
Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World
Preach the Good Word of Mr. Henderson
1
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The Henderson Scale

–9: Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.

-1: The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.

0: For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.

0.5: A tangent impacts the main story.
E.g. A recurring NPC that is meant to have a minor role dies, or one of the players gives them a weird character trait.

0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. The party gets riled up during a common conversation with the NPC and decides to act. They leave behind a PC to fulfill this random NPC's destiny.

1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "I said, 'The lord of the manor might be a vampire. You should proceed with caution.' Did anyone hear me say to light the mansion on fire? No?"

1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "Really now? In this situation, you're still going to break into the mansion all because of a tip I gave you in passing?"

1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "Okay, look. I admit it's a shame that your character is now a fugitive for life. But that doesn't excuse you betraying the party by killing your own priest as soon as combat begins."

1.75: The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "No, I don't have a problem with the fact that you kept fighting, or that you all fled in different directions to take refuge in barbarian territory. What I'm asking is why you started hunting knights. Can anyone tell me why that was necessary?!"

2.0: The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.

Over 2.0: The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
E.g. "And so, for some reason, your reign of terror in the badlands has earned you eternal glory as the greatest barbarians who ever lived... What? You want me to award experience for that? Are you kidding me?"

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One Full Henderson Ver0.1



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Munchkin

1: A childish player who throws fits to try and gain every advantage they can for their PC.

2: A player who prefers to enjoy the act of building up a strong character over fleshing out their place in the world. These players staunchly uphold the rules on their quest for invincibility. Also known as a Japanese munchkin.



Preface

Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rulebooks and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres that include fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

When I realized the first thought that came to my budding ego questioned my own sanity, I began to wonder if I had incurred some sort of karmic debt.

My name is Erich. I have no family name, as I was born the fourth son to an independent farming family on the outskirts of the Trialist Empire of Rhine. Simple farmers are not permitted to hold last names, so the best I could do was to identify myself as Erich of Konigstuhl canton. Elsewhere, it would suffice to introduce myself as the last-born son of Johannes.

My mother had her hands full tending to the newborn girl she'd delivered over winter. As a result, I was left to my own devices in the spring of my fifth year, when my psyche began to twist in a peculiar fashion. I'm unsure if I should attribute it solely to a past life, but the underlying cause was certain: another self dwelled within me, altogether separate from my personal experiences.

For better or for worse, a typical five-year-old child is an innocent and stupid animal. It dribbles with snot and toys with the lives of lesser creatures as it frolics around in the mud. This should be all the more common in a rural village, where every semblance of convenience is replaced with nature as far as the eye

can see.

Yet I was curiously enlightened, endowed with insight as soon as my frayed strand of consciousness grew aware of itself. And this insight was accompanied by experiences both wholly unrelated to me and at once unmistakably my own. These experiences formed memories—memories of a man named Fukemachi Saku.

I could find no better way to describe these memories than to label them as a past life. My previous experiences detailed the unremarkable story of a bachelor in his thirties. I had been born to an average household and was blessed with similarly average happiness, until I'd reached an abrupt, unfortunate end due to an early case of cancer.

I had become a manager at the trading firm at which I worked, and wholeheartedly enjoyed my hobbies in my spare time. I thought it had been a life free of regrets. Although my single status had prevented me from giving my parents any grandchildren, my older sister thankfully managed to, so I didn't have to bear some horrible regret over that.

The question was why I was now alive in an unfamiliar land, perceiving myself as a five-year-old boy. A single memory came to mind: my early onset cancer had developed rapidly, and I'd quickly abandoned hopes of treatment. In the terminal care wing, I had frequently lost myself in deep thought as I meditated to calm my soul. As I had sat in the lotus position and sunk into the depths of my mind, I could feel the mounting fear dissipate from my sick, creaking body.

In the midst of my meditation, I met the Buddha.

To be frank, I myself could only imagine it to have been some form of hallucination, but there was simply no other way to describe what had occurred. After all, upon my chance encounter with this man sitting on a lotus flower, he himself claimed to be a Bodhisattva-in-training on the path to becoming a future Buddha.

According to this future Buddha (*if he was training to be a Bodhisattva, did that make him Maitreya?*), among all of existence there were many worlds that were ultimately fated to collapse. The gods who oversaw these worlds would come to him for help. Instead of intervening directly, the sage opted to toss in

souls that would eventually resolve their assigned issues or otherwise prevent them.

At any rate, his training was to manage and maintain all of existence until every life was saved and he became a Bodhisattva.

I then thought that, instead of calling upon an ordinary person on his deathbed, it would be best to use some sort of godly power to solve these problems, but there were apparently factors barring him from doing so, chiefly that excessive intervention from the gods often led mortals to become idle and decay as beings. As a result, the gods dealt with matters by indirectly nudging things along so that the fundamental corrective force would come from the people of the world themselves.

What was more, he told me that the prophets who laid out the moral groundwork seen in religious mythos were given similar offers to the one I was now receiving. As a result, they became sons of god, enlightened ones, and the like.

It was quite the grand tale. For a humble man whose greatest form of luxury was buying a new rulebook or supplement, this lofty talk was utterly incomprehensible. I had my doubts about his method of selection. There were more virtuous souls out there—people of outstanding character, brimming with philanthropic intent. Why not choose a saint, or someone who had already attained enlightenment?

And yet his will evidently did not waver, as I was now here solemnly recounting what had happened...as Erich, fourth son to a farmer in Konigstuhl canton.

Despite his grand speech, he had failed to give me any concrete mission. I hadn't been given any teachings to spread, nor a prophecy to exhort. All that he had preached was the familiar gospel of a certain deity I'd encountered along my many adventures in my previous life: *"Do what thou wilt."*

A god of evil, are we?

All jokes aside, I was sure the will of the gods foresaw some profound, complex strategy indecipherable to me. There was no doubt in my mind that there was a plan in place so that I could do as I pleased and it would somehow

work in favor of the divine...for better or for worse. My presence here likely had meaning in and of itself—in which case, there was nothing more for me to do than live.

With my purpose established, I had a single piece of evidence that sufficed to prove the existence of such gods. At the end of our encounter, the venerable being offered me a blessing alongside his gospel—the power to mold myself as I pleased.

Although I hadn't understood at the time, now that my sense of self was firmly anchored in this world, I finally knew. I could *develop my skills* "as I pleased." I looked up and focused to see a design document that outlined all the details that made up *me*. What I could do, what I was good at, and what I could will into being were all clearly listed. What was more, I could fiddle with them to my heart's content.

Each element influenced another, and in turn was influenced by others to create the complex web of systems offered by the games that I had loved so dearly in my previous life. The time I'd spent scribbling up characters and exploring other worlds in the most beautiful form of entertainment known to man was unfurling itself before my eyes.

I instantly fell in love with the simple, yet captivating system. An extending cylinder represented my physical growth, with an array of other cylinders surrounding it, each embodying a job, skill, or trait that served to build up an avatar.

When my mind finally recognized what my eyes were showing me, I thought, *This is a tabletop RPG.* The interface was closer to that of a console game, but the underlying makeup was the spitting image of the contents of the thick, pricey rulebooks I had often indulged in. It was the very same as the character sheets on which I had drawn up the history of many a character. I fondly remembered the slips of paper I had used to act out a story with my friends as we played through our analog campaigns.

Oh, what joy! I thought. After all, that meant an infinite number of possibilities now lay before me.

Generally, all creatures gain experience in relation to the actions they brought

about. If you did daily chores like pulling weeds, then you'd become more proficient at weeding. If you swung a sword, you'd accumulate experience with the sword. This went without saying: you couldn't uncover the secrets of the blade regardless of how many weeds you pulled.

But I *could*. By stocking up all of my experience points, I could spend them on anything I wished, just like how an adventurer in a TRPG could hack and slash their way to sagehood. If I put my mind to it, I could master the art of swordsmanship simply by weeding the lawn.

What could I call this if not *fun*? The system was designed just like a TRPG: so long as I saved up experience on my adventures, I could attain skills completely separate from the exploits that fueled them, just as I had in my beloved pastime.

With such unbelievably perfect conditions, it was no mystery that my awakened ego couldn't help but doubt its own sanity. This world was like a pleasant fantasy that I might see in bed before drifting off to the land of dreams.

However, unlike a dream, I truly existed, and my power worked *just as I'd expected*. All the proof I needed to confirm that fact was the simple wooden idol in my hands.

I hate to admit this, but I had been clumsy in my past life. Following the original instructions was as far as I'd ever gotten with plastic models, and even then, they would turn out a mess as I'd frequently broken them by using the wrong pieces.

But look at me now! By putting experience points into Dexterity, I'd unlocked a Wood Whittling skill. After acquiring the first level, Fledgling, I was able to carve a figure with just a knife and a chunk of wood.

I am Erich of Konigstuhl canton, the boy who does as he wills.

[Tips] Experience points are used to improve base stats, traits, and skills.

Summer of the Fifth Year

Dice

A tool intimately familiar to human history, used in matters of gambling since the dawn of time.

TRPGs offer a roleplaying experience in analog form, so dice are essential to add an element of randomness to the affair.

The most common type has six sides, but TRPGs often utilize dice with eight, ten, twelve, or twenty sides. On occasion hundred-sided dice that are effectively spheres that roll forever are used. Other times, four-sided pyramids can fall onto the floor and cause a painful catastrophe later down the road.

A commonplace notation for dice rolls is “xDy,” where D represents dice, the first number the number of dice and the second number the type of dice. Thus, 2D6 is equivalent to rolling two dice that have six sides each.

Among the nations of the western reach of the Central Continent, the Trialist Empire of Rhine was a well-established monarchy with vast holdings that sprawled out toward the center of the continent. The plentiful land was governed by three imperial houses, from which an emperor was chosen by seven electorate houses. This political process had proven stable, as the great country had yet to waver in its five-hundred-year history.

The southern portion of Rhine was known for its history of racial diversity and was home to an administrative district called Heidelberg. Owing to its cooler climate, the South primarily was known for growing grapes used in winemaking. Its thriving olive industry also served as one of the largest sources of vegetable oil for the Empire, and was valued highly as a result.

The western section of this vital—albeit humble—region was defended by the troops quartered in Konigstuhl Fortress. And within one of the several counties that fell under its protection, a similarly commonplace husband and wife were

racking their brains in deliberation.

The man's name was Johannes, and the woman's was Hanna. The two mensch—a type of humanfolk found all across the Empire—were independent farmers that cast their lot with the Harvest Goddess. They worked grain fields full of rye and had a single olive orchard to their name. One could find hundreds, if not thousands, of middlingly successful families just like them within Rhine's borders.

The source of the couple's troubles stemmed from their fourth son, Erich, who was to turn six in the fall. However, it wasn't as though he was an uncontrollable misfit or short of wits. In fact, he was a wonderful boy whom they were very proud of. He obediently listened to their orders, refrained from the idiotic antics young children are prone to, and even gave honest attempts to sing the hymns during Sabbath worship. There was no shame in calling him their son. The couple wasn't fretting about his deficiencies—rather, he was *too* good.

The pair had four sons and a daughter. Their oldest son had turned eight this year, and the twins that had shortly followed their eldest were seven. They'd waited some time to birth Erich, their fourth son, and so he was five. This was the root of their concerns: who were they to send to the magistrate's private school?

A relatively high standard of living in the commoner class pervaded the country, which meant literacy was encouraged even among farmers. For an independent farmer who wished to earn the graces of their local magistrate or lord, learning the palatial tongue (a derivative of the imperial language which employed classier pronunciation, peculiar phrasing, and some irregular grammar) was a must. On top of that, one was expected to have dabbled in poetry, and the ability to play an instrument or two was a given.

Consequently, it was typical for farming households to eat a steep tuition fee so that their firstborn son could attend their local magistrate's school. It was common to see poorer farmers strain their meager finances in hopes of securing a future for their children. On the other hand, those with comfortable margins would go so far as to educate their second son in order to produce a backup heir or to start a branch family. It was only natural that Johannes and

Hanna planned to send their own son to school.

The question was...*which* son?

Johannes had recently managed to win the magistrate's permission to extend his cropland, and had made the large purchase of a workhorse in preparation. His savings were tight; in order to maintain an emergency fund, it was optimal to choose only one of his children.

Normally, he could send off his eldest son without question. Patriarchy prevailed among the short-lived mensch, and more specifically, primogeniture was a fundamental principle of imperial law. And yet, Erich's blinding talents cast a great shadow over his older brother.

Johannes knew a great disparity in ability was usually to be expected of children three years apart. It was a perfectly logical occurrence, as the older child's body was more developed and their mind more full of experience. But the inverted disparity between his first son, Heinz, and his fourth, Erich, was simply not something he could ignore.

Whereas Heinz fumbled through hymns meant to extol the divine and could hardly deliver prayer from memory, Erich recited the words perfectly despite his childlike lisp. Not only that, but Erich had even memorized difficult psalms filled with archaic language, earning the favor of their church's bishop.

Furthermore, while Heinz bloodied his hands at mere vegetable peeling, Erich's use of his fingers was beyond graceful. When the couple had yielded to his pleas for a pocket knife, he had carved a wooden idol of their goddess before the day's end. Last month, he had replicated an entire set of board game pieces with no instruction.

On top of all this, Erich was *also* more mentally gifted. When asked to perform a series of chores, he instantly recognized the most efficient means of grouping the tasks. If there were any that required his full attention, he carefully completed them without a moment of idling. In contrast, Heinz was lazy and his work was often sloppy. When he'd been told to give fodder to the horse, it had ended with him drenching the feeding trough with water.

There were no doubts who was better suited to learn. Still, though it was not absolute, primogeniture was a pervasive principle in the land. To prioritize not

even their second, but *fourth* son would carry serious social implications.

What was more, Heinz was keen on his path to school. As parents, the couple needed to consider how their three older sons would feel if their youngest brother were to overtake them. And so, the prudent Johannes and Hanna spent another day deep in thought as the school's application deadline approached.

[Tips] Mensch are a humanfolk race found on all continents. Due to the great imbalance between the talented and talentless, they are sometimes called the "race of wise fools" or the "lottery race," but none can top them in terms of cruelty.

Padding your stats is truly, truly important. After all, bonuses speak louder than dice more often than not.

I was a devout believer in what they called "fixed values." Well, with my luck being the way that it was, I sort of had to be. Whenever I'd been on the player's end, I averaged a *five* from a standard 2D6 roll and had often oh-so-kindly been blessed with a whopping 250 experience points as consolation for a single session's worth of bungled dice rolls. But if I switched over to be the GM, my average shot up to a jaw-dropping *nine*. I couldn't even remember how many times I'd killed my players with unexpected critical hits.

Looking at my record, I thought it was fair for me to focus on the ability to stamp out any semblance of variance as I planned out my ideal build. Since the concept of a mathematical mean clearly did not apply to me, I had always found things like the godly power of a mace's +1 accuracy bonus particularly reassuring.

There were also schools of powergaming that relied on using an overwhelming fistful of dice to snuff out any variability, but even then, using fixed critical values was the more robust means of slaughter. *I suppose I'll have to avoid luck entirely. What an absolute* shame*.*

As a result, I decided not to try anything strange and took great pains to level my basic stats as soon as my ego took form.

There were ten physical stats that I could manipulate: Strength, Endurance,

Immunity, Stamina, Agility, Dexterity, Intelligence, Memory, Mana Capacity, and Mana Output. It appeared the system revolved around these ten attributes entangling via complex equations to compute a final result, though I wasn't sure what the two fantasy-esque stats at the end meant quite yet.

Owing partially to the klutziness of my past self, I'd put a lot of attention into dexterity. I already had some slight confidence in my memory but also put points into improving it further. The advantage of having dexterous hands needs no explanation, and being able to recall more things is never a bad thing.

I'd had some trouble trying to internalize what "intelligence" actually meant, but it essentially boiled down to speed of thought and rationality. The thought of messing with this stat had been a tad terrifying, but after I'd tested the waters with a handful of experience points and confirmed that there weren't any adverse effects on my consciousness, I began increasing my proficiency in it without hesitation.

Being a not-so-innocent five-year-old with a mental age in my thirties, I had become a bit of a wonder child. Anyone in their thirties could play the part of a child prodigy, but now that I'd boosted myself even higher, I was quite the sight to behold. Despite living out a normal childhood in my past life, I was now well-known as the neighborhood genius. But to be clear, I didn't carry myself in this way to puff up my own meaningless pride.

Now, I profess myself as a data munchkin and a believer in fixed values, but I would say my most notable characteristic is that I romanticize completed builds. While I don't wholly ignore how quickly my character comes along, my top priority is always the ideal of a finished product.

Plenty of TRPGs allow players to continue to stack up experience points endlessly, but there always exists a certain final form to be reached. This could be the moment you hit Lv15 or a build that spikes after 200 XP, but regardless, I think there is beauty in arriving at a clear end point.

It's a magnificent moment when your damage is so utterly broken that you enter combat and instantly deal hundreds of points that can't be defended against, mitigated, or blocked, or when your defense can soak tens of damage points from any attack that comes your way. The beauty of these completed

characters paired with a GM one step from screaming “Can’t you guys hold back a *little?!*” is nothing short of the pinnacle of art.

That was exactly why I thought now was the time to focus on fundamentals. I wanted to dedicate my growth to whatever final form I pursued in the future—both with regards to my stats and my social standing.

The capacity of each of my physical stats was encapsulated by levels which were computed against the average for my race. And, according to the notes on my stats page, once my ability reached the lower bound of a new level, the evaluation on my screen would change.

Generally, the physical entries ranged from I: Feeble, II: Shaky, III: Weak, and only at Scale IV did someone become Average. After that came V: Good, VI: Superb, VII: Excellent, and finally VIII: Ideal, but above that there lay the upper limit, Scale IX, Divine Favor. The wording of the last level implied that it was a level reserved only for those who were literally loved by the gods.

Attaining that would take an ungodly number of experience points. My first objective was instead going to be raising all of my attributes to V: Good. The road to my tentative goal was long, and the numbers were dizzying. But I was used to being derided as a data munchkin: I was an oddball who would slay a god if I had data to support my efforts. Sniffing out interesting skills to abuse was but a part of my routine.

As I stared holes into the cylindrical skill tree, I found a characteristic in the basics category called Child Prodigy. Its effect was simple: so long as I was a child, it was easier for me to gain experience. This limited-time skill was fated to run its course eventually, but I could sense that this would significantly increase the total experience I earned throughout the course of my lifetime, and poured my savings into it immediately.

It goes without saying that it was a rare trait, and it took several weeks of wood carving and daily chores to save up enough to get my hands on it. But the results were exactly as I had hoped.

After half a year, my Wood Whittling skill had gone from I: Fledgling, past II: Novice, all the way to III: Apprentice, with IV: Craftsman mere steps away. Above that were V: Adept, VI: Expert, VII: Virtuoso, and VIII: Master. The only

thing beyond those was IX: Divine, so I was probably close to the average skill level of an artisan in the field.

Child Prodigy was the key factor behind my explosive growth rate. Looking back at my previous experience rates, I likely would have barely made it to III: Apprentice without the skill.

Seeing how the required proficiency level to reach the next rank rose exponentially (the actual numbers were downright disgusting) alongside the ranks of my stats and skills, I understood why a trait like <Child Prodigy> would need to be found in talented children and even some average people.

Regardless, as I mentioned previously, one of my goals was to use Child Prodigy to earn points efficiently and use them to boost all of my stats to be above average. On top of that, I wanted to build up a clearly defined strength. I would love to get at least one Scale IX, like IX: Divine Favor or IX: Divine, but...well, that could be a stretch goal for now.

It was just that, you see, the digits looked funny. The jump from VIII: Ideal and VIII: Master to IX: Divine Favor and IX: Divine was *two digits* of experience points. If I were to save up enough points to jump from I: Feeble to V: Good in one go, it *still* wouldn't be anywhere close to the amount needed for a Scale IX ability. The whole thing reminded me of the masochistic grind of mobile games—especially their endgame content.

For now, I chose to think it over while keeping an eye on my experience inflow rate. I still didn't know enough about the world to be able to decide on what kind of strategy I wanted to go for. It would be no laughing matter if I went all in on a path that was this world's equivalent of industrial garbage.

Securing an efficient source of experience was a given. My next priority was to earn the trust of the people around me. There wasn't any complex scheme behind it: when I eventually found something I wanted to do, the best-case scenario would be for everyone to believe in my ability and help me along. That was true of my parents, the bishop at church, and...

"Erich, what are you doing?"

...Even my siblings. "Oh, Heinz," I said in greeting. I had been sitting on a stack of firewood beside the barn when my eldest brother called out to me.

He was a large boy who had the same chestnut hair and rugged features as our father. Recently, people had been comparing him to me no matter where he went, so he was in quite the foul mood. I was the youngest child in my past life and the youngest of my brothers in my current one, so I couldn't fully understand his feelings, but I did still sympathize with him.

Parents make up the better part of every child's world. Seeing those same parents praise your little brother over you when he wasn't even a toddler who needed constant attention would be unamusing, to say the least. These children often become disobedient in search of attention and lapse into a downward spiral as their mischief only further worsens their parents' opinion of them.

It was plain for me to see the painful future he had in store. But I loved my (mentally younger) brother, so with the withered thoughts of a man in his thirties, I aimed to create harmony between us. "I was making this," I said.

"Whoa!"

I offered my brother a kid-sized wooden sword fashioned out of firewood and wood chips. Using my pocket knife and our horse's hoof file, I had created a longsword that a green-clad hero might swing around on his adventures, sure to tickle the heart of a young boy. The point of the sword was almost cartoonishly long, but the five-year-old deep in my heart was screaming about how cool it was, so I figured it would be fine.

"You can have it, Heinz!"

"What?!"

I could tell from his expression the moment he laid eyes on the wooden sword that my brother had begun scheming something terrible, but I smiled as I handed it to him all the same. I hadn't carved it for myself to begin with; the other day, I had seen Heinz staring enviously as another child swung around a toy sword they received from their parents.

"R-Really?" he asked.

"Yup, I wanted to pay you back!" I explained.

When he tilted his head in confusion, I began listing out everything I could think of that he'd done for me. For example, I wasn't a fan of the tomatoes

(strangely, they were already widespread as a food product in this world) that he'd eaten for me. Another time, I'd neglected to raise my strength levels and he'd helped me when I was struggling to draw water from the well (though I think he only wanted to show off). It was easy to find things to be thankful for when we lived together.

"So thanks, Heinz!"

Faced with a smile and my gratitude, my brother was at a loss for words but eventually gave me a sheepish smile in return. I was sure his heart was a great swirl of emotion. He probably felt a good deal of regret for his childish jealousy and the fact that he'd considered acting violently. As for me, all I could hope was that the seeds of friendship were being sown.

"How is it?! Do I look cool?!" he asked, striking a vaguely swordsman-like pose.

"Yeah, super cool!" I replied. Seeing him so happy with what I had made for him was the sweetest bliss I could ask for. Past life aside, Heinz was my family. How could I feel anything but happiness when seeing him enjoy himself?

After all, the only ones who could judge him were those who had never been a child at all.

[Tips] <Child Prodigy> is one of many time-limited skills. There exists a lower-tier counterpart called <Accelerated Learning>. <Early Talent> and <Young Genius> offer effects during childhood and early adulthood, respectively. Another is <Bursting Youth>, which helps preserve adolescent beauty.

Direction is indispensable when trying to think about anything.

The side of the barn had become my haunt. I sat there on a pedestal placed between stacks of firewood, lost in thought. The three-dimensional projection of intermixing cylinders that I called a stats menu was enormous. I had read countless rulebooks from cover to cover, but with so many skills and traits weaving into one another, I still hadn't been able to grasp the entire thing.

I suppose it was only natural. This chart was jam-packed so that I could choose from every possibility the world had to offer. Thankfully, there were convenient sort and search functions, but it would still take years of research to fully comprehend all of the content.

The main section alone revolved around Body, and Mind, Education, Martial Arts, Sense, and Sociability surrounded it. In turn, each of those was surrounded by a countless number of job categories.

When factoring in the effects and explanations of each ability, the whole system boasted ridiculous complexity and a herculean word count that made it impossible to imagine in terms of page numbers. Trying to convert it into an equivalent number of supplements gave me chills just thinking about the cost. I had nothing but gratitude for the future Buddha who had tossed all this in, free of charge.

My only gripe was that my little number-crunching heart couldn't help but get distracted at every turn. Of course, I recognized this was a luxurious problem to have, but still.

I'd quickly found a few combinations that made me think, *This is busted*. I had gotten absurdly worked up just imagining how they would work out in practice. No TRPG player would be able to contain their excitement when faced with an expanding array of diverse possibilities that each can be used to deal with real, practical situations.

However, distractions and practicality went hand in hand as points of concern. If the skills and whatnot were all practical, that led to the risk of using a few points here and a few points there whenever I found something useful. Ultimately, that would give way to a future where I ended up as the proverbial jack-of-all-trades, with not a hint of mastery to my name.

I didn't have any complaints about the convenient interface or its features, but unfortunately, my blessing wasn't exactly accommodating. Unlike the character sheets I'd made with pencil and paper or in a spreadsheet, there was no way to delete a skill or trait—respeccing was not an option.

I had made plenty of similar mistakes in my early days. My character would seem fine when I first created them, but would come up short due to my

penchant for greedily picking up all sorts of skills. I remembered crying over my pitiful damage during the climactic final battle in such campaigns. I couldn't let myself end up as a half-finished product, if for no other reason than to honor those characters who continued to languish in their battles in the far reaches of my memory.

Well, I was sure there were compassionate GMs out there (of which I considered myself to be one) who would kindly allow their players to respec if everything was going wrong. Unfortunately, the GM in charge of this world wasn't soft enough to bend the rules.

I supposed that was the same for reality. If anyone could respec their life, no one would have ever thought to take a long walk off a short cliff. In order to not end up that way myself, I needed to decide on a direction.

What did I want to become? What did I want to achieve? What was my will? My blessing allowed me to become nearly anybody and do nearly anything, but that also meant I could end up being a nobody who had accomplished nothing.

I needed to be cautious. My knowledge of this world amounted to practically zilch. The only things I knew were the names of my canton, Regierungsbezirk (it had shocked me to find a German administrative district in use here), and the local lord and bishop. I knew next to nothing of government or politics, and the same went for topics like geography, climate, and history.

I would have countless opportunities to choose from, but it was undeniably too early for me to decide on my future. If I were to set my plans in stone while ignorant about the world, it would be no joke to find out that my chosen path was actually one of heresy that would have me chased out of civilization. I didn't want any "Your force field prevents you from staying the night with your companions" sort of issues.

In that case, I needed to prioritize powerful, efficient traits like Child Prodigy while raising my basic attributes. My tentative direction was to be ready for the day that I found out what I want to do.

In my past life, my father had often said to me, "There's no harm in studying." His reasoning had been that a medical student graduating from Tokyo University could still take the plunge and become an author, but an uneducated

adult would almost certainly fail to become a doctor. That meant it was crucial that I prepare myself for my future dreams by improving myself in a variety of fields.

Honestly, my dad had given me some sagacious advice, if I do say so myself. It'd be too late to become a swordsman as an adult if I neglected to train my body now.

All right, I summarized to myself, *first I'll focus on balancing out my physical training while developing my mind both intellectually and culturally. I'll also pick up any noteworthy traits, and the rest of my efforts will go to gathering data.* Whatever the plan, the mountain of skills and traits left me scratching my head, and a lot of prerequisite conditions were absolute mysteries, so more information was a necessity.

Still, browsing through skills and traits filled me with joy. There was an endless supply of interesting things that caught my eye. There were vocational skills of every sort that seemed strong in a straightforward way. I also found a trait that enhanced my observation so I would be able to tell whether a given article was authentic or not. Whenever I stumbled across an evergreen trait like this, it sent waves through my munchkin blood. The importance of workhorse and fight-ending damage-dealing abilities is well established, but the skills that enriched the journey before a climax are also essential parts of a character's strength.

However, I noticed at this point that there existed some things that I wasn't allowed to lay my hands on. For example, there were some traits like Blue Blood that were based on descent, which obviously couldn't be changed. According to the accompanying explanation, the trait gave extra compensation toward mastering noble mannerisms and a bonus when negotiating with someone of suitable status. It was a powerful trait that made my munchkin mouth water...but while I could fake my pedigree, the true circumstances of my birth were permanent, so it made sense that I couldn't have it.

There were also those that were too far removed from my own character. For example, from the Mind category, I could go into the Auxiliary subcategory and then further into the Faith subcategory to find a locked Saint trait. Things like Vorarephilia in the Vice category and all alien racial traits were locked off as

well.

This was easy to wrap my head around, since I had proven that my stats and traits didn't directly impact my sense of self when I'd improved my Intellect and Memory. These traits were purely external titles that were distributed upon meeting certain conditions. Of course, that also meant that heartbreak or a spiritual awakening could lead me to acquiring traits that had otherwise been sealed away.

Lastly, it wasn't possible for me to make large, retroactive changes to my body. The central Body category that anchored all the others around it contained the finest details on my projected height, skeleton structure, and the like. I surmised that my ego had manifested at five years old because it was then that I had finally distributed the bare minimum amount of experience to these sorts of stats. It was likely a fail-safe to prevent me from throwing around experience in a clueless state and dying because of it.

The only things I could manipulate here were the projected values—things like "You'll grow up to be this tall" or "The fat in your body will be distributed like this." All this did was cement my *future* body's proportions. It wasn't as if I experienced physical change as soon as I put in experience points.

This was also easy to understand. Imagine if I were to empty my brain and go, "Wee! I wanna be tall and swole!" I could spend all the points I'd earned doing miscellaneous chores on my height and bone structure, and if the results were instantaneous, I would cause a huge scene. The whole canton would be thrown into chaos as people wondered who I was.

Restrictions were unavoidable for qualities that I needed to appear natural in, unlike stats that improved with active training. I felt like every facet of the system had been polished to create a well-balanced experience. *I wonder who was in charge of the QA?*

Although I'd continued to mull at length on this topic, in the end, I was still a five-year-old child. I could still do anything, so it wasn't *that* important to figure it out now.

"Erich, you're out here daydreaming *again*?"

I had been in the middle of contemplating how tall I wanted to turn out when

my brother, Heinz, came along. *I wasn't daydreaming, I was engrossed in serious thought, thank you very much.* On top of that, I had also been practicing carving wooden idols until a short while ago, since I'd heard that they fetched a pretty penny when made well.

My brother had apparently finished his chores, since he looked ready to play. He held what was now his trademark wooden sword in his right hand, and an old pot lid dangled as a shield from his left. I was glad to see he still enjoyed my gift, and thought to myself that I should craft him a proper shield if I ever came across a flat piece of bark.

"Oh," I said, "hey, Heinz."

"Come on, let's go play," he said. "Michael and Hans are waiting."

After overcoming his hostility toward me, my brother had begun to invite me to play with him and my second and third brothers, Michael and Hans. Heinz was a bit turbulent and frightening, so the twins had taken his side, but it seemed there was no residual hostility between them and me. Nowadays, we were all nice and chummy.

"Sure," I agreed, toddling after him with my little legs. "What are we gonna do?"

"*Duh*, we're playing adventurer," he said as he proudly pointed his sword to the sky.

Adventuring was one of the few occupations that was unbound by the rules and regulations of the Trialist Empire. Their compatriots managed guilds in every nation, and they were free to travel as they pleased. At times, they stopped to help local magistrates and lords, and at other times they cleaned up smaller issues around town. Their journey could take them to slay some terrible beast, or they could uncover great treasure in an uncharted or forgotten land. These were the wandering heroes known as adventurers.

A traveling minstrel had sung a saga about them when he visited some time ago, and Heinz had been infatuated with them ever since. The story was as basic as they came, and it was such a familiar dragon-slaying tale that I couldn't help but feel as though I was getting tired of dragon quests.

The gist of it had been that the princess had been cursed by an evil mage, and the king had offered his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who could obtain the evil dragon's gemstone of healing. An adventurer responded to this quest, only to discover the legendary sacred sword and set off on his journey with divine blessings guiding him.

The saga had been a good old-fashioned classic. The scenario likely would have been torn to shreds for lacking any twists or turns in my previous world, but it was ironically refreshing for a jaded man in his thirties.

I had experience writing and performing similar plotlines when playing with inexperienced GMs or players. As hackneyed as they were, classic stories had possessed an allure that only the classics could provide, and I fondly remembered the fun times they offered.

What was more, the most charming part about TRPGs was that the story couldn't be completed alone. It was the GM's responsibility to dictate the general outline, but each PC's actions were determined by the players. Consequently, what began with a classic synopsis could soon be littered with infinite unconventional moments.

Let's see, there was that one time when some fool started sweet-talking the dragon and ended up marrying it. Another time, someone asked, "Wouldn't it be easier to buy the gem than to fight a dragon?" and the dragon replied, "I'll trade you for the kingdom's most prized treasure." That idiot steered the entire session into a giant heist. As I mused that all of the twists I'd enjoyed were variations based around the classics to begin with, I was filled with an overwhelming gratitude for the old-fashioned saga and the minstrel who had sung them.

At any rate, this dragon-slaying adventure had really tickled my brother's sensibilities, and he was now in the midst of an intense fervor. He had loudly declared that he would one day become an adventurer, and now led me and my brothers as we pretended to be a band of pathfinders. I couldn't help but grin at these antics.

As a matter of course, Heinz was the swordsman in charge, my second brother was the priest with healing miracles, my third brother was an arcane

scholar who had begun to unravel the secrets of magic, and I was a thief. It was the perfect display of our hierarchy as brothers, was it not? The party was well balanced in terms of combat, so maybe my brother was smarter than he let on.

And, since we were all having fun, I decided to hold my tongue; there was no need to slap a starry-eyed child with a harsh reality check. The cold truth was that adventurers were simply drifters who worked any odd job they could find, and Heinz was fated to inherit the house after attending the magistrate's private school.

A few days ago, my father had sat me down for a talk. He'd said that, should I wish to, I could attend school in my brother's stead. With my cynical adult mentality, seeing through my father's thought process had been an easy feat. Basically, he had begun to consider letting his talented fourth son inherit the house.

I had politely declined.

Put bluntly, I found it boring to take over my father's farm when untold possibilities lay within my reach. It would be difficult to find a new place to call home, but I had no issues with committing to a different path so long as there was any risk of regretting choosing a farmer's life.

I sympathized with my father, who had desperately worked to build up the life we led. But this was a genuine *fantasy world*. I couldn't help but want to explore it.

Regardless, I was his fourth-born son. There would be many restrictions on me even if I were to inherit our farm, and I didn't want to create friction between me and my brothers now when we were finally getting along. I didn't have any reason to force my father to carry the burden of such hardship, so I was able to tell him to send my brother to school with a cheery heart.

It was then, as an aside, that I'd learned the truth about the adventurers my brother adored. The ones that slew dragons and dove into dungeons abound with riches were only a small fraction of all adventurers. The reality was that they mainly worked miscellaneous tasks for lords and magistrates when those in power thought it a waste to mobilize their own forces. The powers that be simply had a demand for cheap labor that could be sent out to any corner of

the world.

A cold truth, indeed. Thus, I had also been thinking of my brother's future when I'd declined the offer. To be completely frank, I didn't need to attend school to find success. It would give everyone in our family greater peace of mind if my brother took the house and lived out a safe, healthy life here on the farm.

"Where are we adventuring today?" I asked.

"Let's go to the woods out back," Heinz replied. "The codger next door told me that, a few decades ago, there was a kid who died after hiding a coin blessed by a fairy in some old knothole. Ain't that some crazy treasure?!"

For now, I wanted to let him enjoy his adventures. Running around a tiny wood with no thought for wages or danger was nice and sound. A fairy coin? I couldn't ask for anything better. It was miles and miles above being paid pennies to hunt down bandits or beasts, catching rats in a sewer, or cleaning out a drainage ditch.

Still, it wasn't as if I *didn't* have any attachment to adventuring. Many of the avatars I'd lived through carried themselves under that name as they began their journeys: I had been a boy who abandoned his village just because he thought magic swords were cool. I had been a young man who left his covenant behind when the voice of God told him to face the incoming barbarian tribes. I had been a half-demon, coveting honors as I fled from persecution. I had been a necromantic widow, bent on reviving the lover she'd lost on her journey. I had been a robot who romanticized the ruins from which he emerged, delving into its depths using magical machinery.

I recalled each and every one so vividly that I could write replays of them to this day. They were brilliant, blissful memories.

There were some who earned glory. Others had a remarkable number on the Henderson Scale as they found themselves leading a massive bandit organization. Other times still, the combined efforts of the GM and player's dice led to an untimely death in the first act.

As I lined up these memories, I thought that maybe being an adventurer wasn't so bad after all. Despite the reality, it wasn't as if the heroes of sagas

didn’t exist at all. I began to run in the footsteps of my dreaming brother, diving into the dream myself.

[Tips] The experience spent on a skill or trait cannot be refunded. God unfortunately does not allow you to alter His blessing with a mechanical pencil.

Summer of the Sixth Year

Expected Value

The number in the blank when you tell yourself, “I’m sure I’ll roll at *least* a ___.”

For 2D6 this is a 7, the mean outcome. As a result, many tabletop games balance their difficulty around these sorts of values.

However, probability only trends toward expected results after an infinite number of repetitions, so people with horrendous luck do still exist, and can be found everywhere.

I believe every person has a bad habit or two that they can’t seem to kick. My first was that I was impulsive. My second was that a full wallet tended to go to my head.

“Drat, where is he?”

“Come ooon, where are you, Erich?”

“He’s the last one left...”

And now, my irredeemable vice was on full display. I couldn’t believe I picked up Stealth, Perception Block, and Silent Steps all for *hide-and-seek...!*

I really am an utter moron. I can’t believe that I purchased skills because I was on the verge of being found and didn’t want to lose. There’s a limit to how wasteful I can be! To think that I was talking all high-and-mighty about the logical need for direction just a while ago... Where did that me go?

This time, the skills I’d dipped into would continue to be useful in other situations, but at this rate I was bound to steer myself into ruin eventually. They were all lower level skills from the Martial Arts category. Unlike the job-specific skills of a hunter or assassin, these had been relatively inexpensive, so I just kept picking up one after another.

I'd stopped myself at III: Apprentice in each of them, but that alone blew away a full week's worth of serious work at home. My lack of self-control was astounding.

I found myself in the woods on the outskirts of the canton. The early summer green that surrounded me wasn't wholly natural, as the forest was preserved with replanting efforts, but that also meant the area was safer than most. Of course, it would be dangerous to stray near the woodcutters' territory, but the forest was otherwise akin to a playground. This was where all the children of the canton came to play, and I was no exception. When I turned six, my parents had permitted me to venture out further from home, and I'd begun to mingle with my neighbors here.

Our game of choice was foxes-and-geese, a variant hybrid of hide-and-seek and tag. Simply put, each captured goose became a fox, meaning the pursuers grew in number with every catch. The rules were rather loosely defined, and abandoning your initial hiding spot was fair game. I heard a band of foxes with my Listening skill (another low level Martial Arts skill that was too perennially useful to be considered a waste...even if I jacked it up all the way to IV: Craftsman), so I activated Silent Steps to gingerly make my escape without rustling any of the scattered foliage.

Honestly, this ability to acquire skills was a literal godsend. Naturally, many traits were locked away behind prerequisite conditions, but I was able to unlock stealth-based skills all from a children's game... Not only that, but I could now constantly earn experience points by leaving my skills on at all times.

I'd hoped to be able to abuse a system like this one day, but I never would have thought it was legitimately possible. It might have been one of those mechanics where experience points are dealt out depending on how serious the situation was—and considering how seriously I was taking this game, I could see why the rates were so high. A few more hours of hiding and I could pay off all my expenses.

...Of course, the fact that I was getting so heated over a game of hide-and-seek with *children* when I was nearing forty years of total age did gnaw at the back of my mind. For the moment, I decided to tell myself that this was all for the sake of earning more experience points. I would leave it to the growing

number to prove my moral high ground. Still, I couldn't allow myself to get conceited, or I risked the clasp of my purse becoming even looser than it already was. The thought that I might make an overeager purchase because of my current accelerated income terrified me. The memory of receiving a box full of pricey supplements long after I forgot about ordering them sent a cold sweat down my back.

I put some distance between myself and the other children to spend a moment honing my discipline, when suddenly I noticed something behind me. This something was no ghostly presence; I'd heard the faint, crisp *crunch* of a fallen leaf underfoot.

"Gotchaaa!" it cried, and that was the end for me.

"Whoa!"

The "something" leapt onto me from behind. I'd been squatting down, so the sudden impact made me tumble forward. *I'm glad I leveled Endurance to VII: Exceptional and took Breakfall to V: Adept. I knew I could get hurt playing outside...*

"Heh heh, you're mine!" declared a cute little girl, peering into my eyes as I laid on the ground. Her charming, round face was adorned with large eyes and an adorably plump nose. This friendly face belonged to Margit, another child in the canton who was two years my senior.



“Urgh... Where did you come from...?” I groaned.

“Well, I figured you’d notice me if I made any sound, so I snuck up behind you as quietly as I could,” she said cheerfully. With a toothy smile, she added, “Mensch sure have it tough, not being able to see behind them and all.”

This girl with the dainty chestnut pigtails was not a mensch—not a human at all. To begin with, no breakfall would save me from injury if I had been tackled to the ground by a mensch girl two years older than me. The unfathomably light eight-year-old removed herself from me without a sound and offered me a hand. It was at the perfect height to be in reach, but only because I was groveling on the ground.

“Come on, up you go. Heeey! Everyone! I found Erich!!!”

When I got to my feet, she only came up to my waist. It wasn’t any kind of congenital issue, but rather because her legs were that of a spider’s: Margit was an arachne. My first meeting with her had been the moment that I truly internalized the fantasy aspect of the world I lived in.

Three types of people existed in this world: humanfolk like mensch, demonfolk whose mana left them with untold peculiarities (though I could make some inferences based on the flavor text of skills and traits), and demihumans like Margit. This last group was made up of people that combined human traits with those of other species.

The Rhine Trialist Empire offered no legal preference to any one group, and it wasn’t rare to see a handful of different races coexisting in one canton. In fact, I’d heard that one of the imperial houses of Rhine was a vampire bloodline, so evidently it was less than an issue.

“Oopsie, you’re covered in leaves,” Margit remarked. “Sorry, Erich. There’s some on your face too. Here, lemme get that.”

“Thanks...” I said.

As a result, Margit was considered as normal as you could get, despite her spider-like lower body. I’d nearly exploded in surprise when I first met her, but everyone around me was so nonchalant that it hadn’t taken long to get used to it. At any rate, she was a normal girl who took good care of the younger (*don’t*

look at me) members of our group.

I will admit that I *did* have a...*preference* for non-human characters in my past life. However, Margit was quite different from the sort of arachne I was used to. Her eight legs were short, stubby, and covered in dark plates, evocative of a furry crab. They were a far cry from the long, slender legs of a stereotypical arachne. Even though she was still young, she was coming up on her last molt and getting racy (and before you get any ideas, I mean racy like a fine wine is racy—fully realized as exemplary of its type—capisce?), so she would never fit the mold I had been used to.

That being said, it wasn't out of the ordinary; she came from a line of arachne based off of terrestrial spiders such as the jumping spider. On the other hand, forms of arachne stemming from orb-weaving spiders had classic long legs. To put it in more familiar terms, it was a simple difference of ancestry.

"Aw, I'm no match for you, Margit..." I sighed.

"Of course not," she replied. "Maybe you'll have a chance when you're older."

"We're only two years apart..." I said, pouting.

"That's not very convincing coming from a kid who only pays attention to what's in front of him," she said with a smug grin. She then puffed up her scanty chest with pride, and the dark orbs embellishing what looked to be a pair of hair ornaments glinted with the light of the afternoon sun.

Those weren't beaded hair ties to hold up her pigtails, but rather fully functioning eyes. In addition to a pair of eyes that excelled in perceiving depth, arachne boasted a set of compound eyes that offered an unbelievable field of vision. In addition, the act of sticking low to the ground and pouncing on prey was a perfect fit for a jumping spider.

These racial traits were utterly broken in a game of hide-and-seek. But more than that, it meant that arachne were naturally fit to be rangers and scouts, and often matured into hunters in adulthood. Personally, I was also sure that an arachne grappler or fencer build could turn into a dodge tank that would break all semblance of balance.

And as a matter of fact, Margit hailed from a long, unbroken lineage of state

huntsmen. Not only did they supply the canton with meats and furs, but they also culled the forests of unwanted animals to maintain the ecosystem. This latter point was something they did under direct orders from the magistrate, so they were a cut above the average local hunter.

It couldn't be overstated how impressive it was that the magistrate employed them. A salary from the state in this age held infinitely more weight than anything a public worker could obtain in the modern era. The salary was a display of trust, announcing that an artisan was worth their work even at the expense of regular payments.

"...You won't find me next time," I said.

"Oh, really now? Get ready, I'll make sure you're the first one to fall!" she replied with a radiant smile.

As I watched her merry face, I found myself thinking, *Maybe I should grab Presence Detection for next time.* All my maturity seemed to have vanished in an instant.

[Tips] Many races with powerful unique bonuses exist. Many have subraces that are vastly different from one another.

The ratio of humanfolk to demonfolk to demihumans in the Rhine Empire was said to be 5 : 1 : 3. Considering that neither institutional nor cultural divisions stood between the three types of people, the ratio likely arose from the simple fact that humanfolk propagated the most quickly. Adaptability and the ability to reproduce in any environment had led to a rise in their population. Specifically, the mensch were so numerous that they made up the majority of all humanfolk.

However, numbers did not so easily translate into power. Despite their numerical advantage, mensch influence paled in comparison to their fellow humanfolk, let alone the other highly intelligent races. Their magical aptitude was leagues lower than the long-lived methuselah, and their physical abilities were dwarfed by the mighty dvergar. And these were only other humans; few mensch could hope to match up to demons or demihumans when it came to raw stats.

Children only a few years apart were no match for one another—the older child would always win. This was all the more noticeable with a demihuman. Not even an adult mensch could keep up with a juvenile centaur. The same went for the bullish strength of an audhumbla. And with arachne being famed for their prowess as hunters, scouts, and assassins, few mensch in history kept pace with one in a serious game of hide-and-seek. It took only the slightest gap in skill to ostracize a child.

As a result, one spidery huntsman's daughter was at her wit's end. Margit was still too adept, even after new rules had been put in place to limit her from climbing trees and the like. It had gotten to the point that the local children had begun to avoid her.

There was little she could do about the fact that, like most bug-demihumans, arachne were quick to mature. The speed of this development usually inversely correlated with lifespan; since arachne lived about as long as mensch, Margit was just about to approach physical maturity. Her superiority was more than evident. The games had literally turned into contests between children and an adult, with a harsh divide between races that could not be easily overcome.

However, her maturity did not necessarily extend to her mental state. The Trialist Empire considered arachne to be mature at fifteen years of age, and an upbringing in such a society was sure to reflect this. Margit may have been a fully grown jumping spider arachne, but she was still a *child*.

Margit wanted playmates, as all children do, but could find no one to play her favorite game: foxes-and-geese. Every attempt would end with an instant goose roundup, or else she would remain uncaught for hours at a time. The other children were tired of her unbroken winning streak and would often turn sour when she participated.

Then, one day, a new boy appeared. His name was Erich, and his parents had just permitted him to wander into the woods. He had no particularly noteworthy traits, but his older brothers were already a part of their group, so he fit in nicely. He seemed rather attached to Margit, as he'd run over and talk about all sorts of things whenever he saw her.

Most importantly, however, Erich was good at foxes-and-geese. When he first

appeared, he was clumsy and poor at hiding, as most children are. But one day, he'd suddenly become an expert. His movements were swifter than the swaying shadows, and he would disappear into the brush in the blink of an eye. Additionally, he was infuriatingly difficult to find once he was out of sight.

Erich's stealth meant that when he was a fox, he captured you before you knew it; when he was a goose, the game would never end. On top of that, he was quite the budding tactician. His ingenuity gave the other children the means to stand up to the menace known as Margit.

"If you make a circle and search inwards, you can catch any goose!"

Naturally, this stratagem was effective against a certain arachne too. With the introduction of a new prodigy and new tactics, Margit once again found a place within the group—after all, she was the only one that stood any chance of catching him one-on-one.

This is why Margit fancied him. She liked his smooth, golden hair. She liked how sometimes his baby blue eyes looked mature beyond their age, and she liked his gentle, slender face. She liked how he spoke clearly and concisely, unlike most children of their age. She liked the warmth of his mensch body. And above all, she liked how he didn't leave her out of her favorite game.

Erich was the only one that Margit tackled to the ground. At some point, something in the back of her mind had started telling her to, so she pounced on him again and again. Far was the day when she would come to realize that this was instinctual behavior for the matriarchal arachne, but for today, she once again leapt on her favorite little mensch.

