of The Fangs of the Black Wolf, except for Elinalise, went out to a bar.]

Elinalise: I have plans for the rest of the evening. Fufufu, if you interrupt me...I won't forgive you, you know?

[As soon as she came back to town, she said that and disappeared.]

Paul: (She's probably in bed with some guy right now, having a good time.)

Paul: (... I'll go look for a nice girl later!)

[With this in mind, Paul downed his drink in one gulp.]

Talhand: Phew! A drink after a hard day's work is a special taste!

Geese: You're a good drinker. I won't let you beat me either!

Geese: Come on, drink more Ghislaine!
Hey, lady, bring some more booze over here!

Waitress: Yes, coming over!

Paul: (Oh, she's pretty cute, isn't she?)

[As Paul was following the waitress who answered his order with his eyes, he heard a chuckle from the side.]

Paul: What's with the...?

Geese: Are you after that girl?

Paul: What if I am?

Geese: Don't do it, *don't do it!* No way a pretty girl like that is going to take you!

Paul: Oh? What?

[When Geese laughed, Paul's face twisted into a grimace.]

[Geese seemed to find even such a face of Paul's amusing. He keeps a smile on his face.]

Geese: She's a well-respected poster girl for this town, you know? Look around you. All the guys in the bar look up to her.

Geese: "You think she's going to go for some drunken adventurer who always orders alcohol when she can have her pick of men?"

Paul: You don't know that! You and Talhand are the ones getting drunk, not me!

Geese: We're drinking at the same table. They think we're in the same boat.

Paul: But even so! ...can't say for sure that it won't happen.

Geese: You wanna bet? That you and the girl are going to spend the night together.

Paul: Yeah, I'll do it!

[Paul took the obvious challenge.]

Paul: I know the winner. So? What do you want to bet?

Geese: I bet on the reward. The winner gets the full amount of the loser's share... How's that?

Paul: I'm in!

[Paul grinned and timed his call to the serving woman.]

[She was smiling as she busily moved around the restaurant.]

Paul: (She looks so young when she smiles, but I can't get enough of her body... I'll definitely hook her up!)

[As Paul is on a prickly mission, she brings drinks to the table at just the right moment.]

Waitress: Thank you for waiting! Can I get you anything else?"

Paul: Bring me something to go with my drink, anything that will go with it. And... when do you finish work today?

Waitress: Pardon?

Paul: How about a drink afterwards? You and me, just the two of us.

Waitress: Hehe, while I appreciate the offer, but I'd rather you drop some money at our establishment than have a drink at another place.

Waitress: Oh, I think I'm been called for. I'll bring the food you ordered later!

[A customer service smile. The waitress maintained that smile and left the table with Paul and the others.]

Paul: ...

Geese: You've got a match.

[Geese taps Paul on the shoulder. He is beaming, unable to hide his joy at having won the bet.]

Paul: N-not done yet! Maybe next time she brings us some food, I'll ask her out and she'll accept!

Geese: Don't go doing that. Right? Don't you guys think so?

Ghislaine: I don't know, but that girl didn't seem interested in Paul.

Talhand: Paul, sometimes you have to give up. Just quietly concede defeat.

Paul: No! I'll never admit it!

[“I'm definitely going to spend the night with the girl!” Paul was about to continue when she let out a short scream.]

Paul: (That's...)

[When I looked, I saw that the waitress was entangled with a drunken man who was holding her arm. He was a large, strong man, with the air of an adventurer.]

Adventurer: I'm telling you there's enough money to go around, right? Hey, aren't I right?

Waitress: Uhm, sir, you're drinking too much. Let go of my arm so I can bring you some water—

Adventurer: Shut up! I told you I'd play with you, but you turned me down so casually!

Waitress: Ow...!

Adventurer: You're a waitress in a bar, but you're so stuck up! What kind of a wench are you? Eh!?

Paul: She's too good for somebody like you.

Adventurer: Huh!?

[Paul stood behind the strong man and tipped over the liquor he was holding. The contents spilled out with a clattering sound.]

[The man, covered in liquor, did not seem to understand what had happened at first, but his face turned red as he realized what was happening.]

Adventurer: You fucker...!

Paul: You can't hit on a woman in that soaking wet outfit, can you? Get the hell out of here.

Adventurer: You little...! You think you can get away with doing this to me without paying for it?

[The adventurer took his hand away from the waitress and grabbed Paul by the front of his shirt this time. Paul looked at him coldly and laughed through his nose.]

Paul: Do you know who you're grabbing at? Do you think you're going to get away with this for free?

Adventurer: That's just fine! Let's take this outside!!

Paul: Yeah, sure. I don't want any trouble in the store.

Waitress: Oh, uh...

Paul: Don't worry. A guy of this caliber won't be any trouble for me.

[Paul talks to the woman with a relaxed expression on his face, and the man's face becomes more and more stern.]

Paul: (Only a punk would take up a challenge so easily, right?)

[Before the adventurer could start a rampage, Paul left the bar first and waited for the man to follow him.]

[It only took a moment for the victory to be decided. Paul left the tavern and returned before anyone in the restaurant had time to voice their concern—]

Waitress: Um, is it...over already...?

Paul: I told you. The guy was no match for me.

Paul: It's funny because he really thought he could handle me.

Waitress: Fangs of the Black Wolf...

Paul: Hmm? Did you know?

Waitress: Of course I did. It's a famous party and you're regulars.

Paul: (If you knew we were the Fangs of the Black Wolf and you turned down the invitation... are you sure you don't have an eye for me?)

[There have been a number of women who have come up to me just because they heard the name "Fangs of the Black Wolf."]

[Not a few women flirted with him, whether they thought he had money or simply liked strong men.]

[In Paul's mind, he could still see himself losing the bet with Geese.]

Waitress: ...I thought all the young, strong adventurers were big, self-important guys.

Waitress: The sort who think there's an excess of women in the world. So they think it's okay to treat them roughly...

Paul: (uh? What are you talking about?)

Waitress: Working in a bar, I actually see many people like that...

Waitress: But you're different, aren't you?

Paul: Hmm?

Waitress: You saved me. Thank you so much!

[She thanked him with a smile, and there was a sound of everything snapping into place inside Paul.]

[Paul took her hand and gently stroked the area where the man had held her.]

Waitress: What? Oh, um...

Paul: I can't forgive him for injuring such a pretty girl... I should have hurt him more.

Paul: It's so red. It's so painful to see it on such white skin...

[Paul kissed the reddened part of her arm, and her face turned bright red as if to say "It's terrible to see you like this."]

Paul: When will you finish work today?

Waitress: Ah...

[Those were the exact same words that Paul had just told her and had been shrugged off.]

Paul: Let me tend to your wounds. This injury and the one in your heart from being frightened so—

Waitress: That's... that, uh...

[The woman's gaze wandered as if she were lost, but eventually she nodded with a bright red face.]

Waitress: Please, take good care of me.

Paul: (The game has been decided.)

[If you look at the table a short distance away, you will see Geese looking at Paul with a stunned face. The winner of the bet smiles at the blank look on his face.]

Chapter 20

[The next day...]

Waitress: "N... ah... Paul-san... It's almost dawn... Are you still going to...?"

Paul: Yeah, how'bout one last go...hm?

[Paul's ears, which had been enjoying the woman's soft skin on the bed, pick up the sound of hurried footsteps and voices.]

Paul: (That voice is...)

[There is a wild knock at the door of the room.]

Elinalise: Paul! Paul! We know you're here!

Waitress: This woman...? Don't tell me she's Paul's lover or—

Paul: It's not like that, you know? She's a member of the party.

Elinalise: Paul! You'd better come out quickly! You don't want to be dragged out!

Paul: ...for fuck's sake!

[Paul scratched his head, said goodbye, and walked out.]

Paul: Hey, what... are you doing here so early in the morning? ...what's this, what's the situation?

[The moment he opened the door, he saw the scene.]

[Unhappy-looking Elinalise and Talhand, Ghislaine holding a noose, and Geese tied up at the end of the noose.]

Geese: Paul, help me!

Paul: I'll wait until you tell me if I can help you or not. The reason you're in such a mess is because of something you did, isn't it?

Elinalise: Yes, that's right! This man has done... something unforgivable!

Paul: Well, don't be so worked up. I mean, weren't you just shacking up with a guy?

Talhand: I found it to be an emergency situation. So I woke her up and brought her over.

Elinalise: Uhuh! We were having such an intense time of it and we were then interrupted!

Paul: I see. That's why you're so angry?

Elinalise: No, it's not! My anger is all against Geese!

[Paul pulls a face at Elinalise, who makes no attempt to hide her indignation.]

Paul: (Geese, oh... Seriously, what the hell did you do wrong?)

Paul: ...for now, let's go somewhere calm and talk, okay?

[The leader's suggestion, which was tinged with confusion, was accepted by everyone, and the black wolf's fangs moved on, dragging Geese along with them.]

[When they arrived at the inn room rented by the party, Geese was rolled on the floor.]

Paul: So? What happened?

Talhand: He gambled away all the money from the party.

Paul: ...Huh?

Ghislaine: All of it.

Paul: What about...?

Elinalise: We are a party of poor and penniless people right now.

Elinalise: Although we have paid for our lodgings here in advance... we can't afford to pay anything else. At this rate, we are going to end up bankrupting ourselves.

Paul: ...Geese, for real?

[He looked down at the man who was still rolling over and looked away quickly.]

Paul: Is this true...?

Geese: Yesterday, after you were gone, I left the bar after drinking as much as I could... After that, I found a betting booth...

Geese: I thought I could win. I figured I couldn't lose twice in the same night...

Geese: I was drunk and felt burned from losing the bet with you...

Paul: So you bet all the money the party was worth and went broke?

Geese: ...

Elinalise: Geese, tell us everything.

Paul: ? There's more?

[Geese's shoulders jumped at the sharp voice of Elinalise.]

Geese: ...I've saddled us with debt.

Paul: Oh, you...!

Ghislaine: I heard when I tied him up. It's quite a lot of money, apparently.

Ghislaine: To repay the money, we need to do an A-rated mission... or two? Three? ...I hear you have to take on a lot of them.

Paul: I know it's a lot of work. No wonder you guys came storming in in the morning.

[Paul sighed. Then, Geese picked up his body from where he had been lying and bowed his head vigorously.]

Geese: I'm really sorry! I've blown all our hard-earned money, and we're even in debt...

Geese: If it goes on like this, I'll be chased by debt collectors, and I'll cause trouble for everyone... If that happens, I'm going to...

Paul: Raise your head.

[Paul kneels on the floor and grabs Geese by the shoulders to make him look up.]

Paul: What *about* the debt collectors? Don't be scared of them.

Paul: We're the best team. There is no one who can beat us.

Geese: Paul...

Elinalise: I'm not sure I want to be chased by a debt collector. If they come while you're in the middle of taking care of a request, you'll be in trouble...

Ghislaine: Do you want me to cut them all up?

Talhand: Don't do it. The guild will just look at us funny."

Talhand: They wouldn't care if it's an S-ranked party, but if it's still an A-ranked party, they'll give you no preferential treatment.

Paul: So if we were an S-ranked party, we'd have no problem busting the debt collectors?

Elinalise: Well, probably. They can turn a blind eye to some violations.

Talhand: But there's no way we would be able to be promoted right now. We'll have to take action.

Ghislaine: I see.

[As expected of the "Fang of the Black Wolf," being penniless was not encouraging. While the members were in a heavy mood, Paul came up with a strange idea.]

Paul: Okay, let's go.

Ghislaine: Where to?

Paul: Just get the money and pay off the debt as soon as we can.

[Paul grinned wickedly as he cut the rope that tied Geese up—and then he smiled.]

Chapter 21

[In the center of town, there was a tavern. It was a tavern for the wealthy, and for the past six months it had been rented out by a party of adventurers.]

[A B-rank party would never have been able to rent the place, but the party was supported by the nobility and had no financial difficulties.]

Adventurer: Oh? A guest for my esteemed self? Get away from me! I ain't meeting nobody today!

[The party leader's face is swollen, grim and indignant.]

[No wonder. Last night, the man had been turned down by a woman and got knocked out with a single blow by a young man whose name he did not know.]

Adventurer: The next time I see you, I'll get angry!

[The moment the man spoke out his anger, the door to the bar was blown open.]

Adventurer: !? What the hell!?

[While he was upset, a party member entering the tavern was blown away and slammed into a wall.]

[Then a group of young men enter, all of whom look familiar.]

Paul: Yo, haven't seen you since yesterday!

Adventurer: Hey, you bastard, w-what are you doing here!

Paul: You said you had plenty of money, didn't you? I guess you weren't lying when you said that and rented out such a nice tavern!

Adventurer: So what? What are you up to, dammit!? I just let my guard down yesterday! I'm a B-rank—

Paul: Don't introduce yourself. I'm not interested in guys. Anyway, give me... as much money as you have.

Adventurer: Wha...?

[What Paul and the Fangs of the Black Wolf did was nothing short of a raid and robbery, but fortunately, the party they were dealing with had a reputation for being a party of ill repute.]

[The party had a bad reputation among the general public, as they were greedy with money and did not take their requests seriously because they had so much money.]

[Therefore, it was not reported that The Fangs of the Black Wolf had committed a robbery, but

this case became known to the public as a mugging case.]

Ghislaine: Today, I was screamed at by an adventurer whose eyes met mine at the guild.

Geese: No wonder. There is no one around here who doesn't know about it. The Fangs of the Black Wolf is well-known now.

Elinalise: Even though it's all infamy.

Talhand: A team of thugs who never leave even a blade of grass after they pass through'... right?

Elinalise: That's just so rude. I'd like to be known as a good adventurer who achieved rank A in a short period of time.

Geese: No two ways about it. After that mugging incident, our name will be known in a bad way no matter what we do.

Elinalise: That's why I was against it. I didn't want to go in there and beat them up.

Talhand: What does the woman who was the most violent of all the women say?

Ghislaine: I wasn't beaten.

Geese: You don't have to compete with me there.

Paul: (...)

[Paul felt his heart warming as he watched his companions exchanging pleasant words with each other.]

Paul: (I don't know how to say it, but... this right here feels cozy)

Paul: (I'm not annoyed, I'm not empty. I'm rather content.)

[He had a lonely childhood, and without understanding the meaning of companionship, he set out on a journey with a group of boys from the slums.]

[Unable to get along with his adoptive family who lived by the sword, he became an adventurer to escape from them—.]

[Now, Paul was strongly realized it.]

Paul: (This is the place I've been looking for all my life.)

[The Fangs of the Black Wolf continues to make great strides.]

[Paul and his team moved their base to the Kikka Kingdom, where they mainly handled A-rank requests.]

Chapter 22

[Then one day. When the Fangs of the Black Wolf returned to the guild after completing the request, Paul was stopped by the woman at the reception desk.]

Paul: Are you finally ready to go on a date with me?

Paul: Er, oh, no... There's a visitor? For me?

[According to the receptionist, the guest is a man of the human race and is now waiting in another room.]

Ghislaine: Are you going to meet him?"

Paul: I heard it's a man...

Elinalise: Maybe he's got a juicy story to tell you. Go ahead and meet him.

Paul: (Of course not.)

[In the case of a lucrative or juicy story, a request may be made without going through the guild.]

[But as long as the man is visiting the guild, there is no chance of that.]

Paul: (What a pain in the ass.)

[Paul, who had been ready to go straight to the bar where he is based, reluctantly steps into another room.]

[He opens the door. Paul's face hardened when he saw who was there.]

Paul: You...

Servant: Ah... young master...

Servant: It's been a long time since I've seen you... Oh! You've grown up so much...!

[It has been several years since Paul have seen the man's face. The servant of the Notos Greyrat family was there with tears in his eyes.]

Paul: Why are you here...?

Servant: We have been keeping track of you since you ran away from the house, sir.

Paul: ...we'd sent our pursuers away.

Servant: Yes, we lost sight of you along the way and have not been able to locate you since then. But a few months ago, we received a lead.

Servant: I understand that it has been called the “mugging case...” The aristocrat who was behind that party was a family close to the Notos Greyrat family...

Servant: We learned of the existence of the Fangs of the Black Wolf. I learned the name of the leader, and this is how I came to confirm—

Paul: Enough. Don't say anything more.

[Paul's voice naturally turns cold. The servant's shoulders trembled as the formidable adventurer looked at him with sharp eyes.]

Paul: I've given up the name Notos Greyrat. I'm just Paul now.

Servant: No, young master—

Paul: I have nothing to say. Was it my father who sent you to me? I'm telling him for the second time to leave me alone.

[The servant tries to stop him, calling out "Young master!" But Paul doesn't look back.]

[His chest throbs with discomfort. Paul quickly left the room and headed for the tavern where he was based. He wanted to see his friends as soon as possible.]

Ghislaine: I see you're already here.

Paul: I guess.

Ghislaine: The man who was waiting for you, do you know him?

Paul: No, I don't know him. He thought I was someone else.

Geese: What's that? You mean it was a waste of time.

Paul: That's what I'm saying. Damn, I'm sick of it.

Elinalise: ...

[Paul shrugs and laughs.]

Paul: (I ain't lying.)

Paul: (Paul Notos Greyrat is nowhere to be found anymore.)

[He never intended to see his parents' relations again. Paul would soon forget about the servant and go back to his normal routine—or was going to, but...]

Talhand: Paul, I have a letter for you. He asked me to give it to you..."

Paul: ...throw it away.

[At another point—.]

Geese: Hey, Paul. There's a guy here to see you. A pretty well-dressed guy, yeah?

Paul: "Send him away."

[Another time—]

Ghislaine: I have a letter for you.

Paul: You can throw it away.

Ghislaine: All of them? They gave me ten of them.

Paul: Ju... just throw them all away.

[Against Paul's wishes, the servant was not about to give up contact.]

[Being a well-known party, he seemed to have quickly recognized the faces of the members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf, and at every turn he entrusted them with letters or asked them to act as intermediaries.]

Geese: Paul, I hear your family is a nobleman?

[As a result of the contact between the servant and his companions, it was soon discovered that Paul was a nobleman's son who had run away from home.]

Geese: I can't believe you were born a nobleman.. You've been hiding it all along!

Paul: ...

Geese: Paul's a noble kid! I can't allow you to keep such a juicy secret that could be a good snack!

Paul: Don't take it as a joke. Besides, I don't even have anything to do with them anymore.

Talhand: Isn't Paul the only one who thinks so?

Paul: Aah?

Ghislaine: Maybe one of these days he'll show up at one of the places we go out on a request.

Paul: Don't say anything ominous about...

Elinalise: Bad omens usually come true, don't they?

[And then, we followed Ghislaine and Elinalise's advice... The servant began ambushing people in front of the guild and even showing up at requests received by the Fangs of the Black Wolf.]

Servant: Young master! Please listen to what I have to say!

Paul: I said I don't want to listen!

Paul: (You think I'm going to bother to listen to you when I'm sure I'm going to be offended by whatever you say?)

[Finally, Paul strikes out in the use of force.]

