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BARSE BORNELS

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Just as Ghislaine asked, I used my back as a shield and escorted Eris a safe distance away so we wouldn't be embroiled in the battle. I was careful not to go too far, staying within Ghislaine's protective reach.

If that really were Arumanfi the Bright, a sword couldn't touch him. I was sure I'd read something like that in the *Legend of Perugius*.

That said, where had he come from? No wait, Arumanfi the Bright was said to be the governing spirit of light. It was said that he could travel any distance instantaneously if it were within line of sight. Back when I read that, I thought it was a load of rubbish, but he had appeared behind me in the blink of an eye. Ghislaine would never let her guard down, and he had no reason to be lurking in this area beforehand. He must have flown here, at the literal speed of light. That was one of his abilities after all.

"Woman, move. This strange occurrence might cease if I slay that boy."

Wait, what was he talking about? Strange occurrence; did he mean that thing in the sky? What kind of misunderstanding was he under?

"I am the Sword King Ghislaine Dedoldia. That thing in the sky has nothing to do with us. Withdraw!"

"Sword King? How can I believe that? Show me proof."

"Look! This is one of the famous blades of the Seven Original Sword Gods, Hiramune—Flat Core. Will you still not believe after seeing it?" She thrust her sword toward Arumanfi while still gripping it firmly by the hilt.

I didn't know her sword had that kind of inscription on it. Flat core... Core as in chest? Certainly not a word I'd associate with Ghislaine's chest.

"Swear on the names of your master and your household."

"I swear on the name of my master, Sword God Gal Farion and the honor of the Dedoldia people!"

"Dedoldia, was it? Very well. If we later discover you're not as innocent as you claim, Lord Perugius will decide your fate."

"Fine with me.

Arumanfi stowed his dagger. I wasn't really sure what was going on, but the issue was apparently settled. To me, it seemed obvious that swearing something was true didn't mean someone was being honest, but apparently that was how things worked in this world.

That said, did swearing on the names of those people really lend her words that much credibility? The same level as, say, the Roman-Catholic Pope swearing on the name of God?

"It's fine, as long as you aren't the ones responsible."

"And you won't even apologize for attacking us out of nowhere?"

"It was your fault for doing something suspicious here," he said, turning on his heel.

Let's just calm down and think about this rationally, I thought. First, something strange was happening in the sky. Then this guy showed up, the familiar of a legendary and storied hero. This person of legend attacked me. He thought I was the one who caused the phenomenon in the sky. That wasn't true, of course, but maybe he knew something about what was going on up there? No, he couldn't have, or he wouldn't have attacked me in the first place.

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"Um..." I started to say.
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"Hm?"

"Ah!"

Right as I called out to Arumanfi, the sky turned white and a finger of light sped toward the ground. The instant it reached the earth the light ballooned at incredible speed, violently swallowing everything in its path like a tidal wave. The manor, the city, the citadel, the flowers and the trees. Everything was devoured as it expanded.



As soon as Arumanfi saw what was happening, he disappeared in a burst of gold light. Ghislaine ran toward us but was swallowed before she could reach us. Eris froze in confusion, and I wrapped my body around hers to shield her.

That was the day the Fittoa Region vanished.

Epilogue

t was six months after the Fittoa Region vanished. Roxy had finally reached the area, only to be greeted by nothing but grass-covered plains. She took in the sight wide-eyed and dumbfounded.

She was standing on the main highway, a stone-paved road. No other country had a road so magnificent that far from its capital. Asura Kingdom had developed it and laid it out, stretching from one end of the kingdom to the other.

But that was how the road had been when she last traversed it. Now it was gone, abruptly cut off in front of her. There was nothing else as far as the eye could see. Nothing but grass, spread far and wide.

"…"

Something had happened. She knew that. But she wasn't sure what. All she knew was that the Fittoa Region had disappeared, Buena Village was gone, and Rudeus, his kind family who had accepted her despite her race, and everyone else, had disappeared.

Roxy caught wind of the story several times during her journey here. She was sure it couldn't be true, sure that people were just trying to deceive her. At any rate, she chose not to believe what she heard. She believed that Rudeus and his family were definitely alive. They were just fine and nothing had happened to them. She staked everything on that one sliver of hope.

At least until now, when she finally saw the reality spread out before her.

Roxy's knees gave out from under her.

"So, you lost someone too, eh?" the driver of the coach she took said from behind her.

"An exceptional apprentice," she answered.

"An apprentice, huh? Being a magician's apprentice, he must've been prepared for the possibility of losing his life anyway, yeah?" "He was only ten."

"Well...that is too soon." He patted her on the shoulder as if to soothe her.

For a while, Roxy could do nothing but stare at the earth at her feet. She didn't want to think about anything; she couldn't. She wasn't even sure what she should do from here.

The driver watched her silently before he spoke again, his words measured. "Actually, there's a Fittoa Region refugee camp. Want to go see? Well, it'd be difficult for a ten-year old kid to survive what happened, but you never know."

Roxy's head jerked up. "I'll go!" This was Rudeus after all. Surely he was all right. No doubt he'd used his quick wits to survive. He was surely in perfect health, living in that settlement.

Once again, she clutched firmly at a sliver of hope.

The refugee camp comprised numerous wooden buildings and was roughly the size of a village. A great number of people bustled about. They were anything but carefree; a dark, heavy mood hung over them.