[Tips] Arachne are a race with human torsos and spider legs. Well suited to many climates, they can be found in most regions of the continent. Though they originate from the Southern Coast, their adaptability led to their propagation and subracial division.

The Rhine Empire is home to settlements of arachne resembling remarkably small jumping spiders, large and slender orb-weaving spiders, and tarantulas that came from a foreign land.

Winter of the Seventh Year

Fixed Value

A set number used in calculations that does not rely on dice rolls. Outside of critical rolls like snake eyes or boxcars, TRPGs generally use an additive formula of [Fixed value (representing base ability)] + [Dice roll] = result.

For example, say one's <Strength> (fixed value) is 5 and wants to push a rock. If the number needed to succeed is a 12, the player will need a total value of 7 from their rolling 2D6. This dice roll adds an element of randomness for the players to enjoy.

However, if this fixed value was at 6 or 7, the minimum die result needed to succeed would be lower; hence, in systems that use them, higher fixed values indicate stronger characters.

Summer here was pleasantly dry compared to my motherland, and the year quickly slipped into autumn. The pantheon of gods that oversaw Rhine and its border states counted the Harvest Goddess among its number, and the overwhelming workload of Her season made it pass by before I knew it.

I didn't have the time to appreciate the romantic vista of shimmering wheat, swayed by the wind under the setting autumn sun. Nor could I spare a moment to grow sentimental over another year of age to my name. My brothers and I were instead hurried along to help out around the farm whenever we could.

With all the things that needed to be done during the harvest, a child of seven years was more than enough to be considered a farmhand. My family had gotten their money's worth out of me: the childish stamina that I'd once thought to be limitless was drained in the blink of an eye. In fact, the only memories I had of autumn were of fieldwork and sleep. I couldn't help marveling at how my brothers would continue to play outside *after* a day's work was done.

We had more on our plates than just our own family farm. The idea of a canton wasn't just for show—a part of our taxes were to be paid in maintenance of the lord's fields. His countless acres of land were split up between all the households of the canton to manage, and there was *still* more to be done.

I had to lend a hand at my relatives' farms as well, after all. No matter how bothersome it was, I couldn't make light of this sort of cooperation. In an age wholly removed from modern conveniences and advanced agricultural equipment, manpower was king. The fields would remain blocked up with wheat forever if we didn't rope in our kin to push through all the work. We needed to be able to sow the seeds of flowers before it began snowing, so we could turn them into the soil as green manure come springtime. Otherwise, we could face serious repercussions during next year's harvest.

Our reaping managed to conclude before the Harvest Goddess clocked out for the year. As the hustle of autumn began giving way to the bustle of winter preparations, a stray memory itched in the back of my mind. Modern Japanese farms only maintained a single crop that was sown in spring and reaped in fall, so I hadn't given this any thought, but I suddenly realized that the plant we were handling was *wheat*.

The sort of wheat that we were cultivating was a winter cereal, meaning it was meant to be sown in the fall and reaped near the end of spring. Although I never got to see its ending, I had once read a comic that went into detail about the modern agricultural industry, so the memory was rather clear. Konigstuhl's climate was less prone to deep snowdrifts than that of the manga, but I doubted the wheat itself could differ so wildly, and I asked the adults around me for an explanation.

"What are you on about, Erich?" my father asked. "You plant wheat in the spring. That's when the Harvest Goddess decided we should sow our seeds."

"The earth is a dress made for the Harvest Goddess," my mother explained. "We want to dress Her in the most beautiful dress during the most bountiful time of year, so we sow our seeds in the springtime."

The answers I received contained little substance. The only throughline in

each of them was the mention of our deity, the Harvest Goddess. There wasn't much use in theorizing on my own, so I decided to simply go and ask someone who knew the answer. At any rate, I was used to this sort of initial investigation being a common part of any campaign. The important part was to ask "What's that?" whenever I was faced with an unfamiliar term.

I found a moment between my winter prep chores to sneak off to church and asked the bishop the same question, where I finally got a satisfactory response. Just as my parents had stated, the Harvest Goddess was using Her divine power to dictate the crops' planting season.

This was something that I had already assumed from my own blessings, but the bishop's teachings confirmed that the gods of this world were proven existences, unlike the deities of my previous life. They wrought miracles upon the earth, whispered prophecies into the ears of the faithful, and smote heathens with prejudice. They governed the world with their awesome powers and were undeniably present in our lives.

In essence, they were the classic TRPG gods who were only a fervent prayer away from responding with heavenly blessing. It was this blessing that altered seasons and flora according to the gods' whims. The Harvest Goddess presided over fertility of both man and field, and as the arbiter of life itself, She had bid us decorate Her when life was most abundant. Since the land was Her corporeal form, this meant we were to plan our harvest for the fall.

The bishop was kind enough to explain our holy mythos in greater detail than anything I'd heard in our usual service. "In the spring, we fashion pajamas out of green grass to ensure She can wake comfortably. We then till the earth and plant our crops, creating a thin veil for Her to ward off the summer heat. A golden dress embellished with all manners of fruit is then weaved in autumn to celebrate the year's cycle. Once all the work is done, the Harvest Goddess takes to bed in a blanket of white snow."

I'm sure the bishop was willing to teach me during this chaotic rush of a season (he had been stuffing his winter clothes with cotton while lecturing me) only because I'd been a good participant at church. I had memorized the hymns we sang during service, and it was clear that I wasn't asking to make light of the faith. He stroked the emerging white in his neatly kept beard and added, "We

also offset our harvest season from those of neighboring nations to avoid conflict.” Apparently, this information was only meant to be learned by ordained priests, but he simply patted me on the head and sent me along after telling me this.

I had experienced the feeling of my world expanding many times before, but now I felt as invigorated as the day I bought my first supplementary rulebook. There was something touching about immersing myself in the world that I couldn’t get from looking through the stats pages that came with my abilities. *How fun!*

Excitedly sticking my head into anything that was even remotely interesting was vital. No output can emerge without input, and success in this combo-driven world was directly linked to the amount of data I had on hand. Hoarding information was an important piece of groundwork.

Thanks to the bishop, I spent the rest of the day as chipper as could be while I did my abundant winter chores. I didn’t live in a region that was prone to being buried in snow, but the chill of winter was still a real threat. The temperature frequently dipped below freezing, as evidenced by the iced jars of water I sometimes saw in the morning.

Even as a child, there was plenty to do: for example, many of the kids in our friend group were tasked with augmenting our firewood stack with stray branches or hunting for fruits that kept well. However, the children of Konigstuhl were more than happy to help. In fact, this sort of “chore” could be done in the same forest we played in, so it felt more like an extension of playtime than work. Plus, it was a special form of play we could only enjoy once a year, *and* our parents praised us when we did well. How could we *not* want to help?

But the fun times are always short to last. Winter preparations were already a challenge to complete, but as my sister Elisa approached her second birthday, she came down with a terrible fever that sent our household into a state of emergency.

[Tips] The gods are higher existences that have made their presence known.

If the world were a desktop PC, then the gods would be administrators who could utilize the software installed on it. They watch over those who inhabit their programs and gain power from their faith.

There is no telling when an innocent soul shall return to the gods, for their innocence cannot bear the corrupt cruelty of ephemeral reality.

Johannes shook the old Rhinian adage out of his mind and wiped the sweat off his panting babe. His youngest was red-hot and gasping for air as she writhed around in bed. Little Elisa had been born on a cold, cold winter night two years ago. She had come into a dim and icy world, a new moon hanging overhead. She'd been smaller than she should have, and had been slow to mature as well.

One year would be enough for other children to show signs of speech and command their wobbly legs. Elisa was nearing two and had yet to call for her mother and father. Furthermore, she had still not risen to her feet, let alone taken her first steps. In fact, she had only just been weaned off her mother's teat as of last month.

The nun who'd midwived her had eased Johannes's and Hanna's concerns by saying that the child had simply been born a tad early, and cast a miracle to improve Elisa's hardiness. Even then, Elisa's growth was worryingly slow.

The couple had first thought their child to be diseased and then suspected that she may be deaf. They even considered some terrible malfunction somewhere in the sensitive regions within her skull, but all of these theories came up dry. They'd had no choice but to accept that this was how she was.

And after all that, she was now hotter to the touch than an open fire. She coughed up all of the water they gave her, let alone any sort of porridge. With her throat too raspy and her nose too clogged even to cry, the couple were made acutely aware of the fleeting nature of their daughter's life.

Their family had been free of troubles until Elisa had come along. The three eldest boys, taking after their father, had never once come down with any serious illness. Erich was as scrawny as his mother, but even he had grown up perfectly healthy. They'd never had to beg the bishop for a miracle, and the

only times they called upon a physician was to tend to a bruise or cut. They had grown complacent. *Our children will grow up in good health*, they'd thought.

Only able to force a small amount of water down Elisa's throat, Johannes paused from wiping at the endless torrent of sweat and turned to his wife. "...Can we afford the next dose?" he asked, holding her close. The local physician had accompanied a caravan to the Southern Sea for the cold winter, and it had been a great ordeal to purchase the medicine—both physically and financially.

"...It's going to be tight," Hanna replied. Johannes had often been teased that he didn't deserve a woman of Hanna's beauty, but now her usual charm had given way to a worn and haggard frown as she ruffled through their coin pouch. The autumn taxes and winter expenditures had left it remarkably light: all that remained were a number of bronze coins accompanied by a handful of silver. They had a small stash hidden away in their basement in case of theft, but even that would do little to bolster their purse.

They had spent some of their money expanding their fields upon receiving the magistrate's approval. Some more had gone toward a workhorse to maintain the larger plot. Then they'd purchased paddy seeds to cultivate their new acreage. Had this catastrophe struck but one year earlier, weathering the storm would have been an elementary task. The timing was tragic.

Medicine was expensive. Medicinal herbs required constant care to prevent rot and were altogether meaningless without an experienced physician's understanding of concoctive ratios. Furthermore, these herbalists did not aimlessly brew drugs to suit their fancy, but rather tailored each cure to its corresponding request, taking into account symptoms, age, and the like. The final product's high price was a matter of course.

Little remained of the medicine the couple had emptied their pockets to purchase. It was plain to see that it would only last another dose or two—and if it did not cure Elisa, then there was little hope that anything would.

Many were the young souls who departed this world due to illness. Until now, Johannes and Hanna had been blessed with the extraordinary fortune to not see their children make for heavenly embrace at the hands of a cold. But in

truth, death was a commonplace affair.

"...I see," Johannes said bitterly. His hands tightened over his thighs. *What kind of father can't even save his own daughter?* With the birth of Elisa, he had planned on expanding his farmland to provide a better life for everyone under his roof... His broad shoulders, toned through years of physical labor, now slumped under the immense weight of his own accursed decision.

There *were* means of quickly raising the funds. Johannes knew a handful of potential lenders, and in the worst-case scenario he could mortgage his newly expanded fields to produce the capital. But could he ask his wife and four healthy sons to sacrifice their futures to save his daughter?

Johannes's emotions cried out to do all he could for Elisa, but the rational head of the household within him screamed to reconsider. While he held his daughter's life in one hand, the weight of his wife and sons hung from the other. He could not justify spending the last of their savings to *have a chance* of nursing Elisa back to good health, all while risking death by starvation over the winter months for the rest of the family.

"Dear," Hanna whispered, "do you think..."

"We..." Johannes paused, "We may have to prepare ourselves for the worst."

"Dear!"

"Don't make me say it! You know as well as I do!"

Once the last of the medicine was exhausted, they would need to steel themselves. There was no easy decision to be made here as their trains of thought spiraled into one another like snakes swallowing their own tails. Then, suddenly, the floorboards emitted a noticeable *creak*.

The pair whipped around in surprise and exclaimed, "Erich?!" There in the doorway stood their youngest son, with a sleepy sway to his step. The boys had been busy recently taking care of the house while Johannes and Hanna cared for their daughter, so Erich should have joined his brothers in the land of dreams long ago. To see him here now was a great shock; they didn't want their children to hear such worrisome discussion.

"Mama, Papa..." Erich mumbled.

The boy was incredibly mature for his age, but a child was a child. Some things were fit for them to learn at their age, and others were better left unseen and unheard. The two parents stepped forward in a panic, fretting over what they would say to him. But this state of alarm caused their thoughts to freeze upon seeing the item in their son's hand as he thrust his arm forward.

Erich's small hands held a wooden statue. It depicted a voluptuous figure with rich, flowing locks that exuded an aura of motherhood—the Harvest Goddess Herself. The palpable motion in Her hair and the visible softness of Her body were alluring enough that even an uncultured couple of farmhands could see the mastery in its craftsmanship.

"If we sell this for money, will Elisa be okay?" Erich asked.

All of the color instantly drained from the two adults' faces. After all, their son had just become a thief. While imperial law did not allow children to inherit their parent's crimes, parents were fully responsible for the wrongdoings of their offspring.

Larceny carried a great deal of potential punishments, but fines and exemplary punishment made up the majority. While tales circulated of first-time offenders getting off with a public announcement of their crimes, most were sentenced to live for a time in chains or wooden shackles to show the world their sins. If the stolen item was particularly valuable, there was a chance that their hands could be taken as damages.

Even to an untrained eye, the idol before them was clearly quite sophisticated. The wood had been refined into an avatar of the Goddess, and even in its unpainted state it would clearly fetch a ludicrous sum. It belonged in a temple, not their humble abode.

"Erich, where the hell did you get this...?" Johannes asked, grabbing his son by the shoulders. At that moment, he looked down to the boy's tattered pants that had been passed down through three iterations of brothers, noticing that copious wood shavings still clung to them. The wooden carving also smelled strongly of recent cuts, with no trace of varnish to the odor. While the finish was smooth, it had clearly been a painstaking effort with a rough file, and the texture of the conifers the family used for firewood peeked out from beneath

the surface.

“I made it,” Erich explained. “But it took me a really long time. I tried copying the one at the church.”

Now that he mentioned it, the statue was more of a statuette: it was about the length of a forearm. It was reasonable to think it had been carved out of a piece of firewood.

Still, as curiously dexterous as their son was, it was nigh-unthinkable that he had created something like this without a proper tool to his name. It wouldn’t be strange for the work to fetch a few gold pieces if it were given some finishing tou—*gold pieces?!* The husband and wife gasped in unison.

“Erich,” Johannes asked in confirmation, “did you *really* make this? All by yourself?”

“Yup,” Erich replied while picking a splinter out of his hand. He held back a yawn and continued, “I did a little bit at a time, since you and Mama have been talking about how much money we need ever since Elisa got sick.”

His parents were overcome with shame. They had spoken in hushed whispers long after the sun set so their children wouldn’t hear, and yet their youngest son had caught their conversations as clear as day. No mother or father would want their child to have to carry such worries.

“I’m busy in the daytime,” Erich explained, “so I’ve been working when the moon goes up high in the sky. Then it’s pretty bright.”

Johannes buried his face in his hands. His growing boy had been fighting drowsiness every night to stay up late working on a way to help. He felt as though he had failed him as a father.

“Do you think this will help pay for the medicine?” Erich asked.

“...Yeah. You did well... You’re amazing.” Whenever Johannes praised his sons, he always added “You really are my son” to the end. But tonight, he could not bring himself to do so. Such words from a disappointing father were wasted on a spectacular son.

Selling the statue to the church would certainly yield enough to buy more

medicine. In fact, if they dedicated it to the church, they could petition for the use of a <Miracle> instead. The Harvest Goddess's curative powers were not as potent as the Night Goddess's, who presided over healing, but it was more than enough to cure an illness or two.

"You're amazing," the father repeated. "You really are... You really are Elisa's brother."

"Her brother?" echoed the son.

"Yeah, you're a wonderful brother... Honestly." Johannes lifted up his nodding son to take him to the children's bedroom. Erich had failed to get any proper rest in the past few days working by moonlight as he had. On top of that, he had been helping out around the house, so the fatigue clung to him now like a set of wet clothes dragging along everywhere he went. "It's time to go to bed. Leave the rest to me."

"'Kay... Good ni...mm..." the boy trailed off.

Carrying his sleeping son in his arms, Johannes let out a massive sigh. *I'm going to go to the church as soon as people begin to rise in the morning.* The son had given it his all; now the father was to repay it in kind.

Johannes ignored his own clinging weariness and swore to the icy moon beyond the window that he would succeed. The moon was full tonight. In the Rhinian pantheon, the perfect glowing circle in the sky represented the manifestation of one half of the two parental gods: the Night Goddess, who presided over motherhood and divinity.

With the Mother Goddess and Her sidereal attendants as witness, Johannes gently laid his hardworking son to rest and quietly returned to his daughter's side.

[Tips] Miracles are acts of divinity that bring about realities that would otherwise be considered unfathomable. The will of the gods bends reality toward "truth" and can warp the laws of physics and nature to do so.

Those with the power to bring about miracles do so with considerable gravity, regardless of their faith. Miracles remain miracles precisely because

they do not occur casually.

Spring of the Seventh Year

Critical

Certain popular game franchises label particular dice rolls as critical hits or desperate attacks, depending on who is attacking.

For 2D6 this would be boxcars; 1D100 might ask for 01~05, while 1D20 requires a perfect 20, and so on. These elusive perfect rolls are almost always guaranteed successes for any kind of action.

In combat, a critical hit represents a particularly devastating attack. For example, some games allow untold bloodlust by offering an opportunity for the player to roll again if they manage a 10 or higher from rolling 2D6. Some absolute heretics go so far as to *lower* this threshold and spend the entire campaign clobbering enemies with critical hits.

Good news. In the spring of my seventh year, I first witnessed what one might call “magic.”

I had splurged my accumulated experience to crank up my Wood Whittling skill to VI: Expert, and my baby sister had endured through the winter because of it. That alone would have made for a splendid spring, but the season came with yet another wonderful event.

Magic was the epitome of high fantasy, and appeared in far more than just tabletop campaigns. It could heal wounds, smite foes, soothe nature, and concoct elixirs. While there existed an endless variety of systems and implementations, magic was always a significant factor in every setting. I myself had played the role of mage countless times.

I had been a boy chasing after his friend-turned-adventurer using his middling aptitude for spellcasting. I had been a cursed swordsman abandoned by his village due to his heretical roots, adventuring to pay the bills. I had been a researcher who began his journey in his forties in search of a way to lengthen

the minuscule lifespan of his man-made partner.

Throughout myriad systems sprawled across an untold number of sessions, magic consistently played a part—good and bad. I had known that magic existed in this world thanks to my stats page, but alas, this campaign was sprinkled with harsh reality checks here and there. It was quite the rarity to be capable of using magic at all.

Today was a religious holiday where a plow was driven through the tender soil to celebrate the melting of snow and to pray for a peaceful year. A small feast of dried meats and other leftovers from the winter was held in the town square. It was at this glorified excuse to drink that I first laid my eyes on magic.

Frankly, it was nothing spectacular. The many caravans of Rhine were up and operational again, and one had heard of a local festival. They'd opened up a handful of stalls in the hopes of turning a profit, no matter how meager.

An old scribe-cum-mage was traveling alongside them and had pulled some powder out of a small sack—when *boom*, fireworks appeared in the sky. The vivid colors paled in the midday sky, but the sounds of their pops and bursting lights were enough to make the heart dance.

Local magistrates often funded these sorts of spectacles; magicians made their living through these and sundry other pursuits. I had waited with bated breath. *Is this going to be how I unlock my magical abilities?*

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be. What once had been good news now prompted little but despair. Amidst the crowd of children clamoring for an encore, I asked the old spellcaster how I could learn to use magic. He then asked me, "Let's see here now... Young man, how many moons are in the sky?"

I joined the chorus of children around me and simply answered, "One."

Ah, crap, wait. I recalled that I'd noticed quite a few magic-related skills that wouldn't even let me read the flavor text; among them, many had names with lunar implications. *Do mages see a second moon—no, maybe there are even more than that?*

However, no explanation of moons or what-have-you followed, and the old man simply patted my head with a sympathetic smile. The other kids found his

behavior strange and relented, but I was too stubborn to give in so easily.

Considering that he was in the middle of his job, I must have been quite the nuisance from his perspective. Thinking about it rationally, my actions were quite embarrassing. Perhaps my mental state was being influenced by my childish body, but at any rate my excitement had tossed all self-control and consideration to the wayside.

However, it seemed he was a personage of upstanding character. “Well, give me a minute here,” the man said. “I can’t just leave my work unattended.” And surely enough, he returned to speak with me after the fireworks show had ended.

Now out of powder, the old man pulled out a flask of water and a handkerchief to clean his hands. After a brief moment he produced a worn old pipe from his breast pocket and stuffed it with tobacco with a practiced hand.

“Young man,” he resumed, “that was just an idle cantrip—hardly real *magic*. Either way, it isn’t something you can learn in a day.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

The tip of his finger burst into a small flame, which he used to light the leaves in his pipe. He smiled. “Can you tell which one this is? Real wizardry, or simple hedge magic?”

The humility to admit one’s ignorance is the first step on the path to sagacity. I could press my luck with one of my many hypotheses, but I chose to stash away the personal theories and shook my head.

“Hedge magic utilizes the laws of nature; true magic bends them.” The axiom and following explanation he offered me was rather abstract, so allow me to reinterpret this into my own words. Essentially, hedge magic was the art of using the mana flowing through one’s own body as the trigger for a pseudo-chemical reaction. Magic used the same mana to instead bend or wholly overwrite fundamental laws of nature—say, for example, the notion that a force exists pulling things downwards.

A flame like the one flickering on the elderly gentleman’s fingertip could either be a chemical reaction of combustion or the very *concept* of burning

itself. Fire made with a cantrip was liable to burn the pipe alongside the tobacco within, all while consuming nearby oxygen to fuel itself. The magical element was front-loaded: mana was the initial primer that caused the phenomenon, and the ember would silently run its course and fade away.

On the other hand, a *magical* flame could be contrived to only burn the tobacco leaves if the old man had willed it. It wouldn't affect the pipe, nor would it need oxygen to fuel it. However, once the mana poured into the spell was exhausted, it would disappear without leaving a trace—including the telltale signs of a normal fire. Even if the tobacco was in the middle of burning, it would spontaneously stop. This also meant a flame made of true magic could stay ablaze in pouring rain on a planet without oxygen. It followed the specifications of its spell until it ran out of mana or the caster manually stopped it.

While they appeared to be similar at first glance, the two phenomena were on entirely separate levels. To give an example, a fireball cast by a hedge mage could be put out by stopping, dropping, and rolling. But a magician's work would continue to burn you even if you buried yourself in mud. Honestly, it was quite the terrifying power.

As I reveled in awe, the old man continued on to the next topic. That is to say, he began speaking on what was needed to use magic. According to him, neither technique could be used by throwing mana around at random.

All living things contained mana, and while the volume differed per species and individual predisposition, no form of life existed without it. Variance in magical ability was dictated by one's capacities for mana storage and output. Basically, these were like the size of a water tank and the size of the hose connected to it, respectively.

The final point dividing those who could use magic from those who couldn't was the "vision" required to handle spells. Magicians had special eyes that could see the structure of the world, and their magic was akin to purposefully skipping a stitch while knitting a sweater.

That must be why he asked how many moons I could see, I finally realized.

Some received their powers of perception at birth; others came to see later in

life through some episode or another. Mensch magicians usually tended to be the latter. In the kind, persuasive tone adults use to ease excited children, he added, “There exists a means to artificially induce this process, but it is *extremely* rare.”

It was easy to see why. Bluntly put, magic and magecraft both benefited from being exclusive trades. If every farm boy could cast spells, the value of magic would plummet. Naturally, the nobility who utilized its power and the influence of magicians and mages would follow suit. There was no merit to allowing magical education to proliferate.

As a result, the magical community had come to the consensus that it would be better to keep their secrets hidden to all but those who were worthy of them. Further, the technical aspects of the art seemed seriously challenging. If one were to awaken their third eye for mana and begin firing off spells or cantrips willy-nilly, they might cause an inextinguishable fire or let off a series of explosions. It would be a minor tragedy if this burned down a house or two, but in the worst case, this sort of incident had the potential to wipe out an entire canton. Wanting to keep these details confidential was more than reasonable.

Those who made use of magic were bound to their craft by covenant. It made sense that I wouldn’t unlock the necessary prerequisites just by coming into contact with magic once.

Well, to be precise, I *could* awaken to my powers of my own volition. The first magician in history must have done exactly that, and I had found a few traits and unlocked skills that would likely have allowed me to utilize magic...but they were too inefficient for my liking.

Not only did these spells have a low chance of success, but they came packed with steep mana costs and wild variability in accuracy and damage. As I’ve stated in the past, I am a devout believer in fixed values, owing to the fact that Lady Luck has shunned me for years. It was a shame, but I couldn’t justify shelling out the experience to purchase something so volatile. If a low roll gave decent results and the effects improved with increasing numbers, I would have considered it, but the options available weren’t tailored for my type of luck. If only there had been a Luck stat for me to pour my points into...

In any case, there was only one thing I could do to learn magic properly: save money. In the long term, I could either choose to apprentice under a magician or to enroll in the Empire's official magic training institution in the imperial capital. Both options cost a ludicrous sum of cash that my family couldn't afford even if we sold every square inch of our farmland.

"So I won't be able to learn it...?" I asked.

"That's how it is, young man. I'm sorry... I'm a little too old to be taking on apprentices at my age," he said with a puff of his pipe. He scanned his eyes around the area for a moment and, with a sympathetic smile, he once again reached into his breast pocket. "Hm, I spoke a little too much today... Do you think you can keep this a secret?"

I nodded vigorously at the old man's playful question. I'm sure I looked like a proper seven-year-old without any acting on my part.

"Very good. In exchange, you can have this. I won't be needing it anymore." The man pulled out a weathered old ring. Its color was an indescribable mixture of grays somewhere in between silver and lead, and lacked any sort of embellishment to its name. Despite its plain appearance, my young hands felt it to be quite heavy, and it was large enough to easily slip off my thumb.

"If the opportunity ever arises, this ring will lend you its power," he said.

"Thanks, mister," I replied. "But why would you give me something so..."

"Trashy?"

This time my head was vigorously shaking from side to side. I'll admit that the thought *had* run through my mind, but I couldn't help but feel like there was more to it than met the eye. After all, the old fellow was the spitting image of a wizard. How could a gift from him be anything less than a key item?

"Something so valuable," I corrected.

The old man cackled with a cough of smoke at my appraisal. "That there is something I used in my youth. That's all it is—there's hardly any value to an old ring like that."

No, I'm pretty sure this is going to be a vital unique item, I thought. This was

simply how TRPGs operated: the old gentleman in front of me would turn out to be some unparalleled sage, his ring crafted a millennium ago with lost techniques, and so on, and so on. Some time in the future, I was sure to meet someone with more technical expertise who would look at the ring and exclaim, “Could it be?!” Trust me on this one.

“Well, the path of magic is an unpredictable one. Perhaps you’ll snag on a peculiar turn of fate and find yourself on it. Take care, little one,” he said with a playful smile. After patting me on the head, he pulled out some more powder and shooed me along to return to his work.

And so, with both good and bad news bouncing around my head, I received a priceless treasure in the spring of my seventh year.

[Tips] There are races that need a catalyst to utilize magic and races that do not, with mensch falling into the former category. Furthermore, a chemical catalyst can be used to increase the efficiency or output of a cantrip’s reaction.

In truth, I had already seen miracles in action long before I had laid eyes on magic. Needless to say, I’d witnessed the miracle that had healed my sister this past winter, but the bishop also commonly threw a handful around during festivals.

I personally thought myself more pious than most, and had every intention of revering higher beings regardless of any additional benefits that my worship might come with. I’m sure any of my fellow Japanese countrymen could relate—even those who weren’t explicitly faithful bowed their heads when passing under a torii gate and took good care of any charms in their possession.

I had every intention of revering the gods of this world. I swear I did...

“Ugh... The clients from the Upper Realm are so...”

Until, at the age of five, I’d received a signal—or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a divine prophecy—from the Harvest Goddess during Sunday mass. At the time, I couldn’t help but be overcome with the strange feeling that I was being subcontracted to pray, and I’d been uncertain about dipping into the faith section of my skill tree ever since.

Later on, I asked the bishop to teach me more about the religions of the world and learned that most people were polytheistic, accepting that the world was crawling with gods. Unlike the sects of Earth, the people here simply worshipped whichever deity or deities held power in their region. Considering how overt higher presences were, I couldn't blame them. Instead of relying on word of mouth to spread their influence, the divine directly meddled in mortal affairs, so it would be stranger if the religious environment were the same as back home.

The gods protected their worshippers in exchange for faith and used the rest of their energy to compete amongst themselves. They had reportedly come into direct conflict in the early days of history, but nowadays fought proxy wars through their mortal subjects in a bid for supremacy.

As a result, some gods aligned themselves into pantheons similar to the ancient Greeks' (those of the Empire were a good example), others purported to be the omniscient and omnipotent one-true-God, and others still were parts of nature that gained divinity through human devotion. The religious landscape was as colorful and diverse as it was utterly chaotic. I'm sure that this world had seen its fair share of water-walking, bread-making, prophecy-delivering sages in its time.

Still, as godly as they were, the upper beings in this world were only of *this* world. That is to say, they were no Bodhisattva or Shiva, and were restricted to the planet as opposed to governing over all of space and time. The flavor text on some of the higher-level faith skills explained that their time spent ruling over this world was but training to earn the right to give birth to a new world later on.

In essence, the "outsourcing" that the future Buddha had spoken about was spot-on. Realizing that even the gods couldn't get away from this sort of bureaucracy brought a tear to my eye.

My faith-based skills had been unlocked following my prophetic message, but the blatant preferential treatment tempered my enthusiasm. I mean, think about it: I would be like a new hire related to the CEO. That's awkward on *both* sides.

Of course, I understood that religious skills would come in handy. Miracles were akin to sacrament, using one's privilege as a devout believer to bring about divine change upon the world. It required no mana and only grew more powerful with one's zealousness. On top of that, the action itself was technically exercising a god's power, so (accuracy and resistances aside) there was no risk of failure. I didn't have any qualms over its efficiency.

But...I couldn't wipe away the awkward feeling in my heart. The religious tolerance and corporate experience I'd acquired in my past life didn't mesh well with the actions of a fervent worshipper. Besides, the fact that the faith-based skills were all a bit cheaper than what they seemed to be worth carried the strong scent of bait for some yet unrevealed divine scheme. Despite their power, this only lowered their value in my mind.

All this fishiness threatened the ever-crucial faith that allowed me to utilize these skills in the first place. I could pump all the experience in the world into these abilities, but there was no telling what would happen to me if my mental state degraded the slightest degree. The gods were terrifying. With how much they intervened in day-to-day matters, incurring their wrath was a serious concern. Both the church's bookshelf and the bishop himself were full of stories about heavenly judgment, after all.

At any rate, there wasn't any sort of "Learning magic will lock you out of miracles!" mechanic present. There was a part of me that felt like it wouldn't be so bad to kiss up to the gods, but as I watched the bishop scatter dust and pray it into flowers during the spring festivities, I felt a conflicting bitterness wash over me.

[Tips] Faith skills are activated by the gods. As a result, it is impossible to use them to act against divine will. Fraudulent activity, harming innocents, or engaging in unwarranted religious warfare are only some of the actions disallowed by the gods.

A child's stamina is a bottomless well. The way my brothers ran out of the house to play after our grueling hours of work only reinforced that idea. Their childlike wonder was radiant. It reminded me of the blinding sight of school kids

frolicking about during PE, passing periods, and after school until the sun went down. My previous body had grown creaky from years of desk work and driving. For an old man who could barely run ten minutes to catch a train, their play was alien to me.

"Come on, Erich!" my brothers called. "What are you doing?! Let's go already!"

Well, I'm in a child's body now, so I should be able to keep up with them. Still, all of this activity was mentally exhausting. I wanted to relax after a hard day of work.

"I'm gonna be the leader today!" Michael exclaimed. "I'll be the swordsman! The, um, uhh...the dullahan, Emil!"

"Whoa, awesome!" Hans said. "Then I'll be our scout, the wandering Sir Carsten!"

"Hey, wait! I'm the oldest, so *I'm* supposed to choose first!" Heinz shouted. "Ah fine, then I'll be Nicolaus, the flame of heaven!"

"Whaaat?! But now we have two front liners!" Michael protested.

"Yeah, we don't need *two* swordsmen!" Hans concurred.

"Shut up! I don't know anything about mages!" the eldest retorted.

My fatigue did little more than a gentle breeze to dissuade my band of brothers from venturing out into the forest yet again. With my homemade weapons (which of course were mere wooden playthings) in hand, they were ready to set off and play adventurer.

From early spring to the beginning of summer, each farm had a different timeline for their work. Naturally, this led to many children playing with their brothers and sisters during this season. Unlike the leisurely summer, it was nigh impossible to gather up all of the neighborhood children for a game, so our options were quite limited.

The evergreen choice was a good old-fashioned game of pretend. I'm sure everyone has played the part of their favorite hero at a park or schoolyard once in their life. This truism held steady in this world, with the only difference being

that TV and manga characters were substituted for the folk heroes passed down through song and legend.

Although I mentioned before that adventurers were mere handymen, they had historically been the protectors of mankind during divine conflict in the age of gods. In a time when monstrous beasts roamed the land and the peoples of the planet had little space to call their own, powerful heroes emerged, journeying to strike down those who threatened innocent lives—and the first adventurers were born.

The modern Adventurer's Association had been founded in their image. Apparently, that was why adventurers were permitted to cross borders freely in an era where globalization was a chuckle-worthy joke at best. The organization spanned several states and continents to prepare for the day that a mythical threat once again presented itself.

Of course, each nation would throw its own military forces at an issue like that, so the Association's reason for existing had long since become moot.

No matter the reality of the situation, children were fond of the legendary adventurers. My second brother Michael had donned the mask of Emil, the legendary dullahan who'd slain a tremendous, venom-spewing moth. My third brother Hans had taken the alias of Sir Carsten, the famed knight who traveled the world despite being cursed by the gods. He'd eventually won their forgiveness and gained the awesome power to work miracles.

Lastly, my eldest brother Heinz had taken inspiration from the tale of a dragonslayer who wielded a holy sword bathed in eternal fire to win dragon head after dragon head. Each and every one of them was an immortal legend, but having two swordsmen and a scout front-loaded the party so hard that I wanted to burst out into a team composition rant.

It *might* have worked with five players, but with only four of us, one front guard with a skill to draw multiple units' worth of aggro would suffice. One each of a middle guard, healer, and mage would round out the party nicely from there. *Team composition is important, dammit!*

An adventure tailored for a party was bound to include suitably powerful enemies. It would be absurd to challenge them with a team that had more

holes than substance. The *hilarious* possibility that a mageless party could fail to track traces of magic—or worse yet, that they would be too illiterate to find the main quest line to begin with—loomed over us.

"Um..." I piped up, "I guess I'll be Saint Raymond."

"You're always picking priests and mages," Hans pointed out. "Ain't that kinda boring?"

I wonder why! Snark aside, I wasn't very pleased with how Hans made light of the rear guard. *What, would you like to try fighting incorporeal enemies without any form of magic? I'll have you know that the futility of trying to beat down a specter with a sword is quite taxing on the spirit.*

"Let him do what he wants, Hans," Michael said. "All right, onwards men! The fairy coin awaits!!!"

"Yeah!!!" the other two cried in unison.

In the end, this was all a game of pretend. We weren't swordsmen hunting foul beasts; we were children hunting an old man's fairy tale. There was no need for me to quibble about balance or composition here. Of course, I would be moments away from flipping a table if this were a *real* game.

My brothers wielded their toy swords and unstrung crossbow and marched forward into the forest. I picked up the ever-unpopular staff (which remained unused in spite of how much effort I put into making it look cool) and hurried after them.

Our goal, as always, was the fairy coin. It was a paltry prize for a party of such venerable heroes, but it seemed that my brothers found it more exciting to chase after a treasure that might exist than to hunt for monsters that we would never encounter. Depending on the season, fairies sometimes danced in the corner of one's vision here, so the coin of legend was all the more alluring.

That being said, fairies only appeared in stories as sources of trouble. If this coin really was imbued with their power, who was to say whether it was blessed or cursed?

I chased after my three chanting brothers as they advanced into the woods. The way they marched in what could be loosely defined as a single file line and

carried backpacks full of my wooden weapons put a genuine smile on my face. *Doesn't everyone have an adventure like this as a kid?*

Adventurers certainly didn't have the greatest reputation, but I questioned whether it was truly impossible to have a fun journey with a party full of dream-chasing companions. Perhaps we would even be blessed with the chance to leave our names in history like the heroes my brothers and I now mimicked. As I considered the possibilities, the brilliant stories of the adventurers I'd lived through drifted to mind.

...Maybe adventuring isn't so bad. It's not like I've tried it myself. Who knows, maybe the adults tell us all the bad stories to keep their kids from becoming professional drifters.

As we set out on our childish quest, it finally dawned on me. No matter how many lectures I received, the ambition and passion that the word "adventure" ignited would never subside.

[Tips] The Adventurer's Association is a collective organization that guarantees the identities of the grassroots people it serves. Though it technically transcends nations, in practice the branches of each state are mostly autonomous and only serve to relay work from within their country's borders. The various branches have minimal communication with one another.

Autumn of the Eighth Year

Fumble

The pinnacle of bad luck. As the counterpoint to critical hits, fumbles usually result in failure no matter how the math turns out.

Attacks will whiff; if you were to walk down the street, you'd fall into a manhole; attempting to read a book would only result in your brain exploding and dripping out of your nose.

Fumbles are represented by snake eyes when rolling 2D6, 95~100 for 1D100, and a 1 when rolling 1D20.

Some games include a dread-inducing "fumbles chart," which is a collection of misfortunes like self-inflicted damage. In severe rulesets, the fumbles chart can cause relationships between the player characters to change. The GM can find themselves in quite a bind when one of the PCs is suddenly revealed to be evil like some sort of Saturday morning cartoon supervillain.

However, once in a blue moon, these sorts of fumbles will be a critical hit to the story and become an immortal bit of lore amongst friends.

A certain sickening Virgo and Flag pilot once called himself an "impatient man"; much as I resented the comparison, I was now left wondering if my own early autumn birthday was the reason for my lack of restraint.

After celebrating my eighth birthday (surprisingly, Rhine operated on a twelve-month solar calendar—meaning that this planet was roughly of the same scale as Earth), I took a moment to look through my stats page. The undeniable proof of my incurable habits filled me with a sense of dread.

Look, when I take the time to sort through newly unlocked skills and I find a long-term generalist skill—for pennies, no less—I can't help myself. You understand, don't you? You might rack your brain over a big purchase, but a quick, "Why not?" is all the resistance you can muster for a single paperback.

And at the end of the month, it culminates in a credit card invoice that makes expletives leak from your mouth.

Anyway, the final result was that I'd dipped into my savings a few times in the past year to grab a handful of traits in the Body category. Feline Physique granted me significant flexibility. It made me less prone to injuries, improved my breakfalling, helped me resist grapple attacks, and gave me a bonus to acrobatics. It even came with a correction bonus when falling from heights. Flexible Skeleton empowered my bones and would let me avoid breaking them once I grew up. Cat Eyes allowed me to see clearly at night. The night vision was clear enough to read a book under the dim light of the stars. Steel Stomach was a trait that strengthened my immune system by allowing me to resist both food poisoning and some real poisons.

All of these were vitally important: after all, I didn't want to die an embarrassing death by falling down the stairs or something. With that in mind, I felt like this lineup was perfect for maintaining a healthy everyday life. That is, so long as I ignored the circumstances in which I purchased each trait.

I had picked up Feline Physique and Flexible Skeleton to keep up with Margit and the other kids as our games grew more and more intense. Whether we were playing foxes-and-geese or roughhousing, rural children were unbelievably rowdy. The only reason I had Cat Eyes was because I'd been frustrated at how difficult my side job was at night, and Steel Stomach had been a panic purchase when I bit into a peculiar-tasting fig.

It was remarkable how little thought I'd put into this short selection of traits. Restraint was clearly not a word present in my dictionary. Still, I'd managed to draw the line somewhere, having yet to allow myself to touch the higher-level job skills.

Besides, my choices hadn't been *totally* unreasonable. This was well within the scope of my initial plans. Probably. A sturdy body was evergreen, and my night vision would never—*almost* never—be a hindrance in an era without streetlights. I just needed to ignore the time when I caught a glimpse of my parents partaking in a friendly bout of exercise.

In truth, my original strategy of raising my basic stats was coming along

swimmingly, so my detours had little to no long-term repercussions. When I fully matured, I was slated to grow to around 180 cm tall, and my muscle structure was to tighten up as opposed to swell out.

I had also had the passing thought that it would be nice to take after my mother and be a bit of a pretty boy with slender contours, but unfortunately the Beauty category was sealed away with the rest of the birthright traits. I'd mused that it was likely locked to prevent me from achieving a face so handsome that it instantly blinded anyone who gazed upon me. Feeling persistent, I had acquired Mother's Son and Soothing Visage as a bit of a jab at the system, leaving me both excited for how I would turn out in the future and also a bit worried that I'd taken it too far...

Despite all of my spending, my lowest base stat was Strength at IV: Average, which put me ahead of schedule. My tentative goal was to have all of my stats at V: Good by the time I was ten years old, but it looked like I was going to complete my task a year early.

Speaking of base stats, I had recently found out that the amount of experience points earned correlated directly with Intelligence and Memory. I'd stumbled upon this incremental increase when I happened to level the two of them together one day. This interaction hadn't been mentioned anywhere, so it was a hidden modifier that probably justified itself by asserting that smarter people learned faster. These sorts of things were fairly common in old video games: a certain postapocalyptic game about roaming the American nuclear wasteland employed the same tactic with its INT stat. It was all a part of the system.

This explained why Intelligence and Memory had been a bit pricier to level. If I had known that I could get anywhere close to earning back the experience I committed to these stats, I would have gone all in on them long ago.

As I sat in my regular spot lamenting my loose purse and rejoicing over my progress, a sudden chill ran down my neck. My Presence Detection skill alerted me to a third party. I hadn't heard any footsteps or breathing, so it couldn't have been my family; what was more, the presence was *on the roof*. Without sparing a moment for thought, I leapt forward. I could hear the faint sound of someone landing on the pile of firewood I'd just abandoned.

“What a shame,” Margit said with a click of her tongue. I turned to see she was disappointed that she’d failed to catch her prey.

Margit had grown ever so slightly since last year, but it remained difficult to believe that she was two years my senior. Her skill as a hunter, on the other hand, was sharper than ever. I had sunk a ton of resources into getting Presence Detection up to V: Adept, but she had slipped through my radar with ease.

“Can’t you come over normally?” I asked.

“That won’t do,” she announced in the palatial tongue. Then, with a pout, she added, “How am I meant to enjoy something so dull?”

Hmm... She definitely knows how cute that pout is. I didn’t have any complaints about her deliberate use of her charms since, well, she was cute. But that didn’t stop me from being ashamed of myself for biting my tongue and forgoing my comeback. *I swear that younger girls were never in my strike zone...*

Margit took a step to the side and patted my usual seat, beckoning me back. Despite her childlike appearance, her mannerisms in situations like these were curiously alluring. I obediently sat down, only for her to hop up onto my lap as if it were a matter of course—*facing me*. Our seating arrangement was a...lotus position, of sorts.

But being the innocent child that I most definitely was, I lacked any of the typical fantasies one might have. I could tell that trying to remedy the situation would only backfire and cause her advances to worsen tenfold, so I made the prudent decision to ignore it.

I didn’t know this at the time, but arachne are a matriarchal species, and like other species where the females overpower the males, their sense of virtue and sexuality is the reverse of mensch. As an aside, they also have a strange custom of refusing to cohabitate with their partner if they’re both arachne.

“So, what did you need?” I asked.

“Hm? I simply wished to see your face.” When paired with her bewitching smile, Margit’s statement overflowed with hidden meaning. The way she tilted her head struck a chord in my heart in spite of my many years of experience as a man. I was glad she was only a kid; I would have been in serious trouble

otherwise... *Wait, aren't I in serious trouble now?*

"What's that supposed to mean...?" I asked.

"I finally finished accompanying my family with their work for the day," she said, shifting the conversation. "And you...?"

"I'm gonna be busy soon." I set aside the mysterious tinge of sadness I felt and turned my mind to the fact that my birthday had come and gone. That meant that the harvest season was nearly upon us.

Reaping, threshing, and shipping left little time for leisure, and even after that there was a whole host of odd jobs to be done. I couldn't even count how many things needed to be packed up before the first winter snow. Knowing that my work was linked with my family's success, even a cheapskate like me was willing to invest a lot of experience to raise my proficiency with farmwork.

With six workers in the family, a horse, and help from our family and friends, we were barely able to struggle through all of our fieldwork, only to then lend a hand to those who'd helped us. To top it all off, we had to go through the paperwork of selling our crops to pay our liquid taxes while maintaining enough stock to pay our crop taxes. The crashing wave of busyness felt like the freedom of summertime was being paid back with interest.

My Endurance and Stamina were at VI: Superb, but the season still managed to reduce my small body to a creaking hull. Thinking about it left a pit in my stomach, but I couldn't complain; after all, our household was lucky enough to have a horse and four sons.

"I see," the little arachne said. "Indeed, we will grow busier soon as well." She giggled, but I knew huntsmen had a lot to do during the fall and winter. Margit had been handed her very own bow this year and had excitedly told me about how her parents took her on hunting trips to learn the basics. "I suppose we'll need to have our fill of fun while we still can."

"Just the two of us?" I pondered aloud. As soon as I asked, Margit put on a face like she was going to cry. *What lively expressions you have!*

"Is that a no?" she whispered into my ear. Her voice was a feather tracing my spine, sending shivers in every direction. It crawled into my ear and gave my

brain a pleasant tickle.

I know you're a girl and all, but you should not be this good at flirting, young lady! Or are all arachne like this? As it stands with most gentlemen of the world, I had a soft spot for charming women, and all I could do was shake my head from side to side.

I didn't consider myself to be dense, per se, but I only now began questioning whether or not I'd set up some kind of relationship flag here. *When, where, and how in the world did I stumble into this plot point?* I wouldn't call it unpleasant, but a man whose mental age was pushing forty and an arachne just hitting double digits was quite the questionable pairing. *What kind of freak is running this game?*

I desperately wanted to avoid making the situation any more complicated than it already was, so I tried to derail the conversation. Even if I wasn't displeased with her affection, I was still technically *eight*. I had to protect my modesty.

"Okay, then tell me what you learned at school," I suggested.

"You want me to teach you?" she asked. Her teary eyes vanished into thin air and she tilted her head to the opposite side from before. *So cute.*

"Yeah. Everyone says it's boring, but I wanna know what you do there."

I had initially hoped to have my brother teach me, but the only thing I could get out of him were complaints. My father was strict enough to cram his brain with the palatial tongue and written word, but history, poetry, and mathematics were all hopeless endeavors for him. I was sure he'd forget everything he'd learned by the time school resumed in the winter.

"Let me see," Margit mused. "We learned how to speak the palatial dialect, as well as how to read and write... And there was also a simple course on law. Other than that, most of our time was spent learning history and writing poems."

On the other hand, Margit was an exemplary student, as evidenced by her fluent speech. Her parents and teachers had obviously urged her to use the higher dialect in everyday conversation so that she wouldn't forget what she'd

learned. The beautiful, melodic pronunciation of her words was a far cry from the childish vernacular my brothers and I spoke in. A single sentence was enough to hear the effort she'd put into her studies.

"That sounds fun!" I exclaimed. "Won't you teach me?"

"Hm? I suppose I could."

The palatial tongue was necessary for success in this world, as my father so sincerely explained to my thickheaded brother. Naturally, that made me want to learn it too, but my father was busy and my brother wasn't exactly going to make for a great tutor.

This was the perfect chance for me to unlock the prerequisite conditions to learn the dialect. Magic wasn't the only specialized field that I couldn't break into via self-study; styles of swordplay, literary knowledge, legal affairs, and such were all off the table.

My best guess was that my TRPG-esque skill system wasn't capable of forging knowledge for me if the concept I was working with was totally and absolutely unknown. The reason a certain class of sages could learn languages so easily had to have been because finding a teacher and reading books was too complicated to convey in-game. Otherwise, there was no way they could learn an entire language for the price of a measly 1,000 exp.

"Then how about we begin with your vocabulary?"

"Yay! Thanks Margit!" I cried out in the childish tone that I was finally going to be able to rid myself of. Up until now, I sounded like a toddler as soon as I opened my mouth, no matter how maturely I organized my thoughts. I was relieved to finally have a way to talk normally.

"Then let us start with this," Margit said.

"Huh?" My brain froze as it tried to comprehend what she was doing. Her mouth was wide open and her tongue was hanging out, as if it were on display. On top of that, an inviting finger traced her tongue. "...Margit?"



