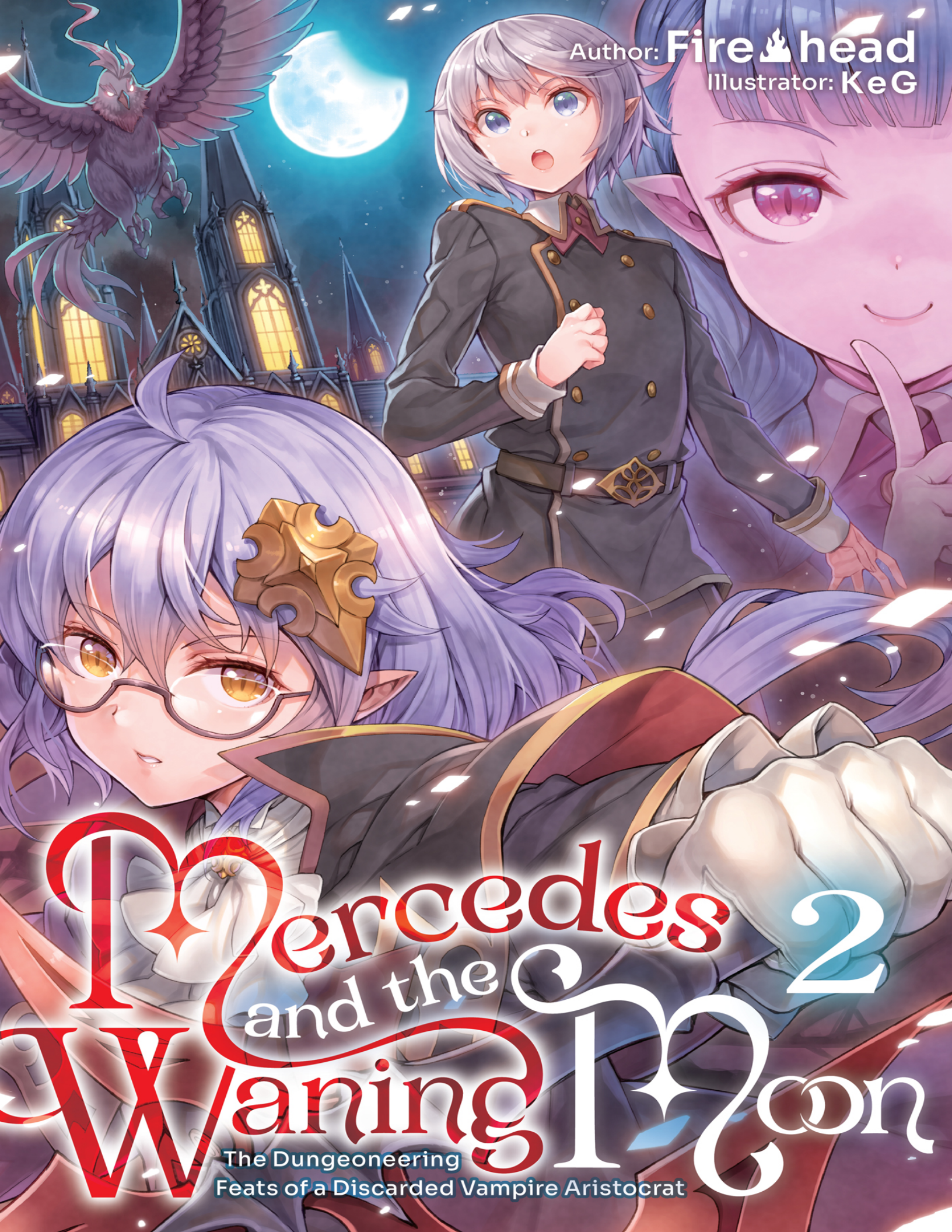

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Chapter 24: Life at the Grunewalds' Residence

Over a year had passed since Mercedes had come to live at the main Grunewald residence. Life here was oddly relaxed; while training and studying were compulsory, her father Bernhard left her alone as long as she completed what was required of her. In fact, so much of the knowledge available to her here was hard to come by elsewhere, so she was proactive when it came to learning. One piece of this was especially impactful to her: the art of Blood Manipulation, a method of increasing physical strength exclusive to vampires.

"All right then, everyone. Let us practice the art of Blood Manipulation today," announced the tall vampire who served as tutor to Mercedes and her siblings. He surveyed the room: Mercedes and Felix were present, alongside Gottfried, Monika, and Margaret. For some reason, Bernhard had invited all the children of the concubines (except for Boris, whose whereabouts were unknown) to the manor and afforded them the same education as Mercedes and Felix. He must have assumed another gem might be among them considering that Mercedes, the perfect daughter, had appeared from the place he least expected.

"Unlike the other Falsch, the flow of our blood can grant us vampires extraordinary physical strength." As Mercedes quickly jotted down these words, she pondered how there could be such a vast difference between human and vampire when her current body resembled her old human one so much. Before she had come to this manor, she had not known that blood flow could create explosive strength beyond that which vampires were normally capable of. Like humans', vampires' hearts pumped blood to every corner of their bodies, but vampires were able to accelerate that and heighten their physical strength in the process.

"Blood Manipulation" was the name for controlling this speed at will to strengthen oneself, and despite having no knowledge of this art, Mercedes had already made use of it—the gravity training she had used to simply increase her strength. Increasing the force of gravity acting on herself naturally made her blood heavier as well. However, her body had resisted this, strengthening her heart and increasing both the speed and strength of the blood flowing through her body. In fact, she constantly increased the gravity acting on her, meaning she had been honing this art every second of every day. *This* was the secret behind her phenomenal strength.

Considering how effective gravity training was, one might assume that every vampire should do it, but things weren't so simple. This world had no concept of "gravity" or "attractive fields." Geocentrism—the idea that the earth was stationary and the planets revolved around it—and flat earth theory were the two main principles of scientific education in this world; all the Falsch here, including vampires, who had developed into civilizations were ignorant of the fact that they lived on a sphere. Anyone who claimed as much would probably be laughed off by academics for the fact that those on the bottom would simply fall off. To the residents of this world, things falling from up to down was just a fact of life; they had yet to discover the concept of gravity. Thus, none with earth affinity in this world thought to use the ubiquitous power of gravity.

Of course, that raised the question of what the gods from the Blue Planet had done to stay on their moon, and there were those who asked it. However, the response of the church (as surprising as it may be, vampires believed in gods and had such institutions) was thus: "That is just the work of the gods. Given their powers, they are able to walk along spheres."

Thus, none realized the obvious potential of manipulating gravity, and as an ability held by Mercedes alone, it gave her a unique advantage.

"In that case, let us first focus on our hearts. Next, we shall feel the blood flowing through our veins..."

Mercedes watched Felix as she listened to their tutor's explanation. Ever since the incident that brought her here, he hadn't

done anything to meddle with her, but she was certain he had mixed feelings on the matter. He handled his mother—Bernhard's legal wife—whenever she protested against her husband. Furthermore, while the events of that day had been partially caused by his oversight, it had been a tragic incident for him as well.

Mercedes had heard from Bernhard that he hadn't been able to extract much information from Boris. Apparently, he'd stumbled across the item on the black market just as his rage toward Felix had reached its peak...but the likelihood of that being a coincidence was low. Instead, it was safe to assume that an enemy of the Grunewalds had tried to use Boris to advance their goals. Mercedes had tried asking the Böse dämon Boris had summoned herself, but apparently, the demon had been sealed right after its birth and had no information to offer them except for the fact it was ordered to "defeat its enemies" and oddly never considered defying that demand. Most likely, this had been an order from its dungeon master, since they're able to give commands to the monsters from the dungeons they own. Currently, ownership rights of the Böse dämon had been transferred to Mercedes, so she didn't need to worry about it receiving any more orders...at least, that was what it had told her while it was making some vegetable stir-fry. Thus, the identity of the dungeon conqueror behind the incident remained shrouded in mystery.

As an aside, the Böse dämon had moved into the main residence alongside Margaret and currently worked in the kitchens. Just where in the world was that demon headed? As infuriating as it was, though, its food was beyond delicious.

***

In the colosseum built below the manor, Mercedes folded her arms and appraised the opponents her father had prepared for her. The elite education Bernhard offered her wasn't just lectures; it included battles as well. Felix had likely received similar training ever since he was a young child.

Her enemies numbered twenty in total. They were all vampires

and all armed. She, on the other hand, faced them alone and bare-handed. It was twenty burly men against a defenseless young girl—from an outsider's perspective, it seemed like an incredibly silly choice of opponent. But just who would prove the silly one in the end?

"Begin!" Bernhard flung down his arm and announced the start of the battle. At his command, the twenty vampires kicked the ground and rushed forward. Their approach was ferociously fast, likely somewhere between fifty and sixty kilometers per hour. All of them took no preliminary actions before launching their attack. Normally, it would have been impossible to deal with such an onslaught, but luckily, Mercedes wasn't normal. With her arms still crossed, she kicked lightly off the floor, passing through the small gap between two of the men and landing behind them. To them, it must have seemed like she had disappeared; at most, they may have noticed a quick shadow for just a second.

"Sh-She's gone...?"

"No, look behind! She flanked us!"

"Damn!"

The men raised their voices, turned around, and once again went after Mercedes. But their shouts contained fear. All of them were former soldiers turned bandits, who had been captured by Bernhard once their luck ran out. He had offered to spare all of their lives if they served as his daughter's training partners, but only if they managed to get at least a single scratch on her.

At first glance, the men had shown visible relief when they saw Mercedes. They believed their task would be simple, and some even tried to hold back out of fear that they would injure her too badly and earn her father's ire. However, Mercedes's first movement led them to realize there was more to her than met the eye. Playtime was over, and they threw out one reckless attack after another, yet none could even get her to unfold her arms. Rather, she drew her opponents in as close as possible and dodged when their weapons were only a hair's breadth away, using minimal movement. Then, she returned to her normal stance. In just a year, her fighting capabilities had improved by leaps and bounds.

"Why can't we hit her?! She's not even moving!"

"Our attacks are going right through her!"

"It's an illusion! Don't be fooled!"

She dodged so quickly it didn't even leave an afterimage. Thus, all her opponents saw was an unmoving image of a young girl with crossed arms; they couldn't even register that she was dodging. Obviously, this was no illusion, and the men's assumption was completely off the mark.

Mercedes glanced at Bernhard and saw that he watched her movements with a grin of satisfaction. Now, if she just routed the enemy, things would go exactly as her father wished.

Mouth shut and eyes half-open, she watched an approaching blade. Dodging would be easy; her enemy's movements were far too predictable. She let the blade approach as close as possible and...let it scratch her cheek. Bernhard didn't even notice.

Now, Mercedes went on the offensive. With a single kick, she mowed down all the men in her vicinity. The attack only lasted an instant, and at the end of it, she had regained her footing. Once again, she appeared to be still to her onlookers. After she repeated that same attack a few more times, all twenty men lay collapsed on the floor. Bernhard's servants who spectated were stunned speechless; Bernhard alone clapped.

"Wonderful. That was marvelous, Mercedes. Truly an elegant and overwhelming victory befitting of the Grunewald name. You excellently finished the battle in the minute that I offered you. Had you not been fooling around at the start, I have no doubt you would have finished even faster."

"No, I still have much to learn."

"What do you mean?"

"I failed to dodge one of their attacks. I lack diligence," admitted Mercedes as she showed him the wound on her cheek. In a flash, Bernhard's cheerful countenance slightly clouded over.

"I see. You were close to perfection, but that is not permissible. Be more careful next time."

"Yes, father."

Mercedes bowed at her father before passing by him to leave.

While she may have sustained an injury, she was certain she had still received passing marks. Felix underwent the same training, but his battles were always a tight contest. Their opponents may have been simple scoundrels, but they were former soldiers who had seen real combat. They had entered battles of life and death and emerged victorious; they were not weak. Felix would certainly struggle somewhat against a single one of these men, and perhaps fail against three. Mercedes, on the other hand, had faced twenty at once and walked away with only a single scratch. Naturally, Bernhard would still recognize her abilities.

"Incidentally, Mercedes... Whenever I offer your opponents a chance to live if they meet certain requirements, you oddly suffer the minimum injury required to fulfill them."

"I mean..."

"Did you think I wouldn't notice?" As soon as those words left Bernhard's mouth, a crushing sound resounded from behind her. She turned around to find blood—blood, blood, and *more blood*. There was a sea of it. Crimson liquid was sprayed throughout the room, and in the center stood Bernhard, wet with blood himself.

"Rulers do not show mercy."

Mercedes was silent. She was frozen. Her father approached, and then he placed a hand on her head and patted her affectionately. It seemed unnatural.

"Be cold. It will bring you to new heights. Next time, be careful."

"Yes, father..."

"Good. Then let us have dinner. Besides that injury you purposefully suffered, you passed with flying colors. I'll have the chef cook your favorite foods tonight." Bernhard communicated that to her and exited the room, spirits high. His servants followed, leaving only Mercedes behind. She stood in the center of the room and looked down at the bodies piled before her. Their expressions were full of relief, certain that their success in injuring her would spare them. With that emotion still on their minds, her father had killed them before they could even process what was happening. All she had succeeded in was giving them false hope and thrusting them to rock bottom. She was certain that these bodies would

simply be tossed outside and never receive a proper burial.

"That didn't go well."

Mercedes had shown them mercy. She had displayed naivety. Yet truthfully, she thought nothing of these bandits. She felt no pity for them; on the contrary, she simply thought they'd gotten what they had coming for them. Thus, if she'd wanted, she certainly would have been able to kill them. Without any hint of mercy or rage, she could have crushed them, the same way she would crush a bug or a monster.

Actually, that wasn't quite true. To Mercedes, the men were below monsters. She would feel nothing killing beasts who preyed on others just to fulfill their own desires. She was certain she'd lack even the slight rage she felt when killing monsters, and it scared her. Villainous as they may have been, the idea of killing a fellow vampire without feeling anything—not even the regret she felt when killing monsters—was terribly frightening.

Case in point: She currently stood before their ruthlessly murdered bodies, and yet she didn't even feel a hint of pity. Previously, when she'd killed monsters, she'd felt the slightest bit of discomfort, and that had made her happy. But right now, she didn't feel that at all, and it scared her more than anything.

This really didn't go well, she thought once again as she turned her back on the scene of carnage and walked away.

Chapter 25: Christening

"Monster Consumption" is a term that means exactly what it sounds like: eating monsters. The practice was not just common in the cities of vampires, but all throughout the world; between limited livestock and monsters that spawned endlessly, consuming the latter was clearly the better choice. Of course, the privileged were able to eat fat, juicy pigs and cows, but for most, meat only meant one thing—monsters.

In the city of Blut—like in all cities—butchers could be found everywhere selling fresh monster meat, and today, one had a customer visiting for that exact purpose: a pitch-black demon who stood three meters high, a Böse dämon. On his neck was a collar that marked him as a monster owned by another, and in his hands was a shopping basket. At first, his imposing figure had spooked the vampires, but in the past year, he had become a regular customer.

"Hey, chief! Back today, I see."

"Yes. Do you have anything good in stock?"

"How's this? Fresh orc delivered right at midnight! Most are caught in the dungeons, but this one was caught outside, so all the fruit and nuts it'd been eating have made it soft and sweet! It's a real bargain!"

"How perfect. I'll buy it."

"Thank you! Come again!"

After purchasing the orc from the butcher, the demon stopped by some more shops to get the rest of his ingredients. Vampires usually consumed blood alone, making dining a near luxury. As there was no need for foodstuffs, they sold for cheap, but that also meant little variety. Still, making good food from limited ingredients was how chefs displayed their skill.

Upon returning to the mansion, the Böse dämon immediately began preparing the meal. First, he heated the potatoes. Then, he

diced an onion and cut the orc meat into thin slices. Next, he beat some eggs of a Lecker Huhn—a bird monster that spawned in Practis Dungeon—and seasoned them with salt and pepper.

Pepper had once been valuable and costly, but once Trein Industries had announced their invention of canned goods, the price fell dramatically, and now it could be bought at any average market. It was still rather expensive, but nothing compared to how much it once was.

The demon fried the potatoes in a frying pan, and once they browned, he removed them and cooked the orc meat and onions together in the same pan. Then, he reintroduced the potatoes once the onions became an amber color and poured in the eggs. Once that was finished cooking, he shaped the dish and quickly transferred it to a plate, garnishing it with carrots and parsley. Finally, he made a homemade blood sauce of ketchup and monster blood to finish his special Böse dämon hoppelpoppel.

"You've gotten quite skilled. Where'd you learn to cook like that?" asked his master, Mercedes, after waiting for him to complete the dish. She was normally expressionless, making it hard to read her thoughts, but now, there was a slight hint of admiration on her face.

"You do know that we monsters spawn endlessly in the dungeons, yes?"

"Yup. And I know they're clones too."

"This is a simple guess, but I believe whoever I was cloned from had experience cooking. I never learned from anywhere," explained the Böse dämon as he served some bread and soup. He had been locked away in a seal stone immediately after his birth, making it impossible for him to have received any training. However, dungeons made copies of individual monsters, meaning that if the original one had cooking experience, those skills would likely be passed down to all of its copies. That meant that monsters weren't always just registered to dungeons, but that dungeons could make copies of monsters that had already received some experience.

"I see. I hear that you've been watching over Margaret. It's been a year, but just calling you 'Böse dämon' is annoying. If you're okay with it, I'd like to give you a name."

“I have no reason to refuse. Please give me one.”

“Right. In that case, starting from today, your name is ‘Shufu.’” The word meant “housewife,” and the diligent way he served Mercedes and her family meant he played that role admirably. Thus, she decided to simply christen him “Shufu,” a name as straightforward as her naming sense always was.

“‘Shufu’... I shall remember it well. Thank you for bestowing a name upon me.”

“No problem. We’ll be with each other for a long time.”

“Indeed, master.”

Thus, the Böse dämon received the name Shufu and renewed his vow of devotion to Mercedes.



***

Felix Grunewald was both the eldest son and child of House Grunewald. His mother was the eldest daughter of a family of eminent nobles, making Felix an elite and the product of two carefully chosen bloodlines. Naturally, everyone believed his future was bright.

However, a shadow first fell on that future when he was only ten years old. Bernhard, his father, began to ignore him. His father had always been cold, but before that point, he still seemed to see some promise in his son. Then, when Felix reached ten years old, Bernhard saw the limit of his talents and became disappointed in the boy.

Despite his young age, Felix could sense the disappointment and disgust that colored his father's eyes and desperately tried to win back his approval. He devoted himself to studying history, arithmetic, literature, and martial arts, yet his father still wouldn't acknowledge him. Instead, he bore children with concubines, making it obvious he was preparing backups to be his heir. Given the ages of Boris and Gottfried, it was clear that Bernhard had begun to doubt Felix's abilities some time before he had given up on him completely.

I'm your son! I'm the eldest! I'm the one who deserves to inherit the Grunewald name! He shouted that loud in his heart, desperate to convince his father of it. Then, on his fifteenth birthday, he decided to summon his other siblings and defeat them in battle before his father. He wanted to prove that he was the best among them. He wanted his father to accept him. But there was also a point to be made to his siblings—to teach them that *he* was the one and only heir to the Grunewalds and that they stood no chance against him. He wanted to put them in their place, but instead, it was *Felix* who was put in *his*. Those actions brought him shame; he had poked the brush, and what came out of it wasn't a snake, but a dragon.

Mercedes Grunewald—she was his half sister who had just turned eleven years old. Unlike Boris and Gottfried, she was a girl, much younger than him, and born to a non-noble woman. Felix hadn't

been concerned about her, to the point that he had neglected doing any research on her. It was only once he saw her at the party that he began to slightly regret that decision. She resembled him—their hair color, their eye color, the aura around them that made them unapproachable. But more than anything, it was her eyes that only seemed to gaze at others on a surface level. While their faces were completely different, his sister looked shockingly like Bernhard even at first glance.

However, there wasn't just a dragon; a snake had used that dragon as cover to likewise appear in the form of Boris, who released a monster in the ballroom. Felix desperately fought against it, but he was powerless before it. Then, just when he thought it was over, Mercedes crushed it with her overwhelming power. At first, Felix had thought that she and Boris had conspired together, and that the monster was merely putting on an act. However, he was wrong. She had defeated the monster with raw power alone, and as a result, she outshined Felix and became the hero of the day, reducing him to a mere foil. Felix had tried to use his siblings as a stepping stone, but ultimately, he became a stepping stone for her, making her performance shine even brighter. She won Bernhard's approval and was invited to the main manor.

That was when Felix realized that he of all people had united a father and daughter who should never have been brought together. His regret was immeasurable; he never should have bothered with Mercedes. Had he been more diligent in researching his siblings—had he left her and only her alone—there would still have been a sliver of hope that he could win his father's approval.

Now, however, all he could do was wallow in regret. Mercedes had no intention of becoming heir; in fact, she had planned to soon leave the city. Had Felix not overstepped, she would have been out of the picture entirely. But now, he had lost his dignity as eldest son as well as the future promised to him, and it pained him to no end.

***

Huff... Huff...

In the underground colosseum, Felix brandished a sword and panted. Three vampires lay collapsed on the ground before him, all bandits who had former experience on the battlefield as soldiers. While they had fallen from grace, they were no strangers to combat; a fifteen-year-old besting them while outnumbered should surely have been deserving of praise. Yet, even though his father looked at Felix, his eyes were no longer focused on him.

"Eight minutes and twenty seconds to beat three of them. You're done for the day. Return to your room."

"B-But father! I can keep going!"

"I said you were done." Bernhard turned around and walked away without even glancing at Felix. There wasn't even disappointment in his father's actions at this point. The small promise he had once seen in Felix had turned into disappointment, and now, it had shifted into utter indifference.

The "dis" in "disappointment" implied reversion; it meant that Bernhard had once had hope in the boy, at least enough to lose. Now, however, there was nothing. Since he had found a new treasure in Mercedes, he did not care one whit for Felix. He could no longer even be called "wasted potential," as he commanded none of his father's attention. All of it went to Mercedes instead.

"W-Wait! Did my sister... Did Mercedes clear her task?"

"In fifty-five seconds. But first, she observed her opponents and let them attack. The actual fight didn't even last ten seconds."

"Huh?"

"She had twenty opponents, and I purposefully chose ones more skilled than those you just defeated. She suffered a single injury, though she allowed it on purpose, as I told her opponents that they would be spared should they land a single hit on her. And that wasn't an outlier. She does it *every* time." He spoke as if exasperated with her, but there was also a hint of enjoyment in his voice. It was the voice of a father proud of his daughter's achievements—or rather, a man who wished to feel that pride.

With that thought, Felix's anguish only grew. Bernhard walked off without even sparing him a glance, leaving him all alone. Not knowing where else to direct his feelings, he slammed his fist into

the floor.

"Just what the hell am I doing...?"

There was no one there to answer him.

Chapter 26: Edelrot Academy

The night sky was clear and the moon glowed a marvelous azure as a lone carriage traveled along the illuminated road. Inside, Mercedes listlessly watched the outside scenery.

"Edelrot Academy, huh?"

She muttered the name of her destination aloud and recalled the events that had led to this moment—if they were really so complicated for "events" to be plural, that is. Edelrot was the only academic institution in all of Orcus and was located in the capital city of Abendrot. Mercedes's father had pressured her into enrolling, and since the youngest age the school accepted was eleven, she was just in time for the start of the new semester.

Of course, Mercedes had readily agreed to attend the academy. She had no intention of relinquishing any opportunities to gain knowledge and wisdom. Apparently, Felix was already going to school there, and the two of them rode in the same carriage. He wore a complicated frown.

To think I'd be going to school after all this time.

Mercedes's lips twisted into a self-deprecating grin. She had been shocked to discover there were any schools in a world that was stuck in the Middle Ages, but even more shocking was the fact that she was headed there in a carriage. Who would've thought, given her capabilities?

The school had no mandatory uniform, so she was thankful she could wear the outfit from her dungeon that she usually wore. Of course, the school did have a uniform custom-made with combat in mind, but only the students with the best grades were allowed to wear it. There likely didn't exist any clothes out there sturdier than what she currently had on, so even if she did rise to the top of her class, she didn't plan on wearing it.

The carriage continued to shake as it made its way along a rough

path. At this point, Mercedes had grown bored of watching the scenery, so instead, she touched the dungeon key in her pocket, displaying the inside of the dungeon. Felix couldn't see this, as it was visible only to her.

She had done little work on the dungeon, save for the lowest floor, which she had begun to customize to her liking. First, she had constructed a house that appealed to her nostalgia so living there would be easier for her. It was a typical two-story house from Heisei-era Japan, not the type of structure that could be found in this world. She had then built a pool and a hot spring a short distance away, the latter of which Kuro and Benkei frequently used. She'd also made a gym and filled it with training equipment and a jelly slime, which had now dark evolved into a swole jelly slime.

She used the dungeon key to command some of the monsters to place a book in her line of sight so she could stave off her boredom with some light reading until they reached their destination. With each page she had a monster flip, she killed more and more time. Eventually, she had finished a whole volume. At this point, she noticed the sun had begun to rise and decided it was time to sleep.

However, that was interrupted when the sound of quarreling reached her sharp ears. Under normal circumstances, one would dismiss it as just some trivial argument and leave it be, but given her boredom, she used her wind magic to better carry the sound to her ears.

"There's no doubt about it! The fifth prince of Orcus is inside! Capture him at all costs!"

"Run, Your Highness!"

"Leave this to us!"

If only I hadn't heard that, thought Mercedes as she began to regret her decision. This was a hassle—an *incredible* hassle. It was no ordinary squabble no matter how she spun it. From what she gathered, someone was about to get kidnapped while their guards tried to buy them time to escape. Plus, the words "fifth prince" in particular stuck with her. Hey, maybe that was just his name, but the chance was slim.

Mercedes had no obligation to rescue a stranger, and their guards

might have already handled it, but still, there was no guarantee the nation *wouldn't* be plunged into turmoil on the off chance the fifth prince *was* kidnapped. If that happened, there'd be no time for school; it was possible the gates to the education she finally had a chance to attain would be closed. Thus, she reluctantly stood up and opened the carriage door.

"H-Huh? What are you doing, Merc—"

"I'll catch up later. Go on ahead."

Her sudden actions had thrown Felix for a loop, but she left him behind and ran toward the voices. The terrain was mountainous, and save for the road, the abundance of trees made traversing the path difficult. However, that just meant she had to go above them. She jumped into the air, landed on a treetop, and then hopped between them at lightning speed.

Eventually, she found a conspicuously opulent carriage surrounded by a group of men who were dressed in white with covered faces. Given the way they carried themselves, it was clear they were no amateurs.

Fighting those men was a knight clad in armor. The fact such a guard was protecting this lavish carriage basically screamed that someone important was inside.

Still, traveling in a plain carriage wouldn't reflect well on a royal either. Clearly, the position could be quite annoying.

There are about ten of the men dressed in white. I'll have this finished in ten—no, five seconds.

Mercedes jumped down from the trees and slammed her fist into the ground in a surprise attack. Immediately, the earth below fractured with explosive force, launching all of the men in white into the air. While they were unable to react, she took the opportunity to launch a dropkick into one of them, knocking him unconscious. Then, she used his body as a launching pad to once again jump into the air. She kicked her foot into another man, used him to leap back into the air, and repeated the process over and over.

The time they spent airborne was minuscule, lasting only two or three seconds. Yet, in that short amount of time, Mercedes had dashed through the air and knocked out nine of them.

However, the last man was more skilled than his comrades. He had spun in midair to dodge her attack and even drawn a short sword to counterattack. Still, Mercedes reversed direction in the air, dodging his blade before launching another kick at the man. It landed, and he went flying in the air until he hit a tree and lost consciousness. Then, all the men slammed into the ground while she softly landed and turned her back to the prince.

Once again, Mercedes leaped into the air and left without saying a word. She doubted anything good could come out of involving herself with a prince.

***

Mercedes caught up with the carriage just as she'd declared she would. After that, it was another two days rocked by the horses before they finally arrived in the capital of Abendrot.

The city had been named after the nation's founder and first king, Abendrot I, who had called the city home. Mercedes, however, wasn't too interested in this piece of trivia; it didn't even win a dull "uh-huh" from her.

Edelrot Academy was a huge school that comprised the city's entire western district. It was constructed in Gothic style, and its imposing form reached high into the sky. It was somewhat reminiscent of the famous Cologne Cathedral of Mercedes's old world.

The entrance was adorned with candles that illuminated the night. While the building was gray, it appeared red in the glint of the flames, amplifying its mystical ambience.

"First is the entrance exam, I guess."

Mercedes had come to the academy in order to enroll, but there was still a chance her plans would fall through. First, all the aspiring students took an entrance exam, and only those who passed would be allowed to attend. Of course, royals and nobles could apply pressure and obtain an exemption, but Mercedes hadn't been given that opportunity. This trial had been set by her father, who had the utmost confidence she could overcome it with her own abilities.

The exam was divided into two separate sections: writing and practical skills. Three subjects formed the writing portion of the exam: history, arithmetic, and war studies. The last of these was a subject unique to Orcus and required students to answer questions regarding battle tactics, strategy, formation, and even weapon choices and monster weaknesses. Each subject was scored out of a hundred points, for a total of three hundred.

Practical skills were also divided into three subjects, consisting of unarmed combat, armed combat, and magic. For these exams, students would fight an instructor in a mock battle. Each of these were also individually scored out of a hundred.

Out of the six hundred total points, students needed to obtain three hundred and sixty to pass, meaning they needed about sixty in each subject. The bar to pass was set quite low, but that was probably on purpose; if it was too high, there wouldn't be enough students to fund the school.

Mercedes and the rest of the aspiring students were provided with feather pens and took their seats. The exam hall had sky-high ceilings reminiscent of a church and was full of desks and chairs.

—First Subject: Arithmetic—

Well, I guess this is about what you'd expect from an exam for eleven-year-olds in a world only as developed as the Middle Ages.

The first exam was so easy it could have duped you into thinking it was full of trick questions. Even the math drill books sold to kindergarteners in Japan were easier. The students around her were counting on their fingers, but to Mercedes, it would be plain embarrassing if she failed to solve them. Within five minutes, she had completed every question, so she had to spend the rest of the allotted time in boredom.

—Second Subject: History—

This time, there were some questions that gave her a bit of a hard time. The knowledge from her previous life wouldn't help her when it came to the geography and history of this world. Still, she had been a voracious reader since the age of five and had filled in a lot of gaps in her knowledge at the Grunewald residence. Thanks to that, she didn't struggle. She was near certain she had gotten a

perfect score in this section too.

—Third Subject: War Studies—

Mercedes struggled a tad more in this section than the others, as there were multiple questions where she knew the answer the test was looking for, but it didn't align with her thinking.

She had memories from her previous life, which gave her knowledge of wars from across Earth and battle strategies, tactics, and formations that her predecessors had developed over centuries of slaughter. Except those could be considered "incorrect answers" according to the playbook of this world.

Therefore, she wasn't going to write those "incorrect answers" in. She didn't want to be treated like an iconoclast, nor did she want to attract attention for being a student especially knowledgeable in the art of warfare. With some frustration, she filled in the answers she thought the instructors were looking for.

Next was the practical skills portion.

—First Practical Skills Test: Unarmed Combat—

The battle ended in an instant. The instructor invited her to attack, so she charged them head-on and gave them a light push. They flew through the air, and after they were knocked unconscious, the battle was concluded.

Now that she had a basis for comparison, Mercedes now knew how her strength fared against others' better than she once did, but she had underestimated how weak her instructor would be.

She made a note to hold back a bit more next time. After that, she headed for the next test with all eyes on her.

—Second Practical Skills Test: Armed Combat—

Mercedes selected a spear as her weapon and won by knocking the instructor's weapon out of their hand. Unlike the previous battle, she had restrained herself enough to keep them conscious. However, they were so pale that she realized she could go a bit easier next time. Later, the instructor would tell others, "My weapon was gone before I could even notice it was missing."

—Third Practical Skills Test: Magic—

Magic was the only battle skill that Mercedes wasn't particularly adept at—not that she was bad, she was just much worse at it

compared to other martial arts. The Seeker card that revealed her skills rated all her other skills at level four or above and magic alone at two.

Still, two was a score befitting full-fledged Seekers, and since Mercedes had been practicing, it had actually risen to three without her noticing. Not to mention, this was a test for eleven-year-olds, and the students who took it were all the children of nobles or wealthy merchants. They were elites, yes, but it was still a test for children. The school wasn't looking for skill levels as high as Mercedes's, and given her record in the practical exams, she would have scored far above the max if that hadn't been a hundred.

The look of surprise on the instructor's face when Mercedes cut the targets to pieces with her wind blades wasn't a trick of the light.

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With that, the exam was over. Representing the new class of students onstage were the top two scorers: the fifth prince and Mercedes.

Chapter 27: School Life Begins

As representatives of the new class, all they had to do was read a prewritten speech off a piece of paper. Once that was out of the way, Mercedes headed to the classroom where she'd spend the next few years.

Classes were divided by entrance exam scores, so the A Class that Mercedes was a part of consisted of the twenty top-scoring students. However, it was possible to change one's class with improved grades, so staying at the top required continual effort.

Mercedes casually looked around the classroom. Naturally, her eyes fell on the fifth prince. He was a handsome boy with captivating silver hair, and the girls in their class were already gazing at him passionately.

Vampires were often stereotyped as having silver hair, but it was actually quite uncommon in this world. Most had blond, brown, red, or black hair. Rarely, you might see pink or blue, but silver was even less common. It was viewed as characteristic of noble blood and a trait only those born into the royal family inherited. Oddly, white hair was apparently common among the royals as well.

Besides him, there weren't any students who caught Mercedes's eye. Given that entry into this class was a privilege held by only the best of the best, all of them stood out in some way, but nothing beyond that.

"I see all twenty of you have made it."

The door opened, and a single vampire entered the room, speaking in a low voice. He was probably—almost certainly—their instructor. He looked to be in his late forties, which was rare for vampires, and he had a sagely countenance. Perhaps it was because his perpetual age had come quite late, but he gave off a somber air that other vampires lacked. His black hair, speckled with gray, was slicked back, and his deeply wrinkled face made him anything but

pretty, but still, he had a sullen, manly, and brooding look to him. A scar traced a line over his left eye, which she wondered why it hadn't regenerated. His eyes were sharp, and his chin was dotted with stubble. Dressed as he was in his gray coat, he had a certain dignity about him.

He's strong.



Looking at her teacher, she sensed he was a man of talent. He was likely even stronger than Benkei—so strong that she doubted she could defeat him one-on-one.

"For the next year, I, Gustav Balt, will be your homeroom teacher. However, whether you will stay in my class next year is dependent on how hard you work. Today, I will give a brief overview of what we'll be doing this year, and after that, you will all introduce yourselves."

Once their teacher stated his name, everyone began murmuring all at once. Clearly, the man was quite famous, but Gustav ignored them and quickly moved on to his explanation.

"Every school year is divided into two semesters, each of which ends with a written and practical exam. After those, there is a long break, but whether you use that to better yourself or rot away is up to you."

He beat around the bush, but he was basically implying that the students who used the break to screw around wouldn't be there next year. Anxiety began to spread among the class as his words set in. It was almost as if the earlier uproar hadn't happened at all.

"Events include the summer hunting festival and the winter martial arts festival. They will not impact your grades, but I encourage everyone interested to participate. With that out of the way, let us begin with introductions."

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The day ended once the students all had a chance to introduce themselves. All students attending the academy stayed in dorms until graduation, so Mercedes headed for the room assigned to her and checked the number beside the door. The room wasn't spacious, but neither was it cramped; the clean space surrounded by white walls was exactly what one might expect from a school for the children of elites. Given the average view of hygiene in this world, the quality was praiseworthy. The room was furnished with two beds, but there were no toilets or bathing facilities attached. Since Mercedes had passed by a room seeming to serve that purpose on

her way here, she assumed they were just supposed to use those. But considering she had a dungeon, that wouldn't be necessary for her.

She spent a short time examining the room before the door opened to reveal another young girl. She was likely Mercedes's roommate, as the rooms were meant for two people to share. She had light blue hair that was tied into two braids, giving her a youthful, cutesy vibe.

"Hello! Are you my roommate? My name is Hannah Burger, and I'm from Nebelbank. It's very nice to meet you!"



After hearing her name, Mercedes imagined the girl before her sandwiched between two buns to look like a hamburger. Of course, she knew that wasn't what "burger" meant here, but she couldn't stop her memories from forcing the connection.

Now that she thought about it, she had never seen a hamburger in this world. Maybe they'd fly off shelves if she sold the idea to Trein. No, it probably wouldn't work. Soft bread was too valuable here.

"I'm Mercedes Grunewald. Nice to meet you."

"Grunewald? Isn't that the name of a high-ranking noble?"

"Yes, but unfortunately, I'm just the fourth child. I won't succeed him."

Bernhard had every intention of making Mercedes his heir, yet she had completely ignored that fact and declared the opposite. To her, the Grunewald name was a shackle. She currently obeyed him since there was still some value she could squeeze out of it, but when the time came, she was hell-bent on severing that chain. Plus, there was at least one other child after the title of heir. Felix could just take her place. She had no interest in earning her sibling's ire by inheriting something she didn't want in the first place.

"If I remember correctly, you were the one who gave the speech at the entrance ceremony. Right, Miss Grunewald?"

"Just call me Mercedes. But yes, I stood onstage as a class representative."

"Oh, then you can just call me Hannah too!"

Hannah effusively praised Mercedes for the speech with phrases like "whoa!" and "you were amazing!" The only people who got a chance to play that role had either been chosen because of their social status or afforded the opportunity due to their high grades. How well the fifth prince had done on the exam was a mystery, but it was likely he'd been given the role for other reasons.

Afterwards, the two briefly discussed their home lives, and after a bit of conversation, Hannah had lightened up and relaxed her speech.

"Your hair is so soft, Mercedes! And your skin too! I'm so jealous."

"You're quite cute yourself."

Recently, Mercedes had gained unlimited access to a hot spring in her dungeon, so her cleanliness was a degree above that of others. The people of this world only took baths once every few days, and average cityfolk used public bathing facilities that were mixed gender. Those in poor villages had no public baths at all. The attention Mercedes paid to hygiene was downright obsessive compared to the standards of this world.

Given that Hannah was a student at the school, she had to be from a well-off family. She was on the cleaner side, but she still couldn't compare to someone who washed their body and hair in a hot spring every day like Mercedes. Though considering the average level of hygiene from someone in the Middle Ages on Earth, she was clean enough to not make speaking and being close to her uncomfortable.

You see, Europe was particularly terrible during the Middle Ages. The Louvre Palace—the home of a *king*—became so full of human waste that it was uninhabitable. Mercedes was incredibly glad that nothing so extreme had happened in this world.

"That reminds me. Is Mr. Gustav famous?"

As their conversation reached a lull, Mercedes decided to ask about their homeroom teacher. His name had caused a stir among the class, but Mercedes had never heard of him. She had been completely focused on training ever since she was five, so the only information she was privy to was that in the books in her manor, which left her with certain holes. At the very least, she was absolutely clueless about famous public figures and recent trends.

"You've never heard of Gustav the Hero? He was a legend during our war with the chimäre eighty years ago. They say the king at the time even begged him to marry one of the princesses!"

"Wow. He sounds like the hero of some story."

"I know! There are even plays that feature him as the main character. Of course, he's never acted in them. Someone else plays the role."

Apparently, Gustav was extremely famous. The story of the king begging him to wed one of his daughters was probably an exaggeration, but their instructor was nevertheless a lauded war

hero. Clearly, there was much to be learned from the man, and Mercedes was glad to have the opportunity to study under him.

Classes at the academy were divided between compulsory classes and electives. Compulsory classes were self-explanatory, and all students had to take them. However, electives could be chosen freely. The compulsory subjects consisted of arithmetic, history, war studies, and magic, while the electives were unarmed combat, armed combat, fiefdom management, governing, Seeking, and Elvish. Students had to take three electives, and one of them had to be either armed or unarmed combat.

Mercedes decided to ignore fiefdom management. She had no intention of inheriting the Grunewald name, so she wouldn't need to know any of that. The same went for governing. Both of those classes were for students who planned to inherit fiefdoms. Seeking had caught her eye, but since she was already a Seeker, she didn't need to take it. Thus, she decided on armed combat, unarmed combat, and Elvish. Her choices in classes were quite battle-skewed, but she had long decided she wanted to be able to fend for herself, so she thought it suited her.

With that, the curtain opened on her student life.

Chapter 28: Studies

Mercedes experienced little difficulty with the classes at Edelrot Academy. In fact, she was even a bit bored in arithmetic, which made sense. Most people in this world were illiterate, which meant that the average person obviously couldn't be expected to know the four basic operations. As a whole, education levels were low.

The arithmetic taught at the academy wasn't even as difficult as what was covered in the lower grades of elementary school, and that wasn't because Mercedes and her classmates were eleven. Edelrot Academy had seven grade levels, and students graduated at the age of eighteen. However, even the math that the sixth and seventh graders studied didn't exceed the level of what was taught at Japanese elementary schools. They didn't even learn multiplication. Mathematical proficiency in this nation—or really, the whole world—was quite low.

Thus, the things Mercedes learned in her math lessons weren't of any help to her. If they operated in duodecimal or another similar system, maybe they would, but unfortunately, the common system here was base ten as well. There was absolutely nothing she could learn.

On the other hand, her history and war tactics lessons were full of information that would aid her in the future. As a whole, she was quite satisfied with her school experience.

"Today, we'll be talking about the formation of the Red Planet. Twenty thousand years ago, the environment of this world was uninhabitable, but then, the gods came from Eden and remade it so that it could support life."