I never thought I would see something like this in Asura Kingdom, Roxy thought.

The Asura Kingdom Roxy knew was the wealthiest country in the world. The people there had faces full of optimism, and there were smiles everywhere you looked. Food was plentiful and monsters were few. It was the easiest place to live.

There were no smiles to be found here.

The settlement didn't seem to lack for food. This was a fairly bountiful area. They wouldn't starve, not so long as they could pull up the grass and eat it. As long as they weren't in danger of starving, they should have been smiling. Even if a disaster had taken place, things weren't nearly as dire as they were on the Demon Continent. Or so she thought, but she couldn't help frowning at the sight before her.

The refugee camp had a temporary adventurer's guild. It was there, in front of

the bulletin board that normally had various requests pinned to it, that the melancholy dwelled the thickest.

A man who had lost his house and family stood there wailing. "What the hell, what the hell is this! Six whole months, it took six whole months for me to get back here, dammit! Laura, Francis, why are all of you dead?!" He lost his family, and not just them, but his house, his land, the tools of his trade, everything he had. His heart-wrenching screams were difficult to hear, but no one could stop him from lamenting.

"God! Is this all your fault?!" A priest threw the tools of his trade, the symbol of a Millis religious organization, onto the ground. "I won't believe anymore! You're not gods—you just ridicule and kill us! You're cruel demons!" Face full of hatred, he looked up at the heavens and cursed. There were other Millis believers present, but none of them were praying to the gods.

A merchant was trying to slit his own throat, only to be stopped by the people around him. "Don't stop me!"

"Hey, knock it off! What good does dying do? Good things can still happen to you if you're alive!"

"I-If I live?! Do you seriously believe that? Dammit, I-I lost something more important than...than my own life! Please, just...let me die! Dammit, dammit, dammit!" The man squatted and began crying, his face contorted in despair. His entire body trembled.

This was a horrible place. Everyone's faces were grief-stricken.

Roxy had never known a place so dominated by sadness before. She had watched many people die, had even escaped scenes of carnage herself numerous times. This was the first time she had ever seen a place of such pure anguish.

This might be a pointless endeavor, she thought.

Pulled in by the heavy atmosphere, she felt close to tears, but she pressed on and began her hunt for information.

An hour passed.

Roxy learned the gist of what happened. After the sky turned strange, a largescale mana calamity occurred over the Fittoa Region.

It was not an explosion exactly, but it did spread far and wide. Everything in the Fittoa Region was enveloped by it and teleported randomly to locations all over the world. The buildings and trees disappeared entirely, scattering only the people that had been there. Some of them had managed to return to the region, but realized nothing was left of their hometowns and lost all hope.

"Truly terrible," Roxy muttered as she looked at the bulletin board. There were rows of names listed as either deceased or missing. Posted beside them were messages to family members and requests such as, *If you see this person in your travels, please bring them here*.

The most eye-catching part of the notice board was a request that was pinned under the name of Fittoa's liege lord, asking for information on the missing and deceased, an unprecedented number of people.

As an adventurer, Roxy had done her fair share of work. Never in her life had she seen a bulletin board this full of requests, nor one that was so desperate and so heart-wrenching. It was clear just how widespread the damage of this calamity really was.

Perhaps she had run across someone on the list of the deceased and the missing on the way here. She heard rumors about people suddenly reappearing. Of course she hadn't paid it any mind at the time; there was always idle gossip like that. If only she could remember something, she might be of some help to the people here.

"No..." She shook her head, stopping her train of thought right there. She'd taken the biggest highway across the Central Continent to get here. Any information she had, someone else had probably already reported by now.

"…"

Roxy instead turned her gaze to the list of the deceased and began going through the names in order. Despite the scale of the disaster, the list of deceased was relatively short, and she didn't recognize any of the names. By comparison, the list of missing people was so long it was painful to look at. It made sense given they had all been transported elsewhere. Surely some of them had been attacked and killed by monsters, leaving behind no remains by which to identify them. There were many places that could kill one instantly: mountaintops, mid-air, or in the sea. It was incredible that some of the deaths were even confirmed.

"There it is."

Roxy furrowed her brows. She found the names of Rudeus and the others in the missing persons column.

Rudeus Greyrat. Zenith Greyrat. Lilia Greyrat. Aisha Greyrat.

She knew that Lilia had become one of Paul's wives; Rudeus had written as much in one of his letters. Paul and Norn's names had a line drawn through them. She took another look at the list of deceased just in case. They weren't there; that meant they had to be alive. Then again, it could have also meant there was no information on them. A short-lived moment of relief. "At least I can rejoice in the fact that they're not dead for now."

Absentmindedly she looked over the message board again. The desperation of the writers was so clear.

Roxy wondered if her own parents were doing well back home. Quite some time had passed since she fought with them and left her village. Until recently, she hadn't paid much attention to the flow of time, in part because she was a member of the Migurd race. The months passed quickly. Perhaps she should at least send a letter.

"That's..."

She found a message on the board. The writer was Paul Greyrat.

To Rudeus,

Zenith, Lilia and Aisha are missing. Norn is safe in my custody. I don't know where you are right now, but I'm sure that even if you're alone, you'll make it back here. So I'll search for you last.

For now, I'm headed to Millis Continent. That's where Zenith was born and

raised. I've sent a message to Lilia's hometown and house as well. I want you to search the northern part of the Central Continent. If you find any of them, contact me with the info below.