Amidst my confusion, she playfully took my hand and smiled. “Enunciation is the life and blood of the imperial palace. The way your tongue has to move is entirely different from normal speech, you know? This is a method of teaching that my teacher taught me. You use your finger to learn the shape of a fluent speaker’s tongue and then place it back in your own mouth to mimic their movements. Of course, my teacher wouldn’t let me do such things,” she concluded with a giggle. Her smug grin sent me into panic, to which she asked, “What? Do you not want to?”

“Um, well,” I stammered, “It’s just...” It was embarrassing to even admit how embarrassing it was. I felt hot as my face turned red and the boiling awkwardness sent a sweat down my back. *Is she doing this on purpose? Either way, this girl is way too provocative!*

“Oh, would you prefer a different method?” Margit asked. “There is another means that my mother introduced me to...”

“Really?! What is it?!”

Margit’s giggling intensified and the corners of her mouth pulled into a wonderful, showy smirk. She leaned closer until our noses touched and our breaths intertwined. Her hazel eyes faintly glimmered and felt like they were going to stare a hole through my own until they reached the back of my mind. *Is this how it feels to be eaten by a spider?*

“According to my mother...it would be fastest to feel my tongue with yours. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Wha?!” I squealed. *Mrs. Margit’s Mom?! What the hell are you teaching your daughter?! She’s ten!*

“But I suppose we should save that for when we’re adults. What say you we continue with the method for children?”

“I-I don’t think either of them are meant for—”

Right when I attempted to make my case, a wet sensation enveloped my finger.

[Tips] Being tutored can reward experience points or lower the threshold for skill acquisition. Sometimes, this can cause the skill or trait to change its effect.

As the chaos of autumn drew to a close, Johannes and Hanna found themselves distraught over another form of chaos. Their many responsibilities had prevented them from overseeing their eldest son Heinz's studies, and he'd forgotten all of the material he'd learned in the summer.

After a few years of attending the magistrate's school, it was tradition for students to thank the magistrate personally during the spring festivities. There, each and every one of them would recite a poem using the formal speech they learned during their studies. This ode to spring was famous as a gateway to success. The nobles of the land were known to allow children to further their studies if they showed promise from a young age. Some lucky souls could even secure a future as a bureaucrat if the magistrate was keen on their performance. Johannes and Hanna had no such ambitions. They loved their son, but their brains were not packed full of posies.

All they could ask was for Heinz to complete his recitation without drawing the ire of anyone in the crowd. And yet, their humble hopes turned to despair when they sat down to test their son after the fields had been emptied. It was dubious as to whether or not he would improve to a respectable level in a single winter.

As the couple trembled for reasons unrelated to the growing cold, their youngest son appeared before them one night with his head held high. He announced that he had immortalized his appreciation for them in the form of a poem. Apparently, the boy had learned the palatial tongue from a friend, and wanted to cheer his exhausted parents with a song. The couple were surprised and eagerly listened to their youngest's performance.

While rough around the edges, the poem was well made. Some of the word choices were quite childish, but that only made it feel more genuine. There was nothing out of place with his prepubescent voice as it carefully articulated every word.

The poem was perfect. The pronunciation was perfect. The lyrics perfectly followed traditional form. And just as perfect was the boy's usage of the feminine palatial tongue.

As the concert came to a close, the boy awaited his parents' thoughts with a beaming smile. Neither Johannes nor Hanna could open their mouths. Over the following winter, the eldest son was joined by his confused younger brother as the couple began going over the basics of imperial speech.

[Tips] There are several subdialects within palatial speech. Some are divided by gender, while some others are reserved for people of differing social stature: high class nobles will speak differently from low class nobles.

Summer of the Eighth Year

GM

A Game Master is in charge of the forces outside of the players' control. They write scenarios, prepare enemies, and roll dice for the bad guys. They are both the welcoming host and the evil last boss.

Many games have their own variants of the title, such as the Hand of Fate, Keeper, or Ruler. One can often tell what TRPG a person usually plays by hearing their preferred term for this role.

A few months after I had committed a grave linguistic blunder that was sure to follow me to the grave, Heinz's oration to the magistrate had come to a close without incident. With the memory of my feminine wiles buried in a thin layer of dirt alongside the spring seeds, I found myself on the outskirts of the village.

"Good to see all of you brats here."

I looked around a featureless plain lined with farm boys from our canton. They were all familiar faces with a single unifying trait: none of us were the eldest son of our respective households. All of those present today were boys unfit to inherit their parents' farms.

We'd been forced to stand at attention in a single file line by the middle-aged gentleman who stood before us. The tall and well-built man sported tanned leather armor and wielded a blunted longsword. His sunken eyes and the gray strands poking out of his neatly cut hair only made the fellow known as Lambert seem more fit for his position as captain of the Konigstuhl Watch.

"Welcome to our first training session," he announced.

We'd all gathered to participate in a selection process-cum-training session hosted by the Konigstuhl Watch. Now, according to what I had learned about the imperial government from Margit, the military hierarchy in place was remarkably modern and systematic.

Each region was headed by a high-ranking noble, who then allowed lesser nobles to manage the administrative districts under their control. Then, members of the lowest class of nobility or distinguished knights were charged with leading cantons and towns as local magistrates. This whole tiered system seemed very quaint and more than a little stereotypical, but the breakdown of power closely resembled the modern bureaucratic systems of Japan, only with heredity substituted for elections.

What this meant was that Konigstuhl canton was run by the Imperial Knight Clan of Thuringia, who resided in Konigstuhl Castle, but they were by no means the final authority. Sir Thuringia may have been appointed by the local lord to rule, but with several cantons under his jurisdiction, he had little time to spare for the everyday administration of Konigstuhl. Furthermore, it wasn't as if he commanded enough men to constantly protect all of his territory at once. This was where the system differed from that of modern Earth. Standing armies were a *massive* hole in one's pocket. They were so costly that it had only been in the modern era that they shifted from being a luxury to the norm.

It went without saying that Sir Thuringia both employed an order of knights and had the ability to draft citizens to maintain peace in his borders. However, these troops were active peacekeepers, not security guards, and they spent the majority of their time holed up in the castle waiting to be deployed. While a standing army chewed through money, a marching army was magnitudes worse. Stationing them where they could launch a campaign at a moment's notice was the fiscally responsible thing to do.

This was relevant today because each canton needed to be able to muster a defensive force in an emergency to buy time until skilled reinforcements could show up. Technology was more advanced than I'd initially presumed here, but it still couldn't compare to the marvels of scientific advancement I'd seen before. In the event of an attack, a messenger would take the better half of a day to reach the castle. *Maybe* someone pushing themselves to their absolute limits could complete the route in a quarter of a day. Either way, that was plenty of time for a band of brutes to run amok in our town.

The result was the establishment of the Konigstuhl Watch, a militia of local men who would hold down the fort until help arrived. The group was officially

sponsored by the magistrate, who went as far as to provide a barracks and salary to those involved, so they were halfway to being regular soldiers. This salary was one of the few sources of income a second-born son could hope to earn without leaving the canton.

"I'm Lambert, the Watch captain," the man announced curtly. "Well, I'm sure I've met most of you at gatherings and festivals, but it's the first day and all, so there's my introduction. Everyone knows there's a process to these kinds of things."

Lambert flashed his teeth in a savage grin. The children around me were fond of swords but too lily-livered to consider that they might get hurt—or worse yet, die. The gruff man's sneering face was intimidating enough to make them all shudder. I'd expected no less from him. Lambert wasn't some goon who prattled on about his own strength; he was a career soldier who had been directly appointed to his position after retirement. According to his festival tales, he'd participated in a score and change of battles, been awarded honors and treasures twelve times, and most impressively, claimed the heads of twenty-five generals (distinguished by their impressive armor). He was a certified warrior, more than fit to lead the recruitment and training programs for the Konigstuhl Watch.

"Man, you kids sure do come in droves... Well, you've all got arms and legs, at least. Don't know what that'll do for a bunch of scrawny brats like you, though."

Lambert began barking at us exactly how I'd imagined a drill sergeant would. *I see the Hartman school of berating and diminishing is alive and well in this world.*

"I'm glad to see all of you hero-worshipping, saga-loving blockheads scared outta your wits like this."

If I may take a moment to interject, I wasn't actually here of my own volition. My third brother Hans had been too scared to come here alone, so he'd interrupted me as I was carving a set of board game pieces to drag me along with him. Still, as I pondered my future career options, I did realize I wanted to be familiar with weaponry. In a world where struggling soldiers could demand food and lodging in the winter months, it was nice to have some combat

experience.

“But this job isn’t so fun. It’s a dirty mess of a life, where arms and fingers snap like twigs and intestines coil around you like piles of rope. We’ve been lucky that no one’s died in the past two years, but you all heard how Lukas got sent to the asylum, didn’t you?”

With his sword resting on his shoulder, Lambert walked up and down the file to terrorize us. The Watch’s budget was unimpressive and the selection process was brutal, so he must have been trying to weed out the chickens as early on as possible.

In fact, I’d heard beforehand that most applicants were rejected. Even if one was capable of keeping up with the training, the limited funds meant the best one could hope for was to be sent home and occasionally summoned as a reserve watchman. Still, each member of the reserves was skilled enough to warrant a tax reduction, so it was well worth the effort to join.

“It’s *rough*. Imagine getting your arm yanked clean off by a bloodthirsty maniac. If you don’t die, that’s pure luck. The best fighters still die, and they die as fast as the rest of us.”

This horrific image managed to invoke a squeal from some hero-worshipping boy. It was a sad squeak, like he’d tried to breathe in and failed.

“So let me show you what reality is like.” Without skipping a beat, Lambert brought his sword down on the boy with a practiced strike. His movements were so natural that, for a moment, I thought he’d moved to pat the boy’s head. But the indescribable sound of metal on flesh made it clear that an attack had landed. I could surmise from the way that the boy was rolling around with his hands on his head that he’d been smacked with the broad side of Lambert’s sword.

“Run. That’s all you lot are good for.”

I only saw his wicked grin for a moment before a flash of pain struck me.

[Tips] The bonuses for public servants are quite respectable.

Lambert huffed through his nose as he took in the unpleasant scene of children running around in pain and terror. Of course, this situation wasn't something he brought about due to some twisted sadism but as an act of tough love.

He'd made up none of the horrors he had mentioned. The life of a mercenary was wretched, and the soldiers of the Watch didn't have it any better. They had to purge nests of monsters that appeared near the village, and when the huntsmen stumbled upon a pack of rabid wolves that they couldn't handle, the watchmen had no choice but to pick up their spears and march.

Furthermore, they had to rally all of the men in the village when a band of hungry bandits or an army looking to find winter shelter came knocking. The glory sung about in epic poems was nowhere to be found. After all this, the only thing waiting on the other end of their desperate struggle was pain and blood. Lukas had gotten off lucky during the goblin hunt the year prior; despite the peace of the past decade, many had died under the blade in Konigstuhl alone.

Battle was not the magnificent dance that the sagas extolled. It was the cold act of kill or be killed, surrounded by pungent gore. And so, Lambert made it a point to show the starry-eyed children of the canton what it meant to fight every few years by slapping them around until he'd beaten them back into reasonable farmers. He didn't want anyone to waste their life by running away from home to become a mercenary or adventurer.

Naivete led to error and unreasonable dreams. Thus, the kindest thing Lambert could do was to introduce these wayward souls to genuine pain. Between meeting an untimely demise due to ignorance and experiencing violence in a controlled capacity, not even the faintest room for doubt remained as to which was better.

The boys were more than welcome to rise up after he struck them down. Anyone who had the courage to face an enemy head on when the situation arose had the right to bear arms—such was Lambert's conviction. In the end, when the blade approached, the will to fight could only come from within. If any of these boys displayed this spirit, Lambert was more than happy to train them.

Unfortunately, this year was looking to be a bust. The captain had held back his swings perfectly to make sure they would all be able to walk home, and yet they were all writhing, crying, and screaming. They were free to complain all they pleased, but none of them even had the grit to shoot him a resentful glare.

If Lambert's blade hadn't been blunted with its tip removed, their heads would have split and their bones would have shattered. If they were going to cry from injuries as common as these, they'd never be able to make it as watchmen. After all, guts spoke louder on the battlefield than anything else.

The Watch captain sighed. *No regulars or reserves this year*. Just as he'd resigned himself to another disappointing recruitment drive, he caught a glimpse of someone pushing himself off the ground from the corner of his eye.

Lambert probed his memory and recognized him as Johannes's son whose ninth birthday was coming up. *If I remember correctly, he's the bright kid that crafted that set of board game pieces for the communal meeting room. He's scrawny, but there's still some hope for him,* the captain mused as the muddy boy rose to his feet.

Setting aside the soft looks that he'd inherited from his mother, Lambert could tell the boy had potential. Despite his narrow shoulders, his bones seemed solid and his muscle structure was suited for future training. The look in his eyes as he wiped the blood from his cut lips wasn't defiant, per se, but they had a man's determination.

This brat would be a better fit with the knights or serving a noble, Lambert thought as he bared his fangs as menacingly as he could. "Oh? Looks like someone grew a spine."

[Tips] Breakfalls can greatly reduce damage.



Wow, breakfalls are amazing, I thought while wiping the blood off my lips. I couldn't tell if my Endurance being at VI: Superb or my litany of breakfall skills were what made the difference, but I'd managed to roll off most of the force from Lambert's swing.

Without my bonuses, I'm sure I would have been rolling on the floor, groaning "Owwww" like the rest of my friends. It still hurt like crazy *after* cushioning the blow.

"Oh? Looks like someone grew a spine."

Seeing Lambert smile as he commended me, I couldn't help but admire his maturity. He was teaching all of the children in town how closely linked their dreams of heroism were to death, all for the price of a few bruises. The pain I felt now was something only he could inflict. His sword was blunt, but it was still a hefty chunk of metal—his refined swordplay was the only reason my fellow wannabe soldiers could writhe around with all of their bones intact.

Don't get me wrong: this was a bit too rough for my tastes. *A quick visit to see Lukas's wounds at the asylum would be more than enough to—oof!*

I'd let my guard down after Lambert praised me and caught another hefty blow to the cheek. I flew to the side but let the momentum of his strike run its course by rolling onto my shoulder. Yet no matter how much force I managed to dispel, the pain of being clubbed with steel stung all the same. *I didn't break any teeth, did I? Oh lord, everything tastes like blood...*

The second attack was enough for me to catch my bearings, and I managed to use the momentum of my roll to spring back onto my feet. But while I had a faint *Oh, he's gonna hit me* feeling for the first strike, this one caught me by surprise and hurt way more. The pain and all of my acrobatics left me feeling dazed.

So this is what it means to fight. My previous world had been blessed. Someone born to a decent family in a peaceful country would only experience violence in the form of childish scuffles. I had never once raised my fists to fell an enemy, and never once had an enemy done so to me.

Now that I had a taste for combat, I finally understood why so many NPCs in

RPGs both virtual and tabletop had abandoned a life of battle. *If this is him holding back, how excruciating is a real fight? How painful is an arrow in my flesh? A sword slicing through my bones? A club crushing meat and bone alike? The burning flames of magic melting my skin?*

The thought of it alone was enough to make me shudder. If a deliberately weak blow softened through continuous tumbles was this bad, I couldn't begin to imagine the physical and mental toll unrestrained bloodlust would have on me. Imagining my body being torn asunder surrounded by an aura of brutality made me cower...and I couldn't bear to think of how it would feel for my family to be on the receiving end instead.

So this is why people take up arms as policemen and soldiers: to protect their family and innocent people from this kind of pain.

In that case, a bit of learning was in order. The ability to fight would go a long way in a world where injustice lurked behind every corner. Stories abounded of villages that had been attacked by bandits or monsters; I'd saved more than I could count as a player and created just as many in the GM's seat. But now I needed the strength to make sure my hometown didn't end up the same.

As I gripped my aching cheek and shook my head to clear my head, a small notification popped up in the corner of my vision. I had finally unlocked the combat category.

[Tips] Experience is not the only means of unlocking skills. Some are bestowed in accordance with willpower.

Summer of the Ninth Year

Player Character (PC)

A character that can be manipulated by a player.

In a form of recreation with many moving parts, these make up the main cast. From heroes to zeroes, some find themselves deeply linked with the world they inhabit, while others are swept away like stray strands of straw.

A beloved avatar whose untimely death brings great sadness and whose glory brings great joy—in some ways, they resemble a child.

My body's ninth summer and my mind's fourth were one and the same. The cool climate of southern Rhine and the safety of the Harvest Goddess's protection meant that the season offered us all a tranquil respite. Seeing as the government went to great lengths to monitor the tempers of the gods and constructed tributaries to secure a source of water in the event of divine outburst, the only thing to fear was an unusually cool summer.

The chores that remained included fighting off vermin and building new roads—all things that were far from time-sensitive. The men generally labored to procure firewood for the colder months or spent some time away from home to earn a wage. The women began making winter rations; rows of salted meats dangling in the comfortably arid (especially compared to Japan's humidity) heat were a common sight in the neighborhood.

The magistrate's school offered more frequent lessons at this time of year, and my friends who attended were swamped. The way they mumbled in contemplation, fighting to improve the quality of their poetry, was heartwarming to see. My eldest brother Heinz was among these troubled souls as he struggled to practice his newly appointed woodwind. He had chosen a flute because he'd considered stringed instruments to be too difficult, but the fingering and chromatic notes had given him enough issue that he still couldn't

play through his piece a month after being assigned it.

Instrumental music was deeply embedded in the Trialist Empire's culture, and children could learn either the flute or the violin at school. These two were popular for their refinement, and they were in a completely different league from the four-or six-stringed lyres found in common pubs.

I suppose every society comes with high society, and being able to demonstrate this sort of skill went a long way in the eyes of the bourgeois. I gave a silent prayer for my brother, who bemoaned that his long hours of practice were robbing him of his long-awaited summer.

Heinz wasn't alone; I had been eagerly anticipating the season too. Long days and open schedules left me replete with time for wood whittling, and the Konigstuhl Watch's training sessions were finally beginning to ramp up. The sweat I worked up playing with my friends was refreshingly cool, and the fruits chilled in the well that we ate afterwards were the greatest in the world. Though, of course, I couldn't forget about the traveling merchants who brought treats frozen with magic. They were too expensive to fill my stomach, but I always looked forward to the one time a year my parents bought them for us.

These days reminded me of the summer breaks I spent in the Kyushu countryside. The television there only had two channels and the nearest store that stocked batteries was miles away, so I couldn't use my handheld game console (although kids nowadays might not know that consoles used to run on simple AAs and AAAs). I looked back fondly on the memories of being invited out to play just as I was doing now.

Despite all of this fun, I looked forward to one part of summer above all else: the canton's bathhouse was open every Sunday. Surprisingly enough, the denizens of the Empire were quite famous for their love of bathing. We were no strangers to the act: every canton had its own facility, and larger cities with thousands of people were certain to have a public bathhouse.

Frankly, when I imagined a feudal society, one of two settings came to mind: either the culture had some level of hygiene with aqueducts and baths, or people frolicked around in filth while cowering in fear of the Black Death. Between these two extremes, I was glad to see that I had been transferred from

the clean nation of Japan into the former option.

As an aside, Rhine's proclivity for washing up originated from one of the imperial houses that had founded the Empire. Long ago, the king of a small nation had stressed that boiled water prevented the spread of disease and one didn't risk contracting an illness just from sharing a tub (though technically there were some bloodborne pathogens that could have posed a problem), which he proved by steeping himself in hot water. After he'd demonstrated the safety of bathing, he then moved on to emphasize the importance of hygiene, which led to the culture of today.

I may have been reading too far into this tale, but I'd suspected that this ancient king had been one of my people. When Margit had first told me the story of this bath-loving maniac, the first thought that ran through my mind was, *You're the same as me!*

The rich history that struck a chord in my heart culminated in a building placed next to a small river on the outskirts of our village.

"All right kiddos, it's your turn. Behave yourselves in there, okay?"

The men of the town shuffled out of the bathhouse with warm puffs of steam trailing off of them and waved us children over. I call them men, but most boys joined their group at the age of ten or so. Hmm? Me? Well...

"Shall we go, Erich?"

I looked at the gentle fingers holding my hand and wondered why their grip seemed so inexplicably tight. Past my hand, I could see Margit peering up at me with a change of clothes draped over her spare arm.

For whatever reason, I found myself in the children's group. As a nine-year-old, I was pushing the upper bound, since even the latest bloomers joined the adults by age twelve. The kids weren't separated by gender, probably because we were small enough to all fit inside together and it was cheaper this way. This wasn't anything new to me; it wasn't that different from my past life. Children without any real notion of gender sometimes changed in the same classrooms in early elementary school, so the reasoning was sound.

My only complaint was that my mental age was pushing forty. The fact that I

had the occasional naive thought and innocently enjoyed foxes-and-geese despite that could probably be attributed to my body influencing my consciousness. This blind innocence was part of the reason why I didn't have any reaction whatsoever to the naked bodies of girls my age. None at all...

"Eriiich? We'll never enter the bathhouse if you don't move these legs of yours."

...With the exception of this spine-chilling eight-legged childhood friend of mine. Margit literally yanked me out of my escapist musings and pulled me into the building. *I'm sure she knows that I'm feeling embarrassed... Can't she cut me some slack?*

Changing rooms were too much of a luxury for our humble facility, so we stripped ourselves under the open sky. There was a space to put one's clothes for winter usage, but for all intents and purposes, the bath began as soon as one entered.

I opened the door with a pure heart and was immediately blasted by a wave of heat that the previous guests had left for us—in other words, a cloud of steam. The lower class of Rhine used steam baths as opposed to vats of boiling water. This was a matter of course: while water could always be taken from a river, the price of fuel was astronomically higher than that of modern Earth. The cost of gas and water may have totaled to an entry fee of a hundred yen in Japan, but it was a different story here. Even with a Roman boiler, the number of logs we would need to boil hundreds of liters of water would be unreasonable.

On the other hand, steam baths were beautifully efficient. A stove with a top layer of heated stone sat in the center of the room. By pouring water on the blazing rock, we could fill the room with steam. This steam then spread heat throughout the entire room, bringing the temperature up past a hundred degrees. Our sweat naturally flushed the dirt from our pores and brought it to the surface of our skin.

From there, it was a simple matter of scrubbing out the grime with a brush or a towel wetted with water heated with the stove. After thirty minutes of sweating, all that was left was to jump into the river or wash off with a bucket

of water in the showering corner. Once the whole process was done, it felt like you'd molted off an entire layer of dirty skin. The only other thing to note was that some women who cared about their hair went the extra mile by using soap.

"Well, Erich?" Margit asked. "May I ask you to wash me again today?"

"Uh... Sure..."

Just like so. After laying on a towel and warming up for half an hour, Margit took me by the hand and led me to the showering corner. I couldn't put my finger on why I felt this way, but the walk there triggered a memory that was less than appropriate.

The sight of her hair draping down should have appeared childish but had a mysterious charm. I was thankful for my immature body and my mature willpower, because I knew I'd be met with a life's worth of teasing if I gave her a reaction—though in truth I'd have preferred that to certain other lifetime commitments that lay among the possible outcomes.

"Be gentle, will you?" she said with a smile as she handed me a bar of soap.

Soap made from animal fat was common in the Empire, but this was a special product made by Margit's family. Instead of beef tallow or lard, this had been crafted from wild game and infused with herbs. Unlike the cheap stuff on the market, her soap lacked the usual fatty odor, with a refreshingly sweet scent in its place.

I sat down behind her, dipped the bar into hot water, and began to slowly work the bubbles into her hair. Margit let out a pleased—and equally provocative—moan that made me think it was about time for me to drop dead. *Man, I don't get it. I've never had a thing for younger girls...*

I emptied my mind but continued to focus on using a delicate touch as I thoroughly washed her hair. I traced my fingers along her locks, softened by the steam in the room. The fact that it remained silky despite its contact with bar soap was remarkable. Borrowing this for myself would leave me with a frizzy head, so perhaps this texture was an arachne staple.

After I finished washing Margit's hair, I began to massage her scalp. It was

important to clear away unwanted oils, but *this* was the most important part. In my past life, my barber had told me that excess dandruff could cause hairs to grow weaker or even fall out.

...*Wait, why do I remember that?* I could hardly recall my parents' faces, but somehow I held on to an offhand comment I'd heard while getting shampooed. Just the other day, I'd spent the better part of an hour trying to figure out what my niece's name was.

What's happening to my memory? The memories tied to practical experience seemed to have been left untouched, but my episodic memories had begun to fade away. What was more, the titles of the novels and manga I died without finishing were all a blur. I could only remember the plots for a select few stories that I'd read again and again. *What on earth...?*

"Erich?"

"O-Oh, sorry... Let me rinse you off." I had been so lost in thought that I'd completely forgotten about Margit. Soap was a pain to deal with once it dried, so I needed to hurry it up. I scooped a bucket of water and made sure it wasn't too hot before trickling it onto her head.

"Whew," Margit said. "Thank you, that felt wonderful."

"You're very welcome," I replied.

Once I had washed out all the soap, the sunlight coming through the window formed a halo around her head. Her soft smile and the wet strands clinging to it made for a hauntingly beautiful scene. I don't mean to say that her elegance stuck with me in her absence; I mean to say that she left me full of equal parts affection and dread. The irregularity of her monstrous legs and girlish body tickled some primitive part of my soul. I could feel it send a jolt from the tip of my tailbone into the center of my brain.

"Will you do me the favor of washing my back, as well?" Margit asked with the same haunting beauty in her smile. I couldn't decide how to feel about her request as I took the bar of soap back into my hands. The sight of her scooping her hair over her shoulder caused me to instinctively gulp. Each and every casual movement had some kind of charm... *How terrifying.*

Chanting hymns in my mind, I started scrubbing Margit's back with a soaked towel when the question *Do I even need to do this?* dawned on me. Arachne looked nearly identical to mensch from the waist up, but their skeletal structure was completely different. The range of motion on their joints was significantly wider to allow them to reach all the parts of their lower body with ease, so washing their own backs was natural and easy. Which meant that she'd asked me for help because...*well.*

Whenever I scrubbed around her shoulders or waist, she made sure to make contact with my fingertips, filling me with a ticklish sensation. I could remain calm thanks to the fact that I had yet to hit puberty, but thinking about how my future body would affect my mind caused me to tremble at the prospect of controlling myself. Margit had too good a grasp on what it took to arouse a man. If I had been any less experienced, she would have had me coiled around her finger in two seconds flat.

"There, done," I announced after clearing my mind once more.

"Thank you. That was quite refreshing," Margit said, turning to face me. As a matter of course, she wasn't wearing a shirt. In fact, none of the children horsing around in the bathhouse bothered to hide themselves in any way (though I kept a towel wrapped around my hips) so she wasn't out of place. Then, with her trademark shiver-inducing whisper, she asked, "Now, shall we switch places?"

[Tips] The Rhine Trialist Empire is leaps and bounds ahead of its neighboring states in the field of hygiene. An average farmer can be expected to bathe once a week in the summertime and once every two to three weeks in the wintertime. When trips to the bathhouse are impossible for whatever reason, it is a cultural expectation to clean oneself at home.

Margit watched the slender boy in front of her shut his eyes. This put a smile on her face: seeing him sitting naked like this gave her the same impression as a feast's main dish, a white plate with top-quality game—no, he was splendid enough to be the *piece de resistance* at a noble's dinner.

Two years her junior, the boy was just beginning to show signs of ripening. *It must be because of his training with the canton Watch*, Margit mused. Out of all the children their age, he was the only one that had been accepted to train with the Watch regularly. Where everyone else had lost their will to fight after being slapped around the one time, he had gotten up a total of seven times and even managed to deflect the final blow with a stone. It was little wonder that *the* Lambert had taken a liking to him.

A handful of painful bruises dotted his body, and a few edges had formed to replace the childish roundness he had sported up until recently. His once soft muscles had begun to harden, and his cute belly was tightening up. At this rate, he would soon mature into a farmer's robust, labor-forged figure. The thought of his future form made Margit's heart race.

His current state wasn't bad, of course. Yet it was the refreshing sour sting of a citrus that had only begun to ripen. The flavor that melted the soul was a paralyzing sweetness that emerged with deeper color at a later season. Considering the way mensch aged, the boy was still far too green. There may have been some who'd contend this to be the best time to pick; however, Margit was particular to oranges that were on the cusp of overripeness.

Succumbing to the beckoning of her quickening pulse, Margit playfully poked at a dark blue bruise—the result of a blow from a blunted sword. It was a minor wound, but the pain was more than enough to surprise the boy, who had been wondering when she was going to wash his hair.

"Ow! Wha—huh?!"

This is it! This reaction is what I was looking for. The boy's innocent shock spoke to Margit's predatory instincts. But he wasn't her average prey. He wasn't a fleeing rabbit, nor a plated sheep. He was an undeveloped monster with the strength of a sharp-fanged boar and the agility of a cunning fox. *If his talents are so apparent as a child*, the little spider wondered, *then what will he be like when he matures like me?* The anticipation caused her heart to thump; after all, the greatest glory came from the greatest game.

"I'm sorry," she cooed, "it looked so painful that I couldn't help myself."

"Wait, you *thought* it'd be painful and you still did it?!"

Despite all that had changed, the kaleidoscopic baby blue of his eyes remained the same. His accusatory glare paired with those delightful irises only further played into the arachne's sensibilities.

Margit chose to let her instincts take hold. "I really am sorry, you know? Here..."

"Wait, wha—Margit?!"

Margit made her way around the boy's crossed legs and sat on his lap. They had never been the same height, but this position let them see eye to eye. Knowing that he would soon grow to overlook her even here, Margit felt this moment to be terribly precious.

"Allow me to give you a thorough washing," she whispered. Like a spider approaching panicking prey, the girl wrapped her arms around his neck with a bewitching smile.

[Tips] Arachne have a range of motion that can reach any part of their lower body, unlike most humanfolk races.

Summer of the Eleventh Year

Player

The person behind a character. The real human being that is playing the game.

Every Player Character is ultimately the same on the inside, so a level of meta knowledge is available to the player, but not the PC.

After a clash of blades, a man stood frozen in shock. *Who the hell is this kid?* He wouldn't have been surprised to see his attack parried—it had been a weak swing meant to test a new recruit's mettle. He hadn't wanted to hurt a boy that was years and years younger than him.

The man knew all too well that little boys were prone to big egos. Much to his embarrassment, he himself had run his mouth back in his childhood. In the world of combat, where competition was directly linked to injury, hubris got the better of many upcoming warriors. Knowing this, the man had taken it upon himself to teach his junior the harsh reality of the world: an adult's strength far eclipsed that of any child, and the gap only grew when facing a demihuman or demonfolk opponent.

Yet somehow the man's sword, once firmly gripped, now twirled through the air, his opponent's blade leveled at his neck. Despite the fancy trick that had taken place before his eyes, the man was left with an uncomfortable lack of tactile feedback in his hand. It was as if he'd been hexed. The creeping feeling that he'd been deceived by something lurking in the darkness spread throughout his mind.

"Satisfied?" the boy asked.

The man stared. Their bout had been so ungrounded in reality that the skinny lad in front of him seemed like he wasn't quite human. On the battlefield, this would have been curtains. The arteries in his neck would have been sliced open,

leaving him to drown in a fountain of his own blood. At best, a neck guard or chainmail cowl could stall for a few seconds, but it would be an easy matter to poke through such defenses when one had such a massive advantage.

"...Let's go again."

However, the man was unable to accept his loss and asked to spar once more. He couldn't believe that his sword had slipped through his fingers like the powdery snow of early spring. The boy nodded nonchalantly. *He's real,* the man assured himself. *He's not some shadowy, unknown horror—he's just a farmer's kid.*

The man readjusted his grip twice, then three times, as if to say that his sword's dance through the air had been some passing illusion. In spite of all his doubts, he couldn't deny the weight of the sword in his hands. He used the certainty of his fastening grip to expel the uneasiness from his mind and postured himself for the duel. The boy mirrored his form: it was a generic stance where one held the blade loosely with both hands and pointed it at their opponent. Their unremarkable postures were the basis for the Hybrid Sword Arts that the two of them studied.

The man looked his composed opponent over and could only see a child full of openings. The boy's gaze was lofty and unfocused, and his undeveloped body showed little vigor. Still, the disquieting effect rolling off of him was as strong as ever. Despite looking straight at him, the man couldn't *see* him. The strange way the boy failed to stick in his mind caused the man's anxiety to run wild.

The man dispelled his agitation by striking. Though his overhead swing was basic, countless hours of practice had left him confident in his form. But the blade did not connect: bafflingly, the boy had begun moving in the middle of the man's strike, yet again robbing him of his weapon with a touch so gentle that it felt unreal. With the opening act out of the way, the boy thrust his sword forward until it was a hair away from splitting the man's skull. Considering how precise the young one's swordplay was, it was uncertain if a helmet would have saved him. The blow would either concuss him or blind him with a splatter of blood; either way, he was sure to be an easy kill.

I would have died, the man finally realized. With a heavy gulp, he internalized

his defeat. However, his initial disbelief only grew stronger. *Who the hell is this kid?*

The man was not the type to pride himself as an undefeated warrior. He had yet to take a point off his mentor Lambert in the seven years he'd studied under him. When he teamed up with two other students only to lose terribly to their master, he accepted that he was—and would always be—no more than an average soldier.

Even so, the boy was an enigma. The man had trained for seven years, survived countless battles against those who threatened the canton, and had been drafted by the lord of the region *twice*. His experience was nothing to scoff at. When their village had been assaulted by armed raiders, he had been able to face several at once and come out unscathed, so how had he lost to an *eleven-year-old brat?*

On top of that, the man's intuition told him that the boy's technique was extraordinary. *Is it even possible to rob a man of his sword without so much as grazing his fingertips?* But no matter how many times he contemplated the situation, the reality remained that his opponent's blade was at his throat, while his own had tumbled onto the ground behind him.

"I-I concede."

Whereas the boy hadn't broken a sweat, an indescribable fright caused a cold droplet to run down the man's back. *Erich, fourth son of Johannes.* The man finally understood why Lambert had taken this boy under his wing, and why he'd forbidden anyone else from sparring with young Erich. Lambert had wanted to preserve the watchman's pride that he'd spent seven years cultivating. But the man's luck had run dry when he decided to interrupt the boy's practice. He had trampled over his mentor's kindness with his own two hands.

What if we had shields? What about spears instead of swords? The man desperately imagined a variety of potential scenarios, but his spirit was so thoroughly broken that he couldn't visualize himself winning in any of them. He would likely never think to tutor a new recruit again. He turned his back to the boy and bitterly voiced one last frustration.

"...You're a *monster*."

[Tips] Hybrid Sword Arts is a skill representing a mixed martial art that is based around the use of swords. Refined by real combat, the art encourages familiarity with all forms of weaponry and emphasizes an understanding of grappling, throwing, and off-handed projectiles. Despite being categorized as a swordplay skill, it provides aptitude for all manner of other arms.

The peak moment for any munchkin is when someone looks at what you've done with your build and you can see confusion and disgust in their expression.

Two years ago, Lambert had taken me on as a potential recruit and made time in between his official duties to spar with me. I had been shocked to see the tremendous load of experience points that combat provided. This generous income was likely a reflection of the high risk and complexity of the act: attacking, dodging, and defending all took a lot of concentration, and every mistake could be fatal. For example, each and every projectile that came my way had to be parried or blocked with a part of my body that wouldn't kill me. Combat's endless battery of decisions and intuitive leaps collapses a lifetime into fractions of a second.

With a new source of income that was leagues better than my old training methods, my surplus of experience mounted...until my bad habit reared its ugly head once more. I *still* hadn't decided what I wanted to do in the future, but somehow I had spent so much experience that my Hybrid Sword Arts skill was at its *sixth* level, Expert.

Um, I, uh... Sorry, me. But it's always good to have a means of defense in a dangerous world like this! I couldn't even come up with a convincing excuse.

Putting my lack of willpower aside, I was a fan of the battle-hardened combat style's simplicity. It placed little value in the aesthetics of form; it was a straightforward study of the most efficient means of cutting someone down and moving on. The basic stance was boring: a sword in the right hand and a shield in the left.

However, it traded flashiness for savage efficiency. The ideal attack was a fast,

fatal strike with the blade, but the style employed anything that might lead to success. The fanciest technique we had was holding our sword by the blade (with gloves, of course) and using the hilt to bash through someone's armor. More frequently, however, we simply slammed our shields into the enemy or looked for an opportunity to sweep them off their feet. When I considered that I'd been taught how to strangle someone in a desperate situation, I wondered how this could be considered *sword*play.

Regardless of its categorization, the evolution of the style was very natural. The men I studied under were veterans of hectic melees (unlike traditional peasant armies), so it made sense that they emphasized the value of picking up discarded weapons to strike down foes as quickly as possible. Its practical origins meant that the martial art taught group combat strategies for one-on-many and many-on-many battles, which I greatly appreciated. The lessons on defensive battles and ally coordination were sure to be helpful in the future.

All this training came with a good number of new traits and skills. This was where I truly shined: mixing and matching abilities to stir up all sorts of trouble is a munchkin's calling. If anyone had any complaints, I'd point them directly to whichever god was crazy enough to let me multiclass.

One ability in particular positively screamed "Abuse me!" Enchanting Artistry was a trait that extended dexterity bonuses to new skills, gave a bonus to dexterity checks, and allowed me to *use dexterity in place of other values* during rolls. Now, it isn't uncommon to see a game where one standout stat is used in lieu of another, but this implementation was a bit special. Many combat skills and traits used multiple stats like strength and agility in their calculations, but Enchanting Artistry let me replace *all of them* with dexterity.

Say, for example, that an overhead swing determines accuracy with dexterity and agility, and the damage is based on strength and dexterity. My new trait let me replace both agility and strength with dexterity, meaning that I could double up on my strongest stat for both calculations. It was almost *too* efficient.

The reasoning behind this effect was that someone with polished technique would be deft enough to use the bare minimum amount of force or speed required for any given task, like how a judo master could throw someone twice their size. Still, the effect was utterly broken.

I had invested heavily in dexterity to improve my carving capabilities, raising it to VII: Exceptional. There were only two more levels left to aim for, but the resources required to get there were beyond the realm of even the most sadistic gacha game. Not wanting to blow all of the experience I had saved for my future, I'd put my progress on hold for the time being.

There were times in my day-to-day life when I needed to purchase a handy skill or two, so I couldn't afford to put all my eggs in one basket. It was usually best to use all available experience to level as quickly as possible in these sorts of games, but I didn't want to run into an unsolvable problem during the quiet moments, so it paid to be patient. If I was to live amidst my peers as a normal human being, I couldn't turn myself into some kind of walking, talking killing machine. Besides, I wasn't a fan of that sort of life.

Breathing life into one's journey with unique skills and looking out for fun moments was the true joy of a TRPG. My life wasn't a game, which was exactly why I needed to be ready to enjoy it. Mechanically bouncing from one completed adventure to the next would be a massive waste of potential, don't you think?

Getting back on topic, Enchanting Artistry had one more absurdly powerful effect: it let me take one dexterity-based skill and combine it with a skill from a different category. I had always considered the system of this world to be combo-oriented, but this was far beyond anything I'd imagined. And it was only a matter of course that someone like me who picked up a skill here and a trait there would end up breaking the system at some point. I was a living example of why no one should ever allow their players to build multiclass characters, even as a joke.

I chose to take the Disarm skill from the Martial Arts category and slapped it onto my basic attacks, allowing me to render my foes helpless. Among the myriad of unarmed self-defense skills, Disarm was one of the cheapest. It was a much easier purchase than an expensive counterattack that I might not land consistently. Furthermore, its only drawback was its low base success rate, which Enchanting Artistry let me boost to ludicrous heights.

A highly capable opponent would likely be able to resist it, but the potential reward of creating an unarmed target was intoxicating. If they didn't have any

hand-to-hand combat experience, my new attack would leave them as helpless as a plated fish waiting to be minced.

I should look into getting more skills that inflict debuffs on—my train of thought was suddenly interrupted by a tingling in my spine. A faint odor carried by the breeze put my senses on full alert, and I shifted my body half a step to the side to dodge an incoming attack...only to realize one beat too late that it had been a feint. She'd let me notice her on purpose to make me commit to an evasive maneuver, and now was her chance to pounce.

"How do you do?" Margit said, swinging across me with her hands around my neck. I didn't feel any pain as she clung to me; I couldn't tell if it was her superb control over her grip or her masterful dispersion of momentum, but she came to a comfortable stop right in front of my chest. Her smile slid right into view, as adorable and brilliant as it was two years ago.

"Please come over normally..." I said.

"But this is our routine," she protested. "Today makes 134 wins and 140 losses, so I'm slowly gaining on you." My living necklace buried her face into my developing pecs like a friendly kitten.

Our relationship had changed as little as her appearance. The romantic flag that I had picked up at some point was alive and well, perhaps thanks to our long history together. Although I suppose I'd known every child in the canton for just as long, so that might not have had anything to do with it.

With around forty years of life experience under my belt, I'd had my share of romantic episodes and knew the signs of affection when I saw them. I wasn't so clueless that I couldn't tell what Margit was thinking. I was the only person she leapt onto, and she wouldn't let anyone else walk around wearing her as a backpack. She may have had a habit of teasing me, but she wasn't a devilish playgirl that toyed with the hearts of men.

Still, her childish appearance and the paradoxical allure of her actions left me in a state of confusion. *How am I meant to view her? How am I meant to feel?*

Completely ignoring my inner dilemma, Margit happily advanced the conversation in the elegant palatial speech she'd spent years perfecting. "Have you heard the news?"

“What news?” I asked.

“It would seem your eldest brother is slated to marry soon,” she announced.

The sudden development caused me to choke and do a spit take.

“Ew! Gross!” Margit shrieked, reverting back to the commoner’s tongue. Her face was positioned right in front of mine and her hands were busy clinging to my neck, so I’d landed a direct hit. I felt too guilty to complain when she wiped herself off by nuzzling my shirt.

“S-Sorr—no, wait! Heinz is getting *married?!*” I had been completely caught off guard. Of course, it was common for parents to arrange marriages for their children when they were close to adulthood in order to form bonds with other families in our small canton. I was eleven, which made Heinz fourteen; he was only one year out from legal adulthood, so it wasn’t a stretch to begin the wedding process now. *But why did Margit know about this before me? I’m literally his brother!*

“Mmhmm,” Margit said. “I heard that he’s been engaged to Mina.”

Mina used to be one of our usual playmates when we were younger. She’d stopped coming to the forest last year to learn housework by helping her mother, so I hadn’t seen her for a while, but she and my brother didn’t have that sort of relationship last I remembered. *I guess the parents were the ones who set it all up...*

“I guess this sort of thing spreads faster between girls,” I noted.

“I suppose so,” Margit replied. “But I think the true reason word spread so quickly is due to Heinz being a favorite among the local maidens.”

Oh? This was the first I’d ever heard of my brother’s popularity. However, now that I thought of it, he *had* inherited my father’s rugged good looks. I was a little biased, considering that he was my family and all, but his sturdy build gave off an aura of reliability. *I guess it’s not too far-fetched for him to step into the realm of dating while I wasn’t looking...*

“He’s the heir to a solid house with healthy savings, after all.”

Oh. I felt like I was about to tumble over with Margit still hanging from my

neck. The harshness of pragmatic reality had taken the wind out of my sails.

To be fair, our house was on the upper end as far as independent farmers went. It had taken some time, but my parents had saved the funds to send my second brother Michael to school as well. In fact, my father had pulled me aside and told me that he could squeeze out just enough money to send me along too. I'd used Margit's tutoring as an excuse to decline, but the fact that we'd had that option at all was proof of our incredibly high standard of living.

The fields we'd expanded six years ago were now stable, our workhorse remained in good health, and we had a handful of olive trees that were mature enough to bear fruit. On the same note, my side gig making board game pieces and wooden idols had apparently earned a pretty penny when my father had sold them. His offer to send me to school may have been an attempt at compensating me for my work.

But wow... Marriage?

"Is there something wrong?" Margit asked, peering up at me as I hung my head in deliberation.

I was unsure of how to respond, but knowing it wouldn't help to brood silently, I answered her as truthfully as I could. With a heavy feeling of responsibility weighing on me, I said, "I was thinking about how I need to figure out what I want to do with my life."

[Tips] In the Trialist Empire of Rhine, official inheritance, employment, and appointment are rights reserved for legal adults. There are some loopholes to begin working before the age of fifteen, such as becoming a steward or apprentice.

There exists a period of moratorium in every person's life. A relaxing length of time where responsibilities are few and far between. For me, it was the college days where my friends and I would hole up in a room to roll dice over rulebooks for hours on end. This age where one has the rights of an adult but the leeway of a child is the most liberating part of a Japanese person's life if used to its fullest extent.

However, this period has more to it than leisure. It is a crossroads at which one must decide what path they wish to take in life, and at this very moment, I found myself at a fork in the road once again.

Truth be told, making plans for the future was difficult in this new world. The child of a farmer was to be a farmer. The child of a huntsman was to be a huntsman. The child of a blacksmith was to be a blacksmith. The unwritten rules of my previous life were such a given here that it had been codified in imperial law.

The logic was reasonable. Without advanced technology, manpower was a necessity for all sorts of things. The state needed its citizens to work in certain fields, or the whole system would collapse.

On Earth, it was evident from the perpetually understaffed agricultural and construction industries and the overwhelming number of office workers that it was less enticing to earn a living through physically intensive work. No matter how much technology developed, that would never change.

It wasn't difficult to foresee that Rhine's encouragement of literacy among the lower class could lead to some sort of social upheaval. Since the majority of people never had a chance to receive an education, demand for skilled labor never ceased. Sir Grant, the local scribe for our backwater canton, made ends meet just by writing a handful of letters and petitions a month. But without a means of importing vast quantities of food, the country couldn't afford to allow its farmers and construction workers to leave their posts. The imperial regulations on viable careers were a fail-safe to prevent total societal collapse.

Some interdisciplinary mobility existed via marriage or registered stewardship, but these opportunities were much like part-time jobs in the Japanese countryside: you could only get in if you had connections. I only had a few real options to my name.

Under imperial law, a farmhand could become an adventurer, mercenary, soldier, or watchman without restriction. The only other choices were to work as a day laborer or coal miner, or to simply continue farming in another region that needed more manpower.

Without any sort of recruitment drive in the area, it would be impossible for

me to be a career soldier, and despite my training with Lambert, I was unfortunately stuck at the position of watchman prospect. Lukas's empty spot had been filled quickly, and it was unlikely that I'd be considered for full-time employment unless another watchman retired. At most, the Empire was willing to employ five percent of its population as part of its standing army, and without the threat of war, it had no place for me.

I could consider being a farmer, but establishing a crop field from scratch required huge sums of capital. Moving to a distant canton to start a farm was akin to signing oneself into serfdom, so it wasn't a legitimate option in my mind. On top of that, I'd heard that underage workers were usually turned away, even as day laborers. Besides, if I were to stoop to the level of working for a daily wage, it would have been better for me to go to school and inherit my family's farm to begin with.

That left me with the sad fact that adventuring was the only choice that gave me any hope at all. Technically, I could also marry a girl and take up her family trade, but that wasn't very helpful in our tiny canton. It wasn't as if that would expand my list of opportunities by much.

What a bind. I also considered joining the ranks of authors, playwrights, and unsponsored artists like traveling bards and theater troupes. However, I wasn't carefree enough to be like these sorts who were employed in little more than name, and I didn't have any passion for performance to begin with. I could spend my experience points to become a skilled artist, but I doubted that I'd be able to stomach it for long.

"...I guess I'll try adventuring," I mumbled. I slowly digested the words as they left my mouth, and a curious feeling sank into the corner of my heart. The statement was little more than the common drivel uttered by the many children weary of their quaint hometowns. I was no better than a university student hellbent on quitting school and paying the bills through music.

However, I now came to understand that this desire had always been with me. The future Buddha had blessed me with this wonderful power and urged me to live according to my own wishes. I hadn't been brought here to do something that had to be done, but to do what I *willed*.

Was there any shame in letting myself indulge in the same story I so dearly loved in my past life? It wasn't as though I'd played the role of an adventurer in every story: I'd been a student that got roped into a supernatural mystery just as often as I'd saved the world.

But, I thought, *no matter what sort of setting I'm tossed into, I'm sure I would seek out this kind of journey.*

It was a comically simple story: adventuring wasn't the only option *left*, but the *only option* for me. I couldn't believe this was the conclusion I'd come to with forty years of wisdom under my belt. From figuring out the details to convincing my parents, a mountain of issues still remained untouched.

"Is there something on your mind?" Margit asked from below my chin.