Servant: Gh...!

[He strikes the back of the servant's neck, knocking him unconscious. He might be targeted by a thief, but he is not someone to worry about. Paul leaves him there.]

Elinalise: Do you think it's all right?

Paul: I'm sure he'll get over it. I don't want them coming after me any more.

Elinalise: I understand...

[As Paul had intended, no more servants appeared before him after that day.]

[But the letters did not stop. For months after the servant disappeared, they arrived at the guild every day.]

Chapter 23

[Soon Paul realized that six months had passed since his reunion with the servant...]

Ghislaine: Paul, today's mail.

Paul: Throw it away.

Ghislaine: Okay.

Geese: I didn't know it was delivered to the guild today. Hey, why don't you read it? Don't you wanna know what it says?

Paul: If you want to read it so much, you read it.

Geese: "Oh? I don't read other people's letters. Especially if they are written to my friends."

[Almost every day a letter arrives at the guild, and the members take turns receiving them and handing them to Paul.]

Elinalise: Paul, may I have a word?

Paul: What's wrong? I haven't received any new requests yet, so you can go ahead and screw around tonight, okay?

Elinalise: Yes, I'll be doing that. Paul, you should go here.

[The note given to Elinalise shows a simply drawn map.]

Paul: Is this... an inn?

Paul: Is this a roundabout way of asking me out?

Elinalise: No, it's not. There is someone there who wants to meet Paul.

Paul: Like some shy girl who fell in love with me, but can't approach me?

Elinalise: There is a messenger waiting for you from your parents' house who has been rejected by you.

Paul: Huh...

Elinalise: He came back here today after being away for a while. We met him by chance a few minutes ago.

Elinalise: So I set up a meeting with you.

Paul: Are you fucking kidding me? Don't go on ahead taking liberties!

[Blood rushes to his head. He crushed the note he had received. He suppressed the urge to yell at her with the last bit of reason he had left in him.]

Elinalise: I am not playing around with you. I happen to be very serious, you know?

Talhand: Elinalise, just give it a rest. We have decided not to get too involved.

Elinalise: We have seen the letters entrusted to Paul and then thrown away. Over and over again.

Elinalise: But no matter how much time we spend, nothing has changed. Time has gone by unnecessarily.

Paul: Then why don't you just not bother? If you are annoyed by my attitude, don't accept the letters. Why won't you just ignore them?

Elinalise: What about you? Will you be able to keep on ignoring them?

Paul: Yeah.

[He nodded as he looked back into Elinalise's eyes. She huffed and smiled condescendingly at Paul.]

Elinalise: That's a lie, isn't it?

Paul: !!!

Elinalise: It's obvious that you're having your mind stirred up. Even if you're okay now, don't you think you might be distracted and make a big mistake one of these days?

Elinalise: We can't trust our lives to a party leader like that.

[Elinalise did not raise her voice, nor did she speak loudly. However, her words pierced Paul's heart.]

[Paul turns away from Elinalise.]

Paul: (I'm... alone in this...)

Paul: (Are they trying to destroy the place where I belong?)

[Feeling as if his body temperature had dropped. The blood started to flow, and a shudder ran down his spine.]

Elinalise: Paul.

Paul: ...what is it?"

[He can't look at her face.]

Elinalise: It's not like you to turn away from your friends.

Elinalise: Paul, please look up at me.

[He slowly raises his face.]

Paul: (Ah...)

[Contrary to the harsh words, Elinalise's face was calm.]

Elinalise: What is a man like Paul, the leader of the famous Fangs of the Black Wolf, to be so frightened at the mere contact with his parents' home?

Elinalise: Go and see him peacefully. If he says something offensive, then you can simply punch him in the face.

Ghislaine: It's easy to understand. I'll lend a hand then.

Geese: In that case, I think we'd better get ourselves a strong drink.

Talhand: Need something that can make your memory skip a beat? Hmm, I know just the thing.

Paul: You guys...

Paul: (I'm not so stubborn that I'll stand against my friends when they push me so hard, huh?)

[Paul opens his clenched hand and unfolds the crumpled note.]

Paul: ...Then I've got no choice but to go see him. I'll send him away again this time.

[Paul is not a young man with an honest disposition. With such sarcasm in his mouth, he headed for the inn where his servant was waiting for him—]

Chapter 24

[He did not expect Paul to actually come, and when he opened the door to his room, the servant made a face as if he could not believe it.]

Servant: Young master...

Paul: I don't care about talking much. Just tell me what you want.

Servant: Ah... yes...

[They sat down across from each other. The servant was thinner than when I had seen him before.]

Paul: (His face reminds me of all the things I want to forget about...)

Paul: (Let's get this over with so I can have a drink with the guys—)

Servant: The master is no longer with us."

Paul: The—

["What did he just say?" Paul's consciousness, which had been escaping from reality, was called back in an instant.]

Paul: Oi... you, what did you say...

Servant: The master... That is to say, Amarant-sama, has passed away from an illness...

Paul: ...no...it can't be...

[His hands trembled. His head refused to comprehend the words. His head hurt, but no tears came out.]

Servant: After Young Master left the mansion, the Master had disciplined himself even more strictly than before and had behaved honorably as the head of the family.

Servant: But about a year ago, he fell ill and his health declined. Since then, his physical condition had not been good...

Servant: It was a while after that. I found out that Young Master was in the Kingdom of Kikka...

Servant: I came to you six months ago because I had to tell you that the Master was in a perilous condition.

Paul: I see...

Servant: To tell you the truth, I would have liked to have taken young master home, but it was beyond my ability to do so... So I went back to the house.

Paul: Did you take care of him in his last moments?

Servant: Yes, with the others in the mansion and Pilemon-sama...

Paul: Pilemon, huh?

[The last time he saw him face to face, Pilemon was a child. Nowadays, he doesn't even know what his brother looks like.]

Servant: The Master had fallen ill, and Philemon-sama has been acting for the head of the family at short notice.

Paul: That guy?

Servant: Yes... He was trying his best to get along with the Master, probably because he had seen the Master's splendid behavior.

Paul: ...past tense, huh?

Servant: The world of the nobility is not easy. The Young Master Pilemon was underestimated and looked down upon, and he must have been completely brokenhearted...

Servant: He was constantly looking at the faces of those around him, and he began to flatter those who were more powerful.

Servant: He took to drifting with such unbecoming ease as the head of the family. He often changes his opinions and confuses those below him.

[It seems that Philemon was completely absorbed into the world of the aristocracy. He follows those who are strong. That is one of the ways to survive in the aristocratic world.]

[He was a cocky and repulsive little brother. Paul had little feeling for him, so little that he hardly remembered him since he left on his journey.]

Paul: (Still...)

Paul: What was Dad doing? Even if he was sick and bedridden, he could've raised Pilemon strictly, couldn't he?"

Servant: ...Master was afraid of him. He was afraid that if he treated him harshly, he would repeat what had happened with Paul-sama himself...

Paul: Feared...? That father is... no, no, that's a lie...

[Paul's father, who never looked at him. He had always hated him.]

[But at the same time he hated him, he also feared him. The image of his strength to survive in a world he had run away from is still etched in Paul's memory.]

Paul: "I don't know what kind of guy Pilemon has become, but isn't it still your job to support

him?"

Servant: You are right, sir. However, Pilemon-sama is too much out of favor with those below him...

Servant: The worst thing that has happened with him was that he showed dependence on Amarant-sama, who was already sick and had his health on the wane.

Paul: !

Servant: The servants of the house had a deep respect for the Master. Because of that, they distrusted Pilemon-sama even more.

Servant: Paul, who was always making his own will known, was more suitable to be the head of the Notos Greyrat family than Pilemon, who had no opinion of his own and was always dependent on other people's opinions.

Servant: We all agree on that now.

Paul: Are you... asking me to go back to and take over house Notos?"

Servant: Grayrats are a military family. There is no need to hide the fact that you have a history of being a rank A adventurer.

Paul: ...Are you kidding me?

Paul: I'm not going to be someone "with a history of being an adventurer." You're talking nonsense.

[Paul's answer had already been given. He had no intention of returning to the world of the nobility.]

Paul: If that's all you want to talk about, I'm going. Don't ever show your face in front of me again.

[As he was about to leave the room, a letter was presented to him.]

Paul: What's this?

Servant: A letter from the Master.

Paul: !! My father wrote to me...?

[The memory of the night he ran away from home came back to Paul's mind—.]

Amarant: You...! Do you dare to belittle the name of our house!

Amarant: Such a man is not needed in this house! The family name will be inherited by Pilemon! Get out of here now!

Paul: Yeah, that's right! That's fine with me! I'm getting out of this house!

[Fighting words. The last time he saw his father's face was in a rage, and a bitter feeling swirls in his chest just remembering it.]

Servant: 'Please read this letter at least. It is Amarant-sama's last and final letter to you...!

Paul: ...

[Paul receives the letter, but hesitated to open it.]

Paul: (My dad's...his last...)

[The letter that the servant sent out, his friends received, and Paul kept throwing away. If he had read it, would he have been present at the end of his father's life?]

Paul: (If I had known my dad was in critical condition, would I have gone to see him?)

[I don't know, no matter how many 'what ifs' I think about.]

[Paul exhaled deeply and eventually opened the sealed envelope and began to read the letter.]

Dear Paul,
When you chance to read this letter, I will be dead.
I have been thinking of you often since I fell ill.

I made a big mistake.
And not just the night I kicked you out.
I have been wrong in my treatment of you for all these years.
Whether it was the house arrest or being cold to you, I have done nothing but wrong in my treatment of you.
I took my grief at the loss of Valentina and my anger at myself for not being able to save her or do anything to help her, and I took it all out on you.

No matter how much I hone my skills with the sword, no matter how much I am praised as a lord, I am still an immature man. I have lost my wife and my son.

I'm sorry, Paul.
I was hard on you, not considering your feelings.
I blamed you, not considering your feelings.
I am truly sorry.

Please forgive your foolish father.

[The letter ended in the middle.]

Paul: ("Please forgive your foolish father"... huh?)

Paul: (I can't... do that, can I? I'm not going to forgive you for what you've done.)

[When he looks up and sees the servant, he looks at Paul with expectant eyes.]

[Perhaps he is expecting Paul to say he will return, having been struck by the letter.]

Paul: Notos Greyrat is a high-ranking noble house of the Kingdom of Asura. It's a distinguished military family with a long history.

Servant: Yes, that is correct, sir. It is the family that the Young Master would inherit—

Paul: I have no intention of doing so. It is a house that has nothing to do with me anymore.

Servant: Paul-sama...!?

Paul: I have given up the name of nobility. I have no intention of going back.

Paul: You are vassals of the Notos. No matter how dissatisfied you are, you are to serve your lord with sincerity.

Paul: If you say you loved my father, don't give up your way of life as a vassal. It would be treason to try to take on another head of the family.

Servant: Well, that's...

Paul: Don't ever show your face in front of me. The next time you try to contact me, I will cut you down. I will show no mercy.

[The servant froze, as if he had forgotten how to breathe, as if he had been stared at by a skilled adventurer who had been through the ordeal.]

[He was not about to take the letter home with him. Paul put down the letter and got up from his seat.]

Paul: (Amarant Notos Greyrat... You who looked so strong are just another weak man.)

Paul: (Now that I know that, I'm not ready to forgive you. But... just once before you'd died...)

Paul: (It would have been nice to have a chance to talk to you.)

[He will never forget his childhood. But maybe things were just a little bit lighter now.]

Paul: (If I have children one day, I won't make the same mistake you did.)

Paul: (I will continue to live my life so that when I die, I won't think, "I made a lot of mistakes.")

[Paul strongly believed that he will continue to live in this place that he found and finally got...]

[Just a few moments before leaving the room. For the first and last time, Paul prayed for his father, Amarant, to rest in peace.]

Adventurer Retirement Arc

Episode 1 [Zenith]

Chapter 1

[There are a number of adventurer parties that boast Rank A, but among them, there is one that has been the talk of the town recently, with a name that always comes up—]

Woman A: Did you hear? I heard that that party has conquered another labyrinth!

Man A: I've seen them fight, but even though the members belong to different races, they are in perfect sync!

Man A: Although they work in simple coordination, each of them is highly skilled! As a fellow adventurer, I admire them!

Woman B: The leader is very charming. He's strong and has a handsome face...and I heard... that he's amazing at night!

Man B: They are monsters! It's a famous story that not even a blade of grass is left after they pass through!

Man C: They got into a fight at a bar and went on a rampage. You are an idiot before having the balls to fight with those guys. Do you have a death wish?

[Their reputation, a mixture of favorable and unfavorable publicity, is spreading throughout the central continent, and everyone is paying attention to what they are up to. The name of this small elite party is the Fangs of the Black Wolf—.]

[They were currently running around the Red Dragon Mountains.]

Paul: Oooooooooohh! They're coming this way! Run, run!

Geese: Gghh, heavy...! You better lose some weight if you make it back alive, Talhand!

Talhand: Yeah, if we make it out of here alive.

Elinalise: Don't be so fussy!

[Paul and Geese run down the trackless path in the mountain range, dragging the slow-footed Talhand by each arm. Elinalise followed close behind.]

Ghislaine: This way! Poke through the bushes! There's a steep slope ahead! Watch out!

[Ghislaine, who was leading the group, said loudly without looking back, and at the same time disappeared into the deep bushes. Paul and the others followed her and stepped into the bushes.]

[The ground that should have been under their feet was gone.]

Paul: What the hell?

Geese: A cliiiiffff!?

[His feet, which were running as fast as they could, could not be stopped. A sudden turn of events. The members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf fell from the cliff.]

[Fortunately, the leaves and branches of the overgrown trees acted as a cushion, and they did not die or suffer serious injuries.]

[Except for Ghislaine, who jumped of her own volition, everyone else was knocked to the ground and were left looking up into the sky.]

Elinalise: ...This is the worst.

Paul: I agree. But we survived.

Ghislaine: Just barely, though.

[A Red Dragon was flying high in the sky. It was the one that had been chasing Paul and the others. Losing sight of its prey, the monster circled and returned to its flock.]

[The Red Dragons, which mainly inhabit the Red Dragon Mountains, are extremely ferocious and are classified as the most dangerous monsters on the central continent. Individually, they were considered to have S-rank strength.]

Paul: It's unbelievable, isn't it... I can't believe that big thing can move so nimbly...

[Paul muttered to himself as he sat up. Despite the sound of his voice and words, he had a somewhat happy expression on his face.]

Geese: It was spitting flames out of its mouth, wasn't it? If you had taken a serious bite from that thing, you could have had your bones turned to ashes...

Talhand: In addition, it seemed to be highly intelligent. It had the presence of mind to take out the troublesome enemies first.

Ghislaine: There are too few of us to beat them

Paul: Seven... or maybe eight parties. Well, we'd still lose a lot of lives.

Elinalise: Who was it? Who said that they wanted to see those powerful Red Dragons!

Geese: That's you...

[The eyes of the members of the the Fangs of the Black Wolf gathered on their leader. Paul frowned at the piercing glances.]

Paul: I'm not the only one!

Elinalise: It's mostly your idea, was it not!?

Paul: Why the hell would I do that!

Paul: We were going near the Red Dragon Mountains, and when I said we should see the Red Dragon anyway, you agreed with me!

Elinalise: You could see them from afar! Why did we have to come all the way up here to see it!

Ghislaine: ...

Geese: ?

[Paul and Elinalise were shouting at each other, and Ghislaine was watching them.]

[Geese, who felt somewhat uncomfortable, tilted his head, and Talhand interrupted Paul and the others.]

Talhand: Don't bark, Elinalise. You had the same feeling that you wanted to have a chance at some excitement, didn't you?

Elinalise: But I am only willing to pay for it with my own life.

Geese: Dragon slaying is a lucrative business. Bone, flesh, and skin... Dragon materials are of the highest quality. Even the reward for killing a dragon is enough to live on for a year.

Ghislaine: A year? That's how much money you can get!

Geese: Yeah. The details aside, you should at least remember the price of a dangerous request, right?

Ghislaine: I'll make an effort...

[Ghislaine nodded with a mysterious look on her face, but it was not clear whether she would understand even if she tried.]

[Paul clasped Ghislaine's shoulder, whose expression was stiff.]

Paul: Don't be so tense! We don't have anyone who would think of cheating you and exploiting you!

Ghislaine: Yeah, right...

Geese: ...

Talhand: ...at any rate, the request itself has been completed. We have to go return to the guild.

Paul: Yeah! Let's get the hell out of here and hit the bars!

[Recently, the Fangs of the Black Wolf has been working in the form of going back and forth between the guilds of the Kikka and Sanakia Kingdoms.]

[For this reason, the Fangs of the Black Wolf has attracted particular attention in both countries, and when they successfully complete a request and return home, influential people who want to establish a relationship with them will prepare a party to celebrate.]

[Paul and his friends were having a great time drinking and singing in a bar filled with attractive young men and women.]

Geese:“ ...

Paul: Hey, hey, Geese! What’s with the difficult look on your face?

Paul: There’s good food, expensive drinks! A banquet with all kinds of beautiful people, and you can’t even enjoy it? You’ve become a man of extravagance!

[Paul, who has already been drinking as much as he can, is in a good mood and patting Geese on the shoulder with a red face.]

Geese: ...Paul.

Paul: Hmm?

Geese: I need to talk to you.

Paul: alk? What is it?

Geese: I’m serious.

Paul: Oh?

[Contrary to the bustle of the surroundings, there was a tense atmosphere at the table around them.]

[The men and women who had been gathered for the reception, perhaps sensing this, quickly moved away from the table. The men and women who had been gathered for the reception quickly separated. They went toward Talhand, who was comparing drinks; Elinalise, who was flanked by men; and Ghislaine, who was drinking quietly.]

Geese: Maybe it’s just my imagination.

Paul: What is it? If you have something to say, don’t waste your time and say it now!

Geese: Uh...

Geese: Paul, you... took a bite, didn’t you?

Paul: ...

[“A bite out of what?” Paul did not ask. Paul understood what Geese was referring to without being told directly.]

Geese: You put your hands on her, didn’t you?

Geese: On Ghislaine.

Paul: ...

Geese: That's not all. You slept with Elinalise, too, didn't you?

Paul: ...

[Silence is an affirmation. Paul slurped down the remaining liquor in his cup, then propped himself up on his elbows and folded his hands.]

Paul: Listen.

Geese: I don't want to hear about your affairs, but I need to know what's going on at the party...

Paul: It was because of being in heat.

Geese: What? You're in heat all year round, right?

Paul: You idiot, I wasn't talking about me.

[Paul glared at Geese as if to say, "What are you taking for granted?"]

Paul: It's not about me, it's about Ghislaine.

Geese: ...when?

Paul: The other day, there was a request that brought in a lot of money, right? When you gambled away your money and went into hiding for a while, well, that's what happened.

Geese: What about... Talhand?

Paul: That's right, he got a lot of money, so he went to a lot of bars, compared drinks, got busted, woke up, compared drinks, and was gone for a while.

