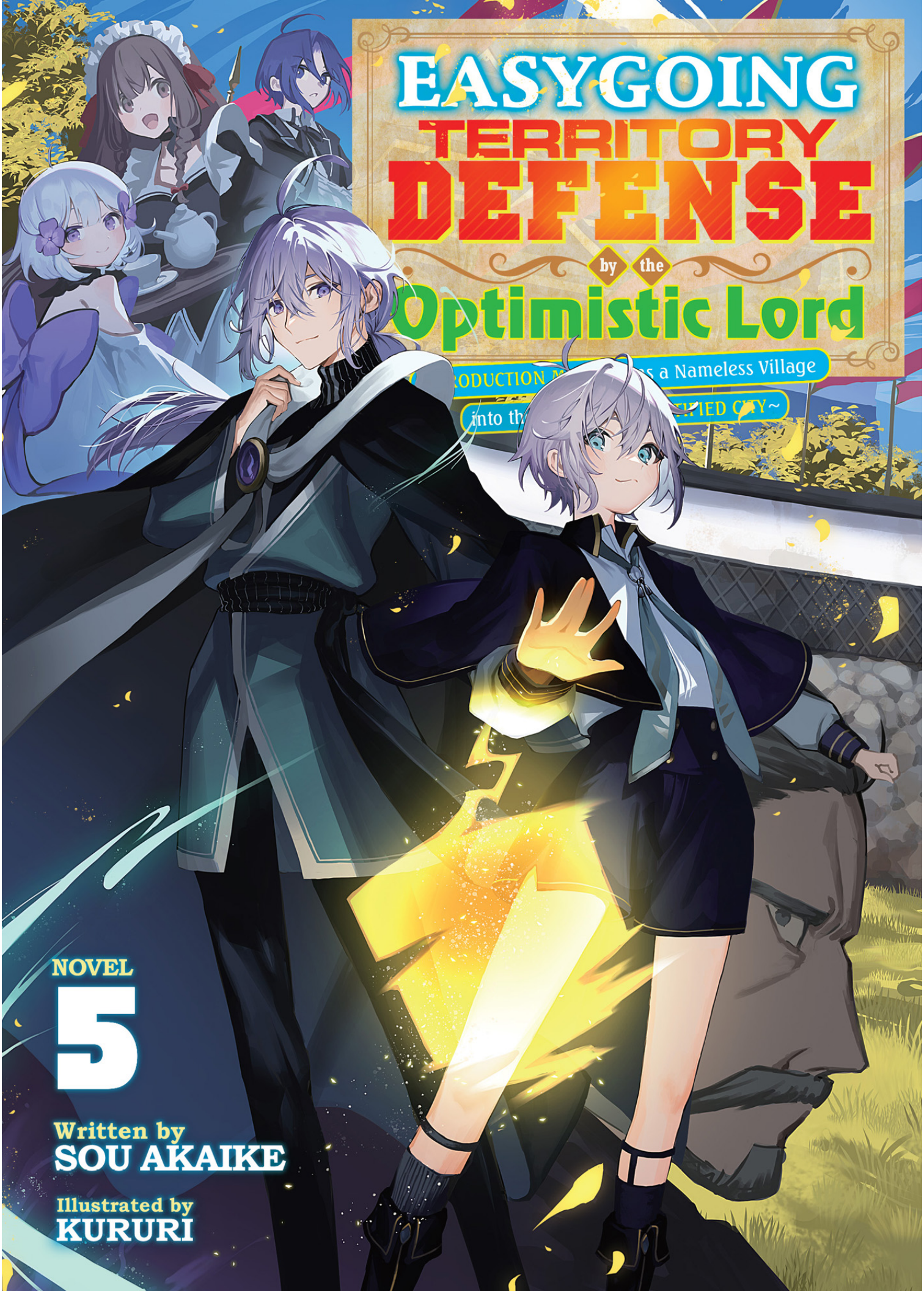
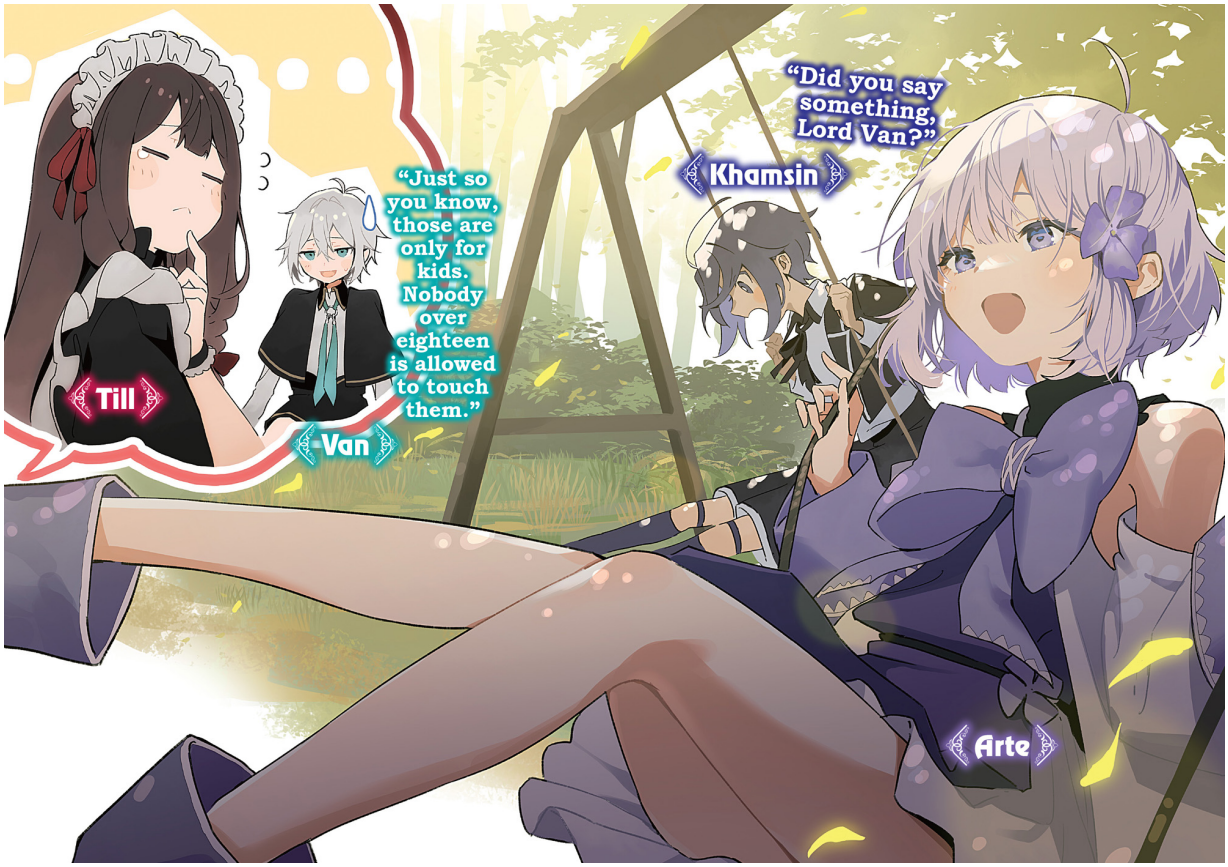

EASYGOING
TERRITORY
DEFENSE
by the
Optimistic Lord
RODUCTION
s a Nameless Village
into th
IED CITY~
NOVEL
5
Written by
SOU AKAIKE
Illustrated by
KURURI

Table of Contents

Color Inserts
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Prologue: The Plan to Build the Strongest Fortress City
Chapter 1: Japan's Famous Castle
Chapter 2: Completion of the Fortress City
Chapter 3: Defensive Stronghold
Chapter 4: Yelenetta, on the Move
Chapter 5: Returning Home
Chapter 6: The Importance of Human Resources
Chapter 7: All Ready
Chapter 8: Brothers, Reunited
Chapter 9: The Situation
Chapter 10: Revealing Fortress City Murcia
Final Chapter: From All Positions
Side Story: Sword Technique
Side Story: Researching Arte's Magic
Side Story: The Bell & Rango Company's Efforts to Acquire Capable Personnel
Side Story: The Murcia Chivalric Order
Afterword
Newsletter




Till
Van
"Just so you know, those are only for kids. Nobody over eighteen is allowed to touch them."
Khamsin
"Did you say something, Lord Van?"
Arte


Murcia
“You can’t possibly mean that castle, right?”
“Thank you, Brother. As it so happens, I’ve been looking for someone to become the lord of this castle.”

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE by the Optimistic Lord

~PRODUCTION MAGIC Turns a Nameless Village into the STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY~

NOVEL

5

WRITTEN BY

Sou Akaike

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kururi

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD: PRODUCTION MAGIC TURNS A NAMELESS VILLAGE INTO THE STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 5
© 2023 Sou Akaike
First published in Japan in 2023 by OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager Kristine Johnson at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Elliot Ryouga
ADAPTATION: Max Machiavelli
LOGO DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm
PROOFREADER: Evan Scherer
SENIOR EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89373-380-8
Printed in Canada
First Printing: August 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: The Plan to Build the Strongest Fortress City

CHAPTER 1: Japan's Famous Castle

CHAPTER 2: Completion of the Fortress City

CHAPTER 3: Defensive Stronghold

CHAPTER 4: Yelenetta, on the Move

CHAPTER 5: Returning Home

CHAPTER 6: The Importance of Human Resources

CHAPTER 7: All Ready

CHAPTER 8: Brothers, Reunited

CHAPTER 9: The Situation

CHAPTER 10: Revealing Fortress City Murcia

FINAL CHAPTER: From All Positions

SIDE STORY: Sword Technique

SIDE STORY: Researching Arte's Magic

SIDE STORY: The Bell & Rango Company's Efforts to Acquire Capable Personnel

SIDE STORY: The Murcia Chivalric Order

★

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE
BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD

★

Prologue:
The Plan to Build the Strongest Fortress City

HOWDY, Y'ALL. IT'S ME, VAN. EVERYONE'S IDOL.

I'd been told to repair a busted fortress smack dab in the middle of the battlefield. You know, the kind that'd be under constant fire from missiles in my world. I also had orders to defend it if the enemy struck. If someone heard about all this without context, they'd probably think I was being sentenced to some new form of torture.

But despite it all, I was brimming with determination. The fire and passion in my eyes were probably visible a mile away. After all, I was on the verge of getting my hands on foods I'd long since given up ever tasting again: curry and rice, fluffy pancakes, and even ramen. For that dream to become a reality, though, I had to be able to do business with the Central Continent, a region known for its plentiful spices and other ingredients. This meant we had to take Yelenetta, which functioned as the gateway to that region.

Delicious food. That was what drove me on!

"All right! First, we need to gather materials! Everyone, collect all the pieces of the fortress you can and put them where they need to go."

"Yessir!"

Armed with my instructions, the members of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order split into their respective squads and got to work. Members of the other orders stayed behind to take on other jobs.

I needed to remain mindful of the fact that most of these people outranked me by a long shot. They were older, too, the kind of nobles who, under normal circumstances, would have no reason to acknowledge any requests I made of them. In my world, this

would be like the president of a tiny startup issuing orders to the president of a giant corporation: definitely not a job for the faint of heart.

Fortunately, I had the king behind me. His authority lent me the power to work the nobility to the bone. After all, time was of the essence!

"Um, Viscount Pinin?" I said. "I hate to ask this of you, but I would love to repair the busted gate on the north side of the fortress. Would it be too much to ask you to gather timber, stone, and metal?"

"Hmph. As you wish. I'll set my Chivalric Order to the task. How much do you need, and when?"

"Thank you so much! This is a priority. I'd like four two-horse carriage loads of metal, then twice as much stone…"

"…Understood. By when?"

"Within a week, I suppose."

"A week?! That might prove to be a bit…" Viscount Pinin trailed off.

I looked up at him. He was a middle-aged man, veins visibly bulging just under the skin of his bald head. I waved both hands. "Ah, please don't worry! You're not the only one I'm asking! I was thinking of talking to Viscount Farina as well."



"Lord Farina? Not a bad choice, but it would be wise to secure more manpower. I will reach out to a few others. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course! Um, but could you let me know who you end up working with? I have to report back to His Majesty," I explained, bowing my head.

Viscount Pinin groaned and pulled in his chin. "O-of course! That goes without saying. On second thought, I seem to recall Viscount Farina having brought quite a few men along on this march. I think our Chivalric Orders should be able to handle this. We will have the materials to you in five days' time!"

"Thank you so much!"

This was how it went. I issued instructions and tried to keep a low profile, compromising as best as I could. If I let my guard down, these nobles were liable to try and get off easy. Too much leeway, and some of them would even try to snatch the valuables from what remained of the fortress.

My job was to limit work to certain areas and have the correct number of people team up to finish the work promptly. Just making requests of the nobility stressed me out, though, so the whole thing was agonizing. Luckily for me, mentioning that I would report back to His Majesty was enough to get even the rowdiest noble to cooperate. It hammered home just how much they feared the king.

In any case, the nobles who remained here at the fortress hadn't had a chance to do much in the battle. By putting them to work on repairs, His Majesty was arguably giving them an opportunity to contribute. If they didn't take advantage of his kindness, who knew how they would be received later?

And so it was thanks to His Majesty that the nobles worked diligently under the command of me, their social inferior. Given the manpower at hand, I planned to use this opportunity to acquire a surplus of materials. I would have been a fool not to take advantage of the situation.

"Lord Van, you have a nasty look on your face," Till said.

I rearranged my features hurriedly. "Now, now! I swear I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. Unrelatedly, have you seen any nobles with free hands? There's a job I'd like to have done…"

"Where did you learn to act like that? You're so good at using people, you remind me of some worldly, jaded merchant."

"You make me sound awful! I'd prefer it if you said that I'm good at requesting things from others."

"It almost feels like you are blackmailing people…" Till smiled an exasperated smile.

I turned to Khamsin. "Are there any other walls that need fixing ASAP?"

He took out a hand-drawn map. "Um, the only one remaining is on the southeast side. Everything else is being attended to."

"If my memory serves, that wall is mostly just cracked. In that case, I'll start with areas where the materials have already been gathered for me. Are the earth mages on standby?" I asked Arb, who stood up straight.

"Yessir! I've received a report that ten of them have gathered in the square. Lowe and the others are looking for more, but that might be all we can locate."

"Well, I suppose there wouldn't be too many folks around here who are useful for building walls. Okay, ten people should be more than enough. Time to get to work."

"Um," Arte piped up from behind me.

I turned around. "Hmm? Is something wrong?"

Arte shook her head, wearing a troubled smile. "Oh, no. I just realized I wouldn't be able to take a bath today. My apologies." She bowed her head deeply.

"I totally forgot! Thank you for the reminder, Arte!" I replied, louder than I intended.

More Chivalric Orders had stayed behind than I expected, so the fortress I'd built earlier was overbooked. There was no way we'd be taking baths tonight. On top of that, I was the lowest-ranking nobleman around, and a new one at that; I needed to know my place. Naturally, my pals and I would be staying in Yelenetta's fortress, which was basically one giant set of ruins at this point.

"You know what? Let's repair this place right now! Actually, let's rebuild it! Brand-new real estate! Everyone, gather up the materials as quickly as you can! I don't mind if it's all timber, just be fast!"

"Yessir!"

Just like that, the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order sprinted into action.

I watched my people carry timber to the square at an incredible pace while Dee blinked curiously. "What do you plan on doing with all this timber?" he asked. "The walls have yet to be completed."

I quickly explained the situation. He was the one who'd taken the initiative in terms of gathering lumber, so it was my responsibility to inform him of our plight.

"Is that so?! That is a problem! But I also feel as though the walls are a higher priority!" he said. Trust him to refuse to take his eyes off the defensive perspective.

Obviously, in a world where monster attacks were frequent, safety came first. But I still couldn't turn a blind eye to our inability to bathe. "I totally get where you're coming from, but for today, our top priority is getting our living situation together. I'll station our people at the ballistae on the fortress, so you don't need to worry."

"Hmm… Perhaps it will be fine, then. I suppose we can use our war wagons as well! In that case, I'll go and gather building materials!"

Dee was truly something else. I watched him sprint away with a warm feeling in my chest. Then Khamsin opened his mouth, an expectant look in his eyes, and said, "Lord Van, you have a lot of materials here. What type of structure will you be building?"

He was practically vibrating with anticipation, clearly expecting another new and exciting building. I'd already built a pentagram fortress, a gigantic dwarf forge, and baroque-style buildings, though. I'd even gotten a little goofy and built a replica Yomeimon. How could I top all of that?

I searched my memories, unexpectedly coming upon a place I'd visited once: Kumamoto Castle, the greatest castle in all of Kyushu. I'd also been to Osaka Castle and Nagoya Castle, but Kumamoto was my most recent visit, so it was still fresh in my memory. A spectacled man near the entrance had explained to me that Kumamoto's stone wall, which was called Musha-Gaeshi, was twenty meters tall. The castle had towers of all sizes, plus a massive watchtower. If you looked up "fortress" in the dictionary, you'd see Kumamoto Castle.

From a geographical perspective, it would take me a while to build a moat, but I could eventually put a long one in place, making the fortress impenetrable. What tremendous luck that I'd managed to remember all these details!

I wasted no time in summoning the earth mages, all of whom looked exhausted from working on the wall. In the meantime, I had the members of my order keep bringing over building materials, creating a veritable mountain of stone and timber. Standing in front of it, I looked at the cluster of pale-faced mages. "So, um, first, I want to express my gratitude to you all for your hard work on this first day. Thank you so much."

The mages looked surprised. I was sure they thought me an eccentric noble. Then again, these were all talented elemental mages, so the other nobles probably treated them exceptionally well. None of them struck me as particularly humble.

"I have one last job for you today. I would like you to build me a mountain the size of this whole square." I smiled, and the blood drained from their faces.

Barely two hours later, a stone wall stood at the center of the square. The mages were all sprawled on the ground by that point. I genuinely felt bad for them, so I asked Till to get started on a barbecue. The Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, which had by then gathered enough materials for me, was also reassigned to barbecue prep.

"Let's see," I murmured to myself, looking up at the new stone wall. It was enormous, a whole edifice in and of itself, and the warped structure was certainly impressive. A steel gate set into it stood open, revealing a path that continued inward. The path, which was wide enough for a carriage, led to a three-story storehouse made from wood blocks.

The roof of the storehouse merged with the top of the wall itself. I laid a stone floor over that roof and then raised new walls on all four sides of it. This would be a Japanese-style castle, of course; it even had sliding door windows.

I wanted the center of the fortress to be as large as I could make it, so I started with the first floor. The goal was for this whole thing to resemble Kumamoto Castle, so I made the ground floor horizontal. I was building this atop a twenty-meter stone wall, making it already tall enough to give its inhabitants a good view of their surroundings, but it was only going to get bigger from here. After all, Kumamoto Castle towered six stories above the ground.

I kitted out the first floor with a dining hall, kitchen, and open bath for the soldiers, and on the second and third floors I built a

series of resting rooms. The ballistae went on the fourth floor, so I made some extra bolts while I was at it. As a precaution against the enemy finding its way inside, I installed spears at the top of the stairs. They could be used to attack invaders from above.

The fifth floor was reserved for bedrooms and bathing areas for the nobility, while the sixth was a castle tower meant just for me. I'd done such a great job that the view from all the way up there was actually kind of scary. When I looked down at the Yelenetta side of the square, I saw the road extending far into the distance, until it disappeared from view altogether.

"Perfect! Done before nightfall!" I said to Arte and the others, seeing them look around the room. I was satisfied with the day's work. "Time for a fun barbecue and some sleep!"

Till and Khamsin shot me identical exasperated looks.

"Even I'm exhausted from being surprised all the time," Khamsin muttered.

"This fortress sure is…unique," Till agreed.

Elsewhere, Arte examined the room with glistening eyes. Eventually, she turned to me. "This is wonderful, Lord Van! I think this castle is my favorite of all the buildings you've made!"

"Really?" I blinked and nodded, overwhelmed by Arte's enthusiasm. "I'm glad."

It must have really captured her heart, if the excited way she explored the castle's interior was anything to go by.

Chapter 1:
Japan's Famous Castle

"GREAT WORK TODAY, EVERYONE! I WANTED TO reward your hard work, so my people went and slew a sanguine tiger! They also took down some rock scorpions and hekaton bears on the way! Eat your fill and rest up!"

Having delivered this greeting, I gave the signal. Dee and the others made their way over, leading four horse-drawn carriages stacked with massive monster corpses. Even the well-trained knights couldn't keep quiet at the sight. "Rock scorpions?!" one exclaimed.

"No way!" said another. "It takes thousands of Order members to take down a sanguine tiger or hekaton bear!"

"Yes, but rock scorpions should be impossible to kill without the help of fire mages!"

The shouts came from every direction. I didn't know the exact number of people present, but it had to number in the thousands, meaning this barbecue was standing room only. Not even a huge fortress like this could change that. I'd heard once that a certain dome in Japan had seating for fifty thousand people. Now that I was faced with an audience of thousands myself, the mere thought of that number was giving me a headache.

I looked over the gathered crowd. Nobles, mages, and Chivalric Order commanders stood at the front. Behind them were the commanding officers of individual squads, and further back, the general soldiers, surrounding the fires. Getting everything ready had taken some time, so a lot of them looked ravenous at this point.

"Let the barbecue begin!" I cried, raising my own skillet, loaded with meat. "Get some meat on your skillets, cook them up, and feast the night away!"

The soldiers erupted into cheers of elation and relief. Everyone scrambled to get their meat and then started cooking, filling the air with savory scents. Some folks were already digging in.

"Oh, and we have salt! We're so far from home that I couldn't provide any other spices, but please make sure to salt your food!"

With that out of the way, I tucked into my own meal. For wild game, albeit *high-grade* wild game, the bear meat was pretty tasty. This was my first time trying it, and I found it tasted kind of like lean pork. Was that also how bears tasted back in my own world?

As I ate, I noticed the nobles had gathered around the scorpion meat. One said, "It's been some time since I last partook of rock scorpion! How about you?"

"Well," said his companion, "I'm embarrassed to admit this is the first time I've even seen one."

"Is that so? It's quite the delicacy. Please enjoy yourself."

They were all excited about the scorpion meat, which resembled lobster or crab. Well, it was effectively mountain food, so maybe it was tricky for Scuderia's nobles to get their hands on it. I found it interesting that the monsters in this area were completely different from those near Seatoh Village. I'd have to investigate what sort of monsters lived near the ocean next.

"Lord Van! Have you tried the scorpion yet?" Khamsin asked, approaching me with a gleam in his eyes. He held multiple skewers of rock scorpion meat in his hands, apparently having cooked them himself so that he could bring me some to try. Till and Arte looked at one another and smiled.

"No, not yet! Thanks a bunch."

"Might I have a taste as well?" Arte asked.

Looking excited, Khamsin bowed and presented the skewers. I took one cheerfully and learned that, just as I'd expected, it tasted like crab. Exciting!

Everyone kicked back, relaxed, and enjoyed the barbecue. At least, we enjoyed it until we heard sudden yelling from the soldiers on the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range side of the fortress.

The lookouts on the wall shouted something, and pale-faced messengers sprinted over to deliver the message. "M-monsters! A group of horned boars have descended from the cliff! About fifty of them!"

The messengers appeared to belong to one of the other Chivalric Orders. As soon as the various commanders got the message, they leapt into action.

"Sentanta Chivalric Order! Ready yourselves and take formation in front of the wall!"

"Th-the Pinin Chivalric Order will equip themselves with heavy gear!"

"Farina Chivalric Order, ready the horses and support the mage squad!"

Amidst this chaos, the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order sprinted calmly to the wall, then took up their positions behind the ballistae and readied their machine bows. I grilled some more meat while the soldiers gathered near the wall. Once there was barely anyone left in the square, another messenger arrived to deliver a new report. "B-Baron Van's Chivalric Order has eliminated the monsters!"

The few nobles who remained nearby went wide-eyed. One said, "Can't you do your job right?! These are horned boars! Surely you mean that they pushed them back, not eliminated them!"

"You make it sound as though his men accomplished this on their own!" shouted another.

The poor messenger shrunk in fear. He bowed his head repeatedly before he dared to speak again. "I meant what I said! All the monsters were annihilated by Baron Van's Chivalric Order! They did not push them back! They slew them all!"

The nobles fell silent. *How typical,* I thought, side-eying them. Then I turned to Till.

"Can I have more tea, please?"

"Right away."

The monster attack and their subsequent eradication was the shocking climax that brought our barbecue to a close. People were basically done eating anyway, though, so it wasn't any huge loss. I ended up instructing people to take whatever leftovers they wanted with them the next day, so if anything, it actually made the soldiers happier.

Unfortunately, the knights above the rank of commanding officer were more focused on me than the meat. The nobility hounded me too.

"Lord Van…" Viscount Pinin whispered to me. He sounded shocked. "Have you developed some kind of poison that allows you to take down large monsters without severely wounding them?"

I cocked my head, setting my teacup on the table. "Huh? I could have sworn that there were rumors about me doing the rounds… Ugh, don't tell me I've been self-conscious all this time for no reason?!"

I turned to Arte, feeling my cheeks flame. It would be mortifying if it turned out I wasn't even remotely famous. *This is awful! Terrible! I want to dig a hole and bury myself in it!*

Arte shot me a pained smile. But then Pinin spoke again, looking troubled. "No, I heard rumors of your prowess well before I was summoned to this battle—that you had slain a large dragon, for example. But when I visited your village, I saw the dwarf forge and assumed that was how you accomplished such a feat."

Farina nodded. "Indeed. I heard that you used tremendously powerful bolts…but in the end, bolts are just bolts, I thought."

Relief washed over me. I smiled at the two of them. "I get it. Most people would never think to take down large monsters with arrows. Even I surprise myself sometimes."

Their eyes went wide and dumbfounded. Then someone burst into laughter. "Pfft… Ha ha ha!"

This was enough to break the floodgates. The other nobles and commanders started to laugh as well. The atmosphere lightened and I saw Arte, Till, and Khamsin sag in relief.

Pinin and the others hadn't been able to distinguish themselves during the big battle against Yelenetta. They'd been positioned in the rear of the long marching formation, literally unable to participate in the fight. They'd never had a chance to see how the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order fought, and given how abnormally fast our village had grown, they must have assumed I was receiving aid from His Majesty or Jalpa. All of which contributed to their suspicions of me as a new member of the nobility and to their jealousy when I was treated like the most accomplished combatant in a battle in which even His Majesty had participated. I was certain they even resented the king at this point.

But whether it was the barbecue or the chance to see my Order in action with our machine bows and ballistae, their attitudes toward me had clearly softened. Compared to their behavior earlier in the day, these nobles were acting downright modest.

"Well, I knew Lord Van was different from the start."

"I can see why His Majesty requested your aid."

"Would it be possible to purchase some of those incredible weapons from you?"

These guys were adorable. They were all bearded, middle-aged men, but I couldn't help but see them like pet iguanas. I smirked. *There, there. Have as much meat as you want!*

Pinin turned to me, a serious look in his eyes. "Lord Van… Quite frankly, I underestimated you. I thought that you were just a

child and assumed, based on how developed your territory was, that you received aid from Marquis Fertio or His Majesty. But I think I always knew, deep down, the reality of the situation." He looked up at Kumamoto Castle then, narrowing his eyes. "Though I suppose that, having seen you build *this* in only a day's time, I would have been forced to accept your abilities either way."

He laughed again, prompting the other nobles to join in. Even Dee, just returning from the wall, chimed in.

"Ha ha ha! Precisely! I fancy myself his most devoted follower, and not even I thought he should build lodgings beyond the wall!" He looked up at the castle. "How could I have anticipated such a unique, defense-focused castle? Lord Van is always thinking of his citizens and doing his best to make his lands more comfortable to live in. Viscount Panamera and Count Ferdinatto support him because they understand this, and they see how diligently he devotes himself to finding new ways to protect his people. In time, more like-minded individuals will gravitate toward him, creating a force to be reckoned with. Now that you have all seen where Lord Van's heart lies, is it foolish of me to hope that you, too, will make a priority of allying with him?"

Dee flashed a powerful smile, one that spoke both of confidence and hope for the future. It struck a chord with the nobles who'd been unable to participate in the big battle. At least, that was what it seemed like to me, watching Dee's impassioned plea bring a tear to their eyes. I thought I even heard some people actively sobbing.

"Uh… What exactly is happening?"

Despite being present for the whole conversation, I had the distinct feeling I'd missed something. I watched, bewildered, as a bunch of grown men openly wept.

I had been excited for the barbecue, but I was even more excited to spend a night in my new Japanese castle. I may not have

been able to recreate the texture and feel of tatami, but the view from the castle tower and watchtower were wonderful. Both structures were plucked straight out of old period flicks. I'd managed to emulate the sort of wooden-floored halls you always saw in the big climactic scenes, and I'd even recreated the continuous Japanese-style rooms that were separated by sliding screens.

I started by opening the sliding doors leading to the break rooms for the soldiers. I pulled them apart with both hands, then entered the room beyond, crossing through to the next set of sliding doors and pulling those open in turn. I repeated this process until I arrived at the long hallway surrounding the floor.

"Oooh, awesome!" It was a shame that I was the only one who could appreciate the accuracy. After all, I'd seen the real thing.

My Japanese castle was splendid in every way. It had an exquisite structural beauty that was functional, not just aesthetically pleasing. Exactly what you would expect from one of Japan's most famous castles.

"What a fascinating castle…" Till murmured, sounding enthralled.

Arte nodded. She and Till were exploring the interior, and she seemed moved by pretty much everything she saw. "I have never seen one quite like it. It's so entirely unique and full of things I've never seen before…and yet there is a lovely harmony to it."

Khamsin and I checked each floor. He expressed surprise at the abruptness of the stairs. *Okay, maybe I didn't need to replicate the stair design,* I thought.

Meanwhile, Pinin and the others ascended the stairs very carefully, almost like spies infiltrating enemy territory. Pinin was leading the charge, and a look of relief washed over him the moment he spotted me.

"Ooh! Lord Van! I was already impressed by your ability to build a castle in only a few hours, but this is remarkable!"

A nobleman behind him hummed in agreement. “At first I assumed you had simply stuck a few wood boards together.”

The nobles looked around restlessly, touching the sliding doors with great interest. It seemed that my speed had made them assume I’d built a cardboard cutout of a castle. In fairness, that wouldn’t have been a terrible plan if my goal was only to bluff Yelenetta’s army and stall for time. It made sense.

In a gentle tone, Pinin asked, “May we stay here as well?”

The pleading look he gave me was kind of gross. Since he was being so humble about it, though, I decided to respond with kindness. I smiled. “Of course! I even went out of my way to make some modifications so that this castle is nice and secure. I would love it if you all stayed the night and gave me your feedback on the experience!”

The nobles lit up with smiles. “I am grateful for your kindness!”

“It is a truly fascinating design!”

“What sort of contraptions did you install? Just for reference.”

They had clearly come to understand the structural beauty of a Japanese castle. This pleased me for reasons I couldn’t quite put into words, and I decided to let them in on the important secrets hidden in the structure. As far as I was concerned, anyone who liked Japanese castles was a good person.