Zenith, Lilia, if either of you see this, please contact me as well.

For anyone that might know me or my family, or former members of the Fang of the Black Wolf, please help me search. I'm sure the members of the Fang of the Black Wolf may have mixed feelings about me. I won't ask you to sweep it under the rug. You can scream at me all you want. If you ask me to lick your boots, I'll do it. All my assets are gone, so I can't pay you, but please. Help me search for my family.

Contact information:

Millis Continent, Holy Country of Millis's Capital Millishion, Adventurer's Guild. Party Name: Search Squadron for Buena Village Residents. Clan Name: Roa Region's Search for Missing Persons Association.

—From Paul Greyrat

Paul was alive. Knowing that brought her relief. Rudeus had griped about Paul in his letters, but it seemed Paul was especially reliable in situations like this.

Roxy stopped to think. The best course of action would be to help with the search. She was indebted to their family after all. Even now she thought fondly of the two years she spent with them, for many reasons. She was more than willing to help.

All right, let's do this, she decided. The moment she made up her mind, her thoughts started churning. But who should I search for, and how?

Fang of the Black Wolf was likely the name of Paul's adventuring party. Those people probably weren't acquainted with Rudeus, or Lilia, for that matter. But since Paul had left Rudeus for last, she decided to search for him instead. It seemed Paul thought Rudeus would return to Fittoa, but that boy was highly adaptable. It was just as likely that he would settle in whatever place he had been teleported off to. If that were the case, she needed to tell him what had happened and bring him back.

I'll search for Rudeus then. Now, where to start?

Paul had gone to the capital of the Holy Millis Country. That meant he probably left similar messages along the way, specifically in three places: the Asura Kingdom's borders, the Dragon King Kingdom's eastern port, and the Holy Country of Millis's western port.

In that case, she should search beyond those places. That would be the northern part of the Central Continent, the Begaritt Continent, and the Demon Continent. One of those three. She had never been to Begaritt before, but she heard it was full of labyrinths and monsters. And while she had some familiarity with the geography of the Demon Continent, it was dangerous to journey there alone.

If she wanted a safe route, then the northern region would be the best. But that was exactly why she had to go to one of the other two. She could find a party and journey to one of those two regions instead.

Good. Now that she had made up her mind, there was no point in lingering here. She would head for the Dragon King's eastern port. From there, she would look for a party heading for either the Begaritt Continent or the Demon Continent.

Once that was settled Roxy moved swiftly. She finished the preparations for her journey and set out from the refugee camp.

Strangely, just getting a move on was enough to lift the veil of sadness. Not just that, but her belief that Rudeus was still alive strengthened with each step.

I want to sit at the table with all of them again, even just once more, she thought as her feet took her south.

That was the beginning of Roxy Migurdia's long journey.



Extra Chapter:

The Forest Goddess Directly east of Asura Kingdom and just over the mountains, right in the middle of the Central Continent, was a sphere of many tiny nations fighting each other for dominion over the region. This place, where countries were built only to meet their demise shortly thereafter and be rebuilt once more, was called the Conflict Zone by the locals.

One of the small countries in the Conflict Zone was the Markien Mercenary Country. Established by the great mercenary whose name it bore, it became a warlike nation that based its economy on dispatching mercenaries to neighboring countries.

There was a pub nestled in one of Markien's corners. There, one mercenary was bragging to another about one of the scars atop his shoulder.

"Heheh, look at this scar! I got this during the defense of Rudomin."

"Ohh, that battle! That was hard fought, huh?"

"Where were you stationed?"

"Arus Fort's eastern gate. That place was hell. I was damn close to losing my wonderful, beloved right arm here."

"Hell doesn't even begin to describe what happened there. I heard you guys were flanked and had your forces devastated!"

"Not much different from what happened to you guys in the Defensive Battle of Rudomin. I heard you guys had your supply routes cut off so you didn't even have food."

The Markien Mercenary Country supported all other nations equally and without discrimination. The mercenaries they dispatched were incredibly feared. Their troops were great warriors, their commanders calm and collected, and their tacticians excelled at military tactics. Once they entered battle, they led their allies to victory without fail. They were a symbol of triumph and fear on the battlefield. That was what it meant to be a Markien mercenary. "It's incredible we made it out of there alive."

"Well, that's what you call the grace of the Forest Goddess."

One of the mercenaries retrieved a pendant from his breast pocket. There was a relief carved into the wood, the profile of a woman with animal-like ears.

Seeing this, the other mercenary unsheathed the short sword at his side. The blade was dyed red with paint. "Then a toast, to the Forest Goddess Laine!"

"May we be the victors in the coming battles as well! Cheers!"

With their items in one hand and wine cups in the other, the two mercenaries drank every last drop of alcohol. That was their way of praying.

"Ahh, that's some good stuff!"

"Yeah, gotta have some alcohol after battle. Markien's stuff is the best around."

"And women too!"

"Shall we hit up the brothel after this then?"

"Let's keep that part a secret from the Goddess."

"Ahahaha!"

The night wore on as the two merrily shared drinks.

The Forrest Goddess Laine was the god of the Markien mercenaries. According to legend, she was the Goddess of Salvation who appeared a hundred years ago when the Markien Mercenary Country was on the verge of collapse. Her guidance of one of the country's legendary commander-in-chiefs rescued the country from disaster.