As always, the timbre of her voice sent a jolt across my back. I looked down to see that the little arachne had been hanging from my neck during my entire soul-searching journey. *Why is it that these hazel eyes and their companions in her hair always stop my mind in its tracks?* On second thought, as of late, her eyes had begun to shift from a standard hazel to a deeper color. A faint brown seeped into her irises, shifting them to amber—no, to a profound gold.

"You see," she whispered with a pause, "as the eldest daughter of my house...I've been thinking quite a bit myself."

An uneasy sweat streaked across my skin. It felt as though my Presence Detection skill was trying to alert me to something, but the gears of my brain refused to turn. *I can't turn away from these eyes.*

Margit's gaze took a corporeal form and caressed my eyeballs, slipping past them into the depths of my skull. I had no idea what caused this hallucination, but it felt unusually grounded in reality. It almost seemed as if we'd made contact mind-to-mind, and this fantasy was my distorted brain's attempt at processing her embrace.

"So *do* feel free to rely on me," she sighed. The eight limbs wrapping around my back tightened. These were not to secure her position, but to secure *mine*.

Suddenly, I remembered that certain species of spider engaged in sexual cannibalism. Margit was a spider—a jumping spider. I couldn't recall whether or

not they were part of that list, but a burst of terror knocked at the depths of my heart, only for—

"I'm sure I can be of some help," Margit whispered into my ear. "Don't you think?"

All at once, the oppressive tension I'd felt vanished into thin air and she released me.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked with a giggle, hopping to the ground. "Why, you look as though you've seen a ghost." She looked up at me from the ground with the same mischievous smile that I'd seen over and over. Sunlight glimmered on her gentle eyes, which were once again a quiet hazel.

Was I daydreaming?

"Shall we go?" Margit cooed playfully in her usual refined dialect. Taking my hand, she added, "I believe you trained with Sir Lambert today. It won't do to have you roaming around covered in sweat. You don't want to catch a cold, do you?"

My sister Elisa had recently started wandering around the house, but holding her hand was totally different from holding Margit's. The spidery fingers coiled around my own were small, soft, and colder to the touch than any mensch's. The refreshing chill of her hand helped soothe my panicked heart.

It felt like the anxiety from a moment ago had been pure delusion. The speed at which it turned from palpable reality to utter fancy baffled me. *Well, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about...* My family was ready to let me stay with them, at least until I came of age. I'd need to be careful not to intrude on the newlyweds' alone time, but surely my parents had a solution for that.

We would either build an annex or a shed—or we could even splurge to build a whole other house. At least one of my brothers would stay at home for the foreseeable future, so it certainly wouldn't go to waste.

As I held onto the tiny hand that guided me forward, my worries slowly faded away.

[Tips] Many families will allow their second or third son to remain at home

in case the eldest falls ill or passes away. Once the eldest brother has a son of his own, the younger brother is expected to marry into a different household somewhere in the area.

Margit's mother always maintained that every prey had a surefire means of capture. The two of them were unlike the patient orb-weaving arachne, the giant tarantula arachne, or the powerful huntsman spider arachne. Those who traced their lineage to jumping spiders approached silently and extinguished lives with a single, deft strike.

First, they snuck into their mark's blind spot with bated breath. Then, they leapt with a dagger or bow, aiming for a vital spot that would instantly kill the unsuspecting creature. Without venom or a web, their kind had to end things instantly. The subrace had survived despite its small stature and feathery weight thanks to their evolutionary bias toward the first strike.

Margit's mother built on this by forcing her daughter to study her game. *Where are they weak?* There were very few points where a dagger or arrow could instantly kill an animal. While many injuries would cause the creature to bleed out, seldom were the locations that could cause immediate fatality. *Where are they blind?* Small as these arachne were, a moving mass with a little more than a meter of height was sure to stand out. Tracking all five senses and where they were least active was a necessity for success. *Where are they dangerous?* Knowing the enemy's strength meant knowing their openings. A swordsman relied on his sword; a bowman relied on his arrows.

Margit had received this lecture countless times on an untold number of hunting expeditions. But one day, her mother concluded in a different manner. "All of this applies to men, as well. Men, too, have weaknesses. Not the bloodstained kind of throats and arteries, but things that will make them *weak*."

Unfortunately for Margit, jumping spider arachne were complete strangers to the mature, voluptuous bodies that were popular amongst the humanfolk races. Unable to support any dead weight, their physique was perfectly tailored to a childish stature. If a female arachne happened to have a bountiful chest, it would cause her to struggle with her balance for the rest of her life. For better

or for worse, age never touched their looks.

Margit's mother had borne a number of children and yet still looked like a child on the outside. Those who could guess her age just from her upper body were few and far between. When paired with her mensch husband, the two looked closer to grandfather and granddaughter than married couple. There were rumors that some abnormal mensch were actively drawn to this dissonance, causing arachne to become the targets of a perverse objectification.

Fortunately for Margit, her chosen mark was a kind, agreeable boy. It may have been the fact that he was younger than her, or it may have been that she had yet to grow old enough for her appearance to seem out of place. Either way, her advances were working, especially when she aimed for his weakest point: Erich couldn't handle a whisper in his ear. Each soft-spoken word caused him to squirm, and hiding it was beyond him when she was glued to his body.

Love was but an extension of the hunt, and this was all the more true for an arachne, whose sensibilities were closer to that of demonfolk than demihumans; a tinge of madness was inherent to her blood.

So she pounced on him to show the world: *This one is mine.* She loved that his skin was warm to the touch, and she enjoyed the way his blue eyes flashed when he was surprised, but more than anything else, she loved the feeling of satisfaction and security he provided.

Seeing Erich stuck in his own mind, the little spider wanted to lend him a hand. As the fourth son, he was too far down the ladder to remain at home, but it wasn't as if they lived in a land of opportunity. The Watch wouldn't have an open slot for some time (even if it did, there were others waiting in line for the position) and Erich wasn't the type of person that could push others aside for the sake of a job.

However, he was well received by the people around him. He'd memorized nearly all of the hymns and psalms that they'd sung at church, and he always prayed earnestly during mass, so the church would be overjoyed to take him. Furthermore, his ability to read and write combined with his good manners and understanding of the palatial tongue gave him a shot at working for the

magistrate. Margit would need to borrow someone else's fingers to count the number of adults who would vouch for his ability.

If all else failed, he could always marry into another family and inherit their business. In fact, this was his easiest path to success. Truthfully, Heinz wasn't the only member of his family that drew the attention of local girls. Erich was talented with both the pen and the blade, worked hard, crafted marketable wood carvings, and had a slender build, blond hair, and blue eyes—all popular with Rhinian women. That was more than enough reason for him to be the target of passionate stares from young girls, fresh adults, and even widows who had lost their husband early. Margit could already see the bloodbath that he'd cause when he neared fifteen.

The arachne suddenly considered making a treehouse in the forest canopy where she could lock him away. The fantasy caused her heart to skip a beat, and she felt a fire in the pit of her stomach.

Oh, I recall that he was considering adventuring. Margit knew very well what the reality of such work entailed—her mother had been a globe-trotting adventurer herself until she fell in love at first sight with a local huntsman. Among the tales of her travels across the world as her party's scout, there were certainly some that kept the little spider girl up at night.

And those stories were exactly why she was determined to follow her beloved warrior if he were to set off on his own. A scout with a keen eye and a sensitive ear was always in need on the road. No matter how acute Erich's senses were, he was bound by the physical limitations of a mensch.

The young yet mature arachne peered up at the boy as he walked along with her on his back, and a thin smile crept onto her face. Would she pin him down, or would he show her a true dance? Margit could hardly wait to see how he would come along.

[Tips] The cultural values of any given canton or village are prone to being influenced by the values of whatever race is most influential in the area.

Autumn of the Twelfth Year

Session

Best thought of as a single chapter of a campaign. Each session is a time for all the players and the GM to meet and advance the story.

Let only those whose pride is unswayed by the sweet praise of others cast a stone upon me.

“By the Goddess, this is something else.”

“Do you really mean that?” I found myself shyly scratching at my cheek as the dvergar (I had to stop myself from calling him a dwarf on more than a few occasions) master of the only smithy in the canton marveled at my work.

“I knew you had a good pair of hands, but I never would’ve thought you’d finish a whole set this fast,” he said, stroking his thick beard in awe. A set of wooden carvings lined the countertop in front of him. The twenty-five different types of figures each represented a distinct piece from a board game popular in Rhine and her neighboring countries.

Ehrengarde was a shogi-like game played on a twelve-by-twelve grid wherein each player attempted to rout the enemy emperor and prince. The unique rules dictating each piece’s movement and attacks were reminiscent of classic shogi, but not all the rules were so familiar. Out of the twenty-five types of pieces, only the emperor and prince pieces were mandatory for both players: the players then filled the first four ranks of their board with twenty-eight more pieces of their choosing to begin the game with a total of thirty units.

The abundance of things on the board evoked the image of a trading card game, and the intricacies during play complicated things in a similar fashion. While the game owed its staying power to its complexity and depth, a new player could fend for themselves with a cheat sheet briefly summarizing the more particular rules. The country’s relatively high literacy rate made the game

a mainstay in Rhine and the neighboring satellite states.

Pieces could be drafted anywhere from one to twelve times—naturally, powerful rook-style pieces could only be taken once, while twelve pawns were allowed on either side. This balancing led to a handful of archetypal compositions, but none of them were blatantly overpowered enough to ruin the game. The game was so popular in the region that I'd heard stories of methuselah dedicating *centuries* to studying the mind sport.

One might think that 144 tiles containing sixty pieces would lead to a prolonged playtime, but the asymmetry that arises when strong and weak pieces intermix causes the game to end quickly once one player hems in the other's prince and emperor. It has quick rounds for a game of its scale.

Of course, pieces for a board game as popular as ehrengarde were in high demand. The price varied wildly depending on quality, but every set was guaranteed to find a buyer. As the seller, this was as simple as it came. With each set requiring a total of 140 pieces, I certainly didn't want for work, and the distinctness of the markets I could cater to was a great help. After all, there weren't many other commodities that could be sold to patricians and plebeians both.

A set of wooden chunks with words written on them was dirt cheap, but a collection of statuesque pieces tailored for nobility could fetch a pretty penny depending on the quality of its make. Apparently, some sets were such masterpieces that they could rival the price of an entire manor. I'd dedicated the whole summer of my eleventh year to polish off a batch of pieces ready to be used as the basis for a mold.

"I can't believe this only took you one summer," the blacksmith said with a contemplative pause. "If I had an apprentice like you, I'm sure the other smiths would slam their chisels into the counter for not finding you first."

"Oh please," I said, "you're just flattering me."

"...Hm, yeah, well, be glad you're a country kid. Things get hard in this neck of the woods for folks who can't take a hint."

Huh? Is it just me or did he insult me to my face? I set the rude comment aside as the waist-high smith picked up the emperor piece with a grunt. It depicted a

middle-aged man hoisting a flag up high: the motif was the heroic emperor who, with his son, had repelled a joint invasion of Rhine over 120 years ago. Knowing that dvergar prized their beards, it was a good sign that the smith was stroking his as he gazed at the flag fluttering in an invisible wind.

"I'm really proud of that one," I told him. "I based it off a portrait of the Black Flag I saw at church."

"Sure, he's a famous emperor. Him and the Silver Prince make a good father-son duo, so I'd bet they'll sell well as emperor and prince pieces."

Although they didn't always retail for a full manor, well made pieces could still trade for significant coin. I'd been told that since many patrons elected to only buy single pieces that caught their fancy, the ever-present emperor and prince pieces were extra marketable, especially when they depicted popular monarchs, and as such I'd spent the most time and effort refining those two into works of art.

The major pieces were the height of an index finger and the minor ones the height of a pinky. It had been a daunting endeavor to carve out glorious poses that could fit into the pedestal at our town's meeting hall.

"So, what do you think, sir?" I asked cautiously after the man had inspected each piece.

"Hrmm... All right, fine," he said, crossing his arms. With a hefty nod, he sealed the deal and declared, "I'll hammer you a set of armor."

"Thank you so very much!!!"

"I didn't think you had it in you to make it—and even if you did, I thought it'd take at least half a year. You did well, kiddo."

I let out a shy chuckle. It was a wondrous feeling to have the fruits of my labor accepted, and all the better when I could trade it for what I really wanted.

"All right, let's get you measured out. You mensch keep growing, don'tcha? I'll make sure to build a set you can have tweaked." The man hopped down from the counter stool and led me into the back of his workshop, swinging his shoulders to invigorate himself. The thought that a month of hard work was finally paying off sent shivers of joy down my spine.

It had all started this summer as I approached my twelfth birthday: I'd needed money. A set of equipment and a weapon was the bare minimum for an adventurer. Unfortunately for me, equipment and weaponry was mind-bogglingly expensive. Generally speaking, a set of chainmail paired with hard leather underneath would cost what my family spent to eat for an entire month.

There was no getting around it, as the requisite leather and metal alone was already pricey. I may have been operating on a TRPG system, but that didn't extend to the finances of those around me. The world wasn't so kind to adventurers that skipping out on a few nights at the inn could buy an entire armor set. In the nostalgic settings of days gone by where the entire universe was built around the concept of adventure, weapons were well within the price range of a child's allowance, but here a mere bronze sword cost a small fortune.

As the fourth son, it went without saying that I was in no position to beg for scraps. Further, our family had recently built a cottage in preparation for my brother's wedding, so our purse had taken a swift turn into the land of austerity. With betrothal fees, ceremony fees, and an officially wed bride on the way...no amount of parental love could justify a spare coin for me.

The only choice I had was to earn it myself. I was not as brainless as a certain hunter who'd ventured into the depths of ruins in search of tanks—or rather, weapons in general. I also could see the costs of raw materials coming, so I refused to take smithing skills as a stopgap.

Besides, I had a different means of earning money. In order to secure an easier path to independence (though that sounded unconvincing coming from me) I made wood carvings until my Wood Whittling skill was all the way to VII: Virtuoso. I picked up an Artistry skill to improve the finer details on the board game pieces, and with that at V: Adept, I took an add-on called Realistic Depiction to round out my money making abilities.

Thinly veiled excuses aside, when I first had brought a pawn to the blacksmith as a sample, he'd been so impressed that he offered to make me a set of armor in exchange for a full ehrengarde set. My initial hope had been for him to buy it off me and then to use the earnings to commission armor, so this was beyond my wildest expectations. I'd leapt at the opportunity without a second thought.

Admittedly, the process of designing and carving twenty-five different pieces had been back-breaking work, but the tantalizing thought of my own personal armor kept me working at a rapid pace. I'd lessened my usual craftwork without hesitation and spent all of my free time creating these instead. My shoulders had grown stiff, no doubt entirely due to the extra weight of Margit dangling on my back begging for attention, but she repaid me with a massage (of the completely wholesome variety, I might add) so we'll call it even.

Any fantasy lover's heart would light ablaze at the prospect of having their own personal armor. That enthusiasm, coupled with the restless feeling that I was only some two years and change away from leaving home, spurred me to work at a pace I had never before achieved. And now, my work was being recognized as I stood still to be measured.

"Hmph, you'll grow another head or two on you," the smith said with a measuring tape in one hand and my shoulder in the other. I had committed a sizable sum of experience to my future growth, so I was meant to be somewhere in the ballpark of 180 centimeters at full size.

"You can tell?" I asked.

"Back in the day, I handled a lotta adventurers and soldiers when I worked at the Innenstadt smithy," he explained, jotting down the measurements of my arms and shoulders. "When you've seen as many tots turn into full-grown men as I have, a good rub is enough to tell."

Innenstadt was a major city that lay on a river to the west of Konigstuhl. Tens of thousands of people called it home, and my father often went there to sell crops wholesale in order to pay our liquid taxes. My brothers had also once hitched a ride with a caravan to learn a trade in the city, but I had never gone, unfortunately. But that made me wonder: why would someone go from a smithy in the big city to this tiny village?

"You've got a good swordsman's body," he said. Then, after a short pause, he wondered aloud, "But there's a bit more muscle on one side of your back and chest here... This from a shortbow or something?"

"Wow, you're spot-on." I was amazed that he could tell from a single touch. Swordplay was my main mode of combat, but I'd been learning how to handle a

bow from Margit on the side. Despite my phenomenal run-in with the old wizard who'd given me the ring, I had yet to encounter my second episode with magic, and wanted for a long-range attack option.

I'd been contemplating how my situation wasn't very ideal when I remembered that my childhood friend was a huntsman. I'd worried that she'd refuse considering that it was a family trade, but my fears proved baseless and she'd instantly accepted my request. When the two of us had free time, she would often instruct me in some light training with the bow.

Thanks to Margit, I'd unlocked archery skills and a whole host of sneaking and tracking skills as we stalked the wooded mountains. These would never gather dust as an adventurer always on the move—nope, never. Never ever. I was absolutely not just telling myself this to avert my eyes from my dwindling stockpile of experience. Besides, my training was a fantastic source of income, I swear.

"A bow, eh... Well, bows are outta my jurisdiction. It's a shame, but I can't make you one no matter what you bring me."

"Really?"

"I'm allowed to make any kinda non-plate armor, swords, and spear tips. Bows are no good. Just 'cause I run the smithy doesn't mean I can make whatever I want."

In my mind, a local blacksmith was an all-rounder that made everything from weapons to armor to even grappling hooks, but the occupation had its limitations here. As he took my measurements, the dvergar man explained how he was a member of an artisan union—a guild, so to speak—that issued licenses allowing blacksmiths to open their shops.

In order to prevent advancements in smelting or casting from leaking to other nations, all smithing workshops were required to register with an artisan union. They were the ones who determined who was permitted to create what; this all sounded rather strict, but an information leak could have serious military implications, so I supposed it was fair enough.

In essence, blacksmiths required national qualification... The people making nails or hoops for buckets and barrels in small cantons suddenly appeared much

more impressive to me. For the longest time, I'd considered the smith here to be the proprietor of some kind of nail-and-kitchen-knife store. I would still have been looking aimlessly for a place to find armor had Sir Lambert not pointed me here.

"But you *can* make swords?"

"All the ones hanging off of the watchmen's belts were hammered out by yours truly. If you want one for yourself, bring another set of these," he said, referring to the wooden pieces. The price was mildly shocking, but the lord of our region had imposed a minimum price on martial arms for the sake of public safety. Whenever the smith made weapons for anybody other than the lord, he was forced to sell it for an absurd price.

It made sense; allowing easy access to weapons practically begged bandit groups to form in the area. Despite the fantasy setting, the world was a ways away from the fantasies I'd dreamed of. Not only that, but each and every sword was marked with a serial number and documented with a certificate. *What is this, a hunting rifle?* The dvergar lectured me by explaining that it was a given that a tool capable of killing another person would be tightly controlled, which probably should have been obvious to someone who'd lived in modern Japan.

"Well," he added, "I hear this is the only place that's *this* strict." After finishing my measurements, he shut his notepad and sat down at a stubby planning desk, where he pulled out a thin sheet of fibrous paper. By this point I had already grown accustomed to seeing paper treated like an everyday commodity in this medieval world. Still, it was always coarse and weak, so long-term writing always utilized parchment instead.

"Let's see, I've got a ton of orders for nails and spikes and the like..." The smith bent his fingers as he counted the orders and mumbled something about one of them being for my brother's new lodging. "Well, I'll have it done by springtime."

I couldn't tell if half a year was a standard amount of time for a full order to be completed. I'd bought my fair share of business suits in my previous life, but this was my first time ordering armor (it would be stranger if it wasn't), so I

wasn’t sure what to make of it. To begin with, it was dubious as to whether or not my ehrengarde pieces retailed for enough to cover the costs.

Well, in a small canton like this where everyone knew everyone, I doubted he’d hustle me. Dvergar, much like their dwarven tabletop cousins, lived a long time—roughly three hundred years. If he were to spend all of that time in this little village, then it was only right for me to employ some common sense. Without airing any concerns whatsoever, I bowed my head and thanked him.

[Tips] The dvergar are well-known for their short stature, being less than half the height of an average mensch. They are a race with iron skeletons and boiling red blood. Hailing from ore-filled mountains, they are blessed with great strength, heat resistance, and excellent vision in the dark. The men are well-built with impressive beards, and the women are voluptuous despite their youthful faces—either way, they are easy to tell apart from those around them.

In the days that followed my episode at the smithy, I began going through the motions of harvest preparation. I wiped the preservative oil off our sickles and hoes and gave them a thorough polish, then sharpened their blades on the grindstone. This made slicing through our rye and oats a breeze.

Met with the precarious glimmer of our sharpened tools, the details behind my order of armor floated to the front of my mind. In the end, I’d spent so much time trying to suss out what I wanted and yet had nothing concrete.

Faith skills were as unsettling as ever, so I still didn’t want to take those. I hadn’t run into the right encounters for magic, and in the interest of realism, there was no point holding out for a life-changing experience before I came of age. The only adventurer’s paths I had available to me were those of a swordsman or scout; and it wasn’t hard to do both in this world.

Scouts in TRPGs are generally small, alacritous characters (exactly like Margit) whose weaknesses lay in their paper-thin armor ratings and low attack power. However, my hoard of experience points and the lack of a systemic lock on what I could do made it simple to polish both skill sets to my satisfaction. If I

kept my equipment load light, I could fulfill both roles at once.

Taking all of this into account, my new tentative plan was to enhance my swordsmanship while leaving some leeway to transition into an arcane or holy swordsman in the future.

This plan was why I spent so much time and effort on the wooden figures that I traded to the blacksmith. Being on the front lines with low armor class is just *embarrassing*. Trying to recruit party members as a "swordsman" equipped with a stick and plain clothes is doomed to fail, and your prospects would be no better trying to join one.

Figuring this strategy to be my most realistic chance at success, the armor was my first real step toward shaping my future. Proficiency in swords and spears was sure to be a boon everywhere I went, as self-defense was perpetually necessary.

If I ever found myself lucky enough to learn magic, or if I finally bit the religious bullet, I always had time to work it into my current skill set; if not, I could stay on the path of the blade. Fortunately, the school of warfare I learned did not discriminate between types of arms, leaving me free to use whatever sort of weapon was most fitting.

...Which meant that nothing had really changed. I couldn't do anything about that, since the plan was *tentative*—after all, I wanted to use magic if I could. Has there ever been a man who didn't long to slice down his foes while unleashing flashy magic, only to exit combat and use his talents in an array of common situations? Nay, I say.

I saw my dreams for the future gleam alongside the freshly sharpened sickle and chuckled. I wanted to be as sharp as this blade whose steel perfectly reflected my face. But for now, I'd finished polishing our equipment and readied myself to move on to care for Holter. We never ran out of things to carry during harvest season, and our workhorse was soon going to be as busy as we were.

I tidied up the shed and made for the stable when I sensed a presence jump out of the house and begin to trail me.

"Mr. Brother! Mr. Brother!"

Everything that follows behind me is adorable, and that's especially true of my little sister.

"Hi Elisa. What's wrong?"



Elisa tumbled into me and grabbed at my belt. Now six years old, my beloved baby sister had only just begun to venture outside the house. Her weak constitution hadn't improved since the first terrible fever that had almost killed her. Perhaps owing to that, her development had been stunted and her appetite small. From her appearance alone, one would guess she was no more than four years of age. It wasn't surprising, considering that she had yet to manage a full season without a cold and was bedridden every winter.

It was nothing short of a miracle that she could now step outside on warm days like today. Despite looking like a miniature version of my mother, she truly was frail.

Belittle not the common cold; in a world without antibiotics, doctors and healers (the latter being a type of mage or priest) were exorbitantly expensive. Fragile children died from simple illnesses all the time: I had seen toddlers too young to walk pass away in this very canton. Every year, we saw colds claim the lives of a few weak children, and even adults weren't safe if they ran into any complications.

A clean bill of health was a fortune of untold value compared to its going rate on modern Earth. Those without such a fortune had to pay their dues in cash if they wanted to see the next sunrise.

Thankfully, I provided our house with a secondary income. When a merchant caravan was in town we would sell my work to them, and otherwise my father would travel to the nearest city to trade my wooden idols for medicine. When I really put my all into a carving, sometimes the bishop would even cast a miracle on my sister as thanks for a generous "donation." Once, I'd fixed up a new wheel and axle for a broken carriage that earned us a fat sum just as Elisa had come down with pneumonia. The timing couldn't have been better, and we'd immediately used the money to take her to a healer.

We were already better off than most farmers, so my extra contributions were enough to preserve the life of a girl who would normally have died years ago. Everybody in the family worked hard to care for our little miracle so she could walk on her own two feet.

And yet, for some inexplicable reason, my parents constantly made a hero out

of me and me alone. Whenever Elisa balked at her bitter medicine, they would say, “Your brother did his best to get this for you, so do your best to drink it.” At some point I’d become a figure of admiration for her, which is why she now followed me around like a baby duckling.

I wasn’t actually anybody special, but I couldn’t bring myself to shatter her childlike image of me. I put on my best big-brother smile and knelt down to pat her head.

“Mama won’t play! She’s doing needle stuff again.” The way she huffed and puffed was so cute that a smile naturally came to my face.

“Aww, but you know, it’s almost Heinz’s wedding. She must be busy.”

As I turned twelve, my eldest brother turned fifteen this fall, putting him at marriageable age. We’d finished constructing a cottage (though it was honestly a tad big to be called one) for him and his wife. They were slated to hold their wedding in tandem with two other couples during the harvest festival in late autumn.

In Konigstuhl—or rather, in the Rhine Empire—weddings were always held in the fall. Not only did the Harvest Goddess preside over plant life and natural cycles, but She was also the ruling authority over marriage. Just as the flourishing crops were the result of successful reproduction, the theory went that as we humans did the same, it was best to wed in the fall—when Her powers were at their height.

Furthermore, weddings were a big event in a tiny village like ours. It would be a major hassle to have more than one, and we definitely had pragmatic reasons to combine all the ceremonies with the harvest festival, when money flowed through the canton anyway. What was more, the bishop gifted the newlyweds some money—though the marriage tax (which made my Earthling mind twist in agony) effectively canceled this gift out—that allowed for even greater celebrations. We had little reason *not* to do it this way.

The big event on the horizon left our household in chaos during the final stretch. First and foremost, we needed clothes. Luckily, the other families were the ones handling the most intensive bridal uniform, but we still had a lot on our plate. Reusing old formal wear caused one’s family to drop in status, so the

first son's marriage always spelled mayhem for his mother. However, second sons and below often wore the same thing with minor adjustments to account for height.

On top of Heinz's outfit, we younglings needed something to wear as attendees. Ours didn't need to be as fancy as the doublet the groom was meant to wear, but new sets of clothes or additional embroidery were required. This too was likely the result of some kind of social politics in the canton that I wasn't made aware of due to my age. Even as a child, I could sort of tell: the seating arrangements at church and the order in which we greeted the magistrate were all reflective of our positions in society.

"What's a wedding?" Elisa asked.

"Well, a wedding is a very happy occasion," I explained. For a small girl who would one day be sent off as a bride herself, and for a fourth son who was destined to leave his home behind, none of this was relevant to us. "There's a lot of yummy food. Elisa, do you remember the pretty brides when you went to the harvest festival before?"

"The white dresses?"

"Yup. The brides with the pretty white dresses."

Curiously, this world also had a cultural history of throwing wedding ceremonies with white wedding dresses. The only twist was that (despite the bishop's blessing and guidance throughout the ceremony) marriage was not considered a holy matrimony: it was a civil contract that was filed with the magistrate. The mix of ancient Roman and Middle Ages European elements swirled together to make a peculiar culture.

What was stranger, women's fashion had clear Victorian and art deco influences straight from early twentieth-century England, but also contained ancient quilted clothes and even drew from the designs of the traditional Far East. There were so many different styles intermingling that the whole thing was in a state of chaos.

I'd suspected this for some time, but there must have been people like me every now and again. The fashion here spanned from Earth's prehistory to the twentieth century, and there were a handful of modernized processes, like

papermaking and the suspiciously well-structured governmental model... The more I learned about my motherland, the more certain I grew that this chimera of ancient and modern cultures had to be the result of outside influence.

Not to say anything was wrong with that, of course. As a man myself, seeing women don a colorful assortment of embellishments was certainly more pleasing than the colorless (dye was expensive!) plainclothes that we all wore while at work.

"...I wanna too," Elisa said.

"You want to wear a wedding dress?"

"Mhmm."

I supposed it was only natural for a young girl to fall in love with a fancy dress. Even in a frugal canton like ours, nearly everyone dressed up during this season. I'm sure that the fluffy frills and lace tickled her fancy.

"But Elisa, you don't have anyone to marry."

"Umm, then Mr. Brother."

"Hm?"

"I'll do the wedding with Mr. Brother."

Aww, you say the cutest things. Having been the youngest child in my past life, I'd never known what it was like to fawn on a little sibling, but...this was addictive. I could see why some claimed that all older brothers had a phase of unconditional doting.

"Ha ha ha, you're going to be my bride, Elisa?"

"Mhmm."

I could tell Elisa didn't really get it, so I picked her up and put her on my broadening shoulders. The beginning of autumn was still hot, and I didn't want her staying out in the sun for too long. She obviously caught colds in the wintertime, but she was also weak to the heat, so I had to be careful.

"Is that so? Then we'll have to ask mother for a pretty dress."

"Mm," she grunted with an adorable nod.

I'd seen my mother fly through the needlework for the men in our household, and she'd be extra motivated for her youngest daughter. At any rate, we could always go into town to sell the dress once we were done with it, so there was no use cutting corners. All of us at home loved Elisa, after all. I was sure she'd be just as beautiful as the bride herself.

Some rational part of my brain watched my foolish brotherly love and wondered if I was allowed to look forward to her dress as much as I was. *Well, it makes me happy, so I guess it's fair game.*

[Tips] Familial laws in the Rhine Trialist Empire are among its most fundamental. In it, mensch are forbidden from marrying their kin—that is, any relative in the second degree or closer.

The curtains of autumn were drawing to a close in the blink of an eye. I was nearing ten years as a farmhand with IV: Craftsman in most agricultural skills, but the rush of harvest season was as unforgiving as it had always been. Yet apparently the routine had seeped into my body, causing the experience income to dwindle, and I couldn't justify investing any more into making the task any easier.

After surviving the dizzying work, the relief that we had enough to pay our taxes and the elation of the coming festival created an atmosphere that was difficult to put to words. I tried comparing it to the fading memory of earning a promotion after handling a big project, and it was tough to say which was better.

Whichever the case, I had to offer my devotions to those above for the fact that I was here to enjoy this day. Unlike Earth, the gods were quick to respond to sincere worship, and it was their diligence that kept the world turning. I would be remiss not to offer a prayer or two.

Our celebration dedicated to the Harvest Goddess was, as usual, blessed with clear skies. The town square by our village head's home was the scene for our festivities. The product of countless women's work lined an endless array of tables with steam drifting off of each dish. The Goddess knew of our struggles

and was ever considerate: during this one day of the year, divine favoritism kept any and all food from losing its heat, and liquor stayed ice cold once chilled. I'm sure She had no qualms tossing miracles left and right, since the whole event was in Her name.

Men and women alike had grown frisky, and an air of levity swept through the canton. Some eagerly awaited the formal dress of the weddings, others' stomachs growled over the feast, and others still roamed the stalls set up by merchant caravans who'd come to capitalize on the festivities...but that wasn't the cause of the rosy fog that had settled over the region. No, the reason was simple: this was a chance for an eventful encounter.

Musicians abounded, playing their tunes in every corner of the canton, and everyone within earshot was dancing till they dropped. In an era wanting for entertainment, no pastime could compete with dancing. After a jig or two with everyone in high spirits, it hardly needed to be said what occurred after the sun went down.

Wheat on this planet had yet to be selectively bred for shorter stalks, and they provided ample cover for any sort of two-player games one might play at a festival such as this. Some of these couples went on to become officially wed, while others between second sons and daughters turned into secret relationships. It'd been prolific enough to spawn a folk song called *Comin' Thro' the Rye*.

In other words, there were a lot of young lads and lasses looking forward to this sort of thing—specifically, my two middle brothers. Both of them had disappeared somewhere when they were supposed to help us prepare for Heinz's wedding.

I was close to blowing a gasket as I lined another table with food. There were supposed to be a lot more helping hands, but the urge to play only swelled in children as they neared adulthood, and it was common for those nearly of age to abandon their posts. As a result, only a handful of kids like myself stayed behind, feeling as humiliated as the serious kid before a school festival. I supposed a change in universes couldn't change human behavior.

After carrying an absurd quantity of piping hot food, I wiped the sweat from

my brow and looked around the square, which was covered in a massive, golden rug thanks to the withering underbrush. Everyone around me toiled with sweat streaming down their blissful faces. The work was harsh, but drudgery for a fun cause is quick to be forgotten.

A wave of nostalgia washed over me. In university, my friends and I had taken up part-time jobs to rent a room to play tabletop games in, but our small numbers made it difficult to squeeze out enough money between us. Regardless, slinging dice was more fun in that room than anywhere else on the planet. I'm sure the hardships we overcame were the reason I spent more time reading my priceless rulebooks than any of my college textbooks.

On the flip side, in my past life I never managed to come to terms with systems whose copious dice rolls brought out my disfavor in the eyes of RNGesus, but I've since accepted my role when playing such games. I badly wished for another chance to sit at that table and roll the bones with my friends. The moments where I destroyed my players with natural twenties and boxcars only to be called a failure of a GM were fun in their own right...

A loud cheer snapped me out of my daydream. I turned to see a group of small chil—oh. *Apologies.* I turned to see Margit and her family pulling along a giant pushcart sporting a freakishly large boar. I could tell the skinned beast measured nearly two meters as they wheeled it into view. I recalled that Margit had told me to look forward to her family's dish, and I guess *that* was it.

How in the world did those tiny huntsmen bring down a monstrosity like that? I'd once heard that giant boars could survive a 5.56 mm round to the head, and I couldn't imagine they'd used poison on something they were to serve at a feast...

"Hey, d'you hear? The magistrate prepared some fireworks for the festival."

"Really, now? That means he must've invited a mage. That's incredible."

As I gaped at how the size of the boar made the little arachne look like moving specks, the conversation of the helpers a table over drifted into my ear. Recently, my Listening and Presence Detection skills had become so effective that I was a tad overly sensitive.

Fireworks, huh? I love how grand they are. Nighttime fireworks were fantastic,

but I loved the afternoon ones that livened up the atmosphere all the same. What was more, they always reminded me of the old man. I couldn't wait for the day that the ring dangling from my neck would turn into a key item.

Submerged in the festive spirit around me, my heart soared as high as the open autumn sky beyond my view.

[Tips] Divine blessings are a given during festivities, especially when the god in question is the one being celebrated. Some of the divine go so far as to descend and mingle with their subjects via an avatar.

By high noon, the party was in full swing. The magistrate's address was a simple one, and as was the case every year, it lasted only a few minutes. Eckard Thuringia, the master of Konigstuhl Castle and magistrate of the canton of the same name, emerged wearing a dignified breastplate with a handful of knights by his side. He offered a few words on the year's harvest, prayed for a serene winter from atop his horse, and quickly took his leave. I figured he still needed to attend to the other cantons under his rule.

As an aside, the sermon that replaced our usual mass was also quite short. This was because the festival in and of itself was a form of hymn, psalm, and prayer in praise of the Harvest Goddess, so we had no need for lengthy worship. It was not because our bishop was such an infamous lover of wine that some questioned whether or not he worshipped the Wine God. And he *certainly* did not shout "We shall finish our prayer later!" because he wanted to skip ahead to the drinking...I believe. Or at least, I'd *like* to believe so. I think that he wouldn't do something like that...in fact, let's just go with that. Whatever the case, this short preamble explained why the citizens of the canton were so utterly gone within the first few hours of the day.

"Mmhee," Margit giggled, "are you drinking?"

"I am, I am."

My usual arachne necklace was no exception. Seeing her baby face flushed red as she slurred words was downright criminal, but rather common in this land. Boiling pots and elementary filtration devices made with cloth, gravel, and

charcoal gave Rhinians access to clean water, but those means were too expensive for everyday use. Most of the time, drinking water was sanitized with alcohol.

With its relatively warm climate, southern Rhine was the grape production capital of the Empire. It wasn't quite as temperate as the smaller states along the southern ocean, but it was good enough for grapevines to flourish and wine to flow through the region. At this time of year, you could go out into the streets to see a constant flow of wagons carrying full loads of wine out of the breweries under the Wine God's influence.

What was more, the church brought barrels and barrels of the stuff out from its own wine cellar for the holiday. This spectacle was what happened when people let their actions outpace their thoughts and knocked back the strong liquor without diluting it. I didn't need to check to know what was causing the sour smell emanating from the trees surrounding the town square.

This was the state of affairs in the early afternoon; *is this canton going to be all right for the wedding?* Well, the weddings of yesteryear had managed somehow, so I was sure it'd all work out. The absolute worst-case scenario was a pair of overeager newlyweds transitioning from ceremony to honeymoon *before* retiring to the safety of their cottage. Don't get me wrong, that would be a terrible thing to see, but with half the population too drunk to remember anything, the lasting damage was sure to be minimal.

"Heyyy, don't ignore meeee..." Margit slurred.

It had been some time since I last heard Margit prattle on in the common tongue. I looked down to see her pouting with puffed cheeks, still dangling in her favorite spot.

"I told you not to drink so much..." I said.

"I only had a bit. Just a teensy little bit," she insisted.

Truth be told, she wasn't wrong. Two to three mugs was well within the realm of "a little," but unfortunately that logic didn't fly with arachne. What they had over mensch in digestive capabilities, they definitely paid for in their alcohol tolerance. I had no idea what she thought was going to happen.

“Don’t you wanna look around the street stalls? You won’t be able to at this rate,” I warned.

“It’s fiiine,” Margit purred. “You’ll take me there, won’t you Erich?”

The spider looked like a spoiled kitten as she nuzzled her rosy cheeks against my chest. I was worried her vibrant pink makeup would stain my shirt, but my clothes were as clean as always... *Arachne can get* this *red without makeup?*

Unfortunately, I couldn’t fulfill her request; I had to get changed. “I can’t,” I explained, “Heinz’s wedding is coming up. I have to go and change clothes.”

“Stooop!” she squealed.

Don’t “Stooop!” me. You’re fourteen—one summer shy of being a full-grown adult, young lady. Margit barely looked older than Elisa, but I hadn’t forgotten that she was two years older than me. No matter how cute she was as she threw her little tantrum, I wouldn’t... I wouldn’t let...her...

“Okay!” I said, “Come on, it’s time to let go.”

“Erich, you meanie!!!”

I savagely beat down the urge to play with Margit with an iron will and lifted her by the armpits to dislodge her from my neck. When I placed her down, I noticed that I had grown so much that she no longer came up to my waist. She looked up at me with teary, accusatory eyes that twisted my senses and made me feel like I was legitimately in the wrong, which was less than helpful. To make matters worse, we were out in public—there were plastered men all around the square, and some of them were our old playmates.

“C’mon, Erich! Don’t be such a goody-two-shoes!”

“Yeah, go take her on a walk, man!”

“I wish I were you, ya damn vitality glorifier!”

Drunkards made fine gossip mongers, and I knew all too well that soft words wouldn’t get through their thick skulls. I yelled, “Get lost, deadbeats! I’ll beat the drunk outta you!”

Despite raising my fist at them, all I got in response was a dry whistle. By the way, “taking a walk” in this context meant finding a secluded patch of foliage to

disappear into; I'd personally witnessed a handful of couples do so already.

On the other hand, "vitality glorifier" was a roundabout way of calling me a lolicon. Some ancient holy man had been infamously partial to certain demihumans and demons that were at best "youthful" by mensch standards. When called out for his debauchery, he'd claimed that he merely loved their overwhelming vitality with a pure and innocent heart. The tale had become a historical allusion that survived to the current day.

Hm? You want to know what happened to the guy? He'd been pursuing underage demihumans too, so he was beaten to a pulp by all parties involved and excommunicated by the church. The religious authorities of this country were nothing if not fervent, considering they were willing to sack a member of one of the imperial houses.

I ignored the fact that my childhood friend managed to initiate a social attack on me just by tearing up and left the scene to avoid being nonconsensually flagged with any unwanted traits or titles. I didn't want to have to jot down a new family member on my item sheet at this age (though I suppose I was technically halfway to adulthood). Still...I couldn't deny that I wasn't wholly against the idea after all the time I'd spent with Margit.

"Hey, Erich, you're late."

I returned home to find my eldest brother all suited up in the living room. The white doublet didn't really suit the chiseled face that took after our father, but today he'd slicked back his chestnut hair with some gel, helping him round out the look. It would be more than a stretch to say he looked like a noble, given his sunbaked face and calloused hands, but this was the gallant figure of our family's eldest son. "How is it? Does it look good?"

"Yes, it looks very good, Heinz."

"That so?" he said, shyly rubbing his nose. He looked just like the little boy to whom I'd handed a wooden sword; at the same time, seeing his growth filled me with pride I'd seldom felt in my nearly fifty years of life.

I fondly reminisced on the days we spent hunting the elusive fairy coins with my homemade weapons in hand, and the time I'd sat in on his language lessons to fix my fabulous accent. I would have liked to delete the latter memory from

the minds of all those involved, including myself, but still.

No matter what, it was remarkable how much he'd grown from the sniveling child who had mimicked the adventurous heroes of old sagas. He'd wrapped his brain around the mathematics that had plagued him for years, and he could hold a conversation in the palatial tongue with only an occasional stutter. Our family's future was safe in his hands.

My brother and I went back and forth for a while with talk of congratulations and future children. I changed into my own formal wear (a clearly well-worn set of hand-me-downs that had passed through my brothers) when I noticed that my two middle brothers were nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, they came home blackout drunk... I think our old man took them out to the well. We didn't want Elisa seeing them like that, so we sent her off to Mina's house to get dressed."

Those boneheaded twins... Not only had they skipped out on their work, but they'd managed to drink themselves under the table. I could imagine my father boiling with rage while he pumped (with a hand crank that I had been shocked to see, much like paper) ironically ice-cold water from the well and generously splashed his two idiot sons.

With the harvest over and autumn giving way to winter, I prayed that the two fools could avoid catching a cold, but a pair of loud sneezes ringing out in the backyard dashed my hopes instantly.

[Tips] Alcohol is used throughout the Empire as a means of sterilizing drinking water. However, it is common for races that can subsist on contaminated water to have little tolerance for drink.

The wedding was less a magnificent ceremony and more a jovial party. Commoner weddings in our canton were wholly removed from the concept of elegance, opting for a raucous gala instead. It was practically tradition for the drunken crowd to hoot and holler at the newlyweds only for the bridegroom to retort with a vulgar remark, causing the bride, one of their relatives, or the bishop to smack him upside the head as he passed by.

It was a simple process where the pair walked down the aisle littered with flower petals and boorish insults to receive the bishop's blessing and sign a contract. After that, it devolved into the usual feast. Booze and commotion were age-old wedding companions, and this world fit the mold. Everyone from the groom to the bride was sure to dance, sing, and drink themselves mad.

The songs changed at the drop of a hat, with dances and partners following suit. Anyone tired of the commotion could grab a bite to eat or quench their thirst with liquor. At sunset, the newlyweds were hoisted up and marched around town, finally being tossed into their bedroom accompanied by a hooting cacophony.

After causing their fair share of mayhem, the crowd proceeded to give the couples some room by leaving for a second (or third, if we count the day-drinking that precedes the whole process) party. It was rowdy and potentially even barbaric, but I thought this was much more fun than the weird speeches and parlor tricks that I'd seen in the past. Of course, I couldn't deny that my view as a thirty-year-old bachelor may have been warped from the wedding gifts that only exchanged hands in one direction.

Regardless, the ceremony was wondrous. Heinz looked triumphant as he led his bride by the arm. He and the fragile Miss Mina made for a pairing that was as criminal as Margit and me in a completely different way—a quick glance at the couple made the words "abduction" and "intimidation" come to mind—but the new Missus's face was dyed a blissful rosy red. Practical factors like familial relations and finances played a part in marriage, but that wasn't to say that those involved weren't happy.

"Mr. Brother," Elisa said, tugging at my shirt.

"Hm?"

I'd been leisurely sitting in the corner of the square with my sister on my lap. Our entire family had been worried that she'd collapse if she got caught up in the dancing, so I was put on guard duty.

"Mr. Brother won't dance?"

"I'm not a fan of dancing," I replied. That was only half true. I was confident that my proficiency in swordplay would translate to the steps of a jig or waltz,

but...I simply had no one to dance with. Margit had been fine until midway through the wedding, where she downed a full container of mead (distilled mead with herbs strong enough to get mensch drunk, no less), leaving me without a partner.

Of course, I could have followed in the footsteps of Michael and Hans, who powered through their newfound sneezes to dance with any and every maiden that came their way. However, girls my age had begun to avoid dancing with me as of late. I was sure a certain little arachnid who was about to become best friends with an empty bucket was to blame for that. I didn't know what she was so worried about, seeing as I was a fourth-born son with little chance for a suitor.

"But you danced with Elisa," my sister pointed out.

"That's because you're special," I told her. My only dance of the day went to Elisa on the outskirts of the area. I say "dance," but I'd picked up my sister and slowly spun her around because she wanted to partake in the festivities. I hadn't let her take a single step for herself, but she seemed happy enough, so I figured it was fine.

"Special!" Elisa huffed smugly and leaned back against me while flapping her tiny legs. *So cute.*



But as a real, in-the-flesh little sister...she would probably be saying things like “Oh my gosh, my brother is so annoying,” in a few years. Thinking about it now almost brought me to tears. If it were to actually happen, I could see myself bawling without reserve, since just imagining it was enough to make my chest tighten.

“Oh, I know. Elisa, do you want to go see the stalls?”

“Stalls?” she echoed.

“Yup. There’s rare food and poets there!”

I shooed away the depressing thoughts with a simple suggestion. With how often Elisa was stuck inside, she’d been starved for outlets for her curiosity, and the idea of looking at street stalls enamored her. She answered with an enthusiastic “I wanna!”

Our father had given me some pocket change to spend at the festival, so I was sure I could buy one or two things for her. It was hard to say if any ice candy remained now that we’d finished the harvest considering how popular it was, but perhaps if I could find some, my rating as a brother would improve. With my excited sister in my arms, I set out for the long line of street stalls.

[Tips] The Wine God, who presides over festivity and merriment, has a following that rivals the Harvest Goddess’s. He states, “The pain of a hangover is but part of liquor’s charm,” and there exists no miracle to cure hangovers. In His eyes, to be a true lover of wine, one must love all its effects.

Why are festivals more fun as a child than as an adult? A stack of 10,000 yen bills is enough to buy anything—even a shot at the raffles that children can only dream of. And yet, the days I’d left the house tightly clutching a few hundred yen coins were always the ones that made my heart dance.

I enjoyed a spell of nostalgia as I looked over the many street stalls that had set up shop. They were all run by wandering merchants who’d built up their stock abroad. At times, they stopped by towns like ours to hawk their wares.

“We’ve got obsidian knives made in the north! They’re great for picking

herbs!”

“Hey, hey! How about some lacquerware I picked up on an eastern route? There ain’t nothing around here that shines like it! Buy a whole set as a gift! How ’bout it? It goes great with today’s blue skies!”

“Heeerbs! Herbs from the western peninsulaaa! Bruises, scrapes, cuts, it’ll heal it all!”

The traders sat on floor mats or stuck their heads out of special wagons that opened on one side as they called out to the dwindling traffic. This shopping aisle had been bustling with activity earlier in the day; with the locals either too drunk to stand or busy dancing away, business always slowed to a crawl after the wedding, but some shoppers here and there preferred to browse at their leisure or wanted to test their luck with what was left in stock.

No shortage of things caught my eye, but today I was following the orders of our family’s little princess. I didn’t even need to ask her where she wanted to go. Her twinkling gaze was clearly fixed on one point: a jewelry stand for housewives. The clearly wellborn proprietor sat in a folding chair, a humongous ogre bodyguard by his side. His enthusiasm to sell had clearly waned, as he leisurely watched the sparse crowd of potential customers walk by.

“Mr. Brother! Pretty! Pretty!!!” Elisa squeaked.

“Yup, they sure are pretty,” I concurred.

My sister toddled over with stars in her eyes, but the shopkeeper didn’t bother to shoo her away. A child that couldn’t pay would’ve been nothing more than a nuisance if we’d come at peak hours, but now that the business was slow, the jeweler called her over with a gentle voice.

“You’ve got good eyes, little lady! This here is a pearl unearthed by the mermaids who live in the deep blue of the southern inland sea. Look how round and spotless it is! And this is it unpolished—it came out of the water looking exactly like this.”

I guess this well-built man in extravagant clothing is a fan of children, I mused. After all, he carefully showed the beauty of his priceless pearl to Elisa as if she were legitimately a potential customer. *What’s the price on this thing? ...Urp,*

three drachmae?