Paul: I think she was in heat at the time, you know. I just got out of hand...

Paul: When a woman with such a nice ass asks you out, how can a man refuse her?

Geese: Hm? Did Ghislaine ask you out?

[Paul's reply stalled for a moment. Then he blatantly looks away from Geese.]

Paul: No, I mean, whether she asked me out or I took advantage of her...

Geese: There's no limit to how out of control you are. So, you couldn't resist looking at Ghislaine, who was in heat, and you took advantage of her, right?

Geese: So? What about Elinalise?

Paul: Ah—... she found out about me and Ghislaine, and we had an affair...

[This is not the first time Paul has had relations with Elinalise. They had first gotten in bed together when he recruited her, and then several times after that.]

[But after sleeping with both the women in the party, Paul himself had no idea what the atmosphere and relationship would be like in the Fangs of the Black Wolf from then on out.]

Geese: ...you, you're really... living by the bottom half of your body, to the point of stupefaction...

Geese: "For God's sake, do a decent job of it, will you? You don't want to get bludgeoned in the company of your friends, do you?"

Paul: ...I know, I know. The Fangs of the Black Wolf is the best party. I don't want to destroy it either.

Geese: I'm not sure how much I can help you if you know that and you still mess with it... You better discipline that wild son of yours.

Paul: ...yeah.

[Paul was impressed by Geese and could only nod.]

[Before forming The Fangs of the Black Wolf, Paul had joined parties on the fly and had been kicked out for groping the women in said parties.]

Paul: (I ain't learnin', neither...)

[He would have to be selective about the women he puts his hands on. Paul only vaguely understood that there are some with whom he should not have casual relations.]

Paul: ...Okay!

Geese: What's up with all the enthusiasm?

Paul: I'm going to play.

[Declaring so with dignity, Paul heads toward the women who have been summoned to the banquet and call out to them.]

Geese: ...doesn't care about discipline, does he?

[The muttering of Geese's disgust didn't reach Paul, who was fishing for women.]

[It wasn't hard to raise enough money for all the members to spend freely, and their fame, though mixed with notoriety, was growing.]

Paul: (... things are going well, aren't they?)

[Maybe that's why. Paul, who had been living a hectic life since he left home, was beginning to feel that his stable life is somewhat lacking—.]

Paul: (That said, going to see a Red Dragon might have been a bit far-fetched, but not to say exciting, suggestion.)

Chapter 2

[A few days later, Paul showed up at the guild with Elinalise.]

[He decided to take on a request that was not as difficult as dragon slaying so that he would not have to feel inadequate.]

Paul: (Hmm?)

[Paul and Elinalise were about to go check the quest board when they noticed that a group of men had their backs to them and were hunched over each other. Apparently, they are surrounding someone.]

Adventurer A: Heh! Zenith-chan is only 15 years old and already a D-rank adventurer? And a healer at that, isn't that amazing!

Adventurer B: If you haven't joined any party yet, come to ours. We're looking for healers. Let's work hard together from now on!

Zenith: Oh, my! Is that okay? Are you sure?"

Adventurer B: Of course,! Yeah, but... our leader is a B-rank adventurer, so Zenith-chan can't join our party right now.

Adventurer B: You can join as an apprentice for now, and we'll reward you handsomely. We'll give you a decent reward, and since it's a B-rank request, Zenith's share will be—

[As far as Paul could tell, the adventurers were in the process of recruiting newcomers. Even though she was treated as an apprentice, the amount she was being offered was considerably lower than the market price.]

Paul: (Is she stupid or what? Who would want to join their party for that kind of money?)

[When Paul snickered, he heard some unbelievable words.]

Zenith: Not only are you letting me join your party, but you're sharing the reward with me? You guys are so sweet!

Paul: (... huh!?)

Paul: ("Is there someone as dumb as Ghislaine?!?!")

[Paul turned his head in the direction of the cheerful voice, which seemed to be going with a whimper. From between the men's shoulders, he can see the girl called Zenith.]

Paul: (...!!!!!!)

[The moment Paul saw the girl, whose face was still youthful, he was struck by a sensation he had never felt before. He does not know what it was.]

Elinalise: It sounds good to say she's pure, but that would be a terrible thing to do. But it's none of our business... Paul?

[She noticed that Paul's feet were moving. He passed by Elinalise silently—.]

Paul: (I don't know if this kid's empty-headed or naive, but I can't leave her alone)

Paul: (As an A-ranked party, we have a responsibility to make sure we don't let the lower ranks down...!)

Paul: (Just when we needed a healer too...)

[Paul puts his hands on the men's shoulders, making an excuse in his mind to no one in particular.]

Paul: What a coincidence.

Paul: We've been looking for you too, healer.

Adventurer A: Aaah! What's the matter with you all of a sudden? We approached this girl first, you know? Don't get in our way!

Zenith: Huh? What?

Paul: Ha, you revealed your true nature, didn't you?

[Zenith seems confused by the sudden appearance of Paul and the adventurers, who have changed their gentle attitude and raised their voices.]

Paul: You're doing a dirty job, trying to cheat newcomers by talking up to them. Are you trying to exploit people you don't know anything about?

Adventurer A: Shut up! What the hell are you up to? Are you going to lecture us? Who the hell do you think you are?

[The adventurers grabbed Paul's hands and popped them off his shoulders, and then they started to shout at him. They probably thought he was nothing more than a cheeky, righteous young... man with a sense of justice.]

Paul: (Don't these guys know me?)

Paul: (... sounds just perfect!)

[The adventurers around him either knew Paul or didn't want to get into trouble, so they didn't try to interfere.]

[Paul gave a sly, mocking smile and encouraged the men.]

Paul: I'm not going to preach to you. I don't think guys like you are going to change your minds no matter what anyone says to you.

Paul: I mean, what's the use of being the first to speak? The first one to speak up doesn't necessarily win, and you haven't officially recruited the girl to your party yet, have you?

Paul: Then why can't I interfere? My party is stronger than yours. It's convenient for me to do so, isn't it?

Adventurer A: Oh? You think you're better than us?

Paul: Of course I do. You want to give it a try?

Adventurer A: That's just great! I'm going to make you regret your cheeky talk!

Adventurer B: What? Hey, this guy is somewhere on...

Adventurer A: Shut up! I'm gonna do it!

[The men clench their fists and strike at us. It's a forceful, linear movement.]

Paul: That's no match for me.

[Paul lightly twists his body to avoid the attack, and counters by slamming his fist into the man's gaping abdomen.]

[With a fluid step, he then delivered a powerful kick to the side of the other man's head. Paul then followed up on the fallen men with another blow.]

Paul: What's the matter? Is this how it's going to be?

Adventurer A: Gu, ha...! What the hell is this...?

Adventurer B

Oh, I remember... this guy is from the Fangs—"

[It was a one-sided beat-down. He beat up the men like twisting a baby's hand. While no one tried to stop Paul—.]

Zenith: Please, no more!

Paul: ...oops...

[Zenith jumped at Paul to grab his upraised arm.]

[She did not have the strength to stop Paul with her arms. He stopped moving, careful not to shake her off, and came face to face with Zenith.]

Zenith: Haven't you had enough? This is just bullying the weak!

Paul: Are you defending these guys?

[Somehow this is not funny. Paul wrinkled his brow.]

Zenith: Of course! What the hell are you doing showing up out of nowhere?

Zenith: And why isn't anyone stopping you? They can't just stand there and watch...!

Adventurer B: Well, there's no doubt... that he's... Paul of the Fangs of the Black Wolf!

Adventurer A: He's a monster! I can't do this!

Paul: Ah!

Zenith: Eh?

[The men got up so agilely that it was hard to believe their bodies were in tatters, and ran away at once. Zenith, who was left on the spot, rolled her eyes in dismay.]

Zenith: The Fangs of the Black Wolf...? Is that you?

Paul: Yeah. I'm Paul, the leader."

Zenith: I've heard rumors. No wonder no one is trying to stop you...

Paul: Well, no one wants to get hurt by getting involved in something unrelated. Adventurers need more than a sense of justice.

Paul: Anyway, that's settled. You're going to join our party.

Zenith: What? What are you doing—

[Just as Zenith was about to retort, the guild officials got off their asses and began to take control of the situation.]

Zenith: Wait, wait! I'm still not done talking about—

Paul: Later, later. Elinalise, watch out for this girl.

Elinalise: ...Looks like it can't be helped. I hope you'll get it done and come back soon.

[Paul replied with a short "Right," and went to a back room with a guild official.]

[When Elinalise, who was left behind, looked at Zenith, she looked as if she was not satisfied.]

Elinalise: Why are you looking so glum, my dear? You were just saved by him.

Zenith: What do you mean he saved me? He suddenly appeared and suddenly went berserk...

Zenith: What on earth do you mean by that? That was like...

Elinalise: You mean to say he looks like a thug?

Zenith: ...yeah.

[Elinalise sighs in disgust.]

Elinalise: You don't understand anything, do you? If you had just gone along with them like that, who knows what would have happened...

Elinalise: You would have been paid an unfairly low price for what you did.

Zenith: Eh?

Elinalise: It's not only that. You might have been used as a shield for monsters under the guise of friendly competition and training.

Zenith: Huh?

Elinalise: Or they may have been forced to use magic endlessly until they fainted. Or, to be more precise...

Elinalise: You are a beautiful girl. It is conceivable that you could be asked for your body, and even if you refuse, you could be... forced to do so.

Zenith: No, no way! That's not...!

Zenith: There is no way, is there... right...?

[Zenith's common sense told her that it was unthinkable. Elinalise shrugged her shoulders as she was upset. The action alone conveyed a response without words.]

Zenith: Wow, I...

Elinalise: Paul himself is not a good man, but he would not cheat and exploit a newcomer. He is not a man who would think petty things like that.

Elinalise: He can be violent and hot-headed, but he is a man with a big heart, a man you can count on.

Zenith: ...

[Zenith had nothing more to say. Elinalise said nothing more, and they waited for Paul to return.]

[When Paul returned, Elinalise said, "I'm going to go tell the others about the newcomer," and left the guild.]

Zenith: ...Why?

[They were alone, and Zenith was the first to open her mouth.]

Zenith: Why did you invite me to join Fangs of the Black Wolf? I'm still a D-rank rookie adventurer. And yet...

Paul: Yeah... that's that. As I said before, we don't have a healer.

Paul: The best way to do this is to get a good, strong, and reliable team. That's why I saved you.

[Paul, while saying the reason, somehow felt that it was not the only reason, but he himself was not sure of his true feelings.]

Zenith: Yes... But it's still a burden...

Paul: Maybe now, but I hope you'll be able to play an active role sooner or later.

Paul: think it would be a waste to refuse. If you want to be a full-fledged adventurer, you know that joining us is the best way.

Zenith: That's...

Paul: The Fangs of the Black Wolf doesn't have a healer. If we want to be better than we are now, we need a healer.

Paul: I want you to be a part of this. I will never make you regret it, so please join us.

[Paul and Zenith's gazes never left each other's. They looked at each other for a while. They looked at each other for a while, and then she nodded her head softly, as if she had made up her mind.]

Paul: Okay, I guess it's settled!

Zenith: Please take care of me from now on...

Paul: No need to be so formal! I'll introduce you to my friends, let's get going!

Zenith: Kya!

[Paul grabs Zenith's hand and starts to run. She was so startled that she almost stumbled, but Paul took her by the hand and they ran out of the guild.]

Chapter 3

[During their stay in the Kingdom of Sanakia, the Fangs of the Black Wolf often gather on the second floor of a tavern not far from the guild.]

[Most of the time, however, they were not all together. Geese was out gambling and Elinalise was staying at an inn with a man.]

[But on that day, unusually, all the members were there.]

Elinalise: We've already discussed all the details.

Paul: Oh, I see. Then I hope you don't mind if I don't muddle through. Let me introduce you to Zenith.

Zenith: I-I'm Zenith! Nice to meet you!

Paul: Don't be so nervous! Talk normally. I told you not to be so formal.

Zenith: Uh, yeah, you're right.

Ghislaine: I hear she's a healer.

Paul: Yes. We haven't had one in our team before, but it's a role we're going to need in the future.

[The feeling of introducing Zenith was not bad, probably because Elinalise had explained the situation to them.]

Zenith: My rank as an adventurer is still low, but I'll try my hardest to catch up soon!

Geese: I understand your enthusiasm, but what about your rank? You ain't getting in with us right now, are you?"

Paul: Yeah. Zenith is D-rank, so that means she'll be an apprentice until her rank is increased.

Paul: So, after you officially join the party, the rewards will be divided equally. There is no such thing as less because you are new.

Zenith: Equal pay? That's not right!

[Zenith raised her voice with a huff at the condition she had never heard before.]

Zenith: I know exactly what I'm capable of. I can't possibly work hard enough to get into an A-ranked party and get paid an equal amount...

[Although Paul's words are a good deal for Zenith, for the rest of the members, it means a reduction in the share.]

[When Zenith shook her head in outrage, the response from the Fangs of the Black Wolf was a simple one.]

Ghislaine: Equal shares are fine. Because the order in which you enter has nothing to do with the amount of your reward.

Geese: That's right. By that logic, I and Talhand would get the most, but that ain't the case.

Elinalise: The Fangs of the Black Wolf is consistent. After Zenith officially joins, that's fine.

Zenith: What... so easily... and you guys don't mind if I join?

[She must have thought that an A-rank party was a bit of a high threshold. Zenith's eyes roll back in her head.]

Talhand: The leader brought you here. You shouldn't have any complaints. You should work hard so that you can officially join.

Elinalise: Oh, dearie me. I really don't like that at all. You're already acting like a senior?

Talhand: What was that?

Geese: Guys, give it a rest!

[Geese intervenes between the quarrelsome Elinalise and Talhand. Zenith's round eyes fluttered and she looked at Paul next to her at the sight of the Fangs of the Black Wolf's daily routine.]

Zenith: Um, so this means...

Paul: It means Zenith has been accepted!

Paul: So Zenith, you're going to take on a lot of requests from now on, and you're going to get promoted quickly. Of course I'll help you, and you'll be B rank in no time!

Ghislaine: Paul is not the only one. We'll help you, too.

Elinalise: Yes, Zenith is still inexperienced, and I will teach you the basics of being an adventurer.

Elinalise: Fufufu, men with no delicacy will not be able to pay attention to details.

Zenith: ! Th-thank you!"

Ghislaine: Don't worry about it.

[Paul smiles and nods happily as he sees Zenith getting to know his friends. At this rate, they will get to know each other even better by the time they officially join.]

Geese: ...Hey. Get over here for a minute.

Paul: Hmm?

[As he was watching the ladies cackle and talk, he was unexpectedly tapped on the shoulder by Geese. He gestures Paul to a corner to get away a bit.]

Paul: What is it?

Geese: Just lower your voice a little bit.

Paul: What? Is this a private conversation? I wanted to have a sexy secret talk with a pretty girl, not with you.

Geese: Don't be silly. I'm serious.

[Geese kept his voice down and turned a serious expression toward Paul.]

Geese: I'm not against letting her in. She seems like a nice girl.

Paul: What do you mean?

Geese: It's your timing.

Paul: What?

Geese: Is it safe to bring another girl to a place where you have such a relationship with your party mates... Ghislaine and Elinalise?

[It doesn't take long for Geese to get the idea of what is worrying him across. Paul knows how sharp he is.]

Paul: You're telling me that I shouldn't be messing with Zenith, too?

Geese: The question isn't whether or not you're going to touch her. It's whether or not the Fangs of the Black Wolf will be okay after you make a move.

Geese: What if the relationship between your companions gets strained and things don't work out?

Paul: The hell, you don't have faith in me.

Geese: I have no faith when it comes to women.

Paul: You son of a...

[Paul's mouth tightened at Geese's blunt statement. But he didn't have the ground to deny it.]

Geese: ...Well, no matter how much I tell you that you're too free with the lower half of your body, when it comes to that girl, that's what's going to happen...

Paul: I—

Geese: No, no, no. Don't say anything.

[Geese puts his hand on Paul's shoulder.]

Geese: Just remember what I said, even if it's just in the corner of your head.

Paul: Don't mess with me.

[If that were to happen, it would suck to have Geese flickering in the corner of my head. Paul shakes off the hand on his shoulder.]

Paul: (Whatever happens to me and Zenith, of course the Fangs of the Black Wolf will be fine.)

Paul: (I had no problem screwing Elinalise and Ghislaine, so how could I be awkward?)

Paul: (What the hell does this guy think I am, anyway?)

[After that, the members of Black Wolf Fang, with Paul in the center, began to actively help Zenith with the requests he had accepted.]

Chapter 4

[Contrary to Geese's concerns, Paul never laid a hand on Zenith, except to touch her buttocks as a greeting, and this did not cause any discord between the party.]

Zenith: Everybody, take a look!

[Zenith pops into the bar after finishing her request. She has a big smile on her face with flushed cheeks.]

Paul: Oh, what's the matter? You're having a great time, aren't you?

Zenith: Kya!

Zenith: Paul! You always say that!

Paul: Haha, my bad, my bad.

[Paul raised the hand that had been touching Zenith's buttocks to the side of his face, smiled goofily, and apologized.]

[Zenith, now completely accustomed to the situation, composed herself and turned to face the members of the party.]

Zenith: Well, once again, look! I've been promoted to C-rank!

[Zenith went around showing her adventurer card. The air on the second floor of the tavern brightens at once when he sees that his rank has changed from D to C.]

Geese: Oh, that was quick. You already got yourself promoted!

Talhand: Heartfelt congratulations! Come on, I'll buy you a drink!

Ghislaine: 'll buy you a drink, too. You can order anything you like.

Paul: One more thing. If you get to rank B, you can officially join the party!

Zenith: Yes, I'm going to work harder than ever! I can't wait to be a real part of your party!

Elinalise: Fufufu, I feel so sad when you put it that way. It sounds as if our current relationship is a fake.

Paul: Oh, Elinalise.

[Elinalise comes upstairs with a languid movement.]

Paul: "When you didn't come back, I thought you were off with some guy.

Elinalise: Oh, nonsense. How can I not congratulate Zenith on such a festive day?

Elinalise: Zenith was so happy about her promotion that she ran out of the guild.

Zenith: I'm sorry I left you there, that... I'm so embarrassed, I feel like such a child...

[Zenith apologized to Elinalise, beaming with embarrassment. She then smiled, and said "You don't have to apologize."]

Paul: "Whatever the case, now that you've moved up to the C-rank, you can help Zenith even more than before."

Elinalise: Yes, I suppose so. From C-rank, there will be requests for defeat. With our help, you'll be promoted in no time at all!

Zenith: Extermination requests... I will be relying on you guys more than ever...

[Everyone present noticed a quick shadow on Zenith's face.]

Ghislaine: Why do you look like that? It's fine. You can count on us.

Geese: Yes, yes, the right person for the job. Generally, I choose to run away in battle, too. Leave it to those who are good at it.

Geese: Well, Zenith will probably participate as a healer. You may be more useful than me in battle!