Thanks to that legend, many of Markien's mercenaries believed that when they were on the verge of death, the Forest Goddess would appear out of nowhere and save them. That was why they prayed to her.

However, strangely enough, there was only one country in the entire world that believed in the Forest Goddess Laine, and that was the Markien Mercenary Country. Why was it only this particular country that had such a custom?

The answer was one interesting story indeed.

Year Four Hundred and Seventeen of the Armored Dragon.

It was the year of the Displacement Incident in Asura Kingdom. Not two years had passed since the Mercenary King Markien proclaimed the establishment of the fledgling Markien Mercenary Country. The country was on the verge of collapse and facing a crisis.

This wasn't a rare occurrence. In the Conflict Zone, small countries were established and destroyed all the time. People would wait for an opportune chance to build their own country, with the ambition of taking over the whole region and creating an even greater country, only for that dream to be shattered and fragmented. Markien Mercenary Country was just another casualty of that cycle, a disorganized nation about to meet the same fate; nothing more, nothing less.

Still, nothing happened without a cause. Their first step down the path of their destruction was diplomacy. The country, whose economy was based around deploying mercenaries, possessed a national and military power beyond what was expected of a developing country. Yet that was the very cause of their problem.

The two countries in closest contact to Markien, Dikuto Kingdom and the Broze Empire, were deeply wary of the mercenary country. They schemed against it, and when diplomatic relations broke down, both countries proclaimed war upon Markien simultaneously.

Although it was a mercenary country, it was powerless against the combined might of two other nations. Markien made a show of fierce resistance, but it lost half its territory after the sudden surrender of an important fortress and the loss of numerous large battles.

There was no future for the country. Those mercenaries who thought as much fled to other countries or turned traitor. What was to become the decisive battle, which would afterward become known as The Site of Markien's Final Battle, took place in a large basin.

Markien gathered its military strength and took position against the two allied countries. Up till that point the two countries had launched their attacks

separately, but the basin was an important landmark with forests infested with monsters on either side. This restricted their ability to maneuver through it. They had to band together.

That was also why the basin was such a key point. Once Markien fell, the other two countries would need to control this point to seize power over the area around the capital. Additionally, once that was over, it was easy to imagine the conflict that would then break out between the Dikuto Kingdom and the Broze Empire.

Markien had already tried to capitalize on the fraught nature of the relationship between those two countries, but their military strength was reduced to the point where they had little ability to put up any meaningful opposition. They had their hands full just trying to keep the country from collapsing.

Bigott Mercenal, the Captain of the third unit of Markien's Mercenary Company, led ten of his men into the depths of the forest. Ejin Forest, as it was called, was infested with monsters. Since time immemorial, the ruler of this area had forbidden passage through it, or so those who lived nearby unanimously declared. Woodcutters even refused to enter Ejin Forest. This meant passing through with troops was impossible. Even in the current battle, Markien's two enemy countries avoided approaching the forest.

King Markien decided to take advantage of that. Their troops would break through the forest and launch a surprise attack on one of their two enemies. A simple but effective plan.

That said, Markien's military strength was not what it used to be. Just the act of invading the forest would reduce their numbers greatly when they were accosted by various beasts. Forget launching a strong surprise attack—it seemed they would only be squandering resources.

That was where their strategy came into play. In the previous battle they had secured several Broze Empire suits of armor. They would have some of their soldiers don these then attack the Dikuto Empire from behind.

The two countries had formed a temporary alliance until Markien was

vanquished. Once that was over, the two would inevitably begin fighting for control over the land they had conquered. Even now tensions ran high as both countries began considering what methods would be most beneficial to them. It would only take one small push for their alliance to snap, creating conflict between them. That was Markien's aim.

Bigott Mercenal, known for being daring and resolute, was put in charge of the operation. He would pass through the forest and launch a powerful sneak attack with a small company of mercenaries.

It was an incredibly dangerous endeavor. They would not come back alive even if they succeeded. In fact, they might have to take their own lives to avoid capture. They couldn't bring anything that may give away their identity. No one could know who they were or where they came from. There was no honor to be had from this mission. Instead, they would die as traitors.

Despite that, Bigott said to Markien, "Do not worry, for tales of us shall be passed on. We will live on as the heroes that led this country to victory during one of its great battles, just like the legendary Twin Gods Migus and Gumis. Is that not an honor by itself?" Bigott took on this duty, seeing the similarity between himself and the legendary heroes of 400 years ago who died in battle against Laplace.

He had ten men under his command. Three were Intermediate-tier North God Style swordfighters, while the other seven were mercenaries unassociated with the three sword styles. Bigott himself was an Advanced-tier Sword God Style swordsman, but their group had no healer and none among them were particularly skilled.

In these parts, magicians were valuable assets to parties, but since they were preparing for the final battle Markien couldn't afford to assign any to a team of throwaway pawns. True victory meant the country had to both trigger warfare between its enemies then capitalize on that opportunity and come out triumphant.

Hmph, never thought I would be doing something like this, Bigott thought, laughing in self-derision.

Bigott was destined to be a mercenary. He was born into a mercenary band.

His father died in battle while his mother was pregnant with him, and his mother died in battle not long after he was born. He was sold as a slave and bought by what would eventually become the Markien Mercenary Company. That was where he learned about swordplay and battle. Ever since then he had lived only for money and survival. He never dreamed that at the end of it all, he would be battling for honor.