That day, their first class was history. Gustav stood at the front of the room and explained the origin of this world while Mercedes listened with mixed feelings. After conquering a dungeon, she had obtained a bit of truth and learned that those hailed as gods in this

world were likely humans, which meant that Eden—which Mercedes had thought to be a moon—was likely earth.

However, that raised certain questions. If Eden was Earth, where was this? The name "Red Planet" would suggest Mars, but Earth wouldn't look so big from there. So just where was this world?

"Do any gods still live on Eden, Mr. Gustav?"

"No. It is said a battle between them resulted in mutual destruction via Holy Flames. However, they had the power to live on a sphere and travel through the sky to this world. Perhaps some of them survived."

"How'd they go extinct with all the incredible powers they had?"

"I am sure even gods cannot withstand the flames used by their brethren. It is only other gods who can destroy the gods."

Mercedes once again sunk into thought as she listened to Gustav answer her fellow students' questions. A power so strong it had brought the gods to their demise... Technological advancements must have been what led humans down that path of self-destruction. A simple fistfight rarely leads to death, only injury. However, adding blades to the mix led to killing, and adding more people to that spawned wars. Battles fought with swords and firearms wouldn't lead to extinction, but if you added tanks, fighter craft, and missiles to the mix and continued to up the ante, all that awaited was annihilation.

"The gods who came to this world created intelligent life known as Falsch in their image. We vampires are just one species of Falsch. The gods also brought seeds of plants from their world and filled this land with vegetation."

Mercedes couldn't help but think it resembled the story of Noah's Ark as she scratched some notes onto her parchment. Her history classes turned out to be very educational. It was best to not take everything at face value and assume that some of the stories had been later embellished, but she had learned enough that she was finally seeing the world for what it was.

War studies was quite interesting as well. Most of what they learned were things like the actions taken by soldiers after they had become feudal lords, so the content was rather basic. Still, that was

only natural. This world was comparable to the Middle Ages, so there was obviously a big difference between their battle tactics and the advanced ones from modern-day Earth developed after copious research.

However, that didn't mean they could be belittled. Sometimes, Mercedes was presented with novel battle formations and tactics that were predicated on magic or the kind of strength available only to vampires. Plus, one had to consider their opponent, meaning the same theories that applied to human-on-human combat didn't fly in this world. To give an example, encirclement was an effective tactic, but that didn't work against the volgelen who could fly. In fact, they often tried to encourage their enemies to surround them so they could pick them off one by one.

Practical skills classes had students train through mock battles against each other or their instructor. Sometimes, they fought weak monsters as well. Mercedes had imagined these would be about as strong as the mole monster on the first floor of Stark Dungeon, but what actually appeared before her was a werwolf so weak it almost put her to sleep. It was a size smaller than even the werwolf blau she had once captured, only as tall as a child. In class, such monsters were used to test students' application of skills they had previously learned.

"You're up next, Grunewald."

Mercedes was handed a sword. She stepped forward and faced a werwolf even shorter than she was. Though really, if the school was willing to give eleven-year-olds real swords and have them fight monsters, it was clear this world really had different values than Japan. Not that fighting monsters was anything new for Mercedes.

The swordsmanship taught in Orcus had five basic stances, and the students learned those were enough to fight effectively. The most basic "uncertain" stance positioned the sword right in front of the swordsman and was similar to the *seigan* stance in kendo that pointed the tip of the sword at the opponent's eyes. In any case, it was the most standard stance that allowed for the quickest movement.

The "falcon" stance was an overhead stance suitable for sharp

downward swings, while the "raging bull" stance positioned the sword overhead to either the left or right with the tip of the sword directed at the opponent's face, making it suitable for stabbing motions. In the "rhino" stance, the swordsman held their weapon near their waist with the tip pointed at their opponent, so it was easy to segue into an upward slash. Finally, the "snake" stance was a downward, defensive position that pointed the tip of the sword at the ground. It was a versatile stance that allowed for stabbing thrusts, upward cuts, and leg swipes while preserving stamina.

Mercedes was particularly fond of the raging bull and rhino stances. They were most suited to fighting with a halberd, so she wanted to master them as soon as she could.

With a shout, she held her blade in the raging bull stance and leaped toward her enemy while transitioning into a one-handed thrust. She pierced the werwolf's throat, ending the fight in a single blow. Monsters as weak as this one couldn't keep up with her speed, nor did they have the mettle to withstand her strength. Regardless of swordsmanship skills, this wouldn't have been a tough fight. Without so much as a grimace, she wiped the blood off her blade and returned to where the rest of the students stood.

Having no notes of his own, Gustav scribbled something onto a piece of paper. Meanwhile, her fellow students were silent. All eyes were on her, and they were filled with both fear and respect.

"Next is Sieghart Abendrot."

"Yes sir!"

Following Mercedes was the most popular boy at school, Sieghart Abendrot. He was the nation's fifth prince and the boy she had rescued on her way to the academy. His rights to the throne were negligible, but he was still a prince. He had excellent grades and had stood beside Mercedes to give a speech at the entrance ceremony. While his face was still youthful, it was beautiful, and his silver hair complimented it well. He would certainly one day become the sort of handsome vampire you'd see in stories.

That made him crazy popular—so much so that it was vexing. His each and every movement was incredibly refined, and on his face at all times was a bright smile. While Mercedes gave off a similarly

refined vibe herself, he didn't have the same menacing air of a wild animal that she did. They were worlds apart.

Of course, he wasn't just gallant, as he had just severed the monster's head by quickly transitioning from the uncertain stance to the falcon stance. As of now, he and Mercedes were the only students capable of defeating a monster with a single blow. While their battles similarly ended in an instant, his elicited only praise, not fear. He returned to where the rest of the students stood and grinned at her as he passed.

Mercedes didn't understand the meaning behind it and ignored him. He looked hurt.

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Elvish was the most commonly spoken language on the Red Planet, though a variety of different languages existed, including more than ten spoken just by vampires such as Orcus's national language of Orcusian. The chimäre and volgelen were in similar boats and had no common language.

Elvish alone was different. Elves were the most prosperous of the four species of Falsch and spoke a completely unified tongue. If someone from Orcus went to a foreign vampire nation and spoke Orcusian there, they would often not be understood. But that was not the case for the elves. As long as one was fluent in Elvish, they could communicate with any elf. It was a versatile language, and many non-elves working for guilds learned it. If you visited a nation that didn't speak your native tongue, you could often get around with Elvish alone.

This was the only subject that didn't come easily to Mercedes, as knowledge from her previous world couldn't help her learn a tongue completely foreign to her. There were plenty of books back at her manor that were written in the language of other vampiric nations, and reading them had given her some limited speaking capacity, though that was just because they largely resembled Orcusian.

When it came to Elvish, however, she had never been exposed to it before coming to the academy, and it derived from a completely

different language family than her native tongue. In a way, she was finally studying a subject that put her at the same starting line as everybody else.

However, Mercedes didn't have any particular aversion to grueling tasks. Learning to understand what she couldn't learn before inspired a feeling of accomplishment, and since she was the ever-diligent type, she could find joy in expanding her knowledge. Therefore, studying the language wasn't hard or painful for her.

A month had passed since she came to the academy, and somehow or other, she had learned to enjoy her life there.

Chapter 29: Hunting Class

The talk of the academy was obviously Sieghart Abendrot, the fifth prince. Though low on the list of succession, he was nevertheless of royal blood. Plus, he was naturally handsome and a bona fide genius who was both athletically and socially gifted. It was hardly a surprise that people flocked to him.

A friendship with him from their shared school days would be an invaluable asset to any student in the future. It could mean working under him one day, and even if that never came to pass, there were no downsides to building connections with royalty.

For the girls, a peaceful and secure future was assured should they fall into his good graces. Being his legal wife would be ideal, but even a position in his harem—the worst-case scenario—would guarantee a future free of strife.

Therefore, Sieghart's classmates were all constantly competing for his attention. The boys approached with understanding looks or tried to sell their merits in an attempt to later gain a position as a trustworthy subordinate. The girls, meanwhile, were trying to beat each other to the punch, and of course, that included waiting at his next destination for him to arrive and pretending it was a total coincidence. The more precocious girls were already trying to use their sex appeal to catch his eye, a method that seems unfathomable coming from a group of eleven-year-olds.

Given these circumstances, Sieghart always had a crowd of his classmates around him. Both his so-called friends and his female admirers kept each other in check behind their smiles. In one sense, none of them actually saw Sieghart for who he was; while he was surrounded by people, he was nonetheless alone.

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"During battles, having a monster who will listen to you as opposed to one who will not can make a big difference. It increases your numbers, but there are also things only a monster can do. An agile one can serve as a mount, and ones that fly can conduct surveillance. I'm sure you could ride one and fire on your enemies from above as well. On the battlefield, the majority of elite soldiers have a monster in tow."

War studies class that day was hands-on learning. Everyone was gathered not in the classroom, but in a field located a short distance from the academy. There, Gustav stood before his students and lectured them on the advantages of capturing monsters.

"Monsters are useful outside of battle as well. Those who are quick and capable of traversing long distances could aid you if you go into the shipping industry, and those who are strong could help work in mills. There are even people who use monsters with special skills to make money in the entertainment industry, and monsters that can use water magic are dependable allies when fighting fires. Those are but a small taste of what monsters can do for you. Should you have one that obeys you, it will assuredly be of great benefit to you."

Mercedes nodded along to Gustav's lecture. People tended to jump straight to fighting when considering monsters' potential, but there was no need to have them fight at all given the multitude of ways they could be put to use. For example, the mole monster that she encountered in Stark Dungeon could be used to transport items due to its strength, the small triceratops-like krylia could be used as a packmonster, and wolfangs could be used as mounts. Plus, no-good jelly slimes could be used for...actually, those alone seemed quite useless.

Owning a dungeon meant owning all the monsters with it. Mercedes was able to reproduce them endlessly, and had she wanted to, she would undoubtedly be able to do anything with them. The potential damage that could be done if used for evil was beyond measure.

"Monsters can be purchased at shops, but ones given to you by others typically don't easily warm up to you. This is because of their

instinct to obey the powerful. When monsters change masters, they doubt the strength of their new owner and grow rebellious should they determine your strength is not worthy of their respect. If you're strong enough that a monster can tell at a glance, that won't be an issue for you. But you all are not at that level yet."

Gustav glanced at Mercedes and Sieghart. They were the only two students in this class who seemed able to buy a monster off the market without issue, but he didn't mention it aloud. He decided to avoid saying anything that could create tension between his students.

"Today, you will be trying your hand at capturing a monster. One month from now, we will hold a mock battle between the monsters you capture today. It will be used to see how well you can tame a monster in that time, and likewise, your aptitude as someone who can stand at the top. Of course, those who fail to capture a monster will have to stay after class, so please keep that in mind."

For Mercedes, this class was like playing on easy mode. Given that the students had been allowed to enter the field, the monsters here had to be weak—for Mercedes, a single look would probably be enough to have them turning tail.

"You will be using a magic stone to capture your monsters. They are imbued with a spell to quell beasts, and I am certain that none of the monsters that appear here will be able to resist it."

Gustav handed out the magic stones rather nonchalantly, but Mercedes was slightly impressed with them. These stones weren't seal stones, of course, but they made her realize that magic stones could serve the same purpose, depending on how you used them. She was curious as to what magic had been imbued into these, but she was content with waiting until she used one to find out. Her best guess was that it was either lightning magic that caused paralysis or ice magic that froze its target.

The stones had been polished into a round ball, which she took no issue with...but did they really have to color it in this specific way? For some reason, the top half was red and the bottom was white. Could they really get away with this design? Maybe it was meant as a message of encouragement to catch 'em all.

"Class will now begin. Return here in two hours."

Once Gustav made that announcement, the students raced into the field. Sieghart had as big of a crowd around him as usual—which would probably be a nuisance for him. After observing him for a bit, Mercedes focused herself and walked off.

She was in no rush; they had two hours, so she decided to choose which monster she wanted to capture carefully. She had already concluded that none of them would benefit her in battle, as the monsters inside her dungeon were clearly stronger, so she set her sights on one that could fly. Since none of that type could be found in Stark Dungeon, one would undoubtedly prove useful in increasing her mobility.

The only problem was whether a flying monster big enough to carry a vampire could be found in this field...and whether they could be found in the middle of the night, the current time of day. For vampires, being nocturnal was just the way of life, but that didn't apply to all organisms.

Mercedes walked through the moonlit field and carefully scanned her surroundings. The first thing she noticed was a large snake—though it was only "large" according to the standards of her previous life. While it was so big it could swallow her whole, in this world, it would likely fall into the category of small monsters. While she found it quite fascinating, she had no need for a snake. After just a single glance, it slithered away in retreat.

The next monster Mercedes noticed was a large cat monster that resembled a serval. It was big enough to carry a person on its back, but since Kuro was already capable of that, she had no need for this monster either. She silently walked past it, and after it saw that she wasn't hostile, it meowed at her and ran away.

I suppose all the monsters here are ones that have overflowed from the dungeons. It was possible there was a dungeon nearby and that the monsters in this field were the same ones that spawned there. With that in mind, Mercedes continued her search in the dark field, but then she noticed Hannah slowly approaching a rabbit monster just a short distance away.

The rabbit was small enough that it would have reached half of

Hannah's height if it stood on its hind legs, but its gaze was too pointed to belong to a bunny, and there was a scar over one of its eyes as well. For some reason, it also held a cigar in its mouth as it observed Hannah. It had quite the weird personality for a rabbit.

Once Hannah had begun to throw her magic stone, the rabbit spit out its cigar, which hit her straight in the face. She flinched, and the rabbit took this opportunity to jump in the air, hop on her head, and run off, leaving behind a pathetic girl who had lost to a bunny rabbit.

Mercedes took a moment to consider her next course of action and approached Hannah. "You okay?"

"Ugh..."

"You seem okay."

Hannah was lying on the ground, but she seemed uninjured. Soon, she stood up, rubbed her head where the rabbit had jumped on her, and then looked at Mercedes. "Oh, Mercedes."

"That rabbit put one over on you, huh? He's smarter than he looks."

"Yeah, but I still have time. I haven't given up just yet!"

"You're gonna go after it again?"

"Yup! I've taken a liking to him. I'll catch him for sure!"

For some reason, Hannah seemed to like the weird rabbit. Having regained her confidence, she ran after it. Despite its odd appearance, it must not have been too bad a fellow, given it had held back its strength enough to avoid injuring the girl.

Once Hannah was gone, Mercedes resumed her search. Or at least, she was about to. At some point, a kangaroo-like monster had approached. It wore boxing gloves over its fists and punched the air in a show of force.

The kangaroo gets up and looks at you as if it wants to join your party!

"Sorry, but I'm looking for a monster that can fly." Mercedes dismissed him. She really was cold.

The kangaroo slumped its shoulders and dejectedly hopped away. She felt a bit guilty.

Mercedes spent some more time walking around the field, but she couldn't find any monster that fit her criteria. But suddenly, her

sharp senses picked up a sound coming from far off in the distance. It was Sieghart and his posse, and they were frantically running away from something.

"What kind of joke is this?! Why is something like that *here*?!"

"How would I know?! We've gotta tell Mr. Gustav!"

"Are we just gonna leave Sieghart there by himself?!"

"He himself volunteered to! He's gotta be confident he can take it!"

From the conversation she had overheard, it seemed that a monster that shouldn't have been there had appeared and the students were running from it. However, they had left Sieghart behind. He was likely trying to serve as a distraction so the others could escape, but had there really not been a single one of them who had thought of staying with him?

Well, sounds about like what you can expect from people, thought Mercedes. It was pitiful that Sieghart put his life on the line to protect people like them. Still, Mercedes was interested in this monster. While her classmates were just inexperienced children, they were still the cream of the crop who had been chosen for the A class. This was no average monster if it had them scampering away with their tails between their legs.

What is this monster that snuck into the mix? Mercedes created a ring with her fingers and peered through it. On the other side was a large eagle that could easily carry a human on its back. No, maybe it was a hawk. In any case, this was exactly the kind of flying monster she had been looking for, and it was significantly stronger than the other monsters that could be found in the field too. For any other student, encountering it would be nothing but bad luck, but for Mercedes, she had found a needle in a haystack. She wasted no time in deciding that this was the monster she was going to capture.

Chapter 30: The Prince's Truth

Mercedes arrived at the scene to find Sieghart engaged in an evenly matched battle. His skills were superb; not only were his movements incredibly refined, they were incredibly controlled. He moved in a manner only exhibited by those who had mastered proper swordsmanship, something Mercedes—who mixed in her own improper self-taught methods—was incapable of. Quite plainly, his skills exceeded Felix's, and probably even Mercedes's.

As a member of the royal family, his athletic abilities had been honed through his elite education. He had physical strength that rivaled the eagle—which was much bigger in size—and was quick enough that his opponent's ability to fly didn't put him at a disadvantage. Had Mercedes lacked the knowledge of gravity—a concept unknown to the beings of this world—and had her random gravity training not been an extension of Blood Manipulation—a method to grow a vampire's strength—Sieghart would have undoubtedly far exceeded her.

However, even more surprising was that the eagle could match an opponent like him. This was clearly no monster a student could fight; it was likely as strong as Kuro. Sieghart seemed to be struggling, and there was a gash over his chest. Luckily, it had only torn his clothes. He didn't appear to be injured. *Wait. Something isn't right here...*

Still, pointing that out could come later. Everybody had a secret or two they wished to keep.

Mercedes slung the sword the academy had provided her over her shoulder, ignored what she had seen, and called out to Sieghart. "Prince Abendrot! Just double-checking, but are you planning on capturing that monster? If so, I'll leave."

No more stealing others' prey, forever.

Despite the circumstances surrounding this monster, they were

currently in a hunting class, and Sieghart had the skills to capture the beast. Thus, if he wanted to take it for himself, any interference on Mercedes's part would be plain rude. She wanted a monster that could fly, but she had no intention of breaking any tacit rules. As long as Sieghart didn't renounce his rights, he had precedence as the one who had first discovered the monster.

The prince responded while fending off the beast. "N-No! I'm not! I'd rather have a monster that's a bit more obedient for my first go! But you should get out of here!"

"Got it."

Mercedes had received the go-ahead, so there was now no need to hold back. She took a step forward, and at the same time, the large eagle retreated into the air. His senses were sharp. She had yet to attack, but his instincts had rightly discerned that she was not a foe to be taken lightly.

"What are you doing?! That's not your average monster! It's likely been sent here by an assassin to take my life! There's no other reason an ashtar would be here!"

So this thing was called an ashtar. Mercedes didn't know the name's origins, but it certainly gave off a powerful vibe. She looked up to the beast and quietly whispered to Zwölf.

"What's your intel?"

"Searching for information about the monster identified as 'ashtar' in this land... Information found. Search is complete. I shall now disclose the information:

"Ashtars are eagle-like monsters considered a B-level threat, the same category as schwarz wolfangs. Their primary affinities are earth and metal. Their secondary affinities are wind and lightning. They mainly attack using their claws and beak, which they strengthen using metal magic. They may also attack by strengthening their wings with the same magic and slamming them into their opponent. They do not utilize their other magical affinities."

Mercedes was a bit disappointed that its affinities overlapped with hers. If possible, she had wanted a monster that could use fire or water magic, but this was not the time or place to be picky. Given her current circumstances, this was the best flying monster she

could hope for.

"Chirp chirp!"

While it had an intimidating appearance, its cry was as cute as any other bird's. Not that it was important. The ashtar registered Mercedes as its new target and dove toward the ground.

First, Mercedes tried to block its claws using the sword the school had supplied, but it easily broke in half. Its claws really were strengthened with magic; there was no way a natural part of an animal would do that to her sword.

The ashtar circled the sky and once again attacked Mercedes. This time, it conspicuously strengthened its wings, turning itself into a sharp blade that it thrust toward Mercedes. The young girl was quite impressed with its mobility and strength, but it really was a shame that its magical affinities didn't mesh well with hers.

"Druck."

Mercedes announced the name of her spell and placed strong pressure on the ashtar, causing it to tumble toward the ground. Even if birds defied gravity to fly, they still fell if enough pressure was acting on them.

Mercedes used one hand to maintain the pressure on the bird and played with the magic stone in the other. Seeing this, the ashtar recognized its defeat. It stopped resisting and closed its eyes.

Mercedes activated the magic stone, causing chains to burst forth and constrain the ashtar. She had been convinced that the stone had to either paralyze or freeze its prey, but apparently, it used metal magic. In any case, she had succeeded in capturing the ashtar, so all that was left was to spend plenty of time training it.

Mercedes approached the fettered ashtar and boldly sat on it. The monster offered no resistance, instead waiting for her next move. She reached into her pocket and pretended to take out a piece of bread, which she had actually taken out of her dungeon.

"You hungry?"

The monster was silent. Mercedes waved the bread in front of it and watched it follow the snack with its eyes. However, it made no attempt to eat it. It must have still been wary of her.

Of course, Mercedes had anticipated this. The most important

part of taking care of a pet bird was patience. She had no intention of letting her guard down quite yet either. First, she needed to hand-feed it so that it could recognize that she wasn't a threat.

"Sorry, and thank you. You really saved me," said Sieghart.

"Don't worry about it. I just wanted to capture this monster for myself."

"But this is the second time you've saved me. Can't I at least offer you a word of appreciation?"

Mercedes glanced at Sieghart before returning her gaze to the ashtar, which was still watching her intently. As a test, she tried lightly touching the bird. It didn't resist, and its plume was surprisingly soft.

"You said this monster was after you. How do you know that?"

"Well..."

"I always thought something was off about you. You lack guards, and your carriage was practically begging to be attacked. If there really was someone after the fifth prince's life, it wouldn't make sense for him to come to the academy. Wouldn't it be safer to stay in the palace until things were safe?" Mercedes petted the ashtar as she spoke. It was incredibly fluffy. "Perhaps it has to do with the fact that you *aren't* Prince Sieghart."

"H-How do you—?!"

"Look down at your chest."

Sieghart followed Mercedes's directions to find not a flat board, but two plump mounds. The binding around her chest had broken, leaving behind a view that bordered on obscene. This was downplaying the matter, but Sieghart's chest was almost *too* developed given her age—especially considering that Mercedes's was still flat. The two were the same age, so what produced this vast difference? It must have been their environment.

Sieghard screamed.

"I don't think a prince would have those."

Sieghart hurried to conceal her breasts, and then wrapped a new binder around them as Mercedes looked away and continued to pet the ashtar. It was shockingly obedient and allowed Mercedes to do as she pleased. At the very least, the bird didn't seem to dislike

being petted.



Her chest bound once again, Sieghart glared at Mercedes with flushed cheeks. "Um, Grunewald? Keep this between us."

"I wasn't intending to spread it around anyway." *That would clearly cause problems for me*, added Mercedes inwardly.

Most likely, the girl before Mercedes was a body double—a decoy that had been placed at the school to be attacked. The royal family must have received intel that there was a group plotting to assassinate the fifth prince and had given the girl the name "Sieghart" to lure them out. As for her silver hair—the hallmark of the royal family—perhaps she had dyed it? If that was her natural hair, then that only complicated the situation further, making Mercedes even less interested in getting involved. In any case, the girl was clearly in a precarious situation. Though really, the life of any noble or royal was complicated, even if to differing degrees.

If she's here as a decoy...then there must be others hiding here who work for the royal family. There's no way they'd be stupid enough to prepare a body double and send them in solo. Bait doesn't work unless you have hunters to capture the prey once they bite.

Clearly, there was a conspiracy afoot. Not to mention, this was the second time Mercedes had accidentally gotten involved. There was no way to stay out of it now; she had almost assuredly become a target of Sieghart's enemies.

This is obnoxious. Mercedes continued to pet the ashtar with a sigh.

Chapter 31: The Heir to the Throne

Once class was over and Mercedes had returned to the dorms, she wrote a letter explaining her current situation. The unsettling shadow that hung over Sieghart was no longer a matter unrelated to her. Not only had she poked her nose into the matter twice already, but she couldn't ignore any unnecessary chaos breaking out at the academy regardless. This place had much to offer her, and for now, she wanted to focus on her studies. But should the prince be killed, the school would certainly be closed for a while, meaning it was in her best interest to nip any trouble in the bud. She'd stop whoever was behind this nefarious plan and obtain a peaceful school life for herself. The current predicament was just a roadblock on the path to her destination, so if it got in her way, she simply needed to remove it.

However, Mercedes currently lacked information, and Sieghart wasn't giving her any, likely because she feared involving Mercedes any further. But who could she then reveal her intel to and seek advice from? Mr. Gustav? No, he'd be a trustworthy ally, but that also made him a formidable foe. It was entirely possible that he had come here under secret orders, which also meant that anyone at the academy was a potential enemy—any inconspicuous student she passed in the halls could be an assassin sent to kill the prince.

Thus, she needed to go to someone outside of the academy, and conveniently, there was a single person she had in mind even if he wasn't completely trustworthy. He may have already known something about the incident, and if *he* was one of the men targeting Sieghart, he'd just demand that she take out the prince herself. In that sense, he wasn't trustworthy, but he *was* reliable in the worst way possible. In other words, Mercedes addressed her

letter to her father Bernhard.

Incidentally, the ashtar knew nothing about this incident. Mercedes had questioned the bird using Benkei as an interpreter, but apparently, it had simply been released near Sieghart and had decided to go after the girl because it was hungry.

"What are you writing, Mercedes?"

"Nothing you need to worry about, Hannah. I'm reporting what's happened here to my father."

"Whoa, you really are from an important noble family."

Hannah had a few small injuries, and beside her stood a one-eyed rabbit with folded arms and a cigar in its mouth. Apparently, she had succeeded in capturing it.

Not that it mattered, but the rabbit wasn't actually smoking the cigar. Now that it was inside, it just held it between its lips instead. Clearly, this was a well-mannered rabbit.

Once Mercedes had finished writing, she waited until late in the morning to summon a monster from her dungeon and entrust it with the letter. She had chosen a monster known as a "gigakhatze" for the job, which had the appearance of a tabby cat the size of a tiger. It had the reflexes of a house cat, making it quick, nimble, and friendly. They could be a bit capricious, but Mercedes was confident it would do the job.

Two days later, the gigakhatze returned with a response. The cat looked awfully proud of itself, and after giving it some treats, Mercedes returned it to the dungeon. Then, she opened the slobbery letter.

All that was written was the following: "Come ask me in person." He was as standoffish as always. Left with no choice, Mercedes slipped out of school on one of her free days and used magic to fly back home.

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"You came, I see. I'll tell you what I know."

Upon returning home, Mercedes followed Bernhard to his private

quarters. He locked the door and cast some magic on it with a snap of his fingers. She felt the wind—or rather, the air—create a layer around the room. It was likely some sort of sound-proofing spell.

"There are rumors surrounding the royal family," Bernhard said quietly but clearly. What he was about to say was likely the sort of thing that had to be kept secret, but he uttered it without any reservation. "Rumors that the current members are imposters."

"Imposters?"

"To explain, let us go back to the beginning, when the previous king was blessed with no sons and instead married his daughter to a man from a reputable house. Eleven years ago, Princess Sieglinde was the first of their children announced to the world."

First Princess Sieglinde... Perhaps it was a coincidence, but that sounded awfully similar to Sieghart. Still, Mercedes kept silent as she awaited her father's next words.

"Afterwards, they announced that her mother—who had become queen by then—had passed due to sudden illness. The new king took a new wife. From that moment onwards, both the king and queen were not of royal blood. That's when it was suddenly announced that Sieglinde secretly had five older brothers."

"Sounds like a tall tale."

"Precisely. Considering that the previous king failed to have any sons of his own, the birth of a male who could serve as heir would be joyous news. There was no reason to keep their existences secret. 'Sieghart' is the name of the supposed youngest son."

Mercedes had no words.

"Adding to the mystery is the fact that at Princess Sieglinde's fifth birthday party, the young girl present was rather unsightly and looked nothing like the girl. She was ugly, quite frankly. Aging can change facial features, and some believe it is possible that her face had changed so significantly given that the last time she made a public appearance was when she was an infant. However, there are others—like me—who do not believe such drivel. What do you think?"

Mercedes took a moment to ponder the question. While it was still a mere suspicion, juxtaposing what she knew against what

Bernhard had just told her led to a single answer.

"It's a plot to take over the throne. The story of the queen's sudden illness was a lie. She's likely locked away somewhere, or maybe they already killed her. The new queen was in on the conspiracy from the beginning, while the five sons had already been born before the son-in-law became king. In actuality, they had five sons and one daughter together, and they gave the name of Princess Sieglinde to their own child and the clueless *real* Princess Sieglinde a new name, turning her into a body double for the throne."

As Mercedes gave voice to her deductions, she couldn't help but think how stupid these people had to be if this was all true. The son-in-law turned king would've had to get with another woman and have six kids *before* being married to one of the previous king's daughters. As a result, it all just seemed strange. It would have been one thing if they had a single daughter who could replace Sieglinde, but they had accidentally gone and had five sons as well, resulting in their sudden appearance and this predicament that clearly didn't add up.

Though for now, that was all just speculation.

"I see you share my theory. There is something artificial about the entire royal family as it is now. Their hair may be silver, but it's a dirty shade that appears dyed. Do you get that impression from the body double at the academy?"

"It didn't seem artificial at all. It was a natural silver."

"Hmm..." Bernhard crossed his arms and briefly pondered in silence. Mercedes patiently waited, and eventually, he reached his conclusion. "This may be our chance to make the royal family indebted to us. And even should that not happen, I despise having some foolish phony of a king lording over us. Pay attention to who comes near the royal body double, Mercedes, and capture one of their assailants for interrogation. If she is the real princess, she may be the last descendant of royal blood. Losing the royal bloodline would greatly hurt Orcus's military might. We must avoid such an outcome at all costs."

"What do you mean?" Mercedes was confused by his statement. Sieghart was certainly skilled with a sword, but she was just one

person. While her technique outpaced Mercedes's, Mercedes's superior base stats meant she would trump the girl in any fight between them. Her skills were on the same level that Kuro's had been when they had first met.

"Considering that you're a Seeker, you must know about the dungeons."

"I suppose so, yes."

"What do you think would happen if a single man gained control of a dungeon's power?"

Mercedes absentmindedly played with the dungeon key in her pocket. Apparently, there were others who knew the truth. It was likely classified and privy to only a select few, but clearly, the head of the Grunewalds could get his hands on information hidden to anyone else.

"Those who have truly conquered a dungeon are gifted with the dungeon itself. They are able to mass-produce monsters and tools, giving them the power to control an army the size of a nation's. However, it is an incredibly difficult feat. Only a few have done so in all of history."

"But wouldn't—couldn't the military conquer one if they tried?"

"I hear it has been attempted many times in the past, but groups are ill-suited for dungeon conquest. Entering a tight, closed-off space in droves only makes you easy prey for monsters with long-range attacks. And if any one person grows fearful, that fear will spread, turning your comrades into hindrances. Dungeons cannot be conquered by numbers. What's required is the extraordinary power of a single individual."

Operating as a group was disadvantageous in a small space. It was one of the basic tenets of battle. Even in Mercedes's previous life, there were many records of larger armies being decimated by smaller ones after being lured into a tight space. Given Mercedes's small stature, she didn't feel limited in any way fighting in the dungeons, but four full-sized adults would be enough to completely block the path. That was how tight it was in there.

"Often, the only individuals who fit that description are prestigious men and women in positions of power. They have no

need to risk the danger of the dungeons. Additionally, dungeons often support nearby towns' economies. Once your rank becomes as high as mine, conquering a dungeon brings more problems than benefits." Indirectly, he was saying that he would be able to conquer a dungeon if he wanted to. Ever the confident man.

"Then Stark Dungeon..."

"Yes, it was a heavy loss. However, that dungeon had only appeared recently. The dungeon that supports this city is the Practis Dungeon, which has been around much longer. While it is a shame, it was simply a temporary boon."

"And what if Practis Dungeon is conquered?"

"Do not worry, Mercedes. *That will not happen.*"

Mercedes felt something off in his words. Practis Dungeon was a lower-level dungeon than the one she owned, which meant the likelihood that it could be conquered was higher. Could he have a soldier trained from infancy lying in wait to assassinate any Seekers on the verge of conquering it? Given her father, it seemed possible that he'd go to extreme lengths just to support the city's economy.

"Let us return to the matter at hand. I believe I told you that highly skilled individuals are the ones who conquer dungeons, yes? If a small band of skilled men succeeded in conquering one, they would fight over the rights to it. They might even be willing to kill."

Mercedes silently nodded, scowling at this new knowledge that demonstrated just how vicious the dungeons were. They were tight to prevent groups from conquering them, and once you arrived at the final floor after expending great effort, you were given a second option of a no-risk cash reward. Most strong enough to make it to the deepest floor would cave in, choose that choice, and lose the chance to learn the truth ever again.

Not to mention the formidable warden that was waiting on the other side of the black door. Once a group cleared that, the next challenge was the ensuing fight over who would win the rights to it. They had risked their lives and beaten the boss, after all. Why *wouldn't* each of them want the reward for themselves? Plus, the most skilled could gain honor without even having to risk venturing into the dungeons.

It had been a pure coincidence that the stars had aligned so Mercedes could overcome these trials. Without honor—or really, anything to her name at all—she started from the bottom. She didn't have the luxury to think about self-preservation, and the only allies she had were monsters she had captured in the dungeons. Her brutal five-year training regimen had boosted her base stats, and her knowledge of gravity had given her an advantage that allowed her to exceed the limits of other vampires. It was only thanks to those circumstances that she had succeeded in conquering a dungeon.

"Anyhow, I digress. The first king of Orcus, Abendrot I, gained ownership of such a dungeon in the form of a sword. The royal sword can only be used by kings, is made of a mysterious metal that is unbreakable, and gave King Abendrot I unparalleled power and prestige. He used that power to become king and build the foundation of this nation. But...a dungeon can only be passed down to those who inherit the blood of its conqueror, and even then, I hear its functions are limited."

Once again, Mercedes realized the ungodly potential of the item she had gotten her hands on.

Chapter 32: The Privileges of a Dungeon Master

"Passed down...you said?"

Bernhard nodded as Mercedes mulled over his words. The conqueror of a dungeon would earn it as a reward, but apparently, rights to it could be inherited by blood, and the ability to use a dungeon was what proved someone to be a real descendant of Abendrot. Plus, this dungeon was the greatest contributor to Orcus's military force; losing it would mean cutting the nation's combat strength in half.

"Yes. During the days of lawlessness before there was order, eight people known as the First Eight conquered eight dungeons and earned the rights to them. Two were elven, two were chimäre, two were volgelen, and two were vampires. They all founded nations that still remain prosperous to this day, and one of those is Orcus. Ever since then, the destructive potential of the dungeons has kept each of these rival nations in check, leading to the present day."

To Mercedes, dungeons seemed comparable to the nuclear weapons of her old world. It was common knowledge that wars were won with numbers, but the limitless power of the dungeons was no simple threat. Fighting meant sacrifice, and no matter who emerged victorious, both nations would be overrun by monsters regardless.

"In that case, couldn't the royal family be more proactive about conquering the dungeons?"

"That is of course their greatest wish, but it would mean the birth of a new king, which could threaten their influence. Perhaps that would stand should they be able to conquer new dungeons themselves, but reality is not so convenient."

Those who possessed dungeons were kings. The moment a

person attained one, all the monsters residing within—alongside all the monsters that could be mass-produced inside—were at their beck and call. Therefore, the royal family couldn't leave conquering dungeons to their knights, no matter how much they coveted their power. Their only option was to conceal the secret of the dungeons and make sure it was never leaked to the public.

Likely, their true wish was to bar Seekers from entering the dungeons, but if they were to do so, monsters would overflow and overrun the nation. Perhaps they viewed Seekers as too weak to truly clear dungeons.

"You said their functions are limited, right?"

"Yes. Members of the royal family can use and produce the monsters and items that are in the dungeons, but only those already registered to it. Only a true dungeon master can increase the scope of production by registering new monsters and items... If the records are to be believed, that is."

This was news to Mercedes. Thinking back on it, she had yet to fully grasp the functions available to her despite being a dungeon master herself. She realized she needed to hear the details from Zwölf.

"In any case, we must avoid the royal bloodline ending at all costs. You must extract intel from those who are targeting the body double, Mercedes. Capture one and bring him here. I shall do the torturing myself."

Considering the word "torture" had so casually left his lips, there really was nothing normal about this man. Mercedes couldn't help but think derisively that it was hard to tell who was truly the villain here.

***

"Zwölf. Tell me what functions a dungeon conqueror has access to that their descendants do not."

"Yes, master."

After concluding her discussion with Bernhard, Mercedes decided to lock herself inside Stark Dungeon before returning to the

academy. If the dungeon master—in this case, Mercedes—went inside the dungeon without decompressing it, the dungeon key would obviously be left behind. In situations like that, the key placed a boulder from inside the dungeon outside of it to conceal itself, serving as a self-defense mechanism that guarded against theft. Basically, the key would get stuck inside a rock as was the common fate in an old, popular video game.

Mercedes headed for the house she had built inside her dungeon and gathered her important comrades to hear Zwölf's explanation. In addition to Mercedes and Zwölf themselves, there was Benkei, Kuro, Shufu—who was still looking for a new goal after losing his old one—and the ashtar, the last of which would soon need a name. In case anyone was wondering, the krylia was left behind at the Grunewald residence.

"As you know, the basic functions of sealing the dungeon inside the portable master key, compression and decompression, can be used by any of your descendants. Similarly, they may produce monsters and items."

Mercedes already knew this, but even that posed a significant threat. One single person would have enough power to topple nations.

"The dungeon conqueror has access to all of these functions, as well as the ability to register new monsters and items to the dungeon."

"Does that mean, for example...that I could register Shufu and the ashtar and make copies of them?"

"Yes, that is possible. Would you like to register them?"

"I suppose I should."

Both ashtars and Böse dämons were non-native to Stark Dungeon, and given their superior strength, it couldn't hurt to produce more of them if she could. However, more Shufus sounded like chaos, so she decided to hold off on that for now.

"Let me ask you this as well. Could I reregister Benkei and create more of him too?"

"Yes, that is possible. However, Benkei will cost more to produce than regular Asura ogres. Additionally, the Asura ogre that is

currently registered will be overwritten, as they share the same name."

"Hmm..."

Mercedes decided to save reregistering Benkei for later. While more Benkeis would make for a tantalizing militaristic force, they would cause trouble for future generations considering they would only be loyal to her.

"Next is updating appearances. While the master of the dungeon can change the appearance of the master key, their descendants cannot."

Mercedes currently kept the key in a halberd shape. While she could freely change this shape, her descendants wouldn't be able to do so should they inherit the master key. It was quite a limiting rule.

"Additionally, expanding and remodeling the dungeon—functions you have already utilized, master—are limited to the person who conquered the dungeon."

"I see. That all makes quite the difference."

"Yes. Also, the dungeon itself—that is, me—will only obey and can only communicate with the one who conquered it."

Zwölf served as a brain that knew everything about the dungeon. With these restrictions, Mercedes's descendants would never be able to discover any of the functions that might be hidden to them. The system was quite restricted for anyone besides the person who had conquered the dungeon themselves.

"Finally, there is the usage of the guardian. Only the dungeon conqueror can summon and utilize it."

"The guardian? Oh, you must mean the thing on the other side of the black door. I can use it?"

"Yes. However, dungeon functions will be prohibited for twenty-four hours should the guardian be destroyed. Please keep that in mind if you choose to summon it."

The schwarz historie that had once put Mercedes and her comrades through the ringer was too strong for her to defeat alone. While it came with risks, having it on her side was huge.

"By the way, master. You have plenty of mana saved up. What would you like to do with it?"

"How much do I have, exactly?"

"Let me display the numbers for your convenience."

```
[Dungeon Points: 600]
-Goblin (Required Points: 1)
-Goblin Soldat (Required Points: 2)
-Goblin Hexer (Required Points: 3)
-Goblin Führer (Required Points: 8)
-Goblin General (Required Points: 30)
-Goblin Neet x3 (Required Points: 1)
-Orc (Required Points: 5)
-Usuihon Orc (Required Points: 7)
-Kyoseizumi Orc (Required Points: 3)
-Land Drache (Required Points: 8)
-Gerippe Fechter (Required Points: 3, or 7 armed)
-Werwolf Blau (Required Points: 2)
-Werwolf Rot (Required Points: 12)
-No-Good Jelly Slime (Required Points: 9)
-Good Jelly Slime (Required Points: 1)
-Really No-Good Jelly Slime (Required Points: 11)
-Gigakhatze (Required Points: 55)
-Schwarz Wolfang (Required Points: 80)
-Ashtar (Required Points: 75)
-Asura Ogre (Required Points: 150)
-Böse Dämon (Required Points: 145)
-Baby Drache (Required Points: 100)
```

"That's enough of the monsters. I'll look later."

"Understood. I shall display things simpler next time."

A list was presented to Mercedes, but it was so endless that she decided to cut it short. She had already seen all the monsters that had left an impression on her, so she wanted to wait until later to

look over the rest. For now, she wanted to see what else she could do.

```
-Monster Feed (10 servings) 1p
-Steel Sword 2p
-Steel Axe 2p
-Steel Spear 2p
-Steel Shield 2p
-Steel Bow 2p
-Musket 3p
-Magic Staff 2p
-Fire Stone 3p
-Light Stone 6p
-Water Stone 3p
-Ice Stone 6p
-Earth Stone 3p
-Metal Stone 6p
-Wind Stone 3p
-Lightning Stone 6p
-Seal Stone 12p
```

"I'll look at the items later too. How much can I expand the dungeon?"

"You may expand the dungeon by one unit for every point of mana spent. Each unit is roughly the size of a square meter. The cost of a building depends on its materials and facilities, but a single house with no upgrades costs 10p."