“This castle was designed with security and defense in mind. The tall watchtowers will all be equipped with ballistae. I also plan to install another level of walls on the top of the castle; these will have holes in them at regular intervals, allowing soldiers to attack with machine bows or throw Molotov cocktails to the ground below. Not only that, but should any intruders manage to get into the castle itself, the stairs are narrow and steep, so those defending on the inside can attack with spears from the top of the stairs. It would be extremely difficult to climb all the way to the top. I’m also looking into setting up modified catapults on the Yelenetta side of the fortress, aimed at the road. These would be able to target a wide

area. All of these defensive measures would allow us to defend against even a giant dragon, so if Yelenetta attempts to attack us, I guarantee we'll be able to fight them off!"

I'd gotten a bit carried away in my passion, and Pinin and the others were now frozen in place, wide-eyed. Maybe they weren't expecting a castle with such a unique and new design to be fully decked out? This seemed like a problem, so I decided to do some additional explaining.

"Ah, and of course, I plan to build a moat around the structure. I'll also connect it to the fortress on the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range so that we can hole up inside for as long as possible. That will make it easy to acquire food whenever monsters attack. When I build walls and gates along the road, this whole thing will become an impregnable fortress."

I struck a triumphant pose…but the nobles just gaped at me.

After a few moments, Pinin took it upon himself to speak for the group. He plastered a clumsy smile on his face. "Th-that is a wonderful idea. I imagine, however, that this will be quite a large project. When do you expect to have it all completed?"

He was probably worried about how long he and the others would be stuck there. I gave him a reassuring smile. "I think it'll take a week or so if I really put my back into it. I apologize, but without the help of all of you fine people, I suspect it may end up taking me two weeks. Would you be willing to provide me your aid for a little while longer?"

It was important to be humble, which was why I bowed. Pinin and the others exchanged looks.

"Did he just say a week?"

"His abilities are even more absurd than I thought…"

"I have decided to swear my allegiance to Lord Van. Do not try to dissuade me."

"That's unfair!"

The verbal attacks started, and suddenly everyone was getting in on it. I watched them fight it out, then turned to Arte. "How many do you think will stick around?"

She offered me a strained smile. "All of them, I imagine."

My plan was to expand the scale of the fortress that protected the border and to surround the hill at the entrance to the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range with a wall. The whole thing would be enormous—the first structure of any kind that granted access to the mountain range.

I woke up the next morning full of vim, vigor, and mental images of designs. I had enjoyed a quick dip in my small but delightful cypress-like bath the night before, and then slept in my bedding made from modified monster hides. I felt super energized.

"A beautiful morning atop the castle tower!" I opened the sliding door and exited to the outside hallway. I must have been even more excited than I thought! The sun wasn't quite up yet and the horizon was still dimly lit; when I cast my gaze upward, the sky was dark. "A beautiful daybreak from atop the castle tower!" I amended, planting my hands on my hips and puffing out my chest to take a deep breath of the fresh morning air. The frigid air made my shoulders tremble. "What a superb view!"

Behind me, I heard voices quietly begin to talk among themselves. Arte, Khamsin, and Till, all still in their sleepwear, were talking about little old me.

"What do you think he's doing?"

"Lord Van must be making sure everything is safe."

"Are you sure? He has that look he gets when he's found something interesting…"

At this rate, they were going to think I'd descended into madness. I cleared my throat loudly and turned around.

"Ahem! As Khamsin said, I was making sure that no enemies or monsters were approaching. When I saw how peaceful and tranquil things were, I put those feelings into words. There's no need for concern."

Arte and Till smirked and nodded, while Khamsin exclaimed his astonishment, his eyes sparkling. *I love how innocent he is.*

After our little conversation, we all returned to our individual rooms in the tower to change clothes. We talked it over and decided to have breakfast even though it was still a bit early, then began our descent to the floor below.

"Man, maybe these stairs are a little too steep."

"Going up and down *is* a bit difficult."

"As a maid, I can't help but think about what it would be like to carry food up here, and, well…"

"Huh? I think it's cool."

We moved through the castle, chatting away, and came across a pack of suited-up knights. Some of them were there to swap with lookouts, but the others were probably staying ready so that they could leap into action at a moment's notice. *Absolutely wonderful.*

The knights waved to us when they spotted us passing through, so I offered them cheerful greetings in kind. "Good morning!"

"G-good morning!"

Most of them seemed bewildered by my friendliness as they stood at attention. If they were readying themselves, I was just getting in the way, so I moved off to the side of the long hall where I wouldn't stand out.

After a bit of a walk, we reached the outer hall on the stone wall. Out in the castle's courtyard, a Chivalric Order was performing maintenance on their weapons and armor. Lookouts also walked along the outer wall. The Chivalric Orders must have assigned themselves jobs to perform. The nobles seemed like useless geezers,

but it looked like the actual members of their orders were good apples.

I kept to myself and watched everyone work. Only a limited number of people had been able to stay in the new castle the night before, so everyone else slept in the fortress over at the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. In about a week or so, this whole thing would look much more like a fortress city, and at that point everyone could stay in new lodgings.

That was when I realized I had a problem. *Wait. When the fortress city is finished, most of these folks will head back to their own territory.* Only the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order and some of the adventurers would remain. And we would go back home after a while ourselves, so in the end, nobody would live here.

"Am I supposed to make a decision on this?" I whispered, gazing down from the wall at the incomplete castle wall and watchtowers.

Arte peered at me. "Is something the matter?"

"Well, this fortress city is going to be huge, right? The problem is that I don't have anyone to live here."

Arte blinked. "I had not considered that."

"Wait, nobody is going to live here?" Till asked. She and Khamsin were listening nearby, and they looked just as surprised.

"About ten thousand knights could stay here," Khamsin said.

I might have to ask for volunteers from Seatoh Village.

The other issue was transporting goods—the supply lines in the area weren't anywhere near ready, especially compared to Seatoh Village. It'd take a week or two just to get spices all the way here. If we factored in the process of placing the orders, we were looking at a month's wait.

"This…is a big problem," I said. Arte and the others nodded.

Chapter 2:
Completion of the Fortress City

WE SPENT THE NEXT WEEK BUILDING AND completing the fortress city. I still needed to finish extending it to the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, but it was good enough for now.

The castle at the center of the fortress was elaborate and exquisite, and once I'd fixed the fortress walls that were already in place, I remodeled the tops of the walls with a Japanese aesthetic. I also built ten towers into the wall, each four stories high, and four smaller castles inside the fortress. These towers and castles were linked by connected passageways for quick access from anywhere in the fortress. The main castle at the center was cut off from this network, and any of the towers and smaller castles could likewise have their passageways cut off to slow down intruders.

In case of a head-on attack, I designed the whole thing so that our people could attack with machine bows from high ground. Intruders would have to pass through the smaller castles, so I made sure that we could shower them with arrows from the stone wall, the towers, and the small castles themselves. The place was impregnable.

I performed my final checks on the finished wall, then stood in front of the castle gates and looked up at my work: the small castles, the towers, and the impressive center castle that sat atop the stone wall in the distance. Not to toot my own horn, but the sheer force of it all was impressive. I could've stood there admiring it forever, but I didn't have the time for that.

In front of the gates stood Dee and the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, the nobles who had helped me with the project, and the commanders of the other orders. I looked at all their faces and said, "Um, everyone! It's thanks to your hard work that we finished ahead

of schedule! When His Majesty returns, he'll look up at that incredible castle and see much work you put in, and of course I will personally tell him about all of your efforts. Thank you so much!"

I bowed my head deeply. When I looked up again, I found the arrogant nobles quietly bowing in return. Maybe it was the wrong time for jokes, but I was so surprised that I thought, *What's wrong, guys? Do your stomachs hurt?*

I stared at them until they each raised their heads to look right at me.

"This has been an incredible experience," said one noble.

"If anything," said another, "it is we who should express gratitude to you."

"This fortress is going to become our nation's most important base."

Once the rest of the praise had died down, Pinin nodded, making his double chin wobble a bit, and stepped forward. "A week ago, none of us could lay claim to any personal accomplishments. But now, having worked on a construction project that will go down in history, each and every one of us is proud to say that we played a part. We offer you our deepest thanks for granting us the opportunity to be a part of this project." His voice resonated with utmost sincerity.

What's up, Pinin? Did you eat something bad? My shock must have shown on my face, because Pinin started to laugh, putting a hand on his hip and puffing out his chest.

"What, does it not seem in character? Frankly, at first I thought it was deeply shameful to be working for a baron, never mind a child. But now, looking at the castle that you created with your magic, I'm reconsidering everything I thought about you. If you're amenable, we would like to form an alliance with you, just as Viscount Panamera has."

This meant that he recognized me as someone of equal standing. Not only that, he wanted to ally himself with me. The baron of a super tiny territory on the border could ask for no better offer!

I nodded my assent, grinning. “Thank you so much! Oh, but I have to check with Viscount Panamera before I form any further alliances.”

“Ha ha ha! You really do act nothing like a child! Indeed, as she is your equal partner, we cannot well ignore her. However, as I am sure you are aware, we also cannot be away from our own territories for too long, so we will depart first and send emissaries at a later date.”

“Understood. Thank you for your consideration.” I shook hands with them all, sharing words of good fortune with everyone.

With that, each of the nobles headed back to their respective homes. They all had to pass through the monster-ridden Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, so I dispatched adventurers and Chivalric Order members as bodyguards. With Arb leading the machine bow squad, they’d have plenty of manpower, even with reduced numbers. I also loaned out two war wagons to make sure everyone would be perfectly safe.

Before Arb led Pinin and the others toward the mountain range, I gave him some quick instructions. “Once you get back to Seatoh Village, I want you to issue a job request to Ortho and his people. Oh, and I’ll be looking for volunteers to stay here for about two months, so can you tell Esparda to get things ready?”

“Yes, as you wish!”

“Ah, also spices! Spices and wheat flour!”

“Oh, right! I won’t forget!”

At this point, five hundred or so people remained in the massive fortress city. We could defend the place if we manned the ballistae, but we couldn't hold out for very long.

For this place to function properly, there would need to be at least three thousand people on site. The wall and the towers would require three shifts' worth of lookouts, with each shift consisting of at least one hundred people. Without a minimum of a thousand people, nobody would be able to take breaks. We also currently only had two to three hundred soldiers to deploy as an immediate fighting force if we came under attack. If Yelenetta deployed two-legged wyverns or their black balls, I wasn't fully confident we could hold the line.

"Hiring mercenaries for the long haul doesn't seem viable," I said aloud. "What should I do?"

Dee folded his arms and looked up at the castle. "Indeed. Even with assistance from Seatoh Village we wouldn't have enough manpower for a fortress this size—and we need to make sure we don't leave the village defenseless, either. I would say we need about a thousand more soldiers. I know that Seatoh Village has exceeded three thousand residents, but our Chivalric Orders combined only total about eight hundred; we receive temporary support from adventurers and mercenaries to fill in any gaps. I think we will need to solicit people to migrate here from elsewhere."

Between the Esparda Chivalric Order and the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, we had a combined eight hundred people? I had no idea. Saying that aloud would piss Dee off, though, so I just nodded.

Dee scratched his chin with a finger. "We need soldiers to protect this place, but we also need an acting governor. They would manage resources and food, so we need someone talented and intelligent."

"How about Esparda?"

"No, I think that would be unwise. He is undoubtedly fit for the job, but we need him to manage the village when you are gone."

Okay, so Esparda wasn't the right choice. But the only other person who seemed up to the task was Dee, and I needed him available if and when I got called into battle. Neither Arb nor Lowe was ready for that sort of responsibility.

"This is a problem. Maybe I should ask Panamera?" I suggested.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, but it would take at least half a year to come to fruition."

"Could we hire mercenaries until then?"

"Hmm… If we called over one hundred members of the Chivalric Order, then had Sir Esparda act as a temporary governor… No, even then, half a year is too long."

We were still brainstorming when a single soldier came running over from the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range side of the fortress. They were a member of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order. "Lord Van! Lord Murcia has arrived with five hundred men!"

"…What?" I looked up, blinking in surprise. "Murcia is here?"

"Heya, Van. Looks like you went and made something incredible again, huh?"

Murcia approached me with an exasperated look on his face, his eyes trained on the castle. Approaching from the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range side, you had to pass through two small castles and then the exterior wall before you arrived at the castle gates. It was a bit of a hike, all things considered; if someone wanted to take the whole place over and get through to the other side, they'd need at least five thousand soldiers to make it happen. Based on how impressed he looked, Murcia must have put this together as he made his way through the fortress.

"That castle at the center is the biggest one, right? It sure looks unique. Normally the center of a fortress is composed of

linking towers; I don't think there's ever been a fortress as complex as this. And I've definitely never seen anyone build a castle on top of a wall! It would be difficult to put soldiers in formation and dispatch them in place like this, but if you're putting everything into its defensive capabilities, it's a brilliant design."

Murcia's observations were sharp. This surprised me a little—I'd always seen him as a fairly mild-mannered person—but it seemed that he had good instincts when it came to military matters. Or maybe this was just the result of all his hard work. If I were my actual age, I sure wouldn't have been able to offer such astute observations about this strange castle.

Daddy dearest didn't seem to value him much, but it was becoming clear that Murcia was highly talented.

"I know, right?" I said candidly. "What brings you here, by the way?"

Murcia laughed dryly and rubbed the back of his neck. "So, um, it's kind of complicated. Father ordered me to give you assistance."

"…In constructing the fortress city?"

Murcia made a complicated expression and shook his head. "I phrased that badly. I'm apparently no longer a candidate to become head of the family. His Majesty said some things, but I don't actually know what's going on. Father didn't give me a firm objective or a specific timeframe; I was just told to do what I can to help you." He gave a self-deprecating little laugh, then sighed.

Ah. Just like me, Murcia had been kicked out of the house. And this was after he dedicated so much time and energy to studying so that he could become the head of House Fertio. Now, out of nowhere, he no longer had any goal; I couldn't begin to imagine how sad and frustrated he must have felt. And to add insult to injury, he was ordered to support his little brother. His self-esteem must have been at rock bottom.

I had no idea what to say to him.

Murcia seemed to snap to attention after a moment. He shot me a pained smile. “Hey, this has nothing to do with you. You have incredible talents, and you’ve worked hard for everything you have. That’s why, if you’ll let me, I want to learn as many things as possible from you.”

“Murcia…”

He flashed a warmer smile then; his words were akin to those of a saint. I almost squinted, as if I were blinded by a bright light. What a man. In his position, I would have spat out all kinds of resentful words about daddy dearest.

The man before me, my older brother, was the one person in my family who had been kind to me through thick and thin. This was my chance to show him my loyalty. With a heart full of determination, I looked solemnly up at him. “Thank you, Brother. As it happens, I’ve been looking for someone to become the lord of this castle.”

“Uh…what?” Murcia looked back at the massive Japanese castle sitting on the stone wall. He blinked a few times and pointed at it. “You can’t possibly mean that castle, right?”

When he glanced back at me, I smiled and nodded. “I absolutely do! We have fresh personnel headed here from Seatoh Village to swap places with the people currently here. We’ll only be able to have merchants coming and going for a bit, but I imagine that before long new adventurers and residents will move here. We’re in the process of boosting our Chivalric Order ranks, but once we have enough people, this place’s population will break past two thousand in no time. After that, the plan is to use it as a starting point to invade and take Yelenetta’s territory. I’m going to have you establish the Murcia Chivalric Order and place you as the supreme commander of it!”

“The Murcia Chivalric Order?!” Murcia’s eyes went wide.

There’s no way I’m just going to make him a governor. I need manpower, after all! “Correct. I believe you’ve been trained in

combat as well as domestic affairs, and you've been taught how to properly manage a Chivalric Order. You have the experience and knowledge of a member of House Fertio, which has spent much of its existence on the battlefield. So I think you're a perfect fit for a fortress city designed for defense. I want you to use this territory as a foothold to eventually establish your own house!"

"What?! You want me to become independent? But I don't have that kind of…"

"Why do you disparage yourself so much? I've always believed that you would become a better head of the family than Father ever was!"

"Y-you really think so? That seems so unlikely." His expression was troubled, but I could tell that deep down he was happy. *All right! I'm going to take him to the top. I'm going to make this fortress city invincible!*

"Murcia, your legend begins now!"

"My legend…?"

Leaving aside the question of whether Murcia bought what I was selling, he did at least seem willing to hear me out. "You know," I said, "this is actually the first time you and I have ever eaten together like this."

"Ah, that's true." Murcia cast his gaze out the window of the castle tower, his expression conflicted. "But, um, this place seems a bit wasted on me."

The red sunset was gorgeous, and the green lines of the mountain range had turned a vivid orange. From our vantage, atop the massive castle and looking down, everything below was stained red. Lights illuminated the wall before us at equal distances, serving as a lovely garnish to the natural view.

It was, in a word, brilliant.

“What a tremendous view,” I said.

“Yes,” Murcia agreed haltingly. “It sure is.”

Why were we having the kind of conversation you’d expect to hear from a pair of lovers? Till arrived then with food in hand, interrupting the weird vibe. It was time to get down to business. I turned to face Murcia.

The room we were in had a traditional Japanese style, wood flooring or no wood flooring, and we sat on cushions around a large, round table. This was the kind of setting that soothed my nerves. Maybe Murcia didn’t feel the same way, but once he’d lived here for a while, he’d get used to it.

“If you’re willing to lend me your aid,” I said, “then I’d like to tell you my plan for the future. Will you agree to be the lord of this castle?”

Murcia gulped and sat up straight. For a moment he stared at me in silence, but then he seemed to accept his fate. “Of course. I was ordered to support you, after all. Just remember that there are things I can and can’t do.” He gave me a strained smile.

Relieved despite his underwhelming enthusiasm, I decided to share my plan with him. “Thank you, Murcia! Okay, so first I’d like you to defend this fortress city for a year. After that, depending on how our forces come together, we’ll invade Yelenetta and take their territory! We’re going to keep taking land closer and closer to the ocean, until we eventually acquire a port that can connect us to the Central Continent! At that point you will be the lord of at least three fortress cities, so once His Majesty gives you a peerage, I’ll need you to appoint governors to all of them! Once more people start moving here, I’d like you to select candidates with the potential to be your Chivalric Order’s commander on top of the governor candidates. Six to ten candidates for each, please! It might be difficult to figure this all out within a year, but I’ll send you people with high aptitudes, so __”

"W-wait a second, Van! You're being awfully loud about this crazy plan of yours! Are you sure that's okay?"

He was flustered about my majestic plan, naturally. The truth was that I wouldn't be able to get my hands on new spices or foods if I wavered here; I needed to gain a foothold that would lead me to the Central Continent, at any cost. I looked my brother directly in the eye. "Murcia, if we chip away at Yelenetta's territory, eventually we'll get our hands on the black balls. When that happens, we'll never have to fear the enemy again. Worry not!"

His expression shifted to one of surprise, but it didn't stop there. Eventually, his eyes narrowed and a strangely sad expression settled on his face. "You're amazing, Van. I think I finally understand how someone so young has accomplished so much." He rose abruptly to his feet. "So this magnificent fortress city will eventually be my home, huh? Protecting all of this is my mission… All right, Van. I'm sure I'm deficient in many ways, but I want to do my best to fulfill my duty."

As he spoke, Murcia moved to the castle tower's outer hallway, then cast his gaze around without moving the rest of his body. Finally he turned back to face me, smiling.

"I look forward to working together, Baron Van."

I stood up and bowed. "Thank you so much, Murcia!"

His smile turned sentimental then, and he chuckled. "Van, I think our roles are backwards."

"Ah, sorry!" I couldn't help but smile back. I was just happy to finally have a chance to talk to my family.

Unfortunately, our brotherly moment was interrupted by a surprise attack. "It's the enemy!" yelled a member of my order from out on the wall. "Yelenetta's army is attacking!"

Hearing this, Murcia rushed out of the outer hallway, and I positioned myself next to him. We both looked down to the ground, where flaming arrow after flaming arrow soared toward the wall.

Fortunately for us, the walls around the city had been repaired by yours truly, so they were super-duper tough; fire arrows would have no effect. The Japanese-style roofing and walls protected us perfectly.

But there was a bigger issue: why hadn't the members of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, with their incredible eyesight, seen this surprise attack coming? Was there some secret road besides the main one that let Yelenetta draw near undetected?

"Can anyone confirm where they came from?" I shouted, directing my question at nobody in particular.

A few people on the wall exchanged words and then hustled into action. Two people split off left and right, proceeding along the wall while the other order members posted up at the ballistae. The order members who'd received the report began gathering at the wall and the towers.

The order member who ran off to the right side turned to me and yelled, "Lord Van! It appears Yelenetta's forces are coming through the forest!"

"Huh? Were they not visible from up high?"

"Correct! Nobody would have noticed them unless they were constantly keeping their eyes on that area!"

"Gotcha! Get ready to defend the fortress!"

"Yessir!"

I turned my attention to Yelenetta's forces beyond the wall. They were getting into formation, and it was clear now that more troops were joining their ranks from the right side. Even more striking was their gall to get into formation right in front of their enemy.

Murcia cast me an exasperated look. "Is it just me, or does no one here have any sense of urgency? With that many Chivalric Orders attacking, I don't think I'd be able to stay calm."

I shook my head gently. “They’re just doing their best to keep themselves together. The most worrisome thing is how quickly the enemy has returned after their defeat. It’s strange for them to be back already, having just lost such an important defensive position.”

“Huh?” He cocked his head in bewilderment. “Why? I doubt they expected the walls to have been repaired. It makes sense to me that they’d hurry back if they want to take advantage of us being unprepared.”

I nodded. “Indeed. Perhaps I’m overthinking things. Remember, though, we took over one of their massive strongholds in the blink of an eye. Not only that, Scuderia’s army traveled straight through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range to get here, so it would be reasonable to think most of our forces were still present. Why would they assume we only have a skeleton crew?”

“Don’t tell me…” Murcia frowned and swallowed hard, catching my implication. Once again, I nodded.

“This is only conjecture, but I believe there’s a traitor in our ranks.”

Chapter 3:
Defensive Stronghold

Murcia

VAN NARROWED HIS EYES AND SAID IT PLAINLY: "There's a traitor in our ranks."

Cold sweat ran down my spine when I saw his unchildlike expression. Van was normally a kind, cheerful boy, but suddenly he seemed more like an experienced general, someone who had clawed his way through horrors beyond imagining. Had he inherited our father's blood so strongly? Or was this part of who he'd been all along?

Either way, he possessed a knack for combat that I lacked. "But why?" I somehow managed to ask. "What would a traitor gain from contact with Yelenetta?"

Van grimaced and cast his gaze back to the approaching army. "I can think of several things, but it would all be conjecture on my part. For now, let's just say that I have other proof of a traitor in our midst. Scuderia having been able to expand its territory for years now, for example. And the fact that our people didn't see the first surprise attack in Scuderia coming."

He said these things matter-of-factly, like it was all no big deal, but his words were horrifying. Only after listening to them did I come to believe he might be right. "So the reason our nation has been unable to expand in the last few years is because someone was passing information to Yelenetta? And if that is the reason for the success of their surprise attack, then there must be a spy among Scuderia's nobility…"

I began to tremble in fear as I spoke. Scuderia was one of the continent's largest nations, but if we had traitors among the nobility

—the guards of our borders—we were finished. The enemy would storm our territories and rip them from us. They might even invade the capital if they had the right information from the spy.

Van's expression was hard to read. "Yeah. But I think it would be dangerous to only suspect the nobility."

"Huh?" Just then the ground shook with a massive explosion from the wall, large enough to shake the ground itself. I ducked. Having heard this sound before, I knew exactly what it was: the black balls. "Ugh! Will the walls be okay?"

Van, meanwhile, leaned forward curiously, looking about as surprised as if a cup had fallen over on a table. He squinted, trying to see into the distance. Fierce explosions rang out, one after another, the enemy's attacks becoming big, reckless, and disorderly.

"Ah, they've fallen back," Van said. His eyes were still narrowed, even though the blasts were so loud I wanted to cover my ears. It did look like the enemy army had put some distance between themselves and the wall, perhaps to avoid being caught in their own explosions. Having confirmed this for himself, Van turned to the small castle ahead and to one side. "Are our crazy strong catapults ready to go?"

"Yessir!" a soldier shouted. "Ready!"

"Excellent! Give them a test fire!"

With this casual-sounding order, something deep within the small castle moved. It was hard to see from our position, but it seemed like some kind of object was attached to the castle's side. Curious, I watched as something zipped through the air. The black object traced an arc, eventually coming straight down on the enemy army's rear rank. It was like the thing knew exactly where it was going.

It landed with a cacophonous explosion. Unlike the black balls, it produced hardly any fire, but it was powerful all the same. Dozens of enemy soldiers were laid out on the ground, their formation in

shambles. Van's ballistae began to fire on them, too; I doubt the enemy knew what to do with themselves.

For a moment it almost felt like the battle was over. But then, in a curious tone, Van said, "Why aren't they retreating?"

I looked back at the battlefield. He was right. The enemy had come under heavy fire, but they showed no signs of retreating. "Why aren't they—?!" I was cut off by an explosion like none I'd ever heard. Not only did the castle shake, but so did the air itself. "Wh-whoa!"

"Huh. Did part of the wall collapse?"

I was busy trying to stay on my feet, but Van ran to the balcony and leaned over the railing. He narrowed his eyes, assessing the wall's condition.

"Yikes. That's not good," he said, his voice betraying zero urgency. Then he turned to face the top of the wall and yelled, "Is everyone okay?!"

Voices shouted back, both from the cloud of smoke obscuring the top of the wall and from within the towers. "Yessir!"

"The wall is fine, but the front gates have been breached!"

"Lord Van, please evacuate!"

Van grimaced. "Thanks, but I can't evacuate, so we're gonna strike back instead! Those of you in the towers and castles, attack the people entering the walls! Everyone else, keep focusing on the enemy beyond the walls! Whatever weapon they used to break down the front gates is still out there, so if you spot it, destroy it ASAP!"

"Yessir!" someone replied.

Someone else yelled, "A suspicious cylinder has been spotted in front of the gates! We're destroying it now!"

"'Kay!" said Van. Something about his directions struck me as bizarrely casual, yet his Chivalric Order accurately deduced his

intentions and moved into action. Part of this was probably Dee's training, but even then, this would have been impossible if they didn't have complete faith in Van as their leader.

That was when I realized that I had no idea where Dee was. "Van! My own troops haven't gotten here yet, but I don't see Dee either. Knowing him, wouldn't he want to stay by your side?"

This shook Van out of what looked like deep thought. He pointed toward one of the small castles and smiled. "Dee's over there giving orders."

"Huh?" I turned around and saw Dee atop the terrace of one of the small castles. He was leaning forward, issuing precise orders.

"Make sure to get them all! They will struggle to climb the stone wall at the center of the fortress, so if we can hold the line here, victory will be ours! Rear units, remember to supply the others with bolts and arrows!"

I looked back at Van, whose serious gaze was trained beyond the wall. In the past Dee had often butted heads with Commander Stradale over stratagems and battlefield decisions, but here he was wordlessly leaving overall command to Van. Dee must have had absolute faith in Van's knowledge and strategic thinking.

I knew it. House Fertio, having banished Van, faces rough times ahead. As I stared at Van's back, a pained smile crossed my face.

"Another strange cylinder spotted! Destroying now!"

"'Kay!" I replied breezily, though my mind was racing. I was honestly shook by the fact that they'd managed to break down steel gates. Those things were six meters tall and four meters wide! That shouldn't have been an easy feat even with the black balls. Either the combo of successive explosions and a heavy impact bending the gates out of shape had been enough to do them in, or the section connecting the gates to the wall had been destroyed, causing them

to fall over. Whichever it was, the castle siege weapon with a long cylinder that used gunpowder had to be a cannon. The timing checked out, too, with the gates destroyed right as we heard that massive blast.

Gunpowder had made its way over from the Central Continent, but its spread to our ally nations had been slow. That was bad news, because large nations from the Central Continent might come knocking. During the Age of Discovery, humanity's range of travel expanded rapidly, but plenty of remote nations were left out, unable to access all those technological developments. Those sorts of places were ultimately turned into vassal nations and colonies. Powerful countries took over weaker ones; it was the way of the world.

It was possible that another, greater nation in the Central Continent had already turned Yelenetta into a vassal state, in which case Yelenetta was attacking Scuderia as that nation's vanguard. This was all speculation, but on the chance that I was right, I had to teach Murcia the fundamentals of defense. Li'l Van's weapons were awesome, but if you didn't know how to use them, they were half as effective as they could be.

"Brother," I said to Murcia, "this is the perfect opportunity for me to explain how to defend a fortress city."

Murcia, who had been watching events unfold before us, stared at me. "What, right now?"

I smiled at his surprise and pointed at the main wall. "It's simple. Going forward, we'll enact a strategy against the enemy's new weapon that will make it a lot harder for them to get past our front gates. While we do that, we'll also strike with our ballistae and machine bows. That's the gist of it. If the enemy gathers further from the wall, we'll use our catapults. I've only made two so far, but I'm open to making a few more if necessary. This time around, the projectiles we used were full of bladed objects, but when the enemy is particularly strong, we can also use projectiles filled with oil. We can deal heavy damage to their forces if we shower them in oil and

then shoot flame arrows. They'll be really mad at us if we do that, though."

"Y-yeah, I bet. What about using magic, or sending out the cavalry for a surprise attack?"

"We haven't trained any elemental mages, and I can't possibly engage in a fight that would result in casualties for my Chivalric Order. If we were to perform a surprise attack, it would be by expanding the city's walls, installing a bunch of ballistae, and attacking the enemy from all four directions."

"I see." He turned his gaze to one of my ballistae. "It's true, those ballistae of yours are astounding. Not just in power, but also in range. It would be difficult for even a mage to close the distance."

It seemed like he understood how our defensive operations worked. Now he just needed to recruit enough people to form his own Chivalric Order, and I could rest easy.

But that wasn't enough. If I were Yelenetta's tactician, I would gather all the cannons together and bombard from afar. Not even a fortress city made by Li'l Van, local genius, could power through that. Preventing that worst-case scenario required a plan that allowed us to take down the Kingdom of Yelenetta swiftly. Our goal wasn't just an invasion, but also a path to the Central Continent. I was going to smash through every fortress and stronghold between me and the ocean. Only then would I reach my goal.

"Murcia, I'm going to need you to work super hard."

"Hm? Did you say something?" Murcia turned to me and blinked, at which point I realized that, with so many plans racing through my brain, I had accidentally voiced my thoughts aloud. I smiled back at him and shook my head.

"Oh, no. It's nothing."

"…Are you sure? Something is telling me I should be worried."

His smile looked more like a grimace. I returned it with a silent smile of my own and went back to assessing the combat situation. It

looked like our people had succeeded in destroying the enemy's new weapon, and the enemy didn't send any reinforcements. Meanwhile, over on our side, the small fortress Dee was stationed at was doing a bang-up job repelling enemy forces. Few managed to reach the gates, and those who were close to the main walls were gradually retreating. It seemed like victory was ours.

But no sooner did I have that thought than I heard a shout from the wall.

"Lord Van! The enemy has deployed another suspicious cylinder!"

"Destroy it!" I ordered reflexively.

"Yessir!"

My soldiers promptly fired their ballistae. In a normal battle, the enemy would deploy mages, forcing their opposition to follow suit to fight back. In all our battles with Yelenetta, though, that hadn't happened; instead of mages, they'd used black balls. It was possible that they had a different use case for their mages, but for now, at least, they seemed to be leaning on dragons and black balls as their primary weapons. Whatever the reason was, once our invasion had penetrated deeper into Yelenetta, I was confident I would find out.

I noticed then that there were no more Yelenetta soldiers within our walls.

"Do not pursue the enemy!" Dee yelled. "Keep firing from atop the walls, towers, and smaller castles!" You would never hear these sorts of commands from any other Chivalric Order.