The Empire's numeric system was base-ten, and its currency reflected that. One gold drachma was worth a hundred librae; one silver libra was worth a hundred copper assarii. It was a simple, familiar system.

The average independent farmer expected to make five drachmae in a year. From there, one drachma was taken as liquid tax, and it took roughly fifty librae to purchase the materials needed to pay the product tax that couldn't be grown, like silk. Living and agricultural expenses totaled to around two drachmae, so the final disposable income for a year calculated out to be one drachma and fifty librae. The ratio between what the government took and what we were left with was roughly four-to-six, which put our canton on the more lenient side.

Adding my side occupation and our extra fields to the mix, our family could stash away three drachmae in any given year—which meant we'd need to commit *all* of our spare money to buy this *single* pearl.

"W-Wow, what a gorgeous gem," I stuttered, reflexively tightening up. *This village bazaar isn't the place for this sort of treasure, old man!*

"My, my," the man said welcomingly. "The young gentleman shares the little lady's eye for beauty, it seems. Indeed, this is a prize that we'd stock at our main shop in the imperial capital. I brought it with me on the off chance that someone might wish to buy it, but this is usually something that's chained together to adorn the collars of noblewomen."

The store owner stroked his sizable beard and laughed affably. Judging from the signet ring on his finger, he was probably in charge of stocking goods for a company in the capital...which made him a *big deal*. *I know you've got time on your hands, but please don't open your store in the countryside. This is bad for my heart.*

"Ha ha ha," I chuckled awkwardly, "I see. No wonder it's so stellar. We'd never be able to buy something like this."

"No, see, there's a tradition among merfolk to buy one pearl at a time to create a necklace out of them when you marry. I've heard that it's been catching on in the mensch realms too! How about it? Why don't you discuss this

with your mother and get one for your adorable little sister here?”

What kind of mensch are you talking about? The bourgeois farmer? The wealthy capitalist? Huh? Spit it out, I dare you. That pearl could buy my armor and then some.

“Ahh, well...” I put on my most polite smile and said, “My eldest brother was married just moments ago. A splendid treasure like this is unfortunately beyond the scope of what our household can afford.”

“Oh?” the man said, opening his eyes wide. “You aren’t the eldest son?”

“Not at all, sir. I’m fourth-born.”

“Truly?! Your command of the palatial tongue is so flawless that even I might wish to take lessons from you.”

Ah, I see. He thought I was an inheritor based on my speech. Wait, no! It looks like he thinks our family is rich enough to send four boys to school. What’ll I do if he actually starts looking for my parents...?

“Well, you see, I am in no position to boast—I’d simply picked up what I could from my father and some friends who’d attended school. Of course, I’d love to purchase this for my sister, but the price is a tad steep for us, so if you’ll—”

“Hey, kid. How about that?”

In the middle of attempting to weasel my way out, I heard a voice call to me from the heavens. I looked up to see the sharp fangs of an ogre looming directly over me. She was at least three meters tall. I’d heard that their skin was blue because it contained some type of rigid metal, but that it remained flexile and springy enough that an ordinary sword simply bounced off of them. Her hulking muscles bulged out like plates of armor, with each limb as dignified as a pillar of marble.

“The prize is five drachmae,” she said, pointing toward a sword dealer’s shop. I followed her razor-sharp claw (that could easily rend human flesh) with my eyes to see that the sword stall was advertising a challenge. Scrawled in a hand that read as if it had been penned by a mouse, the sign claimed that if anyone could split the owner’s prized helmet with a single swing, he’d pay out five gold coins. The fee for an attempt was fifty assarii.

Beside the rat-scrawled advertisement, the sword-seller was puffing on a pipe between occasional wholly unenthused calls to the crowd. I guessed from the shape of his face and wizened, tiny body that he was a stuart—a ratfolk.

These sorts of challenges were a common sight at festivals. They were akin to the cork shooting ranges in Japan, where the biggest prizes were propped up from behind, or the raffles that suspiciously never rolled a winning number. It was a trap designed to lure in and sap the spare change out of parents who'd given in to their children or fools who'd been egged on by their lovers.

"Hey now, Lauren..." the first shopkeeper said.

The ogre bodyguard ignored the jeweler's reproach. With a smile imposing enough to make children cry, she put her hand on my shoulder. *I'm so glad Elisa is busy looking at the pearl.*

"He's built for it," Lauren insisted. Then she turned to me and said, "That mooch has been stacking up petty change for a while now. Don't you think it'd be fun?"

Hmm. The helmet seems like standard steel, but he'd probably make me use one of the shabby swords he has lined up beside it. My father had given me exactly fifty assarii: I could make two or three small purchases or share a fancy treat with my sister, but... "It *does* seem interesting."

"Wha?!" the jeweler exclaimed.

Showing off is all a part of playing the big brother. I pulled out my pocket change and flipped it a few times as I walked over to the stall.

"Hey there, future legend!" the man greeted with a smile. "Here to give it a shot?"

"Yes sir. It's fifty assarii, correct?"

While his face was friendly enough, a hint of shadiness was evident as I dropped the coins into his open palm. But when he looked over the large coppers in his hand, his expression morphed into a frown.

"Hmm, Beyton quarters, eh? Two of these usually only go for forty-five assarii with how poor their make is..."

Quarters were larger copper pieces worth the same amount as twenty-five standard coppers, but without total standardization, money was liable to change value depending on the quality of its mint. The most extreme case was that of Jose's Scratch—coins cast to celebrate the ascension or reign of Jose I, the Miser Emperor, only went for two-thirds of their supposed value, even for the best gold pieces. This led to a number of obnoxious situations like this one.

"Well, you're a kid and all, so I'll look the other way. We'll chalk it up to the festive feeling in the air."

"Thanks," I said, swallowing back a snide remark.

The blades I could choose from were, bluntly put, all made of cheap steel. On the other hand, thanks to the Aesthetic Taste skill I'd picked up from the Sociability tree in preparation for future social encounters, I could tell the helmet had a thin coat of mystarille despite its plain steel body.

Mystarille was a special metal that often found its way into the sagas of wandering poets. It looked like silver with a tinge of blue that took on a faint glow in the dark, and was usually applied as a finishing coat on other metals. However, its most impressive property was its ability to deflect physical blows. This meant that fashioning mystarille into a usable shape required either specialized magic or tools of the same make. Living up to its legendary reputation, it found its way into the adornments of royalty as an emblem of indomitable fortitude.

This helmet had a litany of tiny scores, but the lack of any damage to the lower layer of metal was likely the root of the shopkeeper's confidence. With how many nicks and dents it had, I could only wonder how many years he'd been running this scheme. *Pennies piled up become treasure, I'm sure.*

Still, the task wasn't *hopeless*. I could see the outer coating was meager, and the broken ornamentation of the helmet betrayed its old age. Had the entire thing been forged with mystarille, I would've thrown in the towel, but the local blacksmith had told me a thin layer of the stuff was only tough—not indestructible.

If I had a chance, then it was my duty as a munchkin to test whose brokenness would win out. *Let's give it a go.* I wrapped my hands around the throwaway

sword and hoisted it high after confirming my grip. This was the best way of using all my power against an immobile target.

“Go Mr. Brother!!!”

At some point, Elisa’s attention had been freed from the mesmerizing gem and returned to me. Still safe by the jeweler’s side, her cheers reached my ear as I prepared to swing. *Thanks, Elisa. Your cheers are worth a full stack of buffs!*

“Hup!” The whistling blade that accompanied my short grunt stopped a hair’s breadth away...from the ground.

“Wait, wh—huh?!”

The helmet and the pedestal it rested upon alike had split in two.

“Splendid!”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. The other lauding remark probably came from the ogre that had put me up to this. The sword-seller remained sitting in his chair, looking from me to the helmet and back with his mouth agape.

My dexterity had been on the cusp of VIII: Ideal by my birthday, and my Hybrid Sword Arts and Enchanting Artistry were at VI: Expert. With an upper-level swordplay skill called Insight and the aforementioned Aesthetic Taste, finding structural weak points was a breeze—and splitting the metal had followed suit.

Insight was a skill that granted me a form of visual intuition. Conforming to the teachings of Miyamoto Musashi, the hidden technique allowed me to observe my opponent without tunneling in on one spot, granting me the ability to dodge a blade without staring straight at it. Further, my keen sight made openings in my opponent’s defenses more apparent. In essence, it was a monstrous ability that added bonuses to attacking, dodging, and counterattacking—both for accuracy and damage. The three months worth of experience I spent to get it weren’t for nothing.

...Er, I mean, its dodging bonuses would be useful even if I abandoned the path of the blade, so it was a safe purchase. It’d never collect dust—not a chance.

Anyhow...the helmet I'd sliced must have been smacked around by all sorts of warriors and strongmen over the years. Though the top didn't have any notable indents, there were some spots that had been beaten flat. I supposed a thin layer of mystarille wasn't enough to fully dampen the impact of all its abuse.

The thickness of its plating is important, but a helmet's shape is also a vital part of its defensive structure. The curvature of armor redirects blades to not dig into the body, which is the entire reason Western swordplay on Earth includes the art of bludgeoning someone to death with your pommel.

A small patch of flat metal had been all the opportunity I needed. The sword I'd used was a bit dull, but the rest was a matter of technique. Perhaps owing to its long history of maltreatment, the helmet split far more neatly than I'd expected. Sir Lambert had predicted I could cleave steel if the right circumstances arose, and I was glad to see the skills that had earned his seal of approval hadn't rusted away during the busy harvest season.

The only hiccup worth mentioning was that I'd ruined the sword. I held it straight up, but even a cursory inspection would have told how utterly warped the blade had become. No matter how perfect my form was, a lesser weapon simply wasn't cut out for this use.

"Now then," I said, "I'd like to claim my five drachmae."

I reached my hand out toward the blank-faced stuart. He looked as though he wanted to protest, but with the terrifying ogre happily applauding behind me and the neighboring merchants joining in, he elected to zip his mouth. The jeweler was at least a few worlds above the sword-seller in social standing, and the former's presence in the clapping crowd left the cowardly rat-man with little room for objection.

The sword merchant likely realized that it was worse to ruin his reputation with unseemly reluctance than to pay out. In truth, I had used neither magic nor miracles, and cut the headpiece with my skill alone. The way in which I had won was simply too overwhelming to find any reasonable faults.

"W-Wow, you sure are something, k-kid... Here... The prize money... Take it."

Your word choice makes you sound magnanimous, but you're not fooling anyone with how badly your voice and hand are quivering. Still, I guess money

is...money?

"Hm? What's wrong? Aren't you happy?" the ogre asked, peering at my furrowed brow as the gold gleamed dimly in my hands. I wondered what kind of unbelievable skill it took for this fully armored warrior to sneak up behind me without making a sound. After seeing the metal in my hands, she turned to glare at the merchant and spat, "...Explain yourself, scum."

"Look at the sign!" the rat squeaked. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

The glimmering tender in my hands were gold pieces minted to celebrate Jose I's fifth year in power. The stringent face imprinted on the gold was indicative of the most impure of Jose's Scratch.

The sad little shimmer of these five coins was impeded by the dirty fingerprints that littered their surfaces—no doubt proof of a long history of being passed among the poor. At most, these totaled a piddling two drachmae and fifty librae.

You skeeze... Who would have thought you'd have an extra insurance policy built into a place like this? Now that I looked again, the sign read five *gold coins* and not five drachmae. If he'd switched the two, I could've complained that he was swindling me, but the advertising wasn't false in any way... *How vexing.*

As I failed to hide my slumping shoulders, the ogre's menacing hand reached into view, causing me to flinch. However, the terrifying claws on her fingertips were unexpectedly gentle as they plucked three of the coins from my hand. Leaving me to my confusion, she turned back to the jeweler and began to speak emphatically.

"Now then, o employer of mine, did you witness this little swordsman's brilliant strike?"

"Indeed," he replied, "on the name of House Gresham, I most certainly did."

I'd never heard of the Greshams before, but they must have been quite prominent for the merchant to so expressly declare the name in this situation. *Wait, could he be the sponsor of this entire caravan or something?*

"And even these basest of gold pieces," Lauren continued, "are worth three drachma after being won by a champion. Do you not agree?"

“Indeed, without doubt,” her boss said with a hefty nod. Sir Gresham the jeweler then placed the giant pearl into a small ring box. With a beaming grin, he handed it to my perplexed little sister and said, “You have a wonderful brother, young lady.”

“Thanks...you very much,” Elisa responded. Her juvenile attempts to mimic my palatial speech only broadened the smile on the gentleman’s face.

Oho ho, I get it now. One generous sale here let him show off his magnanimity to the other merchants of the caravan, which must have been his goal. In an age where interpersonal connections were closer to personal friendships than robotic contracts, a good reputation was worth its weight in gold. *What a shrewd businessman.* If the good word from this episode spread, the one drachma and fifty librae difference was totally trivial.

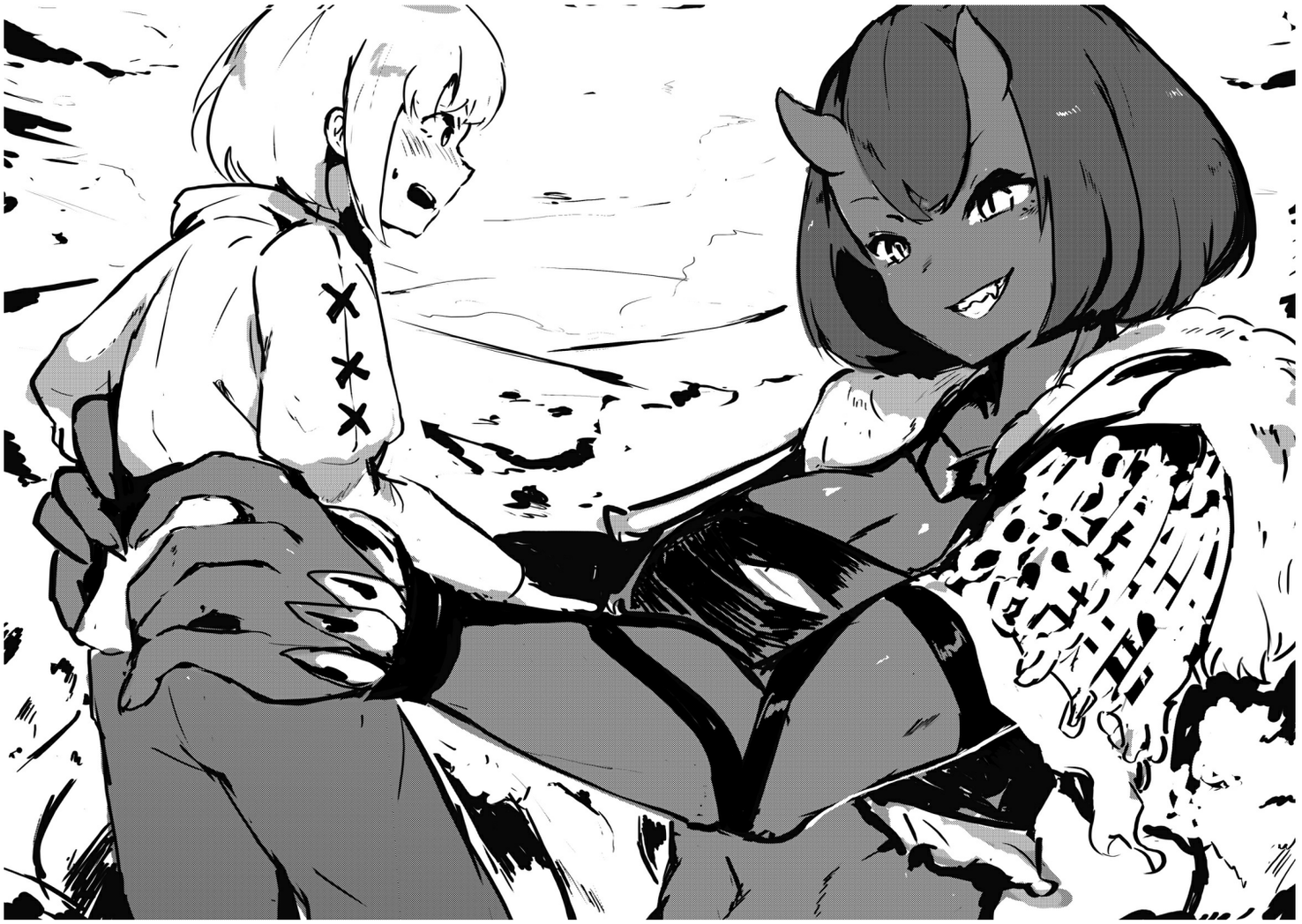
Still, a good deed was a good deed regardless of intent, so I prepared to say my thanks as well, but my feet suddenly lost contact with the ground. “Whoa?!”

The giant ogre had grabbed me by the armpits and was holding me up high, bringing me up to eye level. “Now then, I sent you forth with the promise that you would obtain five drachmae.”

“Right,” I said, still a bit dazed. “But you’ve already done more than enough for—”

“That leaves you still one drachma short,” she announced, pulling me closer.

I could clearly make out the blue of her metal-infused skin, the flesh-rending canines that lined her smile, and the golden irises that marked the eyes of every demonfolk. Her eyes were beautiful, and the lashes that outlined them only grew longer as I approached. The perfectly balanced nose resting atop her gallant mouth suited her face perfectly, and the auburn locks that gave it its contour emanated the pleasant smell of high-grade hair oil.



The distance between the attractive ogre's face and mine reached zero before I could react. The stunning demon gave me a little peck—a gentle touch of our mouths.

"Will this suffice?" she asked.

This was my first peck in this lifetime; I use this word precisely, since it was a formal exchange of lips—certainly no *kiss*. Receiving one from a woman more graceful than most of the models on television left me reflexively nodding at her question.

"Very well. My people will treat you well if you give them the name Lauren of the Gargantuan Tribe. I'll tell them I found an interesting mensch boy." The beautiful warrior, Lauren, flashed a handsome smile as she let me down. With a gentle pat of my head, she added, "I look forward to the day you come to challenge me as a full-fledged swordsman."

The impending reality of a future story beat sank into my body with the tingle of my lips.

[Tips] Ogres hail from the western side of the Central Continent, claiming no home country and organizing around individual tribes, all of whom value martial prowess. Their skin and bones are infused with metallic elements. They are sexually dimorphic, with females in particular commonly towering above three meters in height, and many nations put these absolute powerhouses directly on the public budget. In contrast, the males are relatively small at two meters tall and take up manual labor or odd jobs to make ends meet in their matriarchal society.

"A toast to our legendary swordsman!" a man called.

"Cheers!!!" the crowd responded.

I knew word was quick to spread in the secluded world of our tiny canton, but *have mercy*. It had only been half an hour since my victory at the shopping stall, and now drunkards raised mugs of booze in my name all over the plaza, their alcoholic cheers mixing with the gentle red of the setting sun.

By the way, the man who'd been leading the toasts this entire time was none other than one of our guests of honor: my buffoon of a brother. It seemed his plastered mind couldn't register his newly wed wife rolling her eyes on the sidelines as he hooted and hollered.

On the other hand, I was stuck in the midst of this lunacy boredly holding the cup that they'd given me. I'd taken the Heavy Drinker trait knowing that liquor was a staple of any adventurer's diet, so I was a ways away from losing control. I didn't want to wake up in the street, sign a sketchy contract, or generally do anything stupid while I was drunk, after all.

Knocking back the goblet, my tongue was assaulted with a powerful sweetness and an herbal taste that didn't sit well with my childish palate. *Wait a second, this mead isn't diluted—in fact, it's distilled! Are you idiots trying to kill me?*

I wanted water or milk to thin out the mixture: my tongue still hadn't developed any sort of appreciation for alcohol in this body. In my past life I'd been rather fond of western liquors, but it had taken me until the latter half of my twenties to truly enjoy them, so it was only natural.

"Whoa! Looks like you're as strong with a drink as you are with the sword!"

"A'ight, give 'im another! Another!!!"

They know exactly what they're doing too... Curse you, o father dearest. I glanced over at my old man, who was on the outskirts of the plaza caring for the napping princess of our family. He turned away instantly after flashing me an apologetic look. It would appear that the instigator of this pandemonium had no intention of saving his son from the chaos.

After I'd parted ways with the ogre lady (who, in a rare turn, was still well within the age range suited to being called a "lady," even accounting for my previous life), I'd quietly let my father know what had happened. I couldn't exactly stay silent, considering we'd made a big purchase and brought home spare change in the order of a drachma.

However, the alcohol in my father's system had thwarted my attempts at discretion, and he'd begun boasting aloud. On top of that, he'd taken the money I'd handed him—which I said should be used for our winter preparations

—straight to my mother and managed to convince her that these coins were to be wholly separate from our standard budget. What that meant was that the currency had quickly gone into the bishop's pocket and my father had announced, "It's Erich's treat!" as more barrels of booze were hauled out of the church.

Without any experience as a husband or father, I could only assume that parents were creatures that couldn't help themselves when their son does something impressive. Still, given how ecstatic everyone was, I no longer needed to worry about my parents taking away Elisa's pearl because she was too young for it. Of course, I hadn't worried that they'd be greedy enough to mimic the villains who pocketed their children's New Year's money, but they were certainly cautious enough to worry about her losing it somewhere. My parents were cautious because they loved us, but that was difficult to see from a child's perspective. I didn't want my cute little sister to be upset with them over something like that.

As the crowd poured another helping into the goblet I'd emptied, I heaved a sigh of grief—but with a tinge of relief mixed in. This time they'd given me wine with honeywater. Even my immature taste buds could enjoy this.

However, the sun had almost set and I couldn't help but wonder... *Isn't it about time we toss the newlyweds into their bedrooms?*

"I knew it—I knew it all along!" Heinz shouted. "I knew as soon as I heard you stood up in that training session! I knew that you'd show the world something amazing with your sword!"

Despite the advancing clock, my totaled brother showed no intention of sweeping his bride off her feet. With his arm around my shoulder and a mug in his hands, he cheerily prattled on with all the vocabulary his drunken mind could muster. I desperately prayed that he only had more slurred chants primed to expel from his mouth.

"Listen up, Erich, cutting a helmet is great for your confidence, but see, a real enemy moves around..." And to make matters worse, I had the misfortune of sitting across from a drunk Sir Lambert, who made ending this whole affair an impossible ordeal. *If you're going to be drunk, stick to saying drunkard things!*

How am I supposed to write you off as a rambling idiot when your advice still sounds useful?

If things kept going and everyone blacked out like this, I would never live it down. The women of our canton would glare at me for the rest of time if I ruined their honeymoon night.

“Hey, Heinz...” I said.

“I know, I *know!* Don’t worry, I’ll talk to dad for ya! You’ll make a greaaat adventurer, and you’ll find the fairy coin too.”

Let’s forget about the coin already, okay? The fact that we never managed to find it must have weighed on him. I personally agreed, but my brother was already a full-grown *adult*.

Dammit, why do all men love swords so much? Don’t get me wrong, I love them as much as the next guy, but is it really worth getting so worked up over that you’ll waste the precious experience of your virginal night? This is once in a lifetime. Once. In. A. Lifetime!

As I began considering knocking some sense into him with a Body check, the bride shouted, “Heinz!!!”

“What, Mina?!” Heinz shouted back. “I’m here...try’na help my little brother’s future, uh...”

“*Our* future comes first, blockhead!!!” she yelled. Her face was beet red and her voice boomed across the plaza as she leaned toward her husband. The force of her roar was enough to shut up the other drunkards and wrap the plaza in a veil of silence. “Come on, let’s go! All of you! Don’t tell me any of you forgot what day today was!”

The once-frail maiden snatched the goblet (filled with almost more water than wine) out of my hands and downed it all at once before grabbing the groom’s ear. Let me reiterate that she *grabbed* his ear and did not pinch it.

“Owowowowowow?! Mina?! Ouchhh! Wait, hey, owwww!”

This moment engraved the power dynamic of this couple in stone. In the future, my boneheaded brother would probably be reined in by Mrs. Mina,

who'd use this night to tease and embarrass him in front of their children for years to come. *Go, Mrs. Mina, go!*

"Shut up! Come on, get up, you goons! Work those brains of yours and remember what day it is!"

The enraged howl of a bride ignored sent the crowd clambering to their feet as they remembered how they were meant to close a wedding. The gears in their befuddled heads turned as frantically as their bodies moved to hoist the three pairs of newlyweds. *I wonder how many of them will make it back alive.*

I slipped away from the crowd and found a miraculous cup of water sitting unattended at an empty table.

"I need to be more careful about standing out..." I mused.

The water chilled by the Harvest Goddess's blessing gently slipped down my throat. I sought out a hot bowl of porridge to ease the waves of liquor bouncing around my stomach, and the steamy meal tasted gentler still.

[Tips] Each canton's alcohol is most often kept by a temple of the Wine God or another deity in His absence, and is managed and sold based on need. There is a national price set for all liquors that generally declines in years when the harvest is bountiful; the goal is to make it more readily available than not.

Alcohol is more than a luxury: it is a strategic resource to quell unrest, a sanitary means of purifying water, and a medicinal drug to stabilize mental disorder.

The morning sun glimmered on me as I crawled out of bed and took a deep breath...only to nearly throw up. The spirit of liquor hadn't overstayed its welcome (a euphemism for hangovers); rather, a cloud of sour stench had drifted in through my open window.

After the celebration—only "without incident" by the loosest of metrics—the three new couples had been tossed into their respective bedrooms, and the rest of the pack had taken the extra booze my winnings provided to start the

third party of the day. The still-hot food had probably been accompanied by song and dance, and some must have fancied a spar or test of strength as they partied into the deep hours of the night.

This was my best guess, though, because I'd slinked away early on. No matter how much of a Heavy Drinker I was, I only had so much space in my stomach for liquids. I'd wanted to avoid playing the role of a human pump sober purely because I had the capacity for it.

So I'd gone to bed as usual, but this was quite the nauseating awakening. The odor emanated from a tree placed right by the window. I turned to look around the children's bedroom of our home—which felt bigger than it had before—and found the perpetrators in my two middle brothers. The urge to pour well-water all over them swelled within me. *But I'm an adult. Calm—I am calm.* Still, I'd get back at them by advising my father against letting them drink again for some time. *That will do nicely.*

Wanting to wash my face, I headed into the kitchen to find my mother had already woken up (though I thought I saw she'd drunk more than my father) to stir the same pot that she did every morning.

"My," she greeted, "good morning, Erich."

"Good morning, Mother."

"You made quite the scene yesterday, didn't you, o Lord Swordsman of our humble home?" she added with a giggle.

My father and brother had praised my ear off last night, but this was the first time my mother had done so; I felt a tad embarrassed.

"Has the alcohol run its course?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm fine," I replied. "I'll go feed Holter as soon as I'm finished washing up."

"Then it sounds like you won't need any of this," she said with a mischievous grin that looked years younger than she was. I followed her hand and peered into the pot, where the fragrance of a sweet soup at a rolling boil floated to my nose.

“Oh, it’s root celery...” Root celery was a variant of celery that grew thicker at the root; once it was cooked or boiled, it had a similar crumbly, soft texture to potatoes. The pottage my mother was stirring was called root celery soup, and it was one of my favorites.

Finely grated root celery was mixed in a boiling pot with fresh cream and soup stock to create a mildly sweet broth. The warmth was good for colds and it didn’t have any hard solids, so it was perfect for morning hangovers. It was a staple post-festival menu item in our house.

“Hangover or not, I’ll gladly take some,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Erich. I can’t help but want to tease you,” my mother giggled, readying a bowl. “You know, I was rather lonely when you began calling me ‘Mother’ and not ‘Mama.’”

“Then would you like for me to call you ‘Ma’ like the twins?” I asked as I wiped my face with a cloth I’d dipped in a vase full of well-water.

“No, stop,” she said with a laugh. “That makes me sound like the wife of some country bumpkin.” I was blessed with enough wit to avoid saying that she *was* the wife of a country bumpkin.

“Then madam,” I said, “allow me to order one bowl of your finest soup. A piece of bread would accompany it wonderfully, should you be so kind.”

“As you wish, Lord Swordsman. Allow me to grace you with complementary cheese.”

I’d bowed as I put in my request in the palatial tongue, and my mother responded in kind with the feminine complement. I accepted the warm soup and rye bread that made up my breakfast.

“Would you fancy any tea?” my mother asked, offering a drink made from the roots of boiled wild grass known as red tea.

Rhinians were partial to tea, but not to the black or green teas of the world that came from leaves. Instead, they preferred teas infused with herbs or grasses. Water was regularly boiled to sterilize it, so drinking it raw was seen as a waste. Being so accustomed to boiling water, we naturally began to include herbs to engage our taste buds and maintain our health. Nowadays, every sip in

the Empire included the taste of boiled herbs.

Red tea was made from chicory root, infamous on Earth for its bad reputation as a substitute coffee to those who have tried it. However, it was carefully treated in our household, and didn't taste so foul so long as I thought of it as its own drink and not as coffee. Instead of mixing it with the milk we traded our neighbors for, we usually put in fresh cream. It had the tender deliciousness of home... *How many more times will I be able to taste this flavor?*

My brother was now married and likely snoozing away beside Mrs. Mina in the cottage. One day, he would have his own children and I would become an uncle. Then I would need to leave to make room in the house for his new family. Our dwelling was far from shabby but nowhere near the size of a mansion, so I couldn't stick around forever. Eventually, my parents would move to the cottage and Heinz would take over as the rightful successor to our house.

Despite my two middle brothers' lax attitudes, I was sure they had their own plans for where they would live in the future. There were widows looking to remarry and households full of daughters wanting grooms all over the canton. The commotion they caused yesterday was surely a means for them to fight the anxiety of choosing their own paths. In the end, the best thing a farmer's son could do for his family was to leave before he caused any more trouble.

As I sipped on my red tea, my mother began preparing to bring soup to her husband and sons stuck groaning in bed. Gazing at her back filled me with an untold melancholy. It wasn't as if I wanted to stay; I wasn't that spoiled. I'd already left the nest to make my own living once. I knew how important and meaningful that was. But still...I couldn't help but feel lonely.

Considering the fact that my mother hadn't stopped my father from causing a scene yesterday, she must not have had any qualms about me living off of the back of my sword. Whether I set off on a journey to master the blade, ventured to a faraway land to become a soldier, or fashioned myself as an adventurer or mercenary, she would say nothing.

It wouldn't be that she'd have nothing to say—the love I'd been shown here was enough for me to be certain of that. If my parents didn't care about me, they would never have asked me if I wanted to go to school in my second

brother's place.

My parents were trying their best to let me forge my own path, as the future Buddha who threw me into this world had. Our home was my parents' way of creating an environment where all of us could do as we willed.

They'd told us the truth about adventuring to calm us down as children, but had no words of reprimand when I began studying swordplay or when I ordered armor. That was proof of their acknowledgment.

Just as I proved my filial piety by helping around the house and donating my wood carvings to them, they showed me their parental love by teaching me all that they could without forcing me to do any one thing. *Could I ever ask for anything more?*

Once I left, it would be difficult to come back. Adventuring is a grassroots affair that follows the trail of work. Without trains or planes to bring me home, a job in a foreign territory would leave me with little means of visiting home. The trip to Innenstadt alone took three days by caravan. A six-day round trip was far too long for a break to see one's family.

Of course, the same would hold true as a seasonal laborer. Besides, I knew it was stupid, but I'd been blessed with the privilege of becoming whatever my heart desired—and I'd used my powers in the hopes of being one of the heroes in the tales I had loved so.

I have to prepare myself and tell them...

"Mother."

"Yes, dear?" my mother asked. "What is it?"

I've decided on my future.

[Tips] There are many modes of transportation, but the stagecoach is the most common. Even a child could spend their allowance to get a ride to the next canton over, but they travel on predetermined routes, so they do not travel directly toward any given destination. Further, the number of available carriages can drop steeply in certain seasons. The only means of getting around this is to use another mode of transportation: shoes.

0.1 Hendersons

Henderson Scale 0.1

A derailing event that has no impact on the overarching story.

For example, a conversation with a random NPC could run too long, prompting the players to rush through a minor battle.

Female ogres spent the better part of life staving off boredom. They were born warriors: the alloy in their skin thwarted attacks and their metal bones were tenacity itself. Their joints were as strong as their adamant skeletons, and their impressive musculature allowed their massive bodies to dance with ease. The chiseled gifts from the heavens that they called bodies were nothing if not fit for the art of battle.

However, the superior build of a warrior race alone would have been insufficient for stray ogres to find themselves welcomed throughout the land as state-sponsored fighters. Their instincts were as finely tuned to the sport of combat as their bodies. Just as lesser creatures sought out a mate, ogres sought out the thrill of battle.

The instinctive urge to fight can be found in all life: conflict is often required in matters of survival or securing a mate. Yet most species' inclination for violence pales when compared to the ogres'. Most lifeforms consider hostility as only a means to an end, such as the preservation of life or the acquisition of material. But the ogres see it as no means—it is the very purpose of their lives.

Training is a means to experience purer battle; consumption exists to continue fighting; victory is but a segue into the next encounter. All that they do leads back to the thrill of the fight. Some fundamental part of their soul craves it. Those who fall ill or are too injured to take to the fields of war often take their own lives within half a year. From the moment of birth, life apart from

combat is unthinkable for them.

However, their perfected physique brings more than the delight of battle. With it comes an unbearable hunger, for there are few who can match their innate power. A sword of mundane make can hardly leave a scratch on their skin, and cheap tricks falter in the face of their towering stature. Furthermore, their exceptional metabolism blesses them with long lives free from disease.

Although their downright unfair bodies are objects of envy for many, that same advantage was the root of one of the fundamental tragedies of the ogre condition. Even adolescent ogres can trample experienced fighters with ease. For a people who prize the heart-stirring dance of a well-matched battle over a quick, one-sided beatdown, their physique is *too* extraordinary. If they amounted to no more than a band of savage brutes who used their natural build to bulldoze through everything in their way, no one would honor them with the title of *warrior*. There was a vast gulf between wearing that title and merely being synonymous with violence.

The strong are plentiful in this world. Giants dwarf ogres in both size and power, and their population is still sizable despite the ravages of plague. Dragons terrorize the skies and lay waste to everything in sight upon landing, akin to living divine calamities. Yet these were actors of primitive violence, only interested in pushing the powers of their birthright to their fullest extent. There was nothing particularly strange about this. After all, a tiger is strong because it is a tiger, and it reigns over its territory using the strength befitting it. To train further would be to admit weakness—it was plenty strong enough.

Ogres beg to differ, polishing their insurmountable power by studying the art of war. An ineffable militancy in their hearts compels them to hone their bodies into the perfect weapons.

Nevertheless, the more they train, the further they stray from satisfaction. They sometimes settle for a lesser challenge, but the disappointment of the affair only torments their growing sense of hunger. Fighting weaklings is like eating a single bite of bread on the brink of starvation.

Knowing better than to let internal conflicts consume them, the ogres split long ago into small nomadic tribes that wander the continent, looking for new

battlefields that could offer higher heights.

Some, driven by this same end, leave their clans behind to walk the path of a lone warrior. They make ends meet as bodyguards or tourney fighters (though rare is the circuit that will admit one), all while searching for an opponent that can satiate their craving.

Lauren of the Gargantuan Tribe was but one of these many wanderers who found herself employed as a merchant's bodyguard. Honored with the esteemed title of The Valiant within her clan, she had left them behind in the western reach of the continent and found herself touring the land. Her people had settled down in the West long ago because the land was rich with conflict, but Lauren had tired of battling farmhand draftees and made her departure a few years prior.

Now, on the inner western reach of the Central Continent, she was surrounded by the Trialist Empire and its satellite nations—all famed for their tranquility. While burglars and highwaymen weren't wholly unheard of, there were few bandit camps notable enough to be named, and frequent patrols by the authorities worked further still against the development of villainous infrastructure. Further, the prime roads were patrolled by dragon riders several times a day, so those foolish or desperate enough to turn to highway robbery were few and far between.

Why, you may ask, would a demon starving for battle come to this peaceful region to work as a jeweler's bodyguard for fifty librae a day? (As an aside, this was several times the going rate for the average bravo.) Despite its pacifism, the Trialist Empire was full of well-trained warriors.

From the moment of its founding, the Empire had warred with all its neighbors. Ages of blood washed away with blood instilled a cultural certainty that eras of peace were but time to prepare for the next outburst of violence; Rhine's warrior class was exceptional despite the amicable times.

Local tournaments drew in those confident in their skills, and nobles could often be seen attending contests of strength or mock battles. These competitions were a means for those involved to hone their skills more than idle entertainment or a space for the pursuit of accolades.

Lauren had drifted into the country following word of this abundance of worthwhile fights. Each and every mercenary trained in this region accomplished much in foreign battlefields, so she'd been excited to see a plethora of strongmen in their land of origin.

Besides, Lauren had grown tired of war. Though it may be difficult to comprehend, a sharp gulf stands between warfare and battle as ogres understand it: translated to more familiar values, she was more gourmet than glutton.

Thinking back on it, she considered the act of war to be an utter waste. After years of training, skilled warriors were cut down like helpless weeds by stray arrows or lucky spear strikes from common farmhands. Worse yet, they could be blown away by a blast of magic without a chance to show their skills or assassinated in their sleep. In the very worst case, they could starve to death without claiming a single head if a siege lasted long enough for them to exhaust their supplies.

Consider a marbled steak that could offer unimaginable flavor with just a light sear; these crimes would be akin to drenching it in unnecessary marinade. Of course, the steak would still taste *good*, but there was no need for such things —or at least, such was Lauren's refined opinion.

Rhine, on the other hand, was much to her liking. Unlike the cowards who surrendered as soon as they sighted an ogre on the battlefield, there were people here who would go out of their way to pick a fight with her to test their mettle. What was more, her simple job paid obscenely well, and the bandits that she beat down every now and again were all skilled enough to eke out a living in this well-protected country.

Lauren struggled to find opportunities to swing her blade in comparison to the battlefield, but the quality of each individual encounter was better here by far. It was just enough to satisfy her perennial quest to stave off boredom.

As Lauren awaited her next epicurean meal, she followed her employer and the caravan he sponsored on their southbound journey away from the incoming cold of winter. Tomache Gresham was the head of procurement at the Gresham und Gesell Trading Company, and he'd stopped at a small canton on his way to

buy new stock in the South.

It was an unassuming place; countless cantons like it littered the Empire. The head of the local Watch who'd come to greet them caught Lauren's eye, but he'd totally rejected her advances. Other than him, there was little of interest around.

They were to fill their waterskins and kegs, borrow a bathhouse, and relax under a solid roof while earning some extra coin at the local harvest festival. The reasons they had for stopping by were typical, and today was meant to be no different than the day before or after—or so the ogre had thought.

As the celebrations in the town square intensified, the monotony of the dwindling crowd caused Lauren to heave a massive yawn. A tear floated to the corner of her golden eyes, their demonic vertical irises quickly shifting to look over the mensch running toward her employer's stall. Despite her blurred vision, she had no trouble examining the little visitor.

Lauren may have been a bodyguard, but she protected her client from more than brute force. Sticky fingers were a common threat, and it was her job to keep an eye on every customer that came her way.

The girl who'd come running toward them was a mensch toddler. The ogre had a strange feeling about her, but there was nothing odd about how the child excitedly beamed over a jewel. From her size and unsteady footing, Lauren surmised that she was around four years of age.

"Mr. Brother! Pretty! Pretty!!!" the child squeaked.

"Yup, they sure are pretty." Behind the girl, another person emerged, happily watching over the child. As soon as he entered into view, Lauren squinted sharply. The chaperone accompanying the "customer" was a young, slender mensch boy with a feminine face. He was on the better side of ten years old, and his worn clothes' frayed patches announced that he was a farmer's son.

Not exactly a pretty boy of unmatched beauty, he seemed like little more than a farmhand to the average eye. However, his still unrefined form lightly plucked at Lauren's heartstrings. He had muscles that perfectly followed the center line of his body in a way that only trained fighters did.

Whether walking or crouching, his balance was stable, and his prudent steps left him free to act at any moment. The center of gravity for four-limbed creatures on two legs lay just above the belt, near the navel, but Lauren doubted that he'd fall over even if she'd given it a little shove. This had to have been the result of constant practice. The scent of a warrior rolled off of him in waves.

Lauren glanced at his hands and saw a litany of calluses. Though this in and of itself was a common sight on farm children, she recognized that he'd developed some in places no farmer would. The calluses on his right thumb and index finger were indicative of a single-handed sword, but those on the base of his left ring and pinky fingers were more common for two-handers. Further, his wrist had a spearman's kink, and the marks on the back of his hand and bare arm betrayed the use of a shield.

The marks his training left on him painted him in vibrant hues as part of a mercenary tradition she knew too well. Lauren found the memories of fighters tossing their weapons as they snapped like toothpicks nostalgic.

His vision was keen too. He maintained eye contact while speaking, but the tiny movements of his eyes showed that he was taking in the positioning, hands, and equipment of his conversational partner—even if he himself didn't know it—all while keeping their shoulders and hips (that is, the fulcrums of movement) in the corners of his view.

The fact that he'd stiffened up for a fraction of a moment when he'd seen Lauren was even more reason for praise, in her eyes. It meant he had the intuition to ascertain an opponent's skill. The way he'd slid back an awkward half-pace showed that he was sensitive enough to danger for his instincts to push him out of striking distance.

He was a good warrior. Despite looking like nothing more than a scrawny farmer, he emanated the scent of fine cuisine—or better yet, Lauren's favorite, *whiskey*. Unlike the sickly sweet of mead or the feeble kick of wine, the devilish caress of the whiskey brewed in the islands of the far north was potent enough to fell even her kin.

With a metabolism in a separate realm from mensch, ogres have difficulty

enjoying drunkenness, and the color of their face hardly changes without a seriously powerful spirit. And among these spirits, the amber lover whose years of fortification in some far-off barrel gave it the strength to cradle them into a blissful intoxication had the entire ogre race enchanted.

Lovers of liquor knew when a drink was ready, and Lauren deemed this glass to be much too unripe, as his appearance might have suggested. He didn't have enough kick—perhaps good enough for a quick taste, but there was no fun in that.

No, alcohol was best when left to age. Personally, Lauren preferred the glorious smoky fumes of peat-infused whiskey over the stuff without any quirks. Followers of the Wine God agreed, considering that the Trialist Empire now fermented some of its own, but the finest drinks were still the oldest of the original barrels in the north.

And this boy will age just as finely. Lauren swallowed back her prophetic hunch, but desire began to creep to the surface. Like a test batch of liquor, she wanted to take a sip. Of course, she wasn't so boorish as to scuffle with him. While he wouldn't crumple in one strike like the weaklings in the West, she knew mensch were quick to break down.

As her gaze swam looking for a means to test him, she noticed that the perfect stalking horse was right before her eyes. There was an insignificant stuart merchant who dealt in swords—the kind even commoners could buy, too flimsy and disposable to bother regulating—that had an open helmet-cutting challenge he used to earn extra coin. Lauren had wanted to try her hand, but the fool had begged her not to, tears streaming down his face. She'd reluctantly given in when he started to sob, clinging to her employer.

Although it was beaten up, the ogre could only imagine where the rat had managed to get ahold of a helmet with a mystarille finish, and she decided that he'd made more than enough money from this scheme by now. By taking advantage of the sister's infatuation with a pearl, Lauren managed to send the boy forward without him catching on to her hidden intentions.

As luck would have it, the dull sword at the stuart's stall cleaved straight through the old helm, mystarille coating be damned. The pleasant whistle of it

splitting in two rang in the ogre's ears like a bell announcing good tidings.

When this boy's body ripens and his mind is full of experience...I'm sure he'll age into a liquor so fine that a single sip will be unforgettable.

"Now then," Lauren said, "I sent you forth with the promise that you would obtain five drachmae."

"Right. But you've already done more than enough for—"

And so the ogre thought a reservation was in order. She would be livid if a barrel of this quality were to be opened before the time was right by one of her less cultured peers. To lay down her claim while the product was still fermenting had its own charm: the time spent waiting only enhanced the flavor, turning into a side dish that accompanied the drink better than any other.

"Will this suffice?" Lauren asked after an exchange of lips. Among ogres, a "spit trade" denoted a woman's claim. The occasions where ogres committed their lips to another were rare: their matriarchal society meant that the idea of a lone mate was foreign to them. Though they pinned down their male counterparts to breed—or simply to pass the time—they did not kiss as a display of emotion.

The mouth was sacred to ogres; it was second only to the hands that wielded their weapons. The mouth declared one's name, roared in battle, and offered eulogy to any who managed to best them. It was not to be sullied—ogres prided themselves on the beautiful words they bestowed upon their enemies.

Thus, there were only two times when an ogre thought to kiss: when she wanted to mark someone as her property or when she wanted to show the world that she had found a future foe. Until the day that one of them perished at the hand of the other, no outsiders were to intervene.

"Very well. My people will treat you well if you give them the name Lauren of the Gargantuan Tribe. I'll tell them I found an interesting mensch boy."

The various tribes that roamed the land maintained contact in passing, and the rules of honor prevented them from swiping another's challenger from underneath their nose. After all, they knew well the depths of rage they would feel if it happened to them.

“I look forward to the day you come to challenge me as a full-fledged swordsman.”

I don’t ask that you hurry, Lauren thought. She would outlive the mensch, so she had plenty of time to wait. Bubbling with excitement, she flashed a fiercely beautiful smile. *All I ask is that you age into something delicious.*

[Tips] The “spit trade” is a traditional ogre oath of possession. This formal peck lets one’s battle-starved sistren know that a foe is off limits. Evolving from their habit of leaving survivors in the hopes that they will return as potent challengers fueled by revenge, the ritual is a peculiarity of their combat-centered culture.

Winter of the Twelfth Year

Campaign

A long-form story that takes place over the course of several sessions.

These usually revolve around large-scale issues that cannot be resolved in one session alone, and involve powerful enemies or complicated mysteries.

The sound of a bowstring signals an extinguished life. In exchange for a hefty draw weight, the composite shortbow—made from yew and strengthened with animal tendons—packed great power. The minimal draw distance and respectable force made it a perfect fit for hunting.

“Splendid,” Margit said. The small arachne was no match for me in endurance, but her agility far eclipsed that of any mensch; she and her kind were so well suited to the weapon that they practically came out the womb holding one.

I looked up from my hiding spot to see my old friend clinging to the trunk of a tree, praising my use of her personal weapon. Seeing her nonchalantly scale timber with just her legs hit me with the fact that she really was different from a normal human, as late as the revelation was.

“You’ve gotten the hang of this nicely,” she continued. “Landing a mark from this distance is reason enough to be proud of your skills.”

Margit leapt to the ground from above my head without a sound and scurried off to lift up my catch at a frightening speed. The arrow had flown some twenty meters to pierce through a rabbit buried in the foliage. These brown hares were large critters whose rat-like faces made them markedly uglier than Earth’s domestic bunnies.

This one was hefty, and looked to be around seventy centimeters long. Its coat provided year-round camouflage in this region with little snowfall, but the brown now dripped with red. My arrow had gone straight through its eye. I’d

been aiming for the head, but this was a cleaner shot than I'd expected.

I chalked it up to the Shortbow Marksmanship skill I'd raised to IV: Craftsman. My long dexterity grind combined with Enchanting Artistry had led to a situation where all of my dex rolls were hilariously successful. *A trait that can do it all really is the way to go.*

"It looks nice and meaty," I said.

"How fortunate," Margit remarked. "It seems we're due for a lavish dinner."

The two of us were alone in the woods just outside the canton—the same one that we used to play in as children. I'd been taking archery lessons with Margit (as I'd suspected, having a tutor gave more experience, faster) while earning some small coin for when I left home.

"Shall we gut the hare before moving on?" she asked.

"Yeah, let's," I replied.

Though we began preparing the rabbit to eat, there was actually a bounty on these creatures. Twenty-five assarii per hare was quite the pocket change for a child. They were pests that nibbled on saplings to get through the colder months, and that included the artificially planted trees that supported the logging industry. Impeding reforestation efforts delayed the cycle of rebirth that our civilization relied on, and meant we'd run low on timber and firewood.

Furthermore, these rabbits were acutely sensitive and fleet of foot, making them difficult to catch. Unable to lay traps in a forest frequented by lumberjacks, the authorities were at quite the standstill. Since larger beasts were quickly culled in these preserved woods, the hare population had been left to grow, and so the powers that be in Heidelberg offered monetary reward to huntsmen as an incentive to proactively thin out their numbers.

I'd followed along on Margit's hunting trips eyeing this bounty. Everything was for my future budget. To announce that I was leaving was one thing, but actually leaving was a whole separate beast. The process of walking into a leasing office and moving out a month later in Japan was stupidly easy in comparison.