Talhand: Well, do what you are supposed to do. That is the basis of a party.

Elinalise: You're certainly talking big, aren't you? It's hard to believe that this is coming from a man who couldn't join any party until he joined the Fangs of the Black Wolf.

Talhand: What was that? You're no different from me. You devoured men wherever you went, but you couldn't stay long enough to get kicked out.

Elinalise: Kicked out? I had left on my own. I was seeking good-looking men!

Ghislaine: I didn't fail to join a party, myself.

Geese: That's not something you can brag about. You'd been cheated and exploited every time you joined a party.

Ghislaine: Mhh...

[There are those who are quarreling and talking casually with each other. It is a relationship in which they can say what they want to say without hesitation.]

[There is no restraint on anyone. This is because everyone recognizes everyone else's power. There is trust and respect, even if they don't say so out loud.]

Paul: It's cozy, isn't it?

[With his friends arguing with each other, Paul takes his place next to Zenith.]

Zenith: ?

Paul: It's much more comfortable than a nobleman's house.

Zenith: ! Eh... ah... did you notice?

[Zenith's eyes widen. Paul gasped at the look on her face.]

Paul: Well... The other guys must have noticed it, too. They know that you're some kind of daughter of nobility, Zenith. Did you think they didn't know?

Zenith: No, because no one said anything!

Paul: Adventurers don't pry into the past. That's why I'm not going to say any more about it.

Zenith: ...yeah.

Paul: I do understand why someone would give up their life as an aristocrat to become an adventurer.

Paul: For those people, this is the most comfortable place to be.

Paul: (I know, because I'm like that.)

[Paul smiled, his eyes dazzlingly narrowed as he kept his eyes straight on his companions.]

Zenith: Oh...

Zenith: ...This group must mean a lot to you, Paul. You look like you love it.

Paul: ...I don't have that look on my face.

Zenith: Oh, no, you did.

[Zenith giggles, and Paul scratches his cheek. He feels strangely restless when she is laughing next to him.]

Zenith: Back then... at the guild, I'm glad it was you, Paul, who helped me out.

Zenith: ...I didn't even realize I was being tricked.

Zenith: I left home and became an adventurer, and I've been working hard in my own way... I'd reached D rank, and I thought it was time to start a party...

Paul: You're a noble young lady who just ran away from home... and didn't know anything about anything.

Zenith: Yes... I didn't know anything. So when they approached me, I thought they were kind and nice people...

[Zenith gently closes her eyes. A soft smile was on her mouth. Yet, tears were spilling from between her closed eye lids.]

Zenith: I felt so proud of myself. To be recognized by an adventurer of a higher rank than myself and to be sought after as a companion...

Zenith: This made me feel that I, too, had become a full-fledged adventurer...!

[Just thinking back to those days makes his heart ache. The 15-year-old girl let out all of her thoughts and then crouched down, covering her face with her hands.]

[Her thin shoulders were shaking. Paul's heart was troubled by the sight of her sobs, which she could not hold back.]

Paul: ...please don't cry.

[Even though he has seduced and played around with many women in his life, he cannot think of a single word to comfort her well.]

Paul: ...hey, don't cry.

[He takes her tear-stained hand.]

Paul: ("Crying doesn't suit you, smile at me," I say as I wipe away her tears—)

[Weak and vulnerable women are easy to seduce. The rule of thumb says that one can shorten the distance by making her stop crying and comfort her, just as he has done with other women in the past.]

[And yet, what came out of Paul's mouth were not just words to a woman, but words to a companion.]

Paul: I know you're still hurting, and you still can't forget it.
But you're one of us now, Zenith.

Paul: We all agree. Zenith, you're a full-fledged adventurer.

Zenith: Paul...

Zenith: ...thank you.

[Zenith wipes away her tears and smiles softly.]

Talhand: Paul! Let's drink! We're raising a toast! Zenith, you're the star of the show, so come over here!

[Paul smiled back, and Talhand called for Paul and Zenith. They looked at each other.]

Paul: With the way Talhand is acting, I don't think he's going to let us sleep today. You'd better brace yourself, Zenith.

Zenith: Yeah, I'll do my best.

[Paul pulled Zenith's hand and stepped toward the table where his friends were waiting.]

Episode 2 [S-class party]

Chapter 5

[Even though Zenith has been promoted to the C rank, she still has to be promoted one more rank to officially join the Fangs of the Black Wolf, rank A adventurer party.]

[Nevertheless, Zenith has already been accepted by her fellow members, who treat her the same as they treat their members... actually she is treated with more care and affection than anyone else.]

[In a tavern where the Fangs of the Black Wolf gather, all the members are present except for Elinalise, who has gone off to the inn of a man she met in the guild.]

Ghislaine: I'll go with you on your next request. So you can choose whatever you want.

Zenith: Are you sure? You also have a request for the Fangs of the Black Wolf, don't you?

Ghislaine: No problem.

Zenith: Really? Then I'll take you up on it. I feel reassured when I'm with Ghislaine!

[Zenith smiled innocently, and Ghislaine returned the smile with her eyes narrowed. Geese approached the two in a friendly atmosphere.]

Geese: I'm coming with you. I can't leave you two ignoramuses working together, you know.

Zenith: Wow! If Geese is with us, we'll have a nice dinner!

Ghislaine: Yeah. I'm looking forward to it.

Paul: Well, I'll be with—

Geese: What's the point of you coming to a C-rated job, too? With Ghislaine, we have enough strength.

[Paul's words were interrupted by Geese, who had a dismayed look on his face. Paul raised his eyebrows and looked displeased.]

Paul: ...don't want me?

Geese: You know, think about it. If you and Ghislaine were both helping out, would you need a healer for a C-rank extermination request?

Paul: No way. I'll kill them in an instant.

Geese: You already get the idea, then. Don't rob Zenith of the opportunity to hone her skills, now.

Paul: Dang... I hate to admit it, but you're right.

Zenith: Paul, thank you. This time I'll just take it as a compliment.

[Zenith smiles at Paul. Paul's face, which had looked unhappy, softened.]

Paul: I'll let Ghislaine take it this time. Come with me next time.

Talhand: Well, I'll go with you then.

Paul: What? Talhand, there's nothing to worry about! We'll be fine on our own!

Geese: Don't be stupid. I'm not going to see you and Zenith off alone together.

Paul: What? Why not?

Geese: Because you have zero credibility when it comes to that sort of thing.

Zenith: "That sort of thing?"

[Zenith tilted her head as if she didn't understand anything. Talhand, who understood everything, nodded his head repeatedly, as if to emphasize the point.]

[Zenith is only 15 years old, younger than anyone else in the Fangs of the Black Wolf. For this reason, everyone is overprotective of her, as if she were their own little sister.]

[Everyone wanted to lend a hand to Zenith and prevent her from being alone with Paul, who would lay his hands on any woman without a second thought.]

Paul: You guys...!

[The edges of his mouth twitch, but he can't yell at them.]

Paul: Oh, yeah! I understand exactly what you guys are thinking!

[Deciding to back off meekly this time, Paul turns to Zenith.]

Paul: Hey, Zenith.

Zenith: Yeah?

Paul: Hurry up and get to the B-rank. Then, let's do a big job together.

Zenith: Yes, I'll do my best! I'll do my best to get the same jobs as you guys as soon as I can!

[The members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf are all talented people. With their help, Zenith quickly and surely completed the C-rank request.]

[And not much time passed before she was promoted to the B rank, where she would be allowed to join the Fangs of the Black Wolf.]

Zenith: This is...

Zenith's eyes sparkled as she stared at her adventurer's card at the guild.
Her hands were trembling as she held her card.

Zenith: ...

Name:	Zenith Latria
Gender:	Female
Race:	Human

Age:	15
Occupation:	Healer
Rank:	B

Party:	Fangs of the Black Wolf (A)
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[Paul clasped Zenith's shoulder, who was unable to take her eyes off the newly marked party section.]

Paul: You did it, Zenith! You're now officially a member of the Fangs of the Black Wolf!

Zenith: ...yeah! I never thought I'd be one of you so quickly... Thanks to all of you!

Paul: What's with the "so quickly?" That sounds like we've never been friends before. We should have been friends by now.

[They hugged each other in joy, and looked as if they were about to spin around and leap into the air if no one was watching.]

Talhand: You sure that's not going over the line?"

Elinalise: Well, it's acceptable. ...just barely, though.

Ghislaine: Ah. Paul is getting closer to her face."

Geese: What do you think you're up to, kissing her out of sheer joy? You can't do that!

[Overprotection was invoked. The member of the Black Wolf's Fang jumped on Paul and the others and pulled them apart.]

Paul: What the hell are you guys doing?

Geese: You're the one to blame! What the hell were you trying to do in the confusion?

Elinalise: Did you think we would miss it?

[The party making noise in the guild draws disapproving glances from all around, but no one is about to speak to the Fangs of the Black Wolf.]

[Thus, Zenith officially joined the Fangs of the Black Wolf, even though they didn't care a bit

about formalities.]

Chapter 6

[With a new healer in their ranks, the Fangs of the Black Wolf were steadily completing their A-rank work, and little by little, their fighting style began to change.]

Paul: Ghislaine, let's get stuck in!

Ghislaine: Yeah.

[The vanguard charged into the crowd of monsters and swung their swords. With the addition of a healer, they are able to cut deeper than ever before.]

Zenith: Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again, <<Healing>>...

[Thanks to Zenith's diligent application of healing magic, Paul and Ghislaine are able to fight without slowing down.]

[Her work does not stop there. Outside of the fighting aspect, she also worked exceedingly diligently, whether it was the procedure for taking lodging or preparing for encampment.]

Geese: Zenith works too hard. Are you about to take my job? Hmm?

[While sitting around the table in the dining room attached to the inn, Geese looks at Zenith with a jealous look.]

Zenith: I have no intention of taking anyone's job!

Zenith: Besides, I wouldn't be able to take it. Because Geese's food is too delicious. I could never make it.

Geese: Hmm?

Zenith: Geese, your information gathering and preparation is flawless, and you can even pick and choose the ingredients you gather, can't you? I think it's really great!

Geese: I'm sorry if I made it sound bad! Hahaha, I don't feel so bad when you say it like that!

Paul: Don't get carried away!

Geese: Ow!

[Paul stepped on Geese's foot under the table. He stepped on his pinky toe with precision, as you would expect from an A-rank adventurer.]

Geese: P-Paul...! What the hell are you doing all of a sudden!

Paul: Shaddup! My foot just slipped!

Elinalise: I don't like the way you do it. I don't like the idea of resorting to force just because a man other than yourself was praised.

Talhand: What's with the "I don't like it"? How can you say that after making a face as if you thought it was funny? You are a woman with bad manners.

Elinalise: What do you mean? If you're trying to pick a fight with me, then why wouldn't I take you up on it?

Zenith: What? Both of you, don't fight! And Paul, if you stepped on his foot, you should apologize to him!

Ghislaine: ...

[When the table started to get noisy, Zenith hurried to intercede. Ghislaine was taking her food to her mouth without seeming to mind.]

Paul: ...apologize?

Zenith: Yes, that's right.

Paul: Me?

[Zenith chided Paul, who looked as if he did not want to admit that he was in the wrong. The others shrugged their shoulders as they watched.]

Elinalise: Fufufufu, my goodness. I can't tell which one is the older in this situation.]

Ghislaine: Yeah, I guess so. They are like sister and brother.

Paul: I can hear you!

[In the end, without apologizing to Geese, Paul grins at Elinalise and Ghislaine.]

[However, he is not really angry, so the girls, who had their fangs out, laugh and take their places next to Zenith, respectively.]

Elinalise: But if you're not going to make up with Geese, why don't you at least praise her good points?

Paul: Her good points...

Ghislaine: I'm more at ease in battle. Because of Zenith, I'm fighting freer than ever before.

Paul: (You were free to do what you wanted before Zenith came in. Who was the one who was rampaging around without thinking too hard?)

[Paul suddenly thought while giving Ghislaine—who was puffing out her chest—a dumbfounded look.]

Paul: (It's only been a while since Zenith joined, but she's still able to handle A-rank requests

without any problems.)

Paul: (...I guess we can do this.)

[Convinced on his own, Paul suddenly said his idea.]

Paul: Let's go to a labyrinth.

Geese: Huh?!

Zenith: A labyrinth?!

Paul: Yeah, and it's not just any labyrinth. The the most difficult labyrinth that even S-rank adventurers avoid challenging!

Talhand: Are you serious? It's not a place that can be conquered on a whim, is it?

Paul: It's not an whim. I've been thinking about it for a long time.

Paul: The Fangs of the Black Wolf has a new healer named Zenith, and she's integrated perfectly into the group. It's about time.

Talhand: Hmm...

Talhand: You have a point, but Zenith has never been in a labyrinth before, has she? It would be dangerous to go into a high level labyrinth.

Paul: That's... well, yes, but...

Zenith: ...

[When he looked at Zenith's face, her expression was hard, as if she was nervous about her first labyrinth dive. Paul moved his face closer to hers.]

Zenith: !

Surprised by the proximity of his face, Zenith hurriedly moves away.

Paul: Don't look at me like that. Talhand is right. Let's get into a reasonable labyrinth first.

Paul: And when Zenith gets used to the exploration, then we'll take on the most difficult labyrinth. That would be good, wouldn't it?

Paul: I'll show you just how cool I can be!

[Paul smiles with a face full of confidence. Then Zenith's expression gradually softened.]

Zenith: You are always so confident.

Paul: That's because I'm in front of a good woman.

Zenith: Oh Paul... I don't like that kind of joke.

[Zenith looks away with a huff. As a devout Millis believer, she is not very good at that kind of topic.]

[Knowing this, Paul apologized with a simple, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."]

Chapter 7

[A few days later, the Fangs of the Black Wolf took on the challenge of conquering a labyrinth, a first for Zenith.]

Zenith: So this is a labyrinth...

Paul: Yeah. Looks like an interesting place, doesn't it?

Zenith: Oh, you say it looks interesting... aren't you scared?

Zenith: Even though you are trying to be nice to me, the labyrinth is a dangerous place where many adventurers have challenged it and lost their lives, you know?

Paul: Haha, that's why I'm excited. The labyrinth is the perfect place to test how good you are.

[Paul laughs in a light-hearted tone, and Zenith's eyes widen in dismay.]

Geese: Paul just is this kind of guy. It's a little nerve-wracking having such a confident guy as this as a leader, isn't it?

Zenith: Fufu, you're right.

[Seeing the smile on Zenith's nervous face, Paul looked around at the members again.]

Paul: ...Okay, let's get started. We're going to do exactly as we discussed, okay?

Geese: Roger that.

Paul: Zenith, you ready?

Zenith: ...yeah. Let's go!

[Zenith's first time conquering a labyrinth goes smoothly, thanks to the help of the members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf.]

Paul: (Everyone seems to be in good shape.)

[Paul smiled wryly. The Fangs of the Black Wolf is a party with high individual combat power, but Paul also places emphasis on coordination and tactics.]

[Since Zenith joined the party, they have been able to get along better than ever before.]

Paul: (I can't believe how much easier things are with just one healer.)

Zenith: I'll heal!

[Zenith's skills have definitely improved since she officially joined, partly because she has been taken around on A-rank requests.]

[The Fangs of the Black Wolf moved through the labyrinth faster than expected, and when they approached the halfway point, they decided to make camp.]

Zenith.

"Phew..."

Zenith.

'Oh, Geese, I'll help you!

Geese.

Hmm? Yeah, I'm fine over here, Zenith, just rest."

Zenith.

No, no, no. I can't take a rest all on my own...

Geese: But, you know... Hey, Paul!

Paul: What?

[Paul, who was preparing the tent with Elinalise, turned around when Geese called his name.]

[Seeing the expressions on Geese and Zenith's faces, Paul approached them.]

Paul: Geese, we're good here.

Geese: Oh, I'm going to go get ready for dinner.

Zenith: Oh...

[When Geese is gone, Paul pulls Zenith's hand and makes her sit down on a flat piece of rubble by the wall.]

[Silence fell between them. Zenith was the first to speak.]

Zenith: I think I can still do more...

Paul: You say so, but if you have to put in effort just keep moving, it doesn't mean you're okay.

Zenith: Hm...

[Seeing Zenith's hurt expression, Paul realizes that he misspoke and gasps.]

Paul: I said that, but don't get me wrong. There isn't a single person who thinks Zenith is dragging us down.

Paul: I know you're doing your best. But this is your first time in a labyrinth. You must be tired, right?

Paul: Your task will be important in fights. When the time comes, you have to push yourself even if you feel like you can't. Rest while you can.

Zenith: ...Right. I agree with what you said Paul. I'm sorry, I was being a little stubborn...

[Zenith took a deep breath. As a result, she felt calmer, her shoulders relaxed, and the tension seemed to have dissipated.]

Zenith: I'm going to get some rest. I have to fulfill my role as a member of the party. After all, you've finally accepted me as one of your own.

Paul: Finally? We've accepted you for a long time now.

[Paul tilts his head, not knowing what she means.]

Zenith: But it was the first time. You're talking to me in such a relaxed way.

Paul: ...did I?

Zenith: Yes, you did.

[It was not something Paul was consciously aware of, but it might have been, had he been told.]

Zenith: ...

Paul: ...

[Silence again passes between Zenith and Paul.]

Zenith: ...

[Zenith quietly moves away from Paul without saying anything.]

[A distance is created between them. Paul tilts his head.]

Paul: What is it?

Zenith: Nah, it's nothing.

Paul: Then why did you just move away?

Zenith: Because it's...

Zenith: Because Geese and the others told me not to get too close to... you, Paul... and because... I think it's better for me, too...

Paul: ...I understand the reasons before, but what makes you feel the same way, Zenith?

Zenith: Because... I know what I'm talking about.

Zenith: You and your relationship with Ghislaine and Elinalise.

[She looks at Paul and releases the words, her brow wrinkled and sombre.]

Paul: Our relationship? I mean, we're party pals, right?"

Zenith: Don't try and make a fool out of me.

Zenith: You're together as party mates, and as a man and women, aren't you?

Paul: ...

[Actually it was. So he couldn't say anything on the spur of the moment. When Paul shut up, Zenith blurted out, "I knew it."]

Zenith: I found out... about your relationship when I officially joined the Fangs of the Black Wolf and we were doing A-rank requests.

[Zenith gently lowers her gaze. She learned of the relationship between Paul and the other two in an old inn in the town where they had stopped on their way to complete a request—.]

[The walls of the inn were thin. In the middle of the night, Zenith woke up thirsty and noticed that noises were coming from the next room.]

Zenith: (I believe Ghislaine is staying next door...)

[Listening carefully, there was more than one voice to be heard.]

Zenith: (Paul...?)

[Ghislaine's erotic moans could be heard through the thin walls.]

Zenith: (! No way, the two of you are in such a relationship...!)

[The voices wouldn't go away completely, even if she covered her ears. Zenith had to spend the night with a bright red face.]

[At this time, Zenith thought they had a special relationship. It is not so unusual for two friends to get together in an adventurer's party.]