I turned to Murcia. "Brother, we've successfully defended the fortress city! Now it's time for you to put together your own powerful order!"

Murcia blinked at me, then ducked his head and smiled.

Early the next day, I brought Murcia, Arte, Till, and Khamsin over to the destroyed front gates. I rubbed my sleepy eyes and looked up at the distorted steel gates and the precarious part of the wall. The wall was awe-inspiring at this distance, but I'd gone through all the trouble of repairing the thing, and now part of it was busted again. It honestly bummed me out that the Yelenetta-facing side of the wall and the unique gates I built for it were in tatters.

"I've got no other choice, so I'll just think of it as a necessary sacrifice to protect us from the cannons," I said to myself. "I need to come up with a way to handle those incessant cannon attacks."

I headed through the busted gates to look over Yelenetta's territory and the road heading deeper into it. From here, it was impossible to see the path they took to catch us off guard. Now that I thought about it, maybe this was important land that had belonged to some other nation before it became part of the Kingdom of Yelenetta.

"Lord Van, these cannons you speak of…" Till wore a puzzled expression. "Are they the cylindrical weapons the enemy used? I do not understand how they work, or how we could ever stop them."

Khamsin drew his chin in, looking troubled. "I was operating a ballista in the castle when they deployed the cannon, so all I could see was smoke as something smashed into the gates. I think they used black balls."

"Ooh, correct!" I answered in surprise.

Murcia cocked his head curiously. "It is? You know about their new weapon?"

Arte smiled at Murcia. "Lord Van knows everything," she said meaningfully. I smirked and narrowed my eyes.

"Well, the first time I saw the black balls, I thought about the many ways they could be used," I explained, my eyes locked on the road ahead. "They have lots of practical uses, but in combat, if you stuffed a cylinder with them and then placed an iron projectile over them, you could send the projectile flying. According to my

calculations, you could send a super-heavy object flying at the same velocity as a bolt. And if you loaded one of those cylinders with a sphere filled with black balls, then fired it at the enemy, it would explode on contact. Its destructive power could even eclipse a first-rate fire mage's."

Murcia froze, wide-eyed. After several seconds of silence, he said, "I think you're the only one who would come up with an idea like that." Till nodded, looking pained, but Khamsin's eyes gleamed.

"I don't quite understand all the details, but what you're saying is that you can do incredible things with them," Khamsin said.

Arte, for her part, frowned disbelievingly. "Can the black balls be used for things other than combat?"

I got where she was coming from; it was hard to look at those explosions and see how the black balls could be viable for anything but war and bloodshed. I nodded. "For example, if you had access to the black balls, you could use them to open a hole in the hard rock surface of the mountain range." I pointed at the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, and everyone looked over at it. "Passing all the way through such a large range is difficult, but the black balls would let you open a hole in a mountain and build a road through it. You could also use them to increase the width of rivers to prevent flooding. Honestly, there are all sorts of useful… What?"

They had all turned away from the mountain range to give me weird looks. As I trailed off, Murcia's expression turned exasperated. "You thought of all of that the first time you saw the black balls?"

"Well… Yes. A new tool like that would have all kinds of uses." Obviously I couldn't tell them that I already knew a little about gunpowder from my previous life, but I remembered belatedly that I wasn't even ten yet. Genius or no genius, this was unnatural for someone of my age. Anxiety set in and I tried to come up with some excuses. "I mean, ever since I became a lord, I've had to put thought into so many things. Flood control, road construction…"

Unfortunately, my excuses did nothing for me. I was trying to figure out my next move when a messenger showed up, saving my butt.

"Lord Van! Aid has arrived from Seatoh Village! Adventurers and Sir Rango from the Bell & Rango Company!"

"Really? Thank goodness!" I felt bad for Murcia, but I really wanted to go home to Seatoh Village and take a bath. There was no shopping here and hardly any options for food. I wanted to get clean, eat a good meal, and walk around Seatoh Village. I smiled and turned back to everyone. "Let's spend the next couple days remodeling! Murcia, I'm going to present you with the greatest fortress city ever made!"

Murcia blinked, then offered me an awkward smile that mirrored the ones I so often saw from Till and Arte.

Strengthening the fortress city. Fortifying it against this new cannon threat.

What was a cannon? To put it broadly, it was a tough steel gun barrel that you loaded with gunpowder and detonated, firing a heavy projectile at high speed. If you used enough gunpowder, launching a projectile through a stone wall would be a breeze. A cannon fired into a Chivalric Order's formation would produce horrific results; even heavy infantrymen or soldiers with large shields would be annihilated, hit with a chunk of steel at that velocity. Mages were no different: say goodbye to their walls of ice or stone. If we wanted to stay safe from such a terrifying weapon, we'd have to ensure that the enemy couldn't use it in the first place.

"Cannons are heavy. They must be attaching wheels and using horses to pull them, huh?" I mused.

"Yes," Paula replied. She pointed to one of the destroyed cannons and a batch of spears. "And they had a carriage nearby for

transporting stone and iron spheres." She and her machine bow squad had investigated the weapon for me before I got there.

The thing was bigger than I expected, over two meters long, and the iron spheres were bigger than bowling balls. It would be difficult to adjust the firing angle for projectiles that size, never mind transporting them. I was already constructing a prototype in my mind. *If I were to make one of these…*

Larger wheels would make it versatile on all kinds of rough terrain. I would also extend the barrel to make its shots more accurate, then give the barrel's interior a spiral shape so that the projectiles would spin on their way out. If I could fully harness the gunpowder's explosive power, I could create a cannon with several times greater range and power than Yelenetta's design—all depending on the shape of the projectile, of course.

"Ah, but with this design, the wheels and frame might take damage from the recoil," I murmured. "Oh, what if I build supports to keep it in place when it fires? That should stabilize it for successive shots, too."

I kept modifying my creation until I landed on a solid design not much like the original model. The longer and thinner barrel looked remarkably stylish. Li'l Van's amazing taste was at it once again.

Li'l Van's style is nothing if not explosive. Get it? Explosive? That stupid thought circled my mind while I admired my new cannon. Until I noticed everyone staring at me, that is.

I laughed. "Ah, sorry! The whole point of this is to figure out how to defend against their cannons, not make cannons for ourselves!" This prompted the usual looks of disbelief from the peanut gallery. They moved with such synchronicity, in fact, that I wondered if they had practiced for this moment. It made me feel strangely isolated. "…Ahem. Anyway, this is only my opinion, but I'd like to lay out my ideas for how to enhance our new fortress city going forward."

My attempt to change the mood was successful: I was met with staggered applause. *Thank you, thank you very much.*

"The nature of a cannon is such that it can fire directly at a target. Well, actually, if the cylindrical portion of the weapon wasn't built correctly, there'd be no telling where its projectile was going to fly—but they did in fact take care designing this thing, so that's not something we have to worry about. I would like to start by altering the terrain so that our enemies can't aim at us at all."

Paula went bug-eyed. "Wait, you want to alter the terrain?" The rest of the group wore similar expressions.

"Yup. Sloped terrain and mountains make it impossible to fire cannons. In fact, depending on the position they're fired from, they could even explode from the recoil. For example, imagine if the weapon fell over on a slope and caught friendlies in an explosion? We're going to make it so they can't use their cannons."

I asked the still-confused group to get some people together for me. Paula and Dee scouted the road ahead, checking the area.

A member of the order called to me from the nearby forest, "Yelenetta's army invaded from over here!"

I looked in his direction. "Ah, I see." Indeed, there was a small gravel path wide enough for a single carriage to pass through. I couldn't imagine how difficult it must have been to traverse in large numbers. They must have known we only had a small group present at the fortress. Otherwise, why take such a risk?

I was consumed by the desire to find the traitor and pinch their butt. But for now, my main objectives were to perfect this fortress city, go home, and take a nice long bath.

"Could you guys gather timber for me?" I asked everyone. I'd get my hands on more materials and make Yelenetta's secret road visible at the same time. Two birds, one stone.

At this point, cutting down the trees of the forest was little more than a bonus stage for the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order. With

all their practice and training under Dee's watchful eye, they'd basically perfected their lumberjack skills. This was nothing to them. They swung their axes with perfect form, then used their incredible strength to transport the timber for me. Normally you'd have to cut off the branches; Li'l Van's talents at arts and crafts made that unnecessary. In the end, the area alongside the road was nice and clear.

And of course, the timber changed form with a touch from Li'l Van's divine hand.

I changed the shape of the road, adding uneven terrain and even walls. The enemy would be unable to fire their cannons with their view obscured, and the trajectory of their projectiles would change if they had to pierce walls before they could get to us. I also created a relatively clear downward slope so that we could easily target them from our position. This was bait: while they adjusted the trajectory of their cannon fire, we could rain hell down on them with our ballistae.

"All right," I said finally, "this should do the trick." It took a full day, but we were finally finished adjusting the road in anticipation of a Yelenetta follow-up attack. I sighed, letting satisfaction settle over me.

Murcia, meanwhile, gazed at the unfamiliar road, a serious expression on his face. "I see," he said reflectively. "Your magic is amazing, sure, but that alone wouldn't be enough to accomplish something like this. It's your creativity that has led to your success."

Chapter 4:
Yelenetta, on the Move

Erhard Asbach Yelenetta

"WHAT?!" I BELLOWED, SMACKING THE TABLE IN front of me. The loud noise reverberated off the stone floor and walls. I glared at the messenger, who shrunk into himself. "I dare you to repeat your absurd report!"

"Y-yes sir! Werner Fortress to the southwest has fallen! After the border order retreated, we received word that only a fraction of Scuderia's troops stayed behind, so our forces tried to retake the stronghold but failed! We've taken heavy casualties and our forces have retreated to the fortress city, Grosser, where they are reorganizing!"

"Impossible!" I threw the ceramic cup in my hand at the soldier who knelt in front of me. It hit his shoulder and he flinched. "An unfunny joke at best! To lose on all three battlefields after all that preparation was bad enough, and now you tell me we lost a fortress? Impossible, with weapons like ours!"

I smacked the table again, enraged. The messenger's eyes remained fixed on the ground, his shoulders trembling and sweat dripping from his forehead to the floor. "M-my apologies. They had all sorts of formidable weapons on which we had received no intelligence. Weapons capable of neutralizing not only the black balls, but also our large wyverns. It is possible that someone has leaked information to—"

"Silence! I've already received that report thrice!" I roared.

"Y-yessir!" His voice came out in falsetto.

I tried, despite my fury toward this man, to get a grasp on the situation. With the support of the Solstice Empire, the supreme

rulers of the Central Continent, I had plotted to take down Scuderia and make Yelenetta the reigning power on the continent of Grant. How could I do otherwise when presented with the black balls and cannons, weapons that did not require the help of mages to subjugate any enemy? Much like the Allied Nations of Hethel, which were sandwiched between the empire and the ocean, Yelenetta was forced into a disadvantageous alliance with Solstice. We could not oppose them. Even more pressing, however, was the steady rate at which Scuderia had increased its own power in recent years.

In defense of our nation, I'd purchased vast quantities of black balls and fire cannons. I'd even played nice with the Solstice Empire, all so I could rip territory from Scuderia's hands. If I gained the empire's support, I could acquire the means to develop the black balls myself—under certain conditions, anyway. My ultimate objective was to gain the power necessary to go toe to toe with the Solstice Empire.

How foolish that all seemed now that we had lost successive battles with Scuderia, a country not in possession of such advanced weaponry. We would be the laughingstock of anyone who heard of this. The act of fools, they would say.

I ground my teeth. *How? How could this have happened?*

When we first clashed with the Solstice Empire, the power of their black balls and cannons brought us to our knees. Their ranks included Chivalric Orders from the Allied Nations of Hethel, but frankly, the outcome would have been no different without them. The Solstice Empire itself was simply too strong. Their Chivalric Orders had lined up a horizontal row of twenty cannons, and each of their infantrymen was equipped with black balls. Even with high-tier elemental mages on our side, the best we could manage was to take out two of their cannons. Any attempt to destroy a third would be met with fire from a different cannon, causing heavy casualties.

We attacked with bows and charged them with our calvary, but nothing worked. Their heavy infantry were invulnerable behind their massive shields, rendering our attacks useless, and when we tried to

force a clash, cannon fire battered us the moment we stopped moving. The cacophony of the black balls and cannons scared not only the horses but also the less experienced troops, robbing them of their will to fight. At that point, we were barely engaged in warfare anymore.

So we faced merciless defeat at the hands of the empire, forced to ally with them under their shameful terms. They turned Yelenetta into what amounted to a subservient vassal state. We had to pay one-sided tariffs on imports and exports, and while they forced their demands on us, we could not do the same to them.

The silver lining was that as an ally, we could receive support from the all-powerful empire in battle. The Solstice Empire promised aid to all of its allied nations because it led to more and more nations serving under it. The place had something of a ranking system; those nations allied directly with the empire were the first tier, those nations' own allies were the second tier, and so on. Increasing the number of allied nations below your own rank could earn a nation preferable treatment when it came to taxes and commodities.

The empire didn't call us subservient vassal states in so many words, but nor did it have to. The Solstice Empire would eventually control the world, so its allies rushed to include more countries under their own umbrellas. Hethel was no different in that respect, though the circumstances of its geographical location were unique: capable of acquiring smaller nations only one at a time, their ability to increase the ranks of allies under them was stymied.

For our part, after we lost to the empire and fell under their umbrella, we wasted no time marching to the small nations to the west and northwest and forcing them into alliances. Both nations then became second-tier allies. To Yelenetta's east was Solstice, to the north was Hethel, and to the west were lower-level allied nations. The only enemy country bordering us was Scuderia.

They had always given us trouble, but with the empire's military might, we would change that. Yelenetta would become the

continent's most powerful nation and amass more resources than even the empire. With the technology to make black balls and cannons, we could eventually tear the empire down from the world stage.

Or so I had thought.

"Why? How could this have happened?!" I felt dizzy with rage. I had worked so hard to carve out a good position for us among the allied nations, but at this rate we would lose ground and the empire would dispatch its own Chivalric Orders to handle things. That would endanger not only our position as an allied country, but our very existence. "I must crush Scuderia no matter what. It is the only way for us to survive!"

Cosworth Yelenetta

ALL MY YOUNGER BROTHERS, HAVING LOST THEIR respective battles, were captured by the enemy. When I received this report, the world went dark as fury consumed me.

"How could they lose with all those weapons and equipment? Not just the black balls—they had two-legged wyverns and earth dragons too!"

Without conscious awareness that I was doing so, I crushed the glass in my hand. The soldier who had come to deliver the report shuddered in fear at the shrill sound of shattering glass.

"W-well," he said haltingly, "it appears that Scuderia has developed new weapons of their own. They also seem to have some kind of unnatural ability to construct strongholds…"

"What?" My tone was quiet. "Are you trying to tell me that the fortress cities located in Scudet, Marquis Fertio's territory, and Count Ferdinatto's territory were all stronger than we anticipated?"

The soldier shook his head. "N-no. I mean that they managed to build a fortress out of nowhere in less than a day. That is why

Fortress Werner in the southwest has fallen. His Highness Prince Istana attempted to retake it but failed. He and his men have been forced back to the fortress city in the south."

"Istana lost? Idiots like Unimog and the others I understand, but Istana? If that's true, we must re-examine Scuderia's combat strength. But this is absurd; small they may have been, but I have personally taken over two nations." I snorted. "What idiots. I suppose this is simply proof that I am worthiest of the throne."

The soldier nodded rapidly, attempting to flatter me. *What a spineless man.* I sighed and stood, combing back my hair. "We will return to the royal capital! I, Cosworth Yelenetta, the first prince of Yelenetta, will take direct command of our forces. We will engage Scuderia in all-out war, and we will crush them!"

Istana Yelenetta

"HOW SHAMEFUL," I PROCLAIMED. "WITH OUR OLDEST brother, Cosworth, coming back, the rest of us are in the line of succession in name only. In the worst-case scenario, we might have to request aid from the Solstice Empire, and that would put the Kingdom of Yelenetta on the brink of disappearing altogether. Our struggle for succession will mean little. We cannot afford to lose again."

Commander Hellenic, leader of the Chivalric Squad, pulled his chin in grimly. "Indeed. But if I may be frank, taking down that fortress city will be no easy task. It would be preferable, if possible, to retreat to the capital, gather our strength, and face the enemy elsewhere."

He lowered his head, probably aware that his recommendation was futile. The man was suggesting that we flee to the capital after losing one of our most important strongholds, after all. Should Cosworth hear him speaking like this, Hellenic might well be thrown the executioner.

And yet, even knowing the risk he took, he offered his opinion. From my perspective, he was correct to do so. I said, "I doubt my older brother would be agreeable to that idea, but if we word it carefully, we may at least be able make the recommendation. Tell me, then, Commander Hellenic: in your opinion, what do we need to do to get out of this situation?"

Hellenic groaned, looking grim. At length, he said, "Commander Steyr went into battle with the newly deployed cannons and perished in the attempt to take back Werner Fortress. We took pains to catch the enemy by surprise with our new weapons, and we were soundly defeated. We put stock in the report that our enemy left only a skeleton crew at the fortress, but to hear the soldiers who fled tell it, Werner Fortress looks nothing like it used to. I believe this to be a consequence of their new and alarming construction abilities."

"That much I understand. I want to hear more about this 'elsewhere' to which you referred earlier."

Hellenic nodded firmly. "What I meant is that we need to create a situation in which the Scuderian army will be unable to build a stronghold. We need to return to how we waged war hundreds of years ago."

I couldn't help but frown and sigh. Long ago, countries waged wars without training soldiers to fight; instead they forced farmers and other ill-equipped workers into battle. That was why mages, who were powerful even without combining their forces, were so prized as combat resources. They were the terrors of the battlefield. That approach to warfare changed when Chivalric Orders, essentially professional soldiers, came into being, making it difficult for mages to wield their powers to their fullest extent. Consequently, the primary role of mages in battle shifted to long-range defensive combat fought from behind the tall walls of a stronghold. Combat in open fields, meanwhile, became the domain of the cavalry. For a time, that remained the standard method of waging war.

As nations fought over land, however, a new, more effective tactic emerged: adding mages to the cavalry. Not only did mages have mobility, they also had the attack power to alter the entire flow of a battle. In some cases armies could even hide their mages, preventing the enemy from identifying their location on the battlefield. With their ability to use magic on the move, they could also make it difficult for the enemy to defend smaller fortress cities. Capitals of large nations notwithstanding, it was nearly impossible to gather a group of elemental mages together, so most strongholds fell within a month of the first attack.

Multiple strategies were developed to deal with this new mobile threat, the most effective being the idea to plant traps along bridges, cliffs, and mountain roads in the path of the marching enemy. A surprise attack could thwart them before they even began their assault on a stronghold. Applied effectively, this tactic made defending against an invasion infinitely faster and easier.

Recalling these various popular strategies from the long history of war, I raised my head. "You want to plant traps for Scuderia and launch a surprise attack before they can penetrate any deeper into our territory?"

Hellenic gave me another decisive nod. "Precisely. Specifically, we should look at rivers. They can hardly transport their entire stronghold; we need only crush them before they can deploy their baffling construction skills. If we use the black balls to destroy a bridge they're crossing, we can take advantage of the resulting confusion and launch magic attacks. Whatever madness they used to destroy our cannons will be ineffective against moving targets like horseback mages."

"So we use traps to launch a surprise attack, then draw them into open-field combat…" I murmured, digesting his words. It was true that it would be fruitless to attack their fortress with cannons or black balls. Preventing them from building another in the first place was the correct move. "The only problem is whether or not Cosworth will bite."

I sighed quietly, thinking about the hardship that was to come.

We need more hands, I thought, watching Dee direct defense training. *A lot more hands.*

"Left side! You're taking too long to make a decision! You still lack comprehension of your enemy's effective firing range! If we're within range of the enemy, we'll be forced into a battle of accuracy and speed! Accuracy and speed are key!"

"Yessir!"

Yes, I'd put Murcia in charge of this new stronghold, but I couldn't just hand him the Seatoh Chivalric Order and go home. He had no experience leading them. Instead, I decided to leave Dee and Arb behind for a bit so that they could help Murcia manage the order. And it wasn't just my men training under Dee and Arb; some of House Fertio's knights—Murcia's men—were there as well, about a hundred of them. Though I was a bit puzzled to see some of the adventurers who came along to protect us training with them too.

I kept one eye on them even as I turned to Rango, who had climbed up to the castle tower to see me. He was looking around with great interest, almost like a tourist. I said, "Um, are you finished bringing in the goods?"

Rango snapped to attention and turned to me. "Ah, yes. As requested, we've brought ten carriages of preserved foods, spices, and alcohol. We also have clothes, so you should be all set. We did not bring any weapons or armor, however. Is that okay?"

"No worries, I made those while I waited for you. We have tons of ballista bolts too, so we're fine on that end."

Rango nodded and offered me a strained smile. "Just as I'd expect of Lord Van." He pointed at the floor then, as if he had just remembered something. "Oh, and Lord Van… Congratulations on acquiring new territory."

Finally! Those should have been the first words out of his mouth as he entered the room. He was lucky Bell wasn't present to be upset with him. I mirrored his strained smile. "Land is all well and good, but we need more hands. I think there are something like three thousand people living in Seatoh Village right now, and we need a thousand or so here. Well, truth be told, this stronghold is a cornerstone of our national defense, so we should have up to two thousand knights stationed here, but right now we can barely drum up three hundred people. But I can't afford to chip away at Seatoh Village's defenses either." What was I to do?

Rango offered up an answer like it was nothing. "In your absence, the population has increased by another five hundred or so individuals, but that is still not nearly enough. If you're in a rush, might I recommend purchasing more slaves? I am certain they would be much happier to live in Seatoh Village than to be shipped off elsewhere. They'll likely be grateful."

"Uh, do you really think so? I don't want rumors going around that I looove buying slaves," I said honestly. "I get the sense that people don't exactly look fondly on those types."

Rango flashed me a vague smile and shook his head. "Oh, no, not at all. This was a very common practice until a few years ago. Every time Scuderia acquired more territory, there would be an excess of war slaves, debt slaves, and orphans, and simultaneously a great number of places in need of more working hands due to the land expansion. It was normal in such cases to buy slaves and use them for labor."

"So basically what I've been doing, then. Wait… If we're doing battle with Yelenetta, does that mean the war is producing more slaves? You know, like people who've been made into POWs?"

Rango frowned and tilted his head. "Well, there appears to have been a significant increase in slaves following both the fight to take back Scudet and the battle in House Ferdinatto's territory, but I would not recommend war slaves. Both Seatoh Village and this new stronghold will become front lines in the war against Yelenetta. Such

slaves might betray you, so I would recommend against their purchase. Personally, I think you should look into debt slaves and people who were kidnapped by bandits."

"I see. In that case, maybe I'll have you pick out a few slaves who seem like good people. Could you also ask around and see if any merchants are willing to go back and forth between Seatoh Village and Fortress City Murcia?"

"Understood. By the way, have you settled on Fortress City Murcia as the name of this place? Unless I'm misremembering, I recall one of your family members being named Murcia."

"That's right! I put my big brother, Murcia, in charge. He's currently in the process of assembling his very own Murcia Chivalric Order," I replied. Rango nodded with an awkward look on his face.

Just then, I heard someone clear their throat from behind me. "Huh?" I turned around to find Murcia standing there, looking conflicted. "The Murcia Chivalric Order aside, I don't recall hearing anything about this stronghold being called Fortress City Murcia," he whispered in a voice tinged with displeasure.

This is bad. He might get mad at me. Seeing the writing on the wall, I arranged my features in an apologetic look and played the adorable little brother. "Oh, gosh! I thought you'd be happy… I'm so sorry. I picked the name because I was thinking this would be the start of your very own legend. I just wanted you to be happy," I said sadly.

Murcia started to panic, waving both hands in the air. "Oh, no, I'm not upset at all! It's just a little embarrassing for me…"

"Really? Then you're good with Fortress City Murcia and the Murcia Chivalric Order?"

"H-huh? Um, well—"

"Thank you, Murcia!" I chirped, cutting off his escape route as he struggled to find the words with which to decline. My poor, kind older brother had no choice but to offer me a stiff smile.

Behind me, I heard Till's voice. "Even I feel a little bad for him…"



Chapter 5:
Returning Home

WITH FORTRESS CITY MURCIA FINALLY COMPLETE, it was time to head home. I gathered everyone by the front gates that faced Scuderia to offer them my gratitude. "It was quite the project, but we've completed all of His Majesty's requests. Thank you so much, everyone!"

"Yessir!" replied the Chivalric Order.

In the front row stood Murcia and the temporary commanders of his Chivalric Order, Dee and Arb. Behind them were two hundred members of the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order, roughly a hundred of Murcia's personal guard, and ten or so adventurers who would stay behind with Murcia and the rest. Boy super-genius Li'l Van, meanwhile, stood with his beautiful fiancée Arte, the lovely maid Till, and Khamsin, the boy who would one day be the strongest knight of all. I also had Lowe and Rango, Paula and her machine bow squad, and another ten adventurers to protect and guide us through the mountains.

"The Bell & Rango Company will begin doing supply runs here shortly, so feel free to use up all the spices and booze you have now," I said with a smile. Murcia nodded.

"Thanks, that takes some of the weight off my shoulders. Food is key, after all. I'm sorry to make requests of you, but it would be a great help to receive reinforcements sooner rather than later. I hate to admit it, but I'm terrified of another attack by Yelenetta."

I nodded, quickly putting together a plan in my head. "Of course. Since Fortress City Murcia will be the front line of this war, I plan to maintain a certain number of fighters in Seatoh Village and send others to you as reinforcements as soon as I can. We should be fine over there since we also have the Esparda Chivalric Order. Then,

if our plan to populate this place goes well, we'll be able to send even more reinforcements."

Murcia's tense expression finally relaxed. "That'd be very helpful. I'm an elemental mage, but I'm not talented enough to change the course of a battle on my own," he said matter-of-factly.

That got me thinking about the best ways to use his magic. An air rifle came to mind, but the most effective course of action would be to use his wind magic to detonate traps remotely. We could build a decoy stone bridge that only looked tough, for example, and then, when the timing was right, have Murcia could destroy it with his magic from afar. Something like that would be effective against our enemies.

And if we prepared multiple such traps, our defensive capabilities, even in a war against a massive nation, would increase by leaps and bounds.

"No," I said finally, "I have a better way to use your magic. Let me think on it a little bit."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes. Your magic is so rare, I want to make the most effective use of it possible."

That concluded our conversation. I offered more words of appreciation to the people lined up in front of me, then explained the importance of defending this stronghold. Finally, I turned to the people who would join me on the trip home and informed them that it was time to once again traverse the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. My demeanor was grave; the path ahead of us was chock full of enormous monsters, and no matter how much road work I did, we couldn't afford to let our guards down.

As it turned out, that was all for naught. Just like our last trip through the mountains, having skilled adventurers, ballistae, and my machine bow squad made for a peaceful little tour through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. Monsters were spotted way before we reached them and dispatched before they could become an issue.

And with our carriages able to progress quickly over the road, we experienced way fewer dangerous incidents.

Our journey being what it was, spending the night in the wild was unavoidable, but we even managed to mitigate that issue. I built three large rest facilities in the open areas we came upon. They were by no means complex, but we could rest there with peace of mind. Because of all this, our journey home was even quicker and calmer than I anticipated.

The true hell came after we arrived in Seatoh Village. While my first night home was relaxing, Esparda summoned me for an emergency meeting the very next day.

"G'morning," I mumbled, rubbing my sleepy eyes.

Esparda, clad in his usual work attire, nodded. "Good morning, Lord Van. It is time for work. Let us begin with the business we discussed previously."

"Uh, what business was that?"

He locked his eyes with mine. "You proposed that we train talented people." *Surely you have not forgotten?* went unsaid.

I panicked and racked my brain, trying to remember what he meant. "O-oh, yeah! Of course! I remember! You're talking about that one girl you have working under you, right?"

He stared at me, almost as if he was counting each drop of sweat that rolled down my face. "Correct. Including her, I have finished training five individuals to level one."

"Five?! That's amazing! It's remarkable that you managed to get them ready to go in under a year… Wait, what's level one?"

Esparda raised a hand, palm out. "I split their curriculum into five steps. Level one means that they can manage things only during a time of peace. At level two, they have memorized the fundamentals and can handle a variety of situations. At level three and beyond, I can trust them to deal with unforeseen situations on their own."

"Huh. I guess I must be level three, right?" I asked modestly.

He narrowed his eyes. "Lord Van, in matters of war, you are level four. Likewise when it comes to your studies. However, you are only at level two in internal administration, and for diplomacy and dealing with nobility, I would put you at level one. Oh, and on the business end of things, I would say you sit at level three."

"Th-thank you very much," I managed in the face of this blast of critique.

Seeing my shoulders droop in dejection, Esparda gently caressed his beard. What was he thinking about? "In areas where you excel, you show remarkable knowledge and initiative. You are unmotivated, however, in matters of etiquette, relationships with the nobility, and international diplomacy. You must work harder to overcome your weaknesses."

"Y-yes, I understand…"

Essentially, he was telling me that we would focus on all the subjects I hated going forward. How sad for Li'l Van! I had zero interest in learning about some count's banquet or which viscounts a marquis invited to a ball, and negative desire for a promotion to some key position in the kingdom. I planned to stay holed up in my territory; joining a faction would end with me having to attend banquets and balls every month, which was not remotely enticing.

My ideal diplomatic relationship was the one I had with Panamera, who came over to hang, take a nice bath, and have some drinks with me and my friends.

These thoughts hardly befit a member of the nobility, so I was careful not to say any of them aloud. But Esparda sighed, seeing right through me. "I know you loathe such annoyances, so I have trained two people to administrate things in your stead. One is a former noble girl who, due to her background, is very suspicious of others. The other is the eldest daughter of a knight; I have judged her more than talented enough for the job. Going forward, I will proactively include them in matters involving other nobles. I have

released them from their slave contracts and taken them in as adopted children."

"Wait, what?! You can't just drop something like that on me out of nowhere!" I couldn't believe my ears, but Esparda just nodded, his typical poker face intact.

"When dealing with nobility it is crucial to obscure one's intentions. Bright, compulsively honest individuals are the first to be taken advantage of. By contrast, nobles who have lost their houses and families and become slaves often possess excellent talents."

Here he was, cooly introducing his new children (?!) like a professional recruiter. It was all I could do to grip my head and nod. "Fine, I get it. I'll leave them in your capable hands, so make sure to train them well."

"Of course. As for the other three individuals, I was able to teach them to manage our public finances, our commodities, and the city infrastructure respectively. I would like you to meet each of them so that you can personally decide how much discretion they should be allowed."

"Is it possible to let you handle all of that?"

"Not at all. You are the true leader of this territory."

"…Fine."

Having more land sure came with growing pains.

Ugh, he is so serious! Too serious! So hard-headed, like a big stone block!

But he was incredibly loyal to me, too, and he had a keen sense of responsibility. That was why he was so strict with me and even the others. Honestly, it was because of that strength of character that I gave him full authority over everything. He was in charge of not only managing my territory and its defenses in my absence, but also deciding who could move here as a new citizen

and even managing the monster parts and their sales, our primary source of income.

If Esparda wanted to take the money and run, he could easily have done so the next day—that was how much discretion I gave him. Which was precisely why I could trust him to pick whichever individuals he needed to support him or manage our various duties. Esparda always left the important decisions to me, though. It was never about his own accomplishments; everything he did was to prop me up.