On the day following the festival, I'd told my parents I wanted to be an

adventurer. Perhaps in part due to the strangely passionate covering fire my eldest brother had laid down for me, my folks accepted my plans without incident. Although, to be honest, I think I would've been fine on my own.

However, that day was also when I found out that my mother and father had been asking around to secure a stable future for me as an adult. They'd been in talks with a few families that were interested in taking me in as a bridegroom, and sent expensive letters to distant relatives to see if they would adopt me as an heir. Apparently, they'd even asked the village chief to prepare a letter of recommendation for me, had I chosen to apply as an aide to the magistrate.

Despite reducing all of their hard work to dust, my parents didn't so much as sigh when I told them what I hoped to do. They allowed me to pursue my own future in spite of the fact that my chosen occupation was something as roguish as adventuring.

To be told that I could chase my dreams out of love and not disinterest filled me with such joy...and filled my heart with an unbearable pain. I would never forget the tears that I failed to hold back on that day.

Still, my parents weren't fools; unlike the clowns that blindly support deadbeat wannabe musicians, they gave me a set of tasks to complete. Adventuring was a constant test of vigor, so I was told I needed to save up enough money to safely set off on my journey. If I couldn't do that much, I wouldn't survive out there no matter how desperately I struggled.

I had a long list of expenses to account for. Travel fare to my first major city was too obvious to mention, and my order of armor alone would not be enough to equip myself. I would only be able to set off as a proud adventurer if I managed to gather everything I needed by the time I came of age.

I was nothing but thankful for my parents' demands. They'd prepared an attainable goal and went out of their way to refuse my wood whittling earnings. All that was left for me was to do everything in my power to meet their expectations. Thus, I found myself spending the winter's free time stocking up on experience, money, and dinner supplies.

"You've improved magnificently," Margit remarked.

"Have I?"

I put the dismembered hare into my bag as she removed unwanted fat from its pelt. The pelt sold for another fifteen assarii, making it an important source of income. The ten copper pieces that it cost to rent a run-down motel room felt oddly cheap and expensive at the same time.

“The speed at which you take aim and your concealment of intent aside,” Margit said slowly, “there’s nothing more for me to say about the accuracy of your shots.”

The arachne shrugged her shoulders, as if to show there was little need for her to offer advice. She slipped the rabbit skin into her knapsack after a light cleaning; it became a hassle if there was still excess oil clinging to it later on.

“But my range is limited,” I said. “Any further than this is a bit much for me...”

“One shouldn’t aim to fire much further than this, you know?”

Despite her statement, Margit could land headshots on deer from twice my effective range, so what kind of freak of nature did that make her?

“Sneak in close and end the matter in a single strike—that’s the key,” she went on to say. “This bow hits hard, but a large beast will still take several shots to fell.”

Underestimating animal hides was no small mistake. Even a small flaw in an arrow’s angle of entry could be enough to turn a solid hit into a grazing blow. Furthermore, territorial creatures like boars during mating season were equipped for their turf wars with a hard layer of fat that acted as armor. I could see why there had been stories of hunters dying to wild boars even back in a world where hunting rifles were commonplace. The courage required of this world’s huntsmen to face one with a bow and dagger was nothing to scoff at.

“Well then,” I said, “I’ll strive to stay in the good graces of my wonderful teacher.”

“My, how admirable,” Margit replied. “Then shall we search for our next mark?”

As soon as we finished disposing of the gory byproducts of my kill, we strolled through the woods in search of more prey. I alone manned Margit’s bow for the sake of my training, but my eyes couldn’t hold a candle to an arachne’s, so she

was in charge of stalking the forest critters.

I'd tossed a few points toward Animal Knowledge and Animal Tracking, but I quickly realized that Margit was *at least* in the realm of VI: Expert. Unable to justify the ridiculous costs of catching up to her, I abandoned the idea entirely.

I'd known from my first attempt at setting the course of my journey that it would be a mistake to take on everything by myself. Reminiscing about the half-baked builds my impulsive greed had birthed was painful enough—I had no desire to experience that sort of thing in the first person.

As a result, I elected to commit the bare minimum amount of experience to scouting skills: enough to detect other people. Large and careless, they were far easier to spot than wild animals, and as an adventurer I would probably be tasked with clearing out a bandit camp in the mountains at some point or another.

Margit hadn't let her racial talents go to her head, and years of diligent practice left her startlingly proficient at tracking. Thanks to her skills, we'd managed to catch three hares in the time from morning to evening. I'd missed one shot when Margit had licked the back of my neck, but I think overall we pulled in a respectable haul. Of course, that wasn't to say I'd ever believe her playful excuse that she was testing my ability to remain focused under any circumstance.

The other highlight of the day had been when Margit silently scaled a tree and captured a pheasant with her bare hands. After witnessing that, I'd felt a surge of confidence, considering that I managed to avoid her surprise attacks fairly often.

"Now then, it's getting late," Margit said.

The sun careened to the horizon, and the light shining through the foliage grew dim. Though the preserve was not densely packed, the trees were all tall enough that the winter sunlight dwindled at speed, leaving little time to enjoy the scarlet glow of the last evening hours.

"Let's set up camp," I said. The arrival of night necessitated shelter, and this too was part of my training. We were unlike the heroes of console RPGs who ran around without sleep or rest for days on end in clothes that actively mocked

the elements; a certain amount of preparation was called for.

Besides, camping—that staple of tabletop fantasies—set my heart aflutter. Who hasn't blown a few hours rolling dice to depict a scene like this in way more detail than necessary?

Fond memories aside, crossing borders was basically part of an adventurer's job description. Sleeping outdoors was common depending on one's travel plans, and I'd heard it was perfectly ordinary to have to set up camp alone if one didn't have the good fortune to hitch a ride with a caravan. Therefore, I was learning the ropes with someone more experienced than me in a secure forest.

"May I ask you to prepare the bedding?" Margit said. "I will handle the fire."

"Thanks," I responded. "I'm already having trouble seeing in this light, to tell you the truth."

"It seems we let ourselves get carried away," she noted. "Let's be more careful tomorrow."

I grabbed rope and tarp from my bag and made a simple roof between some trees as a defense against an unexpected shower. Meanwhile, Margit collected a handful of dry branches and used a tinderbox to start a bonfire. Her racial darkvision left her with little need to light a fire unless she was cooking, but my Cat Eyes weren't quite as effective in this wood under the new moon, so the light was necessary.

The midnight forest was too dark a place for any mensch, regardless of what talent they possessed. As a huntsman's daughter, Margit had camped outdoors since she was a little girl: sometimes to learn from her parents, sometimes to teach her little sister, and sometimes alone. She'd earned the privilege of going out on solo hunts recently with her fifteenth birthday in sight, and at worst, I risked death without her guidance.

To a member of one of the frailest human races, the shift from daytime to an unfathomable darkness and cold was a monstrous challenge. Although I had the hang of it by now, my first camping experience had been a disaster. Margit had overestimated a mensch's ability to see in the dark, and we'd only begun our preparations after night had fallen.

The canopy had blocked what little moonlight remained and my Cat Eyes had been rendered useless, turning the simple act of firemaking into a whole ordeal. I'd cut myself while preparing a fire starter and smashed my finger with the flintstone; it had been a bad time all around. I don't know what I would've done without Margit.

She'd apologized to me afterwards, but I'd learned the danger of delaying nighttime preparations firsthand in a safe environment, so I didn't mind. After all, humans were prone to taking the success of commonplace tasks for granted. Honestly, *I* should have been the one apologizing: arachne could sleep perfectly well in the canopy, and Margit had to compromise for my sake.

We huddled around the pleasing crackle of the fire and prepared a simple meal. With no cooking equipment, the only two steps of our recipe were to thoroughly rub salt and herbs into the rabbit meat and sear it. But don't be fooled—this seemingly boring dish had its own rustic charm and tasted amazing.

"By the by, have you heard?" Margit suddenly began speaking as she turned the roast to avoid burning it. "A black type of pepper that's said to be quite delectable is popular in the city right now."

"Black pepper, huh?" *So they have it in urban areas...* The slow advancement of animal husbandry meant a spice that could suppress gamey smells would naturally be popular. I had grown accustomed to the odor, but if someone were to come directly from my old world to share a meal with us, they'd probably be knocked off their feet from the stench alone.

"A classmate of mine was bragging that she'd eaten a dish with some recently," Margit elaborated. "It's shipped in from overseas, she said."

"So it's an import," I mused. "I bet it's expensive."

"One libra per peppercorn, in fact."

The cost of the seafaring good astounded me, but I suppose I should have expected as much from something that spent months on end swaying back and forth under a ship's deck. If the goods came from a newly discovered continent or something, then I could only commend them on a job well done.

“Don’t you think it would be fun to sail the seas as a merchant?” Margit asked.

“I’m sure it would,” I agreed. “I’d love to try food from a foreign land.”

“And my heart dances when I imagine the beautiful fabrics and jewels abroad!” she swooned. “Oh, isn’t there *anyone* who’d decorate me with such a beautiful gift?”

“I know it’s a cliche, but is this the part where I say you look gorgeous enough without it?”

“All that will do in this situation is make you sound cheap,” she said, snickering.

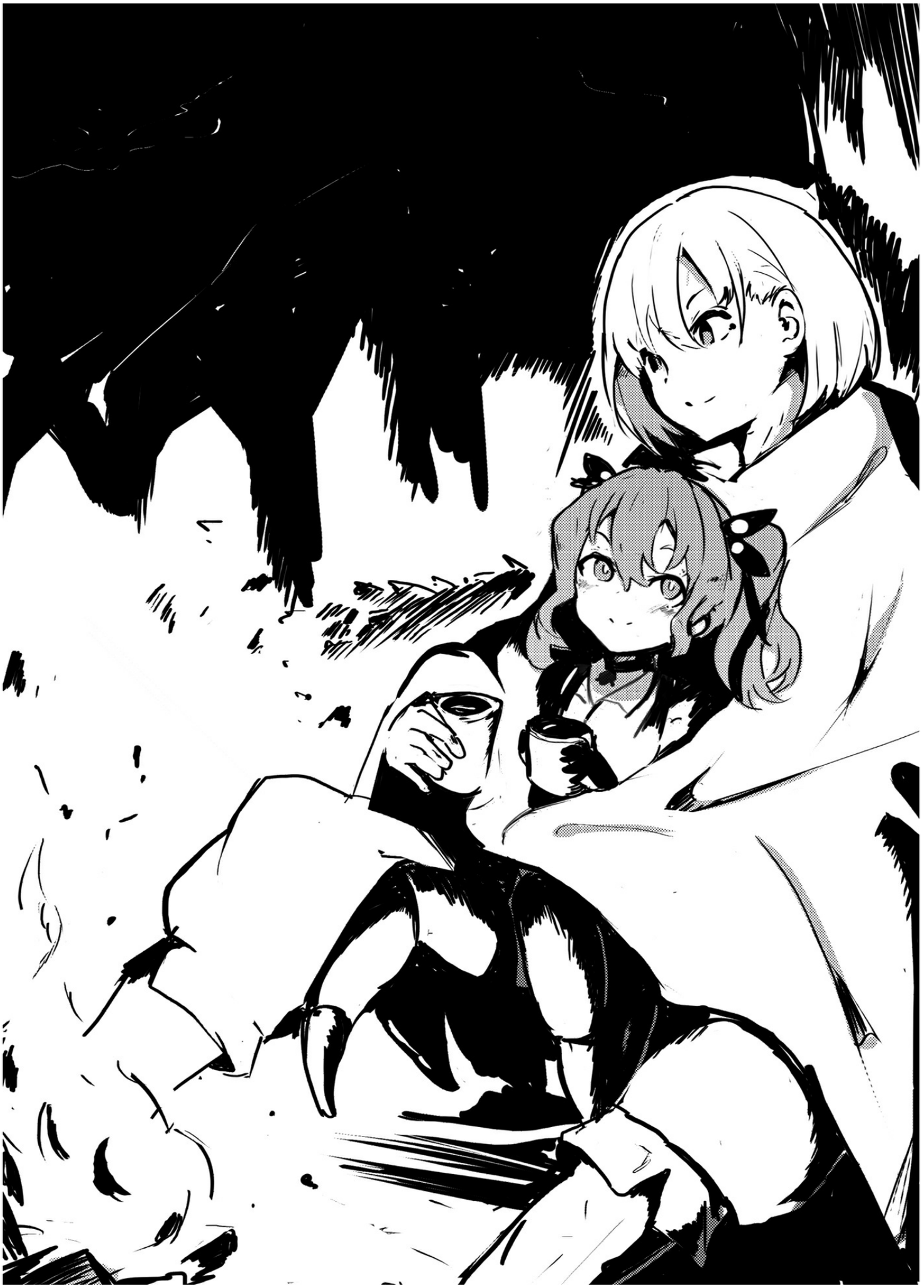
Our idle conversation continued until we finally feasted on the roasted meat dripping with grease. Animals ate as much as possible to survive the winter, so game in this season was always fatty and delicious.

After finishing our meal, Margit prepared a cup of finely ground red tea for each of us. I watched her from the side as I prepared our bedding—though all that entailed was a leather groundsheet stuffed with cotton and an oversized blanket. My only other task was to pile up as much firewood as possible to prolong our source of heat.

“Have you finished?” Margit asked.

“Yep, all done.” Hurried by my spidery companion, I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, took a seat on the leather sheet, and rested my head against a tree.

“Very well. Excuse me,” Margit said, climbing into my lap like it was the obvious thing to do. I let her under the blanket and effectively became the pole holding up a human blanket tent. With a satisfied sigh, she murmured, “So warm...”



Camping was usually synonymous with taking turns as watchguards, but the forest was home to few dangerous beasts, and the only human visitors were hunters. Two kids sleeping had nothing to worry about.

Of course, my level five Presence Detection would trigger a response so long as I remained vigilant as I dozed off. Margit had similar abilities, and arachne didn't need much sleep to begin with.

I took a cup from her and we began to talk the night away. The conversations we shared were our little amusement before bed. The topics were trivial, like how it'd be fun to work as a merchant, or that we wanted to see the sea someday, or that we could venture beyond just the ocean.

At some point, our chitchat morphed into a game of wordplay. It was a game we'd played long ago, when I was first learning the proper pronunciation for palatial vocabulary. All it entailed was chaining together words into improvised poems and singing them to each other. It was a trifling pastime that cared not for rhyme nor seasonal theme.

I quietly sang: "*O grove—hide us—away. As if—to hold—these sleeping souls.*"

A short pause gave way to her reply: "*Two lamps—so warm—encircle me. Defend me—from the night—protect me—from the cold.*"

Without any complicated rules, we were free to sing the words that came to mind. *Maybe the two lamps she mentioned were my arms. I wonder how she feels about being wrapped in my warmth...*

Er, well, it's a bit late to be asking that. The fact that she was helping me prepare for my future without any compensation at all should have been enough of a hint for me. I could only think of one reason she'd go so far as to unveil the hidden techniques of her livelihood.

I sang as Margit pinched my shirt: "*O flame—break forth—upon me. Let not—the winter—discover us.*"

She sang: "*I rest—upon—a shadow unseen. Behind me—beside me—yet out of sight.*"

Surely enough, Margit was a gentle flame that burned softly within me, leaving no shadow behind. The cold touch of her arachne skin felt like a warm coal compared to the winter air. Enveloped in the fragrance of red tea, we drifted off with the words of tender songs lingering in our ears.

[Tips] Some mages in the Trialist Empire make their living as Thalassurges. Their ability to produce fresh water significantly improves the survival rate on long voyages, and seafarers are far safer in Rhine than in medieval Earth.

Spring of the Twelfth Year

Climax

The final destination of any given session.

Oftentimes this denotes a combat encounter that acts as a turning point for the story.

I had always respected cosplayers, but I would never have imagined that my appreciation for the craft would grow in this world. I'm sure you've seen the people wearing their own hand-linked chainmail with full plate armor on top walking around at certain summer festivals. Their determination had always been worthy of applause, but in the spring of my twelfth year, I finally understood just how torturous the act truly was.

"Whoa, I can't move!" I exclaimed.

"Well, yeah," the blacksmith said bluntly. "That's how armor is." Satisfied with his work, the man smiled as I helplessly flailed about.

I too had been satisfied when seeing the completed product placed on a mannequin. I'd always thought that leather-based armor was lame, but the dark finish of my new equipment looked heroic enough to overpower any of my preconceived notions.

The metal-lined breastplate was separate from the cylindrical trunk that covered my torso, and minor adjustments to small sections of woven hide would be enough to tailor them to my growing body. I was happy to see that the two shoulder pads slanted downward to shrug off diagonal slashes and the bits protecting my arms employed the same reliable, hardened leather as the torso piece.

The forearm coverings were dotted on the outside with rivets to bolster their defense and had hide straps on the inside to fasten them tight, meaning I could continue to use these well into adulthood too. Handguards loosely hung off the

ends, covering only the back of my palm to prioritize ease of grip. I was especially appreciative of this make, as it allowed for the use of thick gloves in the wintertime and I could replace the small pieces on my hands with metal at any time.

The belt guarding my waist was similarly adorned with gleaming tack and was more than sturdy enough to withstand a blade. Chain skirt flaps hung off it to protect my thighs and loins, leaving me free from worrying about my lower half.

Lastly, the helmet was shaped like the top of a bullet and was open enough to secure a wide range of vision. However, a nose piece came down from the top just in case I ever took a blow to the face, and I could attach a chain mask to protect my lower face from flying debris. My favorite inclusion, though, was the shingled leather that draped off the back. I could always cover the front of my neck in armor, but it was equally vital to defend my rear.

All I needed was a pair of shin guards and some leather boots to look the part of a full-fledged adventurer. I'd spent a moment marveling at how cool everything looked, but my excitement rammed headfirst into a wall when I put it on.

Unfortunately—and expectedly—I couldn't move as well as I did in plainclothes. If I could, it would be a waste to train soldiers for hours on end in full gear, after all. Several layers of leather had been clamped and beaten together, only to be heat-treated with wax. Despite its soft appearance, the armor was anything but. Its unwillingness to conform to the folds of my body meant that I couldn't bend my joints the way I did while wearing cloth or thin layers of hide.

Patches of chain and hemp under-armor filled the gaps around the arm holes and joints, worsening my mobility further. Moving was by no means impossible, and it wasn't even *that* difficult, but I could tell from the first step that it wasn't going to be easy.

While difficult to explain, the experience felt like my body was a beat slower than my mind. Every movement was oddly cumbersome. I could move, but not smoothly, and the sensation left me indescribably frustrated. Perhaps an apt comparison would be writing with a thick pair of gloves. You can still write

words, but the dullness of your fingers would be too great to write as you usually do. This was a similar level of discomfort.

“Welp, you’ll get used to it,” the smith said. “That leather won’t bend, so it’s basically lighter plate armor. You’ll fall and stumble a bunch, but your body’ll figure it out eventually.”

The man laughed as he pointed out a very unpalatable truism. He was completely right...but I had the markedly unfair ability to transfer time and effort from one activity to another. Now was the perfect time to put my divine favor to good use: this immobile, how would I ever set foot into a forest or ruin?

I’d long been eyeing the Light Armor Mastery skill in the Martial Arts category, and I finally dumped my experience to boost it straight to III: Apprentice, only to suddenly figure out how to dissipate most of the discomfort. A tinge of greed took hold, and at IV: Craftsman I could hardly feel the awkwardness I had so much trouble describing just moments ago.

I see, I have to focus on the range of motion of each joint and how the armor inhibits them. This feels great—dialing in on this lets me move as fluidly as possible and gives me extra experience too. I might go train in the forest to get used to this.

“Hey, whoa...” the blacksmith said in awe after witnessing me hop around and do a few mock swings of an imaginary sword. Seeing me shift from unoiled robot to normal boy in a few seconds flat caught him way off guard. “Well...ain’t that something. Kid, you sure you’re not the avatar of some God of War?”

“If I were, I would’ve gone out to clean house at a tournament years ago,” I replied. Well, if it weren’t for my desire to relish a normal life, I may have ended up like the protagonists of the isekai novels I used to enjoy. I remember one had caused a massive scene at two years old, but a life that excessive is sure to have its fair share of troubles.

Besides, I didn’t want to cause trouble for my wonderful parents, so I renewed my determination that I had no need to rush through life, basking in the simple satisfaction of being able to move in my armor. *I’ll ask Sir Lambert to*

let me wear it during training next time. The experience is great, and I need to test how much damage a breakfall can mitigate with this on.

I didn't have a hit point gauge in the corner of my vision, and the stats menu was equally as barren. The only way to see how much punishment I could take before my movements dulled and my legs gave out was to test it out firsthand. Experimenting with body or death saving throws in the heat of combat was a tall ask for someone as cowardly as I.

Speaking of dice throws, I had unlocked a plethora of new skills when first equipping the armor. There were a few in the Swordsman tree that focused on flexible attacks; the Knight category was packed with high level skills like Heavy Armor Mastery; the Scout section contained things to soften the sound of my equipment like Silent Actions. This single set of armor could be used in so many different ways. I was satisfied for the moment, but decided to spend some time later on to calculate a strong combination of cheap skills. After all, I'd spent a lot of time and effort to get my hands on this armor—I wanted to make good use of it, and for as long as possible.

"With that done, here's a little present from me to the future adventurer," the smith said.

"Huh?"

I'd slipped out of the leatherware thinking that I needed to learn how to equip it myself, but stopped dead in my tracks when the blacksmith placed a box onto the countertop. It was an armor chest complete with a carrying strap—custom made to hold my equipment.

"You'll need an armor chest, won't you? It's not like you can wear that around with you everywhere you go."

"What?! You're *giving* this to me?!"

As plain as it looked, the case was well made and clearly wasn't cheap to produce. Just as he'd said, I would definitely take off the armor for long distance journeys, and an armor chest was on my list of things I needed before I came of age, but I never thought I could get one like this.

"I know I'm calling it a present, but this isn't *completely* free. When the bards

start singing songs about you, make sure to mention my name. The publicity's good for my entire clan."

The blacksmith had once told me about the different sects stemming from smithing styles at the local artisan union, but that was no more than a thinly veiled excuse. With an awkward wink, he handed the armor chest to me.

"Now then, lemme show you how to put it up."

"...Thank you so much." It would have been rude of me to refuse now. Respecting my elder (and the smith *was* one of the few real elders I knew), I let the man spoil me as I listened to his precise and caring lecture.

[Tips] Wearing armor rapidly depletes stamina. At times, wearing armor can cause serious debuffs. In freezing cold weather, platemail goes from protective metal to a deadly cage.

As the snow thawed and crowds of people merrily welcomed spring by unstuffing their clothes, a lone girl walked along a minor path. She kicked her legs forward with every step and her fiercely pouted lips practically screamed "I'm mad!" And, as a matter of fact, Elisa—the eldest daughter of Johannes of Konigstuhl canton—was quite upset.

The end of her bedridden winter months was something to be celebrated: the only reason Elisa had been able to stomach the bitter medicine meant to cure her insufferable fever was because her favorite brother had offered to take her to the local festival come springtime. Today was supposed to be a happy day.

The looks Elisa had inherited from her mother were perfectly set, as she had gotten her brother to wash her face and neatly comb her hair. Being the family's only daughter, her father had bought a pretty dress in town last autumn that made her feel as lovely as could be.

Today was meant to be a wonderful day topped off with Elisa's beloved ice candy that only appeared a few times a year. It was turning out that way too, until...that *spider* appeared and ruined everything.

Elisa hated the spider. Erich was *Elisa's* brother, but the spider clung to him

anyway; Erich was *Elisa's* brother, but sometimes the spider was so mean that she'd just take him away! Erich was too kind to peel her off, and would play along with a troubled smile plastered to his face.

But he was Elisa's brother! *He's my Mr. Brother and he's supposed to be nice to me!*

Today was no different. Elisa was all smiles after everyone in the family had complimented her pretty attire, but the spider showed up right before they were about to leave. Despite not being invited, the spider hopped onto her brother's back as if she had some sort of right to be there.

"My, you're going to visit the merchant stalls? How nice. Say, would you mind if I joined you?"

I super-duper mind! Elisa thought angrily. She couldn't bring herself to say it out loud, but she tugged on her brother's sleeve hoping that he'd shoo the bug away. Make no mistake, Elisa was positively seething; the only reason she hadn't said anything was because she'd been frightened by the spider's smile. The look in those hazel eyes when the spider grinned terrified her. She knew that the spider wasn't the kind to weave webs, but there was a fathomless void in those irises that scared the daylights out of her.

Unable to express the complex emotions ravaging her mind with her limited vocabulary, Elisa stayed silent until eventually her brother gave in and lifted the spider onto his shoulder, saying, "All right, let's go together."

But we were going with the two of us. Just the two of us!

Thus, Elisa lost her temper and was utterly unable to find it. While her brother was preparing to leave, she stormed out of the house. Although she had little experience putting on her own shoes, she jammed in her feet through force of spite and slipped out the back door, which had been left open for fresh air.

Elisa should have been afraid of going outside by herself for the first time, but she was too angry that her brother had broken his promise to care. All of her friends floated around her, saying that it was too dangerous to go, but she had no ear to listen. Childish recklessness had put one foot in front of the other until she found herself far away from home.

That being said, “far away from home” wasn’t exactly a marathon for an eight-year-old small for her age. Her brother could have sprinted that distance in the blink of an eye, but Elisa had never been alone outside of the perimeter of her house before. To her, this was plenty far. Unable to see her home beyond a hill, the anxiety finally began to win out over her tantrum as she whirled around in distress.

At this point, her brother was probably panicking that Elisa was gone. In a moment or two, he’d come running after her with a worried smile and say, “Elisa, you know you’re not supposed to run off without me,” and everything would be fine.

Elisa’s expectations were not so far off the mark. Despite taking after their gentle mother, Erich was sharp-eyed and had his talented childhood friend riding on his shoulder. The two of them could detect the unhidden tracks of a young child in an instant.

Given a few more minutes, Elisa’s beloved, worrywart, blind doter of an older brother would come find her. Then he’d apologize even though she was in the wrong for running away, and he’d treat her to ice candy, and the three of them would go to the festival.

“Hey now, what’s a dolled up lass like you doing out here?”

If only she had gotten those few minutes. The sun disappeared behind a sudden entrant to the scene, and Elisa found herself plunged into shadow. She turned around in terror to see the silhouette of a large man.

The fellow was far from suspicious. His skin was permanently tanned from long hours under the sun, and he wore the same frayed linen as every other traveling merchant. He was the spitting image of someone running a street stall at the festival. In fact, Erich had mentioned that this year, a few different caravans happened to be in town, so there were going to be more shops in the marketplace than usual.

Nothing unusual marked the man’s appearance. Though a dagger dangled from his belt, it would be harder to find a commercial traveler that *didn’t* have one. He didn’t look anything like the villains that appeared in the occasional wandering poet’s tale; he was well-kept and well-bathed.

Still, a shapeless fear coalesced into a physical chill and ran down Elisa's spine. In truth, her instincts were right: the only place where villains look the part is in stories, after all.

The strength in Elisa's body abandoned her, bringing her to her knees as if someone had plucked out her core. The world around her blurred, much like when a particularly nasty fever would muddy her vision. Her last thoughts were not of the incomprehensible dizziness, but rather that she didn't want to dirty the beautiful clothes her family had prepared for her.

Elisa simply could not imagine what happened. Growing up surrounded by nothing but the kindness of her loving family, the possibility that there were evil people who would do evil things to her had never once crossed her mind. In mere seconds, she had slipped into a deep slumber, and the traveler caught her limp upper body right before she crashed into the ground.

"Man, the bossman's stuff sure hits hard. Now then, I wonder how much this charming little lady will fetch," he said, pulling out a folded burlap sack from his pouch. With a practiced hand, he tossed the sleeping child in and loosely tied up the top. The entrance to the bag had a wooden tube to preserve a flow of fresh air, but there was no way to see that from the outside.

"Hup," the man grunted, carrying the cargo like one would handle a large sack of wheat. There was no suspicious kidnapper—only a traveling merchant intent on peddling his wares.

The Rhine Trialist Empire acknowledged slavery in the form of indentured servitude, but forbade class-based slavery and officially denounced human trafficking. The secrets of the Empire's penal code mandated corporal punishment for slavers: the lightest punishment one could receive was to have one's bones removed or to lose all four limbs. It was by no means a light crime.

However, just as the felonies of murder and rape continued to plague the world, there was no end to the seedy individuals who sought out the slave trade and its alluring profit. Japan sees drug busts every year despite its infamously heavy regulations, and no number of criminals hanging off of public highways would prevent their Rhinian compatriots from continuing to abduct children.

The man sauntered to his base while whistling a merry tune. He would never snoop and sneak like a petty thief; if he couldn't keep a straight face and sell the image that his luggage was nothing more than boring merchandise, he wouldn't be able to make a living in this line of work.

Alas, this was a common sight. Every year, children died of disease, and every few years a child wandered off on their own, never to be seen again—whether they were kidnapped, attacked by beasts, or caught by something far more nefarious was anyone's guess.

No matter how hard the Watch worked, they couldn't stamp out *every* crime. Those who consistently evaded the eyes of the frequent patrols in this line of work were wickedly cunning. After all, in an industry where even the patrons were enemies, a crafty wit was prerequisite to survival.

Thus, a young girl was set to disappear from Konigstuhl forever. Normally, this hackneyed tragedy would end with her parents crying and the town stirring for a little while. Without proper systems of traffic and information management, an unknown kidnapper was free once they left the borders of the canton.

However, for better or for worse, this girl was anything but ordinary.

[Tips] Human trafficking has been illegal since the founding of the Empire, but the law is not always obeyed. If it were, no country would need a police force ever again.

"Hey, wait... Where's Elisa?"

After taking my sweet time preparing everything I needed to head out, I noticed that the little girl that should have been sitting in the living room was nowhere to be found.

"Now that you mention it, I don't see her anywhere," Margit said. I felt a tad irked hearing that from her with how much pointless chatter she sent my way (though I was also at fault for responding to everything she said) while I was getting ready, but my sister's whereabouts were more important than quipping at her.

Searching for lost persons is one of the big three archetypes of tabletop adventures (the other two are dungeon diving and one I'll leave to the reader's consideration), but having this sort of thing happen all the time wasn't ideal.

"Her shoes are gone," I said after a quick glance around the room. Elisa's intimate relationship with her bed had left her with a distaste for wearing shoes, so she always took them off when she took a seat. Baring one's feet was unladylike behavior, but I could never bring myself to scold her when she cried about how tight they were with puppy-dog eyes.

Which meant, despite being unable to tie her own laces, she must have put them on herself and headed out. I got low to the ground and inspected the area around the chair. Chaining together small perception checks to reach an objective like this was a common occurrence. *GM, do I see anything?*

Despite my half-joking attempt, I couldn't find any helpful clues. My workaholic mother could be called the quintessential housewife with how little tolerance she had for grime. My family had been lazing about in the living room earlier today, but she'd already swept it clean of any dust or dirt that I could've used to trace Elisa's tracks.

As an aside, if anyone tries to enter our house without knocking the mud off their shoes, my mother tears them to shreds. While this practice suited my Japanese sensibilities well, it was a terrible hindrance to my deductive reasoning.

"I think she's gone that way," the scout candidate of my ideal party said. Today, the little huntress was perched up on my shoulders.

"You can tell?"

"Well, sure. Compared to the beasts of the wood, mensch might as well be singing when they try to hide."

Margit's dramatic analogy drew no ire from me after witnessing her cull geese for years in our childhood games. I had liked this kind of big talk in my youth, then grew tired of it, but it was only now that I realized how weighty it sounded coming from someone with real skill.

"Mother Dearest may love to keep her home clean," my arachne companion

elaborated, “but even she can’t overcome the endless specks of dust that blow in. I think Elisa departed through the kitchen door.”

Margit’s use of the phrase “Mother Dearest” to refer to my own mother caught my ear, but I decided to let it slide. *I could have sworn the imperial language had two completely different words for other people’s mothers and mothers-in-law.*

“Oh,” I realized aloud, “we initially planned to go with just the two of us. Maybe that’s why she got mad?”

“My, is that so?” Margit said. “If you had told me, I would have been more than happy to come again later.”

“I didn’t want to make you do that.”

“I’m not so friendless that I can’t find a way to pass the time while I wait for your little princess to run herself out of energy and take a nap, you know?” she said with a laugh. I really wished she wouldn’t giggle into my ear like this, because every time she did, the tingles in my spine refused to go away. “Still, your sister is *so* enamored with you.”

“Yeah, you remember the *incident* from last year, right?” Margit immediately recognized the loathsome event I referred to and sent shivers through my body with another snicker.

“You certainly made a name for yourself, Sir Swordsman.”

“Please, stop... It’s so embarrassing,” I groaned. The huge commotion my venerable father caused at last year’s autumn festival taught my beloved little sister entirely the wrong lesson. “Anyway, ever since she got the pearl from the *incident*, she’s started to think that being with me will bring some kind of spectacle.”

Elisa may not have ever had an opportunity to hold a gem of that quality without my interference, but her understanding that my presence equaled good things happening was problematic. She practically glued herself to my back whenever we went out to play, and she fought to engineer time alone with me incessantly.

Once, we’d been playing pretend (not pretend adventurers with our brothers,

of course. I'd been looking after her and some of the smaller neighborhood kids) and I'd played the role of a mage, only for Elisa to act as...my familiar. She'd jumped at the opportunity to play a role that any other kid would hate—perhaps my sister was suited to niche roles.

Similarly, there had been a few occasions in my old life when I would play the part of a classic hero only to see every face at my table twist into genuine confusion. Considering how my playstyle involved aggressively avoiding mainstream story beats, perhaps this sort of thing flowed in both of our veins.

"Tee hee," Margit laughed, "if that's what you wish to believe."

"That sounds awfully sinister..."

"It must be your imagination," she said, giggling all the while. I walked out the back door while enduring a barrage of shiver-inducing laughter and used my level III Stalking skill to survey the area. Trimmed grass still grew in the path leading out from our kitchen, and the unreserved stomping of a child left clear impressions for me to see.

I expected no less: Elisa didn't think about being followed when she walked, and it was easy to see her tracks on earth this soft. Although I had to focus to spot them, anyone could pursue a lead like this with minimal knowledge.

"Hmm," Margit mused, "it's been quite some time since she was here."

"You can tell just from looking?" My skills paled in comparison to a professional's, however. I might as well not have tried.

"If I know the mark's height and weight, I can make a rough estimate by checking the state of the ground."

Margit hopped off my shoulder and somehow left no footprints of her own as she scurried over to the markings. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that her light weight was compounded by the fact that every step's tracks were covered up by the leg behind it. I let out a sigh of awe at her feat of multi-legged mastery.

"My mother is far more impressive. One print in the ground is enough for her to discern a beast's species, of course, but also their sex, age, weight, and flavor."

"...That's terrifying," I remarked. *Hmm, I picked up Stalking for an urban setting, but I feel like my purchase was wasted...* If Margit could figure out all this information just by invoking her skill in beast tracking, was there any need for me to continue allocating experience to this sort of thing? Keeping roles distinct within a party is one of the fundamental rules of party composition, after all.

I chased after my skittering companion when she came to an abrupt halt. Just as we left the view of my home, the trail that I could see vanished. Grass flourished on either side of the footpath, and the overgrown greenery was too busy singing the praises of springtime to offer any useful hints. This was in the realm where a GM would refuse perception checks unless the party had a particularly convincing argument.

"I guess she went to play in the woods," I said. "Ah sheesh, I told her not to stray too far from the house. She must have been really mad that—"

"Give me a moment," Margit cut me off soberly, her eyes fixed on an unassuming patch of plantlife. The sound of dice rolling in her brain echoed around me. As if searching for an invisible mark, the young scout touched the grass and began muttering to herself with conviction. "Two legs, and this stride... A mensch? Too perfectly spaced to be elderly, and...he's trained in combat."

"Margit?"

My companion thrust a single finger toward me without looking up: the hand sign for "Quiet" that we used on our hunting expeditions. She'd taught me a bunch of them, saying that this silent communication was standard amongst huntsmen, but for her to use it here meant that her brain had shifted gears into hunting mode.

"Lightly dressed for a mensch...but much heavier over there..." Still close to the ground after rising to her feet, the expert hunter chewed over the information that my eyes failed to notice. After some thought, her eyes went wide and she turned up toward me with a trembling voice that I had never heard in my life. "Wh-What are we meant to do?"

"Wh-What's wrong?" I asked nervously.

“Oh, Erich! This is bad—so very bad! Oh no!”

I’d never heard Margit reduced to a frightened little girl before. I knelt down to eye level and she leapt onto me. Her nearly indestructible palatial speech crumbled, and she mumbled her words like a commoner.

“Wh-What do we—no, this can’t be happening... It can’t...”

“Calm down, calm down. What happened, Margit? I won’t know what happened if you don’t tell me,” I said, patting her on the back. The hands wrapped around me suddenly squeezed both shirt and flesh alike, and her trembling fingers betrayed a terror beyond even her panicky words. Seeing her turn into a scared child was unthinkable to me—I couldn’t even imagine her acting this way before we first met. *What the hell could have—*

“I think Elisa’s been kidnapped!”

“...*What?*”

The nervous wreck of a childhood friend that stood before me had poured liquid nitrogen into every corner of my skull, instantly glaciating my mind. Her proclamation had been so outlandish that I almost took it for a joke, but the evidence was stacked against me: I’d seen her prove her expertise time and time again.

What was more, from her mumbling I surmised that she’d seen traces of a third party. A young male mensch had left tracks nearby, and Elisa’s own footprints vanished. If the man’s weight suddenly changed, there were only two possibilities I could think of.

The first was the warm and fluffy thought that a worried man picked up a lost little girl to take her back to her family. However, the close proximity to our house eliminated that possibility outright. No matter how juvenile Elisa was, she wouldn’t lose her way on a straight path from home.

The second, more likely scenario was that a man had picked Elisa up and whisked her away. Their objective was obvious: after all, our little princess was the cutest girl in the world.

“Oh, Erich, what do we do? Erich...” Margit said in a fret.

“Margit,” I responded firmly, peeling her off by the shoulders. I looked in her teary eyes to see two hazel gems that tickled my protective instincts in the absence of their usual sublime cuteness...but now wasn’t the time. “Can you find her?”

“Wha, but, we should find an adult...” she stammered.

“They’re too drunk to help,” I insisted.

On any other day, Margit’s plan would have been correct, but today was the spring festival. I’d been waiting indoors for Elisa to wake up, but everyone else was off to party. Whether they were window shopping or enjoying themselves at the square, I knew from experience that everyone would be plastered. The Konigstuhl Watch officially warned the citizenry not to overindulge themselves, but I could only expect a handful of people to be functional.

Of course, if I went straight to Sir Lambert, he would never shrug off my report as a child’s tall tale, so the idea held some merit. But barring those caravans invited by the lord of the land himself, the times at which each merchant left were unpredictable. While some stayed the night to stock up on spring fruits, others packed up as soon as the rush of midday waned; a kidnapper had no reason to stick around the scene of their crime.

“It’s getting late,” I explained. “No one would suspect a thing if a caravan or two closed up shop and left. And if they get away, we’ll never see Elisa again.”

I knew all too well that two children chasing after criminals was a fool’s errand. Though Margit was only a year from adulthood and my body was growing rapidly, we were far from fully developed.

No matter how much training I’d endured, I still didn’t have the most critical element in combat: experience. I could keep up with Sir Lambert’s monstrous strength while sparring, but frankly, I wasn’t all that sure that I could handle having a real weapon pointed at me with intent to kill.

Yet I was certain that the situation beckoned us to act. There was a chance that the culprit wanted to take their time departing, and there was even a chance that they’d stay until sunset to capture as many children as they could. All the drunken adults would assume a missing child or two had just gone home, and would only notice the disappearance on the morning after—perhaps

festival days were the harvest season for villainous scum.

However, it was equally likely that their modus operandi was to pluck only a child or two at a time from every canton to keep a low profile. Or what if they had a second, main source of income, and this was merely their side project?

We needed to assume the worst for every detail. Besides, they say a sloppy beta release is better than a masterpiece no one sees, and situations like these hinge on getting the first step right. The two of us would find Elisa and then rush back to rally as many sober adults as we could. That was all my pathetic mind could muster.

“Please, Margit, I’m begging you,” I pleaded from the bottom of my heart, pushing my forehead against hers. Putting Margit in harm’s way weighed on me heavily, but I couldn’t do it alone. Even if I dumped all of my savings into tracking skills, my build wasn’t anywhere close to matching her. “Help me. For Elisa...for *me*.”

“For...you?” she asked.

“Yes, please. I don’t want to lose her, but I know I can’t do it alone. That might make me a failure of a brother, but I still want to save Elisa!”

How blessed would I be for this to all be a misunderstanding. If Elisa had been so upset that she asked the kind stranger to take her to the town square, this would all be reduced to an embarrassing episode my friends and family would tease me with for years to come.

But the terrible premonition in my gut said otherwise. I was not a lucky man. I’d come out of the womb haunted by a missing stat, and a statistical analysis of my lifetime dice rolls was sure to skip straight past morbid humor into the realm of tears. Expected values were fortune incarnate, and I’d once caused my party to wipe by rolling five snake eyes in a single session.

The worst part was that my lighthearted rolls for checks I couldn’t fail always brought out disgustingly high numbers. Whether I rolled 2D6 or 1D10, each and every chunk of plastic toyed with me. That was why I turned away from my LUK stat and the dice gods in favor of fixed values.

As a result, I was convinced of one thing: I would lose someone dear to me if I

got complacent now. If I had absolutely no chance of saving her, then *maybe* I could call it quits after crying and cursing and screaming at fate until I puked blood. However, if there was even the faintest sliver of hope left that I could do something, I would never be able to forgive myself for inaction. *Who was it that said the contents of hell are found inside the skull of a shallow man?*

"Okay," Margit said after a long pause. "Yes, very well!" She sniffed her dribbling nose, wiped off her bleary eyes, and pursed her lips. "I'll chase them for you. Following mensch is little more than child's play."

The arachne tilted her head and brought our touching faces even closer to one another. She rubbed her nose against mine and we shared the same air in our breaths. With our eyeballs nearly touching, her amber gems had me entranced. Owing perhaps to the shadows we cast upon each other, the eyes in my view abandoned their usual color for a rich golden glow.

"But I shall ask you to return the favor... Do you understand?"



“I’ll do anything,” I swiftly answered. “I swear by the Goddess.” Saying this in a land where gods were observably real was nothing short of signing a blank check. She could demand my life and I would be expected to quietly obey.

I wasn’t taking it lightly because I expected her not to ask for anything unreasonable. Quite the opposite, in fact: this was *Margit*, after all. Me, underestimating the never-ending source of intimidation, cold sweats, and half-pleasant, half-terrifying chills known as Margit? Please, I wasn’t the sort of fool to stick my head into a sleeping tiger’s mouth.

My determination wasn’t so flimsy that I would regret this decision. I had no qualms about being ordered to do something ridiculous...so long as Elisa got home safe.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her usual smile escaping her as if to say there were no more chances to retreat beyond this point. On the other hand, that meant I still had a chance to turn back now.

However, what kind of family would I be if I backed down? Margit was far scarier than the demons of hell or the whims of dice, but I wouldn’t balk. In the worst-case scenario, I could end up in a life-or-death sword fight today—I couldn’t hesitate at something like this.

“I’m sure,” I said with certainty. “I hate lies, and I’ll do anything in my power to keep myself from becoming a liar.”

The time for dice drew near. No matter how they fell, a roll was the only way to move forward. Life would be so serene if it were all cutscenes, but as a lover of the epic highs and lows only the whims of two tumbling polyhedrons could yield, I was prepared to accept my fate.

“Splendid! I humbly accept your payment of one favor. Finding her will take no time at all.” The corner of Margit’s lips pulled upward into her familiar smile. The arachne huntswoman bared her long canines and turned to find her mark.

Now then, let’s take a look in the dice tray.

[Tips] Catching criminals who cross regional borders is an exercise in futility. Without photographs or telephones, information is too generic to find a given

individual. This difficulty holds true when searching for culprits and victims alike.

With very few exceptions, every person has thought themselves to be special at some point or another. Whether this overconfidence stems from childlike egoism or the surging courage of someone with the will to prove themselves, this phenomenon is near and dear to the hearts of all mortals.

One such specimen found himself laying down in the bed of a stagecoach parked amongst the camping caravans. The man was in his mid-twenties and had a middling build: he was neither particularly tall nor particularly short and similarly straddled the line between skinny and fat.

His most striking features were his cowlicked black hair and his dark, sunken, drooping eyes. A long staff embellished with countless gems and ornaments laid beside him, and his robe was embroidered with a library's worth of incantations. The sharp scent of herbs clinging to him marked the finishing touch to make it undeniably clear that he was a magician.

The rarity of mensch mages aside, the man was not at all special. He only led a small caravan of ten-odd people; one could find washed-up mages drifting along in every corner of the Empire. It was common to see magic researchers procure grants by asking around the realm, and many started caravans not as a business, but as a more efficient means of funding their own projects.

Once, he *had* been special: he'd been born with memories of a prior life. The intricacies of his past will not be dwelled on. Such milk had long since been spilt, and the man himself had largely forgotten the details of his own origin. It suffices to say that the reincarnator had experienced a chance encounter with some higher being who offered him a single blessing on his path to this new world.

"If it's a world with magic, I want talent for it."

The deity smiled and forgave the man for interrupting His explanation and bestowed him with the talent he so wished for. Minor acts of insolence were of little concern to the god, and He'd long grown used to the unabashed greed of worldly souls. Considering that some craved power that would rival gods of

creation, the man's little request evoked only a tender smile.

Thus, the man became a boy with an intact ego and a talent for wizardry. The story that followed was hardly worth telling. He continued on swimmingly for a time until he hit a wall, and the success of brute forcing things with raw talent no longer seemed like a predestined outcome.

At ten he was a prodigy; at fifteen he was a genius; at twenty he was reduced to a normal man—the old adage he'd heard in his school years a lifetime ago had been true. His friends and family paraded him around as a genius, and he bloomed into his own with the help of his canton's local witch doctor.

The boy could start fires without any tutelage, his medicine brewing skills were far beyond any child, and he'd even begun to experiment with the space-bending magic that most considered a lost art. He was the spitting image of brilliance.

Had he been content to be the local mage of his canton, perhaps his life could have been different. Surrounded by the love of his mentor and many lifelong friends, he could have built up a blissful world where he was trusted and relied upon by all.

Yet the young man had little resistance to the intoxication of prestige. Praised and lauded, the fellow sought out a new source of accolades and left his village behind to serve the local magistrate.

With a letter of recommendation from the village chief, the fifteen-year-old landed a position as the magistrate's magical adviser and was generously given a house in a city of middling size. His boundless supply of mana meant that he could make the most of—or abuse—his mastery of forgotten arcane arts, and his employer prized him for his service.

Had he stopped here, there was a solid chance that he would have been blessed with a slow but steady stream of joy. While working for the magistrate, he could have opened a small store dealing in enchanted trinkets and lived out fulfilling days. Respected by his tutor and peers and fortunately of high status, he would have had no trouble finding a girl to share his life with, all while partaking in luxuries far beyond the reach of any commoner. Though altogether different from the unrealized future in his hometown, this too was a possibility

rich with earthly happiness.

And yet the withdrawals demanded that his addiction be sated. Basking in the pleasure of merit and his social standing as a public official, he began to drown in a nebulous sea of glory.

The position of adviser asked little of him, and in his leisure he chanced upon someone known as a *magus*. Magia were altogether separate from standard wizards and hedge mages, but his life in the countryside had left the man no opportunity to meet any students from the Imperial College of Magic.

Investigation revealed that “magus” was a title reserved for those who had been deemed worthy by the College of Magic in the imperial capital. What was more, those admitted as lecturers were conferred noble titles, received an official laboratory, and were licensed to sell the fruits of their labor in all sorts of different trades. Furthermore, the state gave each magus a stipend to promote research, and some even went on to become bureaucrats influencing national policy. Magia were simply a cut above the typical mage.

How could the man, with his infantile thirst for clout, ever hope to resist? His patience lasted but a handful of days: the knowledge that there was something higher cheapened his current position to an unbearable degree.

After a year under the magistrate, he suddenly resigned, selling all his household effects and making for the capital. Having seen the unimpressive powers of a magus already, he thought that the title was sure to be his with ease.

While hitching a ride with a caravan on his journey to the capital, he met yet another magus. To gratify his childish pride, the man began to boast like a foolhardy drunkard.

The man demonstrated his skills and began to talk himself up as best he could to secure a quick recommendation. Up until now, the braggart had silenced naysayers with his undeniable talent and found himself as the target of nothing but admiration. Knowing no failure, he was sure the magus would grovel before him (that said, while bowing was part of Rhinian culture, groveling on one’s knees was not) and recognize his awesome power. But an unexpected quip left him utterly confused.