Elinalise: Aah! That's good! That's so good!

Paul: You really are insatiable, you know that?

Elinalise: Fufu, I can't let Ghislaine have all the fun with you, now can I?

[So a few days after realizing his relationship with Ghislaine, Zenith was shocked to learn that Paul was also having an affair with Elinalise.]

[When she was up so close to both of them as women who loved her as a sister, Zenith remembered something Geese had said to her once.]

Geese: Don't be silly. There's no way I'm sending you and Zenith off alone together.

Geese: Because you have zero credibility when it comes to that kind of thing.

Zenith: (That's the kind of thing they were talking about...!)

[The young man who invited her to the party, a bit of a frivolous man but a dependable leader. That was the impression Zenith had of Paul.]

[That was completely shattered. It was only natural that she would change the way she looked at Paul, both as a Millis believer and as a young woman of her age.]

[Zenith opens her eyes.]

Zenith: I love Paul, Ghislaine, and Elinalise. I trust you all as friends and I respect them.

Zenith: But I still think it's strange. I don't understand... Especially you, Paul...

Zenith: Why are you having an affair with both of them? No, it's not just the two of them... you're getting your hands on women everywhere you go...

Paul: Not acceptable to a devout Millis believer, is it? It's against the tenets of the Church, isn't it?

Zenith: You have to love one person. That is one of the doctrines.

[Zenith looked serious. When she looked at him with her honest and clear eyes, he felt as if he had done something wrong and could not calm down.]

Zenith: Hey, Paul... is it so difficult for you to love only one person?

Paul: ...

[As Paul was unable to answer, Geese, who had finished preparing the encampment, came to call them both over.]

[Paul and Zenith looked at each other in silence, and then looked away.]

Paul: (To love only one... Is that normal for Zenith?)

[What is love? What does it mean to love? The more he thought about it, the more his heart was stirred.]

Paul: (I don't understand a lot of things. But there are things I do understand. Zenith is...)

Paul: (Zenith is beautiful. Not only in appearance, but also in what the eyes can't see.)

Paul: (I must not touch her out of greed. She is the kind of woman who must be cherished.)

[A woman's face appears in Paul's mind. The image of Zenith overlapped with that person, who was already only in his memory.]

[That's probably why. He wanted to talk with Zenith more.]

Chapter 8

[After the meal was over and the others had gone to sleep, Paul invited Zenith to join him. Perhaps because they had talked earlier, he was not rejected even when it was just the two of them.]

Paul: Zenith, I thought about what you said to me, but to tell you the truth, I don't really understand it.

Zenith: ...I see.

Paul: I don't even know if the feelings I had for the women I've met was love in the first place...

Paul: Because the only person I can say I loved with all my heart was my mother.

Zenith: ! Your mother...?

[Zenith's eyes widen. She never would have thought that Paul would miss his mother.]

Paul: "I don't get why anyone would give up a life as an aristocrat to become an adventurer." Remember how I said that to you before...?

Zenith: Yes, of course I remember. The day I was promoted to C-rank.

Paul: Oh... I'm just like you. I left my aristocratic position, my responsibilities, my home, my family and... and I jumped out of everything.

[Thus Paul began to tell the story of his life so far.]

[He tells everything about himself that he has never told anyone, including his time as a Notos Grayrat, the reason he ran away, his life in the slums, and what he did before he became an adventurer.]

Zenith: ...mm, mm...

[Zenith listened sincerely to Paul's past. Sometimes angry, sometimes laughing, and sometimes shedding real tears, she is there for Paul's life so far.]

[She was angry at the way Paul's father and brother had treated him and affirmed his mother's love for him. He is glad for the sympathy she shows him, and his mouth spins everything without hesitation.]

Paul: I wasn't my father's ideal successor. So my position at home fell lower and lower, and after my mother died, it was gone altogether.

Paul: It was just a big, cold, empty place... Home for me was such a place at the end, you know. So I had no hesitation in abandoning my family and my home.

[He never regretted running away. Even when he heard the news of his father's death, he never

wished he had not abandoned the house.]

Paul: I think I was looking for something.

Zenith: What is it? What were you looking for?

Paul: Something I've always wanted.

[Paul let out a small breath and looked up into the emptiness. In the dim ruins, his mouth continued to spill out his true feelings.]

Paul: I thought I got it... when I spent time with my friends here at the Fangs of the Black Wolf and found out what my father had left me on his deathbed.

Zenith: ...you say that like it's not the case anymore.

Paul: It's cozy here and everyone is nice.

Paul: So I started to think that maybe I got it and just assumed I had it.

Paul: I couldn't imagine being happier than I am now, even though I haven't really found it...

Zenith: What did you want so much, Paul? A place to stay? Someone you could trust?

[Paul's eyes, which had been reflecting nothingness, turned to the person next to him. He stared straight at her, and she stared back at him.]

Paul: Love—

Zenith: What?

Paul: What I really, really, always wanted from the bottom of my heart was... someone beautiful who would accept and embrace me as I am, like a 'mother' who loved me...

Paul: I wanted a warm "home," a warm "family," a "love" that was there, no matter what form it took.

[Thinking about what love is, that was the answer Paul gave.]

[The Fangs of the Black Wolf was comfortable, and he might have no qualms about calling his trusted friends his family.]

[But it was only "like" a family, no matter how far it goes, Paul realized.]

Zenith: I am the same way.

Paul: Mh!

[Zenith's gentle arms embraced Paul. He gasps as his head is gently pulled to her chest.]

Zenith: My heart aches so much, I know what you are longing for.

[Zenith's warmth enveloped him. Her scent, her voice, and her body heat calmed Paul's heart.]

Paul: ...Zenith?

Zenith: I also ran away from home because I wanted a warm "home," a "family," a "love" that was there no matter what form it took.

Zenith: I was the opposite of Paul, because I clashed with my mother... Unlike my brother and sister, who lived up to expectations, I could not be the lady my mother wanted me to be.

Paul: A lady, huh...

Zenith: My mother was very strict in her education, and she did not allow me to be weak. To all eyes, I was to be beautiful, pure, and a lady to be proud of... That was my mother's ideal daughter.

[Zenith talks about her past. Her story is one that no one else could possibly have heard.]

[Their circumstances were so similar that Paul could easily understand the feelings Zenith must have been experiencing at the time.]

Paul: ...ain't got the eyes to see it.

Zenith: What?

Paul: Zenith's mother is not a good judge of character. There's no better woman than you.

Zenith: Oh, for heaven's sake! You keep teasing me like this!

[Zenith was so angry while hugging Paul in her arms. She was so cute and warm that even though she was angry with him, he couldn't help but laugh.]

Paul: I'm not making fun of you.

Zenith: Liar. You're laughing.

Paul: Well, you know, you're—

Paul: —it's because you're special.

Zenith: Special...

Paul: I've never been so vulnerable in my life. Zenith, I think the reason I was able to talk to you was because you were the one I could talk to about this.

[The two of them look at each other silently. In their eyes, there is only the reflection of each other. The distance between them grows closer from either side...]

Paul: !!!

[Paul hears someone moving in the tent where the members are resting their bodies. Paul huffs and turns his attention in that direction.]

Geese: *Yaaaawwwwnnn...* Paul, you take your turn. I'll take watch... hmm? What, was Zenith with you?

Zenith: I was having a hard time getting to sleep...

[It was Geese who came out with a sigh. He nodded along with his arms crossed as if he was satisfied with Zenith's words.]

Geese: Oh, I see. It's your first time in the labyrinth, isn't it? I can understand why you're nervous and can't sleep.

Geese: But, you know, going through a labyrinth is a game of endurance. You'd better go lie down, even if you just close your eyes, right?

Zenith: ...Yeah, I will. Paul, Geese, good night.

[Paul watched Zenith's back as she walked into the tent, covered his face with his hands, and exhaled deeply.]

Paul: (As soon as I thought, "Don't let greed get the better of you," this is what happened...)

Paul: (If Geese hadn't woken up, I'd be...)

Paul: Ohhhh, shit!

Geese: ?

[Paul scratches his head and Geese looks at him suspiciously, but he doesn't have time to pay attention. With mixed feelings, time passed.]

[After that, the Fangs of the Black Wolf easily conquered the labyrinth, and Zenith's first time in a labyrinth ended without major problems.]

[The party did not change after the conquest, due to the low difficulty of the labyrinth, but some things did change.]

Paul: Hey, Zenith. I think the next labyrinth should be in this area. It will be a little more difficult than before, but—

Zenith: I leave it to your judgment, Paul. Oh, I have something to do with Geese...

Paul: Oh, okay...?

[It has been a while since the labyrinth attack. There was some awkwardness between Paul and Zenith.]

Elinalise: What have you two been up to as of late?

Ghislaine: You're acting strange.

Paul: Well, even if you ask me...

[Paul follows Zenith's figure with his eyes, and she is talking to Geese about something.]

Paul: (Is it because of what happened in the labyrinth? Because I tried to kiss her that time...?)

[The awkwardness between them did not disappear after a while.]

[However, because of their individual abilities, the Fangs of the Black Wolf were able to conquer labyrinths smoothly, and within six months, they were able to take on a highest difficulty labyrinth—]

Chapter 10

[This highest difficult labyrinth was a ruin that led underground, and the entrance was lined with cobwebs.]

Geese: This is another nasty-looking place.

Paul: But we can definitely make it. Let's go through this place and get to the top!

Geese: The top... That's a grand goal.

Geese: Well, I guess when you say you'll do something once, you really go for it.

[Paul and Geese, the scout, each light a torch, and the Fangs of the Black Wolf steps into the labyrinth.]

Paul: I don't know if I have any choice, but torches are in the way, you know? It takes up one hand.

Talhand: It's dangerous to go on without light in this darkness.

Geese: I know, I know. Stop talking nonsense, and let's get on with the underground.

[The labyrinth was filled with many monsters, as it was known as a difficult place. Especially, there were many spider monsters, and it was no wonder that they covered the entrance with their webs.]

Paul: Elinalise!

Elinalise: Understood! You want to raise the vanguard line, don't you? Leave the back to me.

Ghislaine: Oooooh!!!

[Ghislaine and Paul cut down the monsters. Although they could not use any big spells in the ruins, Talhand delivered his spells with precision to help the vanguard.]

Paul: Zenith!

Zenith: I'll cast healing!

Zenith: Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again, <<Healing>>...

Paul: ...

[It was only for a moment. It's a slight discrepancy that no one at an average party would care about.]

[It was really a minor thing, and in fact, the Fangs of the Black Wolf was able to progress

steadily underground without struggling in the difficult labyrinth.]

[When they had descended several levels toward the innermost part of the labyrinth—.]

[The Fangs of the Black Wolf found a place where he could rest safely, and decided to camp there to recover.]

Paul: Zenith, may I?

Zenith: ? Yes...

[He stops Zenith, who was about to help prepare food, and takes her to a place a little away from the others.]

Zenith: Paul?... what's wrong?

Paul: I think individual ability is important, but if we work as a party, coordination and tactics are more important than individual ability.

Paul: I think that the coordination between us was disturbed for a brief moment today. We weren't in sync. Did you notice that?

Zenith: !

Paul: In a normal fight, it wouldn't bother me. It's the difficulty of the place that brings any disturbance to the surface.

Zenith: You mean... I wasn't good enough to take on the highest difficulty labyrinth? That I couldn't keep up with everyone, wasn't...?

Paul: No, that is not the case. What you were able to do before, you can't do now.

Paul: You know, I think you know, something's been different between us since that night, right?

Zenith: ! That's not true...

[Zenith tried to deny it once, but shook her head without saying the end.]

Zenith: Yes, you're right...

Paul: You've been avoiding me this whole time.

Paul: Why?

[Paul presses Zenith, who looks uncomfortable.]

Paul: That time, I opened my heart to... and told you everything, my past, my thoughts, everything.

Paul: And I... thought that you, Zenith, had also opened your heart to me.

Paul: Was it my imagination that I felt the distance between us getting closer?

Zenith: It was your imagination...

Zenith: It's not... anything. I could tell you how I felt, something I've never told anyone.

Paul: Then why are you avoiding me?

Zenith: It's because!

[Zenith glared at Paul, who had raised his voice. Paul gulped at the intensity of her gaze.]

Zenith: It's because of you, isn't it!

Paul: What? You're saying it's my fault—

Zenith: You said I was special!

Zenith: You keep telling me I'm special, but you've been laying your hands on other women all this time.

Zenith: On Elinalise, on Ghislaine, on the girls you meet in the bar...!

Paul: Is that why you've been avoiding me? Because I've messed around with other girls?

Zenith: No, I didn't. That's not what I meant...

Zenith: I was avoiding you because... I wasn't sure how I felt about it myself.

Zenith: I'm like... you, a womanizer, someone who ignores Millis' teachings, who doesn't care about getting into trouble and is reckless all the time—

Zenith: I'm supposed to hate you, so why did I want to entrust my heart to you...?

Paul: eh...

[Paul's heart was in turmoil as he listened to her words. When did it all begin?]

[The first thing that comes to Paul's mind is that Zenith has become an irreplaceable woman, so much so that he can be easily swayed by her with a single word.]

Zenith: I am of the Millis faith, and originally I would have despised you and hated you. But I couldn't stay away and even now we are together...

Zenith: I don't know anyone else like you...

Zenith: Even though you have the ability to catch everyone's eye and change someone's entire life...

Zenith: Someone with loneliness in his heart, who is struggling to find love... someone you can't leave alone.'

[His heart burns. It's as if she's waiting for him with open arms. As if to say, all you have to do is jump in—.]

[Paul embraced Zenith. When he hugged her slender and soft body, his heart was hot.]

Zenith: Paul, relax a little. You don't have to be like that, I won't run away.

Paul: ...

Paul: ...you're special."

Zenith: If you tell me I'm special, I want to reciprocate that sentiment.

[Loving eyes gazed at Paul. Smiling, she gently caressed Paul's cheek with her small hand.]

Zenith: I will be Paul's "home". I want to be a "family" with you and... have a warm, happy home.

Paul: ! Are you sure...?"

[Paul couldn't believe the too happy words and asked back. Zenith nodded with a smile.]

Zenith: Yes, it's true. So you can be my "home" too.

Paul: (... accepted and I was able to get it...)

He was able to share his feelings with the woman he knew he had to cherish. Joy and relief are mixed in his heart.

Paul: (With Zenith, we can be a family. A warm, compassionate family...)

Paul: (Oh, yes, of course! We can be a family together!)

[His heart was filled to bursting. It may be foolish to lose one's cool in the labyrinth, but Paul did not think that his current exuberance would be a bad thing.]

[And Paul's hunch was right on target—.]

[A few hours later, the Fangs of the Black Wolf resumed its conquest, advancing through the labyrinth more swiftly than yesterday. Paul swung his sword aggressively, if not enough to break formation.]

Elinalise: What became of that one of Paul's? He seems to be more energetic than ever.

Talhand: I don't know what happened to him, but he is in great spirits. He is moving as well as Ghislaine.

Zenith: ...

[Paul's sharpened sword surprised the members who had seen him fight up close, and at the same time attracted their attention.]

[With his mind unleashed, Paul fought so strongly, so beautifully, so fiercely. And in no time at all, he reached the innermost part of the labyrinth—.]

[The Fangs of the Black Wolf had successfully navigated the labyrinth, which had been considered a difficult place, without suffering any casualties, and the party was promoted to the S-class rank, which is coveted by all adventurers.]

Episode 3 [The Fangs of the Black Wolf Dissolves]

Chapter 11

[The fact that the Fangs of the Black Wolf had conquered such a difficult labyrinth quickly spread throughout the world through the mouths of fellow adventurers and merchants.]

[The party was instantly promoted to S-rank, and became so admired, respected, and feared that it was said, "The Fangs of the Black Wolf has no enemies."]

[Immediately after this promotion, Paul and his team went to the King Dragon Realm. They were welcomed by many people.]

Paul: Oh, this is a spectacular sight! All over the place, people, people, people...!

Ghislaine: What's going on? What's all the commotion?

Paul: "What's the big deal?" They're welcoming us.

Ghislaine: Welcome...?

[Ghislaine doesn't seem to get it, and tilts her head as if she has no idea what's going on.]

Paul: Don't you understand?"

Ghislaine: I don't understand it. This has never happened before.

Paul: Well, I guess so.

Paul: We've had a few welcoming parties from powerful and rich people who wanted to take advantage of our power, but this is the first time we've had a whole city come out to welcome us.

Geese: The Fangs of the Black Wolf has been half well-received and half badly-received. But things have changed...

Geese: After all, we've become the S-ranked party that silences even crying children, the Fangs of the Black Wolf!

[Geese boasted proudly. His face is full of confidence.]

Talhand: Hmmm... Men and women of all ages are cheering. It's like a triumphal parade.

Elinalise: It would have been nice if it had been as formal as a real triumphal parade.

Zenith: What?

Elinalise: ...Coming!

Zenith: What do you mean, "coming?"

[Zenith uttered the question, but arrived at the answer without needing to be told.]

Zenith: !?

[The crowd rushed in on them. It is a natural behavior when you see a famous person.]

“I want to get close to that person.”

“I want to talk with him.”

“If possible, I want to touch him.”

[If it were a real triumphal parade, there would have been people guarding the parade. But here, there was no one to stop them, and the crowds rushed in at once, all seeking the Fangs of the Black Wolf.]

Talhand: We'll meet up at the usual bar!

Geese: Aiyo!

Zenith: Eh, huh!?

[If we stay together, we'll get stuck. In a spur of the moment decision, the members chose to disperse. In the midst of all this, Zenith is bewildered and wide-eyed.]

Paul: Zenith, let's go.

Zenith: Woah, yeah...!

[Paul takes Zenith's hand and starts running. Each member also ran at once.]

[Paul avoided the crowd and entered a narrow alley. He proceeded along the intricate path with Zenith's hand in tow.]

Zenith: Hey Paul, where are you headed?

Paul: Hmm? Yeah, there's a bar that The Fangs of the Black Wolf always use when we come here. I'm going there for now.

Zenith: Right, I got it.

[Being away from the downtown area, Zenith takes a break.]

Zenith: By the way, that was amazing earlier. It was like the whole city was there.

Paul: It's hard being too famous, isn't it?

Paul recalled the sight of the crowds surging in, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

Zenith: But you don't feel bad, do you? You look like you're feeling all delirious.

Paul: ? What's with the look on face? There's no reason to be sullen.

Zenith: Hmmm...

Paul: ...you don't believe me, do you?

Zenith: Because there were some beautiful women, and you like it when people like that do favors for you... don't you, Paul?

[Zenith glances up and down at Paul, as if looking for his reaction.]

Paul: Well... I'm a guy too, and I don't feel bad about it... but!

Paul: I have a special woman named Zenith. I don't think I'm going to look away from her.

Zenith: ...yeah.

[Her response was curt, but Paul smiled with satisfaction. Though her words were few, her reddened cheeks and ears spoke eloquently of Zenith's feelings.]