Yet I had a feeling his true intentions lay elsewhere.

Thinking that over, I glanced around the room, a space we used for hosting special guests. Five individuals sat in chairs equidistant from one another. Behind them stood Esparda and Lowe, staring at the backs of their heads. To my left were Khamsin and Till, both standing, and on my right sat Arte, looking at the five people.

The people before us were clearly nervous. They trained their eyes on me and me alone. I looked them over once more and said, "It's time for the final interview! Starting from the right, please introduce yourself and tell me about the field you specialize in!"

What with the whole thing having the vibe of a Japanese group interview, I decided to really throw myself into the role. I expected my words to surprise them a bit, but the man I'd pointed to on the far right quickly rose to his feet.

"Yes sir! M-my name is Giu Giaro, and I am a former slave. Before that, I worked in construction and design, but I saw a major decrease in work after another company began to monopolize jobs, and I became a debt slave. As a slave I feared for my future, but then the Bell & Rango Company purchased me, giving me the opportunity to live here. I would like to offer you my sincere gratitude!"

So began Giu's very serious introduction. It was immediately clear to me why Esparda had selected him. These serious-looking

men and women introduced themselves one after the other, until finally it was time for the fourth person to speak.

She was a young girl named Giulietta Berlina, and she was a member of the nobility—the girl that Esparda had mentioned earlier. A cute girl with short blonde hair, she seemed to almost always have a smile on her face, and she spoke as if subtly ascertaining how the person opposite her was responding. She also voiced words of agreement and sympathy like she was trying to grasp her conversation partner's emotions.

This was exactly the kind of girl who could become the empress of a place like Kabukicho. If I still lived in Japan, I might've ended up spending my monthly salary on her…not that I'd ever done something like that before.

Anyway, after her introduction, it was time for the final person. She was a tall woman, probably around twenty-five years of age. She had purplish hair that she wore tied back and a powerful gaze that gave her the aura of a female warrior. My initial impression: she was beautiful but also a little scary.

The woman straightened her back and said, "My name is Emira Khomi. I was born into a house of knights, but our family collapsed after my father died on the battlefield. I sold myself into slavery to save my mother and little brother. Fortunately, I was able to come here, where Sir Esparda selected me and began training me to work as the acting lord. I am giving my all to that goal so that I can live up to Sir Esparda's expectations and be useful to you, Lord Van."

She bowed deeply. Of all the introductions, hers was the simplest, but for some reason her honest personality really shone through. I found myself feeling quite fond of the woman, so I decided to ask her a few questions. "Emira, got it. You said you were born into a house of knights, right? Do you have any knowledge of swordsmanship or battle strategy?"

"Yes. Father was not particularly blessed when it came to having children, and when he finally did conceive, he had a

daughter. It was not until I turned ten that my parents had my little brother, so until that point my father trained me vigorously in the ways of the sword. I am confident that my skill with the sword and spear is at least on par with the average knight's."

I nodded, then glanced over at Esparda. "How far into her training is she?"

"I believe she could perform her duties as the acting lord of a small town. She is more than capable of managing finances, resources, and human affairs, not to mention personal problems and water-related issues. She is still learning about taxation, but as we do not yet collect taxes from our citizens, I believe we can put that off for the time being."

"Gotcha. In that case, let's have her handle Espa Town for a month as a trial run. If there are no problems, I'd like her to act in a supporting role over at Fortress City Murcia. The plan is for Murcia to eventually take over other towns and fortress cities; when that happens, I want her to become the acting lord in his stead."

But before he could react, Emira's eyes went wide. Despite her calm demeanor, she was clearly surprised. "Acting lord of a fortress city? M-me?"

I loved these kinds of reactions. *As a gift, Li'l Van will give you a ballista! You can even use it at Fortress City Murcia!*

Esparda stroked his chin, looking serious. "I see. It is true that they have a greater need for personnel, and she would be of great assistance to Lord Murcia. However, my original plan was for her to manage Espa Town and Seatoh Village. I will have to find someone else to train…"

I couldn't quite understand his reluctance at first. Only after I stared at him for a moment did it occur to me.

"You're trying to push me into handling all of His Majesty's requests, aren't you?" I asked, squinting at him. Esparda averted his gaze disapprovingly. "Jeez, that's terrifying! You want to have an acting lord in place for both Seatoh Village and Espa Town so that I

can go out and do everything His Majesty asks?! You know I don't want to leave the village!"

Esparda frowned as if he weren't scheming behind my back. "The truth is that you should not turn down any of his requests, especially now that he has put so much trust in you."

"No, no, no! What about what I want? If I end up doing everything he asks, he'll make me go to the capital!"

I didn't mean to get into a full-blown argument with Esparda, but there we were. My five interviewees must have found it super disconcerting, but this was something I had to make clear right then and there. I didn't care who it was: nobody was allowed to get in the way of me living a nice life away from conflict and others' expectations.

Arte cleared her throat adorably. Everyone stopped and turned to look at her. She looked back at us, a kind smile forming on her face. "Lord Van, what shall we do about the group interview?"

Despite her gentle tone, I found myself straightening my posture. "Right! Um, let me explain everything to the people who will be managing territory going forward," I said, and cut to the chase.

That single sentence from Arte was all it took to get me back on track. It was time to talk to my interviewees about the future. "This conversation is only between me, the people in this room, Dee, Arb, and Murcia, okay? Make sure you guys keep quiet."

"O-of course!"

"Absolutely."

All five of them agreed to keep their lips sealed and I saw in their eyes that they were not lying. I nodded and continued, "Then listen carefully. We'll be increasing the population of Seatoh Village in the near future. Once we've done so, I'm going to select another

ten people to manage things and ten more candidates for command of the Chivalric Orders. While these individuals are being trained, we're going to invade the Kingdom of Yelenetta."

The five interviewees tensed up, their eyes wide. Their responses were all over the place, but nobody's reaction was outright negative. "I-invade Yelenetta?" said one.

"We're at war, so I was prepared for this," said another.

Satisfied with the looks on their faces, I nodded again. "We're going to invade Yelenetta and make our way toward the coast. At bare minimum, we'll occupy four large cities or fortress cities along the way, culminating with occupation of the capital." This whole plan must have seemed completely off the wall to them, but I was confident in my explanation. "I suspect that the occupied cities will become mine, so I'm going to end up needing all of your help to manage those new places."

I monitored their reactions as I spoke, cutting myself off when I saw their expressions grow increasingly serious. That worried me a little bit.

"Um, just to be clear, I haven't lost my mind or anything," I reassured them. "Got it?"

They shook their heads and waved their hands at me, looking a lot more panicked than I anticipated. The vibe was like a pack of criminals walking death row. "O-oh, we know!"

I laughed a little and shrugged. "I mean, I get it: what's a brand-new baron doing going up against a huge foreign nation, right? Well, I happen to have a passion burning in me that makes me unstoppable." Dropping my voice to a whisper, I added, "I will eat curry and rice again no matter what, and I won't lose to anyone while I pursue that goal."

The interviewees looked at me blankly. I ignored them.

"Going forward, I'm going to start making moves to increase Seatoh Village's population. If that influx of people includes anyone

with the potential to become acting governors or Chivalric Order commanders, I'll assign them positions regardless of birth or race. At the end of the day, the most vital quality for them to have is a great personality. I'll select people who are earnest and serious when it comes to their work. I'd like you all to make sure you don't get left behind when that happens."

The five interviewees stood up straight.

Emira

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AGES, I HAD THE CHANCE to speak to Lord Van directly. We'd last spoken when he greeted us personally upon our arrival in Seatoh Village.

When I became a slave, I despaired having lost my father, seen House Khomi collapse, and sacrificed my own future for my family by selling myself. Being thrown in a cage and fed like livestock certainly did not help. The other caged slaves said that I would receive favorable treatment because I was a showpiece slave who would sell well in the market, but I found that hard to imagine. Talking to the other slaves on the way to Seatoh Village changed my perception, but at the time, I truly thought my circumstances were as wretched as they could get.

Being a slave meant having a price put on your existence, and that price dangled cruelly over your head. I learned that I was worth four gold. A high price for a slave, perhaps, but that scarred me nonetheless. The Bell & Rango Company bought me in a business deal akin to a mass purchase, done with the same levity one might display when purchasing a large quantity of bread—but I was the one being bought. I thought that my self-esteem had already been beaten out of me, but I must have still had a shred of it left, because even now I recall how hard it was to keep myself from sobbing.

What horrible sin had I committed? How miserable would I have to become before I could be forgiven? Those were the questions that preoccupied me when we reached Seatoh Village and I came face to face with Lord Van. He was an eight-year-old child, but even at that young age he had the aura of a nobleman. That was my first impression of him. But as he spoke to us now, I was forced to rewrite that impression.

What kind of life did he live to become landed gentry at his age, set his gaze to the future, and put his plan into action? Sir Esparda and Sir Dee must have been providing him with an excellent education, but even then, this was unfathomable from someone so young. He spoke of goals to make Seatoh Village stronger and more bountiful. He promised to protect his citizens' quality of life. With most of the people moving there having no wealth of their own, he provided them with food and shelter, all paid out of his own pocket.

Everything about this was unbelievable. Before I was a slave I grew up in a city that I thought was well-off, but Seatoh Village was something else entirely.

Now, Lord Van continued to make good on his word. When I learned our village would participate in the war against Yelenetta, I braced myself for the worst—but somehow he and the others returned home without a single casualty. Not only that, but rumor had it that Lord Van's powers contributed significantly to our country's victory.

Hearing this, perhaps because I was raised by a family of knights, I found a sense of loyalty growing within me, the likes of which I'd never felt before. I needed to work even harder, I thought. I needed to be useful to Lord Van. But that was not the end of things.

Approximately a year after our first meeting, I had the opportunity to speak with Lord Van again. He was nine years old now. While the other villagers had chances to casually socialize with him, the others and I received instructions directly from Sir Esparda,

so we never had that kind of free time on our hands. This was the first I had seen of him in a long time.

Something was different about Lord Van. Perhaps he was taller now? Something about his eyes was different, certainly. I sensed a strong determination in them.

And then he declared that we would invade Yelenetta, the very same country that had attempted to invade us. To protect his home country, he would willingly pit himself against a massive, powerful enemy.

That fact alone made me tremble. I wanted to run off that moment and brag about him to everyone whose path I crossed. Feeling my heart racing, I placed a hand over my chest and curled it into a fist.

I understand now. I was born to serve Lord Van.

Perhaps this was cliche, but it felt like destiny. My once gray world was suddenly full of color.

Chapter 6:
The Importance of Human Resources

I WANTED TO INCREASE OUR POPULATION AND RECRUIT some folks who could manage everything in my place, but things never went quite the way you wanted. Going around to nearby towns and villages was an option, but that would mean picking a fight with the nobles in charge of those towns and villages. *What should I do?*

"Maybe I'll ask the Bell & Rango Company for help," I whispered.

Esparda nodded. "I believe that would be for the best."

Guess I had the right answer! What a relief. "Heh heh. Let's have them head to the capital and other big cities first. They can recruit people looking to make money, and I can set their pay higher than the baseline in the capital. There'll be all kinds of jobs available, so we can hit a wide range of people! We can also hit up the Adventurers' Guild with escort and dungeon-diving quests at the same time. They'll be all, 'wow, Seatoh Village sure is affluent and awesome!' If we can hire an expensive team of mercenaries, they'll basically function as publicity!"

Now, Esparda! Lavish me with the praise I deserve!

Instead, Esparda looked back at me with a reserved expression. "The Bell & Rango Company is already recruiting and running publicity for us in the capital and in House Fertio's territory. I have already sent requests to the Adventurers' Guild as well. This was all in the report I delivered to you—"

I interjected hastily. "Ah, I read it! I totally did! I knew that!" If I didn't bluff my way through this, I had hell in store for me: twice the usual amount of study. Elegantly, I wiped the cold sweat from my brow and shot Esparda a cynical smile. "I already knew all that. I'm talking about drumming up publicity in *other* big cities! I was

also thinking of having the Bell & Rango Company buy some more slaves for us. We have plenty of jobs here for hard-working people."

For a long moment, Esparda considered me with narrow eyes. I averted my gaze and took a deep breath. Finally, he said, "Fine. In that case, I must send them the order. What is your budget for this?"

There it was. He was trying to catch me in a lie. My well-honed Esparda Radar was screaming at me. If I'd read the report, I could give him a proper answer based on how much money we had…but frankly, I had no clue what our financial situation looked like. How could I? I'd been busy marching to the front lines, rebuilding fortress cities, fixing strongholds, all sorts of stuff!

But Esparda would never accept that as an excuse. Not this study demon.

"Let me see… Last time, it cost something like three platinums to purchase 150 young and healthy slaves, right? In that case, let's raise our budget to ten platinums."

There! I'd dodged any direct references to the report, but also presented him a concrete number. Esparda raised a single eyebrow and stilled, but after several seconds of silence, he replied, "I see. Given Seatoh Village's current fortune, it would be safe to spend thrice that amount. Why ten platinums?"

"Well, if we move a ton of people here at once, that's a lot to handle in terms of room and board, not to mention education," I said, trying to sound like someone who had been thinking about this for a while. "And if we buy too many slaves in one go people will get the wrong idea about me, plus the market will suffer. I think we should buy a few at a time."

Esparda's expression relaxed minutely. "Hmm… That makes sense. It seems you've put a great deal of thought into this. You will hear no more from me. About the petition for more equipment for the Chivalric Orders, however…"

It was another two hours before I finally managed to flee the manor. As I walked through the village, I hunched over and sighed. "I'm so dead."

Till and Arte both smiled at me. Till said, "Excellent work."

"Personally," Arte ventured, "I think it's incredible how much you're managing. I only understood about half of what Sir Esparda said."

I flashed the girls an ambiguous smile. Given Arte's age, it was impressive that she understood that much of the conversation, but she might take that the wrong way if I said it aloud, especially since I was younger than her. Instead, I took a look around the village.

Following Esparda's advice from a while back, I had enclosed a pretty wide area with the wall, meaning we currently had a ton of open space in the village. But in the context of our future plans, we had barely enough ground to accommodate all the people we wanted to bring in. *As always, Esparda is one step ahead. Talk about wisdom.*

As I walked around, I talked to myself about my vision for Seatoh Village. "I still want more restaurants, clothing shops, and other miscellaneous goods stores on this street. I'd also love to have an open market with stalls. We can set up some blacksmiths near the dwarf forge, and then we'll need carpenters, storage units for the businesses… Oh, and a fancy residential district and park. Hmm, what else do we need?"

We had long since passed the point where we could reasonably describe this place as a village, but given how long we'd been doing it, I was committed to the name to the very end.

Arte, hearing my monologue, raised a hand. "Don't we need a hospital?"

"Oh, I forgot about that. We totally do." I smiled at her.

Till raised her hand next. "I would like a library!"

"I see, I see. What about education? We probably need schools, huh? Could we get by just teaching reading, writing, and basic arithmetic? People won't be able to read books without those skills."

"Wait, you want to teach the commoners, too?" Till asked.

"I'd like everyone to get an education."

Arte cocked her head in confusion, and Till and Khamsin exchanged looks. Apparently that wasn't standard practice. In Scuderia, the nobility hired tutors, while middle-class folk like knights or merchants sent their kids to be educated at cram schools. Under this system, only those born into affluent households could receive an education. Everyone else had a fundamentally different relationship with money and regularly juggled high expenses, making it commonplace for those born into poverty to receive no education at all.

There were exceptions to this, obviously. For example, someone could become a merchant-in-training, which would give them the opportunity to receive an education. But that sort of thing was relatively uncommon. I supposed that even Earth had entire - nations with low literacy rates, so it shouldn't be that surprising; only places with financial means could provide education to everyone, and in this world, that felt especially true.

That being said, the smarter your citizens were, the easier it was to develop your territory.

"I have to find people who can be teachers," I muttered as I built the bare minimum of new family housing and group housing for singles. "But we just don't have enough hands in either Seatoh Village or Espa Town. I guess my only option is to pick people out from the new batch of immigrants."

Sounding a bit confused, Arte said, "Um, Lord Van?"

"What's up?" I turned around and she pointed at one of the houses I'd just finished.

"Is it just me, or have you gotten very fast at building houses? Especially after all the construction work you've been doing?"

"Huh?" I glanced quickly around at my surroundings. She was right; it had only been an hour, and I'd already built a bunch of homes. I wasn't just getting faster at creating weapons, but also at making buildings. I looked at Till and Khamsin, who both wore looks of fascination. "When you're able to come up with plans and zone in on the details in your head, I guess the creation process gets faster. That would explain why I've gotten so good at constructing buildings. When I was making Fortress City Murcia, the walls still took quite a while, so maybe I'm just not that good at imagining the details for that sort of thing. Not yet, anyway."

I was still working it all out in my head, so my explanation was vague, but my companions still nodded.

"Well, it would normally take years to build an entire town or castle," Arte pointed out.

Till said, "Lord Van, if you keep pushing yourself too hard, His Majesty is going to force more work on you…"

"You are amazing, Lord Van!" said Khamsin.

Three people, three different responses, and the only open praise was from Khamsin. Till had a point, though; standing out wasn't a great idea.

I kept working it out in my head. How should I handle it all going forward? "It feels like my imagination is the key to all of this," I said quietly. "How detailed I can get, y'know? I bet if I go a long time without building something, my production speed will slow down. It would be in my best interest to keep making things proactively…"

The next problem: how could I increase our population? That would dictate the speed at which we took down Yelenetta, after all.

Jard

WHEN HE SEVENTEEN YEARS OF AGE, JARD returned home. It was his first visit to House Fertio's manor in a year. Three months after Van was exiled to a border village, with rumors spreading about him sending his youngest son away, Marquis Fertio sent Jard and Sesto to large cities to learn how to govern. Having his second and third sons work as city governors and educating his eldest to prepare him as his successor were strategies to make it seem as if everyone was being strictly educated, not just Van. The marquis hoped to avoid any nasty rumors.

Jard, however, was panicking. For a member of the nobility, turning seventeen was a critical milestone, and yet here he was, a governor in some random city. He was a candidate to become the head of the family and both he and Sesto possessed fire magic, making them influential even among their brothers. So why was he stuck governing a city instead of receiving training to be the next head of the family?

Considering the frequency with which Jalpa was sent to war, there was no telling when he might fall in battle. That was precisely why the candidacy for his successor was so important, or so Jard had thought.

Jard governed a city in the southern end of House Fertio's territory, the opposite direction of Van's Seatoh Village. He heard reports of Van becoming a baron and going to battle with Yelenetta, and he saw this as a great opportunity. When the head of the household sent Jard an urgent summons to return home, it felt like the perfect chance to show his true strength as a candidate for Jalpa's successor.

Overjoyed, he hurried home and stood before Jalpa, raising his head to announce himself. "Father! Your son, Jard Gai Fertio, has returned!"

Jalpa nodded, impassive. "How did it feel to govern a city?"

Jard's expression grew serious. "I feel that I have learned how a lord is meant to govern his city: how to profit, and how to develop it. To further solidify our house, I am prepared now to test my strength on the battlefield."

Narrowing his eyes, Jalpa stared down at his son as if scrutinizing every inch of him. He had assigned experienced aides to Jard and Sesto and knew that both of his sons had spent the year learning from them. He also knew that the cities to which he sent his sons were affluent and peaceful. As long as they treated the job seriously, they would have been able to produce results; it was an easy task.

According to the aides' reports, Jard and Sesto simply performed their duties as lords. That was all. Jalpa was not foolish enough to take this at face value. These aides were reporting on two young men who might take Jalpa's place. They would want to shy away from negative assessments and exaggerate any positive news as much as possible. In the year that his sons were away, neither of the cities they worked in had changed significantly, for better or worse, and the aides reported only that the young men did their jobs as governors.

Jalpa's conclusion was that his sons had been lazy. He scowled at Jard, then sighed lightly. "In the year that you governed your city, Van exterminated a large dragon, became a baron, developed his village into a fortress city, and produced results on the battlefield. As his older brother, are you not embarrassed?"

Jard grimaced. "N-no. I suspect Van received aid from Count Ferdinatto." It was impossible for his little brother, not even nine years of age, to perform those feats with his useless magic. "Rumor has it that Count Ferdinatto's daughter now lives in Van's territory, and I think it is safe to say that my little brother has become one of the count's pawns. He leaned on Count Ferdinatto's aid to slay the dragon and develop his territory. In his position I could do the same, if not better."

Jalpa had felt the same way his son did in the beginning, but now that he had seen Van's magic firsthand, Jard's assumptions came off as pure delusion. "Cease with this nonsense. His Majesty has personally visited Van's territory and recognized his accomplishments. If Count Ferdinatto had a hand in any of this, he would never have so much as attempted to fool His Majesty. Besides, to take down a dragon normally requires assembling fully equipped Chivalric Orders of two to three thousand knights, not to mention a team of first-rate elemental mages. His Majesty would certainly have noticed Count Ferdinatto doing something so bold."

Jard attempted to respond, but the words wouldn't come. He was caught off-guard by his father recognizing Van's accomplishments, and he struggled to piece things together. Had his father summoned him merely to reprimand him?

Again, Jalpa sighed. "Last month, we took down one of Yelenetta's critical strongholds," he said at length. "Have you heard?"

"Y-yes! I would expect nothing less from you, Father."

Jalpa frowned. "I see. Well, that stronghold is now being managed by Van."

Jard blinked a few times, wide-eyed. He squeezed out his next panicked words through a tense jaw. "That's impossible! The boy is not even ten! How could he manage such a strategic location?!"

Jalpa nodded, then snorted. "The men who fought in the battle to take the stronghold have already returned to their respective territories, but I imagine they will begin prepping for the next battle. The riffraff who remained to assist Van were all viscounts and below. Unfortunately, I was unable to slip any loyal orders into their ranks."

"What is His Majesty thinking, leaving a stronghold to low-level nobility?" Jard muttered. Jalpa shrugged and shook his head.

"I'm certain His Majesty believes that even low-level nobility can defend the area for a month or two. Even if many of them fell in battle, it would be no great blow to our national defenses. I do not

intend to let all of this transpire beyond my watch, however, and as such, I have dispatched Murcia to aid Van."

Jard's head whipped up. "I see. Then if anything were to happen, Brother Murcia could take command, and his successes would be credited to our house."

"Precisely. But we must not forget that House Fertio has always displayed its value through battle. I suspect that His Majesty will ride this wave of success straight into Yelenetta, stripping away more of their land, and that is when our house will exhibit its true worth." He locked his eyes on Jard. "That is why I summoned you and Sesto."

Jalpa was lying. In reality, His Majesty had ordered Murcia to cooperate with Van, but Jalpa made it sound as if the plan was his. Jard had no way of knowing this, of course, so he took his father's words at face value, concluding that this was all a test for him as a candidate for the head of the house.

"I understand. Sesto and I will show them the true power of House Fertio," Jard said, smiling ferociously.

Jard

JARD WAS GIVEN THREE THOUSAND MEMBERS OF HOUSE Fertio's Chivalric Order. As they assembled weapons and goods for their march, Sesto joined up with him.

"Sesto! Long time no see!"

"Long time no see, Brother."

Jard noticed then that his little brother's expression was dark, his voice rather gloomy. "Did something happen?"

Sesto frowned pitiably and sighed. It looked to Jard like he'd grown a bit, but hunched over as he was, he actually appeared smaller. He nodded. "Father scolded me. He said I played around

with my money and couldn't even maintain my city after doubling my city's taxes…"

"Ha ha ha! You idiot, all businesses give us favorable treatment because we're House Fertio! If you hold a banquet or something, any number of nobles from viscount rank on down will come to you with plans to make money. But there's no use crying over spilled milk," Jard said, throwing his brother a proverbial life vest. "Just raise your tax revenue by an additional fifty percent and have the merchants look for money-making opportunities for you."

In Jard's view, Murcia was a powerful rival in the line of succession but Sesto was destined to become Jard's right hand man. He valued his younger brother in that sense. Sesto was weak to temptation, and his indecisive nature meant that he would never truly become Jard's rival.

Jard looked down at the map he had spread open on the table. Before Sesto's arrival, Jard had held a strategy meeting with the commanders of the respective Chivalric Orders in this very room. The meeting's primary objective was to go over the geography and the enemy's combat strength. Now, however, Jard was pointing at the map like a veteran warrior.

"Sesto, this here is Scudet, and this is the stronghold that we took from the enemy in the last battle. There's another stronghold on the coast, but it won't be easy for them to attack us from there because we have the geographical advantage. More importantly, by taking this fortress, we have flipped positions with them; they are now on the defensive."

Sesto nodded vaguely at this, the smattering of knowledge Jard held. "Because we took this fortress?"

Jard chuckled at his brother's confusion. "Do you not understand? Think about this from Yelenetta's perspective. What would happen if we were allowed to further invade their lands?"

He put his finger on the map and slid it along horizontally. Following this action with his eyes, Sesto then came to a quick

realization. “Ah! They would be isolated. In other words, they’d be forced to hole up while we pincer attacked them. That would leave them unable to get supplies, right?”

Jalpa nodded, satisfied, acting like a teacher although he had himself only learned this fact minutes prior. “Precisely. In essence, if Yelenetta doesn’t take back this stronghold, they won’t even be able to attack us. Conversely, we can use the newly acquired fortress to strike at them, but if we leave it unoccupied, Yelenetta will send their forces to take it back. After all, there are enemy cities and defense points located in three different directions; it would be easy for them to resupply.”

“I see now… So Yelenetta will attack again soon?”

Jard smiled boldly and folded his arms. “Exactly. That is why we must be prepared for battle at any time. We must ensure that the Chivalric Orders we’ve been loaned have the best equipment and supplies. We should also supplement them with mercenaries and adventurers, if at all possible.”

Sesto looked down then, a pathetic expression on his face. “Ah, but I don’t have any money left. What should I do?” he whispered, his face turning pale.

Jard laughed toothily. “Fear not! With the victories that lie ahead of us, you can borrow as much money as you need! Borrow from a company and prepare your men. This is the perfect opportunity to add some accomplishments to your name. Surely you don’t wish to fail because you were too cheap?”

“R-right, I get it,” Sesto replied, nodding confidently.

A battle to obtain territory was an excellent chance to acquire military achievements. Any noble would view this as an opportunity to rise in the ranks, and that meant that the price of supplies and hiring mercenaries would skyrocket. Goods and personnel were so hard to come by that even having the money available didn’t guarantee that you could get what you wanted. House Fertio was certainly both wealthy and powerful, but regardless of how many

companies and mercenary groups lent their support, a considerable amount of money would still need to be spent.

Despite all of this, Jard felt victory was all but assured, so he did not hesitate to spend the cash. In the end, he not only emptied his own pockets but also borrowed a great deal of money to support his war effort.

Van

"HEEEEY! I'VE GOT NEW MACHINE BOWS FOR YOU ALL!"

"Lord Van!" Khamsin called back. He was noisily loading machine bows, arrows, and bolts onto one of the new war wagons. "We already have enough for everyone!"

In the back of the wagon sat Van, manufacturing new weapons, and Lowe, watching this happen. Lowe was unsure what to do with all the new arms. It was all a bit chaotic.

Nearby, members of the Chivalric Order watched this uncommon sight with pained smiles as they looked over the new weapons.

"Lord Van's made a new type of machine bow," said one member.

"Man, I feel bad for the enemy," remarked another.

They laughed among themselves, but their eyes displayed the trust they had in Van. All their armor had already been replaced with hybrid-style equipment made from wood blocks and mithril. This new equipment was light and flexible while also boasting high defensive capabilities—and the most vulnerable sections were all coated with mithril to boot.

Because of how the production process worked, all the old equipment could be reused, so there was no shortage of materials. This was also why Van was able to use any free time he had to

perform experiments and modify pre-existing designs. He had already attached suspension to the carriages and replaced all their wheels with tires made from the most appropriate monster hides. At this point, these were the most comfortable carriages in the world.

Elsewhere, the Chivalric Orders hunted monsters, which also served as excellent training. The citizens with free time on their hands made preserved foods and helped to prepare for the long military campaign ahead. In this way, Van was able to prepare for war without breaking the bank.

"Lord Van, we have more folks looking to move here!" called a lookout.

"Okay!" Van responded breezily. "What kind of shape are they in? If they seem hungry, feed them first and let them take a bath!"

"Understood!"

The lookout in question nodded as if this happened all the time, then returned to the front gates. In Seatoh Village, immigrants were a weekly occurrence and something everyone had long since grown accustomed to.

Well, save for the traveling merchants, the newly arrived former slaves, and the adventurers. "This really is such a strange village."

"Right? I don't think I've ever seen Chivalric Orders or nobles act so kind to outsiders."

"I think Lord Van is just unique."

Overhearing this conversation, Van turned around. "Unique? I feel like that could be a little misleading…"

The lord of this village, a paradise to its citizens, disliked being described as "unique."

Chapter 7:
All Ready

Panamera

NOT EVEN A MONTH AFTER HIS MAJESTY RETURNED to the capital, I received word that he had reassembled the Chivalric Orders and departed. The messengers were swapping horses and running through day and night, though, so we still had time before he arrived.

"How are preparations going here?" I asked the commander, who smiled confidently at me.

"Including our reinforcements, we have five hundred soldiers ready! Our supplies are in good shape, too!"

I nodded. "Excellent. It will take us two weeks of travel to get there. We should be able to stop at Seatoh Village and resupply."

With the ballista and machine bows we'd purchased from Van, eliminating bandits and large monsters no longer ran the risk it once did. Consequently, we had managed to acquire a significant number of treasures and rare materials without suffering many casualties; buying more arrows from Van wouldn't constitute a significant financial loss.

"Hmm," I murmured, "His Majesty asked me what sort of reward I desire. I should be able to ask for my own territory now."

The commander's expression stiffened; he was still hesitant about the whole thing. At times it could be a burden to be a member of the nobility, given all the obligations that came with the title. First were the conflicts between opposing factions of high-ranking nobles. Over the last few decades, the number of high-ranking nobles had remained unchanged. Putting aside members of the royal family who had relinquished their right to the throne, there were four marquis

and counts in the capital and another two or three scattered across the land.

Among the lords of the various territories, charged with protecting those lands in the king's name, were marquis and counts with military accomplishments to their names; they were charged with using their strength to govern much larger areas. In times of emergency, they also received special privileges. Essentially, in an emergency, these high-ranking nobles could take control of the nearby low-level nobles at their own discretion. In situations like that, the nobles possessing territory were at least able to voice their own opinions, but someone like me, with no territory to her name, had no right to say anything. In the case of this war, I could be charged with treason for ignoring the orders of a high-ranking noble.

Low-ranking nobles kept constant tabs on the nobility who outranked them, seeking an opportunity to supersede them. I was no different.

"I refuse to follow the orders of some overweight middle-aged men and risk my life for them," I whispered, dropping my gaze to the palms of my hands. I may have been a noble, and a powerless one at that, but my hands were rugged from all the swords I had swung throughout my life. I clenched my fists, then raised my head. My lips curled into a smile. "I will climb the ladder with my own power. I will be no one's pawn."

The commander began to laugh.

"What wonderful ambition. However… Lady Panamera, even if you acquire territory, Marquis Fertio will be close by. I do not think things will be easy for you."

Holding territory meant drawing attention to oneself, and as a member of House Ferdinatto's faction, I would undoubtedly draw the marquis's fury. In that case, I might find myself dispatched to one of the fiercer battlefields. The nobility had a penchant for hammering in the nail that stuck out; that was why my commander was worried.