Mercedes pondered this for a moment. She had never been naive enough to think she was the only one who had ever conquered a dungeon, and it was possible that she'd have to someday fight another dungeon owner. To prepare for that scenario, it would be wise to increase her dungeon's strength now.

"About monster feed...is that something I have to give the

monsters to keep them alive? I've never given them any before."

"No. Monsters in the dungeons will not starve without monster feed. However, bestowing it on them can increase their loyalty to you."

Do I use my points now or save them for later? She needed to think this through carefully.

Chapter 33: What Forms This World

Ultimately, Mercedes decided to use a hundred points now and save the rest for later. First, she removed all obstacles on what had been the twenty-fourth floor and transformed it into a flat, empty space. The walls and everything else she'd removed were returned to her in the form of points, increasing her point value by fifty.

Next, she bought all the training equipment being sold in town and registered it to the dungeon. Then, she used seventy points to duplicate as much of that equipment as she could. She also decided to move the restorative fountain on the upper floors to this floor. With that, the twenty-fourth floor was transformed into a sports gym. She hoped to use it to train the monsters in her dungeon.

Next, she converted twenty of the fifty points she'd received earlier into twenty goblins, then used the remaining thirty to summon one goblin general to lead those recruits. If her goblins increased in strength, she could reregister the stronger goblin to the dungeon, making any goblin she subsequently summoned stronger.

But there really aren't many of these, huh? Mercedes appreciated learning of the capabilities she had access to, but it had left her with some questions. The number of points she'd accumulated in a whole year was strikingly small. Six hundred points was just enough to summon four Asura ogres, six hundred goblins, or eighteen hundred goblin neets. This might seem like plenty; in just ten years, she'd be able to form a vast army—no time at all given vampires' lifespans. However, Mercedes felt like her resources were quite limited, as this production speed wouldn't be enough to maintain the dungeons' functions as it had been before she became its master.

Seekers entered the dungeon to hunt monsters daily. Even if stronger ones tended to stick around for a while, it was clear that

monsters had been dying at a much higher rate than Mercedes's dungeon could now produce. Therefore, she was convinced there was another way of increasing her points besides waiting for them to accumulate naturally with time.

By collecting mana, I can produce monsters and items. In other words, mana can create mass. If we trace that logic backward...

Mercedes scowled. Mana—nanomachines according to Zwölf—could create mass, which made an increase in mana inevitable. After a short bit of pondering, she realized there was clearly something strange about the dungeons; while Seekers and monsters died frequently, Mercedes had never encountered bones or corpses. The floors were *too* clean.

"Zwölf. You increase mana by bringing organisms and items into the dungeon, don't you?"

"Yes, master. When wild animals, bugs, and Seekers who have entered the dungeon perish, the dungeon receives the nanomachines that form their bodies. Of course, it takes time to completely disassemble them, so it is possible to recover corpses from dungeons shortly after death, just as you once did, master."

It was like some sick tower defense game. In other words, Mercedes could earn more points—and thus create more monsters—by leaving the dungeon open rather than carrying it around as a key. Even Seekers didn't take all the monsters they killed back with them; most were simply left to rot. Even when they needed to collect certain monster parts, they typically left the rest of the corpse behind since monsters were too heavy to bring back in full.

However, that meant that the mana of those dead monsters would be reabsorbed and reused by the dungeons, and they could only be allowed to function through the continuous death of Seekers. The system was depraved.

"Hey, Zwölf."

"Yes?"

"Are we vampires—are *any* living things in this world—really alive?"

Nanomachines could create mass, and those who perished were broken down into nanomachines. It was no exaggeration to say that

people were made out of these things. But if that was the case, were they truly alive? Wouldn't it be more apt to call them machines or robots? At least, Mercedes couldn't help but think so.

"Of course they are alive. They must breathe, eat, and perform all other functions required by organisms. Blood runs through their veins, and they can be sick or injured. They reproduce, age, and die. They are undoubtedly alive."

"But they're made of nanomachines."

"You seem to be mistaken about nanomachines, master. While people are certainly—"

Zwölf's words were suddenly cut off. This angered Mercedes. Why stop now? This was the most important thing she needed to know to understand the basis of this world. But no matter how much Mercedes inwardly begged her to spit the rest out, Zwölf remained silent.

"What?"

"My apologies. I have run into a code that restricts my speech. You do not have the authority to hear any further information. There is a limit as to what can be shared to a dungeon master who only possesses one dungeon."

Mercedes was hit by the overwhelming urge to shout expletives. She had been led on with juicy information, only to get half the explanation. This only piqued her curiosity further. Just what was she? What kind of world did she live in? What had happened to Earth, and what had become of humanity? Zwölf must have known the answers to all these questions, yet she was barred from sharing them.

However, she had said that owning only one dungeon meant that Mercedes lacked the authority to know any more. She recalled what Zwölf had told her when she stood before the black door: "Beyond it lies grueling tribulations, but should you overcome this trial after risking your life, you shall obtain a fragment of this world's truth." She had never promised to reveal all, instead clarifying that the truth presented to her would be a mere fragment of the whole picture.

In other words, Mercedes needed to clear *every* dungeon if she wanted the whole truth. *I need to think about this carefully. Do I*

really need to—and should I—conquer every dungeon?

It was vexing, but at the same time, oddly fulfilling. Ever since being born into this world, Mercedes had been searching for a purpose in life—a goal to reach. And now, though it was still blurry, she finally felt that goal coming into focus.

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"In today's practical class, you will finally be entering the dungeons. Though this will be a quasi dungeon, to be exact."

Gustav's words sent a murmur through the class. All men in this world had once dreamed of making a killing by conquering a dungeon. While they weren't any place for nobles like them, that didn't change the fact that they yearned for the strength and glory that could be found there. The occupation of Seeker—those who explored the dungeons—had the highest fatality rates of any out there, but at the same time, it was well respected as a job done only by the brave.

"Mr. Gustav! What's a quasi dungeon?"

"I am sure you all know that for reasons unknown to us, monsters endlessly spawn from the dungeons. I am also sure it would be pointless to explain that monsters appear on the surface once dungeons are unable to contain all the monsters inside. Those monsters will occasionally inhabit places like caves or fortress ruins, turning the area into what's known as a quasi dungeon."

"Then it's not a real dungeon?"

"No. Unlike real dungeons, the threat subsides once all monsters living there are eliminated, and no new monsters are produced inside. The quasi dungeon we will be using today has been artificially created by releasing captured monsters into a cave near the academy. Given your skills, you all will be able to defeat every monster you encounter there."

Gustav responded to his students' questions coldly, and Mercedes listened with a sense of awe. She would have never guessed these dungeons existed, but it was true; if monsters took up residence in caves or ruins, there was little difference between that and a real

dungeon—except for the lack of treasure hidden inside, that is.

"You will find Seekers if you arrive at the deepest part of the cave. They are a skilled team hired just for this class. Once you retrieve proof of your achievement from them, return here. You will enter subsequently as teams of four."

Mercedes couldn't help but think this was exactly what she would've expected from an academy full of rich kids; everything had been thoroughly and completely planned and prepared. She had been armorless and weaponless during her first foray into the dungeons. Considering that, wasn't this just plain overprotective?

No, even this class came with real risk. As those thoughts made their way through Mercedes's mind, friends began to team up with each other. Before she had realized it, she was left completely alone.

Still, comrades would only hold Mercedes back. If she was lucky, she might be the only one without teammates, which would mean she could go in alone. However, those hopes were dashed when someone grabbed hold of her arm. "Do you have anyone to team up with, Mercedes? If not, then let's go in together!"

It was Hannah. Given her outgoing nature, she should have had no trouble finding other teammates besides Mercedes. However, she must have not seen the glare Mercedes was giving her, as she looked around at their other classmates with her arms still firmly wrapped around Mercedes's. Finally, her gaze landed on Sieghart, who had been left alone for the polar opposite reason Mercedes had been; there were so many dying to team up with her, she had been unable to join any.

While the female students fought to keep the others away from Sieghart, Hannah calmly approached and addressed her, just as someone who completely lacked social awareness might. "Do you have a team, Sieghart? Why not join ours? It would be perfect!"

After speaking those words, Hannah forcefully dragged Sieghart away. She really didn't know how to read a room. In fact, Mercedes began to think that this might have been a calculated act.

At first, the rest of the female students glared at Hannah, but eventually, they gave up and began to form teams of their own. Given Hannah's small animallike nature, they probably felt assured

that nothing unsavory would happen.

"Hannah! You can't just steal the march on everyone—"

"Oh, Dodo! Do you need a team too? Join ours!"

"Huh?" One of the girls tried to harangue Hannah for stepping in, but Hannah just grabbed her arm and pulled her into the team. Now, she had no grounds to attack Hannah, as she was now someone who had stolen the march rather than someone who had the march stolen from them. Now, the rest of the female students were glaring at Dodo with eyes that said *that bitch...*

Thus, the four tumbled into forming a team.

"U-Um," Sieghart cleared her throat, "I'm sorry for forcing you to..."

"N-No! It's nothing you need to apologize for, Your Highness! O-Oh, right. Why don't we introduce ourselves? We're in the same class, but we haven't really gotten the chance to talk to each other before."

Sieghart's righteous nature had her apologizing to Dodo and Mercedes for getting dragged onto the team. However, that was nothing for her to feel guilty about. Why had she apologized, really? In any case, it seemed to have thrown Dodo into a panic, as she hurriedly changed the subject.

"I am Dodo Riotte, the eldest daughter of the Riotte family. My affinity is wind, and I excel at fighting from midrange, as opposed to close-quarters combat," she said as she puffed out her chest, causing her ginger pigtails to sway. Actually, they weren't twin pigtails, as there was a ponytail at the back of her head as well—her hair was organized as triplets. Black ribbons were tied near the end of her hair, and she was dressed in a black bunad with a collar of orange feathers around her neck. While the weapon in her hand resembled a whip, its tip uniquely called to mind a bird's beak. Mercedes was excited to see how exactly such a weapon was used.

"I'm Mercedes Grunewald. I hail from a Duke's family, but as the fourthborn, I won't be inheriting my father's noble title. Treat me as you would anyone else. When it comes to battle, I suppose I'm best at close-quarters combat." Mercedes gave a casual introduction and showed off her halberd-shaped master key. As long as she didn't use

its dungeon-related functions, it was just any old weapon. Given she'd had it assume the exact same shape as a halberd she had purchased in town, it was highly unlikely anyone would suspect it was a master key.

"I'm Hannah Burger. I may be the daughter of a merchant rather than a noble, but I hope that doesn't bother you and we can still be friends anyway! In terms of fighting, I guess I can use a little magic."

Hannah was apparently from a merchant family. Now that she mentioned it, Mercedes couldn't help but recall that the girl had never seemed very noble-like to her. Still, it was easy for her to imagine that Hannah's living situation had been more lavish than her own; while the girl seemed to be a free spirit at a glance, there was undeniable refinement in her movements.

"My name is Sieghart Abendrot. I fight with a sword, and I'm capable of both long-range and up-close attacks. I'd prefer if you treated me like any other student rather than a member of the royal family."

Mercedes felt like she could see flowers blooming behind Sieghart as she made her introduction. Of course, that had just been her imagination, but it didn't change the fact that the girl had been picture-perfect and extremely refined. Mercedes had a hard time believing she was just a body double rather than a genuine member of the royal family. Dodo even seemed to be entranced. Mercedes only grew more convinced that Sieghart was of real royal blood, especially considering the fact that her hair still appeared to be its natural color.

"I see you four have formed a group. You're up next," said Gustave.

"Yes sir!" responded Sieghart. She led the group into the dungeon. While her steps were firm, they were slower than usual. Perhaps she was nervous.

Dodo was putting on a brave front, but her expression was stiff. It was clear that she was trying to err on the side of caution during her first trip into a dungeon. Mercedes, on the other hand, was well accustomed to dungeons; her footsteps didn't waver, and

surprisingly, neither did Hannah's. They were oddly light, yet firm. At the same time, it was clear she was taking proper precautions. She made sure her footsteps produced little noise, but what really set her apart from the others was the fact that the moment she placed her foot to the floor—truly for just a single moment—she used the back of her foot to check the floor before her. It was awe-inspiring. If there were any traps set in this dungeon, Hannah was undoubtedly the only one who would be able to avoid them. The way she walked was something only someone with the knowledge that such traps could be set here would do in the first place.

Not to mention, Hannah kept her breathing steady and her posture relaxed. Mercedes had a hard time believing this was a skill a merchant would need. But what did it mean? As she mulled this over, she lifted her face to discover that Hannah had been staring at her. Their eyes met, and Hannah flashed a shy grin. "Tee-hee! It's really scary thinking about what could be by your feet in places like this, isn't it?"

"Yeah...it is."

Hannah always wore that same friendly smile, and it caused Mercedes to wonder if the expression she had just seen had been a trick of the light; there was such a difference between the Hannah she'd just seen and the Hannah she knew that it was hard to believe both could be real. But in that moment, her face had been nothing but an emotionless mask.

Chapter 34: The White Cloaks' Goal

Their walk through the dungeon was much easier than Mercedes had predicted it would be. The teaching staff must have deliberately made the difficulty level low just for this class. Even if there were traps, it was safe to assume that none would be life-threatening.

The area was more spacious than that of a normal dungeon, and the battles were a breeze. After walking for a short while, the party encountered a lizard monster the size of a dog. Its eyes were big and round, making it needlessly cute. At a glance, it seemed harmless.

"That's a geckogross. They rarely attack unless attacked first. Since they feed on poisonous bugs, they're sometimes released in town for pest control."

The monster made no hostile movements, just as Sieghart had explained. Instead, it stuck to the wall and slithered around, paying no attention to Mercedes and her party. Thinking it meaningless to attack if the monster wasn't hostile, the group decided to ignore it and continue onwards.

After another short while, they encountered multiple green humanoid monsters. They were around Mercedes's height, with red eyes and bulging stomachs. Their bodies seemed to be slumping.

"These are goblin neets. They're the weakest species of goblin and quite cowardly. They rarely leave the dungeons, but they occasionally are ousted by other goblins. They're quite harmless, but they act hostile toward anyone who trespasses on their territory."

"You're so smart, Your Highness!"

"This is nothing. Anyone could find that out with a little research. Anyway, it seems like they've recognized us to be enemies. Look out."

There were four goblin neets, and they let out a cacophonous screech to intimidate the group, but given their toppled-over posture, it had little impact. Sieghart and the rest of the group took out their weapons and began their assault on the monsters.

"Take that!" Dodo was the first to strike. She shook her whip, causing the tip to spin in the air before burying itself in the stomach of one of the goblins. It continued to spin, digging itself farther in its target's flesh until it eventually made its way completely through the goblin and out its backside. With one pull of the whip, Dodo removed the beak from the goblin, returning it to her hands.

How intriguing, thought Mercedes. It was both a whip and a javelin. Nothing like it had existed in her old world.

"Hah!" Next, Hannah outstretched her hand and released a jet stream of water. It blew through one of the goblins, causing it to collapse. Simultaneously, Sieghart stepped forward, and in a mere second, she had closed the distance with the goblin and swung her sword. That one strike cut straight through the goblin's neck, causing its head to fly in the air. Frightened, the remaining goblin rushed toward Hannah.

However, Mercedes grabbed it by the neck, snapping it with the strength of her grip alone. She didn't even need to use her weapon. Then, she crudely threw its corpse to the side and observed her surroundings. There seemed to be no other foes.

"Oho ho! You had it coming for you! Did you see me out there, Your Highness?"

"Yeah, you did well. And so did you two."

While Sieghart's complement had her blushing, Dodo nevertheless puffed out her chest triumphantly. Knowing Sieghart's real gender, Mercedes couldn't help but pity the girl; never in her wildest dreams could she have possibly imagined she was working so hard to prove herself to someone of the same sex.

Afterwards, they completed the task for class with no real effort. For now, it seemed that those after Sieghart had yet to make another move.

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That morning, Mercedes walked through campus while everyone else was deep asleep. The chirping of birds announced the sun's arrival, and thus, the end of the day for vampires. In fiction, sunlight would kill a vampire, but not here. Instead, vampires simply naturally preferred the dark the same way other animals naturally preferred light. Humans were more relaxed in the light. For example, while they feared the school at night, they had no trouble walking its halls in the morning. Vampires felt the same in the dark.

Still, they would sometimes add light to buildings to create certain effects the same way humans sometimes designed theirs to be dim for the same reason. The Seekers' Guild headquarters was an example of this. In other words, vampires had no problem bathing in the sun's rays; it was just that their nocturnal eyes sometimes had a hard time seeing when it was too bright.

Mercedes was no exception, and she had trouble making out everything in the morning sun. However, she had a reason to be out walking during this time—she had sensed a group closing in on her. Feigning ignorance, she went far away from others. That was when the culprits she'd sensed appeared before her.

They were a group of four, oddly dressed in white cloaks. They stood by the exit to block Mercedes's escape.

"I assume you won't answer me if I ask who you are, right?"

None responded. Instead, they all immediately drew their daggers. It was a simple answer, one that made their intentions much clearer much faster than any long-winded speech would.

The men jumped at Mercedes from all four directions. Without so much as a wince, she let them come as close as possible before transforming her master key into a halberd and swinging it. The sudden appearance of a weapon caught them off guard, delaying their response. Their top halves were severed from their bottom as they fell to the floor—all but one, that is. He tried to run, but Mercedes had no intention of letting him get away.

She jumped toward him so quickly it seemed like a magnetic pull, closing the distance between them in an instant. Then, she grabbed the man's head and slammed it into the ground. The force of the acceleration caused it to explode. Finally, Mercedes decapitated two

of the others, leaving only one alive. She only needed one of them to cough up the information she needed, and even if her hostage was missing his bottom half, he wouldn't die immediately.

The man slithered across the floor like a worm and looked dumbfoundedly up at Mercedes. "S-So you...you really were a plant sent here by the Old King Faction. I'm sure...you're not as young as you look either! I was...careless. I never thought the faction...had someone so skilled on their side. And someone...so adept at concealing themselves..."

"You're wrong about me, unfortunately. I'm not part of this 'Old King Faction,' and I'm just as young as I look." If you included her past life, she *was* lying about her age, but if you limited it to the number of years she had lived as Mercedes, she was just as young as she appeared to be.

In any case, she needed to get some information out of this man, but she had the feeling he wouldn't answer her questions if she asked them normally.

"Zwölf. I want to extract intel out of this man. What's an effective way of doing so?"

"You can hypnotize him using a goblin hexer. I believe that will get you the information you seek."

"Got it. Create a goblin hexer and release it here."

"Yes, master."

In a short moment, a goblin dressed in a black cloak appeared from Mercedes's halberd. It held a staff in its hand, making it look like a typical sorcerer. It then outstretched its staff and cast some magic on the man dressed in white. Immediately, all light left his eyes. He appeared to be in a trance.

"Good job."

The goblin hexer responded to her praise with a hearty thumbs-up. While it looked gloomy and depressing, it was apparently surprisingly good-natured.

Mercedes pulled the man's face upward by tugging his hair and began to question him. "Who are you guys? Why are you after Sieghart?"

"We are...a secret force...from the Beatrix Empire. If we eliminate

the only remaining descendant of Abendrot...then there will be none left...who can use the royal sword...and our nation...will gain the upper hand. That is why we have come here."

His answer was exactly what Mercedes had expected, but she scowled regardless. Sieghart's true identity was that of Princess Sieglinde, and she was the rightful heir to the throne. In other words, this clandestine group was not after Fifth Prince Sieghart, they'd not been fooled by the body double, and they had targeted Princess Sieglinde, aware of her true identity. Her disguise was meaningless, and for some reason, the goblin hexer had gotten bored and was now dancing around.

"Where did you hear about Sieghart—no, Princess Sieglinde? Why do you know her true identity?"

"The New King Faction...sold us the information...so that they could get rid of Princess Sieglinde...as she is the only one left standing in their way."

Mercedes felt the urge to sigh. Apparently, the current "King Abendrot" had sold out Sieglinde—the real royal descendant—in order to get rid of her, and he planned on cementing his position by colluding with a foreign nation. Sieglinde was likely ignorant of all this; surely, she was convinced that she had no royal blood in her veins and was a body double assigned with the task of protecting them. The real issue was why all of this was happening *now.*

Just as Mercedes began to ponder this question, the man dressed in white seemed to come to his senses. He placed his dagger to his neck and slit his own throat. Evidently, the hypnotism had worn off. The goblin hexer danced the bon-odori and sent him off to the afterlife.

"So, the king is selling out his own country... This is no laughing matter."

Mercedes returned the goblin hexer to the dungeon and stood up. At the same time, a separate figure quickly jumped from the treetops and made themself scarce. Apparently, someone had been watching her, but thankfully, she had managed to gain a glimpse of the onlooker's back. It was Hannah. From now on, she would have to be wary of her.

Chapter 35: Guilty or Innocent

"Do you have a moment, Sieghart?"

After waiting for classes to end, Mercedes approached Sieghart while everyone was returning to their dorms. As it stood, Mercedes had no idea where in the academy their enemies could be lurking, and the only trusted allies she had were herself and their target, Sieghart. If she *had* to add another to that list, she was quite certain that Dodo Riotte, whom they had teamed up with in class, was innocent as well—she just couldn't fathom the girl being the type to plan a conspiracy.

Additionally, Mercedes thought it was quite unlikely that Felix was a conspirator either. He just didn't seem like one. Still, there was always a chance, so Mercedes decided she ought to avoid leaking any information to anyone besides Sieghart.

"I want to discuss something concerning a certain matter with you. Could you follow me?"

"Sure..."

Mercedes led Sieghart to an unused classroom. Their homeroom class and the dorms were off-limits, since it was impossible to know what sorts of traps Hannah might set for them now that her guilt had all but been confirmed. Considering the level of technological advancement in this world, it was probably safe to assume that there were no wiretaps, but there was magic. The chance that some convenient tool was out there that Mercedes didn't know about was greater than zero.

"So? What did you want to talk about?"

"I fought the group after you the other day."

"Huh?! A-Are you all right? You're not hurt, are you?"

"I'm fine. More importantly, I was able to get some useful intel out of one of them. He said that..."

Mercedes gave Sieghart the rundown: that the group after

Sieghart was a group of assassins from the Beatrix Empire, that the one who had leaked the information to her was none other than the king of Orcus himself, and that Sieghart was a true descendant of royalty. Sieghart mostly listened in silence, but once Mercedes revealed her true identity, she was visually shocked.

"Impossible... Me? Royalty? There's no way. I'm an orphan who was raised to act as the prince's body double. At least, that's what I've always been told..."

"How did they explain your hair?"

"They said that...that magic was cast on me as a baby so I could serve as a body double."

As Mercedes had predicted, it seemed the girl was truly ignorant of the fact she was royalty. But a descendant of the royal bloodline under the mistaken belief that they were just pretending to be royalty? What a headache.

Not to mention her father's abhorrent behavior. Bernhard was quite callous, but Sieghart's father put even him to shame. The current king was Sieghart's father, and yet he had put the children with his affair partner above her—no, had gone so far as to convince her that she was an orphan and not his daughter. Even Bernhard would never stoop to such lows. While he was a devil who wouldn't hesitate to call his children failures, he had never told any of them that they weren't his flesh and blood.

"Do you really think I'd believe that?"

"I understand that it's a hard pill to swallow."

"No, it's not that I don't believe you. A lot of things make sense now. I've known something wasn't quite right for a long time. It's just that...being told you're royalty isn't something anyone could accept so easily. Do you have any proof, perhaps? Anything, it doesn't matter what." Sieghart clutched her head in her hands and choked out a response. She was attempting to confront reality and find the truth in her own right. However, that reality was too consequential to accept without proof, and she sought something that could convince her fullheartedly. Considering she was only eleven, the fact that she hadn't cried out in agony and confusion was praiseworthy.

"The royal sword is your proof. The only ones who can use that master key to the dungeon are those descended from the first king. If you obtain that, the truth will be clear."

"So you even know about the royal sword."

"I heard from my father."

"I see. However, the royal sword is locked securely away in the royal treasure vault. I highly doubt they would hand it to me if I made a request to see it. If I want to test this method, my only option would be to sneak inside."

Sieghart—rather, Sieglinde—touching the royal sword was what the current king wanted to avoid most. Asking up front would assuredly result in her getting kicked aside and told that a mere body double had no business with it. Thus, their only option would be to sneak inside.

However, Mercedes wasn't fond of forcing this outcome. At the end of the day, this was about Sieghart. An outsider's advice meant nothing if she herself had no wish to implement it. Thus, Mercedes decided to simply give her a gentle push and nothing more.

"It's up to you whether you continue forward or stop here. You're free to stay now as you are, and if you wish to stop, I'll remove myself from the situation. If you want to search for the truth, though," Mercedes said, looking Sieghart in the eyes. If she averted her gaze, this would all be over. The path never opens for those who have no desire to pass through it, and a road only exists for those who wish to traverse it. "I'll take you there. No matter what obstacles may stand in your path, I'll cut them down myself."

"But there's nothing in it for you! Even if you're right, there's no reason for you to take such risks! Why are you willing to do all this for me?!"

"Letting a strange group lurk around the academy and potentially plunge the nation into turmoil only hurts me too. A stable kingdom and a peaceful school environment are in my best interest. I just want to resolve this stupid situation ASAP so I can go back to focusing on school." Mercedes's words were the truth and nothing but. Ultimately, she operated based on what would most benefit her. It had nothing to do with kindness or sympathy, but the simple fact

that leaving this matter alone would be a detriment to her and solving it would be a benefit.

Someone in the group targeting Sieghart had released an ashtar in the plains. That could only mean one thing: her foes were capable of summoning monsters. It seemed quite unlikely that they would've been able to release the monster nearby so it could wait and ambush her, considering that the school staff were no fools and would have examined the field before class began. In other words, the same dungeon conqueror who had enticed Boris could be behind this as well, and if that was the case, Mercedes *had* to get involved, as she was likely the only one who recognized the threat this person posed.

"The choice is yours, Sieghart—no, Princess Sieglinde. But if you wish to continue forward, I shall protect you. No matter what awaits us, I won't let anyone lay a finger on you."

Sieghart's eyes flew open wide, and her cheeks flushed red. *What's with her reaction? Why does she look so embarrassed?*

"It's...strange. Whenever I speak to you, it never feels like I'm talking to a girl. You seem so dependable, or...manly. You are a girl, right?"

"I'd think I'm much more of one compared to a beautiful young lady like you who dresses like a man. Those words hurt, but I'm used to them." *Especially in my previous life*, thought Mercedes, but she didn't speak those final words aloud. She sighed.

"O-Oh, sorry. I wasn't trying to make fun of you."

"Don't worry about it. That's not enough to offend me." Mercedes shrugged her shoulders and purposefully tried to take on a joking tone. She knew Sieghart was just a child and bore no ill will. If everyone let such minor words get to them, society wouldn't stand.

"Got it. Then I've made my decision. If what you told me is true, our nation is in danger. I can't afford to run." Sieghart clenched her fist and looked at Mercedes, who noticed the glint of strength in her eyes. Having lived trying to search for a goal she had yet to find, Mercedes's eyes didn't share that light.

"There is likely someone in the academy who's watching you. That's the only way they would have been able to strike specifically

when you were alone. Do you have any idea who that could be?”

“If you’re right and the current king wishes to get rid of me, then there’s one person I believe could be involved.”

Mercedes’s prediction was that the one watching Sieghart had to be nearby, as it was the only explanation for how the ashtar had appeared with such perfect timing. To state it more plainly, Mercedes believed the informant was in class A.

“I infiltrated this academy under orders to lure out and capture whoever was after the fifth prince. In addition to myself, the bait, there was one more person who came here.” Having said all that, Sieghart bit her lip. She must have had faith in this person—no, given her current state, she must still have some. “But if what you say is true, that changes everything. If the royal family is my enemy, then the girl who accompanied me is as well... Probably, at least.”

“What’s her name?”

“Her...her name is Hannah. Your roommate.”

The suspected culprit was none other than Mercedes’s roommate, the exact girl already on her radar.

Chapter 36: The First Prince's Birthday Party

Most nations of the Red Planet that Mercedes called home had eight days per week instead of seven. While there was no "Tuesday," "Wednesday," etc., each day was similarly referred to as "Fireday" or "Waterday," with each of the eight taking the name of a different magical affinity. The order began with ground, then water, wind, fire, metal, ice, lightning, and finally light before repeating. As Mercedes was accustomed to the seven-day week from her previous life, this custom felt odd, but given it was part of her country's culture, she had no choice but to accept it.

For the elven and volgelen, Lightday marked the start of the week, but for vampires, a day of sunlight was a day of rest. Thus, the week began on Groundday in Orcus. Mercedes had always questioned why this day was "Groundday" rather than "Earthday," but thinking back on it, she realized that her affinity had been marked as "Ground" on her card from the guild as well. The books she had read to study magic all used the phrase "earth affinity," so clearly, the name of this magic type had never been standardized. Perhaps it illustrated how belittled the affinity was given none had realized the potential of gravity.

Anyway, the academy held no classes on Lightday, so Mercedes used the opportunity to return to the Grunewald residence. While her usual midair dash would have sufficed, she had Sieghart with her today, and thus she had to rely on the ashtar. Once they had arrived, they were brought into the drawing room. Mercedes alone was summoned to Bernhard's private quarters.

"Mercedes. Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes."

"That," of course, was Sieghart—or more accurately, Sieglinde

dressed as Sieghart. Bernhard's already sour expression soured even further as he folded his arms. "Indeed, her hair does not seem unnatural."

"I drew some information from the group after her. It seems she is truly of royal blood."

"Where is the assassin?"

"He killed himself."

"That is unacceptable. Next time, cut off their arms and legs to prevent this." That sentence was quite outrageous, yet he used it to chastise Mercedes like it was the most natural thing in the world. Still, given he hadn't come off stronger, it was likely safe to assume that the assassin surviving was of little importance. Even if they spared him his life, his words would not serve as testimony, and instead, he'd simply be cast aside and executed as a criminal with a few screws loose. In order to expose the crimes of the current king, they would need more definite proof.

"Then I take it the current royal family are indeed imposters?"

"Yes. The New King Faction wishes to kill Princess Sieglinde, as she stands in their way. Apparently, they sold intel to a foreign nation. If I recall correctly, it was the Beatrix Empire."

"They are another great nation of vampires that stands alongside ours. It is said that their first Empress Beatrix conquered a dungeon and used it to found a nation. Should Orcus weaken, we will surely be subsumed by them. But if he has sold out his country to solidify his own position as you say, then it seems we need to quickly eliminate this filthy traitor who calls himself 'king.'" Bernhard spit out those words with heartfelt loathing. Had other nobles heard him, they would have likely doubted their ears. "But this is quite troublesome. While the current king has no royal blood, his position as king is legitimate," cursed Bernhard under his breath.

The current king was a traitor who had tricked his way into power and sold out his country. However, he was no illegitimate king; having failed to bear any sons of his own, the previous king had taken the current as a son-in-law, lawfully granting him his current title. His position was authentic, and going against him publicly would be an insurrection and cause other nobles to turn against

them. To overcome this, their only option was to prove that none of the current royal family could use the royal sword while simultaneously proving that Sieglinde could. With that, they could overthrow the current king and install Sieglinde as the new head of government. But as things currently stood, there was no legitimacy to their claims.

"No... I believe it's possible." Bernhard brought a hand to his chin as he ruminated over his new idea. His knowledge when it came to nobles and royals far exceeded Mercedes's, and this fact had been the very reason she had come to see him. While she would eventually cast the Grunewald name aside, she'd make full use of it and Bernhard until that day came.

"Do you have a plan?"

"I do. The upcoming birthday of First Prince Baldur may be our chance to shake them."

"What do you mean?"

"It was once a firm tradition to bring out the royal sword on the birthdays of the princes and princesses and have them wield it before the other nobles. Though of course, only a fraction of nobles knew it to be an award received from conquering a dungeon, while the rest simply thought it was a tool capable of summoning and manipulating monsters. By using the royal sword before a crowd, they proved their legitimacy and both demonstrated and solidified their power and influence. However, that custom has not occurred ever since the current king came into power. It was the impetus that led to the other nobles beginning to doubt him."

It was a well-known fact that neither the king nor the queen had any royal blood. However, the king's children were all ostensibly from his previous wife, and he had publicly declared that they were legitimate royals. It was what allowed him to retain his seat on the throne, but despite that, his children had never publicly wielded the royal sword. Bernhard recognized this as something they could capitalize upon.

"I suppose I'll light a fire under the feet of one of the stupider nobles before the first prince's birthday party. Many are displeased with the current king, and if we play our cards correctly, we may be

able to expose him for who he is."

"And if we don't play them correctly?"

"Discontent toward the king will only be amplified. As long as they fail to demonstrate that they can wield the royal sword, they won't be able to wipe away any doubts," said Bernhard with a sneer. It was a dastardly, villainous grin, and in reality, his plan probably was quite evil. It was even possible he hoped to take the current king's place once he succeeded in dragging him down.

While the man before her was a reliable comrade, he was no trustworthy saint. Still, he wouldn't turn against her as long as he saw use in her, and likewise, she wouldn't cross him as long as she still had need for him.

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After only a few days, the prince's birthday celebration was upon them. It was a holiday at the academy, and as grand celebration was compulsory, there was no time to relax.

Mercedes and Sieghart accompanied Bernhard as his guests, with Sieghart dressed in a simple disguise. Those in attendance wore lavish dresses and behaved with elegant poise. As this was a castle owned by vampires, the only lighting in the room came from a few dim lamps, giving the room an eerie vibe. Though really, this was customary everywhere; the Grunewald manor was quite dim as well.

Dressed in an unfamiliar gown that made her a tad uncomfortable, Mercedes bided her time as a wallflower. While she was dressed like a doll, the menacing aura she exuded kept other guests her age far away. Given the benefit of forging amicable relations with the Grunewald family, an eleven-year-old boy had been urged by his parents to invite her to dance. However, he took one look at her, cried, and ran away.

Sieghart, on the other hand, had done away with her male attire and instead was adorned in a gown. She was so lovely despite her young age that it drew smiles from multiple men. However, it must be noted that these men should not be referred to as "lolicons." Vampires could marry at the age of fifteen, and it wasn't rare for

them to go to war at such a young age either. This was not Japan, and there was no compulsory education. Vampires were not fortunate enough to be able to play under the auspices of their parents even into their twenties; instead, they had to grow up fast.

Therefore, these men who lusted after eleven-year-olds were strange according to this world's standards as well. Let the previous statement stand corrected. These men really *were* lolicons.

The food array was as abysmal as could be expected. There was wine mixed with blood, bread spread with jam mixed with blood, blood sausages, and boiled potatoes. Even the random grilled monster meat was covered in a blood sauce, and there was no salad in sight. Vampires didn't exactly have any concept of a well-balanced diet. They could get all the nutrition they needed from blood, so they simply ate whatever they wanted. In addition, they had some chocolate and chocolate cookies that had likely been provided by Trein Industries, but they were diminishing at a terrifyingly fast pace.

"Enter First Prince Baldur!"

A voice reverberated through the room as a pig made its way down the stairs. Actually, that wasn't a pig, just a portly prince. Mercedes couldn't help but think that a chubby vampire kind of broke the regal image she had of vampires as a whole. Quite frankly, she was disappointed.

However, she couldn't lose focus. She needed to observe him carefully. His silver hair seemed unnatural on top of his porky head, while his clothes threatened to burst at the seams at any moment. He wore a red cape, but it only added to the ridiculousness. On his hip was an ostentatious red sword covered in decoration. This boy really was a pig.

"What's that, Sieghart?"

"The royal sword. It's part of the royal crest, so there's absolutely no mistaking it... At least, I think so." As she spoke, Sieghart took the royal crest out of her pocket and showed it to Mercedes. She was probably forced to carry it as part of her body double duties, and the sword drawn on it was undoubtedly the one the first prince currently carried. Mercedes therefore assumed it to be the master key to the dungeon, but...

"No, that is not the master key," refuted Zwölf.

Mercedes began to ponder what that could mean. Sieghart had called the sword Baldur wore the "royal sword," but Zwölf had said it wasn't the dungeon key. Considering that they should have been the exact same thing, one of the two had to be mistaken, and Zwölf clearly had Sieghart beat when it came to the accuracy of such information. In conclusion, the sword Baldur wore had to be a replica.

Dungeon keys and regular weapons couldn't be distinguished based on appearance; Mercedes had turned hers into the same Halberd Wurtzite she had bought in town, and only a specialist who had the opportunity to hold both weapons would have been able to tell this difference. Therefore, it was quite possible that Baldur had appeared without the real royal sword.

Still, that only made things more convenient. This was a venue where he was meant to demonstrate the royal sword's power, yet he had brought a fake. That fact alone practically proved he was unable to use the sword.

Zwölf. Can you tell the difference between real dungeon keys and fakes?

"Yes, master. However, it requires a detailed look. I would not likely be able to tell if I only saw the item in question at a glance."

Zwölf's ability to identify dungeon keys was a great boon for Mercedes, but at the same time, it meant that if the dungeon master scheming behind the scenes had a guide like Zwölf, they'd be able to identify Mercedes as well. Still, no one would scrutinize her halberd unless they already suspected it could be a dungeon key, which meant she was safe as long as they simply crossed paths.

Reflecting back, Mercedes was quite certain no one had realized she was a dungeon master. Whenever she stepped outside, she kept her key in Idle Mode and inside her pocket, which meant that even had she encountered another dungeon master, they wouldn't have been able to recognize her as a fellow member.

Atop the podium, the rotund vampire whom she took to be the nation's king prattled on about the country, its future, and noble pride. All in attendance pretended to be enraptured and when he

had finally concluded his speech, one of the nobles raised his voice.

"Your Majesty! Why have you failed to use the royal sword before us for the past eleven years? Why have you not deigned to demonstrate the power of the symbol that embodies Orcus's unshakable authority? We have always loved and respected the herculean achievements of King Abendrot, our first ruler, and we have dedicated our loyalty for generations! I ask that you please demonstrate the grand power of the king once again!"

It must have been the "stupider noble" Bernhard had incited. Other nobles voiced their agreement with his sentiments. As has been mentioned many times, vampires prioritize strength above all else, and after the king had failed to demonstrate his own for eleven years, even he was subjected to this attitude. In other words, once others began to look down on you, you'd be belittled no matter what influence you had.

If the king was unable to demonstrate his power here, it could even spark a rebellion. As crazy as it sounded, humans and vampires didn't share the same set of values, and nobles respected the king *because* he had power that no other could replicate. If he didn't, then a coup was a real possibility.

"Fine. I shall prove the power of the crown!" Surprisingly, the king didn't seem to be perturbed. The royal sword before them now was a fake, so Mercedes had expected him to panic. What explained his current attitude?

The nobles who had criticized him seemed to be quite shocked as well. Their voices died down, and they looked at each other as if they had been overpowered.

"As you all know, I am no descendant of royalty. However, my children all bear the blood of my late wife, Elfriede. While some have expressed skepticism of this fact, I shall now show you proof that my children bear royal blood. I hope it will be enough to expel your doubts," declared the king with grand gestures as Baldur drew out his sword.

Just what does he plan on doing with a fake? thought Mercedes as she observed the podium. But then, a bright light forced her eyes shut. Vampires had night vision that allowed them to see in faint

moonlight, and thus, they had no need for bright lights in order to see. In fact, a light too bright could render them blind, which was why vampires avoided the day—they saw as well in daylight as humans did in the middle of the night, and a sudden flash of light for them was like a sudden power outage for humans.

Finally, the light died down and Mercedes was met with a shocking sight atop the podium. There were wolfmen, mummies, goblins, orcs, skeletons—while they were all low-level monsters, they had suddenly appeared where none had been before, and they all bowed down in reverence to Baldur.

Was he keeping domesticated monsters on standby? No, it would be impossible to hide that many. Or could they have been outside? No, even if we were blinded, they couldn't have brought so many in without making a sound. That means...

The only thing Mercedes was certain of was that these monsters had not been released via a dungeon key. The one Baldur held was a fake, but more importantly, releasing monsters from a dungeon key didn't result in a light strong enough to blind. This was some sort of trick like, for example...using hidden seal stones. They could be concealed, and it explained the light as well—it kept the audience from seeing the stones being used. However, there was no proof to support the theory, so Mercedes was forced to stay silent.

However, missing their chance to expose the royal family before this crowd would complicate things. Even if Sieglinde succeeded in using the real royal sword and they proved Baldur's was a fake, the king would be able to use his authority to cover up the story if there were no witnesses. They'd be branded liars, so to avoid that, they needed others in the nation with power to serve as their witnesses.

"I have a suggestion, master."

What is it?

"Master keys to dungeons are made of indestructible metal, and this is a well-known fact of the royal sword. Should the sword before you now break, it would raise a contradiction that could lend credence to the doubts of the other nobles."

I see.

After making sure everyone's attention was focused on the

podium, Mercedes used some magic. She increased the gravity acting on Baldur's sword in an attempt to break it. Considering no one in this world was familiar with the concept, they wouldn't be able to identify what force was responsible, and as the magic was both invisible and hard to trace back to the source, none would even realize magic had been used. Despite having been standing nearby, Bernhard had recognized that his daughter had somehow interfered.

"H-Huh? My sword feels so...heavy..."

Baldur's arm drooped to the floor as the sword fell from his hands. To others, it simply looked like he had abruptly thrown the blade on the ground, but as a result, cracks began to form through the fake sword, and with a little more magic, it shattered.

"The royal sword is in pieces!"

"Impossible! The royal sword is supposed to be indestructible!"

"Just what does this mean...?"

The sudden turn of events caused murmurs to spread through the nobles and raised even more doubts. The blood had rushed from Baldur's and the king's faces, but they still tried to raise their voices in an attempt to find who had ruined their grand display.