[Without letting go of her hand, Paul walked through the alley and entered a tavern with a sign that read "The Snake's Den Inn."]

Man A: Oh! Here he comes! It's Paul, leader of the Fangs of the Black Wolf!"

Woman A: Kyaaaah! Paul!!!

[The moment they stepped into the room, he was greeted with loud cheers. As he waded through the waves of people to the back of the room, covering Zenith, the other members of the group had already arrived.]

Ghislaine: You're late.

Paul: I took a detour through the back alleys... but what the hell is going on here?

Geese: The owner advertised the place as "'The Fangs of the Black Wolf's purveyor!'" That's why all the people came.

Paul: What's with that? He's a soft-spoken old man.

Talhand: He said he's going to be very generous with the money for the drinks! He said I could drink as much as I wanted!

Paul: So you're drinking right now.

Zenith: Drinking with a keg in your arms, you are drinking as boldly as ever...

Talhand: Hahaha ! You should try it too, Zenith!

Paul: Don't you dare. Don't get involved with Zenith, you drunkard.

[Talhand is holding a keg and laughing hysterically with a red face. Apparently, the drinking party

had started before Paul and the others arrived.]

Paul: Where's Elinalise?

Geese: She's sitting over there.

[Geese pointed to where a wall of men had formed. From the center of it, a familiar voice could be heard.]

Man B: Aaan!? I'm the one who's going to sleep with Miss Elinalise, of course I'm going to sleep with her!

Man C: I'm the one who called out to her first! Don't butt in from the side!

Man B: Shut up! Let's see who deserves the girl and who doesn't. Let's duel! It's a duel! Get your ass out front!

Elinalise: Duel? You don't have to do that. Let's... have fun together, shall we?

Elinalise: Don't be shy. You can mess me up with everyone here, can't you?

[The men shouted with delight. Paul narrowed his eyes as he watched the heat explode.]

Paul: That wench is going to be gone for the rest of the night.

Geese: Hey, hey, Paul. You're talking like it's someone else's problem.

Paul: Huuh?

[Geese, who had been drinking, did not try to hide his smirk and stood shoulder to shoulder with Paul. Then he points at a corner of the bar with his thumb.]

Geese: The ladies over there, they've been waiting a long time for you to come, you know?

Zenith: !

Paul: Sigh...

Geese: What's with that reaction? We've got everything from pretty to cute, you know? And they're all dressed like they're about to open their legs!

Paul: Whatever.

Geese: !?

Zenith: !?

Talhand: ...

Ghislaine: "Whatever"...?

Geese and Zenith's faces are stained with astonishment, and Talhand, who is also astonished, is spilling a mouthful of booze from his popped-open mouth.

Geese: W-what's the matter with you...? You usually jump into women and gobble them up without restraint!"

Ghislaine: Are you a phony Paul?

Talhand: Did you hit your head in the labyrinth? Zenith, cast a healing spell now!

Zenith: Eh, wha?

Paul: You guys...! Everyone has the same look... I'm not a phony, and I didn't hit my head!"

[Paul looked around at his companions with a twitch in his mouth.]

[He is a womanizer, and he loves women. This perception is not wrong, but for Paul, it is his past self.]

Paul: (I have Zenith now. I'm not going to go to another woman!)

[Following his impulse, Paul grabs Zenith's hand and gets up from his seat.]

Zenith: Paul...!

Paul: ...Anyway, not today. I'm in the mood for a quiet, leisurely drink.

Geese: Hmmm... unusual thing to do...

Geese: But then, why are you trying to drag Zenith along with you?

Paul: You guys are going to drink the night away, aren't you? I can't leave Zenith alone in a bar where I know there will be more drunks.

Geese: Yeah, sure.

[Perhaps because they were already drunk, the members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf did not suspect anything and agreed with Paul's words.]

Paul: Zenith, let's go.

Zenith: Ah, yeah...

[Paul leaves the bar with Zenith, hearing Talhand's voice at his back as they begin a drinking contest. They chose a narrow alley to avoid the eyes of people.]

[Paul then entered the inn, which cost more money than usual, and took one of the rooms at the reception desk.]

Zenith: A room together...

Paul: If you mind it, Zenith, you can have another room.

[Paul told Zenith, who looked nervous, in the softest voice possible.]

[What does it mean to stay in the same room, and what does he intend to do? Paul knew that Zenith would understand.]

Paul: (I mustn't force you to stay with me.)

Paul: (If she doesn't like it at all, then I'll wait until Zenith is ready...)

Zenith: I don't mind.

[Zenith assured him clearly, despite Paul's uneasiness. Her face is still tense, but she looks straight into Paul's eyes.]

Zenith: One room will be fine.

Paul: I see...

[I feel like jumping up and down with joy, but it would be too uncool to do so.]

[With a soppy, restless feeling, Paul took Zenith with him to his room.]

Chapter 12

[He never felt calm even after entering the room. On the contrary, he felt strangely thirsty, and his heart was beating faster and faster.]

Paul: (Are you kidding me? Am I nervous?)

Zenith: ...

Paul: (I know Zenith is nervous. It's probably the first time she's ever done something like this...)

Paul: (Why am I nervous too? I've done this more times than I can count!)

Paul: (... because it's with Zenith, right?)

[This is enough to keep him going. He wonders... how special this Zenith woman is to him.]

[Paul exhales deeply to calm his mind. Then he stands in front of Zenith, who is staring at her feet and not moving, and places his hand on her slender shoulder.]

Paul: Are you sure you want to do this? Now you can still... well, that, you can wait...

Zenith: ...earlier, you made sure of that, didn't you? That is it alright with me? Or...

Zenith: Does Paul want me... to run away?

Paul: !

[Paul's eyes widen as he is told something he had not expected.]

Paul: I'm just I just...!

Zenith: Just what...?"

Paul: Just, you know...

[It was embarrassing to say it again, but Paul had a hunch that his current feelings were not to be mistaken.]

Paul: I want to do things right with you, Zenith.

Paul: I don't want to let my desire get the better of me, or let the moment get the better of me, or whatever...

Paul: I'm going to wait for you to really... feel good about it, and that may not always be possible, but... I'm going to wait as long as I can.

[The words and attitude were not like Paul's usual, but he meant everything he said and did not tell lies.]

[He wanted to be serious. Paul's feelings were conveyed, and Zenith let out a small sigh of relief.]

Zenith: I know what I'm doing here.

Zenith: I know it's a bit of an overstatement to say I'm ready, but I made my own decision and I'm here with you. I decided that I wanted to move on with Paul.

Paul: Zenith... This is the last time I'm asking. Are you sure about this?

Zenith: Yes, of course. Because I believe in you.

Paul: I see.

["I believe in you." Just by throwing that one sentence, Paul's tension is released, and a warmth spreads in his heart.]

Zenith: I don't know all of Paul's past relationships with women, but I can usually guess what they were like.

Paul: ...but I'm surprised you believe me.

[He had no regrets about his past relationships with women, but there was no way he could talk about them openly in front of Zenith.]

[Paul looks away awkwardly, but then he hears Zenith giggle and looks back at her.]

Zenith: I, you know, I believe in Paul from now on.

Zenith: From now on, as long as you don't touch another woman, you can hold me.

Paul: Oh! Of course!

[Paul answered immediately with a smile and impulsively hugged Zenith.]

Zenith: Wait a minute, Paul!

[He picks her up and spins her around, and they both fall onto the bed together.]

Paul: Zenith, I promise you. I won't touch any other woman but you.

Zenith: ...Yes, you do that.

[There was a pause in Zenith's reply, perhaps because Paul had given an immediate answer without hesitation. Perhaps she still has something on her mind.]

Paul: (... If you knew about my past, wouldn't you be worried?...)

Paul: (So it's up to me from now on to erase that anxiety)

[Paul puts his arms around Zenith.]

Paul: ...Zenith.

Zenith: Yes?

Paul: Thanks for accepting me.

Zenith: Hmmm, don't thank me. I'm the one who started this.

[They embraced each other as if they were sharing each other's body heat and making it the same temperature. And then they both drowned in their love.]

Paul: (Oh... beautiful...)

Paul: —I think I like Zenith more than I can help myself.

Zenith: !!!

[Zenith's eyes widen and she freezes at the words that spill out unintentionally.]

Paul: What's with the surprise? Do you think I'm joking? I'm serious...

Zenith: That's the first time.

Paul: ...what?

Zenith: You telling me that you like me.

[It was Paul's turn to be surprised.]

Paul: Didn't I ever tell you?

Zenith: Yes, that was the first time.

Paul: I know it sounds like... an excuse, but I've been thinking about it in my heart for a long time. I like you, I care about you, I love you...

Paul: From the first time I met you, I saw you differently in my eyes than I saw anyone else.

Paul: I'm sure it's because I loved you.

[Paul's mouth repeatedly expressed his love for Zenith, so much so that it seemed like a lie that he had never said it before.]

[Each time, Zenith smiled happily and returned the same amount of love.]

Paul: There is no woman as gentle and warm-hearted as you are...

Zenith: I'm sure that's because I love you, too, Paul.

[It was the most intense, passionate, yet tender, happy time Paul had ever experienced.]

Chapter 13

[The next day—.]

[Paul and Zenith woke up when the sun was high in the sky, spent a lazy half-day, and then went to a bar where the members were.]

Zenith: You look amazing today.

Paul: It's only the second day. I guess it's going to go on for a while longer.

[The party must have been going on in the bar for a long time. The wild revelry was still going on, but not a few of them were lying on the floor, perhaps drunk out of their minds.]

[Among them was Talhand. He was sleeping on his back, snoring.]

Paul: Hey, Talhand. You'll get trampled if you sleep here.

Talhand: Gughhhah, gughho...

Paul: Oh, for cryin' out loud!

[Paul picked up Talhand and carried him to a space that was just barely less crowded.]

Paul: Zenith, wait a minute please. I'm going to talk to the owner.

Zenith: Yeah, all right. I'll take care of Talhand.

Paul: Yeah. I'll be right back.

[Paul went to the shopkeeper and paid him more money than the Fangs of the Black Wolf had drunk and eaten.]

[The owner said, "I can't accept this much!" but Paul hands over the bag of money as if to pushing it at him.]

Paul: Just take it. You don't know who ate and drank how much anymore, do you?

Paul: We like this bar. It would be a shame if it went bankrupt.

Paul: Oh, yeah. We'll have some light drinks and some snacks... and bring some fruit or something in the back.

Ghislaine: ? That's an unusual order for Paul.

Paul: Oh, Ghislaine. You weren't drunk out of your mind, were you?

[Ghislaine was slightly red-faced, but apparently not wobbly. She seems to be able to handle it if asked to fight right now.]

Paul: Were you drinking alone?

Ghislaine: Yeah.

Paul: But did anyone come up to you?

Ghislaine: At first, yes. But after I silenced one guy who was insistent on talking to me, they just looked at me from a distance after that.

I can just about guess what kind of silencing she did. Paul chuckled and pointed to a corner of the store.

Paul: Zenith is over there. And although he ain't awake, I've also collected and rolled Talhand."

Paul: You've had enough to drink by yourself. Let's drink together from here on.

Ghislaine: Yeah, let's do that.

[When Paul returned with Ghislaine, he found not only Zenith and the others, but also Geese.]

Geese: What's this? You retrieved Ghislaine as well?

Paul: ...

Geese: Not only are you taking care of Talhand, but you're also taking care of Ghislaine?

Geese: I saw that you gave money to the owner of the store, so you must have really hit your head.

Paul: ...Hey, Geese. Could you talk about other people's business?

Paul: You're obviously running low on gear, aren't you? Where did you drop it?

Geese: Ah... that's...

[Geese, who was trying to be funny, stumbles over his words at Paul's point and looks away in an understandable way.]

Zenith: He said he got ripped off at the gambling tables.

Paul: Is that so?

Geese: I went to... I got into it with a guy I was drinking with yesterday, and he said he'd introduce me to a good betting house, so I went along...

Geese: I did that, and he got me cleaned out and took some of my equipment... Damn! I could have won if I'd stuck it out a little longer!

Paul: That's what most losers say.

Geese: Guh...

[Paul said disgustedly and rubbed shoulders with Geese.]

Geese: ! Paul?

Paul: I can't help it. I'll go get back what was taken from you.

Geese: What? Why?

Paul: Why? Of course it's because I'd be pissed off if word got around that the Fangs of the Black Wolf are good suckers.

Geese: Well, that's true, but...

[Geese is blindingly surprised. The reason is that he didn't expect Paul to suggest that he go and get it back before he asked for it.]

Paul: I'm going to go. Ghislaine, I asked you to take care of Zenith and Talhand. If any strange people approach, send them away.

Ghislaine: Got it.

Paul: But, Geese. From now on, keep your betting in moderation.

Geese: Oh, right...? I mean, you... don't you look different...?

Paul: Huh? I'm the same. Don't go spouting nonsense.

[Paul brushes aside the slight doubt Geese had.]

[However, Geese realized that his doubts were not just his imagination... no, the members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf were soon confronted with the fact that they were not...]

Chapter 14

Elinalise: What's with the attitude of those nobles! They are playing the adventurers for suckers!"

[One day, the Fangs of the Black Wolf, who had been asked to provide an escort for an expected battle with monsters, were being pushed around by the aristocratic family they were escorting.]

Nobleman's daughter: Wait a moment! The carriage is shaking too much! Stop it quickly. We're going to take a break!"

Nobleman's son: When are the monsters coming out? You don't need adventurers, I'll take care of it! My tutor even admits I'm good at it!

Nobleman: Hey, I'm bored. You, woman, come and pour me a drink.

[Since setting out, the journey has been a mess, with unlimited selfishness, constant bragging, and almost being groped by a womanizer...]

[The carriage stopped for a break, and the members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf met face to face. Elinalise was the first to voice her dissatisfaction.]

Elinalise: That boy was bragging that he could become an S-class adventurer in no time, if we could become such a thing.

Elinalise: If he is so confident in his skills, shall I leave him around here?

Ghislaine: He's trying to touch me.

Geese: It's not fun that they do whatever they want just because they're paying for the job.

Ghislaine: If he touches me any more, can I cut it off?

Geese: I'm not going to ask you what you're going to cut off...

Talhand: Zenith must have had it rough with that little girl.

Zenith: Yes... but I'm fine. I am used to dealing with noble girls.

[Zenith said with a wry smile, as the air was filled with a swoon.]

[The members frowned at her, clearly not okay with the situation. At the sight of her friends, Zenith huffed and tried to change the subject.]

Zenith: More importantly, I have a favor to ask of Geese.

Geese: Hm? What is it?

Zenith: Can you teach me how to cook?

Geese: ...Huh? What's going on, all of a sudden?

[Geese was bewildered by this too abrupt request. Zenith herself was also inwardly flustered, wondering why she had said it at this point in time.]

Zenith: Even that... selfish aristocrat eats the meals Geese serves without complaining, doesn't she? I wanted to be able to make that kind of food too...

Geese: Well, I guess it's fine...

[An indescribable air is created between Zenith, who asked in bewilderment, and Geese, who nodded in bewilderment.]

Elinalise: What are you two talking about? Now is not the time to be talking about such things!

[Elinalise was the one who made the air fizzle out.]

Elinalise: People like that get carried away if we play down to them. We must not let them take advantage of us.

Talhand: Why don't you just go ahead and squeeze them in the carriage so there would be no boring conversation?

Elinalise: Oh, dear? You make good suggestions once in a while.

[Perhaps irritated by the aristocrat, Elinalise doesn't pick a fight with Talhand, but is willing to take him up on his suggestion.]

Paul: I see your point.

[While the members were complaining, Paul quietly interrupted with a serious face.]

Paul: But now that we've accepted the job, we can't just throw it away halfway through, can we? Let's finish the job.

[As an adventurer and party leader, that was a fair statement.]

[However, the members were astonished to hear Paul's honest opinion.]

Elinalise: What's the matter, Paul...? You said such a proper thing...

Geese: H-he did, didn't he? You must be pissed off too, after being told all you want, right?

Paul: I'm not going to throw them away just because I'm pissed off.

Ghislaine: You won't even hit him?

Paul: What are you going to do if you hurt the guy you're protecting?

Talhand: ...that's a good argument... you're making a good argument...

[The members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf looked at each other. All of them were in agreement.]

Elinalise: Somehow, Paul is kind of creepy right now...

Geese: That's... Well, but this ain't gonna last long.

Elinalise: Yes, I know. He's that Paul, after all.

[Elinalise and the others laughed at Paul's fickleness. However, it didn't end that day—.]

Paul: Geese, I'm not saying stay out of the betting hall, but don't bet until you're stripped naked.

Geese: Oh?

[Sometimes it was Geese, sometimes it was Elinalise—]

Paul: As far as the curse is concerned, you can't help it if you keep devouring men.

Paul: But you've got to change your ways. I heard that some gangsters got into an altercation over you, Elinalise.

Elinalise: ...I beg your pardon?"

[Paul's behavior and statements in accordance with the common sense and ethics of the world are still going on more than two months later, contrary to the expectations of the members.]

[Moreover, he was not only keeping 'straight' himself, but he was even demanding it from the other members.]

Ghislaine: ...You're telling me to study up."

Paul: It's necessary.

[Finally, on that day, while in camp on the way home from the commission, an emergency meeting of the Fangs of the Black Wolf was held, initiated by the members who had become frustrated with Paul's transformation.]

Ghislaine: This is getting on my nerves.

Ghislaine: You tell me to learn how to count money and do calculations, and to research the area... there's no way I'll understand even if you tell me so much.

Zenith: ...

Elinalise: Talhand, as I recall, you were also meddled with in various ways, weren't you?

Talhand: Well... I was told to think about how much I drink and to stop making a fool of myself in the bar.

Paul: ...

Elinalise: ...Hey, Paul. Dear, what's going on with you?"

Paul did not answer Elinalise's question and fell silent. The irritation of his friends is amplified even more by their leader, who says nothing.

Geese: We've been free to do what we want, haven't we? No matter what the powers that be or the higher ranks say to us, if we don't like it, we'll blow 'em off...

Geese: We'll stick our necks out and do whatever we want... and the Fangs of the Black Wolf are a party with that much strength, aren't we?

Elinalise: You've have certainly changed. Or maybe you are trying to change now.

Elinalise: You take every job request seriously and don't throw away any of them in the middle of the job. You don't ignore your clients and your attitude has improved...

Talhand: Straightforwardness, for example, doesn't suit you. To be honest, Paul, you're getting kind of creepy these days.

Ghislaine: ...I agree.

Zenith: ...

Paul: ...

[Paul stood up, arms crossed, and looked across at his companions, who made no attempt to hide their frustration.]

Paul: I understand where you guys are coming from. But you know what, I've decided to change.

Ghislaine: Change...?

Paul: I've stopped being a brat.

[Paul says with authority.]

[He had found a woman he loved with all his heart and decided to become a proper man. Everything he was doing now was for that purpose.]

[But there was no way the members of The Fangs of the Black Wolf could have known about such a decision.]

Geese: The hell is up with that? I don't get it!