As if I'm a knight from some kingdom, he thought. Everyone knew knights were the only ones who died for honor. But then it occurred to Bigott. Maybe I am a knight. A knight of Markien.

It made him proud to think that way. For the longest time, he hadn't belonged anywhere. It was only through great hardship that he had come to be able to call Markien his home. Now he would fight to protect it. He'd mocked those ideals in the past for being sappy, but now that he was in a similar position, they didn't seem so bad after all.

"Commander, just a little farther."

"Don't let your guard down. Now that we've come this far, we don't want to be killed by humans."

"Haha, true enough."

Until that point, they had encountered few monsters. They had been walking the entire day and only had two run-ins. It was like a miracle.

Despite that, he had lost one of his men. They had been moving as carefully as possible, but hidden in the overgrowth was a Red Leaf Tiger. It attacked, unseen, and one soldier died. But the beast was already heavily injured and seemed to be running from someone. The Red Leaf Tiger was the most fearsome of the beasts in this forest. Just who in the world could have done that?

Could it be the person who rules over this forest? Bigott wondered.

He had heard rumors of the forest's ruler before. Karentosaurus, an A-class beast with a giant, lizard-like body over five meters in length. He didn't know if it really existed or not, but if it did, it would surely be capable of leaving a Bclass Red Leaf Tiger in critical condition. That also meant that if they were attacked by such a creature, neither he nor his nine remaining men would get out unscathed. So he pressed on even more cautiously than before.

Fortunately, he had experience maneuvering through a forest, enough to avoid encountering any monsters. If he happened to encounter any, he at least had the strength to kill it before it called for help. So long as they managed that, they would be fine.

Sadly, Bigott and his men weren't the only ones who thought so.

"What?!"

"Huh!"

Before Bigott realized what was happening, he and his men had run into another group. This party numbered ten as well. Together, they made a group of twenty men, all of them clad in armor of the Broze Empire. The only difference was that Bigott and his men were fakes.

"You there, give us the name of your unit!" A man clad in lustrous, striking armor stood before Bigott, demanding he identify himself.

"Draw your swords! Let none return alive!" Bigott ignored the question and instead shouted at his men, who drew their swords and leaped at the enemy.

"Deserters, huh?! Die!" The Broze Empire Commander labeled them thus after they launched their attack. He was mistaken, but that didn't change what had to be done. "Kill them! Broze doesn't need cowards who run from battle!"

The Broze soldiers were swift.

"Gah!"

"D-dammit!"

In the blink of an eye, two of Bigott's men had been cut down. In mere moments they were on the defensive. The Broze Empire's soldiers were incredibly skilled. He didn't know it at the time, but they were actually fighting against the Emperor's personal bodyguards.

What were bodyguards doing here in the forest, away from the Emperor? It was because of something that happened an hour ago. The Broze Emperor was

personally walking through their military camp to inspire his soldiers when a beast suddenlt sprang out of the forest and attacked. The creature was quickly dispatched, but the Emperor sustained a small scratch from the struggle and was given medical treatment afterward. Still, the fact remained that he had been attacked right before his soldiers' very eyes.

Sensing a drop in morale, the Emperor ordered his bodyguards to march. Go forth and fetch the hide of a great, fierce beast, he commanded. Then he could claim that he fought the felled creature and that was how he had sustained such a wound.

The bodyguards immediately set out into the forest. Mysteriously enough, they didn't encounter any beasts, but instead came upon Bigott and his party.

"Wh-why here ...?"

The strongest of Bigott's men was easily slain by the Broze bodyguards.

"I'm sure you already know, but I am the captain of the Emperor's Guard, Klein Dinoltas! Water Saint Klein! Do you seriously think you can win?!"

"Dammit!"

"Cease your resistance and surrender, then you may at least have your lives!"

Bigott panicked. There was no way they could surrender. If they were caught and investigated, they would be exposed as pretenders. Markien would fall. After that, the Broze Empire and Dikuto Kingdom would fight. He didn't know who would win, but either way the country he had such fond memories of would disappear.

On the other hand, he had no other options. They were clearly outmatched, and if this continued any longer, their destruction would be inevitable.

I'm sorry, Markien. Bigott apologized to the comrades he held in esteem within his heart. That was when it happened.

"Graaaagghhh!"

A gigantic lizard came flying at them. Its body, all five meters of it, was a vivid green, and its majestic form was riddled with open wounds, blood pouring out of them. Red bubbles came foaming out of its mouth as it moved between the two opposing groups and collapsed. Then, just a moment after that...

"Aaah!"

A wild beast came leaping out after it. This beast let out a fierce war cry as it landed upon the lizard's head and drove its sword through it. The lizard let out a final, anguished cry before it died.

"Gah!"

There was no time for them to process what had just happened. Even after slaying the lizard the wild beast didn't stop moving. It sprang to the ground and, in the blink of an eye, cut down two of the Emperor's bodyguards.

"What are you doing?!"

For a moment Bigott thought this had to be the ruler of the forest. However, this wild beast had the form of a human. Warm brown skin, fiery red hair, and two fully erect beastfolk ears. It also held a sword. A sword that had a thin, onesided blade, which gleamed an eerie red color, and had an inscription on it.

"Who are you?!" yelled Klein, the captain of the bodyguards, as he stepped forward.

"Grrrr!" The beast didn't answer. It merely responded to the presence of an enemy wielding a sword in front of it.

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"Aaah!"
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"Gah, fight back!"