However, one man acted quicker. "Explain yourselves, Your Majesty! The royal sword is supposed to be indestructible, yet it has shattered before our eyes! And why do the monsters still bow before the prince?! If it is the royal sword that controls the monsters, why have they not begun rampaging now that it is broken?!" It was Bernhard. After sensing his opportunity, he rushed to go on the offensive.

Of course, this ploy had been risky. One wrong step and he would have been thrown in the dungeons for his insolence. However, he had no sense of respect or loyalty for the king, so he made his move as soon as he realized it was the right time to do so.

"Answer us, Your Majesty! Are those monsters truly summoned by the royal sword? Were you not simply hiding these captured monsters where we couldn't see them?!"

Bernhard was certain he had come to the correct conclusion; he knew that this family was fake and had no royal blood coursing through their veins. Were that not the case, they would've had no

need to prepare a fake sword.

"B-Bernhard! You insolent wretch! Do you doubt *me?!* The king?!"

"I do not doubt you; I am simply certain that my doubts in you were founded. No, I am certain that everyone here has wondered if your family are imposters!"

"Y-You..."

"The current king is nothing but a son-in-law, with the current queen being someone he dragged out from who knows where. All your children besides Princess Sieglinde conveniently appeared after the previous queen's death. You are all suspicious, and even Princess Sieglinde has clearly been replaced by a fake. Then finally, when the power of the royal sword is demonstrated to us after eleven years, it's a certified fake." Bernhard glared at the king and pointed his finger at him just as armed guards rushed into the room like an avalanche. They must have been from Bernhard's personal army, and he must have had them on standby nearby.

"I sentence you here and now! You are nothing but a criminal who has taken the throne and sullied the blood of the true royal family! You are nothing but a scoundrel who has stolen the name of the great Abendrot! Men, engage! Attack!"

This was nothing but a certifiable coup.

Chapter 37: Plea for Life

The venue for the first prince's birthday was consumed by pandemonium instead of jubilation. Bernhard was the most powerful noble in all of Orcus, and he had just used violence against the king. The rest of the nobles simply watched on, unable to process the sudden turn of events.

However, not all stood frozen. A few jumped into action, causing skirmishes to break out between those aligned with Bernhard and those aligned with the king. The fact that most sided with Bernhard spoke to the broad dissatisfaction among the nobility with the current king.

The battle was completely one-sided. For one, the king had been too stunned to react, not to mention being outnumbered, but what most attributed to his defeat was the phenomenal power of Bernhard and his daughter. With each swing of Mercedes's halberd, soldiers flew through the air like sheets of paper. No one could even get close to her.

Bernhard, on the other hand, unleashed one magic attack after another, his hands firmly in his pockets. Steel spikes erupted from the floor, skewering the king's soldiers.

However, the king's guard was not a group of imbeciles. As people tasked with the important duty of ensuring their monarch's safety, they were all the cream of the crop—the captain of the royal guard was even a certified former A rank Seeker. Yet, they couldn't hold a candle to the Grunewalds.

One knight sacrificed one of his hands to close in on Mercedes, only to get his head slammed against the floor, knocking him unconscious. His comrades attempted to step over his body to get to Bernhard, but they were pierced by spikes before they could even take a step forward.

His accuracy is amazing...

Bernhard's magic was likely linked to the metal affinity. Mercedes herself had yet to surpass the earth affinity, meaning metal was off-limits to her. However, her father utilized it like it was the simplest thing in the world, crushing his opponents with terrifying precision. No wonder the man was so braggadocious.

Mercedes developed a newfound appreciation for her father, and once again, she was forced to acknowledge what a worrisome man he was. While they were allies for the time being, they would one day face off as enemies. Her decision not to fight him during their first meeting had been the right call. While she could have used her dungeon to clench victory, she was quite certain she would have lost Benkei or Kuro in that fight. No, if what she had seen so far was only a fraction of his power, even she might have lost. She had no choice but to acknowledge that Bernhard possessed the power to conquer a dungeon.

On the other hand, Bernhard had his own thoughts as he watched Mercedes swing her halberd around and crush her enemies: *I was right to send her to the academy.* Her movements had grown more polished, as had her use of weaponry. While she'd had incomplete battle instincts initially, a proper education had given her new techniques and taken her to new heights. While her power already outstripped that of an A rank Seeker, its potential was limitless.

This pleased Bernhard, but at the same time, it worried him. She was obedient for now, but one day, his child would turn her fangs against him. She was his flesh and blood, after all, so he knew for certain she would not stay docile forever. Bernhard was well aware that if he met a copy of himself, it would devolve into a battle to the death, and this was the very same thing; Mercedes had happily taken after Bernhard, but that also ensured that she would eventually rebel against him.

For now, Bernhard was confident he could best Mercedes provided she had no more hidden powers. But how long would that last? He saw neither the fake king nor his soldiers as enemies—his true concern was the ticking time bomb that was his daughter.

As they fought, both Mercedes and Bernhard kept an eye on one

another. Neither had the soldiers they battled in their sights; while they could see them, they didn't view them as enemies. Instead, both their eyes were trained on the not so far-off future where father and daughter would fight.

"N-No! I have to fight too!" The sudden turn of events had left Sieghart—or rather, Sieglinde—dumbfounded, but she'd returned to her senses now, and she took a step forward. As the centerpiece of this conflict, there was nothing more pathetic than standing there dazed like this had nothing to do with her and leaving her friend and her friend's father to fight the battle for her. With that in mind, she joined the fray.

However, someone immediately grabbed her by the shoulder, stopping her. "Please wait, Your Highness. This isn't your battle to fight. Right now, you need to change. It'll soon be your time to step into the limelight, and while this dress is wonderful, no one will take you to be a princess in it."

"Y-You're..."

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"E-Eeeeeek!"

The current king of Orcus, Isaac Abendrot, let out a pathetic scream after falling on his rump. Everything should have been going perfectly fine. He had been taken in as son-in-law to the previous king who had no sons of his own, eventually earning the title of king. He had locked his wife away and brought back his current wife and their sons from before he had become king, then bestowed the infant Sieglinde's name onto his own daughter, lying to the real Sieglinde and raising her as a body double.

Of course, there had been a few hiccups. They had ousted the real royal family to take over the throne, leaving the royal sword without anyone who could wield it. Had he possessed the magnanimity to raise the real Sieglinde as his daughter, she could have simply used the sword in his stead. However, he had feared her rebelling, and more than anything, his wife would not have allowed him to raise a child he'd had with his previous wife.

Yet, he had solved that problem by conspiring with the Beatrix Empire, who had provided him with copious amounts of seal stones containing monsters and instructed him that all he needed to do was trick the nobles by using the fake. They had told him how to use magic stones sealed with light to obfuscate the moment the monsters appeared from the steal stones, and they had promised that as long as he sent Sieglinde, the only one with royal blood, to the academy, they would take care of her for him. Everyone else would simply think that a body double had fulfilled their duty in death, not realizing that the real princess had died. Everything had been going so, so well.

At least, it should have been. Unfortunately, he had underestimated the nobles of his nation. Despite being a vampire himself, he failed to truly comprehend what being on the top rung meant—they were a species with no need for a weak king.

He had long known that there was a group of extremists who doubted him, and he particularly feared Lord Bernhard, the man who served as their leader. Bernhard Von Blut Grunewald was the strongest vampire in the nation, but also the most sinister. He was cold and merciless. In the war eighty years prior, he had stood next to the hero Gustav and obliterated beastmen, earning the fearsome title of "Lord of Impalement." His contributions were acknowledged and the title of duke was bestowed on him. Now, the power of his words and influence were second only to the king.

It was typical for those who gained political power to rot; even vampires would fail to hone themselves further and grow weak once they gained stability. Yet, Bernhard bucked the trend. Despite his newfound influence, he remained the Lord of Impalement. He never succumbed to corruption, and he retained his discipline. He was a merciless man and a brutal villain, someone who looked down upon others, lacked a conscience, and trusted no one but himself. He could ruin a person's life or even end it without feeling a twinge of regret.

Yet, there was still beauty in evil. Even villainy could produce pride.

This was true power. The strong would stand on top, and they

would have value—no, *only* they would have value. Everyone else was fodder, food meant to be manipulated and drained of their blood. There were no exceptions to this rule, not his own wife, his own children, or even the king. A life that failed to manifest power was a worthless one, and if a man couldn't use the royal sword, then he was no king.

Thus, Bernhard didn't hesitate to kill. He was the true pinnacle of vampires and a man who lacked a heart. If strength was noble, he was the villain who most exemplified it. That was the essence of Bernhard Von Blut Grunewald.

I knew that Bernhard was strong...but...what the hell is this?!

Yes, the king knew of Bernhard's strength, but the real problem was the *other* one. She bore no resemblance to Bernhard, yet she seemed like a perfect copy of him as she cut down one soldier after another. This had to be a nightmare, an illusion producing two Bernhards.

Finally, the two blue-haired demons stepped over the mountain of bodies lying at their feet and approached Isaac. Fear blurred his vision, making it impossible to read their expressions. Yet, he knew that those cold, golden eyes were trained on him, as if they were simply observing a spec of dust in the wind. They only amplified Isaac's fear.

Just a moment earlier, he'd thought they bore no resemblance to one another. Yet, their eyes—the ones that looked at people as if they were mere objects—were exactly the same.

"What's the matter? What is there to fear? Stand, you bastard king. If you're a king, then act like one," said Bernhard as he approached. He commanded Isaac to stand—stand and fight, fight and die.

"You sold out your own country for the throne, no? Cling to it, and if you're the lowlife I believe you to be, at least show the pride a lowlife would have. At least put up a fight," said Mercedes, standing before the king and commanding him to put up one final resistance. She knew that this king was a weakling, and she pitied Sieglinde for having been manipulated by a man worth less than a piece of dirt. Therefore, she had wanted him to at least go out nobly—had he

been a villain who had the gumption to stick to his schemes rather than tremble in fear like a worm, at least that would have been a small comfort.

"S-Save me...please... I'll do whatever you want...and I'll give you my wife and kids. So please...please spare me..."

The words that spilled from Isaac's mouth were not the ones they wished for, instead nothing but a pathetic plea to spare his life.

Bernhard and Mercedes simultaneously cursed under their breaths, their eyes colored with contempt. Was this really all the man amounted to? A speck of dust—no, even less than that? Had he really stood above all in this nation? Had he really been such a threat to the country? If the answers to all those questions were yes, then he was nothing but a parasite. There was no advantage in letting him live.

"So you won't even put up a fight. How disappointing," sighed Bernhard as he summoned a spear in his hands.

"Your cries are grating on the ears. Even pigs have more dignity than you," berated Mercedes as she gripped her own weapon.

Enough of this. Just die already.

The two spit out those words and swung down their blades in unison.

Chapter 38: Hannah's True Identity

A sword blocked the two weapons before they could touch the king. Neither of their attacks had been tempered—even a steel shield would have shattered to pieces. Yet, the crimson blade that blocked them suffered not even a single scratch. It shimmered majestically, and even more surprising, it looked exactly like the fake sword that had just broken into pieces.

"You're..."

However, Mercedes was surprised most by the wielder, not the sword. She had light blue hair, and uncharacteristically for her, her eyes were sharp. Mercedes had seen her every day at school—she and Hannah Burger had even been roommates.

The shock quickly wore off, though. Immediately, Mercedes swung her halberd, knocking Hannah backward.

The girl gasped. "Wait, Mercedes!"

Hannah had lost her footing, but no matter what she had to say, Mercedes wasn't interested. She was an enemy who had been entrusted with Sieglinde's protection by the king, and now that he was truly in danger, she had brazenly come crawling out of the shadows. She must have been the one who'd informed the hidden soldiers of when the attack would take place, and if that was true, then there was no need to hesitate—only kill.

Yet Bernhard intervened. "Wait, Mercedes."

What business did this man have stopping her? At the same time, though, she knew that he must have knowledge of things she didn't for him to have done this. Thus, Mercedes lowered her weapon and distanced herself from Hannah, while Bernhard stepped forward to stand where Mercedes had been.

"I knew there was a clever rat scurrying around the royal family.

So it was you."

"Aww! That's an awfully rude way to refer to your *elder sister*, Bernhard." Hannah teasingly flashed her fangs and chuckled.

Mercedes had never seen this side of her, but it was likely her true self. Still, what had she meant by elder sister?

As Mercedes was pondering that question, Bernhard offered a nonchalant introduction. "Mercedes. This woman's name is Hannah Burger, formerly Hannah Grunewald before marriage. She is my elder sister, and thus your aunt."

"Huh?"

"Though she looks your age, she's over a hundred years old. She even has children of her own."

This explanation elicited a scowl from Mercedes. Basically, she had thought Hannah was the same age as her this whole time and had never even noticed anything was off. Of course, she knew that age couldn't be judged based on looks for vampires, but she couldn't help but feel like there had to be a limit as to how far you could go when lying about your age.

Hannah laughed triumphantly. "You didn't suspect a thing, did you? That means I've still got it!"

"Prattle on, grandma."

"You're so mean, Bernhard!"

Mercedes was taken aback watching her laugh, but it demonstrated that they knew each other well. Still, there was one thing Mercedes couldn't quite wrap her mind around—why had Bernhard's elder sister jumped in to interfere *now*?

"So, explain why someone from the Old King Faction has stepped in to protect him."

"If I let you slaughter him like a pig now, all my hard work will be for naught. Why do you think I went through the trouble of stealing the royal sword?"

"I see. I always wondered why they had prepared a fake. I take it that was your doing."

The prince's fake sword could be explained very simply: the real one had been stolen, and the one they now possessed was a fake switched out by Hannah. The crown hadn't even noticed, and thus

they had boldly brought out a fake for all the public to see.

Hannah cut through Bernhard and faced the king, who was crumpled on the floor. Then, she handed the sword over to Baldur with a grin. “Here you are, Your Highness. Please show us the illustrious power of the crown.”

“Y-You...you wench! All this time...you were...” The king attempted to berate Hannah with his quivering voice, but his despair kept him from croaking out full sentences.

Baldur reached out for the sword, hands shaking, and then grasped it reverently. The sword, of course, did not respond, proving to all the nobles in Orcus that he couldn’t use the royal sword.

Hannah passed the sword from one prince to another, tacitly commanding them to prove that they could use it. With all the nobles as witnesses, they couldn’t refuse. Their only option was to risk it all on the minuscule possibility that the sword would beckon to them. Yet, no matter how much one wished otherwise, a zero percent chance meant just that. There was no such thing as miracles.

After they had all passed the sword around—even to the fake Sieglinde—and proven they lacked the ability to use it, Hannah yanked it out of their hands. Then, she headed for Sieglinde, who stood there dazed.

“Ending this fairy tale and enacting punishments on these traitors is the job of the true princess. This is your sword, Your Highness Princess Sieglinde. Please take it,” spoke Hannah as she knelt before Sieglinde, presenting the sword to her.

Clearly unable to keep up with the vicissitudes of this situation, Sieglinde glanced at Mercedes in a plea for help. The two had been suspicious of Hannah, yet she had suddenly appeared to offer Sieglinde the sword. Her confusion was understandable.

However, Mercedes responded with a silent nod, urging her to take the sword into her hands. Even she was struggling to keep up with what was going on, but it seemed like Hannah was somehow on their side.

“Wait! Stop her! Somebody... Somebody stop her!” wailed the king. Ironically, his minor protest let everyone know what was about

to happen. The battle had reached a standstill without Isaac even noticing, and both Bernhard's soldiers and Isaac's stood silent, waiting to see what would happen next.

Sieglinde outstretched a shaky hand and gripped the royal sword. Then, she thrust it into the air as if casting off all of her remaining doubts. Magical force erupted from the blade as countless monsters appeared around Sieglinde—a fleet of small three-meter-tall dragons.



So her dungeon is dragon-focused, thought Mercedes. In all honesty, her attention probably should have been focused elsewhere given the situation, but in any case, the dragons made no attempts to attack, instead standing idly around Sieglinde as if waiting for their orders.

With this scene before their eyes, everyone gathered there knew that a true descendant of royal blood was in command of the royal sword.

"H-Hey! What are you lot doing?! A mere body double has her hands on the royal sword! Arrest her for her treachery!" The king barked orders at his soldiers, yet none paid them any mind.

Of course they didn't. Now that Sieglinde had exhibited the power of the royal sword, the fact she was a true descendant of the royal family was no longer a matter of debate. Rather, calling her a body double practically amounted to digging his own grave.

All the soldiers glared at the king with contempt, and one member of the royal guard had even kicked the king's face in, acting as the signal the other soldiers and knights serving the royal family needed to draw their swords with indignant glares and march on the royal family.

Vampires worshipped strength, and the stronger the vampire, the more pride they took in their abilities. Yet they had dedicated that pride to a fake of doubtful origins up until this very moment. They even had comrades who had given their lives protecting this family of imbeciles. Their ire was justified, and knowing this, the king and his family huddled closer and closer together.

"Stop!" At Sieglinde's command, the soldiers froze. With the crowd as her witness, she approached the royal family.

"Wh-What?! What are you doing, you stupid body double?! How could a low-born vampire possibly use the royal sword?! Who do you think I am?! *I'm* Princess Sieglinde!" hysterically screamed a freckled vampire, an unknown somebody who had falsely had the name Sieglinde bestowed on her by her father.

She was likely ignorant of her situation, unaware of her father's crimes and her mother's actions. She had lived her entire life believing that she was a genuine member of the royal family—that

she was the real Sieglinde.

The real Sieglinde must have known that, for the expression she showed the fake princess who bore her name was one of pity.

"Seize them."

At Sieglinde's command, the swarm of dragons swooped down on the royal family. No one stepped in to protect them, and with the fake royal family now rendered powerless, the curtain closed on this turbulent celebration of life.

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"I am sure you will explain things to me, yes?" asked Bernhard. Now that the soldiers had begun to drag away the royal family, he had lost interest, instead shifting his attention to Hannah.

Mercedes wanted to hear what she had to say as well. How had someone she suspected of being her enemy turned out to be on her side? Without a proper explanation, she wouldn't be able to fully accept this development.

"So, you know I'm part of the Old King Faction. Eleven years ago, the king took a new wife, and all of a sudden, there were more princes, right? That was the moment we realized the throne had been stolen and begun our undercover investigations."

"I see you all are as quick as ever."

"I snuck into the palace and did all I could to get on his good side. Honestly, that was easy since he was such a weakling. All I had to do was suck up to him, and I was immediately able to manipulate his impression of me. I earned his trust after five years, and suddenly, he began to blabber about all sorts of secret intel to me. I heard all about how he got the previous king to trust him and how amazing the look on his previous wife's face was when she learned that she and her father had been tricked."

After hearing Hannah's story, Mercedes's opinion of the old king plummeted. She had never met the man, but this was enough for her to know that he was a terrible judge of people. He had to have been crazy to trust such an idiot. Most likely, he based all his judgments of others on the value of their family name and outward

attitude.

This was just the natural consequence of blindly trusting others. One had to decide who to place their trust in based on what motivated that person's actions and what their true thoughts had to be. Thus, having faith was pointless.

To Mercedes, trust and faith were two completely different things. Regardless of the actual definitions of both words, trust was about believing that someone was honest and could therefore be used, and faith was about believing someone had your best interests at heart. Trusting in one's honesty was one thing—if they betrayed you, all you had to do was toss them aside and the damage would be minimal. However, faith was something you could never have in another, as once such a person betrayed you, you'd be defenseless against the knife stabbed in your back.

"What fools, both the previous king and this idiot. This is the natural consequence of trusting others." Bernhard voiced Mercedes's thoughts right as they were going through her mind. Their way of thinking was frighteningly similar.

"You never change, Bernhard," said Hannah, heaving an exasperated sigh. "Anyway, it was a piece of cake after that. I got him to send me to the academy as Princess Sieglinde's bodyguard, which meant all I had to do was pretend to do his bidding while actually defending her, and since I had replaced the real royal sword with the fake, I just needed to wait for the perfect opportunity to hand over the real one, which I got with this birthday party. We were able to prove her legitimacy in front of all the influential nobles of this country."

Mercedes couldn't help but marvel at how stupid and careless Isaac had been. He thought he had sent a treacherous friend to watch over Sieglinde, who mistakenly assumed her to be her ally. While someone had certainly mistaken Hannah for their ally, that had been the king rather than Sieglinde. Hannah must have taken out numerous assassins without Mercedes even noticing.

"Ha—Aunt Hannah. There's something I'd like to ask you."

"Just call me Hannah like you always have, Mercedes. It makes your aunt feel like she's young again."

"You were observing me at the academy, aunty. Why was that?"

"Why'd you remove *just* my name?!"

This grandma was wailing about something or other, but Mercedes ignored her. Since she really was Mercedes's aunt, she had used the proper term of address.

"Oh, well, I mean... I'm sorry. I was suspicious of you. You're way too calm for an eleven-year-old, not to mention strong! I thought you had to be some operative with special training. Not to mention..."

Hannah glanced at Bernhard, making it clear that she wasn't sure whether she should continue. Thinking back on it, Mercedes realized that Hannah had witnessed her summon monsters, meaning she likely suspected Mercedes of being a dungeon conqueror from the Beatrix Empire.

"Not to mention... Bernhard's only children are Felix and the shunned sons and daughters of his concubines. I never would've thought that he'd send any of his children other than Felix to the academy. I was convinced you had to be a spy borrowing the Grunewald name. But even though you look nothing like Bernhard, your vibes are strikingly similar, and that only left me even more confused..."

"She is my daughter, after all. Of course we're similar."

"Wow! I've never seen you look so happy before."

In the end, Hannah avoided touching on the monsters she had seen Mercedes summon and changed the subject. Still, Bernhard looked...*happy*? To Mercedes, he seemed as expressionless as always. In the end, she concluded that Hannah had to be mistaken.

"So, the reason you tried to force me and Sieglinde together during class was to see if I would let something slip."

"Yup. You probably wouldn't strike her down right then and there if you were an assassin, but I thought you'd probably have some sort of reaction."

"And what about Lady Riotte?"

"I had already confirmed she was innocent, so I just put her on the team."

She really had thought things through. Back then, Hannah had

been trying to determine whether Mercedes was a true daughter of the Grunewald family or an enemy. Mercedes was honestly impressed—well, she would have been if she had never started to doubt Hannah.

"Sorry for doubting you, but I know you were doubting me too. Let's call it even, okay?" said Hannah with a smile.

As Bernhard's elder sister, it checked out that she had a lot of eccentricities of her own.

Chapter 39: The Wandering Hannah

Hannah Burger was the leader of Orcus's clandestine forces, and a woman who had sworn loyalty to her country. Her maiden family, the Grunewalds, were once nothing but a lowly noble house holding the rank of baron. However, her younger brother Bernhard changed that in a single generation.

During their war with the beastmen eighty years ago, Bernhard's feats earned him the rank of duke, and his name was changed to the pompous-sounding Bernhard Von Blut Grunewald. In Orcus, "Von" was a preposition attached to the names of nobles whose rank was marquess or higher. He was granted the honor of including the name of the largest city under his dominion in his title as well. This practice could be traced back to documents recovered by Abendrot I from his very own dungeon and was meant to mimic the culture of the gods, but since the documents hadn't been completely deciphered, the practice had not been copied exactly. In any case, Bernhard's full name was so long that he was most commonly referred to as the shorter "Bernhard Grunewald."

Through the use of bountiful resources and supplies of unknown origins, Bernhard developed Blut, turning it into the largest city in Orcus in just eighty years. Even Hannah didn't know the source of his seemingly infinite funds. Magic stones were once believed to only be obtainable from dungeons, but Bernhard discovered a method of manufacturing them, and by circulating them throughout Orcus, he managed to decrease the mortality rate of Seekers and increase their quality. Consequently, Seekers were able to recover more materials from dungeons, bringing greater prosperity to the city of Blut.

He ordered the Seekers' Guild to codify their standards for

rewards and difficulty for quests—which had been done haphazardly until that point—and improved efficiency via bilateral cooperation. He created a strict ranking system for Seekers that revoked qualifications for Seekers who lacked the skills or failed to work. While these practices had once been vilified, they had now spread throughout the entire world.

As her younger brother gained unparalleled prestige in the public world, Hannah had made a name for herself in the underground. She hadn't been the kind of visible, central figure that her brother was during the war, but she had led a private army behind the scenes, capturing numerous enemy spies and sending her own to create fissures between the beastmen. Her contributions were recognized, earning her and her private army the right to act as a clandestine force that operated outside of authority when the situation called for it.

Hannah's younger brother became the head of the Grunewald family, while she herself left to marry into the Burger family. They were ostensibly a merchant family, but in reality, they were a shadow organization that oversaw the flow of goods and the conditions of the cities. To be frank, her marriage was purely political, allowing her brother to amass prestige in the limelight while she garnered influence behind the scenes. Unfortunately, her husband was a lolicon with mediocre looks, but he was quite kind when they weren't on the job. All in all, she considered herself lucky to be his wife.

Hannah's job this time around was to defend the royal bloodline. Everything had begun when a man named Isaac married into the royal family and became king. At first, he and his wife acted like a happy couple and appeared to pose no threat. Although everyone was disappointed when their long-awaited first child, Sieglinde, turned out to be a girl, they all believed a boy would come eventually. But eleven years ago, the royal family had abruptly announced the queen's death, along with the fact that the king had secretly had other children beside Sieglinde.

Oh, the throne's been usurped.

Hannah had immediately realized what was going down and

knew that the country was doomed if Isaac was not promptly eliminated. The previous king had no sons of his own, so welcoming a son-in-law had been his only choice. But knowing that history, it was simply unfathomable that they would somehow *forget* to announce the birth of a son.

He was guilty—plain and simple. Hannah was certain that Sieglinde was the only one bearing royal blood; the other children had come from who knows where. Then, in an incredibly stupid move, King Isaac had welcomed the mother of those children as his new queen. He was dumb. *So, so* dumb.

If that hadn't been embarrassing enough, the next time Sieglinde made a public appearance, her face was clearly different. Quite frankly, Hannah wanted to punch Isaac. The bastard had done something with the real Princess Sieglinde, giving the name to one of his illegitimate children.

It was a race against time, but her enemy was now the nation itself. As terrible as it was, Isaac had been accepted as a son-in-law, making him the proper king despite his lack of royal blood. Fighting head-on would amount to a coup, and even if she won, the country wouldn't come out unscathed. She had to be patient.

Fortunately, Isaac hadn't killed the real Princess Sieglinde. This coward of a man lacked the mettle to kill his own daughter, but that wasn't due to any affection or kindness. It was because he knew that killing the only ones who could use the royal sword would leave him defenseless against any invading country, and that terrified him.

So, he had lied to Sieglinde, raised her as a body double, and only locked away her mother. Hannah realized that this was her in and began currying Isaac's favor. *I'm your friend. I won't betray you even once I learn the truth. I'll wipe out all of your enemies.* She stressed this to him, supporting him, protecting him, and even risking her own life to defend him against assassins.

Of course, it had been an inside job. Those assassins worked for Hannah.

She listened to his woes, took care of him, and even indulged him at times. When an assailant had slipped poison into his drink, she exchanged his glass with her own, drank the poison, and collapsed.

That was the event that dispelled all doubts in Isaac's mind, and he began to trust Hannah from the bottom of his heart after.

Of course, that had also been an inside job. She'd made sure the poison dosage was not lethal.

Still, it had been a close call for her.

Thus, Hannah had captured Isaac with the chains of trust, protecting Sieglinde and her mother through manipulating and guiding Isaac as she saw fit. He had tried to kill the two countless times, but convincing him to rethink his decision was but a simple task. The man lacked resolve. At his core, he was the type who took orders, a man utterly unfit to be king.

However, the real issue was why he and his family had gone to such lengths. Could there have been another mastermind pulling the strings from the shadows?

In any case, she waited for Sieglinde to grow, but once the princess had turned eleven, Isaac decided to eliminate her. Hannah wasn't sure who had pressured him to make this decision. His method of choice was petty. He spread a rumor that a group of assassins was after the fifth prince, sent Princess Sieglinde to Edelrot Academy as his body double, and waited for an assassin from the Beatrix Empire to take care of things in his stead.

Ugh, this man's already conspiring with foreign nations.

Forget just a single punch, Hannah now wanted to beat him to a pulp. No matter how you spun it, he was falling right into their trap. Beatrix was clearly trying to eliminate Sieglinde to cripple Orcus's military might. Hannah wanted to scream at him for being so blind.

In any case, she couldn't ignore the direction things were headed. On the surface, she had been sent to the academy as Sieglinde's guard in order to conspire with the secret forces of Beatrix to take out Sieglinde, but in reality, she protected the princess. Hannah was a real guard masquerading as an assassin masquerading as a guard—a situation entirely too convoluted.

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"I'm Mercedes Grunewald. Nice to meet you."

Eeeeek! She's so suspicious, max *suspicious!*

Hannah entered the academy via a different method from the princess and attended as a student. This allowed her to sneak her own forces into the academy in advance. But when she finally came face-to-face with her roommate, she was met with the very definition of suspicious.

There was only one family in all of Orcus with the name Grunewald—Hannah's own maiden family. Considering Mercedes's age, she had to be the daughter of either Bernhard or herself, but Hannah had no memory of giving birth to her, and the only child Bernhard acknowledged was Felix. Of course, she knew that the boy was a fifth year at the academy, and she also knew that Bernhard had slept and had children with plenty of women whom he'd cast aside. But she had a hard time believing that Bernhard would send one of the children of his concubines here.

Edelrot Academy was an elite school only accessible to the richest of the rich, and naturally, tuition cost a pretty penny. Additionally, admittance required passing an exam. There was no way an abandoned child of a concubine without formal education could enter the school, and Bernhard wasn't kind enough to pull strings for that to happen. Not to mention, Mercedes had received the top score. While she greeted the incoming class at the entrance ceremony alongside Sieglinde, the gap between them was huge. She was an absolute fiend in practical skills, and her strength exceeded that of an A rank Seeker—and that was an understatement.

Could an untrained, abandoned child earn such acumen? Could they gain these skills? No. The answer was no, plain and simple.

There's clearly something off about this. She far surpassed the school's average, and she claims to be a Grunewald. That name is obviously fake; just a little bit of digging would tell anybody that. I'll have one of my men investigate later, though I don't think it'll help much.

She clearly wasn't a Grunewald. A daughter of a concubine, more skilled than Felix? It was laughably impossible. The mere concept was absurd. Felix was an elite who had been given the best education available since he was young, and his skills were top-

class. A shunned child outpacing him was frankly impossible.

Mercedes was an imposter. There was no doubt about it. However, that only raised the question of why she had decided to use a name that would convince no one. She didn't seem that stupid, so there had to be an explanation.

Suddenly, Hannah had her answer. She couldn't believe how careless she had been. *Damn it! I'm being watched! She used a famous name to gauge my reaction!*

This girl was a decoy, and once Hannah arrived at that conclusion, she immediately plastered on the smile of an innocent eleven-year-old. It had all seemed so obvious in hindsight. Just as she had been worried about enemy spies, her enemies were worried about *her* spies. That's why she had stated such an obviously fake name and hadn't concealed her strength. She was bait, and Hannah was the fish.

"Grunewald? Isn't that the name of a high-ranking noble?"

"Yes, but unfortunately, I'm just the fourth child. I won't succeed him."

Hannah had tried to feel out Mercedes, but the girl didn't budge. Still, she had to be lying. Bernhard's fourth child was Lydia's, and she'd received particularly poor treatment from him. There was no way her home could produce a child like this.

"Your hair is so soft, Mercedes! And your skin too! I'm so jealous."

"You're quite cute yourself."

Not to mention, her hair and skin were far too soft to be from Bernhard's shunned fourth child. Hannah had tried to pry into this too, but her question was largely ignored. Clearly, Mercedes didn't want to answer.

Mercedes continued to flaunt her strength, which far surpassed the level of the other eleven-year-olds. It was like an adult who had received a full education had slipped into the class. She had to be older than she seemed.

Even more surprising, she tamed a ferocious ashtar during one of their practical lessons. Hannah had feigned ditziness and pretended to struggle with a mere rabbit as she observed Mercedes, but she was beyond awed at the girl's skills.

You're doing too much, Mercedes. No eleven-year-old could tame an ashtar. Now, I know you're the one who let the monster loose. It's yours, and that's why it's so friendly with you! This must have been a ploy to earn Princess Sieglinde's trust.

Mercedes was also communicating with the outside via letters. While she claimed to be writing to her father, that was an obvious lie. Bernhard wasn't the type of man who wanted mundane updates from his children. What was she going to do, write about what classes she had and how much fun they were? Who was going to even deliver these letters in the first place? She had no servants with her.

In the academy—rather, the whole country—sending a letter first required handing it to a vampire who worked as a messenger. They would regularly traverse predetermined routes, announcing their arrival in town with a horn. Then, they would take letters and deliver them to other towns. While there was a messenger who worked at the school, they were on standby for emergencies. Obviously, they wouldn't deliver a report to one of the student's parents. In other words, sending a letter was impossible!

Yet, Mercedes had managed to do it. She slipped out of her room in the middle of the morning and handed it over to a cat monster. She was guilty. Hannah was already ninety percent sure of it. The only question was, why had Mercedes yet to act? Was it because Gustav and the other students constantly had their eyes on her?

In that case, I need to create a situation where she can move freely. That'll get her to show her true colors.

Hannah planned her trap for the quasi dungeon expedition happening for class just a few days later. She forced Mercedes and Sieglinde on the same team and took them and one more student to fill their numbers into the dungeon. Inside were a few of Hannah's men who had been stationed there in advance with orders to act immediately and subdue Mercedes at Hannah's signal.

From her perspective, she's alone with her target and just two other students. We're in a quasi dungeon, a closed-off space. It's the perfect chance to attack! If she does anything strange, I'll respond immediately!

Yet, Mercedes didn't act at all. In fact, Hannah was the one who seemed like a fool for being on guard and at the top of her game for the whole class period. Afterwards, she began to question whether it was the right decision to so obviously doubt her, as it had likely encouraged Mercedes to be cautious of Hannah and refrain from attacking.

However, Mercedes *did* reveal her true colors later. She summoned a goblin hexer from who knows where and ordered it around. There were only two explanations: she had either conquered a dungeon or received a seal stone from someone who had. It was likely the latter, but in any case, Hannah had confirmation that she was her enemy.

Still, she had just one lingering doubt. Why had the white cloaks attacked Mercedes? *Huh? Did they fight over something? Was she trying to convince me that she wasn't one of them? No, if she was, she wouldn't have needed to summon a monster. I can't get a read on her at all!*

Everything was weird. The situation, the name she chose, her ability to order around monsters—all of it pointed to her guilt. Yet, this conspirator had fought with those sent from Beatrix, killed, and interrogated them. Hannah didn't know what to make of it.

No way! Could she be from a third country?! Some place besides Orcus or Beatrix?!

Hannah rushed from the scene and tried to get her jumbled thoughts in order. The Beatrix Empire was dangerous enough, and adding another nation to the mix only made the situation more dire. She needed to work out a plan to counterattack quickly. Mercedes was too dangerous, and Hannah had no clue what she was after.

She needed to find out Mercedes's true identity ASAP!

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"Huh? So she's really a Grunewald?"

"Yep. She's really a Grunewald."

"And she's *eleven*?"

"Yes, she's eleven."

"She's at the top of her grade despite being a daughter of a concubine?"

"Yes, she's at the top of her grade despite being a daughter of a concubine."

"So, let me get this straight. She's really just an eleven-year-old who seems much older and has the talent to put Felix, someone at the top of *his* grade, to shame despite not having a proper education? A girl with the strength of an A rank Seeker who can tame monsters and has unbelievably perfect hair and skin? She's really just the kid she appears to be despite how ludicrous that all sounds?"

"Yes, I suppose that sums it up."

This report from her subordinate had Hannah staring up to the heavens. It was preposterous. This couldn't all be true. Mercedes being an elite, foreign spy with decades of training sounded more plausible. But if this report was accurate, it meant Hannah had doubted a mere student and spent tons of time barking up the wrong tree.

Hannah collected her anger at this absurdity in her throat and let it all out. "How the hell was I supposed to know?! I mean, she was just so weird! So obviously suspicious! This isn't my fault! I didn't do anything wrong! Waaaaaah!"

"It's hard for me to watch you make excuses."

Hannah retaliated against her subordinate with a slap. This was all Bernhard's fault for failing to properly communicate with her.

Chapter 40: A Merciless Man

Morning had fallen after the groundbreaking birthday party. Usually, the phrase was "night had fallen," but this was a nation of vampires. Night began days, and morning ended them. Thus, vampires referred to the end of a day with the phrase "morning had fallen."

The following day, Mercedes and the others were led to a room inside the castle. Multiple vampires were inside, and in the deepest part of the room was a thin woman propped up in bed. Having recognized their arrival, the other vampires exited the room.

"Um, who were they?" asked Sieglinde.

"The healers employed at the castle, Your Highness. I had them leave," responded Hannah.

Healers were essentially the doctors of this world. Palliative technology in vampiric nations was woefully underdeveloped, ranking the worst in all of Falsch. As Orcus's civilization was only as advanced as the Middle Ages on Earth, most medicines were superstitions with dubious results, but more than anything, vampires were a species with advanced self-healing abilities.

While there were legitimate doctors, they were ostracized. A light injury only required a prescription for some ineffective medicine, while a major injury only required amputating the affected limb or organ and waiting for it to regenerate. Consequently, doctors earned little respect and were viewed as quacks with no magical abilities who cajoled customers out of their money.

Still, vampires weren't immortal, and it was quite common for them to die before they could fully regenerate. In those dire situations, a professional healer was required to save the person. However, they could only heal injuries, not illness. Apparently, anti-poison magic existed in elfen nations, but there were none who could use such spells in Orcus.

Basically, if a vampire in Orcus were to catch a deadly illness, their only option was to wait for death.

"Ah... Linde. Oh, how I've longed for the day we could reunite in the land of the living." Upon seeing Sieglinde's face, the woman in bed broke out into a full-face smile and sat up with tears in her eyes.

Hannah hurriedly lent her an arm and sat her back down.

"Wh-Who is she?"

"This is Her Majesty Elfriede Abendrot, a true descendant of royal blood...and your mother. We recently rescued her from confinement, but her time in captivity has made her weak. We needed some time before we could allow you two to speak."

After being told that the woman before her was her mother, Sieglinde approached with shaky footsteps. Mother and daughter had been reunited, and since they had been separated when Sieglinde was still an infant, this was practically their first encounter.

Not that it mattered. Mother was drawn to daughter and daughter to mother, eventually turning into a silent embrace. They rejoiced in their reunion, tears streaming down their faces. But for Mercedes, she was simply left with an odd feeling of vexation.

I don't understand.

She couldn't comprehend the emotions that led Sieglinde to weep with joy and Elfriede to tearfully embrace her daughter. Hadn't they practically only met today? What caused them to be so delighted to the point of tears?

The answer was undoubtedly love. Bound by those familial ties, their first meeting had filled them with joy.

Mercedes could never feel that way. When she had first met her father, her only thought was "Oh, so that's who he is." Watching Sieglinde and her mother, it was as if someone were showing her exactly what her heart lacked, and it was incredibly uncomfortable.

No matter how dazzling the moon someone shows you, no matter how bright someone tells you it is, feeling a waning moon was uncomfortable. Bernhard's gaze was similarly cold, as if he were watching a mere dog and pony show. She found this unpleasant too.

It had been the same in her previous life. Movies and novels praised for being poignant seemed boring to her. She could never

empathize with those characters—yet she could when it came to the purpose-lacking, unmotivated characters from novels vilified as drivel.

She hated herself. Why did it have to be the same in this life? They say that only death can fix stupid, so why had it failed to change her?

No, she felt it was even worse than it had been. Bernhard's blood had further degraded her.

"At first, I was too weak to even eat. But I enlisted the help of a famous chef in Blut, and he fixed me right up."

Huh? A shiver made its way up Mercedes's spine. Blut was the town Bernhard ruled and where Lydia and Margaret lived. There was only one famous chef from there she could think of.

"Did this chef's name happen to be Shufu?"

"Yes, it was. He said he was the head chef of the Grunewald family."

Him again? thought Mercedes and Bernhard as they face-palmed. Really, where was that demon going? While his name meant "bad demon," his actions didn't seem to reflect that at all. Mercedes couldn't help but think the name of his species needed to be changed to doting-mommy demon. Also, when did he get promoted to head chef?

"I will reclaim him later. We have more pressing matters."

"Dealing with the royal family, right?"

"Right. They have ridiculed the throne, and by extension, all of us who serve it. Execution would be too light a punishment. We shall have them pay for their sins with their own bodies." Bernhard's words were cold. He exited the room, his countenance twisted into a heartless, evil frown.

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"O-Oh! How I've longed to see you, dearest daughter of mine!" As soon as they stepped into the dungeon, the king—well, since he had lost that title, he should probably be referred to by name—Isaac Abendrot welcomed Sieglinde as if she were his own child.

Bernhard and Mercedes stared at him with exasperated scowls.

"I am sure you despise me, but I had no other choice. This was all a trial to see if you were truly fit to rule, my dear. I treated you harshly to test you, but you have overcome all that and now stand triumphant! As your father, I couldn't be more proud." Isaac feigned ignorance and prattled away while gripping the bars of his cell.

Mercedes felt nothing but loathing for the man. Quite honestly, she found him disgusting. He had betrayed the princess and his people to gain the throne, and he was even now trying to betray the family he had gone through such lengths to bring to his side.

"Let me set the record straight between us! I'm going to tell you all about the eleven years of anguish I spent turning my heart into that of a demon for your own—"

Mercedes silently kicked Isaac's face in. He produced a muffled scream as broken teeth and blood splatter from his broken nose escaped his mouth. His portly body slammed against the back of the wall, causing cracks to form in the shape of a spider web.

"Mercedes."