Elinalise: Don't you dare to be whimsical with your ideas!

Paul: Huh? It's neither a whim nor a random thought! I did this after thinking it through!

[The quarrel between the members of the Black Wolf Fangs would never end with just an argument.]

[Paul, who is making an earnest effort to change, reflexively raised his voice and was about to get physical with the others.]

Zenith: Oh...

[Zenith's body, having not uttered a single word until then, fell to the side.]

Ghislaine: !!

[Ghislaine, who was standing next to her, supported her as quickly as she could.]

Paul: "!? Zenith!? What's wrong!?"

[Blowing away the fact that they were about to fight at any moment, Paul rushed to Zenith. The other members hurriedly gathered around her.]

[Zenith's face has turned pale from blood being drained from her face, and her consciousness seems to be clouded.]

Paul: Zenith! Zenith!

Elinalise: Paul, calm down! Don't shake her so much when you don't know the cause!

Geese: I remember there's a small town up ahead. If we hurry now... we'll be there before dawn.

Paul: Geese, lead the way.

Geese: Roger that.

Talhand: My feet can't keep up. I will follow behind you.

Paul: Ghislaine, you stay with Talhand. Elinalise will go with us.

[I don't know why Zenith fell. With his mind filled with confusion and frustration, Paul fires off instructions to the members.]

[Paul puts Zenith on his back and leaves the encampment, with Geese leading the way.]

Chapter 15

[When the sun began to appear, they arrived at a small town and rushed straight to the doctor's house.]

Paul: (Why is this happening... If anything happens to Zenith, I'm...!)

[Paul punches the wall out of frustration and anxiety. Geese and Elinalise, who came with him, also have grim expressions on their faces. It felt like time had passed so long—.]

[How much time had passed? When the sun rose high in the sky and the following Talhand and company joined the group—.]

Doctor: She's waking up.

Paul: ! Where's Zenith? Is she all right?

Doctor: Ask her directly for more information. Please go to the back room."

[Paul rushed into the hospital room.]

[Inside, Zenith was lying on her bed, looking out the window with a quiet face.]

Paul: Zenith...

Zenith: Paul... and everyone...

Elinalise: Your color is still not good, dear, but you seem to be conscious.

Zenith: Yes I feel much better. I'm sorry for worrying you...

Paul: Don't apologize, just tell us, please. What did the doctor tell you?

Zenith: That's...

[Paul asked seriously as he approached the bed. Then Zenith looked away as if she was reluctant to say.]

Elinalise: !!!

[Whether from Zenith's mood or from the intuition of an experienced person, it was Elinalise who first thought of this.]

Elinalise: Zenith, you don't mean...?

Zenith: ...yes. I was surprised too when I heard about it just now.

Zenith: I'm pregnant—

[Silence fell in the hospital room. The next moment, Paul was hugging Zenith, whose expression was still hard, as if she had not realized it yet.]

Paul: ...

Paul: (Pregnant... my...child...)

[It is true that when Zenith accepted him and when he heard the news of his father's death, the idea of a child came to mind.]

[But he did not expect to have a child after only one time. His heart was buzzing, half with joy and half with anxiety.]

[Seeing Paul hugging Zenith tightly without saying a word, the members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf exchanged glances. Then, out of everyone, a sigh escaped.]

Talhand: I knew you had your hand in things, after all...

Zenith: ! So you knew... after all?

Elinalise: Yes, of course. Paul and Zenith are easy to read and understand. We all were aware of it for some time.

Elinalise: Paul always had a special look in his eyes when he looked at you. It was like that from the beginning, when I think about it. I remember the look on his face when he met you, Zenith...

Geese: Zenith, too. Suddenly asking me to teach you how to cook, and it hit me. You said you were trying to learn to cook for someone else.

Geese: Paul is the only one in the Fangs of the Black Wolf who fit the bill, right? Well, I didn't think you were pregnant.

Zenith: So you already knew all about it... I'm sorry I didn't tell you about me and Paul...

Ghislaine: No need to apologize.

[Shaking her head in apology, Ghislaine approaches Zenith. Then, looking down at her still unchanged belly, she asked a question.]

Ghislaine: When are you going to give birth?

Zenith: They told me I'm about two and a half months in now, so a little under seven months to go, I guess...

Paul: ...

Paul: (If you're saying that the day I decided to be serious with Zenith, I had a baby in her belly...)

Paul: (Maybe this guy is a symbol of family.)

[The anxiety that had been born in his heart disappears. A fork in Paul's road appeared, forcing him to make a decision. He is determined and does not hesitate for a moment.]

Elinalise: But what are you going to do now? As long as she's pregnant, we can't let her work the same way as before, can we?

Geese: That's right. Her belly will be coming out from now on, and I know it will be difficult to fight and move around...

Talhand: I think it would be safer for her to leave the party for a while, and then we can think about what to do after the baby is born.

Ghislaine: I see...

The members talk seriously. It is not unusual for adventurers to become pregnant and retire.

Zenith was waiting for her friends' decision with a serious face, as if she was also prepared for it. But the results were already in.

In Paul's mind, it was long overdue.

Paul: Listen up, guys.

Paul: The Fangs of the Black Wolf is disbanded.

[Everyone, including Zenith, was speechless at the decision that the dignified Paul had just said.]

Paul: Zenith is out. I'm out too. So we disband.

Paul: But if you guys want to keep the name "Fangs of the Black Wolf" and continue as adventurers, then go ahead and do it. I have no intention of stopping you.

Geese: Oh... Ma, eh! What are you talking about?

Talhand: Disbanded!? Don't be ridiculous!

Ghislaine: ...I'm not convinced. There must be another way.

Elinalise: What are you going to do now that the party is disbanded? Aside from Zenith, are you saying that even you are quitting the adventuring party, Paul?

Paul: Yes.

Paul: I'm going to marry Zenith and settle down to work.

Zenith: What... marriage...?

[The words that came out of Paul's mouth were unbelievable, even to Zenith.]

[Paul looked at Zenith in his arms. He could see it in her face. She was much, much more anxious than he was.]

Paul: Yeah. Let's get married.

Zenith: Quitting being an adventurer...

Paul: Zenith and my baby are my family. So I will protect them. Let's get married and live together.

[It is nerve-racking to spin sincere words with real feelings. But I was even more nervous waiting for her reply to my proposal.]

[Eventually, she—.]

Zenith: Yes.

[Zenith nodded, shortly, quietly, but firmly.]

[Paul's spine shivers with delight. In his eyes, he sees only Zenith.]

Elinalise:: You two...!

[The world of just the two of them was shattered by the angry gazes and voices of their friends.]

Elinalise: Tsk...!

Elinalise: I have no taste for yelling in front of pregnant women. Paul, come outside.

Paul: ...yeah.

[It was probably because they were women and she was their cute little sister. Elinalise did not want to fight in front of Zenith, despite the indignation on her face.]

[The members except Zenith left the hospital room. Perhaps as a reaction to the anger she had been forcibly suppressing, it was Elinalise who started the conversation.]

Elinalise: Did you think we'd be saying "Congratulations on your engagement"!??

Geese: Yeah, that's right! You ignoring what we have to say? Can't you at least listen to us!?

Talhand: We would never have agreed to this.

Ghislaine: ...

[The stares and hostility flew. Paul faced his companions.]

Paul: Zenith and I are out. Nothing you guys say will change that.

Elinalise: You're the one who brought us into this, remember? Besides, we cherish our friends more than anything else.

Talhand: We liked your spirit to fight the higher-ranked parties and say no to the ones we didn't like.

Talhand: To be decent? To be respectable person? You've lost your nerve, Paul!

Paul: Do I look like a coward?

[Paul clenches his hands and glares at his tormentors. Paul is not mature enough to suppress his anger at the total denial of his attempts to change.]

[So he said it.]

Paul: Don't just say whatever you want! What do you know about me?

Paul: I've decided to retire! Don't start bitching about what other people have decided! To me, being an adventurer is something I can quit easily!

Paul: So I can leave you guys too. We just hung out because we seemed to get along, and called each other friends because we didn't know what else to call each other.

Paul: You guys don't weigh that much in my mind. Don't you guys get in my way!

[These words were too harsh to be called a sales pitch, but rather they were tantamount to betrayal.]

[Paul's words sunk deep into the Fangs of the Black Wolf and inflicted a wound beyond repair.]

Episode 4 [Life in Buena Village]

Chapter 16

[The argument between the Fangs of the Black Wolf over the dissolution of the party became heated, and the conversation was interrupted that day when they were removed from the hospital.]

[Zenith was safely released from the hospital a few days later and moved herself to an inn in the town where the hospital was located.]

Zenith: Have you talked to the others since then?

Paul: ...

Paul: I haven't even seen them.

Zenith: Oh... I understand...

[The town is so small that there is only one inn. Therefore, the Fangs of the Black Wolf had no choice but to stay at the same inn, but apparently they are not involved in any way.]

Zenith: Are you going to not talk to the others anymore?

Paul: ...yeah. I'm not going to change my mind. It's the same with them.

[Paul looked at Zenith and relaxed his expression.]

Paul: Well, whatever it is, don't worry. Zenith, make sure you're in top shape.

Paul: Because we're going to have to travel a long distance, even if it's right after this.

Zenith: Huh?

Paul: I can't stay with them. I'm going to leave them.

Zenith: Have you decided where we're going yet?

Paul: ...

Zenith: Paul... I don't think we can keep traveling long distances. If I'm going to have this baby, I need somewhere I will be able to relax.

Paul: A place to relax, huh?

Paul: Somewhere you can settle down...

[Paul had a difficult expression on his face, but then his expression suddenly changed when he noticed Zenith staring at him with a serious look on her face.]

Paul: Okay, I'll think about it. Well, it's not like I don't have any idea what I'm doing. Don't worry.

Paul: You must be tired after just getting out of the hospital. Get some rest. I'm... going to go to for a bit.

[Paul leaves the room with a smile on his face to reassure Zenith.]

Zenith: Ha...

[She lies down on the bed and lets out a deep sigh. She closes her eyes for a while, but it's a blur and she can't seem to get back to sleep.]

[Zenith bit her lip as she stroked her belly, which hadn't swelled up yet. Because she knew what Paul was thinking.]

Zenith: ...can't go on like this.

[She is in good shape thanks to the doctors' generous treatment and nursing. Zenith got up and left the room and went to her friends who were supposed to be in the same lodge.]

[The members of the group had taken different rooms, but they were all in the same place.]

Elinalise: Zenith, are you feeling better already?

Zenith: Yes, I'm fine. More importantly, Paul's... about us—

Talhand: Zenith, do not be mistaken. It is Paul whom we are angry with.

Talhand: We have nothing against you, and we are not against your pregnancy or your marriage. Am I right?

Ghislaine: Yeah. We all talked about it.

Zenith: ! But it's not Paul's fault alone. You can't get pregnant or married alone...

[Zenith clenched her fists. The most important thing to remember is that you can't blame anyone else for your problems. But her friends didn't blame her.]

Zenith: Paul didn't mean what he said in the hospital room...

[She had been thinking about it ever since she was in the hospital. She had wondered how Paul could have been so angry with his friends, even if he had meant it as provocation.]

Zenith: He's trying to make himself look bad. He's taking all the blame and trying to protect me! So please don't blame Paul alone...!

[Zenith raised her voice to defend Paul. The members of the Fangs of the Black Wolf heard her words and exhaled quietly. There was no surprise on anyone's face.]

Geese: ...I know, I know that.

Zenith: Eh...

Elinalise: Whatever that moment was, I don't believe now that was Paul's true intention.

Ghislaine: Yeah, even I can see that.

[All the companions of the Fangs of the Black Wolf nodded their heads. They all understood Paul well from their adventures together.]

Elinalise: And that is why it makes me so angry.

Zenith: What do you mean...?"

Elinalise: Paul is a free and uninhibited man who goes where he pleases.

Elinalise: He is the kind of man who alone is responsible for the dissolution of the Fangs of the Black Wolf... I still can't believe that he would make such a self-sacrifice.

Geese: So you mean he wanted to disband the party, right?

Zenith: Mh...

Talhand: That's why this is unforgivable! This is our—

Paul: What are you guys doing?

[A voice interrupts Talhand's words. Zenith and the others turned to see a grim-faced Paul standing at the door.]

Paul: Don't tell me you've got the Zeniths surrounded and are complaining to her?

Elinalise: What are you talking about? Do you think we are accusing her of something to harm her?

Paul: Zenith, come here.

Zenith: Uh... um, Paul, don't get me wrong. I came here of my own volition. And I am not being accused.

Paul: Fine, come here.

Zenith: Uh, yeah...

[Paul kept a serious expression on his face even after hearing Zenith's words.]

[Bewildered, she moved closer to Paul, who stepped forward and hid Zenith behind his back.]

Talhand: You, are you serious? Are you really trying to protect Zenith from us?

Paul: You guys can be hot-blooded.

[Paul snickered as he provoked his companions.]

Paul: When we're leaving this town, I'm going to the guild.

Ghislaine: ...to pick up your reward?

Paul: That's one thing, but...

Paul: I'm going to go through the formalities of disbanding the party. I am the leader of the Fangs of the Black Wolf. I'll do as I please, no matter what you say.

[The members were absolutely shocked by his arrogance and brazenness, and in the next moment, their anger exploded.]

Talhand: Paaaauuuuuul!!!

Elinalise: Y-you...! How dare you say such a thing!

[Talhand and Elinalise stood up with bright red faces. Geese and Ghislaine stop them as they try to jump on him, pinning them down in a cross-legged chokehold.]

Paul: Oh, good. Keep up the good work and stop them.

Geese: You're the reason we're in this mess! This is no time to fuck around!

Paul: I'm not kidding. I've always been serious.

Paul: I'm done with you guys. I don't think we'll see each other again.

Zenith: Oh...

[Paul turned his back on the "former" members and left the room, taking Zenith by the hand.]

Geese: Hold on, Paul! Paul!!!!"

[Against the backdrop of angry voices calling his name, Paul returns to the room with Zenith in tow. He continues to quickly pack up his belongings and leaves the inn.]

Zenith: Paul, are you going to go out like this? You should talk to everyone more properly...!

Paul: That's fine. It's better that we didn't get into a fistfight.

Paul: I'm sorry we had to leave so abruptly. We were actually going to leave tomorrow, but this is what happened...

Paul: But if we leave now, we should be in a town where we can stay before the sun goes down. Don't worry, we won't be staying in the field.

Zenith: Oh, right...

]Paul's eyes were kind as he looked at Zenith. Still, she felt like she saw sadness in those eyes, and Zenith couldn't say "Let's go back" or "Let's talk."]

[She took Paul away from everyone in the Fangs of the Black Wolf. She had robbed the Fangs of the Black Wolf from Paul.]

Zenith: ...Yeah. I feel safe with Paul.

[Zenith doesn't say a word of apology.]

[She knew that an apology would not bring back the Fangs of the Black Wolf, and that an apology would only make her feel better about herself, but would not save Paul.]

Chapter 17

The two of them continued on their safe passage to the town. Their arrival was a little later than planned, at night, to accommodate the pregnant Zenith.

Paul: Thank goodness we found a room to stay in.

[Normally this would not have been the time to rent a room at the inn, but ironically, thanks to the name Fangs of the Black Wolf, they were able to get one room open.]

Paul: I'll be out for a bit tomorrow morning. We'll set out when I get back.

Zenith: Where are you going?

Paul: Uh—...I'm going to the guild. I've got some formalities to take care of.

Zenith: .. procedures for the disbanding?

Paul: Yeah.

[Zenith asked something obvious, but Paul nodded his head without a trace of disgust.]

Zenith: ...I'm coming with you.

Paul: You don't have to do that, okay?

Zenith: Isn't it Paul who's taking it lightly?

Paul: Me?

Zenith: You didn't really want to do this, did you? The Fangs of the Black Wolf wasn't just a party. It was an important place for you...

Zenith: You can still—"

Paul: "Make the time to apologize to those guys and continue being an adventurer?"

[As if he had read what Zenith wanted to say, Paul continued to speak.]

Paul: Zenith, you are mistaken.

Zenith: Mistaken...?

Paul: ...let's sit down and talk.

[Paul offered Zenith a chair and put a blanket from the bed on her lap.]

Paul: The Fangs of the Black Wolf was going well. The best party I've ever been involved in, I think, even now that it's turned out like this.

Paul: We had a lot of different personalities, but strangely enough, they all worked well together.

Zenith: Yes, it was. That's why I felt so comfortable in the Fangs of the Black Wolf...

Paul: I'm not exaggerating, if we had kept going like that, we would have been at the top of the heap as the strongest adventuring party to conquer the world...

Paul: And above all, it was a lot of fun... I had a lot of fun doing stupid things with those guys and running amok with them.

[Whether it was beating up on people they didn't like, having a good time in bars, or risking their lives to conquer a labyrinth... it was fun.]

[He can remember everything without closing his eyes. He will surely not forget it for decades to come.]

Paul: If I had never met you, Zenith, I would still be the leader of the Fangs of the Black Wolf, and I would still be doing whatever I wanted to do as an adventurer.

Paul: But when I met you, I realized what I really wanted.

Zenith: ...

Paul: I know how you feel Zenith. I know I'm making you suffer..."

Paul: It's pathetic... I'm sorry for making you feel responsible when you just found out you're pregnant and you're anxious..."

[Paul kneels down beside Zenith and takes her gentle hand and squeezes it. It's the hand he swore he would never let go.]

Paul: But still with all that, I...

Paul: Zenith, I want to live with you and the child in your belly for the rest of my life.

[Paul said it with all his heart and without any hesitation so that all his heart would be conveyed to her.]

[Zenith hears Paul's words and realizes how determined he is.]

Zenith: Paul, you are so determined to move forward...

Paul: Yeah.

Zenith: "... you can't just keep beating yourself up. To not always regret the past, I also must look forward to the future..."

Zenith: Because I'm going to be your wife and the mother of this baby.

[I can't let go of my guilt for the members of the Fang of the Black Wolf or my sense of

responsibility for what happened.]

[Zenith firmly decides that she still has to look forward, that she has to be strong.]

Zenith: Paul. If you haven't decided where you are going to settle down, then we can go back to my country—

Paul: There is no need for that.

[Deciding to look forward, Zenith was about to propose a homecoming, when Paul interrupted and stopped her.]

Paul: You can't just go back to a place where you have bad memories and calmly give birth there.

Zenith: Then where are we going?

Paul: The Kingdom of Asura...

[Paul was the same as Zenith in that he had abandoned his country. He is returning to the country he was supposed to have abandoned for Zenith and is telling her that they are going to settle down there.]

[She was painfully aware of his reluctance to visit the place he had abandoned. That is why she is so moved by Paul's devotion and her feelings are hardened.]

Zenith: Paul—

Zenith: 'I will support you from now on, even more than everyone has supported you up to now. By your side, always...

Paul: Zenith, with you beside me, I feel reassured. We can do anything, you know.

That night, they slept on the same bed, holding each other tightly so that they would never be separated.