I snorted. “I’ll be working you to the bone. Just put your faith in me,” I said, grinning.

The commander blinked a few times, then burst into laughter. “Ha ha ha! Well, well, perhaps you forget, but I have already sworn my loyalty to you. Use me however you need to make your ambitions a reality.”

My smile deepened. “Well said.”

It was time to fight. This battle would determine just how far up the ladder I could climb.

Count Ferdinatto

I RECEIVED THE FULL REPORT AND ROSE TO MY FEET. “So His Majesty has departed,” I said.

“The next battle will be a large one, no?” my wife asked. “Will you be okay?”

I pulled my chin in and sighed. “We will begin to march into enemy territory. Our first invasion in decades. The enemy will likely strengthen their defenses and prepare traps for us. Our house suffered the greatest losses in the last set of battles, and we lack the capacity to prepare properly for this next fight…but wemust participate if our house is to continue. We must produce results.”

I sighed again, and my wife frowned, casting her gaze downward. When she spoke, it was with a tinge of embarrassment in her voice. “Baron Van will be on the battlefield as well, yes? You said he was exceptionally good at producing weapons… Is there any way we could borrow some of his?” She hesitated, then added, “Our daughter is with him, so…”

Anger surged in me at her words, but I resisted the urge to yell. I took a few light breaths, then said calmly, “A count could never request aid from a new member of the nobility. And we did

not send our daughter there to form an alliance. We must not forget that."

I cast my gaze out the window, toward the castle city, lit red by the evening light. It was significantly less active than it used to be. I sighed and clenched my fists.

"It is my powerlessness that has lost our house its influence and strength…but this battle is a great opportunity."

My wife furrowed her brow and hung her head low. "I understand," she said, nodding.

It had been many years since I first became the head of the house, yet here I was, still causing my wife grief. I was ashamed and angry at my own behavior. Now was the time to display my power, even if it meant risking my life.

Meanwhile, despite only recently establishing his own house, Van had accumulated a frightening number of accomplishments. The magic that allowed him to create ballistae and machine bows certainly factored into that, but so did the fact that he knew how to make proper use of them. That he could build a fortress faster than you could blink was undoubtedly one reason for the trust His Majesty put in him.

If we made progress in our invasion of Yelenetta, we would find ourselves in situations where we were disadvantaged in terms of geography, supply routes, or even sheer numbers. Occupying Yelenetta's fortresses and strongholds would be one thing; whether we could use them properly was another question entirely. There was also the risk that we'd be attacked mid-march and suffer tremendous casualties.

One thing was clear: Baron Van would earn himself more accomplishments in this invasion than anyone else. *That means we must aim for second or third*, I thought. *But that would mean outdoing Marquis Fertio*.

I winced as that arrogant man's face appeared in my mind. Despite his fierce disposition, he possessed the strategic mind

necessary to dominate a battle. Put bluntly, we would lose to him eight times out of ten on an open battlefield. To outdo him, we would have to either break down the front gates of an enemy stronghold before he could do so himself or take the head of a general-class enemy. Luckily, these were the sorts of battles in which Van would never participate.

Pondering this, I remembered something my wife said earlier. I turned to her. "Didn't you say that a pair of frightful knights defeated Yelenetta's army when they invaded the city?"

My wife nodded, a serious expression on her face. "Yes. I'm ashamed to admit that I was unable to see them directly, but they waved the banner of House Ferdinatto. Two knights clad in silver armor cut enemy troops in half."

"It sounds too absurd to even be a heroic tale. Fighting in full-body armor is no mean feat, and a single cavalryman riding into a group of a thousand knights is a suicide mission. Yelenetta's forces numbered in the tens of thousands…" I let out a breath. "This is only conjecture, but I don't believe that those two knights were human."

My wife cast her gaze down, her expression darkening with guilt. "Long ago, Arte put on a display of her magic for me by controlling a marionette. At the time, I was furious that she showed aptitude for marionette magic, which is considered so vile. I ended up yelling at her…" She trailed off, biting her lip and looking out the window as she tried to fight back tears.

"When I first met Baron Van," I said quietly, "he rebuked me harshly. He said that the wounds on Arte's heart would never completely heal, but that they could still be treated. He wanted me to open my ears and truly listen to what she had to say. It might be too late, but if you truly wish to apologize to Arte as her mother, then I would be willing to take you to Seatoh Village one day." I turned around as I said these words to find my wife quietly sobbing.

At long last I finished building the additional housing and the park. We didn't have enough books yet so I put the library on the backburner, but I did manage to complete the two-story school and hospital. Oh, and while I was building all of that, Seatoh Village's lone carpenter actually built a house all by himself; it was nice, pretty cozy. At that pace, he'd be able to build a house every two months. His skills would only improve as he continued to build, and eventually more people would seek his talent.

We already had farmland, businesses, blacksmiths, inns, and restaurants. The adventurers could get us timber, stone, and metals. Soon we'd be able to hire folks as educators, doctors, and nurses. We still didn't have any seamstresses, but that wouldn't be the case for long.

Sitting on one of the benches in the new park, I whispered, "Man, Seatoh Village has really become something else."

"Did you say something, Lord Van?" Khamsin asked from a short distance away. He must have seen me whispering. I raised my head and watched him swing back and forth on one of the swings I'd crafted; he was moving pretty energetically.

It was his first time using a swing, so he must've been having a grand old time. Arte, too, looked like she was having a blast, gently swinging back and forth. And for the record, Till was watching them with clear jealousy in her eyes. She had recently turned nineteen, but that didn't stop her from wanting to play.

I suppose it isn't that crazy to want to go back to a more innocent time, I mused, eyeing the three of them.

We were interrupted by a youngster from the Chivalric Order, coming over from the front gates to report in. "Lord Van! A bunch of Chivalric Orders have… Whoa! What is all of this?!"

"Oh, His Majesty is here? I suppose that makes sense. The faster we get back to invading Yelenetta, the better."

"Wait, wait, wait. Lord Van, um, I'm fairly sure this garden wasn't here before. Also, what are those…?"

"Hmm?" I asked, briefly puzzled to hear him call a park with a playground a 'garden.' "Oh, the playground equipment? Just so you know, those are only for kids. Nobody over eighteen is allowed to touch them."

This shocked Till for some reason. She and the young man both looked as if I'd just told them the world was ending. I smirked and quickly modified my rules.

"Okay, fine. Nobody over nineteen. Twenty and ups are forbidden, okay?"

"Awesome!" said the messenger, just as Till said, "Thank goodness!" Their eyes sparkled as they cheered. *I guess I should be happy they're happy?*

"Ah, right," I said, sitting up from the bench, "I totally forgot: we have visitors."

This had the effect of snapping the messenger back to reality too. He nodded. "Right! There are at least a few thousand men, potentially even as many as ten thousand!"

"Whew, that's a ton of people."

I had Arte and Khamsin stop swinging for the moment so that we could all make our way to the gates. Arte, Khamsin, and Till all looked terribly reluctant to leave the swings behind, but I just smiled at them. As we arrived, I quickly spotted His Majesty's personal carriage.

"Ooh, Baron Van! Long time no see! Or I suppose not really!"

"Welcome, Your Majesty. I am glad to see you in good health."

The king descended jovially from his carriage. The horseback knights looked no worse for wear, but the infantrymen around him looked exhausted. It must have been a fast-paced march.

Noticing my gaze, His Majesty smiled and jerked his chin at his soldiers. "We will be departing from Seatoh Village in about two weeks. Until then, I would appreciate it if you could let my elite Royal Chivalric Order rest. At the rear are other Chivalric Orders who

joined us en route. You would have my gratitude if you could also offer them somewhere to rest. Additionally, the amount of food they will require will not be insignificant. Do you have reserves?"

"Yes, that won't pose a problem. I estimated that we might storm Yelenetta in less than two weeks, so I have more than enough food to go around."

He squinted at me, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Hoh. And why is that?"

"Huh? I mean, we invaded enemy territory and took one of their important strongholds," I explained casually, "so obviously they'll want to take it back as soon as possible. For our part, as the attackers, we'll want to get as far into enemy territory as possible before they give up on retaking the stronghold and retreat to a defensive position. I figured you might stay here in Seatoh Village while you reassemble the royal military. I also anticipated that you might draft local farmers and offer them rewards if it meant increasing the amount of time you can spend on this invasion, as much as I'd feel bad for those folks. Time is of the essence, after all."

His Majesty offered me a strange look, like he was trying not to show his delight. *Did I mess up somewhere?* I thought, feeling growing concern as I observed him. *I'm not even ten yet; please forgive me if I said something stupid.*

Finally, he laughed loudly. "What child thinks like this? You have a tremendous mind for strategy. That being said, you still lack real experience. You are correct that one possible tactic would be to invade Yelenetta with an overwhelming force before they have time to react. However, engaging in repeated battles with tens of thousands of soldiers is unrealistic for both sides, especially when you have to pass through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range first."

I nodded. "I see. I suppose that many soldiers would make it difficult." The stress from that kind of long campaign would be intense, a factor His Majesty had clearly considered.

Thanks to the new road, supplying a military march through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range wasn't nearly the problem it once was. After all, the Bell & Rango Company, the Mary Chamber of Commerce, and even the Business Guild regularly used Seatoh Village as a resupply point. It was possible to send supplies through the mountains now. And if I went out there myself, I could produce all kinds of new equipment. The adventurers and the machine bow squad could hunt monsters, too, which meant meat.

At this point, stress really was the biggest factor. I nodded.

Just then, one of the lookouts at the wall ran over to us. "Lord Van, Bell from the Bell & Rango Company has arrived! And for some reason, he's with Apollo from the Business Guild!"

I blinked. "Huh? Apollo?"

His Majesty, meanwhile, nodded as if this was perfectly ordinary. "The Business Guild, eh? They were slower than I expected," he murmured. Then he looked back at me and chuckled. "On the way here, we bumped into a caravan composed of the Business Guild and the Bell & Rango Company, but we soon left them behind."

"Oh, really…? Wait a second. You were traveling with thousands of people! How did you get here so quickly?"

He gave me a big smile and continued to laugh, apparently pleased to have stumped me. "Ha ha ha! Do not underestimate the training my Chivalric Orders undergo! Now then, it seems that someone from the Business Guild has business with you. Surely you do not mind if I sit in on your meeting?"

There was no way to decline. Even Li'l Van, boy genius, could do nothing but nod and smile.

Accompanied by a rather boisterous king, I made my way to the front gates where Apollo was waiting. Upon our arrival we were greeted with some ten large carriages packed into the main street.

Surrounding the vehicles were dozens of adventurers, so the area was absolutely stuffed. Even with His Majesty commanding his men to wait outside the gate, our main street was packed to the brim with people.

"Ah, Lord Van!" Bell shouted from within the caravan.

Behind him was Apollo.

"Welcome back." I waved and walked over, watching as a momentary look of shock ran over Apollo's face just before he took a knee.

As soon as Bell saw this, he noticed His Majesty behind me. "M-my apologies!" The adventurers around us, watching the two men kneel, followed suit.

Personally, this made me feel like a hotshot, but the reality was that I had the superpowerful token known as "the king" behind me. I turned around to find His Majesty magnanimously waving a hand. "At ease," he said.

Apollo stood up first. "Thank you very much. We hurried here, but we were unable to catch up. As is to be expected of Scuderia's infamous Chivalric Orders!"

"Ha ha ha! Indeed! They are the foundation upon which our might rests, after all."

Even faced with the king of a huge nation, Apollo easily made small talk. Bell looked speechless. No wonder the Business Guild was such a massive organization, capable of dealing with all the major nations. Apollo looked practiced at dealing with powerful people.

"What has brought you to Baron Van?" His Majesty asked. Apollo looked over at me, adopting a strained smile.

"I'm embarrassed to say it, but the Business Guild has finally decided on a course of action."

I tilted my head. His Majesty burst into laughter, nodding. "Is that so? In other words, the Business Guild has chosen to forsake Yelenetta?"

"No, no… It's just, well, doing business with Scuderia is such a promising endeavor that we have decided, for the time being, to put off doing any business with Yelenetta. With heavy hearts, of course."

"Ha ha ha! It must be difficult to have to play the diplomat with so many nations! Be honest now, I will tell no one: you are not truly putting off business with Yelenetta? Surely there is a great deal of money to be made, selling goods, weapons, and food."

His Majesty had heard what Apollo wasn't saying. There was a reason the term "special procurements" existed. It was easy to imagine the Business Guild, with their connections all over the world, making huge money by dipping their toes into all sorts of markets. In other words, the guild was selling Scuderia goods for their supply line while also selling weapons and armor to Yelenetta.

Suddenly, I remembered the black balls. "Apollo, I have a question. Has the Business Guild been selling Yelenetta those black balls?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No, we do not carry that particular weapon. Unfortunately, a single nation has a monopoly over it. We still don't even know how to manufacture them."

His Majesty crossed his arms and groaned. "I expected as much. Only a fool would let such a useful weapon fall into the hands of other nations. I do not know how much time or how many resources their manufacture requires, but victory in battle could rely heavily on their supply."

He narrowed his eyes, his words making the atmosphere tense. At that moment, another new arrival casually entered the mix.

"Well, well," Panamera said, her beautiful blonde hair swaying back and forth, "if it isn't His Majesty! I hope you can forgive my tardiness." The unshakable confidence in her eyes belied her apologetic words. It was that confidence that made the king smirk and nod his head.

"Mm. I sent you word of this before I left the capital. If anything, I am impressed by how quickly you have arrived."

"Well, as it happens, I was eagerly awaiting word from you when your message arrived."

"Ha ha ha! I expect nothing less from the dauntless Viscount Panamera!"

Panamera's invincible smile put His Majesty in an even better mood than before. Watching all of this out of the corner of my eye, I turned my gaze to Bell.

"How'd it go?" I asked, keeping my question as short as possible.

Bell seemed a bit disoriented. "Well, we purchased slaves and did some publicity work in not just the capital, but also two large cities we passed through. We ended up recruiting a group of merchants who want to start businesses, former adventurers who want to become knights, and even some mercenaries. Including the slaves, we now have a total of two hundred people who want to move here."

"Wow, a whole two hundred? I'll be able to get more funds from Esparda later, so heads up: when the time comes, I'm going to have you guys go back to the capital. All right, then first things first; let's feed anyone who is hungry, then bring them to the bathhouse."

Bell looked relieved to finally receive his next orders from me. It must have been extremely stressful to be in front of His Majesty. "As you wish." He bowed and left.

I watched him walk away, then turned to Panamera. "Long time no see, Viscount Panamera. Good luck in the coming battles!"

Panamera let out a breathy laugh. "Leave the fighting to me, boy. By the way, have you developed any new weapons? I would be interested in any prototypes, too."

Mere minutes since we'd reunited and already she was egging me on about new weapons. The childish look on her face and the twinkle in her eye made me smile. "I've had a few ideas, but none of them are workable yet. My older brother Murcia will be participating

in the coming battles, so for now I'm preparing a few new weapons, but…"

"Oooh, I'd love to take a look," she responded. The twinkle in her eyes had practically become a sparkle.

His Majesty cleared his throat from behind her, snapping her to attention. "We have both only just arrived. Let's not spend all our time chatting here."

Panamera hastily corrected her posture and bowed, a tinge of embarrassment evident in her actions but none on her face. To the people around us, it must have seemed like she was being courteous.

"Now then, I would like to enjoy Seatoh Village's wonderful bathhouse. Baron Van, can we use the large one near your manor?"

"Yes, of course. One of my people will show you the way if you wouldn't mind waiting for just a moment. Khamsin, do you mind?"

"Yes, Lord Van!" Khamsin enthused. He dashed off to fetch the young man who was basically the leader of the guards at the gate. The man was clearly super nervous, even as he bowed deeply to the king.

"Th-th-this way! P-please watch your step!"

"Mm. Baron Van, I am counting on you to take good care of my men outside," His Majesty said. Then he followed the young man triumphantly.

I watched him leave with Panamera standing next to me, looking shocked. "I cannot believe His Majesty is so relaxed. That speaks volumes of the trust he has in Seatoh Village," she said with a nod and stroke of her chin.

I turned to her. "Ah, Panamera, my apologies, but His Majesty has asked me to take care of his men. So…"

"Hmm? Just tell them where to set up camp. Then, if you can, guide them to where the commanders and higher ranked officers can stay. Obviously, I'll be staying here in Seatoh Village. That won't

be a problem, right?" Her explanation was brisk; she seemed raring to get to the bathhouse.

"No, of course not. But…" The troubled look I gave her made her tilt her head. That was something she rarely did.

"…What's the matter, boy? It is unlike you to be so fidgety."

I decided to be honest. "It's just, well, Dee and Esparda aren't around, so I was hoping you could come with me, is all. Ten thousand is a lot of men, so…"

Frankly, I was scared of going somewhere by myself in the company of only brusque, unfriendly older guys. Panamera's eyes went wide, and then she burst into laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Are you serious, boy? You're scared of the Chivalric Orders?! What happened to your usual boldness? Are you suddenly timid without Sir Dee around?"

She was pointing at me and cackling in front of so many people! I felt my cheeks turning bright red, so I quickly tried to shoot down her words. "N-no, that's not it at all! It's just that my Chivalric Order isn't full of super tough-looking guys. These people never smile, and they have scary looks in their eyes."

This only added fuel to the fire. Panamera was laughing so hard that she was starting to tear up.

The coming military campaign would likely be a long one. I had yet to learn His Majesty's plans, but speed was going to be key to our invasion, and that meant we would be working with an enormous group of nobles. And if nobility were coming from all over the nation, then we had the perfect opportunity to show them Seatoh Village's magnificence.

With that in mind, I began thinking up floor plans for a hot spring facility by the lake. For whatever reason, the image I had in my head was of that place from that one super famous animated

film. You know, the one where all the gods hung out. The only problem was that I had no idea what its framework was like, so with no other options available to me, I decided to instead visualize a hot springs inn that I had been to before. It wasn't connected to a lake, but I was going all out, so I decided to have this one protrude over the water.

An interesting bit of architecture, if I did say so myself.

It would be two stories tall and fairly long as buildings went. An open-air bath on the outside of the first floor would give it a nice cozy vibe. The problem was that if I went too hard, construction would take me nearly a week, and we also wouldn't have enough hot water to go around.

"I doubt the hot springs inn will be ready in time, so I guess I'll build it once everyone leaves the village," I whispered to myself.

Up front, Panamera turned her head to look at me. "What is it? If you're so worried, would you like me to ask His Majesty to join us as well?"

"I swear, that's not it!"

Panamera chuckled, pleased to have successfully teased me. I pouted, trying to show her I was angry, but she just kept laughing. At this point she was just bullying me.

Maybe I'll double how much I charge her for weapons…

As I brainstormed ways to retaliate, Panamera turned her gaze from me, still smiling. She looked at the knights forming lines on the side of the road and took a deep breath.

"You have orders from His Majesty!" she yelled. "Chivalric Orders from across the land will convene here, and in the meantime, he wants you all to camp outside the village and rest! We will be discussing supplies and campground locations, so I need all commander-class officers to gather here at once!"

Backed by His Majesty's will, her words spurred ten thousand people into action…although the way her voice traveled probably

didn’t hurt. I had a front-row view of Panamera’s leadership skills at work, and I was impressed. Once the commanders and other nobles had assembled, she quickly selected fifty high-ranking individuals and sent them into the village.

The campgrounds lay between the adventurers’ town and Seatoh Village, so there was no fear of monsters attacking, but knowing Panamera, she probably wasn’t thinking about that. It was more likely that she expected the men to defend themselves if anything went down; they were the ones making camp, after all. Either way, I was happy to have found a way to deal with His Majesty’s insane request.

Panamera smirked at me. “So, boy, how have things been going with Lady Arte?”

Her question was so abrupt it confused me. “Pardon?”

Simultaneously, I heard a short, panicked yelp from behind me. “L-Lady Panamera?!” Arte squeaked in terror, her face apple red.

This, of course, only made Panamera laugh and slap my back. “Ha ha ha! Something definitely happened, am I right??”

“Uh, Panamera, are you drunk or something? Please stop teasing us.”

She ignored my complaints and kept smacking my back. By this point Arte had taken refuge behind Till, so I was Panamera’s singular punching bag. “Now, now, don’t be upset; I’m just teasing you. Ah, I know! Shall we get something to eat? I would love to hear how things have been going for you both, and I bet that would go well with some fine alcohol.”

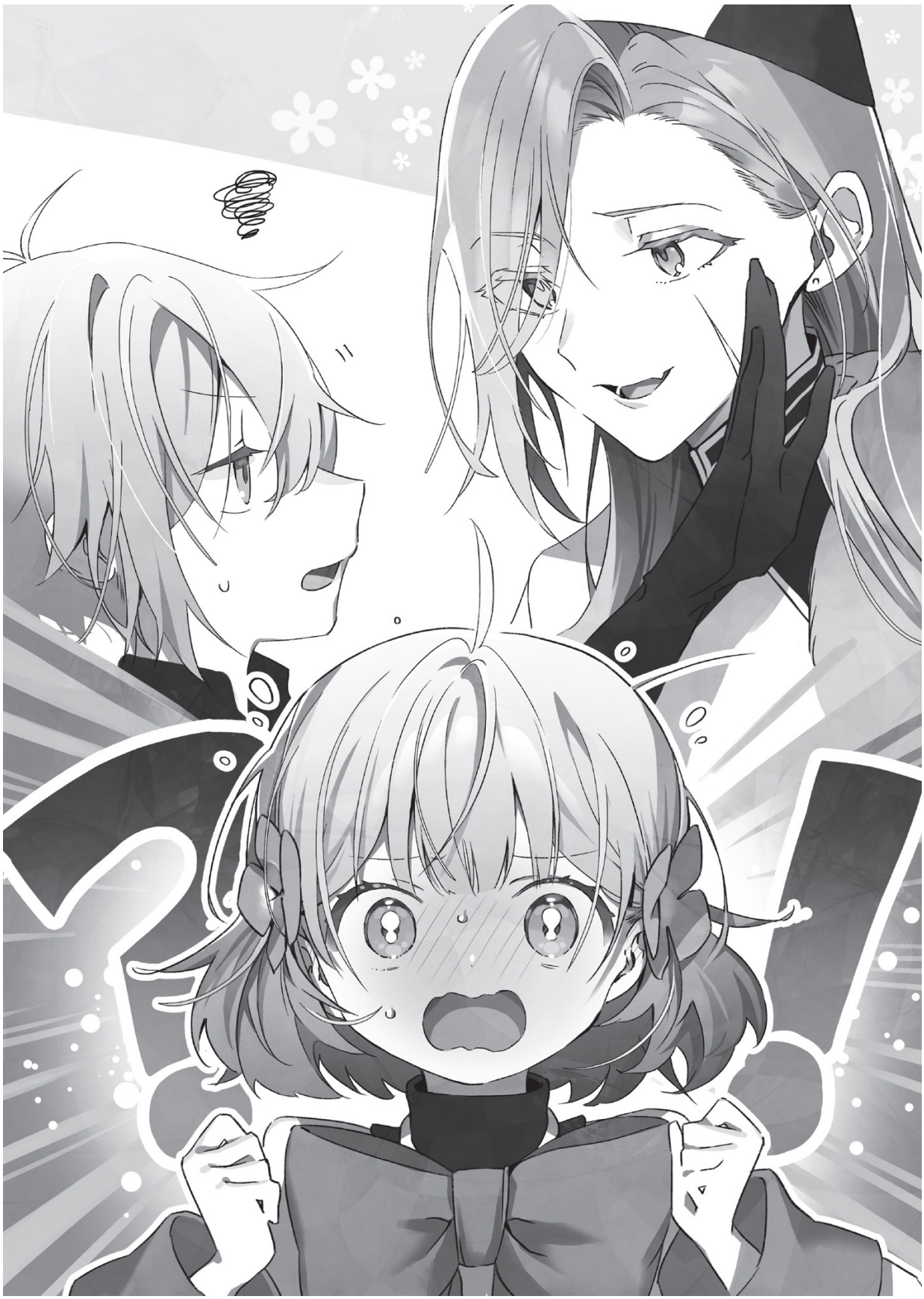
“No way. You clearly just want to mess with me.” We kept on that way, bickering, as we returned to Seatoh Village.

The next day heralded the arrival of Arte’s father, Count Ferdinatto. Unlike last time, he had a lot of soldiers with him.

When I went to greet him, Ferdinatto poked his head out of a conspicuously large carriage and, noticing me, promptly exited the vehicle.

"It has been some time, Lord Van," he said. "Arte, have you been well?"

I bowed, smiling at his somewhat clumsy greeting. "Indeed it has, Count Ferdinatto."



Arte was next up. She greeted him a little bashfully. “It has been a while, Father. Thanks to Lord Van, I have been doing well.”

A warm smile graced Ferdinatto’s face. “I see. I do not know how to express my gratitude toward you, Lord Van.”

“Please, think nothing of it.”

Ferdinatto seemed amused by my easygoing attitude: his shoulders shook with gentle laughter. “Thank you. It means a lot to hear you say that. Truth be told, I was thinking I might try to garner myself the most accomplishments in the coming battles. I will distinguish myself from even you, Lord Van.”

He said this with a fighting spirit I’d never seen from him before. *I’m sure he’s been preparing for this.*

“Well, I don’t intend to fall behind either! Let us both give it our all.” I smiled and pointed toward the village. “Please, make yourself at home. Arte, would you do the honors?”

I wanted to give them some time together. For a single moment, Arte’s expression tensed, but before long she nodded, having apparently found her resolve. “Of course. Allow me to escort you, Father,” she said.

Ferdinatto beamed at his daughter. “You have my gratitude.” The way they spoke to each other still didn’t exactly feel natural, but they were certainly more like father and daughter than ever before.

I always found managing relationships with nobles to be a pain in the ass, but I had to admit, at that moment things were going swimmingly. I was on good terms with His Majesty, Viscount Panamera and Count Ferdinatto were both my allies, and I seemed to be doing well with Count Ventury. Even Viscount Pinin, who’d initially looked down on me, had become pretty chill.

My only real problem was my own flesh and blood: House Fertio.

I watched Ferdinatto and Arte enter the village, then folded my arms and nodded. “I’m kind of awesome, aren’t I? I mean, I only

just became a baron and started my own house, and look how much I've already done."

Till smiled widely. "Indeed. I know how hard you've been working, Lord Van." Khamsin nodded vigorous agreement.

"Heh heh, I'm just messing around. I can't let myself get conceited; people always mess up when they get a big head. I have to be careful," I said, mostly to remind myself.

I felt a bit embarrassed by their compliments, but internally, I wanted to jump for joy. If someone's happiness was determined by their environment, then I was the happiest guy alive. Till, Khamsin, and Arte were basically siblings to me, and I was close to Esparda, Dee, Arb, and Lowe too. I had even built good, trusting relationships with the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order and Ortho's adventurers.

You know what? I am gonna jump for joy! Go Li'l Van! A toast to an awesome life!

So much for remembering to stay humble.

Just then, I spotted one of my messengers running our way, waving. Had someone else arrived?

"Lord Van!" he shouted. "Another Chivalric Order has arrived! They bear the flag of House Fertio!"

"Ah. Daddy Dearest." *Already here, eh?* "There goes all the wind out of my sails…"

But the messenger tilted his head, a strange look on his face. "Actually, the marquis is not with them. There are two noble carriages in the caravan, but he is not aboard either. Instead, there are two younger men…"

"Huh?" If the head of the house wasn't appearing in person for such an important battle, then he must have sent his family. "Don't tell me it's Jard and Sesto? Is he really using such a crucial battle as their first campaign?" I didn't mean to say that aloud, where I risked being overheard, but I was startled; this was not common practice.

The messenger watched me for a moment, hesitating, then continued. “Additionally, the soldiers with them don’t appear to be House Fertio’s Chivalric Order. Their equipment lacks uniformity, and they seem more like a group of adventurers.”

“Mercenaries? Huh? What the heck is going on?”

Had Daddy Dearest finally lost it? Or issued orders while drunk or something? I was at a total loss. That man had a way of dumping cold water all over my good mood.

Chapter 8:
Brothers, Reunited

Jard

PREPPING THE RANDOM, HASTILY ASSEMBLED mercenaries was slow work, pushing our departure much later than I had planned. And while I was getting them ready, I received word from Father that we were to depart ahead of him. Anxious that my slow prep might have left a poor impression on him, I had my personal troops handle other preparations and assist the mercenaries with their gear.

I was spending an obscene amount of money. Hiring a single mercenary for a month cost anywhere from one to three large silvers, so one hundred of them for a month ran me one to three large gold. A thousand mercenaries cost another ten times that. When you considered that a single knight made three to four gold per year, this was shaping up to be a massive money sink, and on top of all that, it was hard to imagine this campaign lasting only two months. If I didn't perform big time, I would be in the red.

I had to hurry to the border village so I could improve Father's impression of me, even if only by a little.

"Van's territory, eh?" I mused aloud. "I never expected that failure of a child to become a baron."

Not only did he not have an elemental affinity, the magic he did have was useless production magic. Dee and Esparda had followed him out of pity, and somehow the boy had managed to use their skills to add a few accomplishments to his name. Rumor had it that he hired adventurers and mercenaries, so it was possible that Dee and Esparda gave him some measure of financial assistance, too.

I knew Dee was an experienced warrior, and I'd heard that Esparda had a lot of battlefield accomplishments of his own. With their help, it was possible to imagine Van defeating a dragon, saving his small border village in the process and becoming lauded as a dragon-slaying hero. That was all luck, but I considered luck an important quality. But now it was my time to reduce the battlefield to ashes and put my power—Jard Gai Fertio's power—on display.

My carriage rocked back and forth as I pumped myself up, heading toward Van's village. I managed to get some rest in the towns and villages along the way, but the constant rocking of the carriage was taking its toll on my state of mind. Conversing with Sesto did little to help either of us hide our fatigue.

Eventually, one of the mercenaries leading the way reported that our journey was coming to an end. "Lord Jard, we will arrive shortly!"

"Damn you," I said, poking my head out the window. "Could you not deliver your report more quietly?"

I was fed up with this mercenary captain and his vulgar yelling. On his first day, I berated him for his impolite speech, so he at least watched his words now; his yelling gave me headaches, but it was still preferable to how things started out.

I scowled at the carriage next to me, where I met eyes with Sesto. His expression mirrored mine.

"I guess we're almost there," Sesto whispered dully.

I nodded at him, then sighed. "I am certainly glad to have seen in person how vast House Fertio's territory is. However, I now find myself pitying our little brother for getting exiled out here. His treatment was dictated by his lack of talent, so Father must have decided he was useless." Of course, my pity for Van and his miserable situation only enhanced my satisfaction in being a superior elemental mage.

Sesto frowned, peering ahead toward our destination. Slowly, in blank amazement, he said, "Jard, what is that? That…can't be

Van's territory, right?"

I looked up, wondering what he was talking about, and quickly found myself dumbfounded. "Is that…a wall? He had that built in only a year or so?"

Down the road was a walled fortress city, that much was clear. It was relatively small, but still large enough to comfortably house a thousand or more people. I could see soldiers atop the wall, keeping an eye on their surroundings.

"This must be Dee and Esparda's work," I breathed. I mustered all the calm I could, though internally, I was shaken. "But how much did all of this cost?"

The city to which Father assigned me was far from Van's village, so it wasn't until I returned home that I heard of Van's alleged recent exploits. I dismissed them as nonsensical rumors. After all, who would expect me to believe that Van had used his magic to build houses and craft weapons, thereby making leaps and bounds in territory development?