With a battle cry, the beast slashed at Klein. Klein was a Water Saint. The Water God Style was a school of swordplay that allowed one to fend off any attack and launch a deadly counter in return.

At least, that was supposed to be the case.

"Th-the Longsword of Light... S-so, this is the Sword God Style...?"

When the beast's sword met Klein's, Klein's blade broke in two. Then a split formed in Klein's armor as the attack sundered his clothing, skin, muscle, and finally bone in succession. That was when Klein's lower and upper half separated. The Broze bodyguards didn't even flinch as their commander's torso fell in front of them with a wet thud.

"How dare you!"

"Our commander!"

"We'll avenge him!"

They were all swordfighters of Intermediate-tier in either the Water God or Sword God Style. There were undeniably strong. And yet...

"Gaaah!" The beast howled. With each swing of its blood red blade, one by one those men were vivisected. The beast moved like a flash of light. Its voice was enough to make one recoil. No one was any match for it. In moments, the entire guard was wiped out.

"…"

Bigott and his men couldn't even move. They had no idea what had just happened. The beast had appeared out of nowhere and, in an overwhelming show of strength, destroyed everything in its path. But why? For what purpose?

"Grrrr!"

It was looking their way. Reason had fled from its eyes. Eyes that now fixated on Bigott and his men, full of bloodlust, amplifying their fear. The clothes it wore were revealing, but terror overwhelmed any sense of attraction they may have felt.

That was right—this beast was a woman. It had a woman's form. As soon as he realized that, the gears turned in the back of Bigott's mind.

It was the story of the Sword Saint that taught him swordplay. That Sword Saint was a just and honorable warrior of the Sword God Style who had trained in the Holy Land of Swords. They wouldn't tell him why they decided to become a mercenary, but they did talk about their prior training experience.

One of the other people there was violent, wouldn't listen to anyone. She was almost like a mad dog. She surpassed me and became a Sword King, but she wasn't a bad person. Just an idiot. Everyone hated her because she lost control in extreme situations and went mad, attacking everyone, whether they be friend or foe. The swordfighter in that tale was the woman in front of him now. That description fit exactly.

"By any chance," he called out to her as he slipped into the God Sword Style bow his teacher had taught him, bending to one knee and tucking his head forward, showing respect and submission. "Are you the Sword King, Lady Ghislaine Dedoldia?!"

The moment he said that the beast stilled. After a short time, Ghislaine regained her sense of reason.

"I have often heard rumors, but I never dreamed I would meet you in a place like this."

She didn't respond to his words. Instead she glared at him with her bloodshot eyes and questioned him very matter-of-factly. "You there, have you seen a girl around twelve years old with pure red hair? Or a boy of about ten who's a proficient mage?"

"No, I haven't." He shook his head, thinking her words over. A red-haired girl of approximately twelve. A magician boy of approximately ten. He had seen many slaves like that in his life, but none of them around this area. Besides, this was the Ejin Forest. It was a place filled with beasts. Why did she think there would be children in a place like this?

"I see. Sorry to get in your way." Ghislaine began walking away. After a few steps she suddenly stopped and looked back, her head cocked. "By the way, where is this?"

Bigott, too, cocked his head. He told her she was in the Conflict Zone, located on the northernmost part of the southern half of the Central Continent. He then explained they were in a forest within the northern part of Markien Mercenary Country.

Bigott and his men were in the middle of an operation. They didn't really have the luxury of time to explain, but she had just spared their lives, and if they upset her, they might be next. This was his attempt at crisis management.

"Impossible." Ghislaine was in disbelief. She didn't understand how she had ended up here. Bigott asked for the details of her situation. She had been acting as the bodyguard for a young girl in Asura Kingdom's Fittoa Region when they were attacked. Before she knew what was happening, she had been swallowed by some light and had ended up in this forest. As she fought hordes of monsters, she lost herself to the excitement of battle and turned into a berserker that killed anything that came near her.

"In any case, this is the Conflict Zone's Markien Mercenary Country. Make no mistake about it."

"So it is." Ghislaine stopped to think.

Bigott had no idea what she was thinking about. After five long seconds, she finally looked up at the sky.

"Then I have to go south to return to Asura."

Using the sun to guide her, she turned straight south. That was the same direction that Bigott and his men were heading.

"Please wait. There's an enemy camp set up in that direction."

"And what about it?"

"'What about it'? I mean, what are you planning to do?"

"Anyone who gets in my way gets cut down. That's all." There was a ferocity in her eyes that made him doubt if she was still in possession of reason. Bigott had no words. Just what had her so stirred up?

"Hopefully Rudeus is with Lady Eris, but there's a chance they were both transported somewhere else just like I was. I have to hurry."

After hearing that, he understood. *We're not that different,* he thought. Those two children, particularly the red-haired girl, were more important than anything to the Sword King. She was desperate to protect that which was precious to her.

"In that case, why don't we travel part of the way together? We also have something to take care of in that direction."

"Very well."

For some reason Bigott felt particularly proud. Although their objectives differed, he felt like he was standing side-by-side with this Sword King, fighting for something he wanted to protect.

Bigott, his men, and Ghislaine slipped out from the forest and attacked the Dikuto Kingdom from behind. Their luck was good. As soon as the battle with Markien began, all the troops were focused on what was in front of them.