Chapter 18

[The next day. Paul went to the guild with Zenith. He presented his adventurer's card to the woman at the reception desk.]

Paul: I need you to complete the request and disband the party.

[Paul's voice was neither loud nor quiet. Paul's face was widely known among adventurers. Those who had been watching from afar in the guild were rustling.]

Adventurer A: Huh, disbanding! The Fangs of the Black Wolf!?

Adventurer B: I've just heard something outrageous! Let's tell everyone!

Receptionist woman: !... yes. Thank you for your time.

[As expected, the woman at the reception desk just looked at me for a moment, her eyes going wide, and went through the procedure without saying anything else.]

Zenith: Please renew my Adventurer's Card.

Receptionist woman: Yes.

[When Paul and Zenith returned, the words "Fangs of the Black Wolf" were missing from their Adventurer's Cards. They looked at them once and put them away without saying a word.]

Adventurer A: What happened to the others? Don't tell me they're dead or something...?

Adventurer B: They're not the kind of guys who go down that easily, are they? I've seen them once, and they're all monster!

[The murmurs in the guild did not cease. Paul frowned from the discomfort of the curious stares.]

Paul: ...Shut up.

Adventurer A: !!!

[Paul's eyes sharpened as he looked around the guild, and the buzzing stopped.]

[Everyone instantly stopped talking. In the midst of all this, the two of them left the guild.]

[As they made their way toward the entrance to the town, Zenith tugged at the hem of his coat.]

Zenith: Hey, Paul. I wonder what they'll think when they renew their adventurer's cards?

Paul: Well, they're definitely going to be mad, aren't they?

Zenith: I know, alright?...

[Zenith's eyes go down and she lets out a sigh.]

Zenith: ...I knew I should have left it back there, didn't I? Let's go back to the guild now, shall we?

Paul: There's a hell of a racket going on right now. I'm sure people are gathering there... Do you want to go back to that place?

Zenith: Well, I don't want to go back there... but it's not like we're the only ones getting rewards...

[The reward for Black Wolf Fang's last commission is now in Paul's hands in full. In short, he is taking it with him, and running away.]

Paul: We're going to have to pay for things. Let's just call it a wedding and a baby shower, okay?

Zenith: It's not okay... although there's nothing I can do about it now...

Zenith: But Paul, you've been trying to 'straighten up' these past few months, haven't you?"

Paul: Yeah, this is the last time I'm going to play dumb.'

[They will be angry and resent Paul when they renew their adventurer cards and find out that he has absconded with their rewards.]

[Perhaps they might even think of it this way. "He's a lousy son of a bitch, a free spirit who does whatever he wants, and he hasn't changed at all!" Or something like that—]

[It's a refreshing feeling. Paul smiled with narrowed eyes.]

Paul: (Geese Nukadia)

Paul: (Talhand of the Harsh Great Peaks.)

Paul: (Elinalise Dragonroad)

Paul: (Ghislaine Dedoldia)

[Although he had destroyed these bonds himself, they were undoubtedly important to Paul—]

Chapter 19

[The destination of the journey is the Kingdom of Asura. Paul was concerned about Zenith's physical condition, but the road was wide and safe.]

[Because he had some money together, Paul bought a wagon, but his progress was slow because of his concern for the pregnant woman.]

Paul: ...

[Paul's expression gradually hardened as he entered the Kingdom of Asura. This is why Zenith was unable to ask him about his detailed destination for so long.]

Zenith: Phew...

Paul: Are you okay?

[Zenith exhaled as she patted her belly, and Paul, who was pulling the reins, stopped the carriage and turned around.]

Zenith: Yeah, I'm fine. Are you tired, Paul? Let me get you some water.

Paul: Oh, take it easy, I'll do it myself!

[At Paul's panicked look, Zenith giggled and laughed in amusement.]

Zenith: Even pregnant women aren't totally immobile, you know?

Paul: ...even if you say so... I'm a man, so I can't feel it, but I can tell just by looking at you that it's hard to move.

Paul: ...Your belly, it's becoming more and more noticeable. I'm kind of nervous about it.

Zenith: Hmmm, I'm not quite ready to give birth yet.

Paul: But it's better to be in a place where you can rest as soon as possible, right?

Paul scratched his head and pulled out a map of the Kingdom of Asura from his luggage.

Paul: My hometown is around here.

Zenith: Millbotts...

Paul: It seems my brother is the lord now.

Zenith: Is that where you're going?

Paul: No, absolutely not. Never.

[He said it clearly without a pause.]

[There was no way that he would ever go back to the homeland he abandoned, let alone introduce Zenith or his unborn child to his brother.]

Paul: We're going this way.

Zenith: Fittoa Region...?

Paul: It is ruled by the Boreas Greyrat family. My mother's birthplace, and the lord is my mother's brother.

Zenith: Paul's uncle... What is he like?

Paul: Well... we only saw each other a few times when I was a kid, but we didn't know each other very well... He's bold at best and boisterous at worst.

Paul: Well, that's not who I'm relying on. The second son of the lord, my cousin... Philip.

[There is no guarantee that his cousin will be able to help them. Paul had abandoned his home and fled the country.]

[A man who has left his noble family behind is unlikely to receive a warm welcome upon his return. Zenith, who was a noble lady in Milis, knows this well.]

Zenith: Don't be too hard on yourself, okay? With Paul, we can live anywhere.

Paul: ...I see. Well, he'll at least listen to me. He won't turn me away at the door.

[But I could not shake off my anxiety. The last time I saw him, Philip and I were still children, and I didn't know what kind of an adult he had become.]

Paul: (I can't help but wonder how he's doing...)

Paul: (After all, we have to meet him.)

[Paul and his team passed through Millbotts territory and headed straight for Fittoa.]

[The destination is the largest town in the territory, the Fortress City of Roa. Many adventurers visit this place and gather a lot of information.]

[Paul's information on the Greyrat family is old because he has been away from the Kingdom of Asura for a long time. First, he decided to investigate the situation of Boreas Greyrat.]

Paul: Where's...? Excuse me?

[A dining place where adventurers gather. After buying him a few drinks, the man calling himself a B-rank adventurer, blabbered on about Boreas Grayrats.]

Paul: The lord has been replaced? It's not Sauros-sama anymore?

Adventurer: Oh, it was about a year ago, I think. The succession struggle between his sons was settled.

Zenith: A succession struggle...

Adventurer: The brothers James and Philip fought, and it was James who won. So now the lord is James Boreas Grayrat.

Paul: ...

[James Boreas Grayrat. Unlike Philip, he had little interaction with him because of their age difference.]

[He remembers how blatantly disdainful he was when they met at a party to celebrate Paul's birthday.]

***James:** I hear you two hang out at school? Philip, even though you are cousins, you should choose properly who you hang out with in private."*

***James:** The Notos Greyrats' problem child. He's notorious for it.*

***James:** The eldest son of Notos Greyrat, at the age of ten, is so absorbed in his studies and swordplay that he has not the slightest sense of manners.*

[Just remembering this makes him angry, but Paul knew that this was no time to be indignant.]

[If Philip, whom he had relied on, had lost the battle for succession, could he really afford to lend a helping hand to Paul? On the other hand, it was hard to believe that he could count on James.]

Paul: ...Philip is the only one I can think of...

Adventurer: Hm? Excuse me?

Paul: No, nothing. What's the brother doing after losing to the older brother? They don't live in the same house, do they?

Adventurer: Of course not! What are you talking about? You don't know anything about anything, do you? Are you really an adventurer?

Paul: Oh, yeah, I'm an adventurer.

Adventurer: Hmm, well, you're still young. All right, I'll tell you.

Adventurer: Philip Boreas Greytat is here in the Citadel of Roa. Surprise, surprise, it's the mayor!

Zenith: The Mayor...?

Paul: ...yes. Now I know where to find him.

Adventurer: Hmm?

Paul: Thank you for telling me.

Adventurer: Oh! Is this good?

Paul: Of course.

[Paul put coins on the table and left the dining room with Zenith.]

[And then he went straight to the largest building in the center of Roa... the lord's manor.]

Zenith: It's a magnificent building...

Paul: The city of Roa served as the last line of defense in the war against the demons 400 years ago. That's why it's actually called a castle, even though it's called a manor house.

[A gatekeeper stands at the entrance of the lord's mansion. Paul approached the gatekeeper, who had a quizzical look on his face, and called out to him.]

Paul: I want to see Philip Boreas Greyrat.

Gatekeeper: What? What are you talking about? A man like you can't possibly see him.

Paul: Yes, I can. Tell him:

Paul: "Your cousin... Paul Notos Greyrat has come to see you."

[He says the name he should have given up. Otherwise, he would not even be able to connect with him. The gatekeeper could not disregard the name of Grayrat.]

Chapter 20

[They had to wait there for a while, but Paul and company managed to get through to the parlor of the manor.]

Philip: ...Paul?

[Philip's eyes were cold. He had never looked at him like this before, even though they had attended the same school together and had become friends in their own way.]

Paul: (Not at all like I remember...)

Paul: (But I guess that's true. It's been nearly a decade since we last saw each other.)

[They cannot remain in the same relationship they were in before. He cannot think naively that he will be reliable, or that they were close.]

[Paul bowed deeply to Philip faster than he could respond.]

Paul: I have to have a stable life. Please give me some kind of job.

Philip: ...Whuh?

Philip: ...I have no idea what's going on. All I know is that you had left the country. Please explain it to me step by step.

Paul: Right...

[Paul told me everything that had happened since he ran away from home. That he went on a journey with slum children, that he lived and trained in a dojo...]

[He became an adventurer, he made friends, he did a lot of bad things... and then he fell in love with one woman. He tells the story of how she got pregnant and came back to the Kingdom of Asura.]

Philip: I see... She is indeed pregnant.

Philip: I mean, it is good that you came back to the Kingdom of Asura, but you can't go back to Notos from where you left off leaving behind a mess. So you have come to me, is that it?

Paul: I'm begging you. You are the only one I can ask.

[He could see that Philip was puzzled. Paul kneels down and bows his head.]

Paul: I want a peaceful place where I can live with my family.

Zenith: '...Paul...!

[The countries may be different, but the meaning of the act is the same. It is a greeting that a

villager or craftsman would make, not something that a noble—even if a former one—and proud Paul would do.]

Philip: ...

[Zenith could clearly see the contempt in Philip's cold eyes, even though Paul, with his head bowed, could not see it.]

Philip: You think a man who has given up his family name, his responsibilities, and has lived a life of selfishness, can live so peacefully now?

Philip: Thomas, show them—

[Philip looks at the butler. Just as Zenith realized that they were going to be knocked out, BANG, the door to the room was thrown open with a loud crash.]

Sauros: ...

[Sauros enters the parlor at a leisurely pace and looks down at Paul, who is kneeling on his knees.]

Sauros: Humph, well if isn't Paul!

Paul: ...Sauros-sama, it's been a long time.

Sauros: You've grown up! But as usual, you don't seem to know how to greet people! Is that the greeting of a prosperous Asura nobleman!

There is no hostility or mockery in Sauros' voice. Paul did not raise his head, though he knew his voice was loud and imperious from the start.

Paul: Since I... now, am not related to the Asuran nobility...

Sauros: You fool! If you had nothing to do with the Asuras nobility, I would not even allow you to step into this mansion!

[Paul looked shocked at Sauros' rebuke. However, he still remained on his knees and continued to bow his head.]

[It is impossible to say that he has nothing to do with it as long as he is using the name of Notos Greyrat to get into the reception room.]

[It's too unbecoming and embarrassing. If it had been Paul alone, he would have left quickly, saying that he had no use for him if he didn't give him a job.]

Paul: But I know I'm doing something that's absurd, so...

Sauros: Humph! Absurd! You're absurd, huh? You got that from your father... from Amarant!"

[At the mention of his father, Paul's face contorted. Even though he is dead, he still feels something for him.]

Paul: (Even more so since I'm having a child...)

[Every time he thought he would never be that kind of father, Amaran's face flashed in his mind.]

Sauros: The man hated anything that didn't make sense! He was stubborn, rigid, and a pain in the ass! What on earth did Valentina like about Amaran!"

[Valentina, Paul's mother, was Saulos' sister. They did not look much alike, however]

Sauros: He was too by-the-book! It was the same when we drank together in his mansion about five years ago! He wanted to divide the contents of a bottle equally!

Philip: Isn't that perfectly normal?

Sauros: "Is that normal?" I don't care if it's *supposed* to be good, it *was* a bad bottle of booze!

Sauros: He said, "Even if you say this wine is bad and you don't want to drink it, I think it's bad too, so let's share it between us" and if someone pops the cork, it's only polite to drink it—

[Sauros' long story begins. The words spewing out are incessant and unstoppable.]

Chapter 22

[Philip's brow is furrowed and his mouth is shut, while Zenith looks on with rapt interest. Paul was on his knees, his face downcast.]

Paul: (Tough on himself and others, and that's why you said he was a man you could trust?)

Paul: (You mean that the way that man looked to me and the way he looked to Sauros-sama are two different things...)

Philip: ...

[While Sauros was talking, Philip was looking at Paul, but his eyes seemed to be looking somewhere far away.]

Sauros: I didn't expect him to be gone so soon! Maybe Valentina called him! Don't you think so too, Paul?

Paul: ...I have no idea...

Sauros: But...! He did not take care of what he had to before he died!

Sauros: His successor!

Philip: !

Sauros: He has left the Notos no worthy successors, and now he is dead!

Sauros: The first son is a fool who ran away from home! The second son is a mean and petty man! There is no heir who can carry on the Greyrat family!

Sauros: Paul! ...would you like to try to take it back?

Philip: Does that mean you will... remove Pilemon Notos Greyrat and have Paul take over?

Sauros: Grayrats are military aristocrats! The title of an S-rank adventurer is not dishonorable!

Philip: ...

Sauros: Paul, if you want to be the head of the family, I can help you.'

Paul huffs and puffs as he stares at the floor.

Paul: (After letting the son of Boreas fight for the heir, now you want Notos to do it too?)

Paul: (This old man... is too belligerent.)

[He is belligerent, daring, and eager to get involved in anything that looks interesting. In such a Sauros, Paul felt a kinship of blood.]

[But his answer was obvious.]

Paul: I want to live a peaceful life. With my loving wife and my yet-to-be-born child...

Sauros: How dare you hope for peace at such a young age! You are not yet ready to wither!

Philip: "... please leave it at that. He doesn't seem to have any intention of taking the reigns of the head of the family, and I don't intend to carry Paul either.

Sauros: .. Hunh! Feckless bastards!

[Paul and Philip did not like his reply, and Saulos threw up his hands in disgust and walked out of the reception room.]

[Philip called for the butler.]

Philip: ...I believe a resident knight of the village of Buena just died the other day in a battle with monsters.

Philip: This man is good with the sword. Let's leave it to him.

Paul: !

[Paul raised his sight with a start and gazed up at Philip with a look of surprise on his face.]

Paul: Philip...

Philip: As for your status, you belong to the lower class of nobility. It is a rural life in a remote village without even a market, but you don't mind, do you?

Paul: Of course I don't mind! I am indebted to you!

[Paul smiled a delighted smile and bowed his head again.]

Zenith: Thank you!

Philip: Ah, as you were.

[Philip stopped Zenith, who was about to bow next to Paul, by lifting his hand.]

Philip: I won't do anything more for you, but please give birth to a healthy child.

Zenith: Yes, I promise.

[Zenith nodded, smiling. Paul lifted his knees off the floor and stood up.]

Philip: '... And how did you manage to catch such a beautiful woman? Apparently you haven't changed your old tastes.

Paul: Don't look at someone else's girl's ass.

Zenith: Eh...?

Philip: I wasn't looking. Paul, that's a strange thing to say.

Philip: ...generally speaking, the moment you get a job, you don't change your attitude like you're getting a palmful.

[Philip said dismissively and rubbed the crease between his eyebrows. Paul and Zenith are cuddling up to each other, and Philip grumbles, "That Paul..."]

Philip: Regardless of the process, I can't believe you found the right person to be your wife, and you are even having a child... Even I'm impressed... that you've grown up so much.

Paul: No, what's that? I'm not much older than you. We went to school at the same time.

Philip: We used to have a lot of... fun back then.

[Philip's eyes narrowed with a smile on his mouth.]

Philip: Since I lost the succession struggle with my brother, my days have been boring. My work in Roa has been dull and uninteresting.

Philip: I denied it, but I could see how it would be fun to join forces with you, take over the reigns of Notos, and fight with James, just as my father had said.

Paul: I won't do it.

Philip: I know. We can't go back to being friends. That's why I'm trying to get you a job as a resident knight.

Philip: I can only help you so far. I will not help you in any way from now on. If life gets tough, then don't run away again.

Paul: I would never do such a thing.

Paul: That time... when I ran away from home, I had nothing. But now I have everything I need.

Zenith: Paul...

[Paul takes Zenith's hand and laces their fingers together. She was embarrassed, but did not shake it off, and rather squeezed it back—.]

Chapter 23

[After that, Paul was assigned to the village of Buena in the territory of Fittoa as a resident knight... and he and Zenith settled there.]

[Within the Kingdom of Asura, he called himself a Greyrat. Because of the large number of parochial nobles, none of the villagers believe that Paul is a member of the main family of Notos Greyrat.]

Zenith: I can't say there aren't problems... but it's a nice, quiet, peaceful village.

Zenith: And this house that Master Philip has prepared for us is very fine. Whatever it is, you guys are still friends.

Paul: I hope so.

Paul: Anyway, so what are these problems? The birth will be soon. It would be better to solve the problems before that.

[Paul asked with a serious face, and Zenith also put on a serious expression.]

Zenith: It's hard to solve. But will you listen to me?

Paul: Yes, of course.

Zenith: You know, the newly appointed resident knight, he is a very handsome and reliable man. He's so attractive that all the women in the village will be after him...

Zenith: He loves women. That's why his wife is so worried that her husband might look away...

Paul: ...That's certainly a concern, but don't worry. But I'll be fine.

Paul: The resident knight loves his wife tremendously. He loves her so much that he thinks she's more important than his own life, and it's a miracle that he met her...

Paul: I'm so thankful to God for the miracle of meeting you.

Zenith: ...fufu, then you can rest assured. I'm sure your wife is grateful to St. Millis.

[Paul took Zenith in his arms and gently kissed her gently arched lips.]

Paul: Hey, Zenith.

Zenith: What is it?

Paul: Thank you for being my family—

[He got what he had wanted ever since he was a child and had slipped from his fingers. All thanks to her.]

[Paul lives in the village of Buena, hand in hand with Zenith, savoring his happiness every day.]

[In the midst of these peaceful days, some unexpected things happen, such as meeting Lilia again, with whom he has had a troubled relationship in the past, and hired her as a maid.]

[—Eventually, Zenith gives birth and...]

[Year 407 Armored Dragon Era]

[The long-awaited first son was born to the Greyrat family, resident knight of Buena Village, Fittoa Region, Kingdom of Asura. The name given to him was...]

~Fin~

Credits

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