Absurdity. I had never heard of such a possibility. He possessed production magic, yes, but history told of no production magic wielders capable of such feats. I would never pay heed to such outlandish rumors.

But the fortress city before me could not have been built in a year's time. The closer we got, the greater the oppressive shadow its front gates cast over us.

"I've never seen this kind of design before," I said conversationally, hoping to keep myself from being overwhelmed by what I was looking at. But Sesto was clearly shaken to his core.

"R-right… And it sure is big."

Eventually, someone on the wall called out to us. "Am I correct in assuming you are guests from House Fertio?" It was the voice of a young woman, which I found surprising.

The commander of the Chivalric Order ahead of us responded, explaining that not only were we from House Fertio, we were in fact Marquis Fertio's sons. The gates were soon opened for us, but we were not allowed immediate entry.

"What? Only ten representatives may enter?"

"My apologies. We are expecting the arrival of a large number of Chivalric Orders."

I glared past the front gates. Open, they revealed a beautifully developed cityscape, one that you could be forgiven for mistaking for the capital city. Even not being all that large, it was enough to make me catch my breath.

"Brother, it is what it is," Sesto said with a faint smile. "There is not enough land here to fit everyone."

I snorted. "True enough. If anything, I suppose I should be impressed that such a poor village was capable of such growth," I said, putting on airs and entering the city.

Sesto was right: the area was full of tall, beautiful buildings, but there wasn't actually that much land. It could fit a thousand or so people at most…or, well, perhaps a little more, since most of the buildings were more than three stories tall. But even then, it was much smaller than the city I was assigned to. They were undoubtedly at a disadvantage for goods distribution compared to other cities.

A feeling of relief settled over me as I cast my gaze around the city. Eventually, I realized that we were being led to the gates on the opposite side of the city from where we entered.

"Why are we leaving?" I demanded.

"Y-you better not be thinking of tossing us out!"

Hearing our complaints, our guide looked back at us with some confusion on his face. Then he nodded, seemingly remembering something. "My apologies. I should have given you a better explanation. This is not Seatoh Village. The village itself was seeing

extremely high adventurer traffic, so Lord Van created a separate town just for adventurers."

"H-huh?" I couldn't comprehend this. A town just for adventurers? What madness was that? What was the man talking about? Sesto and I exchanged glances, and I tried to wrap my confused head around the guide's words.

In the meantime, an order to open the back gates rang out, and we were treated to the view outside the city.

"…Wh-what in the world is that?"

"Are you telling me that is Van's…?"

In the distance stood an incredible fortress city. It dwarfed the one we were in.

Sesto

I HAD NO MONEY. THIS WASN'T A PROBLEM I'D EVER faced before, but my city governor assignment made me painfully aware of what it meant to have no money. When I first saw the giant sum I had to work with, I was thrilled to be able to spend it as I wished; why didn't anyone warn me before it all disappeared?

Before I knew it, I required so many funds that even a tax increase couldn't cover it all. I sold off all the goods I was managing in the city, sent the Chivalric Order out on campaigns disguised as training exercises, and slew bandits and monsters to make money. But it wasn't nearly enough.

Just as I was panicking over what to do, word of the invasion into Yelenetta reached me. "Get a fighting force together, even if it means borrowing money," Jard said, and I nodded. I thought I was saved.

First, I contacted my aide and told him to cook the books, make it look as though the money had gone to the war effort.

Luckily enough, I had records of the campaigns I sent my people out on. Whatever was left over could help cover my expenses for hiring mercenaries. Jard was employing a ton of them, so if we mobilized alongside them, nobody would notice it was all a lie. I was still worried, but that was how I came to participate in the upcoming invasion.

The journey itself wasn't a problem. If I had to point to any specific issues, it would be that the meals were plain and sleeping inside a carriage was a bit rough for someone used to living comfortably. More pressing was my concern about participating in a large-scale war against another country. Jard was excited to add some accomplishments to his name, but things would definitely not be that simple.

Knights sometimes died in conflicts with bandits. The same went for fighting mid-sized monsters, and to get to Yelenetta, we had to pass through the treacherous Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. Ludicrous! Why would we traverse a monster-filled mountain range on purpose? If I said so out loud, my head would be removed from my shoulders, but nothing about this was sane.

These were the thoughts that occupied me over our long journey. I paid no attention to Jard's bragging.

Eventually we arrived at Van's territory, our first destination. I'd heard it was a poor village, one that might collapse in a stiff breeze, but I was still curious to see it for myself. Van was also supposedly a baron now, but I was sure that some kind of bad joke.

And yet. Disbelief overtook me when I laid eyes on his territory.

"Jard, what is that?" I asked. "That…can't be Van's territory, right?"

It simply couldn't be. But even Jard went wide-eyed when he saw what I was looking at. "Is that…a wall? He had that built in only a year or so?"

I looked even closer at the wall standing before us. It was the very picture of sturdy, and the gates were heavily decorated. My brother and I continued our conversation as we entered the city, and I wondered, *Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?*

I had been led to believe that this originated as a tiny border village, and fortunately the plot of land itself wasn't particularly large. The city I was assigned to was still bigger, if nothing else.

But for some reason, we were being led out. "Why are we leaving?" Jard objected.

I backed him up. "Y-you better not be thinking of tossing us out!"

Our guide sounded unfazed when he said, "My apologies. I should have given you a better explanation. This is not Seatoh Village. The village itself was seeing extremely high adventurer traffic, so Lord Van created a separate town just for adventurers."

"H-huh?" Jard said like a fool. I couldn't blame him, though; the guide's words made little sense. *What is he saying?*

The gates opened. Beyond them was another fortress city, this one far larger. It quite literally took our breath away. Its design was unique, and it was easily large enough to house ten thousand people or more. Off to both sides of the well-maintained road were camping soldiers from the capital's Chivalric Order.

We proceeded along the road, bathed in the gazes of thousands of elite soldiers. It felt like we were criminals under arrest. Finally, we arrived at the front gates of this second fortress city, and I looked up at the enormous wall and gates, feeling as though I was looking up a steep mountainside. The small creek in front of us served as proof that, as unbelievable as it seemed, we weren't even truly in front of the gates yet.

"Open the gates! Lower the bridge!" the soldier yelled. A rectangular board I had assumed was part of the front gates revealed itself to be a drawbridge, and it came down quickly. What we had been looking at was the bottom of the bridge; given how

ornate it was, this was shocking. From afar, there was no way to know that it wasn't part of the gates.

With the drawbridge down, the actual gates opened. A maid appeared with a knight by her side and said, "Welcome to Seatoh Village. Lord Van is waiting for you."

Jard scowled. "He's making his older brother come to him?" he complained, but he kept his voice so low that even I, standing directly next to him, barely heard his words.

Little brother or not, now that he was a baron, it would be difficult to publicly criticize Van. All we could do was follow the maid. As we walked, I thought, *I've seen her somewhere before…*

The maid pointed to the buildings on the left and right. "Lord Jard, Lord Sesto, since this is your first time here, allow me to explain our village's facilities," she began, then went on to talk about the village.

According to her, Van had connections with not only the Adventurers' Guild and the Mary Chamber of Commerce, but also the Business Guild. He'd found a dungeon in the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, leading to constant adventurer traffic, and over a thousand adventurers currently resided in the area. This gave Van access to rare monster parts and materials. Even more surprisingly, dwarves had moved into Seatoh and set up a dwarf forge.

This insanity was too much for Jard. "Impossible!" he yelled, fuming. "How could all of that happen in only a year's time?!"

"I thought he was banished to a remote village," I explained placidly, "but it looks like that wasn't the case. The dwarves were probably already living here, leading the kingdom itself to put all its power behind the region's development. That's also why the Business Guild got involved."

Jard nodded and smirked. "Right, that must be it. Damn you, Van, and damn your good fortune. I've never even seen a dwarf before."

The maid narrowed her eyes. She wasn't the only one, either—all the nearby knights reacted similarly.

"What is it?" Jard snapped at the girl in a low tone. "Are you going to tell me I'm incorrect?"

But the slender maid showed no sign of backing down. "When Lord Van first arrived, the village was under siege from bandits. To protect his new territory, he took up his sword and fought them back. And when a dragon attacked the village, he risked his life to bring back Sir Esparda, who stayed behind to buy us time. None of this is the result of good fortune. This village became what it is now because of Lord Van."

Her eyes filled with tears and her fingers trembled, likely because she knew exactly who she was talking to. Jard took a step toward her and roared, "Insolent woman! No mere maid may speak to us like that!"

Despite the fear that made her shoulders shake, she refused to back down. But then a child's voice cut in.

"Whoa! Jard, Sesto! Long time no see! Have you both been well?"

The complete absence of urgency in the speaker's voice shocked Jard straight out of his anger. We both looked past the maid to the dozen or so people approaching from behind her. At the center of the pack was Van. Aside from having grown a tiny bit taller, he looked unchanged. I had no clue who the people behind him were, and while I had expected to find Dee and Esparda at his side, they were nowhere to be seen.

At length, Jard managed to squeeze out a few words. "Van, you need to do a better job educating your maid." The girl's shoulders jumped.

Van placed a gentle hand on his concerned maid's back and then stepped forward. "My apologies. Till has been looking after me since I was a little child, so she may have let her feelings get the

best of her." With a smile, he added, "She's normally an incredible maid, even if she can be a teeny bit scatterbrained at times."

The maid named Till shyly cast her gaze downward. This only served to further annoy Jard who, with an aggravated look on his face, said, "It has been some time, Van. Sesto and I had a look at your village. Not bad at all. It might be smaller than our cities, but it certainly seems busy and safe. Of course, I could have developed it much more." He shrugged.

The people behind Van looked exasperated. *Actually, wait a second. What's with this guy's elaborate attire?* The fabric was high quality and the ornamentation intricate. This was not the attire of someone headed into battle. In fact, his clothes were as ornate as Father's—but surely these people couldn't all be high-ranking nobility? If they were, it made no sense for Van to be the one showing them around. He may have recently acquired a peerage, but he was still only a baron. Were they letting him getting away with it because he was a child?

Either way, there's a good possibility they outrank us. We should greet them. I leaned past Jard and quietly called out, "Van, introduce the people behind you."

Only then did Jard notice the ornate attire of Van's company. Quietly, he said, "Mm, good point…"

Van must have heard him, for he stepped to the side with a smirk, letting us stand face to face with his guests. "The attractive middle-aged man in the center there is none other than King Dino En Tsora Belrinet. Next to His Majesty is the beautiful and powerful Viscount Panamera Carrera Cayenne, and…"

The introductions continued, but we didn't register a word Van said. That first casual introduction was of His Majesty. The others appeared to have significant peerages as well, but how could we be expected to keep listening after being introduced to the king?

"…And last but not least, my super-duper kind and talented maid, Till. She's also an amazing chef. Oh, and I can't possibly forget

Khamsin, who's becoming an amazing swordsman." Van smiled and waited for us to react.

"M-my sincerest apologies," Jard said clumsily. "I am Jard Gai Fertio of House Fertio. This is my younger brother, Sesto Ele Fertio. We have come to participate in the battle as representatives of House Fertio." We both bowed.

His Majesty scowled at us for a moment, then looked at each of our faces in turn. He cocked his head ever so slightly. "Hmm. We are preparing to invade Yelenetta, yet the marquis sent only his children to the front lines? Is this not the perfect opportunity for him to demonstrate his strength?" A smile graced his lips. "Or is this his way of saying that the two of you are stronger than he?"

Jard put on his best smile and shook his head, brimming with confidence. "Not at all. We both have a long way to go…though I aspire to one day surpass my father and elevate our house to even grander heights."

It was unclear how His Majesty received the response, but it was vital that he not mistake our intentions. With few other options available to me, I spoke up. "U-um, Father—Marquis Fertio—will arrive shortly. He decided to strengthen his forces…"

Despite my best efforts to explain the situation, His Majesty's expression remained unchanged. He sighed, gazing discontentedly at us. "It is fine. About what you said earlier—Jard, was it? You said you could develop this village further?"

Jard nodded. With all the confidence in the world, he said, "Of course. This territory seems to have received a great deal of hired help and supplies, but if I were in charge, I would not have designed it with such an odd shape. Aesthetically, it is breathtaking, but the current standard design for fortress cities is much more efficient. Additionally, I see few, if any, slaves. The judicious use of slaves vastly improves productivity."

I panicked quietly through all of this, assessing His Majesty's reactions. I really wished my brother would stop speaking without

thinking first. With the amount of money and manpower that must have gone into developing this city, it was entirely possible that His Majesty had a hand in it all. Hell, the design itself may have been His Majesty's idea.

Fortunately, it seemed we'd managed to avoid insulting His Majesty, for he simply nodded, his expression impassive. "Mm. So you say our kingdom's standard fortress city design is optimal? A year ago I would have thought the same. However, unfortunate as it may seem, Baron Van's design is far more effective than our standard layout. Even more astonishing is that he developed his territory without any outside aid. I recommend touring the region with that in mind; I am confident you will both learn a thing or two."

Jard and I both looked at Van, who beamed and puffed out his chest. *Van did all of this? He made this fortress city?*

Impossible. Van was banished with no wealth to his name, and little more than a year has passed since then. How could he possibly have designed and built such a city? This level of construction would require an insane amount of money and resources.

Jard seemed to be thinking the same thing, but there was no way either of us could go against His Majesty's words. All we could do was agree with his suggestion.

Jard and Sesto both begrudgingly agreed to do as His Majesty recommended. I had two members of the Seatoh Chivalric Order accompany them on their tour of the village. His Majesty wanted to look around as well, so we parted ways with my brothers.

FYI, I had already prepared lodging for them. I could have sworn daddy dearest was coming, so I'd readied a super nice room for him, but oh well; my brothers could stay there instead. They were in for the shock of their lives.

The group of us climbed to the top of the wall, where His Majesty looked down on the village. "Every time I come here, it is

filled with new things. Knowing you, I am sure you are already readying your next plan."

I turned my gaze to the road, prompting everyone with me to follow suit. Just below us, in front of the wall, was a moat with running water that traveled all the way to the lake behind the village and beyond. After a bit of a detour, it returned to the river from whence it came. I gazed upstream and traced my finger along the river.

"I have a few ideas, but right now I'm thinking about how to use this river to improve physical distribution. It's not wide enough to use as a canal, so if we want to carry heavy goods, we'll have to link a bunch of smaller boats together to carry the load. Also, since we have dwarves living here, it'd be nice if we could have them make stuff other than weapons: corrective glasses for people with bad eyesight, mirrors that better reflect people's forms, that kind of thing. Oh, and musical instruments would be nice too. I love the idea of a town filled with music."

Improvements to material distribution and lifestyle. More forms of entertainment. His Majesty seemed stunned by my current plans for the future of Seatoh Village. Did it sound impossible to him?

Nah, don't worry about it, Van. Who cares if someone complains about you talking up your ideal future? There'll be no complaints once you make it a reality.

Panamera smirked, pointing at one of our ballistae. "Will you not design more new weapons?"

I folded my arms and groaned a bit. "Hmm… I do have some ideas, but I don't have enough materials. If I had my way, I'll be able to create a weapon ten times more powerful than these ballistae."

His Majesty widened his eyes at me, blinked a few times, then erupted into laughter. "Ha! Ha ha ha! You are something else!" he proclaimed happily, his shoulders shaking. "The diversity of your ideas is incredible!"

Elsewhere, the other nobles directed cautious looks at me; having judged that His Majesty was fond of me, they'd decided that I was someone to watch out for.

How could you be so scared of a cutie like me?

"Well," Panamera said, "the weapons you make are terrifying, so I would be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to those, too. That said, we are in the process of invading Yelenetta. I would be grateful for any and all weapons you could share with us."

His Majesty nodded and looked toward the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. He narrowed his eyes and murmured, "Indeed. We must be quick. We may have the advantage right now, but our enemies have dragons and those cursed black balls. We must not let our guard down." The other nobles glanced at me, looking concerned. "Baron Van, rumor has it that the enemy deployed a weapon even more powerful than the black balls. What is it exactly? We looked over the report, but it was difficult to envision."

All eyes were on me. I was being asked, in essence, to describe the new cannons. Well, primitive as they were, they still had tremendous destructive power, enough to be a genuine threat. They had very low accuracy—it took numerous shots at the wall before they landed a single hit—but the loud noises they made and the way the earth itself shook on impact was more than enough to instill fear in people's hearts. Horses' hearts too. They were generally considered timid creatures.

Mages would certainly consider the cannons a threat. Depending on how they were used, we might find ourselves in a new world in which retaining mages was no longer a priority.

Before I could really think through all of this, I had to answer His Majesty. I gently shook my head and said, "It's actually a bit like the weapon I plan to make, so I'll start by explaining Yelenetta's version."

I used some trees to craft a model for His Majesty, making sure it was precisely the same type as Yelenetta's cannons. I heard

startled murmurs from the people behind His Majesty, shocked that I could produce a model so easily, but His Majesty was calm as he observed the wood block cannon. "Hmph," he said. "It is not as big as I expected."

I nodded and pointed at one of my ballistae. "For ballistae, the length of the bowstring and the materials it's made from are really important. Likewise, catapults need to be big to give projectiles more time to accelerate. But this new weapon is completely different. You load the barrel here with a large number of black balls, then insert an iron ball or whatever projectile you wish to fire. Next, you detonate the black balls inside, launching the projectile out with terrifying speed and force. In other words, as long as it's durable, the weapon itself can be rather small."

His Majesty seemed fascinated, peeking down the barrel of the cannon. He nodded. "So it fires iron balls from here? That is quite a threat, but I still think your ballistae are far more devastating weapons."

Hearing that he felt my ballistae were superior to the enemy's new cannons delighted me. How could I not feel proud? Unfortunately, reality wasn't so simple. "To be honest, while my ballistae *are* superior in every respect at the moment…there's still plenty of room for this cannon to be improved. With the ballistae, the best I can do is increase the number or make them bigger."

His Majesty glared at the cannon, looking grave. "You mean to say that this cannon can evolve further? You believe it will eventually surpass your ballistae?"

I was impressed by the speed with which His Majesty grasped the threat Yelenetta's new weapon could become. He truly was on another level. Most people would be incapable of seeing ahead when presented with such a foreign, inscrutable weapon.

I nodded, and then tried building the superpowerful but highly impractical cannon I'd been tooling with in my mind so that I could set it beside the Yelenetta cannon. I only had wood to work with so

it wouldn’t be usable, but if you thought of it like a clay model, it would still be pretty impressive.

Quickly morphing the timber into wood blocks, I made a foundation for the cannon, then produced a mechanism that would allow it to be rotated to the left and the right. Next, I made the gears that would enable adjusting its vertical angle, and finally the barrel of the cannon itself, over three meters long for maximum accuracy. I didn’t know if this was the right move, but I also designed the interior of the barrel as a spiral, so it would rotate projectiles on their way out.

Just like that, my superpowerful and highly impractical cannon was complete. My audience could do nothing but stare at it, wide-eyed.

“So I tried building the design I’ve had in my head, and depending on the quality of the gunpowder, I think it will fire much farther and more accurately than Yelenetta’s version. In other words, we’ll be capable of long-range attacks that not even mages could defend against.”

Chapter 9:
The Situation

"I SWEAR, SOMETIMES IT'S FRUSTRATING HOW OFTEN you surprise me," His Majesty said, his face betraying not an iota of actual frustration. In fact, he seemed to be in a great mood, peppering me with all sorts of questions. Propelled by his enthusiasm, I explained at length what made them such a threat and how they might evolve going forward.

Of course, I wasn't talking about the far future. I told him about how they could become bigger, smaller, or made for rapid firing. He seemed to latch onto the idea of a small cannon, which could basically be wielded like the firearms of my old world. Something of the sort would give even a humble farmer the power to take down an enemy, so it made sense that His Majesty had focused on this.

It wasn't all roses, though. The moment that kind of weapon became widely available, the nature of war would utterly transform.

Historically, if you equipped farmers with spears and had them cluster together, they could be reasonably effective on the battlefield. One tactic often used against mages was to have soldiers form V-shaped formations, like a bird with spread wings; another was to split up squads of one hundred men to form an open triangle of sorts, often referred to as a "fish scale formation," although that one wasn't super common.

If guns and cannons were introduced to the mix, these would all be things of the past. Tiny squads would prove extremely effective, making it possible to extend the warfront across a wider area. Guerilla tactics, surprise attacks, and sieges would emerge as powerful strategies. But even more alarming was the prospect of using all the above to set traps for the enemy.

Quailing under the weight of this gloomy future, I turned to face His Majesty. "As it stands, I do not believe Yelenetta possesses such weapons—but another country is supplying them with the black balls. We've taken the first linchpin of Yelenetta's national defenses, so I think it is safe to assume that whatever power is backing them will make a move. We should begin our invasion before Yelenetta can acquire a new type of weapon."

"I understand," His Majesty said quietly, his hand at his chin and his gaze cast downward. After a long moment's thought, he frowned and looked back up. "All right. We leave tomorrow. I intended to take a week to prepare, but as you say, we have only just occupied one of their key strongholds. Rather than wait for the rest of our forces to assemble, we should leave Seatoh Village now, in the order we arrived."

Decision made, he turned to the nobles and commanders behind him. "I am moving up the schedule! More Chivalric Orders than anticipated are assembled here, so we will move swiftly on to our new stronghold! We will strengthen the foundation we have erected in Yelenetta's territory so that it cannot be removed! Whatever resources we have, we will bring with us, and further supplies will be transported to us by the Chivalric Orders to come! We leave tomorrow morning—is that understood?!"

"Yessir!" his subjects responded, their mood changing in an instant. There was nothing like a command from their absolute sovereign to make people feel every inch the soldier. They sprang into action.

Someone asked, "Your Majesty, what should we do about our formation? I would like to have my order at the vanguard, if it's possible."

The commander of the order in question nodded. "We will stand as your shield and protect you."

"I intend to hire adventurers as extra security," His Majesty replied. "I will decide on our formation tomorrow and let you all

know. For now, make preparing whatever supplies we will need your top priority."

This was a country well used to war. It was evident in everyone's high spirits. Panamera in particular was probably psyched. I glanced around in search of her, only to spot her staring at me with her arms folded.

"Don't you have to get ready, too?" I asked, earning myself a sly grin.

"I am ready. We will have no trouble leaving tomorrow," she replied confidently.

I should have expected as much from a true warrior. Man, that one movie about three hundred warriors taking on an empire… If Panamera ever saw it, she'd be moved to tears.

Orders delivered, His Majesty approached me. "Things will be busy starting tomorrow. Lord Van, I have a request. It pertains to your ballistae."

I nodded immediately. "Oh, you can borrow all the ballistae you need. That includes the mobile ballistae and the war wagons we use to move them. I'll put in a request for the adventurers to help with their transport, and I'll also have my wonderful machine bow squad accompany you."

"Ooh, excellent! Now we won't have to worry about supplies! You have my gratitude, Lord Van."

He didn't stick around long, having expressed a desire to check on the dwarves and apkallu. The fact that he took so few soldiers with him spoke to his trust in the safety of Seatoh Village, which thrilled me. I watched him trot away merrily, then turned my gaze back to Panamera.

She wore a serious expression. "Let us lay everything out on the table."

"There's no table here," I joked.

"You dummy."

"Is this about the new weapon?" I asked, switching gears. "Or is it about how Yelenetta will react to us going forward?"

Panamera looked surprised for a moment. Then her face formed a powerful smile. "I should have anticipated you would know what I wanted to talk about. You sure do spend an awful lot of time thinking of me. Are you certain you're not falling for me?" she teased.

"I like you a lot, Panamera," I said, grinning, but Panamera groaned and stepped back.

"Boy, you are going to be a terrifying man when you're older. I suspect your name will go down in history. Just be sure you don't make Arte cry, understand?"

I frowned at her. "I would never make Arte cry," I said earnestly. "I want to take good care of her."

My response seemed to throw Panamera off. She furrowed her eyebrows and groaned yet again. "You're becoming more of a smooth talker every time you open your mouth. Though I suppose that is a skill a nobleman should possess." She sighed and locked me in her sights. "There's no point thinking about this. So, boy, what do you think? In our enemy's shoes, I would not stand for these constant defeats. I would strive to reverse our fortunes at all costs."

I sighed and nodded. "Yeah, absolutely. After all, in the past, whenever Scuderia invaded Yelenetta, we avoided the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range and traveled along the coast instead. The enemy's defenses are largely focused on protecting that region. This time, though, we've struck at a key point. We can continue north if we want to or head in any other direction, and no matter what we do, we'll be causing trouble for them. It's obvious that Yelenetta will be disadvantaged if we split up the battlefield, because they'll have to split their troops in at least three different directions."

Panamera's eyes narrowed. "Which is to say that they will not rest on their laurels."

I nodded. “Right. Even if we strike first, we’ll have to rush back if the fortress comes under attack. Losing it will mean losing our supply line and eventually being caught in a pincer attack.”

Panamera groaned, folding her arms. I watched her from the corner of my eye as I looked over at the smoke rising over the dwarf forge.

Eventually, I said, “I’m certain that His Majesty has already considered this. That’s why he wants to use the new stronghold as the foundation for this invasion.”

She shrugged and nodded. “Of course His Majesty has considered all possible outcomes. I simply thought that, with your knowledge of the enemy’s weapons, you might be able to predict Yelenetta’s next move more accurately. Okay, let me ask you this, boy: if you commanded Yelenetta’s army, what would you do?”

I grimaced and shook my head. “Well, you already know that I have a pretty unique fighting style. I would come up with all sorts of tactics, traps being the most effective. Black ball traps would prevent enemy forces from invading too easily, and once they were slowed down, I would use the cannon I spoke of earlier to make them into mincemeat.”

She winced, though I’d only answered her question. Her expression was even more grave than before. “Traps, you say? I had not thought of that. I will inform His Majesty immediately.”

Panamera then turned on her heel and led her bodyguards away.

Fear struck my heart. “Should I have said that?” I whispered. “Please tell me I’m not going to get summoned to the front lines again…”

Fortunately, I managed to avoid that fate. His Majesty had this whole “it sure would be lovely if you came with us” aura going on, but I did everything in my power to pretend I didn’t notice. In the

end, he and the others finished their preparations much earlier than expected and set off immediately.

I saw the king and Panamera off, but the line of soldiers went on for ages and I eventually got bored. They were marching through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range double file; with a force of more than ten thousand troops, it would take hours before everyone was gone. Quietly, I attempted to retreat so I could return to the manor.

"Where do you think you're going, Van?"

Caught red-handed. My timing was terrible: I bumped into Jard and Sesto just as they were leaving the village, and they noticed me on my way out.

My brothers both approached me, trailed by a group of mercenary types whose vibes were different from the members of the other Chivalric Orders. "Why are you trying to leave without seeing your older brothers off?" Jard asked, sounding kind of angry. "Or perhaps I should be asking, why aren't you coming with us?"

Not "kind of" angry, then. He was actually furious. But if he was going to be all snappy at me, I'd snap right back at him. *Is he seriously asking why? Because it's terrifying, duh! I'm nine, why would you even ask me that? And no, I'm not counting my mental age.*

I decided then and there to refer to Jard as "Brother Dimwit" from here on out. Putting on a troubled smile, I shook my head. "My apologies, it's just… You see, my territory is still quite weak, so if I sent any men from my small Chivalric Order into battle, this whole area would be in danger of collapsing. I cannot afford to leave."

Jard and Sesto glanced silently up at the wall surrounding Seatoh Village. It was a beautiful bit of architecture that received diligent maintenance, and it was breathtakingly impressive from below. Atop the wall sat a series of ballistae stationed at regular intervals, pointing outward.

"…"

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

My brothers looked away from the wall and back at their adorable baby bro, wearing expressions that were difficult to describe. Sesto pulled his chin in and laughed dryly. "What? A-are you claiming all of this would be in danger?"

"Weren't you the ones who said my village was nothing to brag about when you first arrived?" I asked, turning their words against them. "Personally, I agree. I have a long way to go before I can truly rest easy." They both bit their tongues. "The cities you governed were way more impressive, right?"

Sesto frowned and glanced at Jard, who snorted and jerked his chin. "O-of course! The development was far superior to this backwoods village! They aren't even comparable!"

He laughed, but I felt his mounting panic. Honestly, I understood his perspective. In a noble house that prioritized elemental magic over all else, losing out to his reject of a little brother must have been a serious blow to his pride.

Keeping my stubborn brothers in my field of view, I gazed dramatically into the distance like some pretty boy in a TV drama. Lacing my words with admiration for my brothers, I said, "One day, I hope to have a city I can be proud of. That's why I want to take my time and make Seatoh Village into an even better place. Brother Dim… Ahem, Brother Jard, Brother Sesto… You both have powerful Chivalric Orders, and I pray for your success on the battlefield."

Jard folded his arms and glanced behind him at the tough-looking mercenaries. When he realized they were staring back at him, waiting to see how he would respond, he cleared his throat. "M-mm… The strength of our Chivalric Orders is tremendous, and I have no doubt that we will be able to make up for your absence. I simply worried about taking away a chance for you to acquire your own accomplishments, but it would appear those concerns were unfounded!"

Sesto seemed relieved at the direction things were going. He nodded and put on a fake smile. “Th-that’s right. We were worried that you wouldn’t be able to perform any feats because you cannot use elemental magic… Ha ha…”

Now they were trying to act the part of considerate older brothers. Unfortunately for them, the mercenary outsiders were sneering derisively. Mercenaries could be a cruel bunch, and they essentially lived on the battlefield. Of course, it was scary that they were able to kill people they had no grudge against just for money, but their lack of attachment to their employers was also an issue. It took a large paycheck to ensure that mercenaries didn’t turn on their employers, to whom they felt no loyalty. Underpaid mercenaries would flee from losing battles or even betray their employers if the other side offered more money.

One way to judge what sort of group you were hiring was to carefully analyze their level of discipline, training, and equipment. The mercenaries Jard and Sesto had hired projected a threatening aura and were all garbed in completely different kinds of armor. They were a rough bunch, for sure. If someone told me they’d attacked some mountain bandits and stolen their stuff, I would believe them.

It also wasn’t difficult to discern their overall level of training. If Dee saw them, he’d happily step forward to retrain them. They looked weak. I struggled to understand why my brothers, as sons of a marquis, had hired these weirdos, but I wasn’t heading into battle, so it really didn’t matter to me. My only real concern was the prospect of someday having to fight alongside them, so I decided to really emphasize to Murcia and the others the importance of hanging back and defending the fortress. I didn’t want them getting caught in the crossfire of my dumb brothers.

I smiled at Jard and Sesto, then nodded. “Thank you for your concern! Good luck! I’ll be cheering for you both!

Murcia

I HEARD THE CHIVALRIC ORDER YELLING OUTSIDE early in the morning. I was used to it at this point, taking the cacophony as my cue to get out of bed. I approached the window and set my gaze outside, where I saw the Chivalric Order running as one. Dee seemed especially energetic, chasing after the armor-clad order members.

The scariest thing about it all was that Dee wore heavier armor than any of them. He was covered from head to toe, and he was also equipped with a large shield and the massive sword that was as long as he was tall. But despite the added weight, he was chasing the order and laughing at them.

In case you were wondering, my initial food and personnel concerns were solved by the goods Van was sending us and the adventurers who were transporting it all. The big problem was that the adventurers were hunting down tons of monsters while they performed security duties and they kept coming back with butchered monster parts. We didn't have the funds on hand to buy any of that stuff from them. Some of the adventurers were putting the parts on transport carriages and taking them home, but the rest were just sitting there.