The Broze Emperor found it suspicious that his bodyguards had failed to return. He suspected the Dikuto Kingdom was planning an ambush for his troops, and that his bodyguards had been killed after discovering their plot. After all, the Dikuto king's main army was close to the forest. It seemed likely they had troops hiding further within.

In truth, the Dikuto king was a coward and had camped with his back to the forest so he wouldn't be caught in a surprise attack by the Broze Empire. The combination of these factors would later lead to Bigott's success.

Ghislaine howled and Bigott let out a fierce cry as he led his men into battle. They charged right into the enemy camp where the Dikuto king's tent was set up.

The king was startled by their surprise attack. Seeing their armor, he immediately thought the Broze Emperor had launched a sneak attack from the forest. He hailed a nearby attendant and commanded an assault on the Broze Empire. Then he tried to take shelter from the chaos.

It was only ten seconds later when Ghislaine tore the Dikuto king asunder with her blade, killing him. If he had lived, he might have realized Bigott and his men were not of the Broze Empire and retracted his orders, but an imperial edict had absolute power. The Dikuto Kingdom surged into battle against the Broze Empire.

The Broze Empire had predicted such an attack would come, so while they were caught off guard by its timing, they were able to put up a fight. That was when the Markien Mercenary Country took up arms. It was a three-pronged free-for-all.

Bigott found himself surrounded by enemies, but he was still alive. It was his mission to die deceiving the Dikuto Kingdom into thinking his attack was the

work of the Broze Empire, yet still he clung to life. He and his men had already been separated, and the only ally close to him was a single fighter.

There, right in front of him. He followed in the shadow of her tanned back as the light of her sword flashed, cutting through the enemy. He had never seen such a reliable figure before. He felt so proud to be protecting her flank.

At last they could no longer see the armor of the Dikuto Kingdom around them. Instead, they were surrounded by soldiers of the Broze Empire. While the Empire was surprised by the intrusion of a woman with a blood-red blade, they had watched her cut down the Dikuto Kingdom's men and noticed Bigott protecting her flank in his Broze armor. They mistook Bigott and Ghislaine for allies.

That was when Markien surged in. The two allied countries were shaken as the battle started up behind them. Not only had their bond alliance broken, but their formations as well. Markien, which should have been at a disadvantage, broke through their front lines.

A chaotic battle ensued. Amidst the violent fighting, Bigott became separated from Ghislaine, but managed to rejoin his comrades. Shouts of joy rang out from the Markien mercenaries as they recognized Bigott and took up a firm position around him. Instead of falling back, Bigott remained on the front lines and kept fighting.

The battle raged on, the soldiers covered in mud and blood, not fully aware of what was happening around them.

Bigott took an arrow in his left eye. Anguished, he searched for the bowman responsible. That was when he saw it.

He watched as it happened. Below an eye-catching banner, dressed in luxurious Broze armor, was a man with a black beard. Bigott saw the flash of red as that man, the Emperor of Broze, had his head sliced off by a brownskinned woman.

"Ha, hah, hahaha!" He laughed, and as he laughed, the battle wore on. And he lived.

The final battle ended in victory for the Markien Mercenary Country.

Thanks to his achievements, Bigott Mercenal earned the position of general. He was celebrated as a legendary hero for having succeeded in a suicide mission and for executing Dikuto's king.

After that, Bigott Mercenal continued to do spectacular work that resulted in him being known as one of the most outstanding Great Generals of the Markien Mercenary Country. That, however, is a story for another time.

Once that decisive battle was over, the Great General Bigott started doing something strange. He started wearing a necklace that had the profile of a female beastfolk chiseled into it, and began painting the blade of his sword red. "It's a good luck charm."

His men began to imitate him, and those who heard their tales followed suit. These customs continued spreading until they took their modern-day shape.

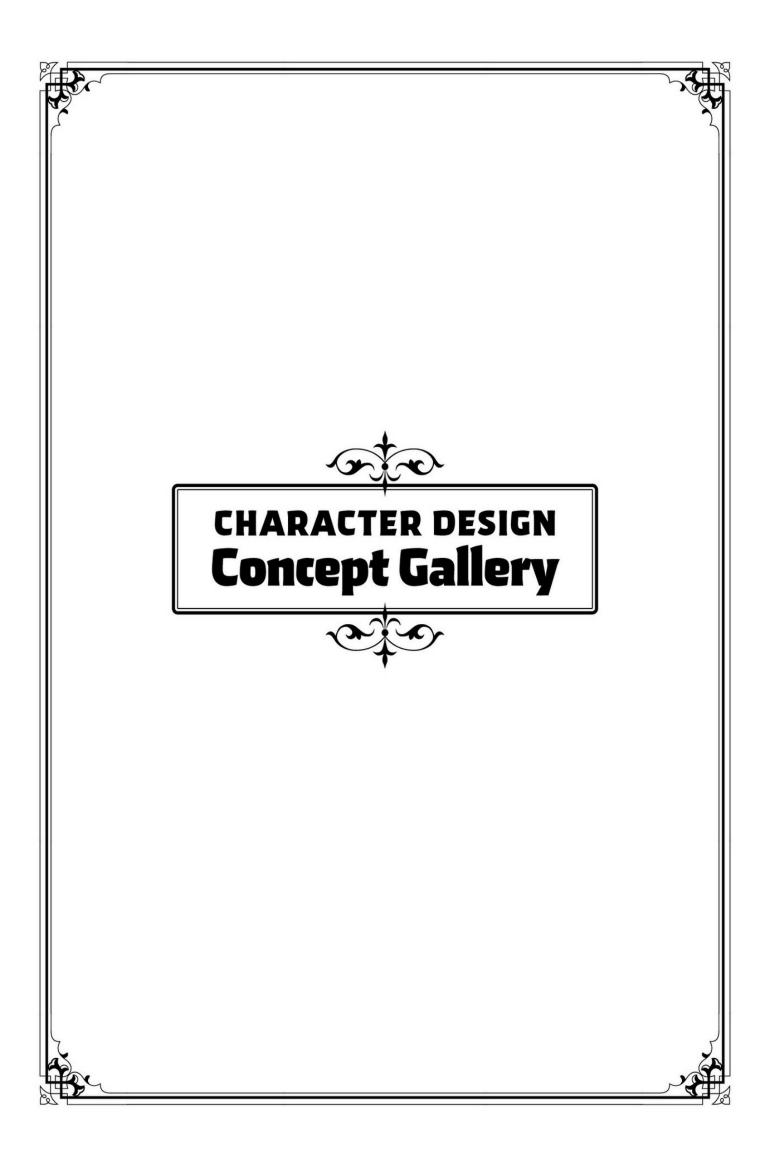
When asked what kind of good luck charm it was, Bigott responded thus: "I was helped by a goddess during that battle. I'm following her example."