“Wow. And? Why is this spell so wasteful?”

The stark, uninterested timbre of the magus’s voice and the incomprehensible nature of her words bundled together and shot through the man. For someone who had used magic his whole life through sheer intuition alone, the question presented before him was indecipherable.

Neither the assembly of the near mathematical equations that enabled one to meddle with physics, nor the logical sequence of actions taken to bend natural phenomena to his will, nor even the general idea of magic theory were known to him. The question—no, the *interrogation* left the man utterly puzzled.

His prodigal disposition had never given him the opportunity to think. Magic to him was just something that *happened*. The divine had given him an intuitive talent that skipped the troublesome thinking that was usually necessary.

Upon closer analysis, the higher being had made a perfectly rational decision. To give a total novice unimaginable skill, it was far simpler to hand him a magic button that did a thing than to try and cram all sorts of theory into his brain. The god knew all too well that even the most impressive technology was worthless in the hands of someone who lacked the requisite knowledge to use it.

Whether spell or cantrip, all magic obeyed certain metaphysical principles and were therefore bound and governed by reason. Reason, attainable only via diligent study, was inherently antithetical to the convenient talent the man had desired. But with higher beings came higher authority, and the rules of the world had been bent. The man no longer needed to know for the world to think he knew, and this potentially world-reaving blessing had allowed him to use magic up until this point.

As a local town mage, that was more than enough. However, the College was far more than a collection of mere mages. It was an institution of learning, of research. The various experiments run by the cream of the crop—that is, the lecturers—weren’t just for show. Their research was the very reason they were there.

Study was the process of nurturing intellect by polishing, refining, and filtering deep thought again and again until all that remained was concentrated truth.

The shimmering gem of wisdom had no margin for the blemish that was a man who “just kinda did it.” To the College, who carefully polished these sorts of scratches out of existence, the man’s magic was but a massive chip on their beautiful diamond that they would never accept.

Feeling thoroughly insulted after being told as much by the magus, the man promptly marched to the College in fury, where he was quickly thrown out in a similar manner: with disinterest and scorn. Seeing his passion, some magia had written him letters of introduction to give him a taste of reality, and in all truth, the man should have been grateful he got an interview at all. His arrogance was grounds enough to turn him away at the door.

For a sagacious soul, ignorance and failure are but the first steps to growth and success. Learning from defeat and seeking new paths forward was exactly what led civilization to spread its reach across the globe.

Had the man begun to study the logical roots of magic here, his story surely would have been far different from its eventual conclusion. With his natural talent and limitless magical energy, the College would have accepted him as a student without reserve. If he’d devoted himself to true learning, it would be no exaggeration to say he could have eventually left his mark on history.

Yet he crumbled. Having the one thing he’d placed all his stock in dismissed as worthless was heartrending enough to break his fragile spirit. There was nothing weaker than strength without foundation; the spells he hadn’t spent effort or labor to use were far too brittle to serve as the lynchpin of a man who had dedicated his identity to casting them.

As a user of magic, he was still well within the upper echelon, even on a global scale. However, his makings as a researcher or human were crude at best. Magia never balked on their perpetual quest to change the study of magic itself with their own two hands. The man’s passion was hopelessly outmatched—he didn’t have the will to live his life like the torrents of a rapid river.

This one crucial defeat marked the beginning of his downfall. The man couldn’t return to the magistrate after abandoning his post a year into the job. For better or for worse, society prized feudal loyalty, and a man too enamored with his own power to think about the consequences of his actions had no place

at the magistrate's door. A faithful retainer was far more desirable than a haughty genius, and a drop in skill was a small price to pay for dedication.

Then what about my hometown? But alas, the welcome there was just as cold, owing to his ingratitude when leaving for the city. A rude customer is never welcome, and the glares of his mentor and childhood companions eloquently aired their distaste for his return. He turned his back on the canton for the second time, running from their gazes.

With a tendency for convenient delusions, the man thought of the girls who would always love him, but daydreams and reality did not converge here. None forgave him for sullying their years of youth by leaving them all behind in search of greater glory. Drawing the ire of influential women is a surefire way to lose your place in any community, regardless of any other traits, as the man discovered.

Hubris had stripped him of title and home, and he was quick to sink to rock bottom. Sweet-talked and taken advantage of, the man used his magic to take the easy path every time. Losing his spot in one location sent him to another, and then another, until the wandering mage had no choice but to drift in lands where no one knew him.

The subordinates around him were nothing but leeches that wanted to make use of his powers. His miserable company dragged his mind through the mud, and now he found himself ransoming and selling children in the name of profit.

The shining visage of a protagonist he once knew was nowhere to be found. With effort, he could have been a hero, but all that remained was an empty husk.

"Hey boss, boss!"

"What?"

As he gazed into the blue skies and suppressed the unceasing, unspeakable pain inside his chest, a call from one of his lackeys caused the man to stir. The goon was one of his two aides. One had forged documents as an official scribe and now sold family registers with blank slates. The one before him, though, had been part of the underworld from the start, and played a large part in the mage's fall from grace.

With a disgusting grin, the lackey silently beckoned his employer over. The mage ignored the insolence of this gesture and got up—he knew there was something that they couldn't speak about in the open.

He followed the thug to an opening in the trees to find a sack. The burlap bag was a common sight for merchants toting their wares, but the deliberate secrecy hinted that this contained a very different kind of product.

"How are the goods?" the mage asked.

"A wonderful batch of wheat," the lackey replied. "Fine texture, first-class coloration, and I'm sure it would make for white bread fit for a noble."

The boss let out an impressed whistle. Wheat was code in this line of work for abductees that were to be sold. Texture denoted quality, color race, and the type of bread represented the intended buyer. Unraveled, the statement meant that his catch was a good-looking mensch child that would fetch a pretty penny whether she was ransomed or sold. The mage opened the bag to take a look and, after a moment, he covered his mouth.

"Where the hell did you get this kid?" he asked.

"Huh?" the goon said, puzzled.

If he were to judge the girl only by her silky gold hair and flawless white skin, he could see how someone might think her to be a noble. Farm children spent most of their youth outside, and their household chores meant even the youngest of kids would have distinguishing marks on their hands and knees. The girl had no such blemishes, but her dress was something that one could easily buy in town, and it clashed with the rest of her appearance. As short as his time under the magistrate had been, one year had been enough for the man to get a taste of noble fashion. No respectable noble's daughter would be adorned with something of such mediocre quality.

However, that wasn't the important point for the man. He'd seen blithering idiots empty their meager purses to dress up their child for a festival many a time in many a canton. Rather, the mage saw value in the girl herself.

"Whatever," he said curtly. "When can we leave?"

"Huh?" the lackey said again. "Uh, well, it's not that big a town, so we can be

out by sundown at the—”

“Good, prepare to leave by evening.”

“What?! H-Hey, come on, it’s a festival! Can’t we at least grab some free booze?” The truth was that the goon had underestimated the mage. He’d easily managed to steer his employer’s mind before, and as the one who had taught him the basics of “business,” the career criminal had grown overconfident in his ability to get his way.

Birds of a feather flock together and rotten apples ruin their bunch. The lackey was just as lost as the fallen mage...but he would have done well to remember this: the man in front of him could vaporize an entire canton with his magic, if he so wished.

“Tell me,” the mage spat. “Since when have I allowed you to place your hand on my shoulder?”

“Eek!” the lackey squealed when his master glared at him from below.

The wrath of being talked back to caused the mage’s mana to quiver, and his bitter eyes gleamed gold in time with the pulse. His hair writhed like a living being, and the effects of his anger leaked out to whip the wind into a furious howl. This unrestrained display of power would do him no good, but it was enough to intimidate his impudent follower.

“Got it?” he sneered.

“Y-Yessir! I’ll get on it right away.”

In fact, it was more than enough. The goon’s legs had given out, but he hobbled away to follow his orders, and the mage was left with the bagged girl.

He hefted the bag with the sort of brilliant smile that had often snuck onto his face when he was young and innocent, although his grin was anything but: his purehearted dedication to impurity in the past few years left only a shallow and gilded counterfeit.

“If I sell this, I’ve got a chance. I can be more than a tired old caravan owner. So much more...”

A broken blade may still pierce its mark. The man saw some hope—some goal

to chase—for his broken mind, just as he had done before. The memory of his forgotten honors clung to him.

Alas, he had missed a simple truth: a warped blade leaves only warped cuts. Once broken, no sword can ever regain its former shape.

[Tips] Even the wondrous displays of magic are dictated by unflinching laws of nature.

My childhood friend really is something else. No amount of cheers or applause would do her justice. A decent amount of time had passed since we began searching for Elisa, and the sun had begun to sink. I suspected festivities were peaking at the town square by now. I could practically hear the atmosphere of civic order gently creak as its scheduled collapse into anarchy drew near, free-flowing alcohol softening the rigid bonds of feudalism as it spongified everyone's brains.

The energy of the jovial music dwindled behind us as we slipped into the woods. Had I wandered around the forest by myself, it would have taken me far longer to find this spot.

We'd gone beyond the thicket to a location that seemed fit for camping but somewhat inconvenient for a caravan trying to do business in town. The workers were packing up barrels and boxes full of supplies and giving their pack horses a final drink of water as they prepared for departure.

The awkwardness of the spot would make one think that this unlucky crew had been bullied away by a more influential caravan or arrived too late to find a reasonable campground. However, the quiet woods were also the perfect spot for a band of kidnappers eager to evade prying eyes.

"They're really here," Margit said, marveling despite being the very person who discovered their whereabouts. Her hands unconsciously tightened around the hem of her skirt, and the damp stains of sweat gave form to her fear.

"Of course they're here," I said. "You were the one tracking them."

"...I suppose."

I tried complimenting her to ease the pressure, but Margit's streak of good dice rolls clearly didn't transfer to me, and my attempt to loosen her up fell flat on its face. Her tone was empty of any joy at the success of her pursuit.

"Do you really think those are kidnappers?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. But villains—"

"Never look the part," she said, finishing my sentence. The arachne scowled with more anger than I'd ever seen her express in our long history together.

At any rate, those we branded as the bad guys of our society always worked to hide that fact. Business was hard when others knew of their crimes, and a guise of honesty helped conceal their unseen sins. A villain that looked the part was less than third-class: they were amateurs that relished in playing the part. The criminals that could turn the fear of others into a profit were a special breed, and the men busying themselves with seemingly regular cargo were among their rank.

They truly appeared to be nothing more than a normal caravan. The three carriages and a handful of horses fitted with carrying packs looked like they belonged to a respectable merchant group, not a crew of wicked kidnappers. But of course, a real kidnapper would never carry something as obvious as a cage—it would only draw the suspicion of the local patrol. Only a truly exceptional imbecile, someone so foolish as to leave dumbfounded anyone who might try to give the account of it, would dare.

In which case, the question was how we could tell that they were more than met the eye.

"Take a look at those two," I pointed out. "The guy that's standing there, and the one that looks like he's lazing around over there."

"Lookouts," Margit confirmed. "No loafing bum would look as alert as he does."

Although they seemed to be normal merchants at first glance, there were a few subtle differences to note. First, they didn't have any mercenaries or adventurers to protect their cargo. Not all caravans employed bodyguards, but small companies of ten or so people tended to employ at least a handful.

Bandits preferred to target smaller groups to minimize the risk that an escapee could call for the authorities. Plus, there were simply fewer people they had to kill. Any prudent caravan leader would hire a tough-looking fighter to ward off attacks.

Second, the weapons on their waists were unorthodox. While my own quest to procure a weapon was full of struggle, anyone with the proper funds could purchase one in the Empire, and could even openly carry it outside of the major cities. By and large, those who ferried valuables through the perilous countryside had some form of protection.

Still, merchants were by no means professional warriors, so they prioritized ease of use in their weapons. Favorites included concealable daggers that wouldn't intimidate potential customers, clubs that required no maintenance (after all, they were sticks with a bit of metal attached to the end), and machetes that were useful when clearing out patches of brush.

However, a few of the men wielded proper, respectably made arming swords. Judging from the way they distributed their weight and the positioning of their sheaths, their weapons were not just for show. While these blades made for stellar companions, they were too exceptional to be carried in self-defense—especially by multiple members of the same trading party. They weren't children drawn in by romantic tales of swordplay. It was hard to imagine a traveling merchant going out of his way to weigh himself down without deeper reason.

Everything about this reeked of foul play. The evidence was flimsy, but I was sure Sir Lambert would act on behalf of my suspicions. Furthermore—

"Erich, this is bad," Margit said suddenly, silently dropping down from the tree she'd been spying from.

"What's wrong?"

"They're already on the verge of departing. All of their remaining goods are too damaged to bother loading onto their carriages."

"How do you know that?!"

"I read their lips. All humanfolk have similar mouths, so it's not that difficult

to do.”

While I would have loved to be genuinely surprised at my companion’s nonchalant feat of brilliance, I’d grown used to it by now. She’d probably picked it up from her ex-adventurer mother.

We were a ways away from the town square. In the time that it would take for us to go back, convince the adults, prepare ourselves, and leave, the men here would be out of the canton with no hope of determining which path they’d taken. Not even the little scout by my side would be able to pick out a single set of tracks on a paved road taken by infinitely many other caravans.

Thus, I needed to buy time; there was no need for *both* of us to call for help.

“Wait, Erich?!”

“I’ll go stall for time, so you go talk to Sir Lambert! You’re faster than I am!”

The wise men of the past certainly knew what they were talking about when they said to strike while iron is hot. Generally speaking, more is better when it comes to action points, so I wanted to act fast to save as many rounds as possible. *Come on,* I told myself, *how many times have you encountered combat where the win condition is to stall? No big deal.*

Besides, what jumping spider arachne lost in endurance, they made up for in raw speed. Margit made for a far more suitable messenger than me with my stubby mensch legs. No party would let their thick-skulled frontliner whose only talent lay with the club handle their perception checks; I knew it was far more efficient to divvy the roles based on our apparent differences in skill.

The dice should only ever fly when your character has a chance to shine. It wasn’t as if I was trying to show off in front of Margit or anything.

After all, I didn’t have the huge corrective bonuses of an epic hero. The future Buddha’s blessing allowed me to shape my future in accordance to my will—which inversely meant that I could end up achieving nothing. I could die a dog’s death, like the forgotten casualties buried in the memories of countless sessions of play.

I was no hero: I was merely a lone player character dropped into the world. Strong or weak, a PC could die at any moment. No matter how plentiful the

handouts or how thick the plot armor, fate was determined by the dice alone.

If so—if everything is still on the line...what's the point of getting a second chance if I don't even do what needs to be done?

"...I feel a bit tipsy," I muttered. Of course, not from booze, but from my own pompousness. Still, as I steeled myself for a conversation that could lead straight into combat, I forgave my own embarrassing attempts to hype myself up. Compared to the lines I'd recorded for replays in the past that sent me in search of a hole to bury myself in, I was thankful that I managed to keep it all in my mind this time.

"Now, the time for dice beckons."

I slipped out of the foliage where we'd taken cover and took broad steps toward the parked carriages, actively exposing my presence to draw their attention. My final one-liner had been cool and all, but... *My rolls are always so cursed.*

[Tips] The frequency of certain odds can skew with a finite number of trials. In fact, some might claim that such statistical biases are inevitable.

The young arachne watched with bated breath as her childhood friend marched off. Margit had a good reason for scurrying up a tree and watching over him despite being tasked with delivering a message to the grownups. She wasn't upset that a younger boy gave her orders, and she wasn't frozen with fear either.

Rather, just as Erich had sensed earlier that something was awry, she too had a visceral premonition that something was going to go wrong. The danger she sensed wasn't the same as when one was surrounded by enemies, but rather a unique hunter's instinct that was difficult to put to words. It was a hunch that a shot well within the bounds of one's skill would miss due to unforeseen factors, and it only appeared the instant before an arrow was loosed.

Margit's intuition for this sort of thing had never been wrong. A sudden breeze would steer her arrow off course, an unexpected predator would steal her mark, or an ill-timed sneeze would cause her form to skew—no matter

what the underlying reason, an arrow would sometimes fly wide due to sheer misfortune.

In this case, the arrow was Erich. With his silver tongue, Margit should have had little worry that he'd manage to prevent the men from leaving. She could see him mouth the words "drinks" and "party" as he called to the lookouts. The lip reading she'd practiced with her mother was far from perfect, but she could make out enough to guess what was being said.

Erich was probably inviting them to stay and enjoy the free wine provided by the local ministry. Offering alcohol to merchants at the end of a merry festival was common practice to encourage their future return, so his appeal was more than natural.

He's such a smooth talker, Margit thought, a smile coming to her face. At this rate, he'd defy her expectations and keep them busy without a hitch. *They might even come to the town square on their own two feet.*

Thinking that her protection was no longer needed here, the little arachne readied herself to sprint at full speed to make up for lost time—but that very same moment, a perilous sight caught her eye.

A man calmly walked toward her eloquent partner as if to join the conversation, his fingers coolly wrapped around a dagger. On any other day, Erich would have noticed. He had managed to evade the huntress's surprise attacks that outmatched the sixth senses of wild beasts with incredible consistency; detecting a mere mensch should have been a breeze for him. The pair's relationship would never have grown so deep if he'd been an easy mark, after all.

But today, Erich was anxious—anxious that his sister had been taken, that he had to do something about it, and that a single mistake could cost him a precious member of his family. His usual senses that could detect a silent arachne hellbent on hiding had been overwritten by the overwhelming pressure, like he'd been caught in an unimaginable streak of bad luck.

The phantom clatter of two tumbling stones filled Margit's ears. Faced with her companion's exceedingly rare fumble, she lacked the composure to maintain her usual smug smile.

Erich's time spent training with Lambert meant he could easily whoop a standard hoodlum into the dirt, but there was nothing he could do about an attack that he didn't see coming. Even a brittle dagger was more than enough to end a soft, fragile mensch.

"Erich!" Choked up, Margit could hardly breathe. *At this rate*, she thought, *he's going to be killed!*

However, the unarmed girl was too far to close the sizable distance, and it was even doubtful whether or not her voice would reach him in time. *Something, anything!* Her hands clawed at the tree she'd been clinging to and suddenly sank into the bark.

Still panicked, Margit looked to see that she'd unwittingly reached into a hollow in the wood, and felt something cool at the tip of her fingers. Pulling out the source of this sensation, she found a single coin weathered by the passage of deep time. Large and thick, the weight of the metal drew attention to itself; it had been minted with the visage of a regal woman who gleamed a proud gold in spite of the years' worth of mud and wood chips that covered her.

Whether she knew it or not, Margit's hands had never moved faster as she slipped off the ribbon holding up her hair and wound it around the coin she'd haply taken in hand to form an impromptu sling. Her mother had taught her this trick in case she ever ran out of arrows or snapped her bowstring during a long expedition. At the time, she'd thought that surely such an occasion would never arise, but present circumstances proved otherwise.

The same could be said for the coin. Margit couldn't begin to comprehend why such an expensive-looking gold piece had been resting in the trunk of a tree, only for her to chance upon it at this exact moment...but that didn't matter. The coin could have materialized out of thin air for all she cared, so long as she could save Erich. She would have taken a rock or an unripe fruit and had little reason to question the chunk of metal in her hand.

Margit whipped the sling around in circles over her head. Its unwieldy shape proved unstable, and the makeshift nature of her weapon necessitated that the coin and ribbon be thrown together: there would be no second chance.

The distance measured roughly fifty mensch paces. It'd be a guaranteed shot

with her well-loved shortbow, but her partner in crime was napping at home. Margit had no other options—she would land her attack to save Erich's life.

If my dearest is ready to risk his life, then I shall prepare to die should I miss.

The arachne was not so devout as to pray before firing. She never prayed to the deities that presided over the hunt or war, nor even love. Once everything was said and done, her pride as a huntsman shone because victory was something she claimed with her own two hands. Prayer only came after the dust had settled to thank the divine for a peaceful hunt.

Free of both divine protection and mere coincidence, the life-or-death projectile took flight and smashed into its target. The coin drilled straight into the man's shoulder as he made to raise the dagger to Erich's neck, as if it had been guided there by an invisible wire.

Even from afar, the man's piercing shriek of pain rang sharply in Margit's ears. Flesh and bone alike had been crushed on impact, and the right arm that had once wielded a dagger now twisted in an unthinkable direction. The sweet touch of a perfectly conceived trajectory mutilated his shoulder beyond recognition.

Two different reactions accompanied the scream. The thugs stood in mute horror at the failure of their foolproof first strike. The same could not be said for Margit's precious childhood friend. Once he whirled around to see the source of the agonizing wail, his switch flipped.

Whenever Erich fought, he always had a different air about him, like something had shifted inside his brain. *Which means...he's going to be fine.* Trusting that he wouldn't die so easily, the arachne sprinted away to bring victory to her beloved. Margit's only regret was that she couldn't stay to fight alongside him. Unfortunately, an unarmed arachne without the element of surprise would be of no use in combat.

"I won't ever forgive you if you die!" she shouted in frustration. With an unwavering will, her tiny legs tore up the earth, skittering forward as fast as they could.

[Tips] The fairy coin is a figure from Konigstuhl canton folklore. Legend says

that it was given to a powerful fairy to secure the well-being of young children, but no one knows where it is. However, the local elders say that it will never fail to appear when a child needs it most.

I whirled around at the sound of a man's scream and realized that I'd fumbled. Eating a sneak attack as penance for failing a perception check was nothing new, but this commonplace occurrence could wipe half a party or down a tank in one shot, paving the way for an untimely demise.

Jeez, I never catch a break, do I? The memory of a party of five rolling for perception and the best of us only getting a four, only to turn my way and shout "This is your fault!" flashed before my eyes. *What a terrible scene to reminisce upon.*

In any case, the friendly neighborhood spider-girl I called a partner had bailed me out of my botched negotiations. I had thought she'd left to find help long ago, but she had no doubt been too worried about my risky plan to leave me unsupervised.

Now it was my turn to take the stage. Exploration giving way to combat was par for the course, and every role-player has at least once substituted a speech check with brute force. Anything goes when you take a more physical approach to "negotiation."

My Lightning Reflexes made everything seem almost vexingly slow, but allowed me to snatch the dagger my assailant had unhanded out of the air. The weapon's make was flagrantly cheap, but it would serve.

I'd managed to succeed on my first reaction, and perhaps as a bonus for avoiding the sneak attack, it seemed I had the initiative. Once upon a time, I'd chided turn-based battle systems as unrealistic, but as I twirled the knife to a backhanded stance, I felt that it was a reasonable estimation of combat.

I lowered myself to the ground and turned without any wasted movement, pressing the handle of the dagger into my hip and securing it in place with my left hand. This efficient stance put all of my weight behind the blade and prevented any slips that could injure my own hand.

Hybrid Sword Arts included a bonus to a warrior's last hope—the dagger.

When quivers ran dry, spears snapped, and swords shattered, a versatile sidearm was man's best friend. A martial art forged on real battlefields would never be so ridiculous as to omit such a crucial weapon.

"Hurgh!" the enemy cried.

I plunged my blade into the knee of the man I'd previously been talking to with the momentum of my entire body. The unpleasant sensation of parting flesh came through crystal clear as my strike rent his sinews. Metal ground on bone as I twisted the knife to open his wound, and I found it distasteful how similar it felt to dissecting a wild beast.

Ugh, so this is how it feels to slice into a person? Despite all of our lofty talk of society and culture, this feeling made it seem as though we were no better than any other desperate animal rooting in the dirt—and in truth, we weren't. Here stood a group of people that had stolen my sister in the name of profit, and here I was making sure they would never walk again to get her back. We were nothing but mortal in every way, shape, and form.

In which case, justification could wait. I yanked the dagger out—with surprising ease, thanks to the gaping wound my twist had opened—and turned my attention to the next closest target. My first victim was a non-factor: without two legs to stand on, he could do little more than writhe in pain.

To my great joy and surprise, my next mark was still carrying luggage, unable to process what had happened. *I take it that I'm getting another turn?*

The distance between us was further than what I could close in an instant, so I pinched the blade of the dagger and prepared to let it loose. My expertise with thrown weapons could hardly be called adept, but I knew I could at least hit my opponent with all the pragmatic training I'd received. *At this range I'll need about...three and a half rotations.*

"Argh?!"

The twirling steel sank deep into his right shoulder; with the handle almost touching his skin, I was forced to abandon hope of recovering the weapon. Still, I was grateful to learn that the thugs here weren't wearing armor underneath their clothes, as it would have been quite the struggle to beat down a pack of high-AC enemies.

Plundering another knife from the man whose knee I'd ruined, I dashed toward another enemy. As cheap as it looked, the dagger was well used, and I assumed it to be sturdy enough for the task at hand.

"The hell's wrong with this kid?!"

The early bird gets the worm, so I lunged at the next closest thug. However, these people weren't career criminals for nothing, and this man powered through his bewilderment to unsheathe his arming sword. An overhand swing from a top-heavy blade like his could split a log in two; my undeveloped skull would burst like an overripe melon if it hit me.

Of course, that was *if* it hit me. Exploiting my small stature, I somersaulted forward out of its path. I banked slightly to the left to make it as hard as possible for him to catch me in a corrected swing, reaching out to shank the back of his knee as I rolled past.

"Ow, agh!"

Without any sturdy bones to protect it, the fleshy joint ruptured with ease. I could tell that the dagger's tip had cleaved his tendons and reached bone when its course slanted, so I pulled it out before the man fell. The prone status that accompanied attacks on people's knees made it a most lucrative target.

I slammed the back of his head with the handle as he fell onto me and the man went out cold. The knife had chipped when it shattered his bone, so I relieved my partner of its short tenure and set my sights on the fallen sword. Its broad, girthy blade was about as long as an average adult's forearm—just my size.

Now then, next up—whoa! I caught a glimpse of a drawn bow in the corner of my vision and reflexively brought up the sword, only for the force of impact to reverberate through my arm not a moment later. *Wide swords like this sure are handy as a makeshift shield.*

"You've gotta be kidding me! You sure this brat's human?!"

"Shut up and shoot! He's already taken out three of us!"

"Everyone, to arms! I dunno who he is, but *just kill him!* Who cares if he's a kid?!"

Oh crap, they're getting serious. Where were you hiding those swords, hand spears, and shortbows? An entire camp of bandits amounts to practically a single significant foe in TRPGs, but these goons weren't going down that easily. The archers stood on barrels to gain height, and the two frontliners approaching me made sure to stay out of their path of fire. They were too well coordinated to reduce them to a single forgettable mob.

I couldn't help but feel like this use of strategy against a twelve-year-old was somewhat immature as I took a hearty leap to the side to avoid an arrow. The first shot I'd deflected left my right arm numb, so I decided the next one had to be dodged.

"You're mine, brat!"

The bandit with the hand spear pounced on me, so I flipped my sword grip to have it follow my forearm and held my stomach in my other hand to deflect the thrust. The combination of Lightning Reflexes and Insight made defense and evasion reactions laughably trivial. Each had cost me a pretty penny, but I was glad to have them now.

Not expecting to have his attack parried by a downed opponent, the spearman had come in with excessive momentum, leaving me ample opportunity to roll onto my shoulder and sever his legs.

"Wha—gah!"

As he collapsed forward, I mercilessly slammed my heel into his nose. I posted my elbow onto the ground to put my full force into the kick, and it was plenty to concuss an adult far larger than me.

"Dammit, are you all right?!"

"Forget him, moron! Just kill the kid!"

The other vanguard wielding a one-handed sword froze when he saw his comrade go down, giving me a moment to dive behind a pile of wooden crates and hide from the barrage of arrows. *Good, the numbness is fading.*

"Elisa!" I shouted. "Elisa, where are you?!" At this point, their guilt was undoubtable. They attacked because they considered me a threat that might uncover whatever it was they had to hide. Whether they planned to kill me or

knock me out, there was no other explanation as to why they'd suddenly turn on a child inviting them to join the local festivities.

I shouted in search of Elisa while weaving in and out of the cargo to buy more time. I wasn't a total idiot, after all; the optimistic idea that I might wipe them out had never once crossed my mind. No matter how much training I had, my young body lacked the stamina to fight for an extended stretch, and truthfully, I was already feeling winded. My heart hammered faster than any sparring session; I knew I was hyperventilating, but I couldn't stop.

I was scared of the fact that a single misstep would spell my death. Both body and soul shrank from the horrible fate that could await me. The gap in skill between these hoodlums and Sir Lambert was night and day. Had the captain of the Watch been here in my stead, a swing or two of his broadsword would have turned the whole crowd into chopped liver.

Compared to when I crossed swords with him, this battle should have been effortless. But as easy as it was meant to be...I couldn't move in the way I wanted to.

"Found ya, kiddo!"

"Stay still!"

The sword fell sluggishly and the dagger stabbing in my direction was half a pace too far to land. Slicing the swordsman's hand—fingers and all—was a simple task, and I managed to kick the dagger away while smacking the second enemy in the head with my sword's grip. But it cut deep into my stamina, and my desperate breathing only grew rougher as sweat streamed from every pore. The slickness of my fingers dampened my grip, and I struggled to find control of my blade.

I could no longer tell if I had been here for a few minutes or a few dozen. I'd explicitly tried to keep track of time at the beginning of the battle, but pathetically lost my bearings as soon as combat began.

With the two goons I had just cleaned up, my tally was at seven people. Their dwindling numbers made it easier for me to escape, but I may have lost myself in the moment and gone too far. *At this rate, they might use Elisa as a hostage...*

“How pitiful.”

A young voice hoarsened by liquor rang in the air, dispelling the sound of my breath and the overwhelming drumming of blood in my ears. I turned to the only roofed carriage in the camp to see a single man step out of it.

His robe was decorated with grave ornaments whose purpose was totally alien to me. While nothing about his middling build or stature caught my attention, the permanent bags under his sunken eyes filled me with dread. The dark, discomforting gleam of his deep amber eyes almost looked gold from a certain angle.

There was only one kind of person who had tools dangling off every corner of their body like this. Despite not carrying a staff, the man was obviously a mage.

“What’s with all the fuss over this single kid?”

“B-Boss!” The man who’d lost his fingers had been frantically gathering his severed digits and feebly looked up at the mage. “Y-You don’t understand, this brat is—”

“I don’t want to hear excuses. But I suppose there’s no use in waiting for you fools to do your jobs.” With a flip of his robe, he stepped off the carriage and onto the ground. He ran his hand through his hair looking exceedingly annoyed and shot me an evaluating glare. “Well, at least it looks like we’ll be able to cover our losses.”

A shiver ran up my spine, wholly lacking the affection of those caused by Margit’s soft whispers. His appraising gaze rested on me, but *I* wasn’t what he saw. To him, I wasn’t a person—merely livestock ready to be priced for the marketplace. All that mattered was how much gold I would fetch... In fact, his dispassionate eyes hardly registered me as a living thing.

“Sit back clutching your fingers,” he ordered. “I’ll put them back on for you later.”

“Y-Yessir!”

The mage stepped toward me in place of his retreating subordinate. *A mage leading a group of bandits? Been there, seen that, but...I don’t know, he seems a teeeeeensy bit different from what I’d expect. He’s a far cry from the hooligans*

that parade around their basic magic to feel cool that act as the first boss of a campaign.

"*Heed me*," he muttered.

"Hngh?!"

Just as I resolved myself to stay on my toes, I found myself soaring through the air the very next instant. It took a moment to register that I was airborne and to feel the pain exploding through my jaw despite my Lightning Reflexes.

I had no idea what had happened. Even with Insight-boosted observational skills, I hadn't seen him telegraph his spell in any way, and a short murmur was immediately followed by a strike on par with a clean uppercut from Sir Lambert. It was probable—nay, certain—that his magic had summoned a physical attack.

Without the experience of rolling off damage while being beaten to a pulp by my mentor, that attack would surely have shattered my jaw and robbed me of consciousness. Never had I been more thankful that I'd invested so heavily in damage reduction. While I was fond of systems where combat amounted to rocket tag, my journey would have come to an end here if I'd built myself as a glass cannon.

My short trial run as a creature of flight came to an end when I crashed into a pile of crates. Thankfully, the boxes didn't contain any heavy goods and took on some of my momentum as I flew past them and rolled to shrug off most of the impact. This was the first time today that I was grateful for my small, light physique.

"Urgh..."

Still, that wasn't to say it didn't hurt. My sense of taste was overwhelmed with blood, and I could feel something slide down my tongue into the back of my throat. *Were those teeth? I can't tell which ones fell out because everything hurts so much, but I'll never forgive you if those were adult teeth, you bastard!*

That being said, my tumble had been quite flashy, so I decided to play dead and wait for an opening. If he underestimated me and came closer thinking that I was unconscious, I could ambush him, and being left on the ground would accomplish my original goal of buying time.

“Hm, I suppose I should hit him again, just in case.”

“Whoaaaa?!” I shouted. I leapt to my feet only for the space my head had occupied moments prior to explode. Carried forward by the wind, I surmised from the dust cloud at the area of impact that he’d blasted me with compressed air. *Or maybe he temporarily expanded the air in that location?* Regardless, I wasn’t a fan of his mysterious magic that was hard to dodge and quick to cast.

“Oh? You’re conscious after a direct hit and even managed to dodge the second.”

I managed to get back on my feet riding the shock wave from his attack and re-equipped myself with a nearby dagger. The mage’s words of praise were accompanied by a truly vexed frown, like a villain who’d failed to end a fight with his signature move. I nearly burst into laughter, but labored to keep a straight face to not draw his wrath by substituting it with a demand.

“Give me Elisa! Give me my sister back!”

“Sister?” he asked with a tilt of his head. “I don’t know about your sister, but the sight of my poor subordinates after you brazenly attacked them breaks my heart.”

What a bald-faced lie. My grip tightened to the point that the dagger creaked, but I knew his response was logical. Admitting to kidnapping, even to a child, would do him no favors. Whether he planned to kill or kidnap me, unnecessary risks were always worth avoiding.

“So let’s finish this quickly,” he said.

Apparently not a fan of drawn-out speeches, the mage fired another volley of spells. I danced to the tune of his imperceptible explosions of air. Unable to block them, I was forced to dodge them with an unsure step and depended on my breakfalls to avoid critical damage.

First shot: the area around my head exploded, so I sank down to avoid it. Second shot: the ground beneath my stomach exploded, so I jumped back to dodge it. Third shot: the air below my back exploded while I was airborne, so I had no hope of evasion. Instead, I relaxed my body, rolled off the momentum,

and tried to close the distance between us. Fourth shot: he cut off my approach path, so I slammed my dagger into the ground to act as an emergency brake. Fifth shot, sixth shot, seventh shot...

[Tips] Many races lack the internal mechanism to focus mana into magic. Even among these races, there are some exceptions caused by rare and sudden genetic mutations.

During his very first battle, the spell that the mage had instinctively cast instantaneously and explosively expanded a volume of air around a single point. It had a special place in his heart. The incantation could be shortened or skipped altogether without dampening its impact, which was comparable to a hearty swing from a mallet. Furthermore, a light hit could incapacitate enemies without killing them, and stacking multiple instances on top of one another could fell even the greatest beasts.

All in all, it was a convenient bit of magecraft. His aimless journey hadn't quite been an adventure, but the familiar spell had seen use many times along the way. In fact, one could even say that the blast of air that he'd used to fend off the beast that had assaulted him and his childhood friends as they played in the woods all those years ago was the very source of his confidence; it was a reminder that he could fight to protect something that he cared about.

Seeing his signature move dodged and predicted at every turn chipped at his psyche. His splintering spirit fractured ever more, and anger swelled in his heart. Of course, he wasn't serious—or so he insisted in the lonely depths of his mind as he fired another blast. The need to preserve the boy to sell later alongside his sister served as an excuse to abstain from using more lethal magic.

I missed again. The mage had timed his attack as the boy tumbled to the ground, and he'd had a good feeling that it would land. Yet the child dexterously twisted his body clear of the spot he'd marked. Despite mixing in illusions and sleep spells in every spare moment, the child had shrugged off everything the mage had thrown at him. Children were weak of will and their egos were undeveloped, so they were supposed to be especially susceptible to enchantment. The man couldn't understand how the child was resisting.

To top it all off, the boy used the force of the blasts to regain his footing, only fanning the flames of the mage's ire. *Why? Why does every! Little! Thing! Have to go so wrong?!* He continued to fire off spells as he tried to calm himself down. Whether he was aware of it or not, the accuracy of his attacks had dropped despite his facade of cool disinterest.

Suspicion wormed its way into the roiling cloud of rage in his head. The boy looked like an average mensch hardly older than ten. In a world where kids worked long days and fifteen-year-olds were considered adults, children were prone to accelerated development, but this one was far too strong.

A normal child should have been rendered unconscious by the first attack. The man had seen children in his hometown and on his journey who'd trained with their local watchmen, and none of them would have been able to parry his blows.

Suspicion demanded thought; excess thought derailed his focus; successive blunders twisted his mind with envy. And that envy brought the man to a single conclusion: *He's the same as me.*

The boy had skill beyond what a child his age could attain. That ability of his had caught the mage's eye as a selling point to a future buyer, but on second thought, such finesse was only possible with some form of divine favoritism.

Seeing a young, tattered boy single-mindedly trying to save his sister clashed with the degenerate setting around them. The mage seethed with hatred: he too had traveled that path, but had long since diverged from it.

No man can crave pleasures unknown. Just as one cannot hunger for a flavor that they have never tasted, one will not long for a life they have never lived. But what about those who lose something only to see another with what they once had?

I have to erase him, the man resolved. There was no logic to his decision—how could there be? They would likely never meet again, and the boy was one black market dealing away from vanishing forever. Childish envy that boiled the blood was all it took for one person to kill another.

However, despite the fact that the only witnesses present were him and the boy (who would be gone if he managed to accomplish his task), the mage kept

setting off airbursts. He could have lit the entire region ablaze or slipped outside the bounds of space-time, but some subconscious part of his brain simply found it too embarrassing to make a serious effort to kill the child. No one can escape from themselves no matter how far they run, and try as the mage might, there was no denying this truth—it reared its head in the little decisions he made.

[Tips] Gods bring mortals to their worlds with reason, just as humans care for aquariums and plant seagrass to breed fish. The hidden intent cannot be gleaned from within the water, but in the open air...

Long after I'd lost track of how many explosions I'd dodged, the grimace on the mage's face began to warp into a full-blown scowl. The flat line of his mouth bent out of shape, and he could no longer hide the angled wrinkles of his brow. Although his rate of fire had increased, I felt as though his fury had greatly diminished his accuracy.

Oh, that's a perfect spot. I took advantage of an explosion at my rear to quickly accelerate and clear a few dozen paces in a single beat. The excruciating pain in my ankle and bruises that littered my body were a trivial price to pay for survival. *Trivial, I say.*

Suddenly, a lovely voice fell upon my numbed ears. I turned to see Elisa's head poking out from the canopy of the mage's carriage. Despite not being able to hear myself call to her, the mage's voice was loud and clear.

"I'm done. If the more troublesome method is stronger..." The space in front of him began to glow. White lines of light bent into complex shapes, creating a supporting incantation for spellcasting known as a magic circle. I'd seen them in books, but none of the mages accompanying caravans here had used them before, so this was a new experience.

The brilliant lights roared as the air around it superheated to glow even whiter than the circle itself. Vivid radiance bathed the dusky wood, drowning out the evening light. A far cry from the shining sun, this ball of energy released rays of destruction that threatened to burn me and the air it occupied.

I...can't dodge that. Faced with certain death, my spirit nearly wavered, but my body naturally rushed forward. With a single pathetic dagger in hand, I bet it all on the dubious odds of survival I had left.

If the dice can be rolled, they ought to be. A sweet, sweet array of twelve little dots might stare back at you. The enemy's dice could always land on the two red dots of doom.

As the light swelled and threatened to swallow me whole, I heard Elisa's voice.

"Mr. Brother!"

[Tips] Magic generally can be split into two categories: spells that mark a targeted location and spells that call forth natural phenomena. The former is impossible to resist but can be dodged, while the latter can be resisted but is unavoidable once the spell takes effect.

Dragged out of a muddy and unpleasant slumber, Elisa felt so sick she wanted to cry. The last thing she remembered was that she'd gone outside and met a scary man. She couldn't recall anything past that point, and was hopelessly confused as to why she was rolling around in a sack in a place like this.

Today was supposed to be a wonderful day. She was going to go to the festival with her beloved brother, eat the ice candy that he'd promised to buy her, and maybe—just maybe—she'd even get to dance with him again.

How did that wonderful day turn out like this? Elisa felt nauseatingly sleepy even though she'd just woken up, and the constant bang-banging outside didn't help her groggy head. Sad and alone, she called for her brother, and tears accompanied her words.

After crying inside of the burlap bag for a while, the top spontaneously slipped open. One of Elisa's friends must have opened it for her. She crawled out in search of home, but found herself in a place she'd never seen before.

Elisa was inside of a dark, moldy, gloomy carriage. It was completely different from the one her Papa rode when he went into town. *I don't want to be here,*

she thought instinctively. She could tell from the lingering *something* that hung in the dark air that nothing good would come from this place.

There were a lot of loud sounds outside that scared her, but she readied herself and exited the carriage. She timidly poked her head out of the canopy only to see her beloved elder brother being beaten to a pulp. His enchanting golden hair had been scuffed in all directions, and his skin was speckled with painful blue bruises. What was more, one of his eyes had swollen so badly that Elisa couldn't make out the pretty blue she held so dear, and the fancy clothes he'd worn for their day at the festival were covered in mud.

The arduous sight of her battered brother filled Elisa with a despair that tore her heart in two. She'd never known that seeing the kindhearted Mr. Brother hurt would cause more pain than being hurt herself.

Mr. Brother's getting bullied. Mr. Brother's getting hurt. Mr. Brother...is going to die!

The girl expressed her heartrending anguish with her voice. A formless wail escaped her lips and morphed as she called out to her kin... And the white light of sorrow melted away.

[Tips] The most important element in magic is the heartfelt desire to bend the world to one's will.

"What?!"

The weave of the mage's spell had come undone, and the impending doom it symbolized had given way to hope. I couldn't begin to guess as to why, but the projectile on the cusp of being launched had dissipated like a summer mirage without a trace of the heat that had broiled the air.

I really don't understand...but I'll take it! I abandoned all thought and bolted across the cleared path, plunging my dagger into his stomach with all my might.

"Blagh! Huh?! Wha..."

Wrecking his limbs wouldn't be enough to disarm a mage, so I stabbed his gut in hopes of inhibiting his speech, thinking that I could rob him of his

incantations.

After all I'd done, I still had my reservations about killing. The man before me had caused me so much pain, nearly killed me, and abducted my precious baby sister; ten deaths and one hundred hangings would hardly be enough to pay for his sins. Yet the thought of ending his life still scared me.

Slitting his throat would assuredly kill him. The lungs were also a great target to prevent him from casting magic, but the thought that he might drown in his own blood stayed my hand. I was a coward: I'd come so far yet balked at the thought of becoming a murderer. But I was equally as afraid that he might regain his vigor and begin chanting...so I beat the daylights out of him instead.

"You, you little—oof?!" There's a trick to punching people: it's way easier if you hold onto a rock or something while you do it! "Augh! Blegh?! Hrngh!"

Naturally, the wisdom that a tight fist was key to delivering the most painful punches came from none other than my master in all things brutal, Sir Lambert. Furthermore, he'd taught me that the easiest way to do so wasn't to grip with your thumb, but rather to find something to squeeze. Apparently, with a solid fist and proper form to make full use of gravity, even a child's punches can turn into crushing blows!

I glanced around to look for a suitable mass and found a nicely shaped coin laying on the ground, so I elected to borrow it. *Money is power! Man, what a golden saying.* With the chunk of metal in hand, I whaled on the wizard's face; his broken teeth cut up my fingers, but I much preferred this to when he was blasting me with magic. *I think I should be fine as long as I smash in all his front teeth.*

After pummeling him more than enough times to feel safe, I threw another two or three punches on the house and things went silent. He wouldn't die anytime soon, seeing as I'd avoided his vitals, and I felt quite satisfied. As soft as I was being, this was enough for me.

A cursory look around revealed that all his companions had vanished. *Fair enough. Sticking around would have been dangerous with how many explosions he was causing.*

"Elisa, are you okay?" I asked as I picked her up by the armpits to pull her out

of the carriage.

“Mm,” she feebly affirmed.

I set her down and gave her a giant hug. She had a warm, gentle smell to her; the little girl I now held tight was just the way I’d left her at noon.

“I’m so, so glad...” Elisa’s presence was such a given—or rather, it *had been* until she’d been plucked out of my grasp like a stray feather. Her tender warmth was priceless, and the weight in my arms was the most precious of all treasures.

“Mr. Brother?”

“I’m right here, Elisa.”

“Mr. Brother...” She sniffled and began to loudly cry as the pent up fear finally settled in. “I was so scared! Mr. Brotherrr! I thought you...you!”

“It’s okay,” I cooed. “Mr. Brother is right here. I’m sorry for leaving you all alone, Elisa. I’ll be right here, so it’s okay now. Don’t cry.”

Elisa cried like she wanted to tear her vocal cords apart, and I hugged her from the bottom of my heart. I rubbed her back and buried my face in her hair to be as close to her as possible. This always got her to calm down and doze off. Every nerve in my body was screaming with pain, but by no means did my injuries take priority over soothing my terrified little sister.

Now then, it’s about time we left the scene. I’d strayed from the original plan, but I’d done enough damage to down all the enemies, so I started toward the town square. *I’m sure Margit did her part and we’ll be able to meet in the middle...*

After a few paces, I sensed something move behind me. Whirling around, I saw the mage rising to his feet while clutching his bloodied face. *When did he—*

His gaze of pure animosity met mine and my body suddenly froze under a hex. I didn’t know when he managed to do it or where he brought it from, but he’d produced a large staff with which he’d drawn a magic circle—no incantation required.

The circle was far larger than the one that had scorched me moments ago,

and its color was far more sinister. All of the air around us came to a perfect halt, and the atmosphere flooded with deathly silence.

Only the sputtering sound of a curse spoken through broken teeth and a crushed tongue echoed in the nothingness. He spat words and blood alike, causing the circle to glow brightly and signal my imminent demise for the umpteenth time today.

Darkness spilled from the center of the circle like a blob of ink, growing and growing into the shape of a sphere. My meager vocabulary was ill fit to describe that *thing*.

Blacker than the darkest night, graver than the bottom of a dried well, quieter than a funeral, and emptier than a dreamless sleep—these were the ways I could attempt to give form to the unknowable orb. It grew from the center of the magic circle to a size that could easily swallow a person whole.

He had bored a hole into the fabric of reality. A distorted horror lurked within, biding its time as it waited for a chance to free itself. Every fiber of my being told me that I could not escape it, that there was nothing the hands of man could do once the spell was let go.

“All of you. Die. All who refuse to acknowledge me, all of you, sink to the depths of hell.” Amidst his long mumbling, these words alone reached my ear.

I couldn’t tell if the curiously gentle appearance of the black hole was caused by my Lightning Reflexes attempting to somehow evade it or if its strange image was built into the spell itself.

“My, it appears I’ve stumbled upon something peculiar once again.” A silhouette appeared between us and the oncoming mass of pure despair with all the grandeur of someone walking to the local market. Her nonchalant steps brought her from the corner of my vision that I had thought empty to center view. “Still, what a boorish and wasteful conjuration.”

The black body evaporated as a refreshing *snap!* soaked into the universe. Like a candle whose wick had been snuffed, this spell vanished even more naturally than the burning light from before.



Dyed vermilion by the setting sun, not a single hair on the woman's perfectly set chignon had so much as swayed when she erased the ball of death, and she listlessly puffed out a cloud of smoke. The arms that slipped through her deep crimson robe were slender like her lengthy pipe, but the contour of her body had ample intrigue to maintain a stunning balance.

What was more, the sharp point of the ears extending from between her locks drew my eye. She wasn't a mensch; she was a methuselah, the peak of all humanfolk. Impervious to age, illness, and weakness, these everlasting beings remained at top physical form for all of time unless someone managed to kill them.

"I followed an interesting frequency of mana here, but I'm utterly lost as to what occurred."

With her silver hair proudly shimmering in the evening glow, the woman turned her back to the aghast mage and peered into my eyes.

"You there. Would you mind explaining what happened?"

She was exceedingly beautiful. The loveliness of her visage made her look artificial—I would have believed her if she told me that a master sculptor had dedicated their entire life to carving her to perfection. Supple lips, a gallant and high nose, and heterochromatic eyes of deep blue and light jade embellished the sharp outline of her face, sticking fast to the depths of my consciousness. No work of art could hope to match her natural allure.

"You..." the mage groaned. "You! It's you!!!"

"My word, how obnoxious," she remarked. "I don't know who you are, but I'm not interested in talent of your level."

She pulled away from me and pushed up the monocle that rested on her green left eye, sighing over the rowdy wizard behind her. He hollered curses at her and prepared to recast the black ball of doom.

The woman snapped her fingers, and just like that, it all came to a close. The man winked out of existence as if he had never been there at all.

"Now, would you mind telling me your story?" she asked again. "Where in the

world did you get your hands on that changeling?”

[Tips] Neither verbal nor written incantations are absolutely required for magic, but this is a fact unknown to the average person.

One Full Henderson

Ver0.1

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The tale that follows is not from the timeline we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

One Full Henderson Ver0.1

Every place has its own class of untouchables. Although some are a result of social class, others *attain* this status with power.

A single man groaned on the outskirts of the canton. He held his stomach tight, hysterically fighting his abdominal muscles to prevent his internal organs from spilling out, all because he knew that once his intestines hit the soil, there would be no saving him.

The man had seen this time and time again: on battlefields, in the mountains, on highways, and in countless villages. Yet it was not a sight he'd ever clenched his own stomach for. It was a view reserved for enemies, women, children, merchants—the prey that he'd cut down. As the leader of a crew of thirty bandits, the man was supposed to be the predator...and a predator was never meant to find himself in such a position.

The bandit chief had delved into his memories to try and recall where he had gone wrong and come up dry. Nothing had been any different from usual.

Their preparations had been perfect. The scouts had studied the patrol routes of the local lord and magister's watchmen, and they'd deftly avoided them. He'd sent in a few men disguised as travelers to confirm that no soldiers were quartered in the village. They'd even stayed for a few nights to determine when the watchtowers were first manned and when each shift ended. On the night before Sabbath day—the one day of the week when all the peasantry could enjoy a deep slumber—the raiders had been blessed with a cloudy night that hid the moon. Could he ever have asked for more?

There were ten watchmen, give or take. Even if they rallied all of the men in town who could wield a weapon, they'd number thirty strong at the most. Naturally, the side with the element of surprise would be at a massive advantage. All the raiders had to do was break into the watchmen's houses first, or light the whole village all ablaze to enjoy a nice duck hunt. Then, they'd bask in the soft, delicious spoils of victory for a few days before cleanly razing

everything to the ground.

The bandit chief had spent seven years repeating this routine in the towns and cantons of Rhine's satellite states. His villainy remained unchecked in the year he'd spent roaming the well-patrolled streets of the Empire that left other criminals quaking in their boots.

The professional thug had never let his guard down, and this time had been no different—or at least, he *felt* it hadn't, but now he found himself in a sorry state of affairs.

When his scout had waved two torches back and forth to signal that they were in the clear, the entire gang had made their move. It'd been going fine until they vaulted the stone fence around the canton's living quarters and steeled themselves for the attack.

A rain of arrows was waiting for them on the other side, mowing the crew down. Preoccupied with the thrill of plunder, half of the man's unwitting underlings were killed or maimed by the initial volley. Though they were all equipped with at least light chainmail that they'd looted during previous raids, the heavy projectiles had pierced their defenses without any issue. Their equipment was sturdy enough to block arrows from afar, but not strong enough to handle longbows and crossbows at close range.

What came next was a hurricane of steel conjured up by a single dancing blade. All the bandit chief could see from his subordinates' torchlight was a deadly silver afterglow that left screams in its wake with every step.

His goons' fingers, thighs, and tendons—supposedly safe beneath their armor—were torn to shreds in the blink of an eye. The boss had no idea how much time had passed. Despite his skill with the sword, it only took a single strike to cleave through his breastplate and torso piece, leaving him crumpled on the ground.

The man crawled away, clutching at his wound. He could hardly move with his open injury, couldn't fight, and had lost all of his men, but he still tried to run all the same.

He simply did not want to die. Throughout his long history of bloodshed, never once had he held the slightest intention of dying himself. To kill and to be

killed were not so inseparable in his mind, and the thought that the latter might ever come to pass never occurred to him.

How very wrong he'd been. Something bumped into his nose, and it took some time for him to link the faint smell of oil to the long boot it emanated from. The wind parted the heavy clouds covering the moon, and in the new light the man recognized the shoe in front of his face...and the man wearing it.

"Oh... Ohhh..." The thug groaned and looked up into the face of a lone swordsman. Clad in light leather armor with an open helm, he cut a prosaic figure as he rested his sword upon his shoulder. Only the ice-cold stare in his blue eyes stood out, gleaming in the moonlight.

"Are you the leader? Never mind, don't bother answering. I can tell from your armor."

A voice as frigid as the cool of night cut deep into the bandit chief's—no, into the lone bully who had lost all of his subordinates'—brain, as if to prove a single fact: *Oh, I'm done for.*

His head hung in despair until the tip of the victor's sword scooped his jaw into place and forced his gaze up from the boot before him. Skewered by that hateful gaze, the man delivered a line he'd heard many times before. Without any conscious thought, he begged for his life.

"H-Help! D-Don't kill me... Please!"

His pathetic pleas for mercy and whimpering cries made the swordsman frown as if he'd bitten into something bitter and had trouble swallowing.

"What an indulgent request," the swordsman spat. "Have words like that ever stopped you?"

The man thought back on his travels. Not once had anyone's desperate words stayed him. However, the swordsman's blade did not cruelly slice into his vitals. It slowly retreated from his chin and slipped back into its sheath with a delicate hand.

"Still, I have no intention of sinking to the level of a common thug. Don't worry, none of your men are dead."

Hearing such soft words from such a harsh voice made corners of the thug's lips pull upward. *We'll have plenty of chances to get away with an idiot this tender*, he thought.

"If anything," the swordsman continued, "don't think that you can get away with dying here, scum."

A deft, ruthless kick to the side of his head neatly snuffed out the thug's consciousness before he could even begin plotting his escape.

[Tips] The Trialist Empire's ruthless war on crime means that there is always a reward for dealing with bandits, even if they don't have bounties. Petty footmen are still worth a full libra, and bandit chiefs net a minimum of one drachma, with the most notorious criminals having bounties worth thirty gold pieces. On top of that, a bonus reward is available under certain conditions...

After kicking the bandit unconscious, I lifted him up and wrapped him in gauze before his insides decided to take their shot at life in the great outdoors. I wasn't charitably tending to his wounds in the vain hope that he might turn over a new leaf, of course.

It was a verifiable fact that this sort of vermin was rotten to the bone. I could dunk him into a river of holy water, but his blood-soaked heart would never lose its stain. Parting his head from his shoulders was far better than waiting for reform that would never come—for him and society both.

The only reason I'd yet to follow through was to suit my longer-term interests.

"Well done." I turned to see Sir Lambert calling over to me. Now that I was twenty, my master was getting along in years, but terrifyingly had no issues keeping up as an active watchman. "Twenty men reduced to chopped liver in an instant."

"That makes me sound like some kind of monster," I protested. "I didn't kill a single one, you know." The captain grimaced as he raised his torch above the fallen thugs, prompting an involuntary frown of my own.

A few of the raiders had died to our surprise volley of arrows, but I'd made

sure not to add to the body count when I stepped forward alone. I'd either maimed limbs or cut along an opening in their armor to injure them grievously enough that there'd be no fighting back.

"That makes you even more of a freak," Lambert said with a tired sigh. He made a wide gesture with both hands at the crowd of groveling men and said, "No matter how chaotic the fight, most people wouldn't be able to aim for a single thumb or specific tendon against battle-hardened bandits. Even I wouldn't want to do that."

You "wouldn't want to," but that means that you theoretically could. I get it. At any rate, I hadn't been given a choice: the bounty on these criminals was higher if they were alive.

After telling my mentor as much with a smile, he merely scratched the back of his head, at a loss for words. I didn't see what the problem was. These sadists marched in and plotted to run amok in our canton; any punishment they received was fair game.

Sending in a scouting party was all well and fine, but these morons had been far too careless. Their equipment had been too oriented for combat to suit a normal traveler (since heavy weapons and armor were ill fit for long journeys), and their awkward grasp of the imperial language had made their cover story obviously unnatural.

On top of that, I could turn a blind eye to how they'd scouted out the locations of our warehouses and watchtowers, but the way they'd stared at the local women ventured into the territory of stupidity. To skip catcalls and go straight to stalking them to their homes was the height of idiocy. They may as well have been hoisting a flag that read, "We are scheming something evil."

My best guess was that a streak of good fortune had gotten to their heads. Their assault tactics were carefully conceived and hard to counter, but that also meant any failure was doomed to be a critical failure.

Above all else, I had no idea what they thought would happen if they made passes at someone's missus before they got to work. I'd lost my temper immediately and invited one of them for a friendly little...*conversation* where I confirmed their plans and began preparing to offer them our best hospitality.

After all, there's nothing softer to sink your fist into than the distracted mug of a man who thinks he has the upper hand.

The result was as you see here. Everything went our way, and not a single citizen of the canton was hurt. Plus, we'd pull in a fat purse, so the whole situation turned out swimmingly.

"Honestly," Lambert said, "the fact that you stuck around as a reserve watchman was these fools' downfall."

"I can't bring myself to appreciate this twist of fate, considering you were the one who said, 'Why don't you try taking them on by yourself?'" I responded to my master's barb with a cynical jab of my own.

That's right: after all those twists and turns, I ended up staying in the canton...

"Yes, yes," a new voice called, "I see you two are as cordial as ever."

"Margit," I said, "you could have waited for me at home."

...For the sake of my new family. Nowadays, I was a member of the Konigstuhl Watch's reserves and spent my days working as a huntsman, since I'd married into Margit's family. I didn't have a particularly complex reason for abandoning the path of adventure, despite my big talk and long years of preparation. A little bit of this and a little bit of that had led to some friendly tumbles in the hay, and...

"How is our little princess going to fall asleep when her father is out and about like this?" Margit said, rolling her eyes. At twenty-two, her cuteness hadn't waned at all from the time we first met, and the young girl in her arms almost looked like her sister. Margit tightly held her by the thorax, and the adorable angel looked at me with lustrous blonde hair and baby blue eyes.

"Papa..."

"Iseult, sweetie," I cooed, "you know you're supposed to be in bed."

"No! I wanna sleep with Papa!"

The angel's name was Iseult, and my lovely only daughter had blessed our lives six years ago. Look, these things happen—I'm only human. It's not my fault; I wasn't the one who started it, okay?! Don't you think it's unfair that I'm

the one taking responsibility just because I'm a man?! Not that I didn't want to, but still!

And, well, I ended up staying in the canton to live out my blissful days; my parents had been elated but shocked, and the look on my eldest brother's face had been brilliantly *meh*. Issues like this cropped up now and again, and it'd taken ages for Elisa to accept our marriage, but all in all, I had a good life.

Though a far cry from adventure, every day was full of surprises. Unlike me, my six-year-old daughter was cute and childish, and watching her grow up was incredibly fulfilling. I had nothing but gratitude to her for teaching me what it felt like to be a parent. As unexpected as she was, in my mind, she was the embodiment of my happiness.

"Hrm," Lambert grunted, "We'll clean things up here, so you head on home."

"Huh? But—"

"You can't let your kiddo stick around a bloody place like this." He glared at me as I rocked my little girl and shooed me off like a stray dog. "And Margit, be more careful about the places you bring her out to."

"Oh dear, my apologies, Captain," she responded. "But the little one's eyes are glued onto her father, so there isn't any need to worry."

We still had a lot to do: there was no end to the preparations needed before we turned the criminals in to the magistrate, and we needed to make sure they didn't die of blood loss or infection before we got there. And even outside of that, the mere act of tidying the scene was its own task, but Sir Lambert had made up his mind and driven me away once more.

"Yeah, yeah, get going, Erich!"

"C'mon, poor li'l Iseult looks all sleepy!"

"You did the heavy lifting, so leave the rest to us."

The rest of the watchmen chimed in, and I began thinking it'd be less tasteful of me to stay and help than to leave at this point.

"Papa..."

"Okay, you're right, Iseult. Let's head home and get to bed." I graciously

accepted everyone's kindness and decided to retire one step earlier than my fellow city guardians. For some reason, our daughter had a hard time falling asleep without me around. Unsullied by even a speck of blood, I readied myself to hurry into the covers and rock her to sleep.

[Tips] Live bandits are worth half again to twice the reward for their dead counterparts; bandit chiefs triple, quadruple, or even quintuple in value.

The man who had once again taken up the title of bandit chief—or more precisely, who had once again been turned into a bandit chief—trembled at the realization that a quick execution was not so merciless as he thought.

His ears ached from the chorus of voices. Each of them shouted the same words, but the dissonant rhythm and harmony gave birth only to a cacophony of sound. Still, he knew all too well what they were screaming. Their will had taken form and ruthlessly assaulted him from the moment he came into view.

"Kill them!"

The men, women, and everyone in between; the young, the old, and even the gods themselves; everyone in the city was calling for death. The man and his subordinates had been given the bare minimum medical care to survive being shipped to some metropole they couldn't name. They'd been locked up like packages of mail on their trip here, leaving them disoriented in this foreign land.

Furthermore, the people of the canton had neatly prepared each and every one of them: the tendons in all four of their limbs had been snipped to prevent them from ever causing trouble—or escaping—again.

First, they had been chained together in an open cell for all to see. Though onlookers pelted them with everything from pebbles to rotten fish and fruit, the captives still had enough will to shout back at those who threw filth their way. After all, they'd preyed on common citizens just like the ones beyond the iron bars.

However, the theatrics of the third day were enough to snap their pride. A few of the man's lackeys had been taken out and reduced to laughingstocks for

the locals to kill.

Three of his youngest men, of which one had only participated in their latest raid, were dragged to their feet and chained to a post in the city center. The boys hardly looked to be of age, but that drew no mercy from the feral crowd.

Each of the spectators held stones the size of fists and eagerly began hurling once the guard permitted it. However, they refused to put their strength behind solid overhand throws, electing instead for softer underhands or side-tosses.

The cruelty of the act could not be understated. A clean throw from a full-grown adult could knock a man's head clean off. This relatively quick death would free the boys' souls of their earthly suffering. Yet the citizenry held back to prolong their ordeal. Weighty rocks brought pain and pain alone—their gentle trajectory would never come with sweet release.

The agony continued as the damage slowly piled up, and after an unbearable eternity, the boys finally died. They themselves could not know how many days had passed, but the torture had stretched beyond the scope of time.

The bandits quaked at the sight of their newest recruits being reduced from humans to man-shaped meat over the span of days...as it grew clear what came next. Their fear manifested when the last of the newbies (who'd failed to kill even a single person on his first and only raid) drew his last breath, and the next handful of men were taken away.

This lot was cooked alive in a massive contraption. The towering mechanism resembled a grill for smoking meats, and the people of the city were free to add firewood at their leisure. While the men were fine for a short period, the extended heat slowly turned them into no more than cured cuts of venison. Onlookers pointed and laughed at how their seared, bloated bodies looked just like the lambs that were served during festivals.

Time passed, and the grueling torture continued for the bandit chief to witness. They forced food and drink into his mouth to rob him of a chance at starvation. After enduring an everlasting stream of verbal abuse from the audience and his once-loyal grunts, the man's psyche had shattered. In truth, he could no longer distinguish the hateful clamor from the voices of the past that bounced in his mind.

At long last, when the last of his party had been nibbled to death by rats, it was finally his turn. Once again reduced from a bandit chief to a mere man, he breathed a sigh of relief when they slipped a thick straw rope around his neck. No matter how long it took, a death by hanging was more humane than the fate of any of his men.

“You a fan of this knot, deadbeat?” the executioner said, seeing his happiness. “But let me warn you. I’m not as nice as the people around town.”

The masked executioner kicked the man like a roadside pebble and marched him to a river that ran through the heart of the city. A large bridge overlooked the ferry-worthy water, beautifully adorned, with enough embellishment to tell its tourist landmark status at first glance.

Yanked to the center of this architectural marvel, the man was lowered into the water with the rope tied to the bridge’s handrail, as if he were fishing bait or a bobbing river marker.

A single wooden platform had been constructed underneath the gentle current, its height tweaked so the water would come up to the convict’s navel when he stood. At first, the former bandit chief didn’t understand the intent behind this punishment. *Why are they making me stand here?* he thought, only to be met with a swift answer.

Despite his fatigue, he could no longer sit or sleep; any accidental attempt at the latter was interrupted by the stinging rush of water in his lungs, while the platform kept him in place so he wouldn’t wash away.

At wit’s end, he tried to drown himself...but failed. To drown was so horrific that, no matter how many times he tried, his body would instinctively claw for the rope to extend his life. Each time, he despaired at his continued breathing while the townsfolk mocked him for his folly.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine had elected to keep its penal code confidential. Judges, lawyers, and the lords of every region strictly hid the secrets of their punishments all for a single reason: they did not want their citizenry to evaluate established consequences and come to the conclusion that a crime was ever “worth it.”

The opening preamble to the Empire’s penal code is lined with this message:

Let every penalty atone for one hundred sins. Today, the austere people of Rhine upheld their policy. This was as common a sight as a father fighting to protect his family.

The shore's sand is yet more finite than the seeds of human malevolence; still, how easy it is to nip the bud once it forms.

[Tips] Public punishments are deemed a necessary evil in all corners of the world.

"*Blanket of night—pillowy moon—cradle this little spider to bed. Stars watch over—her gentle dream. Tucked and covered—her eyes unseen.*"

As I sang my original lullaby and softly patted Iseult's back, she quickly dozed off into the kingdom of slumber. Seeing her conk out so easily nearly convinced me that I was a genius singer-songwriter.

Long ago, my daughter had been a terrible sleeper. When she'd been a baby, her tears were so stubborn that, even after taking traits to reduce the rest I needed, my short-slept arachne wife and I could hardly keep up with her.

I'd written this lullaby in a desperate attempt to rock her to bed, and I can't begin to express how grateful I'd been when she'd taken a liking to it. Leveling a singing skill was ludicrously expensive, so I'd chosen cheap traits like Lingering Timbre and Gentle Voice to try and come up with something myself. When she had first fallen asleep to it, I had cried tears of joy.

Though, admittedly, Margit then immediately forbade me from singing—not just lullabies, but in general—in front of other people, so my excitement was short-lived. I supposed my daughter was just as biased toward me as I was toward her. *I wonder—how much longer will this song put her to sleep?*

"Asleep already? My, it's as if I'm not even needed."

I'd been lovingly watching over my adorable girl when my wife whispered into my ear without the faintest forewarning. The bedframe failed to creak, and I was puzzled at how I hadn't even felt the mattress shift. She'd been putting up my armor while I was busy putting Iseult to bed, but she'd finished up her end

in the blink of an eye.

As a delightful tingle ran up my spine, I mentally noted another defeat. I tried to turn toward her from the side I was laying on but was preempted as Margit blocked my arm with her chest. Her perfect positioning had totally locked me in place; she had the fulcrum of my body tightly bound. Clearly, she had no need for webs to seize her prey.

“What are you going to do with your poor, captive husband?” I asked.

“Who’s to say? What *shall* I do? Perhaps I’ll keep you in a little cage. Or would you prefer a collar?” Margit peered over, placing the better part of her weight on me. Although her lips twisted into an arched smile, I could tell from the golden reflection of the moon in her eyes that she wasn’t playing around. She was so intensely bewitching that her charm overwrote the childish exterior that I’d seen for all my life, stealing my breath away.

“You know, I’ve been thinking... Why is our little princess such a crybaby?”

Uh-oh. This is bad. I immediately tried to break free, but the eight legs digging into the mattress deftly wriggled into place to kill any momentum I had. She had me on my back before I knew it, and by the time she mounted me with her arms through my armpits, I was at her mercy.

For a moment, I worried that the movement might have woken our daughter, but she’d been moved to the corner of the bed (but not close enough to the edge to fall, naturally) before I knew it. Not only that, but the extra blanket wrapped around her was proof of her mother’s love. *Wait, this is no time to be impressed!*

“Iseult’s all alone, isn’t she?” Margit cooed. “She gets to keep her mother and father all to herself, and her loving grandparents dote on her at every turn.”

“Um, that’s true...”

My wife then laid on me, resting her chin on my chest with a playful grin. Still, the look in her eyes was anything but jolly.

Hauntingly beautiful as always. I’d used this phrase before, but allow me to reiterate that I wasn’t saying her elegance lingered with me; she was simply terrifying and captivating in equal parts. And much to my horror, it seemed

both qualities only deepened with each passing year.

"So, perhaps," she continued, "she could do with a little brother or sister."

Don't you think my idea is perfect? was written all over her face, and no objection came to mind. I myself didn't find the idea absurd: I'd been the youngest in my past life, and the brotherly responsibility I felt from Elisa's birth had certainly changed me a lot. Her reasoning was solid, but...

"You're not thinking that things are fine the way they are because you love pampering your daughter...*are you?*"

"Aha ha ha ha. No way." *How'd she know?!*

Margit sighed at my monotone response and propped up her chin, still on my chest. Her free left hand came closer and gently rubbed my cheek.

"My, what a sweet father. But...you know, *Erich*," she whispered as she pulled my face close. "You may be a father, but it won't do to forget that you're also my husband, will it?"

Margit's smile disappeared from view as her lips fell onto mine. The gentle kiss left behind a tender, mushy sensation as the hunter finally bared her fangs. To be fair, I'd had no intention of refusing from the start. Love made me weak—or rather, perhaps I was simply fated to be her prey.

Our marriage may have arisen from an overly affectionate camping trip, but I wasn't rash enough to risk making a child due to lust alone, no matter how excitable my pubescent body could be. I'd been close to full-grown back then, so I always had the option of pushing her off of me...but I didn't.

I see no reason for me to go out of my way to explain why. Don't ask, it's embarrassing!

"So, what do you say?" Margit asked mischievously.

I answered only by closing my eyes. *You win—tonight, I'll obediently play the role of the hunted.*

[Tips] When mensch males reproduce with other species, the offspring almost always takes after the mother.





Afterword

Let me first thank the laudable readers who were kind enough to pick up this book. Following you, allow me to offer my deepest gratitudes to my patient editor who never once lost their temper at my slow progress, and the splendid Lansane, who embellished this story with gorgeous illustrations from cover to cover. And of course, thanks to all of you who watered me with your thoughts as I wrote the web novel on Narou—I'm quite prone to withering, after all.

Above all else, I'm thankful for the companies that develop the TRPGs that have acted as the foundation for countless stories and adventures. I can only hope I've been able to honor the tabletop games that I've enjoyed for years in some small way.

I remember drowning in the mountain of rulebooks we'd stuffed into the cupboard of a messy four-tatami-mat (or was it six?) room; before I knew it, we were rolling dice in a slightly larger apartment as the neighbors yelled at us to be quiet; and one day I found myself playing with enough space to line three tables up next to one another. Looking back, it's been a long journey since I graduated from our decrepit little cave.

"Man, I want to draft up a character sheet and roll some comically oversized dice," I'd groan at work. Being the strange creature that I am, I simply wrote as it took my fancy until I found myself in an astonishing place: with a paperback book full of drawings, I too can now claim to be a fully-fledged author.

If nothing else, let me address my old school friends who egged me on by saying, "You're going to turn *your* pompous ramblings into a light novel? Don't make me laugh. Hurry up and write the next part of our campaign." I'll return the favor by reaching through time to ask, *Do you see me now???*

With that out of the way, I'd like to touch on the subject of TRPGs like a good afterword should. Every now and again, I received comments on the web novel from people who were not at all acquainted with the concept. This should go without saying; it isn't exactly a ubiquitous hobby (though it is unbelievably

popular compared to the days of its inception) and requires several people to truly enjoy. Still, I can't think of any other activity that's as much fun to enjoy with a big group.

It's akin to acting out a play that has story beats but no script, where the GM and players are trying to kill one another but still working in tandem to weave a story together. Both you and others will vicariously enjoy the tale through characters near and dear to your heart: you'll laugh, cry, bask in glory, and sometimes trash talk each other all night. Honestly, it's hard to sum up in a single sentence.

There are perfectionist weirdos like me who use pen and paper to jot down everything from numbers to the setting in order to cause all sorts of mayhem. There are also hobbyists who don't care for data and are only there to dive into their role. I find this troubling, but there exist warmongers who see the GM and other players as "opponents" to beat down for the thrill of triumph. And there are even some who simply use the medium as a tool to spend time having fun with the people they love. Tabletop games are a very, very tolerant pastime that will accept anyone and everyone.

Beyond that, there are enough genres to drown in. You have classic fantasies, settings where you might expect a dark something or other to reside in someone's eye or left hand, worlds that threaten to chip at your sanity just by reading of their existence, and more.

I tried to list as many things as possible, but the depths of the hobby can't be enumerated in the short space of an afterword alone, so I urge you to try your hand at it yourself. Relax, it'll be fine: just as the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the path leading to the bottomless pit of tabletop games is easygoingness. A few minutes with the glowing slab of metal next to you is more than enough to find a place where you can enjoy a campaign.

Who knows? That might be the beginning of a lasting friendship—the kind where you listen to their drunken babbling even approaching your thirties. The fun of playing a role, writing a campaign, and letting dice decide your destiny may lead to something new.

With only a smidgen of space remaining, I finally realized that I completely

forgot to talk about the story itself, but I hope you at least got a laugh out of my scatterbrained nature. I plan to continue Erich's adventures online, and would be overjoyed if you kept up with the latest releases with the same nonchalance as reading somebody's replays. If we get a chance to meet again, I'm sure those terrifying fairies will get their turn in the spotlight.

Now that that's all said and done, thank you for accompanying the long-winded text of both the novel and afterword. I pray that I might be able to bring you more of Erich's journey in the future.

[Tips] The author's expected value when rolling 2D6 is 5 as a player and 9 as a GM.



Congratulations on the release!

Having an arachne heroine is the best!

Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word of Mr. Henderson

Author
Schuld
Illustrator
Lansane



Henderson Scale

A scale of measurement for gauging plot derailment.

Originates from Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop character who miraculously tied up his campaign with a neat bow in the face of a blood-thirsty GM.


“*Do* feel free to rely on me...”
“Be gentle, will you?”
“Erich, you meanie!!!”
Margit


The lauding remark came from the ogre that had put me up to this. The sword-seller remained sitting in his chair, looking from me to the helmet and back with his mouth agape.
“Splendid!”
Elisa
Erich


What's the point of getting a second chance if I don't even do what needs to be done?
"Now, the time for dice beckons."

CHARACTER



Name

Erich

Race

Mensch

Position

Front Guard

Specialties

Dexterity VII

Skills

- Hybrid Sword Arts
- Wood Whittling

Traits

- Enchanting Artistry
- Insight

Name

Margit

Race

Arachne

Position

Scout, Archer

Specialties

Agility VI

Skills

- Silent Movement
- Presence Dilution
- Shortbow Marksmanship

Traits

- Spider Physique
- Bewitching Charm

CHARACTER



Bonus Short Stories

Bathtub Concerto

The bathtub is a Japanese citizen's paradise. Of course, I'm an imperial citizen now, but still.

"All right, that should do it."

I wiped the sweat from my brow as I gazed at the fruit of several days' hard labor near a small stream in the woods by my canton. Having paid the toll of sweat and agony all great feats of creation call for, I'd given physical form to my hardships, frustration, and ingenuity. Seeing the large wooden tub enshrined before me almost brought a tear to my eye.

The size was just about right to whip up some miso or soy sauce inside, but I didn't plan on recreating the flavors of my motherland—all I wanted was a bath.

Our canton was too rural for anything more than a cost-efficient Turkish bath. Saunas had their own merits, but my soul forged in the land of the rising sun longed for shoulder-deep hot springs. Every trip to the steam bath only fanned the flames of my desire, and I finally lost my patience and built my own.

Boy, I was full of myself.

I'd thought that constructing a big bucket would have been easy with my whittling skill, but the process had been a nightmare. Lining up all of the planks to create a watertight fit truly was the work of an artisan. I don't think I would have finished the project without the advice of the local blacksmith.

After thrice failing to piece together defective planks that I salvaged from the sawmill, I had finally managed to make something that held water on my fourth attempt. I had also patched up the holes in an old firewood stove from the canton's junk heap and tossed a rusty pot on top to boil up some hot water. I couldn't create something as complex as a water heater, but I figured diluting

boiling water with fresh stuff from the river would be enough for the small, single-person tub.

“The nearby stream makes this so easy,” I said to myself, tossing firewood into the stove. I worked up a sweat while scooping water into the tub, but I was more than happy to for the sake of my bath—after all, there’s nothing like soaking in hot water when you’re sweaty and tired.

“It’s almooost ready...”

Raising the temperature of the water had been more painstaking than I’d anticipated, but at long last, my preparations were complete. Steeping myself in water that was the slightest bit too hot was my Truth, and I felt quite pleased with myself when I dunked my hand in to check the heat—until a cold shiver ran up my spine.

“You’ve been so distant lately, but I would have never guessed you were hiding away building something like this.” A sultry voice that seeped into my ears was accompanied by a new sensation of weight on my back. My neck turned like an unoiled hinge to see my grinning childhood friend. “Everyone would want a turn if word got out about this. Wouldn’t that be a shame?”

“...How did it turn out like this?” I asked.

“Ahh, how pleasant,” Margit said, ignoring me.

Although the details were far from my original plan, I found myself bathing only a few minutes later. The girl who had threatened me with a cheery smile just moments ago now sat in my lap.

I’d made the tub on the smaller end to make it easier to fill it with hot water; an adult would have to squeeze in, and two mensch children would barely fit. However, Margit’s build meant that there was room to spare, so long as she folded up her legs and rested on top of me. Still, I had one issue: my nice, soothing bath had become a horribly literal *stew* of tension.

“Mmm, I’ve heard of hot water baths before, but I never realized they were this wonderful, Erich,” she said, peering over her shoulder with a mischievous smile. Her usual pigtails had been undone, and her mysterious charm left no

trace of any innocence appropriate for her age.

“I’m happy you’ve taken a liking to it...”

“Very much so,” she said. “Shall we do this again sometime?” As she spoke, her arms made their way around my neck and she leaned her whole body against mine.

“Wha—hey!”

“But you know, the fact that the water cools so quickly really is a shame. Oh, so that’s why you’re still boiling water despite already being in the tub. Let me see, how much should I add to warm us up?”

Margit certainly would have had an easier time reaching the hot water if she leaned forward a bit. *She’s doing this on purpose... How terrifying! Any other boy our age would have lost it in more ways than one!*

“Still, I would have appreciated it if you’d given me some forewarning.” She ladled up some more boiling water to adjust the temperature and shot me an accusatory glare. “I didn’t know to bring soap, so I can’t wash myself.”

“Hold on a second,” I said, “you can’t do that anyway.”

“What? But baths are meant to clean the body.”

“No, you’re supposed to keep the tub clean.”

“Huh? But I can’t help but feel strange without washing up...”

“You absolutely aren’t allowed to dirty the tub!”

For better or for worse, my passionate lecture about the proper way to bathe made me completely forget certain other details of my current situation. Still, Margit had only ever experienced saunas before, and continued looking wholly unconvinced no matter how enthusiastically I tried to explain my position.

[Tips] Imperial citizens also wash themselves before entering the bath, but it is acceptable to use a scrubber in the water.

Tingling, Fleeting Love

The wistful gaze of a young girl fell upon a boy of similar age. Bathed in gentle sunlight filtered through the trees of the canton's woods, Erich dozed off for an afternoon nap. He enjoyed a small degree of local fame, and it was not just his blond hair and blue eyes that were popular with the Rhinian populace.

There were many reasons his name was recognized throughout their canton; first and most simply, he was popular with the ladies. In a world that had yet to achieve cultural maturity, he had the most attractive trait a man could have: the power to earn money. Usually, a fourth-born son with no hope of inheriting his house would draw no more romantic attention than a fallen branch. However, his name was a mainstay in the gossip that bloomed every time young girls gathered.

His statuettes of the Goddess were of good enough make for the church to grab them up, and his wooden board game pieces drew the admiration of even professional craftsmen. In fact, his skill as a whittler was so great that there were rumors of him funding his sickly sister's persistent medical costs out of pocket. Hunger was a death sentence in this era, and anybody who could put bread on the table was more than certain to draw the eyes and ears of the opposite sex.

However, this girl's interest was of a different kind. Like Erich, she was a mensch, and her growth spurt had begun one beat earlier than all her peers—as such, the intent behind her passionate stares was different too. Her tale was as simple as it was commonplace; still, to a girl barely past ten, it felt like destiny.

One day, her friends had teased her for her tall, developing body. They hadn't done so out of malice—she'd grown prettier, and they'd poked fun at her in a cute, childish attempt to process the beating in their own chests.

However, a fragile young girl had no leeway to appreciate this "cuteness." Unaccustomed to pain, the daggered words of those she considered her friends stung beyond imagination. She felt the wound deep inside her heart, in the vulnerable spot that people seal away when they reach adulthood. Tormented, the girl could only pray that she might disappear.

But then, Erich smoothly stepped in to stop them. With a silver tongue

beyond his years, he led the group around by the nose, and before they knew it they were all playing together again. The girl had naturally found her place in their games, just as she found herself captivated by the tender look in Erich's eyes as he watched over them. From an outsider's perspective, the boy's ungodly eloquence might have been seen as unsettling. However, his meaningful gaze only seemed dependable to the young girl, and catalyzed the shift in her feelings from gratitude to love.

Ever since, the girl could not pry her eyes away whenever he came into view. Yet despite harboring her fleeting first love, the girl never partook in the gossip that blossomed amongst her friends.

Erich's best trait wasn't that he could make money. He was kind, caring, and wouldn't turn his back on you in a pinch. What was more, he'd endured the Konigstuhl Watch's painful training, or so the story she'd heard one day had told, for a reason that tickled her heartstrings: he didn't want anyone *else* to feel that same pain. *How gallant and noble can he be?*

None of the other girls understood his true worth. The money wasn't secondary, or even tertiary. She could only imagine how dearly he'd care for the girl he deemed most precious.

Her fantasies alone were enough to send a sweet tingling sensation running through her body. She wanted to savor the pit of warmth in the depths of her gut overflowing to every corner forever.

But today the feeling was a bit different. An ice-cold fear made its way up from the tail of her spine. Surprised by this intrusion on the tender warmth of her happiness, she whirled around to face a pair of glowing, golden eyes.

"Excuse me, would you like to join me for a friendly conversation?"

The voice was at once amicable and hostile; the chill it carried drowned out the gentle tingle she'd been basking in—and she would never feel it again.

[Tips] There was once a time in human history when the ability to earn extra coin in the winter was far sexier than good looks or a beautiful singing voice.

Secret Manslaying Arts

Hanna curiously tilted her head when she heard a light knock at the door. She wasn't expecting any guests, and her relatives wouldn't do her the honor of asking for permission to enter. She mused over her peculiar visitor as she opened the door to a young girl carrying a basket.

"Oh, if it isn't Margit!"

"How do you do, Mother Dearest?" the arachne said, playfully curtsying like a noblewoman.

Hanna quickly recognized her son's friend; in truth, she held the girl in high regard—everything from her spider legs to her adorable chestnut hair and hazel eyes.

The countryside saw little traffic and thus oft fell short on entertainment. Prosaic human drama stood as its foremost pastime, and no conversation could pluck at a mother's heartstrings like the love lives of her children. Fourth-born sons generally had great difficulty finding partners given the slim pickings of their inheritance, so seeing Erich tied up in young romance left Hanna overjoyed.

Furthermore, not only was Margit a well-mannered hard worker who had everything she needed to succeed in the countryside, but it was obvious from the outside that she was madly in love with Erich. Perhaps members of the less emotionally capable sex wouldn't have noticed, but Hanna had once been a maiden in love herself.

"This is from my own mother, to repay you for lending us oil the other day."

Margit's basket contained a neatly processed cut of venison. The huntsmen made their livings protecting the preserve's saplings from deer, and the meat they provided to the canton was a big-ticket item. They used a lot of oil: they needed it to maintain their tools, and many made a handy sum on the side rendering soap from surplus oil and the vast reserves of fat from their kills. Johannes's farm had its own olive field, and his household often lent the huntsmen oil upon request. Today, it seemed the dues had been paid.

"My," Hanna said, "this is a shoulder cut!"

“Yes, I’ve heard that you’re all fond of it.”

Trade within the canton was founded on the exchange of favors, to the point that it was rarer to settle an account in cash. Faithfully paying back one’s debt was key to living happily in the village, but this gift was extraordinary. The shoulder cut of a deer was very lean but flavorful, and its preparation largely depended on the culinary skill of the chef.

In some regions of the world, a woman’s beauty was evidenced by how well she could prepare her hometown’s dish. Hanna figured she’d marinate the meat in a wine-based sauce that her fourth son was particular to when she suddenly had a revelation.

“You know, Margit...Erich is out right now on a little errand.”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” the arachne replied. “I don’t mean to intrude, so I’ll be taking my leave—”

“I’m going to make one of his favorite dishes. Would you care to join me?”

“By all means!”

Hanna couldn’t stifle a full-blown grin at seeing Margit’s enthusiasm. The sight of this lovestruck maiden filled her with secondhand embarrassment as it reminded her of her youth. She, too, had once devoted countless hours cooking with a boy’s mother, tweaking this and that over an infinite number of trial runs that he would never eat. The bitter memories that melted over her tongue left her with a nagging urge to cheer the little arachne on however she could.

She couldn’t help but suspect she’d used up all of her luck as a mother. *To think that there’s a girl who loves Erich not for his status or fortune, but for him!*

“To start with the ingredients, we’re going to want to find the most sour wine we can.”

“Huh? But Erich likes sweet wine...”

“Hee hee, that’s right! But we can adjust the flavor with honey, and we don’t want it to taste too overbearing.”

Seeing Margit’s attention locked on like she was at one of the bishop’s sermons, Hanna happily taught the girl her secret manslaying arts.

[Tips] Sauerbraten is a dish made with heavily marinated meat, and a local classic in the Empire. Generally, pork or deer shoulder is steeped in wine-based sauce.

Lively voices bounced back and forth over the dining table. Eating a huge lunch to prepare oneself for the backbreaking work of the afternoon was a very Rhinian thing to do, and I felt blessed to be sitting at a table lined with steamed meats and bread.

"Man, this is as great as always."

As I happily munched on one of my favorite dishes, a knowing smile crept onto my mother's face as she began telling her story. She wove her tale like a sonorous poet, and I'm sure a lyre would have fit her quite nicely as she revealed that today's dish had been made in tandem with Margit, who'd stopped by to drop off the meat in my absence.

"Ahh, so this is from *that* girl," my father said. "I had a feeling this meat was softer than usual—maybe it's because those huntsmen prep it properly."

"Oh, right, Margit's parents are huntsmen," my eldest brother followed. "Hold up, does that mean we can eat all the meat we want if they're our relatives?"

"Heinz, you're a genius!" Michael exclaimed. "Do you think we'd get boar and fowl meat too?!"

"That'd be awesome," Hans agreed. "Erich, when are you marrying into their family?"

My father's sharp observation was immediately followed by my brothers jumping in saying whatever they pleased, leaving me pinching my furrowed brow. *The way Margit sets her traps is so damn cunning!*

"Mr. Brother, no!"

"Why not, Elisa?! It's not every day you get to eat meat this good!"

I basked in the wholesomeness of the one member of my family who chose

me over meat, and took another bite out of what was essentially a pit trap in culinary form. It tasted delicious, but the thought that this flavor might decide my life left me puckering my lips.

[Tips] Marriage is commonly decided by those around the couple being wed as opposed to the pair themselves.

Pushy Mother

"My, my! Welcome!"

I knocked on the door of a home that scarcely resembled my own and was answered by a sweet voice from within. This stone house in the shadow of the wood was home to the magistrate's officially appointed huntsman—which made this Margit's residence. That being said, she was *not* the one to greet me at the door.

"I'm so sorry, dear. Margit's away on an errand right now. Why don't you come on inside in the meantime?"

The familiar chestnut hair and large, cute, hazel eyes that greeted me adorned a round and youthful face that looked to be around my age based on appearances alone. However, my mensch sensibilities couldn't properly assess the eight-legged woman's age; she was by no means my childhood friend's sibling.

Her hair had a slight wave to it, and the air about her was altogether different from Margit's. Where her daughter exuded playful mischief, she had the composure of a full grown lady.

"Would you like some tea?" Margit's venerable mother asked me.

If nothing else, her bearing clashed with her appearance: she certainly didn't *look* like she was in her thirties. Although she could pass as the preteen Margit's sister, her expressions, speech, and mannerisms oozed with mature grace. Furthermore, I could make out dangling earrings lining her ears from between the parts in her hair, and her loose clothing exposed the heavily inked skin underneath. This wasn't the first time I'd been shocked by her deviance: the

traditional arachne leatherwork that she'd worn in past festivals had a deep cut that proudly displayed a spider tattoo on her lower abs and a pair of butterfly wings right above her tailbone.

"No, thank you, I'm fine," I replied.

"It won't do to be so reserved from such a young age. Come, come, I've just brewed a new batch of tea. Take a seat."

The old la—er, *seasoned mother* nudged me along to a chair and poured me a cup of red tea. Not only was it fresh, but she paired it with apparently homemade dried fruits to really stop me from leaving. My imperial pride wouldn't let me waste a perfectly good cup of tea. *Oh well, what can you do?*

"Young boys sure are wonderful," she said with a giggle. "You're all so full of life."

Her statement was laden with deeper meaning that sent a jolt along my spine. If Margit's whispers were a sudden drop of ice, then her mother's voice was akin to a feather duster tracing my back.

"You know, when I was younger—"

"Mother, what in the world are you doing?!"

My lifelong friend's familiar voice cut through the peculiar sweet timbre that had been tickling my ear. With a basket under her arm, she entered, for whatever reason, through an open window. She sprang toward me so nimbly that I lost sight of her for a moment, and I had no time to react to her leaping onto my chest. Her usual smile vanished, and she squinted at her mother over my shoulder.

"Why are you making a pass on Erich?!"

"Whatever could you mean? I only poured him a bit of tea."

Margit's uncharacteristic anger made her look like a disgruntled puppy (in truth, she was closer to a majestic wolf), her brow crinkled in rage. I tried to calm her down and knocked back the rest of my tea so as to head out. She'd promised me archery lessons in the woods today.

"What are you so upset about?" I asked.

“I saw how smitten you were with my mother,” she said.

“What?! No, hold on...” I tried to allay her suspicions, but she remained irritable, and the day’s training ended up a living hell.

[Tips] Arachne reach physical maturity relatively quickly and see little change to their appearance once they do.

“Margit sounded really mad. What happened?”

A thin man made his way down from the second floor a little while after his daughter dragged away her companion with puffs of steam shooting out her ears. The mensch stripped off his work gloves and shook the wood from his clothes.

He looked to be around fifty; although he could have made a convincing grandfather for Margit, their relation was one step closer, and few people would have believed that he and his wife were not so far apart in age.

“Hm? I gave her a little push is all.”

The lifelong huntsman took a seat next to his partner. In contrast to her exuberant smile dripping with intent, he let his facial muscles relax. “What are you going to do if that lights a fire under her?”

“But dear, I don’t think it’s very proper to be too full of oneself or one’s position.” She put a hand to her cheek and tilted her head as she spoke, causing a familiar sensation to run down her husband’s spine. “If she were to get careless and let her mark escape...well, it’s just not what a hunter *does,* is it?”

The reason for the man’s chills was simple: her expression was that of an archetypal predator. Reflecting on their history, the man was made to remember that despite his status as a huntsman, he was also a helpless mark entangled in the a spider’s web.

According to his wife, their daughter was by far the favorite in her race of love, but her lead had gone to her head, and she’d recently grown to play with her food. Of course, Margit’s mother would never forbid such things; the period of sweetness that drifted between friendship and courtship was not territory

that could be retread once a relationship settled. Still, it was unacceptable to drown in that bliss and lose sight of the dangers of her romantic rivals.

“Our little girl has so much competition,” she sighed. “You know as much, don’t you?”

“It makes sense,” he said. “The boy’s got a good reputation.”

Erich’s face drifted to the thin huntsman’s mind as he thought back on what he’d heard from his friends. The boy was diligent and honest, and was especially popular for the value of his wood carvings. Widows and families without sons were particularly keen on him.

The father was impressed with how completely his daughter had managed to fend off her competitors and retain her place beside him. Yet if she continued to dance around, she risked losing her mark to another predator’s ambush: after all, there existed a situation in which a man had no choice but to take responsibility.

“So, well, you know...” his wife said with a mischievous giggle.

Her laugh filled him with nothing but bad premonitions, and he silently thought of the young boy. *This is a path of thorns, son.*

“What is it, dear? Is something the matter?”

“...What makes you think that? I was just thinking about how lovely my wife is today.”

“My, you won’t get anything for sweet-talking your lovely wife, you know? Of course, I’m more than happy to accept anything you might *give* me.”

The missus cheerily grinned at her risque joke and her man mirrored her expression. Their two smiles, as incongruous as they were, continued on for quite some time.

[Tips] “Responsibility” generally falls to the man, even if he finds himself pinned down.

An Arachne’s Views on Love

Any conversation held between a gathering of maidens is sure to bloom into discourse on love, complete with the honeyed scent of dancing petals. Lips lubricated with enough alcohol are sure to let slip the name of their fancied boy, and perhaps even the deeper secrets of their taste in men.

“Why I fell in love with him?” Margit asked in confirmation.

Faced with this question, her characteristic smile had been replaced with a rare grimace. The drunken ramblings of romance shared by the local girls had been boring enough, and to top it off, she personally didn’t think it was decent to speak so openly on the subject. She thoroughly enjoyed the space she currently occupied: she wasn’t quite a lover, but certainly more than a friend, and the saccharine relationship left just enough of a sour aftertaste to stimulate her senses.

Above all else, Margit was well aware that she was not alone in her quest to win her beloved’s heart. Still, she had no intention of sending the enemy any sort of munitions, and the question of why she loved him so had tipped the little hunter over the edge—she decided to answer, as sticking out among her peers wasn’t ideal. At times, the ability to give up proved to be a useful skill.

Margit’s mark was her childhood friend Erich. The impetus of her curiosity was simple enough, but the roots of her love were plentiful. She thought through reasons that outnumbered her fingers, searching for the most fundamental one.

“Let me think...” After a long pause, her first choice was, “Perhaps how resolute he is.”

Erich did not waver. There were times when he would take pause, but he would never abandon the core values that he chose to anchor himself with. No matter how difficult or cumbersome the task, he always completed what he set out to do. Similarly, he never went back on his word.

His disposition manifested itself physically too: he had never allowed Margit to fall when she pounced on him. To leap onto someone is no easy feat, and small mistakes could turn into serious injuries for both the jumper and jumped-on. Even a compact, lightweight jumping spider arachne packed a punch when lunging forward at full speed. If the two of them tumbled to the ground

together, a broken bone or two would be no surprise.

However, Erich had lovingly caught her every time. Margit had the same absolute faith when pouncing on him as she did hopping into the sturdy boughs of a great and venerable tree.

“You know, the list of things one can jump onto blind is quite limited,” the arachne said, finishing her grog. Her words only fanned the flames of the other girls’ envy.

How many *places* were there that one could entrust their body to? It was difficult for most to fully relax and fall face first into one’s own bedding with faith that nothing would go wrong.

Margit’s boasting left a quiet unease in the other girls’ minds: would *their* crushes or established betrotheds accept them, both physically and emotionally? Her audience’s frustration and the magic of mead (compounded by her pitifully low tolerance) drove the arachne to pile on one lovely characteristic after another.

She spoke of the small things he nonchalantly did for her when catching her or carrying her around; of how considerately he prepared things she wanted without her asking; of his forgiving nature and his willingness to help her learn from her mistakes without reproach; and most of all, of how he chose to say the things she wanted to hear at every turn. How many people would she meet in her lifetime who cared so deeply for her?

“...Oh, and now that I think of it, his hair is wonderful.” Margit’s praise for the good looks she frequently laid eyes on only came at the tail end of her blossoming dialogue as a passing afterthought, filling those around her with a mysterious sense of inferiority. Unaware or uncaring of their struggles, she rose from the table to leave them behind after saying, “Here, take a good look.”

Margit had spoken of the devil, and the boy in question had appeared before her eyes. He must have pulled another empty lot, as he was walking along with an exhausted face and a drink in his hands.

The arachne prepared her usual approach. As a lovestruck maiden, this bombastic display was her god-given right. She snuffed out her presence and snuck up behind him without so much as a footstep, then used every ounce of

her spidery agility to leap straight at him.

The result hardly needed to be put to words—one look at the plethora of mugs emptied in frustration was proof enough of her success. After completing her sneak attack, the arachne merrily buried her nose into the boy's soft, golden hair and smiled.

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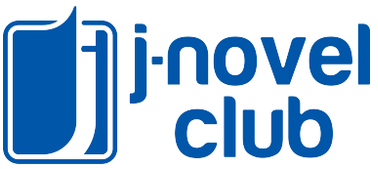
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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 1

by Schuld

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