Van himself had hired these adventurers, and they cut off the materials they intended to sell, then dried the meat that would otherwise rot. They also gathered timber and ore from the surrounding area, storing it all in the storage space in the castle town that faced Yelenetta. At this rate, the Mary Chamber of Commerce might dispatch a caravan.

At the moment, the Bell & Rango Company was making round trips from Seatoh Village, but I was still anxious about buying or trading materials, weapons, and daily necessities. Given that the population would only increase going forward, small purchases wouldn't be enough. A caravan from the Mary Chamber of

Commerce could fix that problem. But even then, it would be no easy task to service a road through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range so that caravans could freely come and go.

All the monsters in the area were on the large side. And if you let your guard down for even a moment at night, your carriage could be destroyed. It was also easy to imagine carriages sliding down cliffs when combat took place. Weighing the dangers against the potential profits, personally, I would choose not to dispatch a caravan.

"Though I'm sure that's not a good way to be thinking about it," I muttered as I changed.

It was a bad habit of mine to assume that things would go poorly from the outset; it made me hesitate to make decisions. Father had pointed this out repeatedly. And neither Father nor Van seemed to have this problem. Jard and Sesto also believed in their own decision-making, though in their case it was because they failed to think things through.

Father considered the worst-case scenario, then used that as the foundation for his strategy. Van was similar. When he put me in charge of this castle, I asked him what I needed to do to protect it. He looked down at the fortress city from above the top floor and said, "Personally, I'd think about what I would do if I was the enemy. First, I'd accept the cruel reality that I would take heavy casualties trying to storm Fortress City Murcia. I would also take great care to avoid ballista fire. Then I'd spread out wide to either side and destroy the wall with brute force.

"Another possible strategy would be to get as close as possible without being discovered; to do this, I'd have to cultivate the land to make a path. I'd cross through the dangerous mountains and attack from either the left or right flanks. Wyverns would make this possible. My final strategy would be starvation tactics: Yelenetta has already penetrated deep into Count Ferdinatto's territory, so they could invade from there and cut off our supply line."

He explained it all as if he were a veteran commander. I was speechless, but Van just smiled and continued.

"Of course, digging holes, launching attacks from the river, or striking at night are also options. Surprise attacks, basically. Either way, you have to be flexible. You're a careful person, Murcia, so I think you're well suited to defensive or field battles with smaller numbers of soldiers. You have Dee with you, so follow your heart!"

Then he returned to Seatoh Village like it was no big deal. Van always seemed like he was having fun and going with the flow, but the more I spoke with him, the more surprised I found myself by the depth of his thoughts and his consideration for me. He was still only nine, and I'd heard Esparda and Dee were always by his side, educating him. But even then, that could not account for what he had already become.

If someone were to tell me that Van was an elven child who was fifty years of age, I would have believed them.

I heard someone calling for me from a distance. Wondering what was going on, I stepped outside to find Arb yelling from a watch tower. Normally he would have come to see me directly, but he seemed to be in a hurry. Were we being attacked?

"Did something happen?!" I shouted quickly.

Arb pointed to the rear of the fortress city. "I see the royal banner! The royal army has arrived!"

Two separate emotions took hold of me. The first was a tremendous sense of relief; their arrival meant that I had successfully defended the fortress city. The second was anxiety over the certainty that I would have to play host to noblemen and noblewomen, His Majesty included.

I made a strangled noise. "Prepare to welcome them! Hurry!" I said, panicked, and Arb nodded vigorously.

"Yessir!"

Even as he responded, I was turning on my heel to sprint down the castle stairs. In the back of my mind, I pictured my father's face, and my stomach began to ache.

Chapter 10:
Revealing Fortress City Murcia

DEE AND ARB GRABBED A FEW DOZEN MEN AND hastened for the front gates. Even from a distance I could see the massive line of Chivalric Orders trailing down the road, the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range at their back.

One of the men atop the gates looked down, awaiting orders. "Open it!" I cried. "Open it!"

Dee and I positioned ourselves in front of the gates as they were thrown open. The first people we saw were Count Ventury and his Chivalric Order. Ventury, who had gray hair and the fierce gaze of a seasoned warrior, looked over at us and pulled his chin in.

"Ah, Marquis Fertio's eldest son. Lord Murcia, is it? You were given charge of this stronghold, then? I am glad to see you well."

"Th-thank you. I am also relieved to see you well, Lord Ventury."

Greetings out of the way, Ventury looked behind me and folded his arms. "That must be the famous dragon slayer, Sir Dee. Did you poach him from Lord Van?"

Before I could respond, Dee began to chuckle. "No, no. I may currently be the Murcia Chivalric Order's acting commander, but I will return to Lord Van's side soon enough! I wouldn't leave the Seatoh Village Chivalric Order to anyone else."

Ventury blinked a few times and turned back to me. "The Murcia Chivalric Order? Don't you mean the House Fertio Chivalric Order?"

His gaze was sharp. I'd never had cause to speak to a high-ranking head of house before, so I was a bit nervous, but I decided honesty was the best policy. "I received orders from His Majesty:

from now on the Yelenetta invasion is to rely heavily on Van's powers, so I am to assist him however I can. Van—Lord Van—put me in charge of this new fortress city. We're already prepared to welcome the royal army, so please make your way to the central castle."

Ventury squinted and cast his gaze behind me. "This place does seem to have undergone significant changes, and its unique qualities definitely come from Lord Van. So, what is this new stronghold's name?"

I fell silent.

Ventury frowned at me. "What is the matter?"

"…Th-this is Fortress City Murcia," I admitted, resigning myself to my fate.

Ventury burst into laughter. "I see! Let me guess: Lord Van's work?"

I nodded. "That is correct."

Ventury continued to laugh. "How very like him! Now, would you be so kind as to tell me where the Chivalric Orders will stay?"

"O-of course! The fortress city itself is rather complex in its design, so the M-Murcia Chivalric Order will serve as your guide." I turned around and called out to the man standing next to Dee. "Marcos, please show House Ventury's Chivalric Order to the small castle in the back."

Marcos straightened up and stepped forward with a vigorous "Yessir!"

He was one of the knights with whom I had the longest relationship. While small in stature, Marcos worked hard to become an elite, and he also wielded useful magic.

Even when faced with the commander of the House Ventury Chivalric Order, a man who stood a full head taller than him, Marcos puffed out his chest. "I am Marcos, a private in the Murcia Chivalric Order. This way, please!"

He led the way, and the Chivalric Order bowed to me and followed him. Ventury's troops moved with perfect coordination, clearly well used to warfare. Once they were gone, Ventury pointed past the gates.

"I will stay here until His Majesty arrives. Where should I wait?"

Oops. I'd forgotten to prepare a resting spot. "Ah, right! Please wait a moment while I prepare a tent for you."

Trying to hide my panic, I instructed a nearby soldier to prepare a tent. When the next Chivalric Order passed through the gates, I greeted the nobleman and commander and advised them to head further back, and in the meantime, my people finished setting up the tents.

"Right this way, please," I said to Ventury.

"Mm."

I guided Ventury and the others to their resting areas, complete with chairs. Two more Chivalric Orders arrived immediately thereafter, but they were both smaller orders, so I was able to finish greeting them relatively quickly.

Eventually came a group bearing the royal banner. The four-horse carriage passed through the gates, and Ventury emerged from his tent.

His Majesty poked his head out of his carriage. "Oho, to think this fortress could change so much! The last I saw it, it was in shambles. I cannot wait to tour the interior!"

I had to be cognizant of every word that passed my lips. I could not afford to be disrespectful to him in any way. As I took a deep breath, I felt a single bead of sweat roll down my forehead.

"Your Majesty, welcome to Lord Van's new territory. I hope you will enjoy your stay." I lowered my head, trying to swallow my

nerves.

His Majesty slowly descended from his carriage. He looked at me. “Hmm, you seem to be performing your duties splendidly. How would you like to give me the tour yourself?”

When he smiled, relief settled over me. *Thank goodness. He’s in a good mood.* I bowed and said, “It would be an honor to serve as your guide, Your Majesty.”

“Excellent. Then lead the way.”

It was a short exchange, but I was too nervous to carry on extended pleasantries. All I could really do was try to avoid making a bad impression. Other nobles and Chivalric Orders continued to arrive while all of this was happening, but His Majesty took priority. I shot Dee a silent glance; he issued some kind of order to Arb, who made his way to the front gates, leaving a handful of knights behind. It seemed Arb would be in charge of handling the rest of the nobles as they arrived.

Dee, Arb, and the machine bow squad, all tasked with defending the fortress city, were Van’s people. Once the Murcia Chivalric Order was filled out, they would all return to Seatoh Village. Could I really handle things without Dee or Arb? The Chivalric Order I commanded had many talented men like Marcos, but they lacked experience, and it wasn’t just them; I was inexperienced, too. In fact, I had significantly less experience than they did.

But perhaps thinking this way was my real problem. I lacked confidence. How could someone as unreliable as me be trusted with the defense of a key stronghold? And how could I keep doing so without His Majesty noticing how short I fell in every regard?

With all of these negative thoughts racing around my head, I failed to explain any of the facilities on the tour. I only spoke if His Majesty or Ventury spoke to me first.

“Lord Murcia, what are those small castles?”

"O-oh, right. As you can see, it is exceedingly difficult to get to the center of this fortress city without navigating a complex path. These smaller castles beyond the wall function as defense points. We also have multiple vantage points on the wall for archers, where they can take out enemies trying to attack the small castles."

Ventury looked up at the wall. "That sort of design became outdated long ago. In an age of powerful mages, some would argue that such a trap could easily be countered by knights standing at the vanguard to block the arrows. What would you say to that?"

He wasn't trying to insult the design, merely asking a question born of true curiosity. Given his status as a veteran soldier, his question directed everyone else's attention to me. Van and Dee had told me all about how this fortress city could be defended and the applications of all the facilities within it, but if I didn't display confidence as I explained how it all worked, my words would fall over deaf ears.

I strengthened my resolve, then faced Ventury directly. "Fear not. In addition to the walls surrounding the fortress city, a contraption called a 'sengan' provides further protection. It is not easily destroyed. Lord Van has also developed multi-shot machine bows that can be used from above this sengan. Even if heavy infantry protected the mages, they could not block all of the arrows fired their way. In fact, this structure is designed to make taking out any mages who manage to break past the walls simple and efficient."

Ventury raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Ah, I see. I suppose an ordinary mage could do little against Van's fearsome ballistae. Mages like us could always destroy the wall from afar… No. No, in that case the fortress could simply attack us with the ballistae lining the walls. I see. This superstructure is indeed impregnable!"

The other nobles began voicing their agreement, one after another. "So it would be difficult to strike with magic from afar, but also to attack with brute force… I see now. I pity anyone who tries to take this fortress city."

"As expected of one of Lord Van's designs!"

"Quite right, quite right."

A slight sense of inferiority washed over me as I listened to them, but I was also genuinely happy to hear my little brother receive so much praise.

I raised my head and said, my voice coming out a bit louder than intended, "Exactly! This fortress city is nothing like it was before! And the surprises don't end with the small castles or the city's interior design: there are countless little traps and systems all over the place! I heard from Van that he wanted to add more, but as it stands, I doubt any fortress city out there is more deserving of being called impregnable! As the person in charge, I can state that definitively!"

Crap, I screwed up already! I was so excited to hear them praise Van. Funny, I don't think I would have rambled like that if it were me instead of Van. I just don't have that kind of confidence in myself…

Cold sweat rolled down my face while I waited for His Majesty's reaction. The man burst into laughter and gently patted me on the back. "Ha ha ha! I see, I see! I thought you to be a bit unreliable at first, but I clearly could not have hoped for a better governor! That confidence of yours recommends you," he said, more jovially than I could have anticipated. "Actually, I realize now that I have yet to learn the name of this new fortress city. Judging by how definitively you called it impregnable, surely it must have a name?"

I swallowed hard, but there was no way to avoid answering him. "Fortress City Murcia," I said quietly, making everyone blink a few times.

I led our visitors to the castle tower at the stronghold's center, even as they chuckled at me. My face was blazing, yes, but at least now His Majesty and the others were conversing freely with me, so

perhaps this was for the best. They'd gotten the impression that I was a confident governor. Personally, I was pretty embarrassed about gushing about my much younger brother's accomplishments as if they were my own, but…all was well that ended well.

With deep relief, I reached the top of the castle tower and turned to face the others. Ventury came up first, followed by His Majesty, and the sight visibly took their breath away.

I knew how they felt. Every floor of this castle was designed so that ballistae or machine bows could be fired from it, and each window had a sturdy covering. The interior of the castle was fascinating, certainly, but it was also filled with drab rooms and hallways and a narrow staircase; the top of the castle tower, meanwhile, opened in all directions, allowing warm light in. And every direction other than that of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range showed nothing but blue skies.

As if drawn in by the blue horizon, His Majesty and the others walked toward the terrace. Eventually, they recovered enough of their wits to voice their admiration for the view.

"Oooh!"

"This is incredible!"

I followed them out to the terrace. I'd seen it many times already, but even I found myself moved by the tremendous view. Under the blue sky, stretching out toward the horizon, lay an open field bifurcated by the main road. The stunning new castle town was directly in front of us, and to the left and right you could make out parts of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range.

When you climbed the claustrophobic tower stairs, this was the view that greeted you at the top. The sense of liberation it granted was deeply refreshing. Even the breeze felt amazing. But it wasn't all for show. Van's designs served a practical, strategic purpose, and it was time to explain that to the others.

"The top floor here is called the castle tower. The fortress city was designed like a staircase leaning on the slope of the hill. In

other words, the wall and gates that face Yelenetta are at the lowest point of the superstructure, crowned by the watchtowers. Next is the castle tower of the first small castle, then the second, then the third. Where we stand now is the highest point in the stronghold.

"Each castle functions as its own defense point, but a key element in this fortress city's defense system is that even in other places our troops can keep an eye on our surroundings. Additionally…" I moved to the railing of the terrace and put my hand on it, then pointed at the main road. "The ballistae on the floor below us can fire as far as the center of that main road."

This caused a stir. When I turned around, everyone was staring at the road. They could not hold back their surprise.

"Say what?!"

"A true threat to anyone who would try to take this fortress city."

Frankly, I understood where they came from. Even Van, the mastermind behind the ballistae, had been shocked by the firing range when he tested one out for himself. Yes, the ballistae were less accurate at that range, but they were still a massive threat to anyone approaching the stronghold.

The powerful mages in the group were even more impressed than the rest, given that they normally reigned over the battlefield. Unable to hide the smile creeping across his face, His Majesty remarked, "And you say that he still wants to do more? Now I'm curious as to his plans."

Ventury put his hand to his chin, his expression one of careful thought. "Hm. Will we be able to handle Yelenetta's new weapons?"

"According to Van, at their current technical level, we should have no issues. Their cannons have low accuracy already, and the greater the distance at which they fire, the worse that will get. Should one of their shots manage to reach us, the projectile would likely land somewhere in the fortress city, but not necessarily on its actual target. Essentially, it would be pure luck."

This was, word for word, what Van had told me. His Majesty and Ventury both appeared satisfied by my answer.

"I see," said Ventury.

"In that case, we have nothing to be concerned about," His Majesty agreed. "If our enemy chooses to strike at this fortress city with full knowledge of its defensive capabilities, they will do it in an unorthodox manner. They would look for some kind of weakness or opening."

Van was the most well-researched of us all when it came to the black balls, and it was that knowledge that earned him such deep trust from His Majesty and Ventury.

As other nobles joined the conversation, I noticed some late arrivals beginning to climb up the castle tower. Among them were two faces I hadn't seen in a year.

"Brother Murcia?"

Jard and Sesto both looked shocked to see me.

Sesto

AFTER TRAVERSING THE LABYRINTHIAN CASTLE, I made my way up a set of steep stairs. I was genuinely astonished by the outer wall, the gates, and the beauty of the fortress city's interior, but the castle at the center of the stronghold was all dark hallways and stairs.

"I suppose this is the best that could be done in a couple of months," Jard murmured, putting on airs. "It must have required a great deal of manpower to accomplish." But the reality was that we could never have accomplished any of this.

To get to the fortress city we had to traverse the treacherous Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, but we arrived to find a beautiful and well-maintained road. There were rest facilities scattered along the

path, and to add insult to injury, the mountain road ended in a strangely designed stronghold, all of which was said to have been made by Van when His Majesty first attacked Yelenetta.

The other Chivalric Orders marching with us at the rear discussed it avidly. We entered the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range braced for the dangers ahead, but in total, the journey lasted not even two weeks. We had the road, rest facilities, and fortress to thank for that, and all of it was Van's doing. The Chivalric Orders were understandably grateful for this, so they were abuzz over Van and his accomplishments.

Jard took every opportunity to complain about this, but after a time I lost the drive to keep whining. Jard was confident in his fire magic and proud of his administrative skills. He believed he was suited to lead troops on the battlefield. But I wasn't like him. I knew that I had failed as a governor, and when it came to leading people into combat against mountain bandits, I was nothing to write home about. Sure, there were opportunities for me to wield my fire magic, but I never accomplished much of note. If anything, I got in others' way. Comparing myself to Van made me feel like a pitiable fool.

Honestly, the praise for Van all came down to his abnormal magic abilities. If I had magic like that, I could have accomplished as much as him, and I would have been the one to receive a peerage. In the end, it was all down to luck. When my magic was appraised and I learned that I possessed not just elemental magic, but fire elemental magic, I thought my future was secured. But in my brief year away from home, everything changed. The war with Yelenetta was huge, certainly, and if it were only that, then perhaps I'd have viewed it as a good chance to make a name for myself. The real problem was Van.

When Father sent Van to some middle-of-nowhere village, I assumed Van wasn't long for this world. Thanks to his fantastical magic, though, not only did he turn his village into all of this, he was even lucky enough to have a dragon conveniently pop up for him to slay.

I continued to walk through the castle, thinking, *Just how much can the world love him? If only that could have been me.* Eventually, I spotted light at the top of the stairs: we had arrived at the top floor.

Following Jard to the top, I was greeted by a breeze of fresh air redolent of trees and leaves. I heard the sounds of iron grinding against iron…and a familiar voice.

I turned my head, looking past the crowd to seek the source of the voice. Ahead of us stood more than a dozen armor-clad people and, in the back, a single person looking our way.

"Brother Murcia," I whispered.

Murcia immediately recognized us. "Jard? Sesto? Are you telling me Father doesn't intend to participate in a battle this size?"

His whispers seemed so much louder than they were. Jard opened his mouth to say something, but before he could get the words out, the other nobles accompanying us dropped to their knees and offered loud greetings. "Your Majesty! I apologize for our late arrival!" said one man, still in his prime.

From the back of the room, His Majesty approached us and nodded. "You need not apologize. I merely used the extra time to tour our new fortress city. As I'm sure you have all seen by now, it is tremendous. With this new fortification as our home base, we will crush Yelenetta with ease." He chuckled, his shoulders shaking.

One of the few noblewomen among us poked her head forward. She was Viscount Panamera, a noblewoman who'd joined the rear guard to lend us aid because of our tardiness. Rumor had it that she was one of the people who helped slay the dragon that attacked Van's village. On our journey through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, she'd used powerful fire magic to handily set multiple large monsters ablaze. I felt confident assuming that she was the primary reason Van had managed to slay the dragon at all.

She had a commanding presence as she stepped forward, the same attitude she had displayed during our interactions earlier in the

march. “Well, well,” she said. “I was excited to see this place for myself, but it is as you say, Your Majesty. It far exceeds my expectations.”

His Majesty nodded and spread his arms out wide. “For ten long years, despite our power and resources, we have failed to extend our borders. Ten years, frozen in time. But I am confident that we can move forward at last. Time moves for us once again! As you must all be aware, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. We will carve away Yelenetta’s territory, and the achievements will go to those who act quickly!”

His smile was fierce, his words those of someone with absolute strength. Words of utter confidence. Words that seemed imbued with magic itself.

He’s right. This is my chance to make a name for myself here. If the fighting gets too fierce, I could be killed…but as long as I stay with a faction that avoids the heavy fighting, I should be able to claim some achievements. But which faction? Who will give me the best chance to use my powers?

As I pondered this, I saw Jard grinning out of the corner of my eye, his fists clenched. He didn’t intend to miss this opportunity to climb the ranks. But while his magic was second only to Father’s, his ragtag group of mercenaries were hardly dependable.

I gave my brother a sidelong glance. *I suppose I could just use him and, if things get bad, abandon him.*

Final Chapter:
From All Positions

Cosworth Yelenetta

OUR ONLY SOURCE OF LIGHT WAS THE SUNLIGHT that shone through the entrance of the large red tent. The rest of the tent was bathed in darkness so thick it felt like we were deep in the woods. Materials, equipment, and booze were scattered haphazardly to the side. The ground, covered in all sorts of low-growing weeds, was overlaid with a thick carpet upon which I sat cross-legged, gazing at the men who sat in front of me. Despite my cross-legged posture, their faces were much closer than mine to the ground, and every time I tried to look them in the eyes, they cast their gazes down to it.

My little brother Istana and Commander Hellenic each knelt on one knee, their arms on the ground and their heads lowered to me. Here in Yelenetta, this was a traditional, formal way to express absolute loyalty to another, but it was also the stance taken when issuing a deep apology. Which of the two was this? A tricky question indeed.

"I require more details," I said to their bowed heads.

Hellenic twitched in response. Eventually, Istana slowly raised his head, his expression one of absolute exhaustion. Had the battle been that fierce? Istana may have been my little brother, but he was often difficult to read.

Istana took a long breath, collected himself, and said, "I might ultimately repeat what was said in the previous report, but permit me to explain. The enemy took Werner Fortress. We tried to reclaim it immediately, but we failed. In the second battle, we caused damage to their forces, but our side took far greater casualties. We

lost because we did not anticipate such a large armed group to cross the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. Moreover, the enemy managed to build a fortress between the mountain path and our own stronghold, which should have been an advantageous position."

Having echoed precisely what was in the earlier report, Istana fell silent, looking up at me expectantly as if he had no more to say. I ruminated over this information, but wrapping my mind around the situation was no simple feat. I found Istana's failure to defend the stronghold with which he had been entrusted difficult to comprehend, and I failed to understand how my other younger brothers had likewise lost battles in three different places. Battles they should have handily won. It was unbelievable.

Reports had come in on all these events, but even now, I failed to understand elements of what had transpired. Pushing through the beginnings of a headache, I posed another question. "When we built Werner Fortress directly ahead of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, we created a situation in which any would-be invaders would be forced to watch their backs for monsters. Certainly, a fortress at the foot of the mountain range would be desirable, but building such a fortress would be difficult. Am I wrong?"

Istana frowned, thinking this over. "I thought the same as you, but the reality is that Scuderia has done just that. When they finished, a small child, likely an earth mage, stood atop the hill with a knight by his side and declared war against us, and an immense wall of earth appeared soon after. We attacked them with our black balls, but they were able to repair the wall so quickly that we were unable to bring it down. Their ability to construct a fortress at that speed makes them a clear and present threat. In fact, that skill might even eclipse our cannons."

No new information was forthcoming from Istana, then. I couldn't help but sigh. Casting my gaze at Hellenic, I said, "I understand what happened at Werner, even if I am not particularly satisfied by the answers I've received. I assume you heard about what happened on the other battlefields? A giant crossbow with

breathtaking range, a pair of immortal knights… None of these reports are believable."

"That was the mysterious party who appeared in House Ferdinatto's territory, yes? They did not appear at Werner Fortress, so it is doubtful that they're part of Scuderia's royal army. Scuderia must have received help from some other large nation on the Central Continent." Hellenic lowered his gaze.

"That's possible, but I think the chances of it are low. The Solstice Empire is the Central Continent's greatest power. Weapons may have been acquired from another country, yes, but they could never stand up against the might of the empire's cannons. On top of that, we are in possession of all routes leading into the Central Continent. If any other nations tried to develop diplomatic relations with Scuderia, we would know."

Istana furrowed his eyebrows and let out a troubled sigh. "Then how did Scuderia undergo such rapid technological advancement?"

"That is the question," Hellenic agreed. "Even if they spent the past few years developing new weapons, this is too much and too soon. We would have caught wind of such a thing before we invaded them, especially considering we are constantly at war."

Istana nodded. I agreed on that point, but ultimately, the most plausible explanation was still that Scuderia had developed these new weapons themselves.

Spending further time on this debate was fruitless. What mattered most was defeating Scuderia. Since we were borrowing the strength of the Solstice Empire—receiving powerful aid from outside sources—defending ourselves was no longer enough. We needed to be the most powerful nation on the continent. Otherwise we would be bled dry, left behind as a minor power to be manipulated by the empire.

"I am sure you both understand this, but it bears repeating: we cannot back down. If we lose shamefully to Scuderia, the empire

will forsake us and almost certainly extend a cooperative hand to our enemy. They need an alliance with a powerful nation here in order to have control of this continent," I explained. Their faces tensed up. "Winning is all that matters. I do not care about the veracity of the information we receive about our enemy; we must put it all on the table, stay on guard, and deliver Scuderia a critical blow."

Three weeks had passed since then, and at this point, open combat had probably begun between our two nations. If the people in charge over there were as brainless as that prince who tried to attack Seatoh Village, they'd probably use the same strategy to attack Fortress City Murcia, and if they did that, they would lose. Every. Single. Time. Panamera and Ventury, two extraordinarily powerful mages, were both on standby in Fortress City Murcia. The enemy's primitive cannons would be annihilated on approach. The real problem would be them coming at Murcia with a different strategy altogether.

Under normal circumstances it would have been impossible to invade Yelenetta without breaking through multiple fortresses and strongholds along the coast. That was why passing through the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range and straight into the center of Yelenetta was so effective. As far as the enemy was concerned, this was the worst-case scenario.

If we marched out of Fortress City Murcia toward their capital city, we could potentially take control of the entire country within a few months' time. And in the event of them somehow preventing that from happening, we could launch an attack on their coast and strip away twenty percent of their land. Yelenetta possessed no means by which to defend both areas simultaneously, and if their neighboring nations realized this, those neighbors might approach Scuderia with offers of alliance.

If that happened, Yelenetta would be finished. They would crumble from the inside, starting with their most cowardly nobles. In

other words, Yelenetta's best move was to retake Fortress City Murcia as quickly as possible.

During moments like this, it was important to consider the unexpected outcomes of the enemy taking a different strategy than anticipated. "What would I do if I was in their position?" I whispered inside my manor's office, staring down at the map of the continent I'd gotten from Apollo.

Arte and Khamsin both poked their heads out from beside me, taking their own looks at the map. "Are you thinking about what Yelenetta might do?" Khamsin asked.

I grinned and nodded. "Yeah, but His Majesty will have considered anything I could possibly come up with. Still, I figured I might as well prepare for any eventuality."

Khamsin nodded enthusiastically. "Amazing, Lord Van! I'm certain you'll think of things that even His Majesty has yet to consider!"

"Ha ha, thanks." I smiled at Khamsin, then looked back down at the map.

Arte chose that moment to say quietly, "Um, what do you think will happen?"

I groaned and laced my hands behind my head. "Hmm, great question. If they have complete confidence in their military strength, they'll probably try to take back the fortress city. Simple, right? They'll be in a great position if they manage that. But if they aren't confident they can win, well, that's the real question. They could maybe post up some of their forces near the fortress city to prevent Scuderia from moving onward, then try and attack another location? You know what they say: lose a battle to win the war." I pointed at the roads on the map. "They could also lure our forces out of the fortress city and hit us with a trap, but that would be too obvious considering the lay of the land."

Fortress City Murcia was directly in front of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range. Yelenetta's capital city was to its northeast, and

while there were a handful of defensive strongholds on the way there, that was about it for obstacles. The handful of towns decorating the path likely posed no real military threat, and the road itself was flat, with only a single river in the way. A bridge ran across it, and to cross it with such a large army, you'd have to reorganize into a really tight formation. If the enemy managed to launch a surprise attack there, depending on the timing, they could deliver a decisive blow before we had a chance to regroup.

I was still looking at the bridge when Khamsin and Arte both snapped to the same realization.

"Oh, you mean the bridge is dangerous?" Khamsin asked first. Arte shot me a serious look.

It's like they're checking their answers with me, I thought with a smile. "Well, I could be wrong, but there's nowhere around the bridge to hide a large military force. At best, they could annoy us with cannon fire from a distance, but that won't be terribly effective. If they take out the bridge, they could slow us down, but they can't exactly beat us like that either… That's why I think they'll try to force a retreat."

"So where do you think they will engage us in battle?" Arte asked, frowning.

"If I was in charge…" I pointed at a spot on the map. "I guess I'd use this town as bait for a surprise attack. Since Scuderia has a host of powerful mages, it would be wise to avoid any kind of battlefield that would work in our favor."

They both seemed puzzled by my words. "What do you mean?" asked Arte.

Khamsin said, "What do they have to gain by using a town as bait?"

I started to answer but was interrupted by Till arriving with tea. "I see you're all studying hard, but how about you take a break for now?" she asked with a smile, setting tea and snacks on the table. It all looked delicious.

"Wow! Thanks!" I said.

"Thank you very much," said Arte. We both reached for the snacks.

"…May I have some too?" Khamsin whispered.

He must've been hungry; normally he'd wait for Till to say something. He had probably been using his brain too much.

Till smiled behind her hand. "Of course. Help yourself, Khamsin."

Khamsin smiled brightly in return and reached for one of the snacks. Till and I watched over him warmly. Arte, meanwhile, was staring at the map while she munched on a cookie.

She must have still been thinking about our earlier conversation. It was rare for her to do something like this, given the emphasis she placed on manners.

"So…it's not exactly a strategy I'd ever want to use myself, but if the enemy lured us into a walled town, they'd be able to engage us in close-range combat," I explained. "Assuming they were willing to sacrifice themselves, they could use the black balls to create chaos on the battlefield, which would reduce the effectiveness of our mages and machine bows. Though the standard infantry and mercenaries would make up the majority of casualties in the first town, because His Majesty would be the last to enter it."

They all looked up at me. "What a horrible strategy," Arte murmured, looking grim. "What do you mean by 'first town?'"

"Are you saying that they'll use the same tactics in other locations?" asked Khamsin, his tone and expression identical to Arte's.

I nodded at them, then slid my finger forward on the map. "They'll kill a few thousand soldiers in this town, then a few thousand in the next. It's hard to tell from this map, but if it looks like they can hide a large army in these small woods, they'll attack from behind when we try to strike at this next stronghold. In every

combat exchange until then, our most important people will be at the rear, so if they play their cards right, they could potentially assassinate His Majesty," I explained delicately.

Till, Arte, and Khamsin all swallowed hard. Till said, "Then at this rate…"

"Should we not go to aid them?" Arte asked.

They looked deeply concerned. I panicked and waved a hand, quickly shooting down my own theory. "Look, this isn't set in stone! As I said earlier, it's likely that they'll try to invade Scuderia or do something about Fortress City Murcia. It's also possible, but less likely, that they will focus on defense and request aid from an allied nation. I personally doubt they'll take such a laid-back approach to the war, but they have a few options available to them." I forced a smile.

Till and Khamsin nodded, though they still seemed troubled. But Arte hung her head, looking even more concerned than before. In an unsteady voice, she whispered, "D-do you think they'll attack House Ferdinatto again…?"

Arte and Khamsin jumped in to reply before I could. "I am sure House Ferdinatto will be fine."

"I heard all about how you really beat their butts before, so I bet they're too scared to go anywhere near your family's territory."