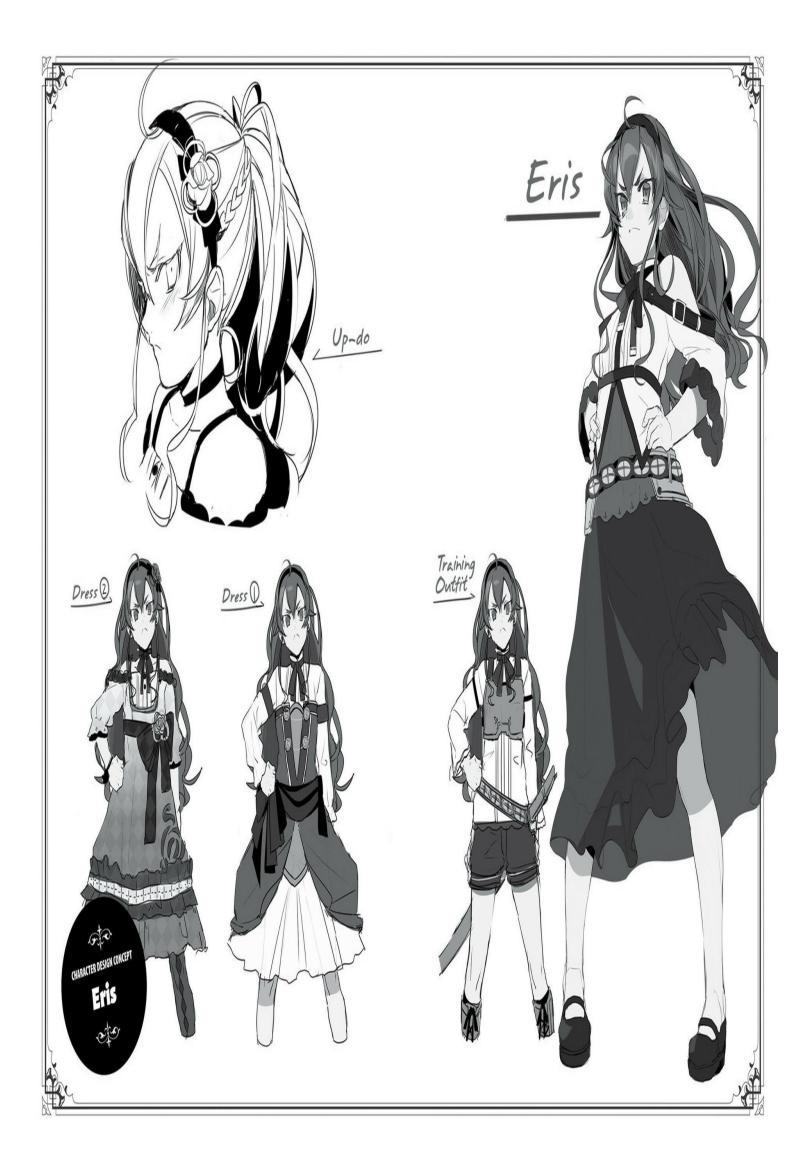
It was from his words that the Forest Goddess Laine was created. The name Ghislaine was difficult for those in the southern part of the Central Continent to pronounce, and so her name, altered by their accents, became Laine. She appeared from the forest, rescuing the life of the great general, becoming the Goddess of Salvation. Forest Goddess Laine.

For the next hundred years she was worshipped as Markien's Goddess of Protection, providing support to the hearts of many soldiers. Of course, the real Ghislaine had no knowledge of this designation.

Where did Ghislaine go after that? Was she still alive? Did she survive that battle and go on home to Asura Kingdom? Was she able to meet that precious Young Mistress of hers again?

Bigott Mercenal had no way of knowing.





About the Author:

Rifujin na Magonote Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Become Novelists,* they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei.* They instantly gained readers' support, and within one year of publishing on the website, achieved rank 1 on the site's combined popularity rankings.

"Mixed among the things in our lives that we discard, thinking them unnecessary, may be that which is truly precious to us," the author said.



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