"I simply silenced a nuisance. Is that a problem?"

"It is," Bernhard chastised Mercedes. Then, metal lances summoned by magic stabbed through Isaac's cheeks, coming out the other side of his mouth. They lifted him into the air, and he flailed around, crying at the intense pain. "You were too soft. If you wish to shut someone up, this is what's required."

"I see."

The scene caused Sieglinde to go pale in the face, while Hannah wore only a bitter grin. Criminal or not, the man inside the cell was still the true king. It was hard to keep from breaking into a cold sweat watching others attack such a man without hesitation.

"One way or another...they really are father and daughter, huh?" Hannah spoke her genuine thoughts aloud. While Bernhard's expression seemed blank, the corners of his mouth were twisted upward as if he couldn't fully hold back a smile.

Mercedes, on the other hand, looked clearly disgusted.

"Isaac Abendrot. Your crimes are unforgivable, amounting to treason against the whole nation. Once you have faced trial and you

and your family have been paraded throughout Orcus, you will be burned at the stake."

He spoke as if his punishment were already a forgone conclusion. It was odd. He mentioned a trial, but the method of execution had already been chosen. Still, this nation was full of vampires and stuck in the Middle Ages. Just as criminals would be punished without trial during that period on Earth, it wasn't odd for show trials to happen in Orcus as well.

Not to mention, the current king and his family had been thrown into the dungeon, while the true queen was bedridden and the princess only eleven. It wasn't difficult for Bernhard, a duke whose influence rivaled that of the king, to have seized command, and it was safe to assume he had already finished laying the groundwork to do so. In fact, he had likely met with a judge to decide on a punishment long ago, a full display of the twisted nature of a medieval society.

"Though that's only after he coughs up all the intel I need, okay? He may be the ringleader, but he couldn't have accomplished all this by himself. There have to be some stupid nobles who played right into Beatrix's hands and helped out. It's the perfect opportunity to drain out all the rot in this country, so I can't let you kill him until I get that information out of him!"

Honey attracted flies, and Isaac was terrified of his true colors being exposed. Any upright man would despise him for his actions and seek to oust him from the throne. But what of those unrighteous, myopic fools who only saw their own greed? They would cozy right up to him. As someone who had succeeded in doing so by pretending to be one of those foolish nobles herself, Hannah knew this well.

Isaac was thus surrounded by flies drawn to honey, but the one time those flies managed to act intelligently was when it came to their own preservation. They hid themselves among the upright nobles, and if Hannah wanted to round them up and remove all the rot from Orcus, she needed Isaac alive.

"Now that he's a criminal, I finally get the chance to properly interrogate him. Can you wait to execute him until I'm done?"

"In that case, I'll interrogate him."

"That won't work! You're terrible at interrogations, Bernhard. You'll turn him into a meat sack who can only beg for death."

Isaac turned pale as he watched this disturbing conversation play out in front of him. Hannah may have looked like a sweet, lovely child, but she was a woman who'd lived over a century and survived various predicaments in the underworld. Torture and nefarious dealings came naturally to her. After all this time, she wasn't going to choose her methods based on what was moral or not.

Mercedes didn't think much of this. Instead, she simply accepted it as a feature of medieval societies. But there was one person who *didn't* accept it: Sieglinde. "W-Wait, Lord Bernhard. His children may not have known anything! There's no need to..."

Bernhard watched her silently. Internally, he was probably annoyed at her naivety, but he kept it to himself. Rather, he was likely calculating what response would best earn her trust. It was obvious that offending Sieglinde would restrict his options in the future, so stepping toward compromise was ultimately the most beneficial course of action for him.

"I see. You truly are a princess. I am moved by the mercy you have shown those who robbed you of the life you were meant to live. In that case, I shall banish Isaac's children to the frontiers as slaves."

"S-Slaves?"

"There, they can repent, and if they work hard and honestly, I shall consider allowing them back into society. What do you think? Of course, I will assign soldiers to watch them and make sure they do not revolt."

"U-Um... Well, if they can reenter society, I suppose that's one of the better options... Fine. Please do that."

Considering their crimes, this was extraordinarily lenient. Though from the perspective of someone living in the present day, it may have seemed incredibly harsh since they hadn't participated in these crimes knowingly. Still, sullying the king's name, knowingly or not, was a crime deserving of death in Orcus.

In that sense, punishing criminals on death row instead via slave

labor *with* the possibility of one day returning to society was just too generous. Bernhard's unexpected display of magnanimity had allayed Sieglinde's fears, earning him her trust.

She was truly ignorant. She had no idea what orders Bernhard had given the soldiers he had claimed were serving as guards.

Kill them all, and make it look like illness or accident.

Those had been his orders. He was a merciless man.

Chapter 41: The Empire's Plan

Bernhard perused a contract in his private quarters. It had come from Isaac's vault, and it contained within it the potential to shape the future of Orcus.

Recent events had left Bernhard with a single question: Why *now*? Isaac had been given countless opportunities to kill Sieglinde, including when she was still an infant, and yet, he hadn't.

The reason was simple—her blood. Only those descended from royal blood could wield the royal sword, and Sieglinde was the only one beside her mother who fit that bill. Isaac had raised both of them as lambs for the slaughter, and he regularly drew their blood and studied it to verify this ability belonged to them alone.

Hannah had heard from a royal chef that Isaac had been feeding his children this blood, and while not particularly relevant, she took this chef's life with her own hands after he coughed up all the intel he had. In his place, Hannah hired a new chef—the head chef of the Grunewald manor, Shufu. Bernhard was shocked to hear this news.

Anyway, the foolish man had clung to the hope that his children would one day wield the royal sword if he continued feeding them Sieglinde's blood. Though of course, there was no way such a method would transfer the ownership rights of a dungeon.

Still, the man's folly had been what saved Sieglinde and her mother, though that only raised the question of why Isaac had decided to kill them now, and furthermore, go about it so circuitously as to have assassins from the Beatrix Empire do it in his stead. If he'd simply wanted to kill them, he could've done it in secret, so Bernhard suspected that there had been secret dealings between Isaac and the Beatrix Empire. He immediately went to examine Isaac's private quarters, where he found a secret passageway leading to the basement. Hidden there was a single safe, containing this contract. It was stamped with blood, marking it

as a blood pact. Betrayal would leave Isaac shunned from vampiric society.

"What a fool. They had him wrapped around their finger, and he was none the wiser."

The details of the contract could be summarized thusly: "Princess Sieglinde will attend the academy as the prince's body double. There, assassins from the Beatrix Empire will eliminate her and retrieve her body. In exchange, Queen Beatrix XVII vows with the gods as her witness to not attack the Kingdom of Orcus, and to support and protect the nation. Additionally, she will lend King Isaac the necessary monsters to gain his people's trust."

The only problem was that the *queen* had vowed not to interfere with the kingdom, not the empire itself. The contract had purposefully been written with technical jargon and roundabout language that extended its length, thus burying the lede. And yet—*and yet!*—there had still been a man dumb enough to fall for this obvious trap. Bernhard wanted to curse him.

Assassinating her wasn't their goal, since they would've just had Isaac do it. They must have had a reason to kill her themselves...

Bernhard pondered this predicament. *Think! You must be missing something!*

He scoured through his memories of the conversations he'd shared with Mercedes, reiterating the complete order of events over and over in his head. She'd said this all began when she overheard white cloaks discussing a planned attack on Sieglinde while en route to the academy. If memory served him, the exact sentences she had heard were "There's no doubt about it! The fifth prince of Orcus is inside! Capture him at all costs!"

That's it! The Beatrix Empire wanted to capture Princess Sieglinde, not assassinate her. The ashtar they set loose at the academy likely had instructions to do just that. That explains their roundabout ways.

Indeed, killing Sieglinde would have been simple. They could poison her food or shoot her down with a musket, but they had avoided those options to keep her in the best condition possible. That was why the group had never resorted to extreme measures,

and why Princess Sieglinde had escaped unscathed despite her multiple run-ins.

Why hadn't they injured her? If they simply wanted to capture her, they could have used force. But what if they wanted to minimize any ill will between them? Think! What would become of a princess deprived of her true identity and forced to live as a body double if she was brought to a foreign nation and suddenly learned the truth at just eleven years old? It's simple. She would despise her king.

Bernhard was an emotionless man, which granted him the ability to consider things coldly and rationally.

She'd feel indebted to her savior, Queen Beatrix, and trust her. In that case, the godsworn oath that "Queen Beatrix XVII will not attack the Kingdom of Orcus" wouldn't matter, since Sieglinde would be the one doing it, not her.

Finally, Bernhard had discovered what the Beatrix Empire was after—the lineage capable of wielding the royal sword. They'd bring Sieglinde over to their side by rescuing her, thereby giving their nation access to two royal weapons. *That* was their true goal, and Isaac was a mere villain prepared to do their bidding.

It was all a Cinderella story centered around Sieglinde. The illustrious princess lives ignorant of her true status until a sudden savior allows her to blossom into a true ruler. In the end, she defeats the villain and lives happily ever after with the Beatrix Empire—it was just the sort of mediocre fairy tale children tended to love.

However, in the *true* end, the heroine would be nothing but a puppet—a pawn that catered to the empire's every whim, chained by the fetters of trust.

Bernhard began to chuckle. *I see. I see now! We were on a one-way street from ally to vassal, and they were about to gain victory without a single battle being fought! Their plot was excellent, and Isaac must have been a pawn picked by them from the start. It spanned eleven years! What happened at Felix's birthday party must have been a trick to diminish my influence and authority, as they saw me as a threat... No, that can't be all. They must have been trying to shake up Felix more than myself. In that case, he'll likely be their next target. If he's truly enough of a fool to fall for their*

schemes, I'll simply hand him some money and disown him.

It had been close—so close that Bernhard wanted to give his enemies props. Orcus had been at the brink of defeat before their foes had even gone to war. Strong as he may have been, Bernhard wasn't a match against *two* royal weapons, even if they were inferior articles deprived of most of their original functions.

But the script was rewritten at the finale. Mercedes became the princess's savior and earned her faith. Not to mention, Mercedes is an admirable child who doesn't let her emotions get to her, much like myself. She may have gained the princess's faith, but she'll never place her own faith in the princess. Not to mention...

Bernhard could no longer stifle his grin. All the puzzle pieces had already fallen into place.

Mercedes's wealth despite her young age.

Her overwhelming strength.

The armored monster and black wolf his butlers had once witnessed.

The recent disappearance of Stark Dungeon.

It all led to a single conclusion—one that fit together perfectly.

Yes... Yes! I can feel it! Times are about to change! At this rate, obtaining the power of three dungeons is no pipe dream!

There was one thing about the dungeons that Mercedes *didn't* know—what would happen to one if its owner died without an heir. In such cases, the dungeon would return to its pre-conquered state and respawn somewhere in the world. But, if—and only if—the dungeon master was killed by *another* dungeon master, the victor could take their dungeon.

And that wasn't all. Descendants of a conqueror had what was known as inferior authority over their dungeon, while conquerors themselves had superior authority. A master of inferior authority could entrust their dungeon to someone of superior authority if they wished.

Bernhard himself knew both these things, though he had no intention of killing his daughter—he wasn't so foolish as to get rid of such a perfect specimen. As things stood, the princess would willingly cooperate with Mercedes, meaning taking her dungeon had

little merit now. There were no powers that could defeat him regardless, and if he played his cards right, Mercedes might even voluntarily hand over the authority to her dungeon.

He chuckled once again. "I can see it! The Beatrix Empire—no, the volgelen, elven, and chimäre—all on their knees before me! A world completely united, like never before witnessed in history!"

Bernhard's cheeks were flushed with glee. With the power of three dungeons, none could defy him. He'd overrun the whole world in an instant, gaining complete control!

Of course, there'd be futile rebellion and chaos in the initial phase, but what could be done about that? Bernhard had gained know-how by choosing to cultivate his domain's economy instead of becoming king. He was confident he could bring wealth to towns, cities, and even whole nations; he had already accomplished it with the grand city of Blut. There were only a few cities in all the world blessed with such prosperity, and while he couldn't take total credit, Blut's success had been mostly Bernhard's doing. The people were mercenary in their views, and as long as they had riches, they would obey him.

"Now, the only question is whether it will be me who becomes king, or Mercedes? I can still see it, though! A perfect world lies on the horizon! Either I—or the progeny who most inherited my blood—will bring this world out of stagnation!"

Bernhard laid his ambitions on full display as he grinned to himself. For now, he would have to remain discreet. But he knew that one day, the flames of his twisted desire would scorch the world—one day very soon.

Chapter 42: Monster Battle

Once the chaos around the royal sword had subsided, Mercedes returned to life as usual at the academy. However, she had failed to completely eliminate everyone who might impede her studies. The informant who had signaled the timing of their attacks to the assassins remained unidentified, leaving seeds of uncertainty within the premises. True peace wouldn't return until this shady figure had been dealt with.

Mercedes had been quite certain that Sieglinde would go back to the castle, but she instead decided to stay at the academy and reveal her true gender and circumstances to everyone. This came as a shock to her female fans, and Dodo even passed out. Meanwhile, others seemed quite excited by this news, though Mercedes was baffled as to why. Perhaps they were of the same persuasion as Monika.

Sieglinde's unmasking came with heightened security at the academy. Now, soldiers—all men working under Bernhard—patrolled the perimeter. Personally, Mercedes thought Sieglinde would be safest within the castle until the informant was discovered, as it meant that assassins would still be a threat here.

Bernhard's response to her fears were as follows: "There are still vermin hiding in the castle who have lined their pockets through loyalty to Isaac, and perhaps even foreign spies as well. Leaving the princess here before the place has been purified is even more dangerous than leaving her at the academy."

Essentially, Bernhard wanted to do a purge within the palace grounds, removing all the noble houses that might oppose him and consolidating power, but the princess would be in the way. There was no way this man would waste energy trying to protect someone who wasn't himself.

When Mercedes expressed that very sentiment to Bernhard, he

responded with a proud smirk. She realized anew the need to neutralize this maniac.

The seasons passed, and it was now summer. Thanks to Mercedes's dramatic performance during the royal sword debacle, her schoolmates had begun buttering her up. It honestly irritated her. Still, even if she didn't see herself as one, she was the princess's savior and a hero who had defeated the fake king. It had earned her curious gazes from other students, as well as many who approached her—though whether that was motivated by their own judgments or their parents' orders was unclear.

"Hey, Mercy! Are you going to enter the hunting tournament?"

"Well, I was thinking I might... Actually, I'm curious why you're still here, aunty."

"Hey! Don't call me aunty! Just call me Hannah like you used to!"

"Sure, Aunt Hannah."

"That's no better!"

The academy held an annual hunting tournament during summer, and of all people, Hannah Burger—a 170-year-old mother who still remained at the academy for some strange reason—was the person asking her about it.

"So? Why are you still here?"

"Hmm... Well, don't you remember what you said? There's still an informant here, and catching him's my job. I'm also in charge of leading the effort to guard Her Highness!"

"But does that really require dressing as a student?"

"It's easier to stay closer to her when I'm disguised as her classmate. Plus I can get my hands on certain intel I couldn't obtain otherwise. And I mean, I look good in this, don't I?" Hannah spun and struck a pose.

"You don't need to try so hard, aunty."

Her niece was so cold it almost brought her to tears. With a sigh, she remarked, "You're so cute, Mercy, but you really are just like a mini-Bernhard. I get why he likes you so much."

"That means nothing to me. I'll cut him off once I'm done with him and let Felix be the heir."

"Felix? Hmm... Well, he's quite the diligent boy, I suppose."

Hannah conjured up an image of Felix in her mind. Normally, the eldest son would inherit a noble's title—at least, according to tradition. However, Bernhard wasn't the type to let that dictate his actions. He had complete and utter confidence in his judgment, and no matter what objections others might have, he was perfectly intent on ignoring them and choosing Mercedes as his heir.

But that was exactly why Hannah pitied Felix. "Bernhard might begin to recognize him if he accomplishes something meaningful."

"Something meaningful..."

Bernhard's cruel treatment of Felix didn't benefit Mercedes either. She didn't feel emotions like pity, nor did she hold any sort of affection for her brother, but if Bernhard continued shunning him, she actually *could* be forced to become heir. Of course, she planned to run away if that came to pass, but the easier option would be for Felix to take that title for her.

In that sense, she wanted Bernhard to have some faith in her brother. Still, letting him win the hunting tournament wouldn't accomplish that, and Bernhard would easily see through her plot. Not to mention, earning first place in a silly little school tournament would hardly sway Bernhard's opinion. Finding something grander, more spectacular for Felix to accomplish would be better.

"I'll think about that."

Right now, nothing particularly came to mind. Thus, Mercedes cut off the conversation, spread out some parchment on her desk, and began to study.

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There was another event before the hunting tournament—the mock battle between the monsters the students had caught in class. Still, Mercedes's overwhelming victory was all but a foregone conclusion. Her ashtar wasn't native to the plains that served as its hunting ground; instead it was a deadly monster that had been sent to attack Sieglinde. The monsters her classmates had been able to catch couldn't even hold a candle to it; even A rank Seekers would likely struggle.

The only problem was whether Mercedes would be able to train the ashtar, but considering Benkei and Kuro were already loyal to her, that wouldn't prove an issue. Case in point: the creature had perched itself on her arm.

The ashtar weighed over three hundred kilograms, by the way.

"Tom, Mercedes. Step forward."

Mercedes followed Gustav's instructions, and the boy did after her. His poor face was frozen in fear. Next to him was a squirrel the size of a small dog. It was cute, but it didn't seem all that useful in a fight. The species was known as Furchitsam Eichhörnchen, which sounded much cooler than it looked. They were a timid monster that was virtually harmless, and they were quite friendly toward Falsch, making them a popular choice for newbies looking to raise their first monster pet.

Their flesh was also exceptionally tender, and an ashtar's favorite meal.

I can't do this! This is impossible! I mean, just look at how big it is! It's the predator and my squirrel is its prey! The battle hasn't even begun and...it's already drooling!

The ashtar eyed the Furchitsam Eichhörnchen like a hunter locked on its prey. It didn't even see the squirrel as a foe, which Tom had realized immediately.

Indeed, the fight was already over for the ashtar. In his mind, he had simply been presented with a tasty meal!

"Don't eat him, Chirpy. He's not your food."

"Chi..."

Chirpy?! After hearing Mercedes utter this terribly unbefitting name, the entire crowd had the same thought: ridiculous—*utterly* ridiculous. While the ashtar did go "chirp," Chirpy was no name a creature that large should have.

Chirpy let out a despondent "chirp." He didn't like having to wait for his meal.

"In that case, beg—"

"I concede!"

"Acknowledged." Gustav immediately accepted Tom's surrender. Obviously, this was never going to be a real fight. They could pit

these two against each other a hundred times, and Chirpy would win every single one. Whatever this was, it wasn't a mock battle. If they had actually fought it out, the squirrel would have been lucky to avoid being swallowed whole.

"Hannah Burger, you're next."

Hannah and her rabbit were next to step forward. While the bunny held a cigar in its mouth, no smoke was being produced. Apparently, he'd decided to be polite and refrain from smoking in front of a crowd of minors.

"H-Hey! Why do you look so fired up, Bunbun?!"

The rabbit squared up the ashtar, fearless and raring to go. He was silent, but his nose was twitching almost like he was trying to communicate. To translate into Falsch words, he seemed to be saying something like "I see this guy's got guts."



“Okay! I surrender!” Hannah lifted Bunbun into the air and retreated. Unfortunately, she had made the right call. The rabbits that lived in these plains weren’t very strong.

One by one, all of Mercedes’s classmates conceded, awarding her the crown without a single battle. They would never forget the sad look on Chirpy’s face as he watched each of his meals be taken away.

Chapter 43: Faction Feuds

Once summer had reached its peak, an air of tension consumed Edelrot Academy. The hunting tournament wasn't just fun and games. All sorts of people would come to watch, from the prominent nobles and merchants from cities all across Orcus to famous Seekers associated with the guild to even titans of industry, organizations, and military officials. Obviously, those people were looking to appraise their future capital—to find the most promising students and nab them before another organization could.

However, this was also one of very few opportunities for the students to prove themselves. Aside from the eldest sons who had already been named as heirs, the majority of students would have to find work and make a living on their own, and having an under-the-table job offer already lined up was obviously the best-case scenario, as it eliminated the stress of uncertainty.

In other words, this event was a showcase of the academy's talent for the influential men across the kingdom, as well as a scramble to claim said talent. Therefore, "Hunting Tournament" had been the perfect title—not only did the students hunt monsters, but the elites hunted the students, and *that* was the true purpose of the event.

All the students at the academy were pitted against each other as rivals, but there were exceptions to that. Obviously, fighting as a team was more effective and increased the overall chance of victory. A group could defeat far more monsters in a far shorter amount of time than an individual.

The rules of the tournament were simple, and points would be calculated from how many monsters you defeated within the time limit. Bringing back severed parts would add that monster to your till. The points weren't calculated in real time as you defeated monsters, which was only natural. While the academy staff would fly

laps in the air on the backs of monsters, they wouldn't possibly be able to know what every student was up to at all times. Instead, their patrol was meant to recover students who had been knocked unconscious during battle.

Thus, utilizing this system to form a team was entirely possible. For example, student A might defeat a monster and agree to let it be counted as student B's, or a group might focus on weakening monsters and let all the points go to student A. Of course, student A would be the only one to receive any credit, while his teammates would receive scores of zero.

However, once student A's accomplishments landed him a job, he could use his position to give his teammates preferential treatment. In fact, this was quite common. Each year, students from influential households would recruit allies with the promise that they'd keep them in mind after achieving a high rank, and each year, students who weren't confident they could defeat monsters on their own would try to join such teams. This was particularly common among first-years, who had neither the skills nor experience to compete against their upperclassmen. In their case, it was actually smarter to find an older student who might assist them.

The instructors at the academy implicitly condoned this behavior, and as the years went on, the tournament had turned from a hunting competition to a battle determined by which upperclassmen could gain the best allies and which underclassmen managed to sell themselves to the most skilled team leader.

However, this system came with several disadvantages. Naturally, underclassmen tended to flock toward the most influential students, creating an imbalance of power, and in turn, rival factions. This was the real source of the academy's current tension. The hunting tournament wasn't about to begin—it had *already* begun, and upperclassmen on the prowl had already started to hunt their younger classmates.

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Class had concluded for the day, and Mercedes was on her way

back to the dorms when she was stopped by a group of vampires. It was already quite late. She had stayed behind to review her notes, meaning there were very few students still on school grounds.

In other words, this clique had been waiting to jump her.

They seemed to range in age, but she assumed they had to be upperclassmen. She doubted they'd meant to completely block her path, but there were so many of them she couldn't get around. Once they were only two steps away from her, they stopped.

"Mercedes Grunewald, right?"

The one who spoke seemed to be the leader. He was a young man with short black hair, a color rarely seen on vampires. He was reasonably handsome, and heightwise, appeared to be about a hundred and seventy centimeters tall. At a glance, he seemed to be a gallant, affable young man.

"Who are you?"

"Goetz Hölderlin. I'm a sixth year, and well...one of the top brass of the Thunder Faction. I'll give it to you straight. Are you interested in joining our faction, young miss?"

"Your...faction?"

"Oh, so I gotta start there. Got it. Your friendly upperclassman will tell you all about it." Goetz Hölderlin flashed Mercedes a candid grin and agreed to answer her question. While he seemed friendly enough, there was no trusting anyone who'd approach a stranger with a smile.

In any case, Mercedes figured she should at least hear him out.

"You know about the hunting tournament in two weeks, right? Students are forming factions, and the people at the center are from, well...marquess families, at the very least. There are four of them, and their factions are known as the Four Greats."

It was impossible to put a number on the name value of a marquess, much less a duke. If Mercedes hadn't been the fourth child and a girl, she'd have been bombarded with sycophants hoping to get her scraps. Considering there were multiple students in the school who held this power, it made sense that opposing factions would form around them.

"There's the Thick Fogs, the Helixes, us Thunders, and finally, the

Fresh Bloods, all named after the city each faction head's family governs."

"And...who's behind the Fresh Blood Faction?"

"Your older brother Felix, as you've probably guessed. So, you do want to join his faction, huh? Though really, I'd advise against it."

Just for the record, Mercedes didn't want to join *any* faction, but common sense dictated that siblings would likely stick together. At least, that was what Goetz had assumed, which was why he warned her against the idea.

"You see, well... They've already got defeat written all over their faces. They were the most powerful faction up until last year, but after what happened at his birthday party, it just... I guess you already know about it since you're his sister, but apparently some monster went crazy. A lot of the big shot nobles there were put in danger. His reputation has plummeted, and his members are scrambling to cut ties with him."

Of course, she was aware of that. She had been a witness, and the monster that had caused the whole ruckus currently served her. He was even working as the queen's chef.

Still, she hadn't known that Felix's position in high society was now on shaky ground, though she had suspected as much. Her brother was a truly unlucky man, so much so she even began to pity him—only slightly, of course.

"You and Prince Siegha—well, I guess her name is Sieglinde now—anyway, you and the princess are at the top of your class, and you even hold the honor of having saved the royal family. I'm sure you'll have your own faction once you're a fourth year, or maybe even a third year. It'd really suck if you tripped up here when you've got the potential to climb to the top. We can give you the experience you need and even teach you how to run your *own* faction. So, what do you say? Are you with us, or not?"

Mercedes took a moment to consider Goetz's offer. On the surface, it didn't sound like a bad deal. While she doubted she'd ever run a faction of her own, gaining experience was never a bad thing. Still, she would have to delay her decision until she had time to sniff out the other factions. Though honestly, she wasn't intending to join

any of them anyway. Her answer was going to be "no" regardless.

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't think I want to join any factions at the moment."

"What a shame." Goetz awkwardly scratched his cheek with a handsome grin.

But when Mercedes turned to leave, another boy blocked her path. "Hey! Who do you think you are to refuse? I'd do what we say while we're still being nice if I were you, *little lady.*"

Ah, so they're stooping low, thought Mercedes with a sigh. Still, that made things easier for her. She no longer had to worry about niceties. If someone was in her way, she would eliminate them, plain and simple.

"Don't act all high-and-mighty! Your dad might be a duke, but he's still just—"

"Hey. Stop."

"But Goetz! She took your kindness and—"

"Stop."

He cursed under his breath. "Sorry. I stepped out of line."

It was Goetz who had placated his comrade before he could lay hands on Mercedes. Had this been an accident, or some performance by Goetz to prove his kindness?

Either way, the answer wouldn't sway her opinion of this group. She wore a poker face, but inside, her appraisal of the Thunder Faction fell by two notches.

"I'm so sorry! I apologize for my friend's behavior. I'll give him a good talking-to and make sure this doesn't happen again!" Goetz bowed his head.

Mercedes wasn't sure what was going through his mind as he apologized, but she assumed their conversation was finished regardless. Still, she wasn't too happy about the glare that boy was still giving her.

"No, I don't mind. See you around."

"R-Right. Hey! Clear a path for her!"

Now that they had moved out of the way, she walked through them and headed back to her dorm without even sparing them a glance.

"Are you really okay with this, Goetz? We could force that brat to comply and—" said the boy who had just threatened her. Still, before he could finish his words, Goetz slammed the back of his hand against his face to quiet him. "Ack!"

"She hates us now."

Goetz's countenance transformed from that of an agreeable young man to a sinister villain. He bared his fangs as the blood vessels popped out of his forehead, his eyes open so wide you could completely see all the whites. His kind tone from earlier seemed unreal, as his words now were filled with disgust.

The other boy was crouched on the floor and holding his nose, but Goetz grabbed him by the hair and yanked him to his knees. "Am I really okay with this? No shit I'm not, and it's all your damn fault! Don't you get why I bothered to invite her myself?! Why the hell did you have to go and ruin our reputation?! She saved the princess, she's the daughter of the duke, and she's the best in her grade. Why the hell would you drag our names through the mud in the eyes of someone like that?! What? Are you a plant from some other faction? You here to mess with me?!"

"I-I just wanted to help you, Goetz..."

"Huh?!" Goetz threw the boy on the floor. "This may be beyond your puny brain's comprehension, but life doesn't end after we graduate. That girl might be a big shot one day, and building a relationship with her and making her indebted to us *now* could help us out down the line! What, you rise to management in some faction and think you're such a damn big shot now?! You're just the sixth son of a viscount! Don't you freaking get it? She's *above* us. Right now, we're upperclassmen, but in the near future, we'll be groveling at her feet. That's why we need to start collecting those brownie points *now*!"

As Goetz spoke, he stomped his foot on the other boy's forehead. "You get that through your thick skull?! I can find trash like you anywhere, but a girl like her's one in a million!"

Stomp.

"Damn it! And I finally thought we'd gotten our hands on someone valuable. Had we been nice to her while she was still just a

brat, taught her a few things, and graduated while she still saw us as kind and helpful friends, we'd have gotten some passes once she rose to the top!"

Stomp.

"You got that, numbskull? Noble society is about making a living and currying favor. If the people at the top like you, you succeed, which means being a sycophant to the people you think will be there one day! Shithead idiots like you who think they're so damn great just because they were born a few years earlier only end up regretting it when people take revenge against them for their shitty behavior and kick them to the curb!"

Stomp.

"Why the hell did you do that?! She hates us now, and she's gonna let the freaking princess know! We're the dumbasses who threatened this country's savior, and we're gonna feel those effects when it's time to find a damn job!"

Goetz let out a dramatic sigh and yanked up the boy's bloodied face. Then, he slammed it against the floor.

"This!"

Slam.

"Is all!"

Slam.

"Your damn fault!"

Slam.

"Goetz! You're going to kill him!"

One of their other comrades finally intervened to stop Goetz. His hand was now still, but the next moment, he threw the boy on the floor like he was tossing away some trash and spit on his face.

"Throw this damn thing out in the field. Make it look like it was a monster who did him in."

"R-Right!"

Goetz left the boy to his comrades and looked out the window. "First, I've gotta fix my image from negative to neutral. Gods damn it. I shouldn't have let in such a freaking idiot."

***

"I was right. They were bad news," muttered Mercedes after Goetz had left the scene. She had feigned returning to her dorm, instead hiding to eavesdrop on them. It was as if she'd finally gotten a glimpse of reality—this guy was a weakling on the same level as Boris.

Considering he was the type to play the long game, she was confident she could avoid becoming his enemy as long as she didn't provoke him. Still, he really was a scumbag too, caught up in ingratiating himself to others to see things as they were. Not to mention, the girl this dumb guy had chosen to suck up to had been Mercedes. She despised him. Quite frankly, she considered him unworthy of her time.

Still, this was how people capable of approaching strangers with a smile operated, and additional proof that having faith in others was pointless. The only person she could trust was herself.

In any case, she needed to think of a way to ward off the idiots.

I wish they could keep their make-believe factions to themselves, thought Mercedes as she returned to the dorms, this time for real.

Chapter 44: The Workings of Magic

With the hunting festival approaching, the Thunders weren't the only faction that contacted Mercedes. The next to do so were the Helixes, who rushed on her one night while she was enjoying dinner in the mess hall. Approaching her was fine—well, not really, but she could turn a blind eye. The real problem was *how* they approached her, or really, the eccentric appearance they chose.

"Bwah ha ha ha!" came a booming laugh from the mess hall's entrance. Mercedes turned to find...a *horse*. A tall young man stood on its back, drawing the attention of every student in the hall. He was clearly well trained and muscular, but not *too* muscular. It was a perfect physique. He wore an odd, sleeveless black tunic that covered his whole body with a crimson cloak on top—an incredibly lame look—and on his head was a brown helmet that seemed to be expressing...a spiral-shaped wig? Quite frankly, it looked like brown soft-serve ice cream. But why would someone want to wear p—ice cream on their head?

He wasn't ugly, but he wasn't particularly handsome either. He had deep, chiseled facial features, but his eccentric costume made that all for naught.

His dazed-out horse slowly approached Mercedes, and when the two were right before her, it shook the man off its back. He fell to the floor, landing in a pose that made him look like a crushed frog. But he quickly hopped back to his feet.

"You are Mercedes Grunewald, right, young lady? My name is Sixtus Schoenberg. I'm the eldest son of Marquess Schoenberg and the man who will one day rule the Schoenberg fiefdom! I will soon be twenty, as my poor behavior has forced me to repeat a year *twice*!"

I see I've got another weirdo to deal with... Mercedes lamented. She observed him with cold eyes.

"Rejoice, young lady! You have been granted the great honor of joining the Helix Faction!"

"Which I refuse."

Sixtus was at a loss for words. Mercedes had answered instantly, and quite honestly, she was extremely amazed someone like him could lead a faction. Though she had a better impression of the Helixes given their leader had come to greet her himself, unlike the Thunders.

"Rejoice, young lady! You have been granted the great honor of joining the Helix Faction!"

"Repeating yourself isn't going to change my answer."

"But if you join now, we can wear matching uniforms!"

"Don't need one."

"You can wear this helmet!"

"Don't want to."

Mercedes coldly refused all his offers. Sixtus was clearly hurt, as he walked off to a corner of the cafeteria, sat on the floor, and took up the fetal position. As soon as Mercedes had assumed he was a dauntless man, he made a one-eighty and turned into someone wishy-washy and depressed.

His retinue began to panic. "Oh no! Sixtus is sad again!"

"What did you do to him?! He might be an idiot, but he's sensitive!"

"Yeah! A sensitive idiot!"

"A lame idiot with no fashion sense!"

"He may have poop on his head, but his heart is delicate!"

"I see..." *Is this guy really fit to run a faction?* thought Mercedes, feeling absolutely exasperated. Being the eldest son of a marquess must really have carried a lot of weight.

In any case, Mercedes didn't want to be lumped in with them, and if—just *if*—she was going to join a faction, she vowed to pick any except this one. The uniform was just too ugly.

"Sixtus, I don't think that helmet is helping our case. Let's get rid of it, okay?"

"Excuse you?! This is the haircut of the gods discovered in texts of old, the Ascension of the Pegasus!"

"Does having thin hair really require making a helmet and wearing it all the time as a replacement? Even if it does, that color's gotta go."

Mercedes ignored the comedy skit playing out between Sixtus and his retinue, finished her meal, and returned her utensils to the old lunch lady, who had the appearance of a young woman in her twenties. Thanks to vampires' perpetual ages, it was rare to find an old lady who actually looked the part. But for some reason, there were plenty of old men. Perhaps there was disparity between the sexes when it came to perpetual ages.

In any case, Mercedes had no further reason to keep these arguing idiots company, so she ignored them and left the mess hall.

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"We'll be practicing magic today. You've only received lectures on the topic thus far, but we'll now be putting what you've learned into practice. Given your class, it's likely you can already cast spells at some level, but you won't be able to improve without learning the essentials. At the end of the class period, we'll be conducting a short quiz. Anybody who scores below seventy percent must stay after class, so keep that in mind," announced Gustav, inspiring anxiety in his students. Quizzes and tests were the worst, and to students, they might as well have been the devil.

Gustav ignored his students and dispassionately began to recap what they had learned thus far. His students appreciated these pretest review sessions. "Magic is a force. By using the mana flowing through the air, we can create all sorts of different effects, and the greater influence you exert on mana, the stronger the spell will be. We call this 'magical strength.'"

The students listened with rapt attention, not wanting to miss a single word as they scratched notes onto their parchment. As members of the A class—and thus, the students with the highest grades—many were diligent. Though of course, there were also

some who didn’t take their lessons too seriously. They were overconfident in their intellectual abilities, and by next year, they would almost certainly have disappeared from the class.

“We are not certain what magical strength is, but we know that it depletes with use, and overuse can even lead to death. Studies have also shown that we Falsch lose body mass when using magic over extended periods of time. From that, we can assume that there’s some substance in our bodies that gets expended when we cast magic.”

“Is it still all right to use magic then, Mr. Gustav?”

“Of course it is. Using vast amounts is dangerous, but normal usage will not impact your health. We have already proven that using magic has no effect on lifespan, and with time, you will regain the weight lost by using magic.”

Mercedes already knew what that substance was—nanomachines. Everything in this world was made of them, whether it be monsters, tools, or even vampires. They were likely man-made atoms, and Mercedes theorized that the ones in their bodies exerted influence on the ones in the atmosphere. By rearranging and changing the reactions of atoms, they could induce all sorts of phenomena, including creating water and fire.

However, that failed to explain how Mercedes controlled gravity. There had to be more to it. Maybe being artificial meant these atoms could influence forces like gravity as well? In the end, this was all purely conjecture.

“Magic is a power that paints the images in your mind onto reality. Mana reacts to these images, giving them material form, but magic requires imagination. You can’t use it to perform what you can’t imagine yourself, and the easier it is for you to imagine something, the more likely your spell will succeed. As a beginner, it is difficult to create magic from imagination alone, but there are existing spells that are easy for anyone to imagine. One example is the beginner fire spell Flamme. It’s famous, and thus, easy to imagine.”

Gustav conjured a flame at his fingertip as he lectured. He had a fire affinity, apparently.

"Being too rigid in your thinking is a bad thing, but it can sometimes aid you when casting spells. Someone who is able to perfectly imagine the effect Flamme creates will cast much better magic than someone who simply has the vague idea that they need to create a flame."

If Gustav's explanation was accurate, it meant that the more familiar you were with a spell, the clearer idea you'd have and the stronger your magic would be. Anybody could create original spells with imagination alone, but that would leave those with little imagination behind, which made existing spells with clear names and effects quite useful.

However, that also gave Mercedes a gigantic advantage. She was familiar with all sorts of spells. The magic and supernatural powers that littered fiction in her old world were fantasy, but she had seen them realized in illustrations and on-screen, giving her a complete image of what that magic looked like. Fiction was just an embodiment of the creator's imagination, but in this world, a single manga volume featuring magic battles would reach bible status among magic users. Its story would explain the effect of a spell, what it looked like, how wide its range was, how fast it was, how much damage it did, and even what would happen to an enemy who was afflicted by it. All of this would be much more useful than a stiff, written explanation.

It was a pity that Mercedes only read what others considered to be drivel. Of course, she had at least glanced upon series that were popular among her peers, but that didn't make for a fleshed-out image.

In any case, she now understood why she had been able to create spells of her own so easily. For that reason, this class had been worthwhile.

Chapter 45: An Invitation

Invitations continued to come Mercedes's way. After the Thunders and Helixes, the next to approach her were the Thick Fogs.

She had been reviewing her notes between classes when she received summons from some upperclassmen. It was quite annoying, and frankly, she wanted them to leave her alone, but she got the sense that ignoring the call would only bring her more trouble later. Thus, she decided to refuse their offer now so they wouldn't bother her with any more invitations in the future.

They met in a classroom that was normally empty during this period. She entered, and immediately her eyes spotted two burly young men dressed in blue coats concealing their faces with sunglasses. Between them was a boy who appeared to be younger—about as old as Mercedes. He had glossy pink hair and effeminate features. Alongside his dainty build, he really did seem quite girly. In fact, it was quite possible he *was* a girl. Mercedes couldn't tell, quite honestly.

"Thank you for coming, Mercedes Grunewald."

Nope, definitely a guy. The deep voice revealed his gender. He wore the school uniform, a privilege only afforded to those with the highest grades at the school. From that, she had a decent idea of his intellect, though it was still possible he was an idiot who just happened to be good at studying.

"My name is Hartmann Hartmann. I'm the leader of the Thick Fogs, and the man who will one day rule the great western city of Nebelbank."

Perhaps it was a tad inappropriate given the occasion, but Mercedes couldn't help but appreciate how easy his name was to remember, his first and last name being the same. Still, the name Nebelbank rang a bell. Where had she heard it before?

"These two are my guards. They're the sons of the head of a

family that has long served the crown in the underworld, and a woman who manages a clandestine force that directly works for the crown as well. She just so happens to be my private tutor. Oh, but I'm not trying to threaten you. I'm simply explaining the situation you've currently found yourself in."

This boy was both talkative and prideful. Mercedes had already begun to think of this guy as a wimp, but she decided to keep those thoughts to herself and hear him out. Despite Hartmann's personal lack of abilities, he was certainly well-connected.

"I'll cut to the chase. Join our faction. You've got the qualifications."

"I refuse." She had been formally invited, so she turned them down. She wanted nothing to do with these make-believe factions the others were involved with; she just wanted to focus on her studies, hone her skills, and expand her knowledge. These guys weren't her enemies. That was Bernhard, the man who would try to prevent her from cutting ties with the family. Though now that she had set her sights on discovering the full truth of this world, she counted the dungeons and other dungeon masters among his ranks as well. Her eyes were focused far above these petty factions.

"Hmph... Well, you seem to be mistaken about something. This isn't an invitation. It's an order from the next head of House Hartmann."

The two blockheads stepped forward.

So, it really comes down to this, thought Mercedes. She silently clenched her fists in annoyance, but if they were going to attack her, she had to fight back. Though she hoped they were prepared to break a bone—or twenty.

However, as soon as the battle had begun, someone else rushed into the room. "Time out!" It was Hannah, and beside her, Bunbun holding a gun. Wait, where had he gotten a gun?

"Huh? Who would be foolish enough to stand in my—"

Annoyed, Hartmann had turned to face the intruder, but all blood rushed from his face before he could finish his sentence. A river of cold sweat formed on his back, and the question "Why?" was written all over his face. His two guards began to tremble too.

"M-Miss Hannah...?"

"Yup! It's Hannah, your private tutor."

"U-Um, why are you at the academy? A-Are you a temporary teacher?"

"I infiltrated as a student to protect the princess."

"Um... I don't think you're young enough to..."

"Hmm? What was that? I couldn't hear you."

Apparently, the private tutor Hartmann had referenced was Hannah. Mercedes had known that she was the leader of a clandestine force that directly served the crown, but now she had discovered that Hannah's husband led an underground force that served them as well. When they met, Hannah had said she was the daughter of a merchant. The Burger family must have been using that as a front.

"M-Mommy..."

"Wh-Why is mommy here...?"

However, the guards had said something even *more* shocking. Two huge guys saying "mommy"? Really?

Anyway, this meant that the two big blockheads were Hannah's sons. They looked nothing like her, and it boggled the mind how a woman who still appeared as a child could have given birth to two boys that huge. But given their reactions, that insane situation seemed to be reality. Quite honestly, Mercedes would have found it more believable had they been adopted.

"Well then, I think it's about time I heard an explanation. Since when did you fellows turn into villains who threaten others? I really am disappointed in you."

"Oh, n-no. I-It was just a figure of speech! W-We never *actually* planned on hurting her...right?" said Hartmann in a panic as he glanced at his guards. They gave vigorous nods of approval. Apparently, they were terrified of Hannah.

She responded with a grin, which only made her words sound even more frightening. "Pressuring someone to comply is a threat whether you planned to go through with it or not! We nobles have power and influence, but that only means we need to carefully consider how we use it. If you force others to kowtow to you for the

sake of your own goals, you're no better than a tyrant."

Not that it particularly mattered, but one such man—one who had forced women to bear his children for his own benefit—was Mercedes's very own father.

"I see you all are in need of some remedial lessons."

"Eeeek! Spare me! Please!"

"Your father himself asked me to discipline you should you do anything stupid here at the academy. Are you ready?"

"Heeeelp!"

"And you two as well. Your mommy can't overlook this."

"We're done for..."

"Yup..."

Hannah kept smiling as she grabbed the two blockheads by the collar. Bunbun grabbed Hartmann around the ankles and dragged him out of the room. Hannah followed after them, the three boys crying and begging for their lives the entire time.

"Oh, let me apologize for the trouble they've caused you, Mercy. I'll give them a good talking-to, okay? And there's something I want to discuss with you later, so be sure to make some time for me!" With those final words, Hannah left for good. Mercedes heard the sound of dragging bodies grow fainter and fainter.

"We're sorry!"

"We won't do it again!"

"Please forgive us!"

A few hours later, the three appeared before Mercedes sporting the sort of head lumps usually only seen in comics and cartoons. They apologized to her and vowed to never get in her way again.

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Felix had formed his faction during his third year at the academy. He was only thirteen at the time, but even at that young age, he considered winning the hunting tournament a necessary step toward earning his father's attention. He used the Grunewald name to gather allies, and eventually, those allies formed an entire faction.

They recruited the weak, those who lacked the strength to

achieve victory on their own. It was a narrow-minded strategy, the kind that subverted what was originally intended by the hunting festival. So, while no one said it aloud, they all knew this was the only path to victory.

No one knew who started the tradition, but now, the festival had completely morphed into a team competition. It was only natural. The descendants of influential men drew crowds around them, and the points those in their orbit scored became theirs. But even those in an influential noble's retinue knew that the few points they would be able to score alone weren't enough to draw attention. Thus, they focused their efforts on currying their leader's favor. It was a way for the weak to attain some means of making a living, predicated on abandoning all hopes of victory before the hunt had even begun.

However, weaklings comprised the majority of society. Gather a large group of people, and you would only be able to pluck out a few truly *strong* people. The weak would cozy up to these types, offering themselves as profit in return for protection. But that didn't mean they were cowards, as they were simply driven by the basic instinct of all living things to form a pack. Even wild animals would find a leader and serve him in exchange for protection.

A group of people would form a pack, and a group of packs would form a village, until finally, a group of villages would form a nation. The warring factions in the academy were just a microcosm of this real-world phenomenon. People would band together and form opposing cliques. It was just the way of the world, and it came with obvious advantages and gave the weak the means to survive.

The academy likely gave their tacit approval in order to judge the leadership skills of their students. Once they graduated, the descendants of influential nobles would surely stand above others, and these factions served as a perfect way to gain experience doing their future duties. By letting the students war among themselves, the faculty were giving them a taste of real noble society.

However, in this war, it was Felix who had been backed toward a cliff. He had gradually amassed allies, forming a force that none—including those in his grade—could ignore. He failed to clench victory during his third year, but during his fourth, he had placed second.

Now that he was in his fifth, victory seemed all but assured, and yet...the chaos that had occurred in the aftermath of last year's hunting festival had put his social position in jeopardy.

That birthday party was supposed to bring him glory. His father was going to recognize the fact that he far outclassed his siblings. But in the end, all he had managed to accomplish was bringing his freakish younger sister into the limelight. Her talent far surpassed his, and now he had completely lost his father's interest. All the nobles in attendance had been put in harm's way, and news of the incident spread like wildfire. Everyone was disappointed in him, and that even extended to the academy. His faction lost over half of its members.

All they cared about was their own self-interests. As soon as they realized they could no longer suckle on the sweet nectar of Felix's status, they left in droves. The majority of those who stayed behind were just craftily trying to prove their loyalty so Felix would feel even more indebted toward them, tacitly whispering, "I won't betray you no matter what, so I think I deserve some special attention."

However, they were ignorant of the Grunewalds' internal affairs. If they knew that his sister now monopolized all of Bernhard's attention, they'd abandon Felix in a heartbeat and cozy up to her instead.

This wasn't cowardice either, though. Only a strong leader could maintain a pack. Nobody needed to be led by the weak, and in nature, the pack would kill the leader and replace them if they proved incapable.

After class, Felix walked the hallway back to his dorm alone. He had no retinue. He was lonelier than anyone and pathetic beyond all belief.

That was exactly why someone used this opportunity. "You are Lord Felix Grunewald, yes? I have an offer I believe you'll be interested in." The man who addressed him wore a white cloak, and in his hand was a seal stone.

Was it a student in disguise? A spy from an opposing faction? Whatever the case, Felix knew he needed to keep his guard up.

What most drew his attention, however, was the stone the man

was flaunting. He had seen one before—it was the same kind Boris had used during that wretched party. A monster must have been sealed inside. Felix didn't know how strong it was, but he was well aware he couldn't handle it himself if it rivaled a Böse dämon.

"An offer? Which is?"

"I believe you recognize this stone. It's called a seal stone. It traps monsters inside, allowing people to carry them around."

"Are...you the one who offered Boris one?"

"Indeed, I am." The white cloak easily confessed. Perhaps he didn't feel the need to keep that secret, or maybe he simply felt Felix wasn't worth deceiving. In any case, Felix now realized how little the white cloak thought of him.

"And you want me to take it? Do you really think I'd be so foolish?"

Of course he wouldn't accept it. That was obvious—*too* obvious. Felix didn't know this man's identity or intentions, but he did know that the seal stone he'd given Boris was what had damaged his social standing so much. Why would he take it after all that?

However, the white cloak seemed to be expecting this answer. "But you'll need to take foolish risks if you want to rule House Grunewald one day."

Felix was silent.

"You're in great danger of losing your social status, and now you have a prodigious sister threatening you as well. But most damning of all, you are not Lord Bernhard's flesh and blood."

"You bastard!"

"Oh, excuse my words. But haven't you already begun to sense it? Your blond hair resembles neither your mother's nor your father's. So, where could those genes have possibly come from?"

Felix was at a loss for words. He didn't doubt his mother's fidelity, but his hair color still differed from both his parents'. Not to mention, they looked almost nothing alike. Felix and Bernhard shared no similarities whatsoever. Their hair color, facial features, temperaments, preferences...the difference between them was as vast as night and day.

For this reason, he envied his sister. She took after Bernhard so

strongly that it was evident at a mere glance, yet she had no attachment to either the Grunewald name or the Grunewald family. He was unbelievably jealous of her, so much so that no matter how unsightly he knew this emotion was, he just couldn't suppress it.

It was incredibly ironic. Felix's greatest wish was to win his father's approval and inherit the Grunewald name, but it was his sister, without an ounce of interest in earning their father's approval —the girl who was simply using him for her own benefit—who resembled him beyond all others and who was most fit for succeeding him.

"As things stand, you will never win his approval. You won't become his heir, but this might change your tragic predicament."

"Do you know what they call this? A fixed job."

"Indeed! But you have a reason to accept my help! Those around you are expecting you'll act out just like Boris did." The white cloak grinned behind his hood.

Now, Felix had confirmed what he had been expecting—this man wasn't looking for his consent. What mattered most to him was how those around Felix viewed the situation. He had plenty of reasons to act out. His sister was standing in his way, so it would be perfectly natural if it led to some rash actions.

"Ah, now I get it. What I plan to do is irrelevant to you. You just have to use this stone when it would be natural for me to do so. The monster sealed inside won't listen to me, will it? It'll rampage like the Böse dämon—perhaps even more—and create more victims. It would be a fiasco if one of the noble children here became its victim. Responsibility won't fall only on my shoulders, but my father's, and the whole world will know the son of Duke Grunewald was so jealous of his sister he went on a rampage and hurt innocent bystanders."

"My, now that's an interesting interpretation."

"My father's authority will be crippled, which is exactly what you're truly after. You used Boris to rile me up—or at least, create a situation where that would be the natural response—to then use me to drag my father's name through the mud. That's what you're after."

Felix realized their plan had always been to simply create

believable circumstances. The man before him now wasn't looking for consent, which likely meant he could use hypnosis magic. While it was considered a taboo that condemned any caster to death by execution, such a lightning spell existed. Felix already knew that dangerous magic existed out there that could directly interfere with your brain and change your thoughts and perceptions. However, the spell was quite complicated, and it required that the target be completely docile, making it rather impractical on the battlefield.

However, using magic to manipulate Felix into lashing out wouldn't stain Bernhard's name. Felix's actions would be so unnatural it would simply cause confusion, which was why his opponents had first goaded that buffoon Boris into ruining Felix's reputation, offering an explanation for Felix's future rampage. Not to mention, the hunting festival was the perfect time to hand over the seal stone. It would weaken Bernhard's influence.

If this was their plan, they must have been terrified of Bernhard. That much was clear.

"Well, you've almost got it. But if you're this sharp, I'm sure you know my victory is all but assured, yes?"

"I do. There's a conspicuous lack of students around us, and I'm sure you're strong enough to easily incapacitate me if you've approached me directly."

"Realizing your own helplessness is quite tragic, isn't it?" scoffed the white cloak. Even if their plan had been figured out, it mattered little. Their plot had already neared completion, and now, all they needed was for Felix to be their abiding puppet.

However, Felix seemed to pity them. "You really don't understand."

"Hmm?"

"You've completely misjudged Bernhard Grunewald."

Felix could never match Bernhard, but there was one thing he was confident of—that he knew Bernhard even better than Bernhard knew himself. He'd spent all these years watching him so intently in a bid for his affection, after all.

"He'll see through your plan. In a single generation, he earned the title of duke and ascended to the top of high society through his

own craftiness and strength. He's long figured out your ploy. He knows I'm your next target, and I'm sure he's already planned accordingly."

"You're bluffing. Bernhard hasn't approached you. He's sent no letters or warnings. Who would use their own son as bait without even making him aware he was in danger?"

"Bernhard would. Without even batting an eye."

Felix's words sent a shiver up the white cloak's back. *This is bad*. He didn't know exactly *what* was bad, but his numerous years living in the underworld were telling him he needed to leave. He jumped into the air as his instincts commanded, and a blade slashed right through the spot where he had just been standing.

It was Hannah's. She had swung her short sword before he could even sense her approach.

"When did you...?!"

"Hmm, I missed. You've got good reflexes, but..."

Her first attack whiffed, but that had just been a distraction. In a flash, the window in the hall shattered, and a kick landed right on the white cloak's face. It was Mercedes. She had been waiting at the other end of the hall, and she attacked at the speed of sound. The white cloak flew through the air, the shock waves sending even Felix tumbling. The backlash sent Mercedes backward as well, but she flipped in the air, kicked off the ceiling, and landed on the ground.

The white cloak was still flying. Bunbun was standing where he was set to land, holding a musket in his paws. He deftly shot the white cloak in the foot before jumping out of the line of fire, reloading his gun with one eye still trained on the white cloak. He landed a shot on his other foot, completely immobilizing him.

"Hannah. Why does the rabbit have a gun?"

"He seemed like he wanted one, so I let him have it. I'm glad he's such a skilled shot..."

"Mörder hases are rabbitlike monsters skilled with weaponry. When unarmed, their strength is negligible, but they exhibit incredible skill with blades, blunt weapons, bows, guns, and all other weapon types, making them a rare species able to drastically improve their rank just by holding a blade. As they are similar in

appearance to a weak rabbit species known as der laie hase—a species which has evolved solely to survive their fights—teams of Seekers have been annihilated by mörder hases in fields and upper dungeon levels where monsters are typically weak after mistaking them for der laie hases. They are a species that dislike closed spaces and have evolved to leave the dungeons, making registering them to a dungeon quite difficult. Their strength varies depending on weapons equipped, but they pose a greater threat than ashtars when wielding firearms."

Bunbun didn't let up during Zwölf's explanation. He reloaded his gun, aimed it at the white cloak, and fired. Now, he targeted his arms. In a flash, all of the white cloak's limbs were neutralized. Once Bunbun had clinched victory, he asked Hannah to light his cigar in celebration.

"I think I've made it clear that you can only smoke outside, Bunbun."

Unfortunately, rules were strict when it came to smoking. His ears drooped, expressing his disappointment.

Chapter 46: Case Closed?

Morning had fallen on the night of Felix's attack, and Mercedes, Sieglinde, Hannah, and Felix were gathered in Mercedes's room to discuss the incident. After incapacitating the white cloak, Hannah's men had taken him in for questioning, along with some other white cloaks they had found in the vicinity. As far as Hannah could tell, they'd rooted out all of these Beatrix assassins from the academy.

Of course, not all of them had been captured—most had retreated, so only the few left behind had been taken into custody.

"What intel did you get out of them, aunty?" asked Mercedes.

"We tried to wring out all the information we could, but it was just stuff we already knew. We *did* confirm that their goal was to capture Princess Sieglinde rather than assassinate her, but that's all in the past. Today's incident really was just a scheme to damage Bernhard's influence," answered Hannah with a scowl.

One of the white cloak prisoners had been a platoon commander, putting him above the rest. Mercedes and Hannah's surprise attack had left them outnumbered, but he'd still been deft enough to dodge Hannah's first attack. All of them—including Bernhard, who had used Felix as bait for this very purpose—had assumed he would be in possession of some important intel.

However, their efforts proved fruitless. All he could offer was information that they had long discovered.

"Should we assume he's been cut off?" asked Sieglinde.

"Yes. This plan to hurt Bernhard's reputation was supposed to be carried out alongside your kidnapping, Your Highness. Bernhard's words carry more weight than anyone's in the kingdom, so with you gone, they hoped to smear his name and allow Isaac to maintain his seat on the throne. Then, they would wait for the opportunity to hand you the royal sword and oust Isaac. In the end, you and the Beatrix Empire would have conspired to defeat a common enemy,

making you indebted to them and turning Orcus into a vassal state without any war. *That* was their plan," explained Hannah.

Bernhard had been the one who deduced this plot, but both Mercedes and Hannah were confident he was correct, and the intel they had squeezed out of their white cloak prisoners had confirmed that. But given Bernhard had already seen through their plan, it was more confirming the intel they already had rather than gathering intel.

Basically, the result of their interrogations had been zilch.

"Abducting Her Highness was essential to their plan, and with that having fallen through, their plan was done for. It's unfortunate, but we should assume that the white cloaks we captured today were sacrificed so the higher brass could run. The other spies have probably already made their escape."

"So we were too late."

"Too early, actually. You and Bernhard foiled their plot before they could make their move. They had no choice but to retreat," said Hannah, puffing her cheeks out in dissatisfaction.

Mercedes was none the wiser, but she had been a huge roadblock in Hannah's plans. Her entire existence was just too suspicious, and it threw Hannah for a loop. Not to mention that she'd exposed Isaac's crimes to all of high society before Hannah could get the chance to herself.

Yes, Mercedes was undoubtedly Orcus's hero, and she deserved praise for her accolades. Even Hannah knew it was wrong to harbor ill will just because Mercedes had beaten her to the punch, but that didn't change the fact that Mercedes's hasty actions had accelerated Hannah's plans, depriving her and her squad the opportunity to capture any of the white cloaks' leaders.

Still, Hannah had made some mistakes on her part. Had she contacted Bernhard and confirmed Mercedes's identity, she wouldn't have strayed so far off course. The two could have cooperated. But that was exactly why Hannah felt so conflicted about the matter.

"We sent a written complaint, but I'm sure they'll play dumb. We don't have any definitive evidence tying the Beatrix Empire to the incident."

"Wait. There has to be a mole in Class A considering the timing of their attack. Did we find out who that was?"

"We've already captured them. Her Highness used to have a retinue, remember? One of them was the mole, so we had them 'transfer schools,' but...it just seems too easy, like we've fallen for a trap."

There'd been an informant in Class A who had told the white cloaks when to attack. While Mercedes had been convinced it was Hannah, Hannah had been convinced of the opposite. In the end, however, it had been neither of them, but some inconspicuous, unrelated spy entirely. Well...of course a spy would be inconspicuous.

In any case, the two had looked for a spy and found one. They should be rejoicing! And it should have been safe to assume that all of their enemies were eliminated from the academy. But still, Hannah's instincts were telling her she couldn't relax just yet.

"It seems like a whole lot happened without me knowing..." said Felix. He was only present now because he'd gotten caught up in the previous incident, and his face was currently as white as a sheet. This was the first he was hearing any of this, and it made him question whether it was really okay for him to listen in on the conversation.

The royal sword is a dungeon? Hadn't heard that before.

Sieghart was Sieglinde and the body double was the person in question? That sentence hardly made any sense.

Aunt Hannah was disguising herself as an eleven-year-old student and attending classes? Isn't she way too old for that?

King Isaac and the entirety of the royal family were imposters? So the rumors were true.

My father and Mercedes already beat them to a pulp and executed them? What in the world is happening?

"It's nothing you need to worry about, Felix. This is a matter adults ought to handle, so I'm really sorry you ended up getting involved."

"B-But Mercedes is involved..."

"You probably shouldn't use Mercy as a basis for comparison."

Mercedes couldn't help but object to what Hannah had said.

In any case, Mercedes was just glad there were no more enemies lurking in the school. Now, she could focus on her studies, and in hindsight, having the royal family indebted to her would be a huge boon—they'd likely help her locate the other dungeons once she graduated. Of course, she planned on using the Gruenwald family to help her gather information on dungeons while she still could as well.

Still, she wasn't so conceited as to think she currently had the power to conquer all the dungeons in the world. First, she needed to build a foundation, and she was in no rush. Assuming a few years would give her what she needed to accomplish something that others had failed to do for centuries was foolish. Therefore, she'd spend her seven years at the academy building her strength as much as she could. Without that training, she likely couldn't even conquer Bernhard—much less every dungeon.

"Aunt Hannah, I have a question... Am I really not my father's son?"

"Is that what the white cloaks told you?"

"Yes...but I've also had those doubts myself. I'm nothing like him, and our hair and eyes are even different colors. I've been wondering...if I'm the product of my mother and another man."

"Your mother is Walburga, right? She doesn't seem like the type to cheat...although I can certainly understand having the desire to if you were married to a man like Bernhard."

So Felix's mother was named Walburga. If Mercedes remembered correctly, she was the pink-haired woman she saw at his birthday party. Her features were soft, but her name was strong—it even sounded like a plausible name for a human-controlled giant robot.

Super Beast Machine God Walburga, blasting off to defend Earth's future!

"I've never looked into it, not to mention I'd never investigate someone who isn't an enemy, not even my little brother's wife..." said Hannah, scowling with crossed arms.

Quite frankly, Felix being the result of an affair seemed likely to her. Bernhard wasn't one to show affection to his wife—he wouldn't

even pretend to be part of a loving family. He was in no position to complain about infidelity even if he made an attempt to provide for her. At the very least, Hannah could never tolerate having a husband like Bernhard. She'd have divorced him ages ago.

"It's not common for children to have a different hair color than either of their parents, but it's not impossible. You could have inherited it from your grandmother or grandfather."

"R-Really?"

"Yup! So don't worry!" Hannah grinned and gave Felix a reassuring pat on the back. With that, discussions were over, and everyone returned to their rooms.

Mercedes and Hannah were now alone. The latter looked up at the ceiling and said, "What should we do, Mercy? There's not a single person in Walburga's family who has blond hair!"

"Huh?"

She'd just revealed a bombshell. Had Felix overheard, he would have certainly fainted.

Chapter 47: The Man Who Failed to Make a Move

Hannah and Mercedes naturally began to avoid the subject of Felix's birth. Digging into the matter was unlikely to provide the results they wanted. Mercedes wanted Felix to be Bernhard's heir, and Hannah didn't want to back him into a corner. Thus, they kept the subject taboo.

The sun cycled, and eventually, the day of the hunting tournament had arrived. Most participants were in their third year or above, and all belonged to a faction—all but Mercedes and Sieglinde, that is.

In Sieglinde's case, a faction had naturally formed around her whether she wanted one or not. In that sense, it was hard to consider her a lone competitor. A group of fangirls had once been her lackeys, but it had transformed into a group of men, almost certainly due to her revealing her true gender. Being a royal princess's knight in the shining armor was the dream of boys everywhere.

"It is finally time for this year's hunting tournament."

The students were assembled in the large hall—the same one that had been used for the entrance ceremony—to listen to a speech from the principal. He was a bald old man with a tottering gait. His perpetual age had clearly come shockingly late. In his case, it was practically meaningless—perpetual age or none, he would live the rest of his life as an old man. It was quite pitiful, really.

"His name's Frederick Beckenbauer. We went to school together, but he didn't hit his perpetual age until his nineties..."

"I see fate is a cruel mistress."

The man was apparently the same age as Hannah. Mercedes couldn't help but feel sorry for him. One was an eternal legal loli

who had stopped aging before hitting her prime, while the other was an eternal old man. What even was the point of a perpetual age in his case? It almost seemed like the gods had punished him.

"But he's a really hard worker! He has zero talent, but he still made it all the way to that position."

"Zero talent? You really don't pull your punches."

The zero-talent eternal old man gave a tediously long speech at the podium, blabbering about when he was young—how he had been a handsome, spirited young man with luscious hair. Basically, his speech had nothing to do with the hunting tournament; he was just reminiscing on his glory days.

Finally, a faculty member succeeded at prying him away from the podium, and Gustav took over to explain the procedures. "Let me go over the rules of the tournament. Stay within the boundaries without exceeding the time limit, defeat monsters, and take the specified parts back to us. No complaining about how they're too heavy to carry. Prepare something in advance, like a backpack, a packmonster, et cetera. Your tactics will be judged based on what you use. Hunting past the time limit or stepping out of bounds will result in immediate disqualification. Fighting your fellow students is also prohibited. If we find you participating in such hostilities, you will be removed from the premises immediately."

The stage for the hunting tournament was the field they had once used in class, but the nearby forest and hill had been included in the area as well. Faculty riding flying monsters would be waiting on standby in the airspace, ready to intervene in case of emergency.

"That is all. Show us your strength!"

Gustav fired a musket into the air, marking the start of the tournament. At once, the students all dashed off and dispersed.

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After they were all gone, Gustav returned to the faculty room. During the tournament, teachers were tasked with observing the students and tallying points, but having left those duties to the rest of the staff, he could instead act freely. Though he wasn't playing

hooky, of course. Having free personnel that could mobilize at a moment's notice was essential in case of emergencies.

Gustav found a surprise guest in the room. She wasn't a teacher, but it was hard to truly consider her a student either. Perhaps that was true of her standing, but she had known Gustav for well over a century.

"Hannah..."

"Hi, Gustav."

Hannah was the same age as the hero Gustav Balt, and his upperclassman during their school days. Therefore, she knew the man well. He wasn't someone who would fail to notice the attacks on Sieglinde at the academy—neither their number nor the fact that enemy spies had infiltrated the school. Yet, there had been a shocking lack of reaction by him. He seemed to be playing dumb, purposefully limiting his actions to what his job as teacher permitted. Hannah found it exceedingly strange.

"So? Why didn't you do anything?"

Gustav remained silent.

"You know what I'm talking about, right?"

"I do." He seemed completely unperturbed by her question. He studied his surroundings, and oddly, there was no one around. It had to be Hannah's doing. "I knew that Beatrix was targeting the princess, and that they planned to turn Isaac into a villain and install her in his place as a puppet."

"Did you hear that directly?"

"I did. They came to me and demanded I not interfere."

Now things made sense. For Beatrix, Gustav was the biggest threat inside of the academy. Approaching him beforehand had been the right move. Beatrix knew he would retaliate against them in the event that their plot failed. But at the same time, it was strange that he agreed to their request.

"And so you didn't? Doesn't that sound strange?"

"I just didn't care much either way. If Beatrix had succeeded, we'd have become their vassal, but we'd also be under their shield of protection. Bernhard and those like him wouldn't fancy the idea of an equal adversary becoming an unequal ally, but for those like me

who only know how to fight, it doesn't change much. If anything, there's merit in increasing our numbers regardless of how it might damage our nation's standing."

"You didn't want to protect your student?"

"I would have killed them myself if they were really trying to assassinate her."

He spoke with great confidence, but he had the skills to back it up. That was exactly why Beatrix had opted to divulge their plans to him and get him out of the equation. From a broader viewpoint, being subsumed into the Beatrix Empire wasn't such a bad thing. Currently, the vampiric nations were divided and antagonistic, but if they managed to coalesce into a larger nation—no matter what form it took—it would increase their power and assure safety for all. While the nobles didn't stand to benefit much, it seemed like an excellent deal for the common people. They didn't care who ruled them as long as they could maintain a stable lifestyle.

"The beastmen learned from our war and are trying to unite their species. The birdmen are nearing that stage, and the elven have already reached it. We're the only ones lagging behind. I'm sure you're smart enough to realize that we'll stand no chance if a great war erupts between the Falsch."

Hannah couldn't immediately offer a rebuttal. There was logic to his words. Eighty years ago, the vampires went to war with the beastmen and only barely emerged victorious. But the war had been brutal, and the various nations of vampires failed to communicate and cooperate. Backstabbing and trickery were commonplace, and they only claimed victory because their opponents suffered from the same faults. But the beastmen had learned from their mistakes. If they fought again, the vampires would lose.

"So you think we should be ruled by Beatrix?"

"Like I said, I don't care. I'm not smart enough to figure that out. Whatever happens happens."

"It sounds like you're shirking responsibility."

"Creating more casualties due to some misguided sense of responsibility would be worse. I'm not as smart as you or Bernhard. An idiot like me calling the shots would get their allies killed. I

learned that plenty well eighty years ago."

Among the words left by the gods in their mythology, there is a quote that goes something like this: "A man who is clever and lazy qualifies for the highest leadership posts. Those who are clever and industrious make for skilled general staff, while those who are stupid and lazy can at the very least work as messengers or foot soldiers. But the stupid and industrious? They must be *shot*."

Yes, thinking for yourself and working toward your goals was a wonderful thing. But when the stupid are ignorant of their lack of wit and begin to operate according to their own vision, it only results in more bodies.

Gustav knew very well that he fell in the stupid category. "I can't live like you two. I'm not clever enough."

"Those hardly sound like the words of a hero."

"And why should I be one? I'm nothing more than a rusty sword people revere, a pile of scrap metal dyed in the blood of his fallen comrades."

He only needed to be a sword wielded by its master—the kingdom. A sword that thinks, moves, and slays by itself is fundamentally broken. That was the conclusion Gustav had reached, and accordingly, he had tossed thinking to the wind.

"Gustav, I didn't know you still..."

"This conversation is over. But don't worry. I'm not some servant of the empire, just a rusty sword no longer wielded by its master."

Swords can't think. They can only move when someone swings them. Thus, deciding what was right or wrong could be left to those above him. The clever would deduce the way to a bright future, and he couldn't let the judgments and sense of responsibility of an idiot like himself ruin that. Gustav knew that well—*painfully* well.

"I'll tell you one last thing. There are no longer any moles in *my* class." With that, he left the room.

Now Hannah was alone, and she glared at the door and bit her lip. "You're just a rusty sword? Then why'd you become a teacher? Aren't you trying to prevent others from repeating your mistakes?"

Unfortunately, those words couldn't reach Gustav.

Chapter 48: Independent, or Isolated?

The hunting tournament had already concluded by the time Hannah returned. The time limit wasn't up, no, but the tournament was definitely over. There were mountains of corpses, and the field had been reduced to a sea of blood.

Sitting atop that throne of corpses was a waning moon. Mercedes had exterminated every monster prepared for the event and claimed victory for herself *alone.*



She had thoroughly trounced the faction system—alongside the camaraderie of the students who formed those factions—and annihilated all the monsters in one fell swoop.

A car traversing down a road doesn't even notice the insects that happen to be in its path. It makes no distinction between the cockroach, the ant, or the praying mantis—it crushes them all without mercy.

Overcoming the Thunders, the Helixes, the Fresh Bloods, and the Heavy Fogs was mere child's play in Mercedes's eyes. They were all equally worthless, all too insignificant to enter her line of vision. That was the day the silly faction battles ended, all at the hands of the force known as "Mercedes."

I shouldn't have expected more from a school event. These monsters are weak.

They were chosen to match the level of the students. To Mercedes, they were too weak to even be considered foes. What drove her to try so hard wasn't the strength of the monsters, but simply her annoyance at having to sit through the factions' earlier invitations. She absolutely loathed that these fake wars had distracted her from her studies.

A nail that sticks out gets hammered back in.

Sabotage between factions was common, and it was natural to regard those who obstructed your plans with contempt. Unfortunately, Mercedes's talent was so phenomenal that it made her the target of everyone's scorn whether she was part of a faction or not.

Thus, she decided to shut them up by proving just how vast the gulf between them was in terms of strength.

Sure, nails sticking out get hammered back in, but what if the nail stuck too far out? What if it stretched far above your head, and even the trees towering toward the sky? Sure, they could try to hammer her back in, but they'd only end up hurting themselves.

That had been Mercedes's message to these sham factions. She didn't mean to criticise the tradition itself. Surely, it was good practice for eventual life in high society. She wouldn't stop it, and those who wanted to participate were free to do so. Her goal wasn't

the abolishment of the system, just to let everyone present know how far above them she was.

I get not wanting to join a faction, Mercy, but...you can't just do this! You can't!

Mercedes's methods inspired a bit of anxiety in Hannah. She shouldn't have done this. Yes, it would effectively remove her from the faction nonsense, but this just wasn't a good idea. She'd become isolated.

Vampires were devoted worshippers of strength. If you happened to possess that quality, others would bow at your feet. But now that Mercedes had proven her strength, the only ones left around her would be worshippers. She'd have no equals, no friends nor rivals. The path she had chosen led to only one outcome—a despot.

No single person had been the first to kneel; all of a sudden, almost every participant in the tournament was kowtowing before her. Some fancied themselves strategists, and others clowns. Some were pride incarnate, while others were ruffians whose only redeeming quality was their strength. But in Mercedes's eyes, every single one of them was equally worthless.

There was but one man who seemed to derive satisfaction from the spectacle that had unfolded—Bernhard. He sat in the audience looking incredibly smug.

The vampires bowing before Mercedes hadn't even realized what had come over them as she walked by, ignoring them. She dragged a sack behind her which was packed to the brim with parts recovered from the slain. She then presented it to the pale-faced teacher—practically forcing it upon them—and returned to the waiting room.

The other students moved in unison to make a path for her.

Her waning moon would never be full, for she willingly pushed away that which could wax it. She failed to recognize whether the masses that surrounded her were trash or the parts capable of fixing her. Therefore, she distanced herself from all of it, fighting regardless with everything she had to turn her moon from one that waned to one that waxed.

However, in her fight, she cut down everything, both the trash

and the parts she needed. It was a never-ending cycle of negativity. No one wanted to approach a girl like her, so her moon would never wax in full.

Even death couldn't fix stupidity. She didn't have the power alone to make herself whole. Despite knowing she was broken—that something was wrong with her—all she could do was press forward.

Indeed, she could never fix this on her own.

"Mercedes!"

However, there was someone who approached her. While everyone else cowered in fear, Sieglinde ignored them and ran right toward her. "You won! That was amazing."

"I did."

"You don't seem too happy, though. Come on, smile!"

"Well, I'm not very happy."

Mercedes's attitude was as cold as always, but that was just who she was. She never tried to be likeable—she was honest, in the absolute worst sense of the word. Thus, she treated everyone in this same emotionless manner.

Of course, there was variety. She didn't treat the common brats like she did Margaret and the rest of her family. But still, that was only because she felt that was "right." On the inside, she made no distinction. They were equally of little value.

As an elder sister, she had a *duty* to protect her younger siblings. A good person would *probably* treasure their sister. You *had* to treasure your family. All of those judgments were based simply on added value, and if that added value was reversed—if the common brats supposedly had more value than Margaret—she'd cast her aside immediately.

"You don't understand people's hearts." She had heard those words in her previous life time and time again.

"Anyway, do you really want to be with me right now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look at everyone. They're keeping their distance from me."

"Keeping their distance..." If anything, it was Mercedes who had purposefully done this out of annoyance. She knew that people tended to avoid nails that stuck too far out. Stand a head taller and

you'd be scorned, but soar straight into the sky and you'd be ignored. While people envied those who stood above them, there was no point envying a tree whose leaves reached the heavens. Who cares if someone laps you when it's not a fair race? Challenging them is pointless, and there's no shame in defeat. Ignoring them is the best course of action.

"I don't get it. You're amazing, plain and simple."

"*Really?*"

"At least, I think you are."

This conversation brought a smile to Hannah's lips. There were others who thought differently, it seemed.

Sieglinde's reaction was far from the norm. She was too pure and honest. You never came across vampires with hearts so unsullied.

However, in rare—exceedingly rare—cases, you'd find those of a slightly different breed. Sieglinde must have always heavily leaned on the side of compassion. In a sense, she already had one foot in the door to crazy. Her life had been stolen, and she had been raised to be the body double for the very people who'd taken it from her. Yet, she never directed any anger toward them. She pitied them, in fact.

She was a failure of a statesman, but the perfect poster child. And perhaps, she alone would remain at Mercedes's side.

I was scared Mercy would walk the same path as Bernhard, but maybe—just maybe—she won't. She probably just sees this as getting rid of everything preventing her from focusing on her studies, but kindness performed out of self-interest is still kindness. I'm sure that karma will come back to her, concluded Hannah with a grin. *Your daughter may not end up the way you did, Bernhard*.

Bernhard was unequivocally alone. Nobody truly understood him, and even Hannah had only been able to form any sort of relationship with him once she'd entered adulthood. But by the time she'd realized it, it had already been too late. His personality was warped beyond repair.

However, there was still time for Mercedes. She may have failed to realize it herself, but she undeniably had a friend.

Hannah glanced at Bernhard, who was wearing a frown that

shooed away those around him. Somehow, she felt maybe he was beginning to change too.

Chapter 49: The Mole

Time continued to flow, and the year's first semester was nearing its end. For students, that meant exams—both written and practical. Although her classmates were on edge, Mercedes was perfectly relaxed. As long as a student regularly reviewed the material and committed it to memory, they would receive good marks—that was just the nature of classes. It had nothing to do with intelligence. Any student who slacked off to play would receive poor marks, even if they were the brightest in the room, while a dedicated idiot could achieve high scores.

Of course, memorization abilities varied between individuals, and those who could commit information to memory faster and longer naturally rose to the top. This meant intelligence did have some correlation with test scores, but anyone who put in the effort could score high regardless. In the end, it was a matter of tenacity, which happened to be one of Mercedes's strong suits.

The practical exams were even less of an issue for Mercedes. In fact, she had been excused from them completely, as according to Gustav, she'd "hurt the proctor's pride," so he automatically passed her. It sounded like an awfully half-assed practice for an academy.

Still, she hadn't been totally exempted, and she was instead instructed to visit the principal's office while her classmates were taking their practical exams. Apparently, her skills so outpaced the other students that he wanted to talk with her directly about her future. Skipping grades was even on the table, but since Mercedes wanted to properly build a firm, sturdy base in her education, she had every intention of turning down that offer.

The principal's office was located on the highest floor of the academy. While frequented by faculty, it was rarely visited by students. Mercedes was the only one in the vicinity. A staff member was waiting outside the door to the office, and they ushered her in

as soon as they had spotted her.

"Excuse me."

"Oh, there you are! Take a seat," said the principal—Frederick, she believed—with a friendly grin. Mercedes couldn't help but think the grin seemed forced, the type that concealed ulterior motives and sought to manipulate others. In her previous life, she had seen that smile more than any other, and she despised it just as much.

Frederick took out Mercedes's report card, looked it over, and nodded in praise. "Your written and practical exam scores have far exceeded your classmates, and you claimed sole victory at the hunting tournament. You are one impressive girl! We have had countless invitations for you delivered to the academy, but we've gone ahead and weeded them down to only the best. You are certainly popular! But just to confirm, you do not want to see all of them, do you?"

"No. I don't plan on accepting any of them anyway."

"Ho! You are not the greedy type, I see. I assume you have set your sights on something far above these trivial invitations?"

"Far above..." Mercedes could neither deny nor confirm, as she lacked a clear picture of where she was headed herself. She couldn't tell him whether it was faraway or nearby, but her temporary goal was to conquer all the dungeons. In that sense, perhaps her sights were set "far above."

"You really are quite talented... You remind me of your father." Mercedes didn't miss the darkness that momentarily peeked through his words. On the surface, he was praising Bernhard, but it was clear he didn't think highly of her father. Perhaps something had happened between the two, or perhaps with Hannah, who had been his classmate.

"In any case, I summoned you here to discuss skipping some grades. I doubt anyone would object to you being moved to a senior class given your grades. You could even take the necessary tests now, if you would like."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm afraid I'll have to refuse. I came to this academy to build a solid foundation in my education. Skipping material to graduate early would run counter to that."

She wouldn’t be able to utilize the fundamentals unless she had a firm understanding of them; while she had her sights set far ahead, she was in no rush to get there. For now, the greatest threat was her father, but as long as she was still under his auspices, she had no need to prepare to fight him. It would be foolish to hasten that, since she could easily end up having to fight him in a body still not fully developed.

Quite frankly, her small frame put her at a disadvantage in battle. She hoped to at least reach a hundred and sixty centimeters in height, and her limbs could use a bit more growth as well. Considering that a showdown with Bernhard was inevitable, taking any great leap forward would be dangerous.

However, there was one fear she had in particular—the possibility that her perpetual age could come early. She could only bet on luck, but ideally, she wanted it to come when she was around twenty. Suffering the same fate as Hannah would be unbearable.

“You may say that, Miss Mercedes, but have you ever put yourself in your classmates’ shoes? They must be miserable. They will always be your inferior, never be able to hold a candle to you... Is that how you want to make them feel?”

“I don’t want to make them feel anything, neither bad *nor* good. No matter where I go, I’m sure I’ll find others who feel inferior to me anyway. Why should I care?”

Frederick was silent.

Mercedes didn’t care about others. They could envy her all they wanted, but if they dared to get in her way, she’d kick them down. She had come to this academy with a goal, and if she failed to accomplish it due to being overly considerate of her transient classmates, that would only be putting the cart before the horse. She’d happily revel in the spiteful gazes of her classmates for these seven years. In fact, everyone in the world could hate her for all she cared.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to sound so forceful. I do hope you forgive me.”

“Sure.”

He hadn’t said anything that required forgiveness. As a teacher,

he had simply made the choice to sacrifice one part to prioritize the whole. His phrasing subjectively sounded irrational, but his judgments were objectively sound. Organisms naturally tried to discard what was aberrant or hard to understand. Thus, she didn't think anything of the principal's statement. Instead, she merely acknowledged that she was someone he was trying to discard.

"Is that all you needed?"

"Yes. I will send the invitations to you promptly. You are now free to go."

"Goodbye, then." After a brief bow, Mercedes exited the room.

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"She truly does resemble her father," muttered Frederick once he was alone. His tone was far from positive. Instead, he spoke in the croaked voice of someone reminiscing on their rage.

He had been around Grunewalds ever since he was young. He and Hannah had been classmates, but he could never reach the same heights as her, and he envied her youth. Bernhard was the son of a baron just like Frederick, but he had climbed to the echelons of nobility in a flash. During the war, Frederick had fervently gathered his own accolades, but they were all overshadowed by Bernhard's.

And yet, he had worked feverishly. He lacked talent, a strong build, and even a reasonable perpetual age, but he continued to strive forward with his talentless, below-average body until he had gained the title of Edelrot Academy's principal.

A genius would never understand how hard he had worked, nor how desperately he clung to his title. But at the rate things were going, he would soon lose not just that title, but the entire academy. If they went to war with the Beatrix Empire—or if a war broke out between the Falsch—Orcus would be trampled. The position he had attained after a lifelong struggle—the geniuses be damned—would be a casualty in a war that could not be more pointless.

Thus, Frederick did what was needed to protect himself, but once again, the Grunewalds had stood in his way. They had thwarted him again! Who cares about noble honor when it comes to protecting

your country? Frederick didn't mind being subjugated if it was for that purpose. Queen Beatrix would simply assume the throne, and if she continued to protect the people of Orcus, so what? Being a vassal state was fine! Especially if it meant being protected by an illustrious queen who wielded the power of two royal weapons. Why didn't the others see that?

Frederick wasn't wrong. Everyone else was.

He *knew* he was right.

"This is my academy... My title... My everything..."

Why not offer it all to a queen if it meant protection?

The mad old man slowly—but belatedly—began his rampage.

Chapter 50: The Issue of Inheritance

At Edelrot Academy, there was a long break at the end of each semester. Just twice a year, the students were given sixteen days off before they once again had to resume their studies. Mercedes saw little point in going home and instead planned on staying at the academy to study, but since the Grunewalds had sent a carriage to collect her, she had no choice but to do so.

Of course, she could have ignored it, but Hannah had encouraged her to return, telling her it would bring shame to Felix if he showed up alone. According to him, this was the first time a carriage had ever been sent to collect them, which could only mean the carriage was sent specifically for Mercedes. If Felix used it to return without her, it would bring much more than just shame.

"Welcome home, big sister!" As soon as Mercedes returned, Margaret ran up to her and jumped into her arms.

Mercedes kindly accepted her greeting with a smile. Given her usual steely, emotionless countenance, it was perhaps easy to assume that Mercedes couldn't smile, but that would be false. Her facial muscles worked perfectly fine. If she wanted, she could smile or even frown. Given that her affectionate little sister had jumped into her arms in an expression of her love, greeting her warmly was the correct response, as was showing a smile.

"Oh, Mer-ce-des!" Now, it was Monika who rushed her.

Mercedes took a moment to ponder. It was probably correct to accept her advances as well, but considering she hadn't done anything to earn Monika's favor, she found her affection unsettling.

So, she decided to dodge her approach.

"Blegh!" Monika's hug met thin air, and the momentum sent her face-planting into the floor. She even slid across it, her face taking

the brunt of that force. She lay there for a while, but then stood up as if that little accident had never happened, lifted her skirt into a curtsy, and politely greeted her. “Welcome home, Mercedes.”

“Y-Yeah. I’m back.” As usual, Mercedes had no idea what was going on in Monika’s head.

Mercedes set Margaret down and walked over to her mother. Her complexion was much less pale than it used to be, and her skin almost seemed to be glowing. She had always been a beautiful woman, but a proper diet had made her absolutely eye-catching. “Welcome home, Mercy! I want to hear all about your time at school!”

“Sure, mother.” Her words were cold, but Lydia was used to her daughter’s temperament. Therefore, she didn’t berate her daughter, but simply greeted her with a smile.

The pink-haired woman standing beside her wrapped Felix up in a hug. “Welcome home, my dear Felix! Are you hurt? No one bullied you, did they?”

“G-Greetings, mother.”

The woman was Felix’s mother. *What was her name again? Oh, that’s right! Mobile Suit Walburga.* Never mind, it was Walburga Grunewald, the woman suspected of infidelity. She glared at Mercedes before dragging Felix away. She was an awfully touchy and affectionate mother.

Seeing them side by side was enough for Mercedes to tell that she and Felix really did resemble each other. They had similar facial features, enough so that it was clear they were mother and child despite their differing hair color. On the other hand, Felix really didn’t have any of Bernhard’s features, both looks-wise and personality-wise.

However, to make that observation, it was necessary to state that neither Margaret nor Monika resembled Bernhard in the slightest either. Perhaps he had weak genes. You could see traces of him in Boris’s facial features and aggressiveness, and as for his other son... His other son? There definitely was one more, but what was his name again? Gott-something? In any case, he lacked presence. If Mercedes couldn’t remember his name, it probably didn’t matter. She

gave up on trying to remember.

***

The vampiric nobility typically consumed three meals a day. The first was supper, but since vampires awoke once the sun had set, this corresponded to breakfast of other Falsch species. Next was the midnight meal, which was consumed in the middle of the night when vampires were most active. To other Falsch, this would correspond to lunch. Finally, dinner was eaten at the end of the night, usually near dawn. Falsch had a similar meal that shared the same name.

Just as the diurnal Falsch had no midnight meal, nocturnal vampires had no breakfast, as their early morning corresponded to late at night for the other Falsch species.

The entire Grunewald family shared dinner that night, which was an exceedingly rare occurrence. There was Bernhard, his legal wife Walburga, and his four concubines, which included Lydia. All five children were present as well—Felix, Mercedes, Monika, Margaret, and Gottfried.

The first course served was sausages, which was typical. Once bitten into, they overflowed with juices carrying not only the umami flavor of meat, but the aroma of herbs and spices. They assaulted the taste buds, but the subtle taste of the accompanying kartoffelsalat (potato salad) was the perfect remedy for the overworked tongue.

The next course was spanferkel—in this case, a whole lavishly roasted baby orc. Orcs weren't a particularly rare monster, but babies couldn't be found in dungeons, as only those which had overflowed and migrated to land procreated. Thus, baby orc was a pricey delicacy that common folk would never be able to consume themselves.

The soft orc meat was cut into smaller pieces and coated with an acidic sauce. While the skin was crispy, the inside melted off the bone. Flavor-wise, it had a subtle taste, but the thick sauce complimented it beautifully.

The bread that was served as a side was also soft with a subtle

sweetness, and the kartoffelsuppe (potato soup) was full of chopped onions and bacon. While simple, its flavor was rich. The two made for an excellent pair, and dipping the bread into the soup allowed for another way of enjoying these delicacies.

All of these had been Shufu's creations, and such advanced cuisine could hardly be enjoyed anywhere in vampiric nations, even among the nobility. Mercedes couldn't help but think that the demon didn't quite have his priorities straight, but she was pleased to have him regardless.

Incidentally, Shufu's skills had led Mercedes to wonder whether all dungeon monsters could secretly cook, and she had accordingly instructed Benkei to try his hand at it himself. The result was an indescribable blob of black ashes. Shufu really was special.

Since she couldn't eat the black ashes herself, she gave them to a jelly slime.

"By the way, dear, when are you going to announce Felix as your heir?"

"We are in the middle of a meal."

"Don't change the subject! We already have everyone gathered here, so I think it's about time you publicly acknowledged that your heir will be Felix!"

Lady Walburga had begun to scream and shout while Mercedes was focused on her meal. Bernhard had yet to announce Felix as his heir, which upset her as his wife. Still, bringing up the subject now suggested tactlessness, selfishness...or perhaps desperation.

The rest of the ladies—besides Lydia—glared at Walburga with contempt.

"You agreed yourself once that Felix would be your heir!"

"Only because I had no other candidates. The situation has changed."

"What's changed?! He has the skills and education to be your heir! His grades are excellent! Who else could you possibly choose?!"

Among nobles, the firstborn son typically inherited the father's title. This rule wasn't set in stone, and sometimes, the second- or thirdborn would become the heir—but only if the firstborn died or had tarnished his reputation beyond repair. Household troubles

afflicted every family, and there were times when ambitious vassals or relatives would make a young boy the family head to steal the seat of heir for themselves.

A firstborn son dying in "an unfortunate accident" was a common occurrence in this world. Other sons could serve as a noble's heir, and if a man wasn't fortunate enough to be blessed with a son, he'd take in a son-in-law to become the heir instead. Even the exceptions to the rule didn't allow a woman to be heir.

The most unfortunate of those gathered was undoubtedly Gottfried, who had already been taken out of the running despite being a son. However, he himself was so focused on shoveling down his food that the conversation hadn't even made it to his ears.

"Hmph. And what does everyone else have to say on the matter?"

"I think Lady Walburga is right. It would be one thing if this family had no sons, but Felix is an excellent firstborn with the necessary skills. He should be your heir. High society values customs and traditions, and needlessly breaking that tradition would only be a stain on our household. We must adhere to those rules," answered Mercedes. She supported Walburga, using this opportunity to try to thrust Felix into the seat of heir. Being a woman—someone who could not traditionally inherit a noble title—was a handicap Mercedes was thankful for. She had no choice but to argue that tradition could not be broken. Even the arrogant, evil emperor of a famous novel had strictly adhered to it.

"Well, if that's what Mercy thinks, then I'm with her. Can't you make Felix heir? Mercy will be fine even without your title. Oh! But if that happens, I guess Shufu will be leaving with her..." Lydia agreed with making Felix heir, though not out of any deep conviction of her own, but the passive idea that if that was what her daughter thought, why think differently?

However, others—specifically, Gottfried's mother—begged to differ, resulting in the rise of two factions: one supporting Felix and one opposing him. The only problem was that Mercedes, his only rival, was a member of the former.

Chapter 51: Practis Dungeon

Having grown annoyed at the dirty nature of high society she had to deal with both at home and the academy, Mercedes decided to pay a visit to somewhere she hadn't set foot for a long while—the Seekers' Guild.

The moment she walked inside, she was met with the savage glares of ruffians. Seekers saw each other as rivals, and she enjoyed this tense atmosphere, filled with the tacit message that none of them trusted anyone but themselves. Unlike the vile nobles who would approach with a smile and a friendly facade, the people here wore their hostility on their sleeves. The filth she was constantly around had led to some built-up stress in her, and thus, she had decided to enter the dungeons partly as a method of catharsis.

"Oh my! It's been such a long time, hun." The receptionist was the same friendly, effeminate man as always. His bald head was now adorned with a mohawk, and the pattern of the stitch marks on his face had changed as well. Apparently, trends had shifted, but Mercedes still didn't understand his sense of fashion.

"Oh, that's right! Why don't you update your guild card, hun? It's been a while."

"Sure."

The receptionist offered her a new card, which she exchanged for her old one. Rank could be updated on any card, but doing so for stats required issuing a new one, which helped prevent falsification. A long time ago, simply smearing a new drop of blood on an already issued card would update the stats displayed, but Seekers had started using the blood of people stronger than themselves to fake their stats. To combat this, the guild began to use indelible ink on their cards and made it so they would only react to blood once. All of this technology had been recovered from a dungeon by the legendary Seeker Isha Tense.

Mercedes cut her finger and dropped some blood onto the card. Immediately, her updated stats were displayed.

```
[Mercedes Calvert]
Seeker Rank: C
Primary Affinity: Ground
Secondary Affinity: Wind
Arm Strength: Level 5
Leg Strength: Level 5
Endurance: Level 5
Stamina: Level 5
Magic: Level 3
Agility: Level 5
Regeneration: Level 6
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"Wow, you even went up a level..." remarked the receptionist, looking awfully pale. But to Mercedes, that didn't seem like that much of an improvement. If anything, she was shocked she hadn't made more progress considering she had a magic stone imbued with gravity magic acting on her at all times. She was weight training twenty-four seven. Shouldn't it have had more of an effect?

Everyone knew that astronauts lost muscle and bone mass while in space, as the lack of gravity meant less of a burden on the body. *Use it or lose it* was an axiom that applied to all beings, but that also meant that all that you needed to do to make your muscles stronger was use them. An astronaut who had returned to Earth could recover the muscle and bone mass lost after some physical therapy, and the constant gravitational pressure she was putting on herself put her in the same position as this hypothetical astronaut.

However, that still didn't mean her strength would grow endlessly. Once she had recovered and grown accustomed to her new gravitational norm, it wouldn't make her stronger, just like living one's daily life could only keep muscles, not build them, as the body would decide it had developed enough.

Muscles were a fickle thing—they didn't try to become as strong as possible, but as weak as possible while still being effective. Creatures that lived in the dark would develop stronger senses of smell and hearing, but they would eventually lose their sense of sight over years of evolution. If you lived somewhere with less gravity, your bone and muscle mass would deplete to match the demands of that environment, but if you went somewhere with more gravity, they would quickly increase according to the demands of that one.

Mercedes's body had strengthened to meet the demands of her current gravitational pull, which meant it was time she increased that pull.

She headed for the job board and studied it. Of course—and obviously—all requests for Stark Dungeon had disappeared. Now, all jobs were for Practis Dungeon.

She randomly picked a request to hunt some orcs and took it to the reception desk. "I'll take this one."

"Orcs, huh? I'm sure you'll have no problems, but would you like to hear about orcs anyways?"

"Sure."

"Right, then! Orcs are roughly 1.5 meters tall, though the big ones can reach heights of up to two meters. They're two-legged pigs with tons of fat, and they're resistant to both fire and ice magic. Since they're so strong, the elven apparently have a hard time dealing with them. But for us vampires, they're just dumb hunks of meat."

In most fantasy settings, orcs were muscle-brained simpletons who were weak to magic, but they apparently had magic resistance in this world. On the other hand, they were slow, and their flesh was soft, making them extremely weak to physical attacks from blades.

Basically, they were nothing Mercedes had to fear.

"Oh, and Practis Dungeon is a bit special, hun! It's got twenty-five floors, but there's no treasure at the bottom. Just a dead end."

"A dead end?"

"Yup. But there's a boss with some fancy armor and weapons. That's the treasure, in a sense."

This struck Mercedes as awfully strange. It made no sense for a dungeon to lead to a dead end; as a dungeon master herself, she knew this for certain. All dungeons ended in two doors, one of which led to a trial. If there really were no doors, then Practis Dungeon had to be a quasi dungeon, not a real one.

I'll have to check it out for myself.

Mercedes decided to take a detour to the lowest floor while she completed this job. Thankfully, the dungeon had been around long enough to be fully mapped. She purchased one and headed straight to her destination.

***

Practis Dungeon was located just twenty kilometers from the city of Blut. All the monsters inside were weak, but that only made it all the more useful; every single one dropped materials that could be used for equipment, food, or clothing. It was commonly said that every monster in the dungeon had value, and everyone knew that bringing any monster home could lead to money in your pocket.

Thus, many Seekers delved into Practis Dungeon, and some Seekers and merchants even came from out of town to reap the dungeon's benefits. Eighty years ago, when the war with the beastmen had ended and Bernhard became the lord of this land, the dungeon had appeared, and it had supported Blut's economy ever since. In fact, it was single-handedly responsible for Blut's development.

So, what Mercedes stepped foot into was a dungeon that seemed awfully convenient—*too* convenient. Benkei and Kuro had long been members of her retinue, but she had brought Shufu with her today as well. She also had summoned a jelly slime from her dungeon to lead the way. His job was to trigger any traps. Chirpy didn't serve much use in the tight quarters of dungeons, so he had stayed behind. She hadn't brought the krylia—her packmonster—with her either. As she could store whatever she needed in her dungeon, pack animals were useless.

"It has been quite a while since my last expedition," remarked

Benkei. He was on full alert, and his armor clanked with every step. Ever since Mercedes had started attending Edelrot, she'd had little opportunity to use him.

"I hope we find some good ingredients." All jokes about Shufu had outlived their humor. In both his hands were kitchen knives. He was in real need of some direction.

"Jiggle jiggle! I'm a no-good jelly slime!"

"All right. Let's get going."

"Sure thing!" said the jelly slime. He took the lead to examine any traps that may have been lying in wait for them.



Of course, a jelly slime had no way of detecting any traps, nor dismantling them. However, he could only die if his core was destroyed, making him awfully resilient to almost any trap. His job was to be their victim in place of Mercedes and the others. Thus, the questionably swole jelly slime moved at a brusque pace until they encountered their first monster, which resembled a sheep.

It was of a species known as weich schaf, known for their soft, luxurious wool. Its skin was often used to make parchment as well, and while its meat lacked any strong flavor, the offal was soft and known as a delicacy. They were a very useful and delicious species of monster.

"Hwah!" One swing from the swole arm of the jelly slime and the sheep had been defeated. It couldn't even withstand one hit.

Mercedes had experienced plenty of battles with jelly slimes, and she never remembered them being particularly challenging. While they had stamina and wouldn't die unless their core was destroyed, they lacked physical power. Not that she had ever been on the brunt end of any of their attacks herself.

Naturally, Shufu was the first to approach the sheep's corpse. With impeccable knife skills, he began draining the blood from the carcass right then and there.

"Jiggle jiggle! We won, master!"

"This is excellent meat. It's soft, and it doesn't stink. It must have eaten well ever since it was a lamb."

Juxtaposed against the jelly slime in a proud victory pose was Shufu, who was breaking down a carcass in rapture. It was a scene so chaotic, Mercedes was at a loss for words.

Chapter 52: The Dungeon Master

"Grrrrrr, here's a tip! You can steal equipment from dungeon monsters! It's a great option if you don't have the funds to buy your own! But I didn't need to tell you that! Prepare to die!"

"Jiggle jiggle!"

One blow from the jelly slime was enough to send the monster—which looked like a two-legged rat—flying. It was no match for the glob of jelly; none of the monsters here were.

This is too easy.

As Mercedes made her way deeper into the dungeon, she grew increasingly bewildered by how easy it all was. She had only summoned the jelly slime to trigger traps, and quite honestly, it was a replaceable pawn. Yet it was still alive and kicking, leading the party with gumption as it knocked down every monster in its path.

Of course, they did encounter some traps, but nothing life-threatening—mere scratches at most. Honestly, Mercedes found it odd that there were traps in Practis Dungeon in the first place. Considering how often Seekers entered it, they should have all been disarmed, destroyed, or triggered by now. The only possible explanation was that someone was resetting them.

"Zwölf, do dungeons automatically set traps the same way they spawn monsters?"

"No, master. Dungeon wardens like myself replenish monsters and other installations when they are destroyed and produce excess monsters when enough points have been collected. However, we cannot install things which were not there in the first place. Our job is to simply replenish—to maintain the normal state of the dungeon."

"Next question, then. You'd replenish a trap as long as it was already there, right?"

"Yes, I would."

"Then there must have been a dungeon master who set

these...or maybe, they're still around"

"Indeed."

There was one thing present in Practis Dungeon that couldn't be found in Stark Dungeon—traps. That was likely because Stark Dungeon had never had an owner before. Nobody had laid any traps, and Mercedes had obtained the dungeon with its default settings.

However, the settings of Practis Dungeon were no longer the default. Clearly, a dungeon master had tinkered with them. Now, the only question was whether said dungeon master had already perished—thus rereleasing the dungeon into the wild—or if he was still out there.

Not to mention how easy this is. We've already made it past the tenth floor, but we haven't encountered any monster stronger than a jelly slime. Sure, they occasionally appear in groups, but none are very tough on their own.

Of course, they hadn't made it this far relying on the jelly slime alone. Benkei had stepped in whenever they encountered monster swarms, and had the jelly slime challenged this dungeon on his own, he would have been long gone by now.

Still, in a one-on-one fight, no monster could hold a candle to the glob of jelly. Sure, it was stronger than the average jelly slime due to its training, but it was far from powerful. The monsters in this dungeon were just incredibly weak.

"Remember, monsters you've defeated in dungeons disappear shortly, but not if you break them down and take them with you! That's why I'll break you down and make you mine!"

"Thanks for the advice!"

This monster was a two-legged lizard. Once again, it proved no match for the jelly slime, and after one blow, the fight was over.

Of course, Shufu quickly broke down its carcass, just as he had done with all the other monsters they had defeated.

These monsters really were suspiciously weak. Mercedes's party made it to the deepest floors of the dungeon without even breaking a sweat. In fact, things were so easy, it seemed almost too good to be true.

“Benkei, Shufu. What do you make of this dungeon?” asked Mercedes, assuming they’d offer more meaningful observations than her, being monsters who came from the dungeons themselves.

“This place poses no challenge. The monsters here are weak and insignificant.”

“I disagree, master. This dungeon is wonderful. Everything here is useful, and not just the monsters. Even the wild grasses that grow here can—”

“That is only from your perspective, Shufu. Our master wanted to know whether—”

“Wait, Benkei.”

Shufu was about to go on another peculiar rant, but Benkei stepped in to stop him, clearly annoyed. However, there was something in Shufu’s words that had caught Mercedes’s attention. What he’d pointed out sounded quite important.

“Continue, Shufu.”

“Of course. Let’s take those mushrooms, for example. They’re edible, and the grass growing in the cracks in those rocks can be used as medicinal herbs. All the monsters we’ve encountered provide either high-quality meat or other useful resources. Everything here can be sold.”

“I see.” Mercedes brought a hand to her chin and began to ponder. After coming so far, it was now painfully obvious what the point of this dungeon was. It had been purposefully filled with weak but valuable monsters that were practically begging to be killed.

This dungeon had to have a master. Someone had already conquered it.

Could it belong to the royal family...? No, they would have announced it. The person who most benefits from this place is him*... He may be even more dangerous than I thought.*

The man who popped into Mercedes’s mind was none other than her father, whom she would one day need to battle. If he was the master of this dungeon, that wasn’t good news, as it would mean her battle with him would be a fight between two dungeon masters. Having an army of her own would no longer be an advantage—but even more consequently, their fight would morph into a full-blown

war. Who knew how much destruction they would leave in their wake?

"I'll give you some advice to take into the afterlife! If you're in total darkness, then monsters can't see you either! They can only locate you using their senses of smell and sound! If you try to trick us, we won't be able to find you! Now, let me send you to hell!"

"I'm a monster too! I already know that!"

This monster resembled a wooden doll, and once again, it was no match for the jelly slime. After just three punches, it was dead.

"Shufu, can you use this monster too?"

"It's composed of excellent wood, meaning it makes excellent furniture."

"I see."

"Leaving nothing to be desired" was the perfect phrase to describe this dungeon. It was convenient to the point of raising eyebrows. The difficulty level had clearly been purposefully lowered in order to foster Blut's development, so Mercedes could understand why it drew merchants and Seekers from all over. Anybody would want to hunt on such fertile ground. You could feed yourself with minimal work, and once the hunted monsters were sold and circulated through the market, they'd bring even more wealth. The abundance of foodstuffs prevented starvation, and as the population increased, so did the number of workers.

During the Meiji era, Japan's motto had been *fukoku kyōhei* —"enrich the country, strengthen the military"—and it aptly described the effect Practis Dungeon had. An abundance of food enriched the people, and enriched people could be drafted as soldiers. Not to mention, many of those soldiers had developed combat experience thanks to this dungeon, putting them a class above the simple foot soldier.

What truly made this dungeon special was that it didn't just provide for the people, it forced the people to provide for themselves. Had the master of this dungeon simply provided them with their needs up front, they would rot, as was the nature of those blessed with abundance. However, this method prevented that—and even further developed the masses as they worked to find riches of

their own.

The more one delved into the dungeons, the more money they made, and to minimize the risk associated with Seeker work, they trained. Then, they continued regularly going into dungeons, recovering countless materials and contributing to the economy. It meant more food, which meant a healthier population, which meant more people heading into the dungeons. For a ruler, this was a much more lucrative method than monopolizing the dungeon and foolishly turning it into a family treasure like the royal sword.

Ultimately, this hardened, developed city would prove a convenient pawn for none other than Bernhard. He was willing to enrich his people, provide them with food, and protect them—as long as it all came back to benefit him in the end.

He's already planning for the next war.

This dungeon was also a warning. Given how blatantly convenient it was for Bernhard, anyone with a decent head on their shoulders would begin to suspect that he was a dungeon master, and those fears would be enough to protect him from most invasions. They kept the Beatrix Empire at bay, and of course, the royal family couldn't simply ask Bernhard if he had a dungeon either. If he said yes, it would constitute a threat to their authority. That was why the previous king had granted him the title of duke; it was an attempt to keep Bernhard as an ally rather than force him to reveal the truth. In the eyes of both his friends and foes, the question of how he'd generated his fortune was a Pandora's box that had to remain sealed.

Though Sieglinde seemed like the type who might ask him up front—a fear-inducing prospect given she was a member of the royal family herself.

Of course, however, all of this was predicated on the assumption that Bernhard was the master of this dungeon. And if that was true...then Mercedes needed to power up her own dungeon if she wanted to stand a chance against him. Once again, she was awestruck by her nemesis's might.

Afterwards, Mercedes's party captured some orcs and made their

way to the fifteenth floor. There was no door in sight, just as she had been told. Instead, there was a three-meter-tall lizard—ahem, *dragon* covered in green scales. It stood on its hind legs, arching its back. Mercedes couldn't help but think it was awfully tiny for a dragon.

"Lesser dragons are a weaker species of dragon, but their jaws and fangs are so strong they can bite through large trees, and their claws can rend an orc in half. The scales that cover their body are tough enough to repel iron blades, and the fire they breathe can reach temperatures up to a thousand degrees. They certainly are a tough opponent for any beginner," reported Zwölf.

"Hmm... Their name doesn't sound like it comes from the language used here in Orcus."

"I would assume the Falsch who discovered and named the species was not a vampire."

Mercedes had heard of lesser dragons before, as the boots she currently wore had been made from their hide. However, "lesser dragon" didn't match the language used in Orcus. Names tended to vary by country; while cat was "neko" in Japanese, it was "gatta" or "gatto" in Italian. However, it worked slightly differently in this world. Names—at least, those of animals and other organisms—were the same across all languages once one had been decided upon. Of course, each country had a different word for things like "desk" or "chair," but monsters usually had only one name. Now that they were on the subject, "no-good jelly slimes" most likely came from a foreign language as well.

As Mercedes was discussing this random, irrelevant knowledge with Zwölf, though, the fight had already begun. The jelly slime had gotten into a boxing match with the lesser dragon, but the latter had a clear advantage. Given the slime's fluidity, physical attacks were ineffective, but fire was a different story entirely.

Slimes were weak to fire. It was just common knowledge.

"Eeeek! I'm an on-fire jelly slime!"

"You've done well enough. Return."

With the slime on the brink of death, Mercedes returned it to the master key, and Kuro jumped forward to take his place. He bit and

tore at the lesser dragon's feet with blinding speed, bringing it to the ground. Then, Benkei followed up, swinging down his giant swords to cut off the dragon's tail.

The dragon managed to return to its feet, but that was when Mercedes jumped into the fray. She borrowed that momentum to swing down her Blut Eisen—holding it with just one hand—but the moment it lodged itself into the dragon's neck, it stopped.

He's tough, but...

If a one-handed strike wasn't enough, she just needed to use both. She quickly grabbed onto the handle and swung with all her might, cutting off the dragon's head. It collapsed on the floor, blood spurting from its wound.

Shufu immediately rushed to the scene. He started breaking down the carcass and draining the blood. Wasn't he supposed to be here to fight?

"Yup, no door. It's completely hidden away."

Either way, Mercedes had already known this. It was almost certainly on a lower floor which the dungeon's expanded functionality had concealed—or really, down some stairs that the dungeon master had removed. There was a chance she could find it by blowing through the floor to try to get to the lower levels, but there definitely wouldn't be a black door anyways.

"Master. The dragon was wearing an odd wristband."

Just as Mercedes was getting ready to leave, Shufu brought her a bracelet. Apparently, even dragons wore equipment in this world. She recalled the receptionist saying that the boss of this dungeon dropped some fancy spoils.

"Hmm. It appears to make fire magic more effective," observed Zwölf.

"Fire magic? Then it's useless, at least for me."

Mercedes's affinities were wind and earth, so she unfortunately couldn't use the treasure herself, but some of the monsters in her dungeon had fire affinities. Maybe she could equip it to one of them.

Having decided it had at least some value, she stored it away in her dungeon.

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Edelrot Academy held an annual martial arts tournament during winter, but Mercedes had no interest in participating. Still, that was only due to the age restrictions. Only fourth years and above were allowed to try their hands at real combat, while third years and below could only do a demonstration of their skills. Of course, that meant participation wasn't completely without benefit, but Mercedes wasn't fond of making a spectacle of herself, so she decided to pass on the chance to participate.

She didn't think proving her skill level was useless, but since the audience would be filled with nobles and merchants who knew little about combat, the tournament was nothing but a pageant judged on aesthetics alone. In Mercedes's eyes, it was pointless.

However, unlike Mercedes, Sieglinde was excited to participate in the martial arts tournament, even if she had sat out the hunting tournament Mercedes had won. Apparently, Sieglinde had only done so because she knew the faction that would form around her would be the strongest since she was a member of the royal family. However, there were no factions in the martial arts tournament. Of course, she would probably have some patronage as a princess, but that wouldn't affect the results of this competition nearly as much as the hunting tournament.

Sure, Mercedes had refused to participate in the underclassmen division, but that didn't mean she was completely uninterested in the tournament. The upperclassmen were sure to use techniques unfamiliar to her, serving as inspiration she could incorporate into her own battles. Joining the audience couldn't hurt.

In general, there were no students at the academy who could hold a candle to Mercedes, but that was only because her basic stats were extraordinarily high due to her gravity training. If you removed those from the equation, her skills were underdeveloped, meaning there was plenty she could learn from her upperclassmen.

In their division, success in the hunting tournament didn't necessarily translate to success here. When students from the same faction faced off, the lower rank would often forfeit, which was quite

disappointing for the audience. But when students of opposing factions faced each other, they fought their hardest regardless of rank. For example, Lother Tabel—which when pronounced, sounded like something you might find in an "adult" dungeon—was a leader of the Thunder Faction, but had been beaten to a pulp by one of Hannah's sons from the Thick Fog Faction. Meanwhile, Hartmann Hartmann from the Thick Fog Faction had lost to Goetz Hölderlin, the hoodlum who had invited Mercedes to join the Thunders.

The only faction leader with a history of success in the martial arts tournament was Felix. Unlike the other leaders, he was truly strong and utilized orthodox swordsmanship that was on par with Sieglinde's. However, he lacked a certain edge, and while his skills were well-rounded and honed, that was the extent of it. His swordsmanship was a perfect textbook example, but unfortunately, that also meant he lacked any flair of his own.

The leader of the Helix Faction, Sixtus Schoenberg, was his polar opposite. This man—who had failed to receive the message Mercedes had sent during the hunting tournament and invited her to join his faction another time—had a fighting style that was unrefined and erratic, but a large build and natural strength that allowed him to bulldoze through his opponents.

Well, given that he had repeated some years and was now twenty, he'd obviously have an advantage over his juniors.

In any case, the tournament concluded with Sieglinde claiming victory in the underclassmen division and Sixtus in the upperclassman division. Felix had come second, proving the power of his orthodox swordsmanship.

Bernhard, however, had not come to watch.

Chapter 53: A Theory of Perpetual Ages

The second semester was entirely uneventful, making the pandemonium from the first seem like a mere fever dream. Students went to class, trained, and took their tests—all like normal. The students who received poor grades fell to the B Class, while the students with excellent grades took their place in the A Class. Then, the year ended—all like normal.

It would be safe to assume that there were no more Beatrix spies within Edelrot, but Hannah would attend as Sieglinde's guard as long as she was there. Still, Mercedes was finally able to celebrate the return of the peaceful school life she had always wanted. While she was somewhat ostracized due to her skill, Sieglinde still spoke to her often. She may have been a lone wolf, but she wasn't completely alone.

"We've once again safely made it through another school year."

The entire student body was assembled in the great hall for a closing ceremony to end the semester, and standing on the podium babbling endlessly was the academy's principal, Frederick. He staggered and tottered, but his speech continued.

"With each passing year, you students grow, both in age like the rest of us, and in knowledge and skills. Back when I was your age, I was in a hurry to grow up! I used to tease my classmates who had reached their perpetual ages early, but now, I'm the one who's jealous of them! Oh, how the times change! But you can only be young for so long! Do not cling to the false hope of your perpetual age, and make sure you remember how sprightly you once were! I am sure many of you students will suffer the same tragic fate that I did."

Almost immediately, he'd gone off on a tangent. What he was

saying had nothing to do with academics or closing ceremonies.

Nobody wanted to reach their perpetual age when they were still young, but not reaching your perpetual age until you were a senior was even worse. Youth was guaranteed for no one, even vampires. They were few and far between, but many would suffer the same fate as Frederick.

"One theory states that the onset of your perpetual age is dependent on whether you have children or not. According to it, the perpetual age is a mechanism to extend one's youth and allow you to reproduce more. Thus, those who have children do not need to remain young, and their perpetual age does not come. In simpler terms, it depends on whether you've (BLEEP)ed. But unlike women, men's bodies have no way of determining whether that has happened or not. Basically, men's bodies measure this by how much (BLEEP) they've ejaculated. The more you (BLEEP), the later the onset of your perpetual age. At least, according to the theory. I had quite active loins in my youth, and I was quite handsome. Many young ladies flocked to me, and I was quite the playboy! As for women..."

"Hey! Somebody stop this senile fool!"

"Drag him off the stage!"

Once the speech had devolved into dirty talk, the teachers fell on Frederick like an avalanche and pulled him away. The students were left sitting in their seats, cringing. This was a closing ceremony! What the hell was the old man even talking about?

Mercedes couldn't help but notice how pale some of the male upperclassmen were. It seemed like they had an inkling.

"Frederick never changes."

"Has he always been like that?"

"He was handsome when he was young, so he was quite popular with the girls. He was always bragging about how many he'd slept with during the break with his friends..." said Hannah, looking awfully nostalgic.

Mercedes simply nodded.

While it was just a theory, sexual activity was a sensible basis for what could possibly determine the onset of one's perpetual age.

Nobody knew why vampires had them, but it would make sense if it was a mechanism meant to prevent population decline because vampires' longevity made them reluctant to have children. While Hannah was over a hundred, her children were just fifteen, which meant she hadn't given birth until her eighties. Clearly, vampires weren't very proactive when it came to creating the next generation. And given Felix's age, Bernhard hadn't had children until quite recently either...but given that his appearance was on the older side, he may have slept with plenty of women in his youth.

As for women, well... The more experience they had, the later their perpetual age would come. But considering that Hannah still had the appearance of a child, there had to be some individual variation as well.

In any case, the closing ceremony provided the students with some very unnecessary information.

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Once she had returned home, Mercedes devoted herself to practicing magic. She was quite proud with where her physical strength was, but her magic was comparatively less developed. According to her guild card, it was only level three, while her other stats were much higher.

However, she knew the reason for that. She couldn't cheat with magic the same way she had with gravity to boost her physical stats. Increasing the gravity acting on her would develop muscles, help strengthen her skills of Blood Manipulation, and make her faster too. But the effects were solely physical. Her magic remained unchanged, though that also meant that her level three magic reflected her natural talent.

Though if she accepted that as the limits of her talent, she would never improve. She didn't mind slow progress—as long as she continued to walk forward, she would eventually improve. The important part was never stopping and giving up. She would keep walking, as it was all she could do.

Thus, Mercedes would slip inside Stark Dungeon whenever she

had the time and do magic training. She had a goblin hexer serve as her instructor, and since it couldn't speak, a jelly slime was on standby for interpretation. Goblin hexers were quite skilled with magic, more so than any other monster registered to this dungeon, as most specialized more in close-range combat. Monsters who used fire magic operated on instinct alone, so the goblin hexer was the only monster available who could possibly serve as her teacher.

"Jiggle jiggle! Magic allows us to affect the world around us by commanding the mana within our bodies, which acts on the mana around us. The world is almost completely made up of mana, which means you could consider magic to be a power that shapes the world," translated the jelly slime as the goblin hexer mumbled away. He sounded somewhat annoyed.

Still, who would've thought that Mercedes would be taught magic by a goblin? In fantasy worlds, they basically just existed to be killed and plundered. She had even read a novel in her previous life that featured a protagonist whose job was hunting them.

"Apparently, meditating where your affinities are present awakens you to magic because it allows you to sense how the mana that controls your affinity is organized, but he doesn't know why organisms can only learn four affinities. How weird!"

In other words, the goblin hexer was saying that magical skills were dependent on how well you could control the mana around you, and there was individual variation in that skill, which was known as magical strength. This was not only a measure of how much of your own mana you could use to cast magic, but how much that could be as well. In other words, the more mana you could store, the stronger your magic would be and the more of an advantage you would have.

"Does that mean fat people have stronger magic because they store more mana?"

"Yup! Fat people can use better magic!"

"That's blunt."

When Mercedes thought of magicians, she imagined slim fighters who fought from the back in a more supportive role, blasting magic at their enemies. It was a scene that appeared time and time again

in fantasy works, and a large, stout barbarian standing there instead just didn't seem quite right.

However, apparently in this world, thin people were at a disadvantage when it came to magic. It was hard to figure out just who should be fighting on the front lines... Actually, never mind. A portly magician had no chance unless they were fighting from the back.

"But there are plenty of slim people who can use magic, right?"

"Yeah, but only because they know how to use it! Even without physically gathering more mana in the body, those who know how to retain mana within them can increase their magical strength even if they're slim. But since they have a lot of mana stored in their body, they're also a bit heavier than they look!"

"I see... And what about the goblin hexer?"

Mercedes glanced at the goblin, and on cue, he undid his robe with a proud look, revealing his rotund midsection. Apparently, he was the type who stored his magic physically.

Chapter 54: Malicious Benevolence

A local lord had an obligation to protect the land he ruled. If monsters began to roam with reckless abandon, he was required to send troops to vanquish them, and if bandits began to threaten the townsfolk, it was his job to eliminate them.

Orcus was relatively peaceful, but the world as a whole was constantly embroiled in war. While larger nations like Orcus or Beatrix rarely engaged in full-fledged combat, smaller nations would frequently clash to gain new territory and economic sustenance.

However, with war came defeat, which led to vagabond ex-soldiers who'd pillage towns to survive. These were bandits, and it was the job of the local lord—not Seekers—to subjugate them.

Of course, a local lord could enlist a Seeker's aid, but none would likely heed his call. Even should he put a bounty on the bandits' heads, only an elite few would take it. The risks were far too great. They may have been tasked with eliminating bandits, but these ones were former soldiers. They had experienced war and were ferocious enough to return from the hellfire.

The word "bandit" might call to mind images of mindless hoodlums, but that couldn't be further from the truth. As old comrades, the bandits kept in touch, and if a former platoon commander was in their ranks, they could form groups strong enough to rival *real* platoons.

Bandits were soldiers who had fallen from grace, and they couldn't be dismissed as mere novices. Thus, in a Seeker's eyes, they were a much bigger threat than a monster, and attempting to fight them meant putting their life on the line.

Of course, it was also risky to venture into dungeons, but monsters on the upper floors were weak, and Seekers were able to

turn back whenever they wished. Not only were dungeons the easier option, but a much more profitable one as well. Anyone with half a brain would stay far away from bandit hunting.

Therefore, it was left to the local lords to subjugate these omnipresent pests—although Orcus suffered disturbingly few losses by their hands. This was all thanks to Bernhard's swift actions. As soon as he received a report that bandits were running amok, he'd move in to hunt them instantly, raining his force down upon them with lightning speed.

Bernhard was a man who made his judgments quickly. Upon calculating the number of his forces, the expected number of casualties, and the scope of their enemies, he was willing to sacrifice a whole village if the situation called for it. Because of that, he didn't suffer the same problem of wasted time that plagued the other local lords.

It also would be important to mention that Bernhard located bandits with awe-inspiring haste as well. The other vampires even began to fear he had the ability to predict the future.

Bernhard, of course, lacked clairvoyance. He simply had eyes and ears stationed all throughout Orcus—loyal spies who would risk their lives to serve him even if it offered zero benefit to them.

Where did Bernhard find such a loyal group of agents, though? In an orphanage he personally administered, of course. Yes, a man like him running an orphanage sounded like a joke. Such benevolence was completely out of character for him.

However, this was no show of benevolence, and there was no kindness behind this action. To him, all orphans were simply pawns that had yet to be trained. Educating them while still young minimized the risk of future betrayal, and the nascent talent of the cream of the crop could be fostered, creating great warriors and scouts. To Bernhard, running this orphanage was simply a future investment.

As they lacked parents, no amount of harsh treatment could reflect negatively on him. Rather, bestowing them with food, clothing, and shelter would only earn him praise—what fools they all were. The orphanage offered him a nest of chicks he would raise

into obedient pawns. Without him, they all would have died on the streets. In fact, in other domains, there were an endless number of children who starved to death.

To onlookers, raising these children and providing them with a home made him look like a saint. But he was the opposite—his benevolence was rooted in malice. It was the sweet allure of the devil.

Only a third-rate villain would act purely evil a hundred percent of the time. He was broadcasting his malice to the world, begging to be captured and lacking the foresight to think ahead! Such a man was as foolish as a criminal who committed his sins for mere momentary pleasure. Anyone would cut down a rotten tree that threatened the whole forest.

The second-rate villains were those who concealed their malice. They exhibited a degree of intelligence in their dealings, but they failed to build a forest capable of hiding their evil deeds. No matter how hard they tried to camouflage themselves, anyone would notice a single tree growing in a barren field. While they could carry on for some time, it was all over once someone began to suspect the presence of a tree where there shouldn't have been one.

However, it was the villains who masked their malice behind benevolence who were unstoppable. Many politicians fell into this category. They erected enough trees to form a whole forest and hid the rotten amid them. At a glance, this forest of benevolence was enough to convince onlookers of its worth, and even if doubts began to spring up, anyone would stay silent once they started sucking on that sweet nectar produced by the villain's forest. Even when their suspicion turned into conviction, how could they possibly abandon such a saccharine temptation?

Besides, no matter the motive, the villain's contributions had real positive effects! Benevolence was still benevolence, even when based on mercenary calculations that showed malice's head. Cutting down the forest would cause those who reaped its benefits to rebel. The cons of eliminating the villain far outweighed the pros. Thus, the best course of action was to turn a blind eye to his malevolence and wall him in—to keep him as an ally rather than a foe. It was what

the previous king had done; the title of duke was a mere cage meant to rein Bernhard in.

Yes, the king had kowtowed to Bernhard. He had yielded to him, begging for his loyalty in exchange for overlooking his wicked deeds.

Bernhard was no king, but even back then, he had far outstripped his monarch.

Tonight, Bernhard once again committed an act of malice cloaked in benevolence. He swiftly hunted down the bandits and took them prisoner. It would assure peace across his domain and earn him the trust of his people. But as has been stated repeatedly, Bernhard was not a man who acted out of generosity. No matter his actions, it was safe to assume they were backed by mercenary calculations and malice.

The appearance of bandits in his domain was always quite convenient for Bernhard. His fiefdom boasted wealth obtained by no other, and many bandits swarmed like moths to the flame to reap Blut's benefits. To capture these hoodlums, Bernhard had even prepared a cave for them to hide in. It was much easier to squash bugs if you set out traps.

Then, he headed for Practis Dungeon.

"Hmph. It's been almost six months since my last visit. I see we're quite low."

Bernhard dragged his bandit prisoners into the dungeon. It was quite the odd spectacle. No monsters attacked him, and some even offered to lead the prisoners themselves.

He grunted. "A Seeker made their way to the fifteenth floor in the blink of an eye? What skill. Perhaps they could be of some use. Describe them to me. I might have to take them out myself. Oh? They had monsters with them? Wait, was this a young girl with blue hair?"

To the bandits, Bernhard seemed quite disturbed. Who was he talking to? No one else was here. He must have gone mad. That seemed to be the only explanation, but his conversation clearly consisted of questions and answers, as if someone really *were* there.

"Bwah hah hah! So, I was right. She really is too much sometimes, isn't she? You couldn't have known yourself, but a

dungeon like this is a piece of cake for her. Hmm... The next time Mercedes comes here—ah, that's the girl's name, by the way—allow her entry to the *eighteenth* floor. That should be a sufficient challenge for her. I suppose it will cost me some, but..." Bernhard glanced at the bandits, his eyes icy cold as if he were looking at mere objects, not fellow living beings. "These guys can make up for it."

It was at this point that the bandits knew that they were about to become fodder for something bone-chilling, and that they had no hope of salvation. They were right. Metal spikes erupted from the dungeon floor, skewering them whole.

"All of them and only 250 points... What a shame. Well, whatever. I can have countless replacements. I'll come again soon. Make sure you replenish the monsters and traps."

With that, Bernhard left the dungeon, his conversation partner known to none but himself.



A Portrait of a Benevolent Ruler

A nameless someone adopted from an orphanage—that had been her identity for as far as her memory went back. She was worthless, but she was okay with that. Having no dreams of her own, she felt being nobody was better than being somebody.

The nameless girl had seen this nation's shortcomings firsthand: the king who sought only to protect himself and the nobles who obediently drank the sweet nectar he offered them. The world she saw was tinted with the stains of people abused and discarded, and she dedicated the short life she had to protecting those stains.

All she saw was filth—but ironically, it taught her to find beauty in others. Perhaps spending so much time living in grime had led her to unconsciously search for what glistened. To her, others' flaws were obvious, and so she learned to search for what was harder to find. She was surrounded by filth and raised by filth, but those experiences fostered a sincere character in her that allowed her to honestly recognize the strength of others.

Thus, the girl led a colorful life at the academy. Of course, the school wasn't only filled with beauty—students demonized one another, tried to beat each other down, and even formed opposing factions that fought. There were a myriad of problems. But for a girl who grew up in the putrid world of her master, it was a marvelous wonderland.

It was thanks to this temperament that, to her, Mercedes Grunewald shone so brightly.

"I'll take you there. No matter what obstacles may stand in your path, I'll cut them down myself."

The day this nameless girl learned of the royal blood running through her veins, she gained a name—Sieglinde Abendrot. She learned that the royal family she had always known was nothing but a group of phonies. Her whole world had been shattered.

However, what shocked the nameless girl—nay, Sieglinde—more than anything else wasn't the truth behind her birth and her family, but the strength of Mercedes. She had seen countless sycophants to the king and countless people who cowered to authority, but this was her first time meeting someone who lacked even a shred of fear, even going so far as to say she'd cut them down herself. And amazingly, her only reason for picking a fight with the nation's ruler was that he had gotten in the way of her studies.

"The choice is yours, Sieghart—no, Princess Sieglinde. But if you wish to continue forward, I shall protect you. No matter what awaits us, I won't let anyone lay a finger on you."

Sieglinde had never been given this kind of personal freedom before, nor had anyone ever vowed to protect her. While vampires were a species drawn to strength, Sieglinde had never witnessed it in truth before. Neither the king, his family, nor their noble sycophants had ever taught her what the word actually meant. All she ever saw from them was filth.

Mercedes was awe-inspiring compared to them.

The day Sieglinde learned of Mercedes's strength was the day she found her dream. She knew what kind of person she wanted to become.

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Six months had passed since Isaac was abruptly dethroned. He had been taken into questioning by Hannah and her men, and they wrung out every last bit of information they could regarding the Beatrix Empire—the nation who conspired to make him crowned king—and their informants. Then, Isaac was put on trial, just as Bernhard had promised. He was sentenced to death, and after having been dragged by monsters through town and paraded in the streets, he was burned at the stake while being pelted by a hail of stones thrown by his own people.

Thanks to Bernhard's mercifulness, Isaac's wife and children had been spared, instead banished to the countryside to work as slaves until they could atone for their sins...but due to an unfortunate

incident, they had all recently perished in a mudslide.

Sieglinde pitied them. Perhaps his wife the queen—rather, former queen—was truly deserving of this fate as someone who had conspired in imprisoning Sieglinde's mother Elfriede, and perhaps the older princes had been aware of their family's crimes considering their ages. Maybe they too could be considered accomplices. But what of the freckled girl who had been bestowed with Sieglinde's name, the nobody who was convinced she was the real one? She had been a mere infant when they usurped the throne. She couldn't have known the truth. She was innocent.

For that reason, she had asked Bernhard to take pity on them. That nobody and Sieglinde were one and the same, two divergent paths that history could have taken. Until recently, Sieglinde had thought she was a nobody too—a simple, nameless person. But suddenly, the two had swapped positions.

It was incredibly ironic. She had thought she was nothing her whole life, but she was really a princess. Meanwhile, the girl who thought she was a princess was a mere nobody. Sieglinde figured she at least deserved another chance. But instead, the now-nameless girl had died, and it filled Sieglinde with sorrow. It was a fate she herself might have suffered.

Despite her grief, however, time marched onward, and her first year at the academy had now come to a conclusion. She returned to the palace and spent her days there studying just as she had at the academy. Whether she became a queen or took a husband to serve as king, she'd have to lead her country regardless. For that, there was much to learn.

Bernhard carried out all public duties in her stead for the time being, but she couldn't rely on him forever. Therefore, she spent her break learning what her future work would entail from Hannah.

However, one day, while she read through documents describing the many cities and villages of Orcus, a certain town caught her attention. A baron served as the village's local lord, but they had ceased all functions—including eliminating bandits in the nearby mountains.

"Hannah. Isn't there something odd about this place?"

"Müll Village? Baron Basch ruled those lands...though he was quite the character. Taxes were so high there that people starved to death, and he spent every single day holding parties and showering other nobles with money in an attempt to curry their favor. He's the spitting image of greed, and it's left the village in shambles and its people starving. It'd be faster to build a new village than fix what's wrong with this one."

"That's terrible. Where is Baron Basch now?"

"Dead. He's one of the nobles who conspired with Isaac to leak intel to Beatrix, so he was executed."

"And what happened after that?"

"Well, the land was left without a ruler, so the bandits swooped in and took his place. It's only a matter of time before the village is gone."

Sieglinde stood up inadvertently. How could she turn a blind eye to people suffering? They needed to do something, whether that be appointing a new local lord or sending in the army to vanquish these bandits!

"Why have we abandoned them?! Why hasn't the military done anything?!"

"It was Bernhard's decision. His reasoning...is that fighting a battle while having to defend a village will increase soldier casualties. What would best minimize casualties? Fighting while having to protect the last few civilian remnants in a dying village, or burning the whole place to the ground, the bandits along with it?"

It sounded brutal, but in short, he had decided that protecting something already worthless would only lead to pointless deaths. If they needed to safeguard the villagers, a percentage of their forces would have to be diverted to do that. Their forces would be split, and there was a chance that some bandits could disguise themselves as villagers and take them by surprise, or that the villagers would feel threatened and fight back themselves. They could even take prisoners.

Of course, the army would ultimately prevail, but the loss of life they'd suffer regardless was nothing to balk at. Why sacrifice so much to protect a village that was already virtually gone? There was

nothing in it for them—it would simply be a waste of resources.

However, if protecting the village was not a priority, then the military could attack with full force. They'd have no need to distinguish between friend and foe; they could simply kill everyone in sight. They'd take no prisoners, nor would they protect infrastructure and farmland. In fact, they could use fire arrows, magic stones, and fire magic to raze the whole village to the ground. The better choice—the choice that minimized losses—was obvious, which was why Bernhard had chosen to abandon Müll Village.

"But that's no reason to..."

"Then will you command the troops yourself? They'd go if you demanded. But...it would mean soldiers dying who would have otherwise lived. The number of bereaved would outweigh the number of villagers saved."

Sieglinde was at a loss for words. It was a simple matter. Let us say, for example, that they fought a disadvantageous battle, saving the lives of a hundred villagers and losing fifty soldiers in the process. Each of those soldiers had a mother and father, grandmothers and grandfathers, and some of them sons and daughters. The death of a single soldier led to the sorrow of at least two or three, oftentimes more. Saving a hundred meant that hundreds had to suffer through grief. It was hard to consider that effective.

Not to mention that this village was already beyond saving. The rage of the bereaved would first be directed at Sieglinde, the woman who had commanded these troops. But she herself didn't have the courage to face those families should all of that come to pass. Soldiers, to a degree, are prepared to die—but that didn't mean they wanted to do so in vain.

"As a ruler, you will be asked to mercilessly weigh one set of lives against another. Can you do that, Your Highness?" asked Hannah.

"I..." She couldn't answer that question. It's easy to spout platitudes, but sometimes the reality of a situation goes beyond what mere ideals can solve.

"Just kidding!"

"Huh?"

“That’s only true if you’re using our nation’s army, but you have your own personal army as well. You can lead them according to your principles, if you so desire.” Hannah’s stern expression morphed into a kind smile as she presented a possible solution that only Sieglinde herself could actualize.

It took the princess a moment to process her words, but once she realized what she was saying, a small gasp escaped her lips. Yes, Sieglinde alone could protect the village without begetting any other casualties in the process—it was a power afforded only to the royal family.

“So what do you want to do, Your Highness? I can come with you if you’d like.”

Sieglinde’s response was a vigorous nod.

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Müll Village was a hellscape. The deceased Baron Basch had levied taxes so exorbitant they left the people wanting for food and gaunt. Had they not been vampires, they likely would have perished when nearly all their crops had been confiscated as tax payment. By drinking the blood of animals so insignificant even the local lord would pass them up—for example, rats—the villagers had managed to cling to life. When death was inevitable for someone, the other villagers would share their blood, and mothers would often offer their own blood to their children.

Had the people here been strong, they could have staged a rebellion. But they were weak Thinbloods. A vampire’s faculties were dependent on the strength of the blood they inherited. A child of powerful parents was often powerful themselves, while weak parents produced weak offspring. Vampires who were destined to be weak from birth were known as Thinbloods, and they lived in villages like this because they’d been chased from their old homes.

Of course, it was possible to overcome innate shortcomings—to turn a weak bloodline into a strong one—but it required immense effort. Their fates as exploited ones were decided at birth, and in vampire society, the weak lacked the strength to stage an uprising.

Not to mention, Baron Basch lavishly used the funds extracted from these people's exploitation to protect himself. His bodyguards numbered more than necessary, so even had the villagers managed to unite and revolt, the outcome would have been grisly.

The lord of this land was a lowlife, but the size of his army had served as an adequate deterrent. The moment he passed, bandits from the mountains rushed into town, instantly transforming it into their turf.

"Bring me some blood, you bastard!" barked the bandits' mohawked leader to one of his subordinates as he sat on a pile of rubble. On command, said underling dragged a skinny village girl forward and presented her to his leader.

A man—presumably, the girl's father—rushed forward. "W-Wait a second! P-Please! I beg you! Spare my daughter!"

"You want me to save her? Fine. I guess I'll be taking your blood instead, then!" The bandit mercilessly decapitated the desperate father, scooped up his head, and swilled down the blood that spurted forth. His underlings took the leftovers, slicing off sections of the corpse to gulp down blood themselves.

These were no intelligent creatures. They were mere beasts, and the villagers quaked at the sight of them.

"Daddy!" After watching her father be ruthlessly killed before her, the daughter tried to rush to his side, but a bandit stepped in to stop her. This wasn't out of pity—he wholly lacked such emotions. To him, she was nothing but food.

"You're up next, little lady!" he shouted with a cackle, drool dripping from his mouth as he approached, blade in hand.

She retreated slowly in fear, but eventually, she bumped into something. She could go no farther. Trepidatiously, she peered behind her to see...another bandit. She was surrounded.

The bandit let out a gleeful screech and jumped on her...but his feet never touched the ground. Instead, he was stuck in midair, his legs flailing around helplessly. It was only then that he began to feel the pain coursing through his shoulders. Something had captured him. He turned back to see what it was...only to find a small dragon.

"Huh?" He was dumbfounded. His vision became increasingly

filled with a gaping dragon's mouth. Then, his head was bitten clean off.

"M-Monsters!"

"Why the hell are monsters here?! Did they crawl out of some dungeon?!"

Blut's Practis Dungeon was famous around these parts. Seekers constantly ventured inside, though, so given the number of monsters they slew, any degree of overflow seemed impossible—not to mention, this village was quite far from Practis. The occasional monster wandering into town wasn't unheard of, but it was quite a rare occurrence.

However, something else was even more shocking.

"L-Look! Above us! How the hell are there this many monsters?!"

There was more than just one dragon—so many they obscured even the clouds in the sky. That was when the bandits decided it was time to turn tail.

"Retreat! We'll all be fucking dead if we try taking on all those! We can use the villagers as bait to buy us some time, though!"

Monsters were incapable of discerning bandit from villager—to them, they were both prey. Having reached that conclusion, the bandits assumed that if they ran, the dragons would attack the villagers first. It was sound reasoning—a perfectly logical conclusion.

However, that principle only held true for *wild* monsters.

For some reason, the hordes of dragons completely ignored the villagers. They attacked the bandits instead.

No one could understand why. Had the dragons decided the villagers were too gaunt to be tasty? Did they instinctively only target stronger opponents? Regardless, the monsters exclusively attacked the bandits, finishing them off one after another. The bandits did their best to fight back, but blades were ineffective against their airborne opponents, and even when the dragons came within reach, the blades only bounced off their tough scales. No dragons died in the battle—only bandits.

Eventually, the leader was the lone surviving member. In a desperate attempt, he turned back to the village. For some reason, the monsters were ignoring the town. If he could hide among the

villagers—or if the villagers could serve as his shields—he still had a chance. At least, that's what he assumed.

A dragon landed in his path. On its back was a beautiful silver-haired girl. The bandit was flabbergasted.

She may have looked young, but her defined features were a sure sign she'd grow into a rare beauty. He felt on the verge of falling for her right then and there. But the fact someone was riding this dragon was of far greater concern than all that.

The girl alighted on the ground, and her dragon bowed to her in reverence. It was then that the pieces finally clicked together in the bandit's mind. The monsters had limited their attacks to the bandits because they had been ordered to do so.

"Are all these monsters yours? Ain't no way... Wait!"

Gathering so many loyal monsters was no easy feat.

That's when he saw the sword she wielded. He gasped.

Many years ago, a noble he'd sold some slaves to had mentioned that those with royal blood in their veins could summon a legion of loyal monsters. It required a sword—a "royal sword," he thought it was called—and now, the bandit began to wonder if that was the very blade this girl wielded. He recalled laughing the first time he heard this story, saying something like "Hell, I'd want a treasure like that myself if it's really out there! Sounds like a dream!"

Now, however, that dream was right before his eyes, and the threat it posed was directed at *him*. What could he do? Winning seemed impossible, but so did running. Still, he wasn't going to give up, so he decided to buy some time by rattling the villagers.

"Listen up, you bastards! You better not be thinking you've found any damn savior! You think I'd lose to a brat like her?! I'll knock her dead before any of her monsters can reach her! Then, those wild beasts will trample all over *you*!"

He wasn't completely bluffing. Sieglinde was quite young, and choosing to disembark from her dragon had placed her quite close to the bandit. Just three or four steps and she'd be within reach of his blade. His words were convincing.

"But I'll give you one last goddamn chance! Buy me some time to escape! Get in her way and I'll leave this fucking place alone for

good! And don’t worry, the brat won’t hurt you! Or do you really think a little girl is stronger than me?!”

His bluff shook the villagers. But Sieglinde simply laughed, assuaging their fears. “Don’t let him fool you!”

Sieglinde knew the appropriate words for this situation. Her strength guided her. Despite the royal sword, she still couldn’t hold a candle to a certain *someone*, even though she longed to be like her. She wanted to match her strength, to be fearless and untamable, to walk her own path. Thus, she repeated the words that she had once told her. “I shall protect you! No matter what awaits us, I won’t let anyone lay a finger on you! Trust in me!”

Well...she felt like Mercedes hadn’t added the “trust in me” at the end, but it was still close enough, right?

Her proud declaration quelled the villagers’ fear. No one obeyed the bandit.

The battle had already been lost. Out of desperation, the bandit rushed Sieglinde, but she slew him with a single swing of her blade before he could even cry out in anguish at his death.

Sieglinde’s total strength did not match Mercedes’s, but her finesse surpassed hers—even beyond her brother Felix’s. She would have never lost to a bandit in a fair fight, even without these monsters.

Cheers erupted throughout the village. Hannah watched the scene from above, sitting atop a dragon’s back. She sighed with relief. “I thought I might have needed to intervene, but...guess not.”

Once Sieglinde had joined the fray, Hannah had planned to kill the bandit leader by launching a dagger at his head. But the princess had admirably defended the village and defeated the bandits all on her own.

“I think she’s got the makings of a benevolent ruler...” mused Hannah, sounding quite joyful as she watched Sieglinde mingle with the villagers and accept their gratitude.

Big-picture-wise, Sieglinde’s victory today amounted to nothing. There was little to be gained by vanquishing a band of hoodlums terrorizing the countryside. The leader of the bandits was quite sensible as well—as odd a term as it was to describe such a ruffian.

He retreated as soon as he caught sight of the dragons, and he was smart enough to lay low while the lord of this land had still been alive. Even had they left him to his own devices, he wouldn't have moved into the cities. The bandit made no grand plays, and while that made him a small fry, it was what kept him from attracting the nobles' attention. Had Sieglinde not interfered, he would have surely lived a long life.

The village was beyond repair, and its residents would have to be relocated. Yes, from the broadest perspective, today's success story was meaningless.

Not completely, however. The story of the young, brave princess who led her troops into battle to defend a near-ruined village would spread, unifying her people under her.

The princess is too honest and my niece is a bit twisted, but I know they'll be the hands that shape our future... Hannah thought. She was excited to see what that future had in store, but first, it was time to swoop down and save the trapped princess from this mob of new supporters.

The Little Sisters Dive into the Dungeons

Mercedes's first year at Edelrot Academy had ended, and she spent the long break between school years back at the Grunewald manor. There, she studied her weakest skill, magic—specifically, how to manipulate mana. That was what defined the magic of this world, and directing the mana within one's body to act on their surroundings could conjure a range of phenomena. Zwölf had referred to this mana as "nanomachines" and revealed that they were the atoms that Mercedes and every other living being on this planet were made of.

Thus, casting magic meant expending one's mana, but as long as this was kept within reason, it didn't pose a problem. Just like how hair regrows after being cut, nanomachines, when lost, would be replenished.

However, using magic in extreme excess could be dangerous. One's supply of nanomachines was limited, and their magical strength was defined by how many nanomachines they could use for magic without it posing a threat to them. Therefore, those with ample flesh—or put more crudely, pudgy folks—could use magic better than others.

Of course, Mercedes had no intention of taking that route. Excess flesh would hinder her movements, and even if it *did* increase her magical strength, it would make her weaker overall. Thus, she pursued the other method of increasing magic potential—storing mana within one's body as mana, not as fat. Apparently, it was a feat those adept at manipulating mana could pull off. In that case, Mercedes could maintain her current slender frame yet still develop advanced magical strength. And if she pulled it off, she'd gain access to a much wider range of combat techniques.

Mercedes carried out the majority of her training in her own dungeon as she waited to return to school. She was always the type to use her time efficiently.

However, one day as she was enjoying morning—rather, evening—teatime with her mother Lydia, her two sisters Margaret and Monika came to pay her a visit.

"You want me to teach you two how to fight?"

"Yup!"

"Yes. After discussing the matter between us, we thought you would be the best teacher."

Indeed, the two had come to ask Mercedes to teach them how to fight. However, she found this request a bit odd. Vampires worshipped strength, and the strong did win respect regardless of sex or gender, so it was natural to covet power—Mercedes had climbed this far on her own merits herself. But no matter how she spun it, these two—especially Margaret—just didn't seem fit for combat.

"I don't mind, but...do you really need to learn?"

Although strength had high value in vampire society, it wasn't an absolute necessity. Those like Lydia and Trein—the merchant she sold her chocolate production method to—lived lavish lives despite lacking battle skills of their own. Not to mention, her two sisters' situations had been completely upended. They were no longer shunned by their father, but welcomed into the Grunewald residence to live as noble ladies. They'd be able to survive in this environment regardless.

"Well... Father's asked us to enroll at Edelrot Academy...but we don't think we'll be able to pass the entrance exam," said Margaret, looking awfully worried. It made sense. She'd had virtually no ties to noble society for the first nine years of her life, while her potential classmates had received the best education possible since they were young. While they had probably closed the academic gap taking lessons at the Grunewald residence these past two years, they still suffered a handicap.

Of course, all that applied to Mercedes as well, but she had both knowledge from her previous life and the strength to solo conquer a

dungeon. She was a bit of an exception.

"I don't think attending school will help you two very much anyways."

From Mercedes's perspective, attending Edelrot would give little advantage to them. The focus of the academy was combat skills, whether they were to gain standing in noble society, conquer the dungeons that plagued this country, or fight in any eventual wars. The education there was tailored around the skills a local lord would need, or to help the second or third sons who wouldn't be their fathers' heirs become adept at navigating high society.

What about Margaret and Monika, however? Mercedes was quite confident they'd do well for themselves even without formidable strength. Both were beautiful, high-class ladies. They'd attract attention regardless, garnering a mountain of marriage proposals—in fact, they already had. They could freely pick whichever boy suited their fancy, marry him, and live as the lady to a noble house. Of course, the academy would teach them the necessary knowledge and manners to navigate high society, so it wouldn't be *completely* useless, but they could easily learn those things at the Grunewald manor as well.

Mercedes's declaration that it wouldn't help them very much had been made with all of that in consideration, but it had clearly disappointed the two girls.

"Just do it, Mercy! Your cute little sisters want you to help them. Why turn them down?"

"But mother..."

"You've jumped to a conclusion before you've even tried yourself! Do what you can, and if they still fail the exams, then you can give up. And if you two pass the exam, then work and study hard! Isn't that enough? We vampires live long lives. If you fail once, you'll always have the chance to try again."

Mercedes took a moment to ponder these words. At the very least, attending school wouldn't be pointless for Margaret and Monika. Unlike humans, vampires lived long enough that choosing the wrong path once or twice wouldn't divert you for good. Mercedes had a habit of judging things with her human sensibilities,

so she perceived deciding to attend Edelrot as a choice that would permanently affect the trajectory of their lives. But vampires' longevity meant that as long as your perpetual age didn't arrive once you were as old as Frederick, wasting a few years would hardly have any significant impact.

Therefore, this would be a new, useful experience for them. Mercedes had changed her mind. "Fine. But I'm not a very good teacher. If that's okay with you, I'll take you on as my pupils."

Margaret and Monika were beaming. Apparently, Mercedes hadn't needed to warn them.

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Mercedes chose Practis Dungeon for their training grounds. The monsters there were weak and also kind enough to share all sorts of unsolicited advice, likely due to an order from the dungeon master that the monsters blindly followed. It was a dungeon built on the premise that everything inside existed to be hunted, making it the perfect place to train beginners.

Of course, all dungeons were dangerous to some degree, but Mercedes could cover for her sisters if necessary. To be on the safe side, she had summoned Kuro and Benkei from her dungeon. As long as nothing crazy happened, the two girls would be well protected.

They were not *completely* safe, but if that was what the two wanted, they weren't fit to attend Edelrot anyway. Students fought monsters as part of their lessons, and safety wasn't ensured even there.

"Um, Big Sister? Is this really a good weapon?"

"I wanted to use the same weapon as you, Mercedes!"

Margaret and Monika carried sacks on their backs filled with rocks. Obviously, "weapon" called to mind lances or swords, so these had come as a surprise to them. And there were rocks inside! Not even magic stones, just *stones*, ones you could find absolutely anywhere. The two were understandably confused.

However, Mercedes chose this primitive weapon for a reason. In

battle, the safest and strongest position is when you're outside your enemy's range. Thus, attacking from afar provided a tactical advantage that greatly improved your chances of survival. Everyone imagined samurai as swordsmen, but even they used their bows more than their katanas. But unfortunately, bows required training, which Mercedes couldn't provide since she had never used one herself. While crossbows were a potential alternative, they could only shoot one or two shots at a time.

Therefore, Mercedes had settled on throwing stones as their ranged weapons of choice. They required zero training, and you'd never run out of ammo since you could just use any old rock lying about. She had considered utilizing slingshots, but those took some time getting used to. Not to mention, the monsters here were too weak for them to be necessary.

"First, you need to get used to slaying your foes. Only then can you choose a weapon."

It didn't sound very convincing coming from Mercedes given she had killed her first monster with her bare hands, but people were naturally averse to taking the life of a fellow living being. Still, once a monster approached, hesitation spelled death. That was why she decided to first acclimate them to the act of killing.

"Watch," said Mercedes, picking up a random stone on the dungeon floor. She aimed at a monster a short distance away and launched the stone as hard as she could, pelting the monster's head and killing it in an instant. "See? Vampires are so strong that stones can serve as a perfectly fine weapon, even more so if you raise your base stats using Blood Manipulation."

Yes, vampires were strong. Case in point, an inexperienced one like Lydia could crush an apple with one squeeze of her hand. By human standards, even Margaret and Monika possessed monstrous strength, and they had only grown stronger thanks to studying Blood Manipulation at the manor. Although they couldn't hold a candle to Mercedes, they were perfectly capable of taking out weaker monsters with rocks alone. This certainly wouldn't work on stronger monsters, but it was perfect for a first foray into combat.

"See the monster over there? Now you try." Mercedes had noticed

another monster besides the one she had just slain. It looked like a walking mannequin, and its object-like appearance made it the perfect target for a first kill.

"Stone throwing has its advantages! Your opponents will have a hard time dodging in narrow hallways like this one, and you can fight from afar! Lances are another great option! Anyway, that's why I'll approach you!" it said, providing some unsolicited advice.

Quite honestly, the monsters here all seemed incredibly silly, and the motivations behind why a dungeon master would direct this behavior—assuming that was indeed the case—was clear. It made this all seem like a game, which created an easy environment for Seekers to gain experience. The guilt they felt at taking a life would gradually dissipate as they cultivated their combat abilities. The master's plan was to turn the people into soldiers, as after enough experience in Practis Dungeon, anybody could easily fight on the battlefield.

"Let me go first!" said Monika, extracting a stone from her bag. She raised it as high as she could, then hurled it forward with all her might. She may have been a young lady, but she was a vampire. The force and speed of her throw left little to be desired, and the stone cleanly hit its target straight on, knocking it off-kilter. She launched another two or three stones, downing and immobilizing her opponent.

"Very impressive."

Monika giggled. "I've always been quite good at hunting. It's a sport many of us nobles enjoy, after all."

"Hunting? What do you use for that?"

"A musket."

Monika had apparently already obtained a proper foundation. Hunting—the sport of killing other animals for fun—was a common pastime in this country. Every noble partook in it, just as Monika had stated. They'd show off their kills with pride and slurp down their prey's blood like one would a glass of wine. It was a daily occurrence in high society, and Monika had naturally participated herself. Still, muskets could only fire one shot at a time, making them ill-suited for dungeons. In terms of ranged weapons, Mercedes still thought

practicing with stones would be better.

"You're up next, Margaret. Think you can do it?"

"Um... I'll try my best."

Margaret was next up to bat. She lacked the basic knowledge that Monika had, and this was likely her first time killing another sentient being. She may have squashed a few bugs in her lifetime, but Mercedes highly doubted she had killed anything bigger. Despite her nerves, however, her aim was accurate, and her rock hit the monster. She threw a few more to keep it at bay, which was made easy by the narrow hallway. After her sixth stone, the monster lay there motionless.

"I-I did it..."

"Good job. First, we'll do this a few more times so you can get used to combat."

Thereafter, Mercedes had her two sisters repeat the process, and once the girls had grown tired, they called it a day.

***

The following day, Mercedes equipped the girls with spears. Ranged combat had its perks, but they needed to learn hand-to-hand combat as well, especially since most monsters in this world would pounce on you if you threw a stone at them. The jelly slimes in Mercedes's dungeon were a good example of this. As long as you didn't hit their cores, they'd rush you, paying little mind to the rock barrage they were being pelted with. Mercedes needed to prepare the girls for every potential opponent, so she therefore had to train them in all types of combat.

Just as they had done the day prior, Mercedes first had weak monsters with object-like appearances serve as her sisters' targets and only then moved on to monsters that looked alive. Both girls—not just Margaret—seemed somewhat averse to stabbing their opponent's flesh. Luckily, it was nothing more than a slight hesitation. Vampires survived off the blood of others, making them far less hemophobic than the average human. If a lion, for example, was squeamish, it would starve. Blood was similarly just a part of life

to vampires.

Her sisters may have been cute, docile girls, but they were still vampires. Blood did not disgust them. In fact, Monika bottled up the blood of her own monster and offered it to Margaret to drink.

Eventually, the three girls (plus Benkei and Kuro) reached the fifteenth floor, where they teamed up to defeat the lesser dragon. Of course, it was quite a formidable opponent for her two sisters, so Mercedes had inhibited its movements with her gravity magic. Only then did they barely manage to clench victory.

"I think you've gotten a good enough taste for combat. Now, you just need to find a weapon and style that suits you and work on those."

Mercedes decided to leave the rest to them. Any further instruction would just devolve into teaching them her methods, which would only hinder their growth if her style happened to be ill-suited for them. The fact Mercedes's strategy heavily relied on gravity magic and the absurdly strong abilities she had gained through gravity training made it especially difficult for her to recommend it to anybody else.

Therefore, they decided to head back—but that was when Benkei noticed something new. "Master."

"What is it, Benkei?"

"The number of floors here has increased."

Mercedes scanned her surroundings. He was right. There was actually a staircase leading to a new floor.

It was strange. The guild had told her Practis Dungeon had only fifteen floors, and she had confirmed that for herself the last time she visited. This staircase hadn't been here at that time.

"I'm intrigued, but let's head back for now."

After deliberating for a moment, Mercedes opted to retreat. There was no predicting what lay beyond this mystery staircase, and bringing Margaret and Monika there could put them in harm's way. Therefore, it would be wise for Mercedes and her monsters to go alone.

"Wait a sec. Aren't you all being a bit cold?" Suddenly, a male voice rang out from behind them. Benkei was the only man present,

but it obviously wasn't him. And there was something familiar about the voice. Where had she heard it before?

She turned around to find a boy she'd never expected to meet again.

"Long time no see."

"Boris Grunewald."

Indeed, it was her half-sibling, Boris Grunewald. Two years ago, he had summoned a monster during Felix's birthday party, creating pandemonium. She never expected they'd meet again at a place like this.

"No way..."

"My, you were still alive?"

While Margaret's scant and unpleasant memories of Boris had erased even his face from her recollection, Monika's tone communicated her disinterest. It got to him, and he glared at the two girls.

"You've got some nice clothes, I see... What's that about? Why are the kids of concubines—kids just like me—living lavish lives up there while I'm down here like this?"

"This sucks..."

"It's so frickin' unfair!"

Boris's voice began to overlap. He wasn't speaking in succession, nor did the room echo. Instead, his voice rang out from different directions. Two more Borises appeared from the stairs. Even Mercedes was shocked.

"Ah, I get it now. You're a monster that assumes the form of your foes' acquaintances." Seeing the multitude of Borises, Mercedes concluded it was some monster's trick. She grabbed the first Boris—or really, Boris-shaped monster—by the neck and slammed it into the ground. Its neck broke. Then, it was dead.

"Y-You bastard!"

"You'd really kill your own brother?"

"I don't remember having a monster for a brother," Mercedes calmly responded to the two panicked Borises.

Realizing they were at a disadvantage, they rushed for Margaret and Monika, likely in an attempt to take them hostage. Having

already killed one, Mercedes was well aware that these Boris-shaped monsters were weak. The two girls were strong enough to beat them on their own, so she instructed Kuro and Benkei not to interfere.

"Hey, Monika! Help me out here! The two of us can—"

"I don't remember us being friends." Monika nonchalantly thrust her spear into the Boris-shaped monster that approached her. It barely dodged a lethal hit, but its stomach was gouged, causing it to stumble. "You're dead to me," she said, this time thrusting her spearhead into the monster's chest. With that, it collapsed on the ground, barely clinging to life. Monika finished it off by stabbing its neck.

This creature may have looked like their brother, but it was just a monster. There was no need to second-guess yourself.

Margaret, on the other hand, had been cornered against a wall as her Boris-shaped monster sneered at her triumphantly. "The little brat who followed me like a slave's been living the good life, I see. Work with me here. As useless as you are, you can at least help me get out of here, right?"

"I don't...want to."

"Huh? Who gave you the right to refuse?! Shut up and listen to me!" This Boris monster furiously began to pelt Margaret. It was the single trick idiots had up their sleeves. As weak as they were, the only thing they were good at was punching down on somebody else. Once, Margaret had feared his wrath and served as his tool—but things had changed. She now knew how puny her brother truly was.

Thus, she silently blocked his punches, grabbing his fist and squeezing as hard as she could.

"Agh!"

"I used to be so scared of you." Margaret was only eleven, but during the two years she had spent at the manor, she had studied the art of Blood Manipulation and built up her strength. A foe who could only fling around the power he was born with was no match for her. "But not anymore. I won't listen to you ever again!"

With that, Margaret let go of the monster's hand and launched him into the air. Realizing it didn't have the necessary strength to

bully its target, the Boris monster pitifully turned tail and fled.

"E-Eek!" He made a desperate beeline for the stairs, but with a snap of Mercedes's fingers, Kuro jumped into action, clamping his fangs down on the Boris monster's throat.

It let out an excruciating scream as it collapsed to the ground. Mercedes approached, confirming that the monster was indeed dead.

It was just...so *weak*. Why was this pathetic monster all the way below the fifteenth floor? Yes, a monster that transformed into one's acquaintances could be quite dangerous, and there was some variation in the strength of different monsters on the same floors, so maybe that explained it. In any case, it had served as a way to test Margaret's mental growth. That enough made it a valuable opponent.

"That was weird, but we're done here. Let's get going."

They were lucky that the monster they'd encountered was so easy. Heading any deeper into the dungeon could mean encountering even stronger monsters, so Mercedes gave the order to retreat—which the two obediently followed—and spared one last glance at the Boris monster before turning her back on it forever.

Mercedes had concluded these Borises were only monsters, but there was a part of her that wondered... Dungeon conquerors could register new monsters to their dungeons and reproduce them endlessly. Was that really a monster? Or was it *something else*...?

The three Borises' lifeless eyes were filled with resentment as they stared into the void.

Afterword

Woo-hoo! We've released a second volume!

It's been quite a long time, everyone. My name is Fire head, the author of *Mercedes and the Waning Moon.* Thank you so much for picking up the second volume.

This installment features a school arc, though Mercedes has to deal with a power struggle for the crown instead of the peaceful days she wished for. I hope you all enjoyed it! I'll do my absolute best to make the rest of the story even better so that those who already enjoy it can enjoy it even more, and those who don't can enjoy what comes next.

As I mentioned in the first volume, *Mercedes and the Waning Moon* has a manga adaptation, and the reviews are excellent. I'm so grateful for this opportunity, and I really do love the manga, so I hope you all will check it out for yourself. The first chapter has been included as a preview after this afterword, so you really should take a look as soon as you're finished! And that goes for everyone, even me!

In addition to the manga, KeG has returned to illustrate the second volume. The artwork is really amazing, so you definitely don't want to miss it! I always have these vague images in my head when writing characters, so getting to see them illustrated is my favorite part about serialization. In this volume, Hannah, Chirpy, and Sieglinde have been turned from a foggy blur into a definite image, and it was only after looking at these images that I myself even got to know their faces for the first time.

Thank you so much to KeG for your amazing illustrations, Pochi Edoya for the manga adaptation, TO Books for sharing my words with the world in novel and manga form, my kind editor, and everyone else who has helped make this book a reality.

Finally, I'd like to give one last thanks to my readers. I hope to

see you all again in the next volume!

Fire head



BERNHARD

Mercedes's cold and emotionless father who rules over the largest town in the vampiric nation of Orcus.

MERCEDES

Our heroine, a former Japanese office worker who has been reincarnated as a vampire. She dedicates her life to escaping poverty, becoming a Seeker at just ten years old. Her goal is to conquer every dungeon, and she continues to recruit monster companions with her freakish physical strength. She trusts monsters more than humans.



Using her father

His rightful heir



FELIX

Mercedes's elder brother who wishes to be recognized as Bernhard's heir.



BORIS

Mercedes's elder brother who causes a commotion at Felix's birthday party. His whereabouts are unknown.

GOTTFRIED

Mercedes's elder brother who has no interest in being heir because he wants to live a quiet life instead.



MONIKA

Mercedes's little sister who loves her as her "grand, beautiful big sister."



THE GRUNEWALD FAMILY



MARGARET

Mercedes's little sister, who Mercedes teaches how to read, write, and make money by using her artistic talents.

TREIN

The president of Trein Industries who has a sixth sense for money. Mercedes once offered him some chocolate when rescuing him from a dungeon, and he was so moved by the taste he started to sell it.

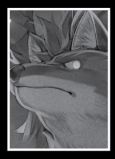


MERCEDES'S COMPANIONS



BENKEI

A humanoid monster with six arms. He can speak the languages of both humans and monsters, making him an apt interpreter. Despite being quite reliable in battle, he rarely gets any time in the sun outside of fights, which secretly bothers him.



KURO

A black wolf measuring three meters long. Despite being incapable of human speech, he's still smart enough to communicate. Mercedes sometimes uses him as a mount in battle.

ZWÖLF

The AI that manages Mercedes's dungeon. She provides knowledge to Mercedes, but there's a limit to what she can share.



SHUFU

A three-meter-tall demon. He joined Mercedes's crew as Margaret and her mother's guard, but for some reason he spends his time cooking instead.

【HANNAH BURGER】

Race: Vampire
Creed: Patriotism
Aspiration: To bring stability to her nation
Likes: Family
Dislikes: Making incorrect assumptions that set her off course
Personality: Bubbly and kind, but has a darker side too









【BUNBUN】

Race: Mörder hase (a type of rabbit monster)
Creed: Even weaklings can beat the strong with the right strategy
Aspiration: For others to look more favorably on his smoking habits
Likes: Cigars and carrots
Dislikes: Anti-smoker discrimination
Personality: Cool, calm, and collected
Note: Even stronger than ashtars when wielding guns

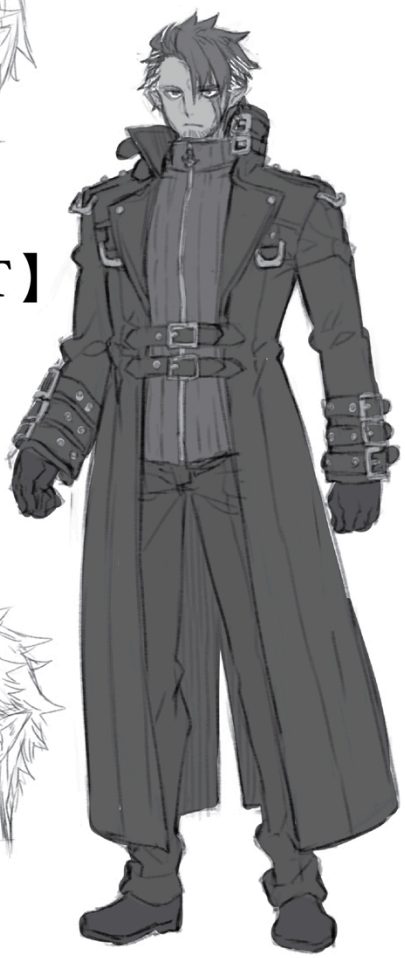


【SIEGHART ABENDROT】

(Real Name: Sieglinde Abendrot)

Race: Vampire
Creed: As a body double, believed it was wrong to hold creeds and aspirations of her own, but now wishes to defend her nation as its princess
Aspiration: To repay her debts to Mercedes
Likes: Training
Dislikes: Injustice
Personality: Serious and virtuous, for better or for worse





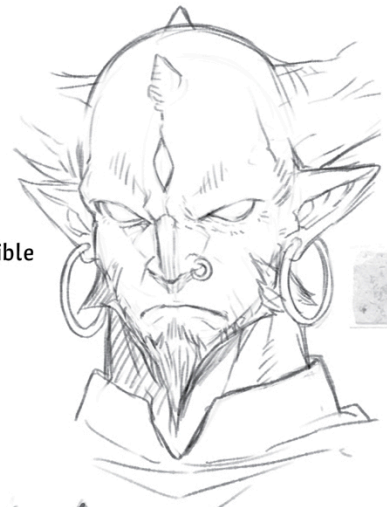
【GUSTAV BALT】

Race: Vampire
Creed: A sword should remain a sword
Aspiration: Believes he shouldn't have aspirations of his own
Likes: Liquor
Dislikes: His past self
Personality: Reticent and self-deprecating



【SHUFU】

Race: Böse dämon
Creed: Good health begins with tasty food
Aspiration: To utilize his skills as much as possible
Likes: Cooking
Dislikes: Lazy Cooking
Personality: Serious but heading down a questionable course







【CHIRPY】

Race: Ashtar (a type of bird monster)
Creed: An empty stomach deserves meat
Aspiration: To eat tasty meat
Likes: Meat
Dislikes: Rye Bread
Personality: Doesn't think too deeply

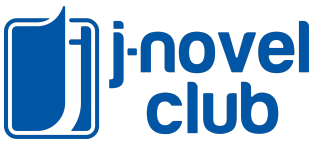












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Mercedes and the Waning Moon: The Dungeoneering Feats of a Discarded Vampire Aristocrat Volume 2
by Fire head

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Edited by Travis Welsh

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