Arte glanced at me. I met her gaze and nodded. "They're right. It's unlikely that they'll try to attack your family again, given that they've already lost there once before. Hmm…" I pulled my finger along the map again. "If they plan to invade before we take their capital… They can't use the ocean or the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, so…"

Eventually, I stopped on a neighboring country. At that very moment, someone knocked at the office door.

"Lord Van! Apollo from the Business Guild has a pressing matter he wishes to discuss with you!"

I had a bad feeling about this. "…Tell him to come in."

Side Story:
Sword Technique

"PLEASE, JUST ONE MORE ROUND."

"…I think it's about time we take a break."

From afar, I saw Khamsin and Lowe facing off against each other, both shirtless and covered in sweat. Khamsin held a wooden sword wrapped in a flexible hide, and Lowe had dropped to sit on the ground. Despite the exhaustion emanating from Lowe, Khamsin was still gunning for more.

I watched, smiling, as Khamsin looked around. His gaze landed on me. "Lord Van, would you join…?"

Despite his trepidation about asking, his eyes were practically sparkling. He'd been winning against Lowe since last week, and I'd begun to wonder if he finally had the hang of combat against the young knight. Obviously, he didn't win every match, but he was coming out victorious more frequently than before.

I had little doubt that Khamsin could sense his own growth, giving him a sense of genuine accomplishment. There were few things as satisfying as rapidly improving at something. In fact, I also got the feeling that he was getting taller; he had always been taller than me, but I thought that gap was beginning to widen.



I'd spent this entire time seated on my chair and watching the two of them spar, and now Khamsin was looking right at me and issuing me a challenge. Naturally, everyone turned to me.

Cursed Chivalric Order. Don't think I didn't see you all avoiding Khamsin's gaze because you don't want to go up against him and his limitless energy. You've got a lot of nerve looking at me now, jerks!

Unfortunately, although Dee had been training me personally for years, I was still weaker than Lowe. Granted, it would have been weird for me, a ten-year-old kid, to defeat a knight who was in his twenties and had plenty of real-world combat experience, but I digress.

Well, if we ignored the fact that Khamsin, who was eleven, was beating him just fine.

Okay, I can just act mature here and brush him off. I gave him a strained smile. "I doubt you have anything to gain from fighting me, Khamsin."

For some reason this only stirred up the members of my Chivalric Order. "Ooh!"

"Look at his confidence!"

"I knew it! Lord Van is not a warrior to be trifled with!"

Are they misinterpreting my words? Or am I just imagining that? But the knights only grew louder.

"Ooooh!"

"Lord Van is provoking him!"

"That smile is filled with strength!"

Wait, no it wasn't! I was just tilting my head! Are you guys even looking at me?!

I tried to deny all of this, but before I could, Arte said, "Huh? Really?" She sounded genuinely confused.

Till beamed, full of pride. "Lord Van is a prodigy, after all!"

I felt all my escape routes receding from my grasp. I looked over at Khamsin, who was still waiting quietly for a response with a gleam in his eye. Did he sense the same thing I did? Or was he misinterpreting my strength like everyone else?

I had to clear this up as soon as possible, and I tried to. "W-wait. Wait, wait, wait. Seriously, I…"

But Arte fixed me in her own sparkling gaze. "I want to see you fight!"

Who could say no to such a pure girl's wish? I flashed her a thumbs-up and a dashing smile. "Ha ha! I'm on it!"

This is just how guys are. Where Arte couldn't see me, I let out a sigh, and then I rose to my feet and headed over to where Lowe was still breathing heavily. "Can I borrow a wooden sword?" I asked, awash with despair.

Lowe shot me a knowing smile and handed me a sword. He didn't say it aloud, but he and I both knew how strong I was, and he definitely knew how I was feeling.

Well, I've got two cute girls watching me, so I can't afford to look dorky. I'll give this my all.

Mentally putting together a strategy, I pointed the tip of my sword at Khamsin. "Come at me," I said with a smile.

Khamsin nodded sharply. "Here I come!" In the next moment, he sprang at me with his sword.

Most of his formative experience as a swordsman involved fighting much taller adversaries, so he tended to approach his opponents from a lower stance. As always, he drew his sword from his hips, bringing it up diagonally from a low position, but because I was smaller than pretty much everyone, I had to be very tricky when I fought anybody. Trickier than Khamsin, even. If nothing else, I had plenty of experience on that front.

In this situation, it was key that I attack Khamsin immediately, while he was unguarded and riding his own momentum. I was

insanely nervous, but I made it a point to move and look like none of this was any sweat off my back as I warded off Khamsin's slash. "Hmph!" I stepped back, changing the trajectory of Khamsin's attack by hitting the side of his sword. It was easy to do with the vector of his strength going in one direction.

"Urgh…!"

Khamsin's posture broke down ever so slightly, but he made it a point not to swing with all his strength, so he was able to correct his stance quickly and move on to his next attack. I was still Khamsin's lord, though, and I was confident that I knew his swordsmanship better than anyone. I knew all his quirks.

He emphasized his speed when he fought, so I knew how he would move after a slash like that. If he swung from the left to the right, then his next attack would either come down from above or up from the bottom right. Long story short, he would always end up swinging from the direction he was leaning.

My style of fighting, meanwhile, was completely different. I leaned heavily on the element of surprise. As such, I kicked the ground, then used my foot to essentially trample Khamsin's wrist. He had anticipated me defending with my sword, so this move caused him to choke on his breath and pause momentarily in surprise. "Ngh?!"

Keeping an eye on my stunned opponent, I swung my sword parallel to the ground. Khamsin fell back to dodge it. This was a display of incredible physical reflexes, but even more surprising was that, although he seemed to tumble to the ground, he was back on his feet in almost the same time it took me to correct my posture.

This boy had the physical abilities of a wild animal. But I was certain he had yet to regain his composure.

This was my chance. I let out a brief, pointed breath —"Hmph!"—and performed an explosive downward slash. Khamsin dodged by leaping to the side, but I stepped inward to catch him with a surprise attack.

"Ugh!" In desperation, Khamsin performed a diagonal slash. Because his opponents were normally much bigger than him, Khamsin hated having to take attacks head-on; that's why he was countering so quickly.

Unfortunately for him, this was all according to my plan. By trying to counter or even defend against one of my attacks, he was putting himself in a position to have to engage me head-on, a scenario he had no way to win.

To that end, I took a deliberate step back. Khamsin, seeing this as his best chance, swung his sword desperately, but he only managed to hit air. He was wide open. This was my one and only opportunity to win.

"Hiyah!" I put my all into a sword thrust, an all-or-nothing strike. In kendo, this was formally known as a "tsuki," but I gave it my own modifications. Instead of extending my elbow, I didn't thrust all the way forward, instead leaving room for me to quickly pull my arm back in. By doing this, I limited how long I left myself open and made it possible to slide into my next attack. I'm sure some would see this move as prioritizing defense over all else, but for me, it was how I avoided an embarrassing loss.

Either way, the modifications seemed to work. While Khamsin managed to fend off the strike with the side of his sword and counter my attack, contrary to my expectations, his hand stopped. At a loss for how to continue his assault, he leapt backward a few steps.

I watched Khamsin, who was now significantly more on guard than before, and realized I had already lost. I had options available to me if he tried to attack head-on, but now that he was in defense mode, none of my attacks would reach him. In fact, attacking him could give him the chance to wipe the floor with me.

"It's over! I lost," I announced earnestly.

Khamsin paused, blinking in confusion. A commotion occurred as the knights-turned-spectators discussed what had transpired.

"You lost?" Lowe said, surprised. "That can't be. You were winning." Khamsin nodded his agreement, but I waved my free hand.

"No, no. The moment my surprise attack whiffed, I was done. Man, what a shame! I better train some more so I can win next time. Time to head back to the manor before Esparda gives me an earful. See y'all later!"

I flashed the crowd a strained smile, to which they responded with confusion and praise for my performance. Turning my back to them, I returned to Arte and Till.

"Man, Khamsin sure has gotten strong. I barely stood a chance," I said with a self-deprecating smile.

Arte and Till shook their heads. "Not at all! That was amazing!"

"I swore you were going to win!"

Thank goodness. At least I didn't look like an idiot. With relief in my heart, I made my way back to the manor.

A short while later, rumors began to circulate that little old Van was a swordsman on par with Commander Dee. The rumors seemed to partially be in jest, but Khamsin was seriously going around telling people this. If Dee ever caught wind of it, I knew for a fact he would force me to spar with him.

In the end, I had to run around telling people that I was weaker than Khamsin: "I swear, I'm not strong at all!" Weird, right?

Side Story:
Researching Arte's Magic

ARTE WAS A DEEPLY KIND AND GENTLE PERSON. To all appearances she was at her happiest having tea with me or Till. That personality of hers made me hesitate to send her to battle. I wanted her to live in peace in Seatoh Village.

Of course, I wanted that for myself too.

But Arte's puppet magic was particularly well suited to combat. The irony wasn't lost on me, given her personality, but her actions had cemented the rapid-fire machine bow squad's position in battle. Arte's magic gave her control over all kinds of things, and currently, she used a pair of wood block puppets equipped with mithril armor: the two silver Aventador knights.

I didn't know if it was because they were made of light materials or what, but those wood block puppets had supernatural mobility. Their mithril armor was also specially made, designed for maximum mobility without compromising protection, and they wielded immense swords more than two meters long, boasting slender forms and top-of-the-line sharpness. These supernatural puppets could race to the heart of an enemy formation, heedless of any damage they sustained.

They posed a monumental threat to any opponent, able to create distractions that helped the rapid-fire machine bow squad provide effective long-range support. The enemy could not ignore the silver knights once their ranks were infiltrated, leaving them wide open to a shower of bolts and arrows—which, helpfully, were so powerful that not even silver shields or armor stood a chance against them. In the enemy's shoes I'd do anything I could to avoid facing those projectiles head-on; anything else was suicide.

That was how strong Arte's magic was, and that was why I couldn't ignore it. In fairness, it would also be beneficial for Arte to know how to protect herself if something were to happen, so I made the call: she needed to learn how to use her abilities properly. But what was the best way to train her? The standard magic curriculum consisted of beginner, intermediate, and advanced courses. I couldn't be certain, having never experienced it for myself, but I figured it covered how to control one's magic, more clearly visualize what you wanted to do, and make your reserves last longer.

There was just one problem: nobody had a clue what the curricula would look like for my production magic or Arte's marionette magic. Khamsin's thieving magic posed a similar problem. All three aptitudes were scorned by noble society, so there was no publicly available research into how to improve these skills. Production magic was generally considered useless, marionette magic had been used in the past to perform assassinations, and thieving magic was notorious as a skill for criminals.

It was unfortunate that research had been stymied on those fronts, but I had a decent idea of what to do. We needed to explore the scale of the magic and its effects, compare affected targets to each other, and analyze all of it.

"Marionette magic enables the user to control organic and inorganic matter. In other words—hmm, let's see, the easiest point of comparison would be something inorganic… Mithril is easier to use than iron, so wood is also easier than iron. Right?" I asked Arte, the person who actually used that form of magic.

She put her hands on her knees and nodded seriously. "Yes. Objects made of wood are much easier to control. Oh, and smaller objects are easier as well."

"Hmm." I scribbled down notes on a piece of paper. "How many objects can you control at once?"

"In terms of wood puppets, three… No, four, maybe. I can only simultaneously control two iron puppets. And with iron, the overall

duration is much shorter."

"Hmm," I said again, putting together a simple chart. I separated the materials and number of simultaneous targets into distinct categories, then drew up empty boxes into which to insert times. "All right, then let's give this a shot."

"R-right!" Arte said, getting to her feet.

Her determination put a warm smile on my face. Together, we exited the building and walked to the small plaza in front of the manor.

Villagers called out to me while I put together some practice puppets. "What are you up to today?"

"Lord Van, what's going on?"

"Ah, Lord Van!"

Before I knew it, we had a crowd around us. "We're practicing magic!" I replied, completing puppets of wood, iron, and mithril.

"Whoa! You used so much mithril!" cried an observing adventurer.

"You could make an entire mithril armor set with all of that," said another.

"I wonder how much that'd cost."

"If we're talking raw materials, a whole damn lot. When you add its value as a piece of art, well. Whew!"

The peanut gallery motivated me to give the puppets a bit of aesthetic flair. Focusing on realism would make them creepy, so I designed them after patterned drawing models. They looked like ceremonial dolls at that point, but the mithril reflected the light in a way that made them feel a bit divine.

All the while, Arte stood next to me with her gaze cast downward and her fingertips trembling. Our audience was only increasing her stress levels.

"Okay, all set," I said. "Let's get the ball rolling. Can you start with the wood puppet?"

Arte activated her magic, glancing at her surroundings. "Here goes…" she whispered, and almost instantly the wood puppet rose to its feet.

It looked just like a human standing up from a seated position, and it set the onlookers abuzz.

"Wow!"

"It's like it's alive!"

It was unclear whether Arte could hear the spectators. She seemed focused, bringing both of her hands up in front of her and making the puppet somersault first forward, then backward, like an acrobat. Then it kicked off the ground, launching itself into the air. Next, it kicked off the side of the building and spun through the air like a gymnast.

Its jumping abilities far exceeded anything a human could achieve. This world had knights and adventurers, people like Dee, who were capable of insane displays of strength. My guess was that this had to do with magic, a type of power that didn't exist on my Earth. But even compared to them, Arte's puppets were on a whole new level.

It probably helped that this puppet was made of wood, but still.

To adventurers who regularly threw themselves into battle, the puppet's movements proved particularly surprising. "Incredible…!"

"If that thing had a sword, there'd be no defending against it."

For something like two minutes, the wood doll danced about, performing all kinds of acrobatics. I checked that Arte was still okay, then called out to her, "Okay, we're good! Could you take control of the iron puppet next?"

Arte blinked and turned around. "Ah…of course."

I guess that was shorter than she expected? I plan to quantify the aggregate amount of magical power she's using later, but for now, output tests are the priority.

Ever earnest, Arte returned the wood puppet to its place and sat it down. She wasted no time activating her magic to take control of the iron puppet. Unlike the wooden one, it produced a loud noise as it stepped its right foot forward to stand up. The puppet was an impressive sight, due in no small part to its weight and the shine of its metal body, but it was incredibly tough and had the power to match its weight. It was a completely different beast from the previous puppet.

Picking up on that, the onlookers went quiet and tense, watching the puppet's every move. For my part, though, I was vividly reminded of a bunch of robot flicks.

"Here I go," Arte whispered after she took a single deep breath. She began to move the puppet, making it launch into the air with a boom that echoed across the plaza. Though it might as well have been wearing full-body armor, it flew like it was made of feathers.

Unfortunately, its weight had consequences. Leaping through the air for even ten brief seconds made it land with enough force to shatter the ground beneath it every time. "Ah…"

Arte deactivated her magic so that she could apologize. "I-I'm so sorry!" she said, bowing her head in all directions.

Eh. We're performing these tests in an open space, so nobody got hurt. It's fine.

The crowd started chatting again. "…Incredible."

"If that thing tackled one of us, we'd probably be dead."

"Oh, Lady Arte, worry not! It's fine!"

I turned to Arte. "Don't worry; I can fix this no problem. How does it feel to control this thing? Is the process consuming more magic than before?"

Arte nodded, still looking apologetic. “W-well, um, it does feel a little heavier when I move it. More like, whenever I try to move it, there’s a slight delay before it responds? Oh, and when it lands after a jump, it takes more time to get it to do the next action. I’m…not sure about my magic consumption. I do think the amount of time I can control it for is shorter than before.”

“Hmm.” I jotted down her words in addition to my own observations. The iron puppet did in fact move slightly slower than the wooden one, and its reaction time wasn’t as good, either. To my surprise, however, the magic consumption only saw a slight increase over the wood puppet. “Okay, next up is the mithril puppet!”

“A-all right!”

Once Arte focused and began to control the mithril puppet, it leapt through the air just as swiftly as the wooden one. Not only were its arm and leg motions swift and precise, so were its movements after it landed on the ground. The onlookers were clearly impressed.

“Wow!”

“It’s made of mithril, but it’s moving that fast?!”

“I think this thing could beat a dragon.”

After about two minutes of letting her move it around, I called out to her, “All done!”

“Okay!” Arte replied, sounding relieved. She quickly returned the puppet to its starting position.

“Took a lot out of you, huh?” I asked, watching her.

“Y-yes. I don’t think I can control it for extended periods of time. That being said, it wasn’t as difficult to control as before. I feel like I could handle two at once.”

I nodded. “Then I guess we should try that next, huh? I’d like to investigate how exhausted you get. Are you still up for it?”

“Of course. Which two would you like me to control?”

"Since I want to study your magic consumption, let's go with the mithril and iron puppets. They'll make it easy to measure."

Arte nodded, then activated her magic. The iron puppet stood first, followed by the mithril one. They simultaneously kicked the ground and broke into sprints, but the iron puppet was demonstratively slower. The mithril puppet ran all the way to the roadside tree trunks, then leapt up and spun in the air. At this point, the crowd was watching in stunned silence.

The wood puppet moved fastest, followed by the mithril puppet, then the iron. But the mithril puppet consumed the most magic by a huge margin. A good comparison would be modern-day vehicles: the wood puppets were like two-wheeled motor vehicles, the iron puppets were like trucks and such, and the mithril puppets were like sports cars. Thinking about it that way made it easy to see the relationship between the frame's weight and its "fuel" consumption.

"I-is that enough?"

Abruptly, I realized that sweat was rolling down Arte's forehead. She was looking at me and still controlling the puppets. A significant amount of time must've passed while I was lost in thought. "Oh, man, I'm so sorry! You can stop now!"

Arte quickly returned the puppets to their starting points, then sat down, looking relieved. "Oh, I'm fine. But controlling two at once sure is exhausting." She flashed me a tired smile.

I nodded. "What kind of exhaustion is it? Is it different from when you controlled just the mithril puppet?"

Arte looked down and thought in silence for a moment. "Let me see… I think it was several times more exhausting. I believe I could control the iron puppet for up to two hours, but my limit on the mithril one is somewhere around thirty minutes. Controlling them together, I can probably keep going for ten minutes at best. The last time I controlled two wood puppets at once, it was exhausting, but I think I could do that for about an hour."

I nodded and jotted down some more details. “Gotcha. So does that mean each additional puppet multiplies the magical consumption by itself? Or to the third power? Or are they just added to one another? Wait, it’s possible that there’s a fixed number based on the materials and capacity…” I whispered, analyzing all the possibilities. Arte giggled gently, surprising me. “Hm?”

I turned around to see her covering her mouth with one hand. “Ah.”

“What’s up?” I asked.

Arte gave me a troubled smile and looked straight at me. “I-it’s nothing. It just seems like you’re having fun,” she explained.

The affectionate look on her face embarrassed me a little. It was like she was calling me cute, which felt odd since she was also still a child.

“My bad,” I said, trying to rein myself in. “I think I lost myself in thought.”

“Hee hee… Well, I enjoy it when you have fun,” she replied with another cute giggle, only furthering my embarrassment.

Our audience took the opportunity to provide an entirely different kind of excited commentary than before. “Awesome! This is what I like to see!”

“Someone bring the booze! I can’t handle all of this!”

“Looks like someone’s jealous.”

“Leave ’em be. He’s just jealous ’cause he ain’t got a girlfriend.”

“Shut yer trap!”

Out of nowhere, the people around us were getting riled up. They were even setting up tables and chairs around us, complete with snacks and drinks.

“Go on, Lord Van! As you were!”

"Enjoy yourselves!" said another onlooker, sitting us down in a pair of chairs.

All Arte and I could do was exchange glances and smile.

Side Story:
The Bell & Rango Company's Efforts to Acquire Capable Personnel

CHRONIC LACK OF PERSONNEL. AN AFFLICTION FROM which anyone in any position of importance in Seatoh Village suffered. Even for those who weren't nobles or Chivalric Order members, it was a massive issue: for the adventurers who took on innumerable quests and for the business-minded folks who had more and more customers each day.

Naturally, then, the Bell & Rango Company was short-staffed, especially with Baron Van's territory as their main base of operations.

"We need more people," Rango whispered. Bell sighed and shook his head.

"You're preaching to the choir. The real question is: how do we get them?"

The initial plan had been to head to the capital and the territories of House Fertio and House Ferdinatto to buy slaves, but the approaching war against Yelenetta had made it far more difficult to hire adventurers. They would need anywhere from five to ten adventurers if they wanted to feel safe leaving their own territory.

"Do you think we can ask Lord Van to borrow five of his people from the order?"

"Probably not. You're well aware that the order is short on personnel, too."

Both men sighed. They wanted to increase their workforce, but they didn't have the staff. Even though every month saw a few hundred new villagers, the personnel problem persisted.

"If we don't do something fast," Bell said, "we'll work ourselves to death. Ugh, fine. It's time to swallow our pride and ask the Mary Chamber of Commerce for help."

Rango made a sour face, his shoulders sagging.

"Absolutely. We have caravans going to Seatoh Village weekly, so we would gladly lend you some of our people." Rosalie smiled at Bell and Rango, who bowed their heads and smiled tensely back.

"You're a real lifesaver."

"You have our gratitude, Rosalie."

Rosalie lifted an eyebrow at their self-deprecating tones and cocked her head. "It's nothing. Honestly, I expected you guys to come to me sooner. I was starting to get worried."

She smiled peacefully, but Bell and Rango clenched their jaws and tensed up. They used to work as merchants for the Mary Chamber of Commerce, where Rosalie was essentially their boss; when they heard her enter lecture mode, instinct took over and they stopped moving, resembling nothing so much as a pair of toads caught in the gaze of a vicious snake.

Rosalie narrowed her eyes at them, still smiling. Speaking quickly and quietly, she said, "Standard operating procedure would be to increase personnel while you still have workers to spare, no? I know Lord Van can make pretty much anything, but he can't conjure up employees to manage all of those new stores. Regardless of your inexperience, you're company presidents. Don't you feel bad for your employees?"

Both Bell and Rango shrunk into themselves. "Y-you are completely right."

"We're so sorry."

She sighed. "I expected you to come to me at least a month ago. Even from the outside, it was clear you lacked the personnel to deal with your volume of customers. As I'm sure you know, when you hire new employees who don't already have at least three years

of experience under their belts, you need even more workers to train them. What are you going to do about this?”

The smile was long gone. Bell and Rango looked down, sweat rolling down their foreheads. “Well, we figured that if the village gets another few hundred residents, a few of them would have to have merchant experience…”

“Y-yeah! And then we could have those people train the new hires—”

“Are you idiots?” Rosalie spat, cold as ice. Bell and Rango gulped. “It takes time to adjust to a new location, company, and even culture, regardless of how experienced a merchant might be. That’s the first thing they must do, which means you must have a mid-level employee available to handle training, then fill in the holes with any merchants you hire after the fact.”

“R-right.”

“Yeah…”

She stared at the two of them, both quiet and disheartened in the face of her strict, businesslike reprimand, then shrugged. “It is what it is. Fortunately, I anticipated a personnel shortage and made preparations two months ago, so I have more than enough people to loan you. And since your new hires will require training, I can lend you some workers for three months after your return. That being said—each person will run you five gold per month.”

They were stunned. Bell said, “Five gold?!”

“That’s so expensive!” said Rango.

Rosalie only grimaced. “If it’s too much, feel free to turn down my offer.”

“I-I’m sorry!”

“We’re fine with five gold per person!”

The swift turnabout made Rosalie chuckle. She waved a hand. “Apology accepted, really. We’ve known each other forever. But you

guys are going to owe me one."

Bell and Rango exchanged glances. "Even though we're paying five gold per person?" Rango whispered.

"Bro, is it just me or is she trying to swindle us?"

Rosalie narrowed her eyes at them. "What? Are you complaining?"

The response was hasty and apologetic. "Nope! Not at all!"

"Never!"

At this point, they were reacting on instinct alone. But the Bell & Rango Company was finally able to take steps toward fixing their personnel problem.

It wasn't long, however, before Bell and Rango purchased another thousand slaves, exasperating Rosalie all over again. "And who is going to train them?" she demanded. "Are you idiots?"

Side Story:
The Murcia Chivalric Order

HOUSE FERTIO'S CHIVALRIC ORDER WAS RENOWNED for its strength.

It had the numbers. It had the equipment. But most importantly, each of its members was an experienced warrior. And Marquis Fertio himself was not merely a skilled commander—he also had a great mind for combat tactics. The House Fertio Chivalric Order, which served under him, was one of the most powerful in all of Scuderia.

The troops under Murcia's direct command were part of that order, so they were comparatively experienced and skilled. Ultimately, though, it was Jalpa who acted as their supreme leader, so Murcia commanded a small group of about five hundred. The more veteran officers and experienced soldiers also served key roles in the main force, so those led by Murcia leaned relatively young; while their ranks did include some older soldiers nearing retirement age, their average age was under thirty. Murcia had been loaned members of Van's Chivalric Order, and he had further supplemented his order's numbers with potential recruits, but mixing them all together with his own troops was chaos in the making.

First, the chain of command was a mess: a simple solution would have been for Murcia to make his personal troops superior officers and have everyone else serve under them, but that was not how things played out. Murcia sat at the top of the food chain, and under him served Dee as the acting commander of the Murcia Chivalric Order with Arb as his adjutant. Then Murcia's and Dee's respective subordinates were all thrown together, plus an additional hundred or so apprentice knights with no experience to speak of. If Murcia's order in its current incarnation was ever sent to battle, any formation would fall to pieces and they would be handily defeated.

Dee was contorting himself to try to fix the problem. His solution was to give all of Murcia's subordinates the title of "assistant commander," thereby differentiating them from Dee's adjutant and evading any scenario in which Dee's absence would force Arb to act as his stand-in. Next he promoted many of Murcia's original troops to high-ranking officer roles. He had his own people serve as their assistants and tasked them with training Murcia's officers so that, when Dee and the others returned home, those officers could shoulder their responsibilities on their own. Finally, he ordered Murcia's subordinates to train the greenhorns.

This was all to prepare for the eventual return of Dee and his people to Seatoh Village. He had to ensure that this new organization could function and fight on its own, and train future new recruits. And after days of training, they finally began to look like a cohesive unit.

One day, during a short break following a half day's rigorous training, Dee folded his arms and looked around. "Mm! You're all looking fantastic!" he said with delight.

The men and women to whom he spoke were scattered on the ground around him, exhausted. The worst of the bunch were sprawled on their backs, struggling to catch their breaths, while those accustomed to Dee's harsh training regimens mostly sat upright. To Dee, though, this was perfect. After all, everyone, newcomers included, had been keeping pace in full armor! When he began, he had been prepared for more than a few people to drop out.

How did these newcomers get through this fierce training? In Dee's opinion, it all came down to the hard work of Murcia's subordinates. The knights who had been ordered to train the new recruits were young, certainly, but they were committed to their duties and to ensuring the newcomers received proper training.

Part of the regimen involved Dee splitting the order into six different squads so he could task them with group work. While Dee's subordinates assisted, it was the hard work and leadership of

Murcia's people that saw the tasks successfully completed. Group work pushed people to their limits, and pulling through required the presence of good leaders. Dee thought highly of their accomplishments on that front.

"All right! Keep it up, folks! We still have half a day to go!" Dee announced cheerfully. He laughed loudly when everyone turned to him, jaws agape, and proceeded to take point and run ahead of them in his heavy armor. "First up: a good old-fashioned marathon! Late finishers will have to equip heavier armor! Show some guts!"

He laughed and sprinted ahead, running halfway up one of the small castles. When he reached the top, he moved to the terrace. It was a bizarre image, Dee clad in western-style armor on the terrace of a Japanese-style castle, but he had no way of knowing this.

"Mm, Arb seems to be having no trouble," he said, gazing out at the sight before him.

From up top he could see the Chivalric Order in its entirety, and he kept an eye on Arb, the first of the group to follow him in sprinting for the castle. As Dee's adjutant, he wasn't in charge of leading any squads during the exercise, so this was just personal training for him. The other adjutant trailed Arb by a fair bit, and back at the starting point the six squads were taking formation.

Dee watched carefully and rubbed his jaw. "Hmm, that squad there is efficient, but there's another squad that has yet to take formation. I suppose I'll require my adjutants to keep at it for a while longer." In his mind's eye he saw the perfected form of the Murcia Chivalric Order. "At this point, I would appoint him commander of the Chivalric Order, with the captains of the first and third squads as adjutants and the other four as centurions. Their leadership skills will only get better, so I could always train them a bit more intensely…but if the goal is to strengthen this fortress city's defenses, then I need to have them learn proper operation of the ballistae."

He folded his arms, thinking over the multitude of things that needed to be done. The current Murcia Chivalric Order was fairly small, composed of only twelve squads. Under normal circumstances, Dee would have them train in four squad rotations: intense full-day training, ballista training, and guard duty over the course of three days, then repeat. This time around, he was conducting joint training in which six squads did the day training while the other six were on guard duty. Tomorrow, he would have them train in the same way.

"I would like another thousand troops, but we don't have the COs for that yet. The question is, how ready can I make them in a month?" Dee smiled confidently. "Oh, what fun! Let's see how powerful I can make this Chivalric Order before it's all said and done!"


HA?
HA!

Arb, who was running with all his might toward the small castle, overheard Dee cackling and looked up to find him on the top floor of the building, smiling fiercely. A wave of despair washed over him.

"I wonder if I can get him to send me back to Seatoh Village?" Arb said to himself. His face turned pale as he imagined the torturous training in store for him.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR PURCHASING THIS VOLUME. It's me, Sou Akaike. Volume Five is here at last! I never imagined that *Easygoing Territory Defense by the Optimistic Lord* would live long enough to reach Volume Five. This is all thanks to you, dear reader.

It feels like just yesterday that I began writing *Easygoing Territory Defense by the Optimistic Lord.* The passage of time really is something else, huh? The emergency of the coronavirus has made it consistently difficult to travel over the past two years. Around the time I hit the two-year anniversary of starting *Easygoing Territory Defense by the Optimistic Lord*, the world finally went back to some measure of normalcy, where folks could leave their homes without too much worry.

I remember immediately going to the prefecture next door. I even looked up a bunch of delicious foods on the internet ahead of the trip. It was loads of fun.

I've always enjoyed traveling and wanted to travel overseas. In fact, as soon as I became a working member of society, I went to Italy and enjoyed some pizza in Rome. I scraped together the money for the trip by skipping out on more than a few meals. Despite all the fascinating foods I ate there, I still managed to lose weight.

Some welcome news is that thanks to work, family, and my writing, I'm too busy these days to just hop on a plane and fly overseas. That's why I decided to go to Tokyo Disney instead. All on a whim, mind you, and it just so happens to be Disneyland's fortieth anniversary. I have my doubts that I'll ever hit a fortieth anniversary, so hey, you win this round, Disney.

I would be lying if I said I don't feel a dash of bitterness comparing my own anniversaries to Disney's, but this will be my first

trip in a good while, so I intend to have a blast. I will defeat you, Disneyland! Don't think I won't eat you out of churros.

All this to say, I'm very, very excited for this trip.

Now then, it's time to thank everyone who helped me to get here. To H, who always listens to my concerns and whips my compositions into shape. To the good folks at Overlap, who publish my books despite my gleeful self-indulgence hobby. To Oraido and their proofreading. To Kururi for all the beautiful illustrations that make these books what they are. To Maro Aoiro's manga adaptation that breathes new life into the world of *Easygoing Territory Defense by the Optimistic Lord*. And last but not least, to you, the readers, for purchasing this book. Thank you so, so much. From the bottom of my heart.

—SOU AKAIKE



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter